
DARK CLOUDS OVER SALTY SHORES

**AN ABBY VAUGHN MURDER
MYSTERY**

E.J. MASTERS



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CHAPTER ONE

"Isn't this just the perfect day, Pip?" she murmured, glancing at the canvas tote bag nestled in the crook of her arm. A single orange eye blinked back at her from the tote.

Pip, her one-eyed tabby cat, preferred the subdued world of her bookstore to the boisterous crowds, and snuggled deeper into the bag. Abby looked forward to this festival all year and couldn't resist indulging in the festive spirit. Besides, her bookstore, *Booked by the Bay*, could run itself for a few glorious hours while she enjoyed a well-deserved lobster roll and a scoop of Captain Salty's legendary blueberry ice cream.

The salty breeze whipped tendrils of Abby Vaughn's hair across her face as she navigated the throng of sun-drenched festivalgoers. The aroma of sizzling lobster enticed her, a delicious counterpoint to the cacophony of music and excited chatter.

Salty Shores' annual Lobster Festival was in full swing, transforming the quaint harbor beaming with pride and a vibrant explosion of color and sound.

Abby dodged a rogue beach ball, its bright stripes blurred against the sea of faces. A squealing child darted past, narrowly missing Pip's watchful eye in Abby's tote bag.

"Hey, Mrs. Henderson. I hope you're enjoying yourself," she called with the practiced ease of a well-known local bookstore owner.

Mrs. Henderson was a regular customer with a penchant for historical romances. She beamed, clutching a thick volume about the War of 1812. "My dear, it looks like this year will be like no other. I'm having tons of fun already. I'll be around tomorrow, so hold the second volume for me." She waved the book at Abby.

Abby smiled, already spotting young Tommy with his nose buried in a comic book. "Hey, Tommy!" Abby called out. "Enjoying the festival?"

Tommy peeked over the edge of the comic, a grin breaking through his concentration. "Yeah, Miss Abby! Just got the latest issue of Captain Kelp!"

"Well, don't keep your nose buried there all day. Make sure you have fun, too!"

But Tommy's attention was already back on his comic even before Abby finished her sentence.

She smiled, walking in the direction of the coveted lobster roll stand. A sudden commotion erupted near the fishing boats, causing her to pause. A booming voice cut through the festival din, and she craned her neck, searching for the source.

Her gaze, honed by years of meticulously organizing books and remembering every detail of a customer's purchase history, landed on a familiar figure. Captain Barnacle Bill Higgins, a

hulking man with a perpetually furrowed brow, stood by his prize-winning lobster trap.

He was arguing with a younger man, their voices rising. Bill's face, normally a roadmap of weathered lines, was contorted with anger and something else. A flicker of fear, perhaps? It was a fleeting expression, gone before Abby could be sure, but it left her uneasy.

The man said something that caused Bill's broad shoulders to slump before he stormed off to the harbor tavern, leaving the younger man shaking his head in frustration.

A shiver ran down Abby's spine despite the warm sunshine. Bill wasn't exactly beloved around these parts. His gruff demeanor and ruthless competition earned him more respect than affection. Yet, something about his defeated posture and that fleeting glimpse of fear gnawed at Abby's curiosity. It was odd that she'd never seen the young man in Salty Shores before. Still ... she wondered.

Reaching the lobster roll stand, she shook the thought away and ordered the signature "Salty Special," a towering creation overflowing with succulent lobster meat and drenched in a secret buttery sauce.

Finding a shady spot under a striped awning, she settled down to savor her lunch. Pip, ever hopeful for a bite of whatever Abby ate, poked his head out of the tote bag, his nose twitching hopefully.

Abby broke off a small piece of lobster, and Pip snatched it up with a grateful purr.

"There you are, dear." Mrs. Abernathy owned the Seagull's Nest bakery. "Can't have you starving yourself on that glorified crustacean, now, can we?" she said, placing a tray on the table.

Abby smiled in acknowledgement. The tray was laden with two steaming teacups and a plate piled high with pastries. Mrs. Abernathy was renowned for motherly fussing and delectable treats, a fixture at the festival every year.

Abby appreciated the older woman's generosity. She was a constant source of comfort. Looking down, Abby hid the urge that shot through her as she surveyed the tray. Three scones, two slices of pound cake tilted slightly to the left. Her hands itched to straighten them, because she loved order and symmetry.

Abby thanked Mrs. Abernathy for the treats, but as soon as she bustled away, Abby carefully rearranged the pastries so the scones formed a perfect triangle with the pound cake slices flanking them like bookends. Satisfied, Abby took a tentative bite of the lobster roll and focused on its succulent deliciousness.

Soon, however, the image of Bill's troubled face came back to mind. What was he so afraid of? The argument with the other man didn't seem so serious at first. Not until she saw the fear in Bill's eyes - a stark contrast to the blustering bully everyone knew.

Was she overthinking? Maybe the bustling festival atmosphere was getting to her. Still, the niggling suspicion refused to leave.

Taking another bite of lobster roll, Abby decided to check on him later. Even though she wouldn't exactly call Bill a friend,

if there was something going on, she'd be happy to help if she could.

After finishing her meal, her concern for Bill, fueled by the odd behavior she witnessed, compelled her to visit the harbor tavern. As she approached, the laughter and music from the festival was replaced by a tense silence. The tavern, usually a hub of raucous activity, was unnervingly subdued.

Abby peered inside. The room was sparsely populated, the usual crowd conspicuously absent. A sense of foreboding filled her, scanning the shadowy corners for clues.

"Have you seen Bill?" she asked the bartender, an old sailor. He looked up grimly where he was polishing glasses with a soft cloth.

"Left in a hurry after a heated call. He looked troubled," the bartender muttered, nodding toward the back door leading to the docks.

Thanking him with a worried frown, Abby hurried out, her heart pounding. Once at the docks, her steps quickened, where a crowd gathered near a set of stacked lobster traps. Her breath caught as she edged closer and realized the source of the commotion.

The sight that greeted her was horrifying: Bill Higgins, sprawled in his lobster trap, lifeless eyes staring at the gray sky. A cold chill ran down her spine as she instinctively surveyed the scene—footprints in wet sand, a torn piece of fabric caught on the trap, and the faint smell of tobacco in the air.

Abby's mind raced, cataloging every detail. She knew the clues were fleeting, easily lost in the chaos that would soon sur-

round the scene. Pulling out her phone, she dialed the sheriff, rehearsing what to say as calmly as possible.

"Sheriff Dawson, this is Abby. It's Bill Higgins—he's dead on the dock. Looks like he was murdered."

As she waited for the sheriff, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to come. The annual Lobster Festival was suddenly brimming with ominous secrets, and she was about to dive into them.

Despite the shock that gripped her, her attention shifted to her surroundings noting several disturbances: a thin thread snagged on the wire trap, a smudge of oil on the dock, and an unusual pattern of sand near the edge of the water.

As she pieced clues together, sirens tore through the quiet, and soon Sheriff Dawson arrived, surveying the scene. He wasn't surprised to see Abby; she had a knack for getting involved whether he liked it or not.

"Abby, did you see anything?"

She briefed him on her findings, pointing out the thread, oil smudge, and the odd pattern in the sand. The sheriff listened, his expression inscrutable as his deputies took notes.

With the sheriff's implicit blessing, Abby began her own examination. She noticed the thread was likely torn from a piece of clothing, suggesting a struggle. The oil smudge, barely visible in the fading light, indicated that someone was working or tampering with the boats. And the disturbed sand suggested hurried movement, possibly someone fleeing the scene.

When the coroner arrived and the crowd began to disperse, Abby's phone buzzed—an unknown number. She answered hesitantly.

“Stay away from the scene at the dock. It’s deeper and darker than you know, as deep as the ocean, going just as far back. Don’t get yourself drowned.” The line went dead before she could utter a single word.

Chilled, Abby knew she had to dig deeper. Clearly, Bill’s death was no accident, and someone wanted it kept quiet. She walked back to the bookstore, her mind racing with possibilities. The festival, once a source of joy, was now overshadowed by the dark turn of events.

One thing the caller said kept running through her mind, “... *going just as far back* ...” Could Bill’s death be related to something that had happened long ago?

Back at Booked by the Bay, she pulled out local history books, turning up tales of feuds and ancient fishing rights that sparked bitterness among the fishermen of Salty Shores. Could Bill have stumbled on something worth killing for?

She was interrupted by the bell over the door. It was Bea Kensington, now retired but never missing a beat.

“Terrible business about Bill,” she tsked, “but between you and me, he was on edge these past few weeks. Kept talking about a big score that would set him up for life.”

Abby’s eyes narrowed as the wheels in her mind started turning. “A big score? Did he mention what it was about?”

Bea nodded, settling into a chair apparently with all the time in the world. “He was obsessed with some old maritime legend. Kept poring over old maps and talking about hidden treasure from the days of privateers.”

Abby’s mind shifted into overdrive. “Privateers? Do you think it could be linked to a particular legend?”

Bea leaned forward, her voice lowering conspiratorially. “There’s a tale about Captain Redgrave, a notorious privateer who allegedly hid a vast treasure somewhere along the coast here. Many have looked for it over the years, but none of them were successful.”

Abby nodded thoughtfully. “And Bill thought he was close to finding it?”

“Yes,” Bea confirmed. “He even mentioned finding a clue recently. Something convinced him he was on the right track.”

Abby’s eyes sparkled with renewed determination. “Bea, you know more about this town’s maritime history than anyone. Would you help me look into this? We need to find out what Bill discovered and if it got him killed.”

Bea smiled eagerly. “Of course, dear. I’ll dig through my old records. If there’s anything to be found, we’ll find it.”

Later after the bookstore closed, Abby sat back, slowly forming a clearer picture of Bill’s death and what might have caused it. It wasn’t just a random act of violence; it was a mystery with hidden depths and silent threats. The story of Captain Barnacle Bill Higgins was far from over, and Abby was determined to bring it to light.

CHAPTER TWO

Morning dawned with a crisp, clear sky, the kind of day that usually lifted Abby's spirits. But today, a shadow hung over her. As she unlocked *Booked by the Bay*, the comforting scent of old books did little to soothe her restless mind.

Pip, her faithful one-eyed tabby, settled in his usual spot by the register. Abby absentmindedly scratched behind his ear, her thoughts elsewhere.

She couldn't shake the image of Captain Barnacle Bill Higgins crammed into his lobster trap. Bill had long been a complicated figure in Salty Shores, respected for his fishing skills, but not beloved. His gruff demeanor and ruthless business tactics had earned him plenty of enemies.

She straightened a display of new arrivals, her mind cataloging the list of people who might have had a grudge against him. There were rival fishermen who had lost competitions to him, former crew members he'd fired in fits of temper, and townsfolk who simply disliked his domineering attitude.

Abby couldn't shake the feeling of needing to return to the crime scene. She might have missed a detail or two in the initial shock of finding Bill dead on the dock.

Setting her mind to it, she decided to take another look at the harbor. Maybe there was something subtle she missed, something only a second glance would reveal. She had a couple hours before the morning rush; it would be time well spent.

Picking up the phone, she dialed Bea Kensington's number. Her voice crackled over the line, warm and reassuring.

"Good morning, Abby dear. How're you holding up?"

"I've been better, Bea," Abby admitted. "I can't stop thinking about Bill and what happened yesterday. I feel like going back to the harbor. There might be something we missed."

"Smart thinking," Bea replied. "I've been mulling over old maps and legends we talked about. I'll meet you at the festival grounds in half an hour. Two heads are better than one, especially given this tangled web."

"Thanks, Bea. See you soon."

Abby scribbled a quick note for her part-time assistant to handle the shop in her absence and then headed out, her mind already turning over possibilities. She was determined to uncover the truth behind Bill's death, no matter how deep the buried secrets.

The walk to the harbor was brisk, the salty air invigorating. As she approached the Lobster Festival grounds, she was relieved to see activities continuing as usual. The grounds were bustling with tourists and townsfolk, eager for the day's events despite the underlying tension.

She scanned the area, looking for anything out of place. It seemed the town had decided to hush the murder and maintain the festival atmosphere for the sake of the tourists who came to the festival every year.

Bea was already there, her bright eyes scrutinizing the docks with the intensity of someone much younger than her octogenarian status. "Morning, Abby. Ready to dive in?"

"Absolutely," Abby replied, feeling a welcome surge of gratitude for Bea's presence. Together, they approached the spot where Bill's body was found, ready to uncover secrets that may still linger.

They started a meticulous search, any small detail potentially a crucial clue to unravel the mystery of Bill Higgins' untimely demise. Abby knelt, examining the spot where Bill was found. She noticed a slight indentation in the sandy ground, as if something was dragged away. "Bea, take a look at this. What do you think caused it?"

Bea peered over Abby's shoulder taking in the scene. "Could be anything, but it looks like something heavy was moved. Maybe the trap itself, or something else."

Abby nodded, her mind racing. She stood and dusted off her hands. "Let's talk to people who were part of Bill's life. We need to better understand his last moments."

Their first stop was the harbor tavern. Jake, the bartender, was busy serving the early crowd but paused when he saw Abby and Bea. "Morning, ladies. Here about Bill, I assume?"

"Yes, Jake," Abby said. "You mentioned yesterday that Bill received a call and hurried to the docks. Did you overhear any part of the conversation?"

Jake scratched his head, thinking. “Not much, just bits and pieces. He seemed agitated, kept saying something about a deal and time was of the essence. Then he rushed out.”

Abby exchanged a glance with Bea. “Did he mention who he was meeting?”

“No, no one specific. Just that I should run the bar until he returned. Said it was urgent.”

The women exchanged glances. So, he didn’t plan to stay away for long.

Next, they approached a group of fishermen near the docks. One of them, Hank, was one of Bill’s long-time rivals.

“Hank, did you and Bill have any recent arguments?” Abby asked.

Hank snorted. “We argued all the time, but nothing serious lately. He’d been bragging about some big score; said I was small fish now. I figured it was just talk.”

Joe, another fisherman, stepped forward. “I was on Bill’s crew once. He was tough but fair. Lately, he seemed more on edge, like he was worried about something.”

“Worried? About what?” Bea asked, leaning in.

Joe shrugged. “Couldn’t say for sure. Just had that look about him, you know? Like he was expecting trouble.”

As they gathered snippets of information, Abby pieced together a complex picture. Bill’s big score, his agitation, the mysterious phone call—there were too many threads, and none of them tied up neatly.

Bea sighed, looking out over the bustling festival. “It’s like trying to catch fish with your bare hands—slippery and elusive.”

Abby smiled at the analogy. "We'll figure it out, Bea. We just need to keep pulling these threads until something gives."

As they watched the festivities continue around them, Abby felt they were on the verge of uncovering something significant. They just needed to find the right piece to make the whole puzzle come together.

"Do you think Finn might be able to tell us something useful? He spends a lot of time in the ocean himself," Bea contemplated, her eyes narrowed in thought.

"There's only one way to find out."

The marine research center was a modest building near the docks, filled with marine biology exhibits and research equipment. This is where they found Finn O'Malley, a marine biologist recently settled in Salty Shores.

Finn was examining water samples and looked up with piercing blue eyes. "Hello, Abby, Bea. What brings you here?"

"We're trying to piece together Bill's movements before he died," Abby explained. "We thought you might know the routes he navigated lately."

Finn nodded, setting his samples aside. "Bill was a creature of habit, but lately he took some unusual routes. I noticed his boat heading out to deeper water where he usually didn't venture."

"Deeper water?" Abby echoed, intrigued. "Any idea why he'd go there?"

Finn shrugged. "He was tight-lipped about it, but he seemed determined. Almost like he was looking for something specific."

As Finn detailed the areas Bill explored, the women were silent. Abby's mind whirled as she recalled that Finn had appeared in Salty Shores rather suddenly, and no one seemed to

know much about his past. He often went deep-water diving alone and took his boat out on solitary excursions.

Finn, catching their subdued exchange, raised an eyebrow. "Is there something else I can help with?"

Abby smiled, keeping her tone casual. "Just trying to understand the bigger picture. You've been quite helpful, Finn. Thanks."

As they left the marine center, Bea leaned closer to Abby and whispered, "Do you think Finn came here looking for something? Maybe it has something to do with Bill's death?"

Abby nodded thoughtfully. "It's possible. We need to find out more about Finn's past and exactly what he's searching for."

Bea couldn't help but voice her suspicions. "There's more to Finn than meets the eye. We should keep an eye on him."

Abby agreed. "Definitely. Let's gather more information about him and see if it ties into Bill's activities."

Back at Booked by the Bay, Abby and Bea reviewed their findings. The store was quiet, the late morning sun casting long shadows across the shelves.

"Finn's information about Bill's unusual routes is quite interesting," Abby said, jotting notes. "It suggests that Bill was looking for something specific in deeper water."

Bea nodded. "And we need to find out what else Finn knows—or what he's hiding."

"We should also talk to some of the other fishermen and townspeople," Abby suggested. "Maybe they've noticed something odd about Finn or Bill's recent behavior."

Bea leaned back, her eyes twinkling with the thrill of the hunt. "And while we're at it, let's see if we can dig up anything

about Finn's past. There has to be a reason he showed up here out of the blue."

Abby smiled. "Agreed. Let's start with the fishermen and work our way from there."

As they planned their next steps, Abby felt a growing sense of purpose. The mystery of Bill's death was proving more complex than she anticipated, but with Bea's help and their combined determination, she was confident the truth would unravel.

And as the sun set over Salty Shores, casting a golden glow over the harbor, Abby knew they were on the right track. The secrets of the sea were slowly revealing themselves, and she was ready to dive as deep as necessary to uncover them. Intrigued by rumors of sunken treasure, Abby delved deeper into local maritime history at the Salty Shores library.

CHAPTER THREE

When Bea left, Abby decided it was a good time to talk to other fishermen. She grabbed her notebook and pen, her mind already buzzing with questions. The docks were busy, the smell of fresh fish mixing with the salty breeze. The hum of engines and the clatter of gear and seagulls filled the air as she made her way toward the cluster of fishing boats.

Abby approached a group of fishermen gathered near the lobster traps, their faces weathered by years of exposure to the elements. She recognized most of them; Salty Shores was a tight-knit community.

“Morning, gentlemen,” she greeted with a friendly smile. “I was hoping to ask a few questions about Bill Higgins.”

The men exchanged wary glances. Hank, the grizzled fisherman who often clashed with Bill, stepped forward. “Morning, Abby. What do you want to know?”

Abby focused on keeping her tone neutral and her questions open-ended. “I’m trying to piece together Bill’s last few days.

Did any of you notice anything unusual about his behavior or fishing routes?”

Hank scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Bill was always a tough nut, but lately he’d been more secretive. Took his boat out at odd hours, went to spots we usually avoid.”

Abby nodded, taking notes on her pad. “Did he mention why he was changing his routine?”

Another fisherman, Joe, piped up. “He said he was onto something big; kept talking about a haul that would set him up for life. But never said what it was.”

Abby’s mind raced. Bill’s secretive behavior and talk of a big haul matched what she’d already heard, but she needed more specifics. “Did he ever mention who he was working with? Or if he had trouble with anyone recently?”

Hank’s eyes narrowed. “Bill didn’t trust easily. But I did see him arguing with a stranger a few days ago. Didn’t recognize the guy. They were by the dock, shouting about something.”

Abby noted the details. “Can you describe the stranger?”

Hank shrugged. “Tall, lanky, wore a cap. Didn’t see much else. Bill told him to stay out of his business.”

Abby noted the information. A mysterious stranger could be a crucial lead. Was this the same man she saw arguing with Bill? “What about Finn O’Malley? Did any of you see him with Bill?”

The fishermen exchanged uneasy glances. Joe spoke up again. “Finn keeps to himself mostly. Goes diving alone, takes his boat out for hours. But now that you mention it, I did see him and Bill talking a few times. Always looked serious, like they were planning something.”

Abby's thoughts churned. Finn's involvement seemed more significant with each new piece of information. "Did Bill seem worried or scared recently? Like he was in over his head?"

Hank nodded slowly. "Yeah. He tried to hide it, but you could see it in his eyes. Something weighed on him."

Abby carefully observed the fishermen's body language. They seemed genuine, their concern for Bill's fate evident in furrowed brows and somber tones. She made a mental note to follow up on the stranger Hank mentioned and to delve deeper into Finn's activities.

"Thank you for your help, gentlemen. If you remember anything else, please let me know," Abby said, distributing her contact information.

As she walked away, her mind was a whirlpool of swirling thoughts. The mysterious stranger, Finn's secretive behavior, and Bill's cryptic comments about a big haul all pointed to something significant. She needed to find out more about what Bill discovered, and why or how it led to his death.

After speaking with the fishermen, Abby headed back to the harbor tavern. She hoped that revisiting the scene where Bill spent so much time might reveal more about his activities and possibly even introduce her to the mysterious stranger he had argued with.

The tavern was a hive of activity, filled with locals and tourists alike. The cheerful atmosphere seemed at odds with the dark shadow of Bill's death hanging over the town. Abby stepped inside, scanning the room for familiar faces.

Jake, the bartender, spotted her and gave a nod. "Back again, Abby? Need more answers?"

“Yes, Jake,” she replied, making her way to the bar. “I’m hoping to learn more about Bill’s last days. Did you notice anything unusual? Any strangers around?”

Jake leaned on the bar, considering her question. “There was that tall, lanky guy Bill had an argument with a few days ago. But now that I think about it, there was another incident. Bill had a heated argument with Tom Callahan, one of his rivals.”

Abby’s ears perked up. “Tom Callahan? What was the argument about?”

Jake scratched his chin. “From what I heard, it was about money. Something to do with a big fishing trip they did for a company. Bill took his share of the profit, and Tom was furious. It got pretty intense. That’s all I know.”

Abby nodded thoughtfully. “Definitely, thanks, Jake. I’ll go have a talk with Tom.”

Armed with this new information, Abby headed to Tom Callahan’s boat. As she approached, she saw him angrily hauling in a net, his movements sharp and aggressive. The sight made her pause, but she steeled herself and proceeded.

“Tom,” she called out, trying to keep her voice steady. “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

Tom looked up, his face hardening as he recognized her. “What do you want, Abby?”

“I’m trying to find out who killed Bill,” she said plainly. “Jake told me you had an argument with him recently. You didn’t kill him, did you?”

Tom’s expression darkened further, and he threw the net down with a huff. “You think I killed Bill? Do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

Abby didn't flinch. "I'm just following the clues, Tom. You had motive. I need to know the truth."

Tom's shoulders slumped slightly, anger giving way to bitterness. "Bill and I went on a big fishing trip for a company. We caught a huge haul, but when it came time to split the profit, Bill took more than his share. Said it was for expenses. I was furious, yes. But kill him? No way, Abby. I wanted my money, still do. Killing Bill would be counterproductive, wouldn't it?"

Abby studied Tom's face, looking for signs of deceit. His eyes, though filled with anger, also showed genuine weariness. She sighed, feeling a pang of disappointment. "I suppose it would be. I'm sorry, Tom. I had to ask."

Tom's expression softened slightly. "I get it. You're trying to find the truth. But I didn't kill Bill. If you find out who did, let me know. I still want my money."

Abby nodded, turning to leave. "I understand. Thanks for your time, Tom."

As she walked away from Tom's boat, she was frustrated but still resolved. The lead didn't pan out the way she hoped, but it was still a piece of the puzzle. She couldn't afford to be disheartened. There were more questions to ask, and more clues to uncover.

The sun was beginning to set over the harbor, but Abby knew she had to keep pushing forward. The truth was out there, buried under layers of rivalry, secrets, and lies. She was determined to dig it up, no matter how long it took.

Back at Booked by the Bay, Abby sat down with her notebook, reviewing the day's findings. She still had more people to talk to and more leads to follow. But with each step, she felt she

was getting closer to understanding the tangled lines leading to Bill's death.

With a sigh, she closed her notebook and glanced at Pip dozing peacefully on the counter. "We'll get to the bottom of this, Pip. One way or another."

As the last light of day faded, Abby vowed to keep digging, questioning, and searching for the truth hidden somewhere in Salty Shores.

The next day, the bookstore was busy with the usual flow of customers. Abby chatted with them, recommending books and catching up on their personal lives, all while managing the store.

"Good morning, Mrs. Henderson," Abby greeted a regular customer. "How are you today? How's the garden coming along?"

Mrs. Henderson smiled, a twinkle in her eye. "It's flourishing, thanks to your recommendation of that gardening book. I've got tomatoes the size of baseballs!"

"That's wonderful to hear," Abby replied, noticing a book out of place on a nearby shelf. She adjusted it to align perfectly with the others. "And did you finish that historical romance you picked up last week?"

"Oh, it was a delight! Do you have anything similar?"

Abby thought for a moment, then led Mrs. Henderson to a nearby shelf. "I think you'll love this one," she said, handing her a book. "It's by the same author with just as much intrigue and romance."

As Mrs. Henderson left with her new book, Abby turned to a young mother browsing the children's section. "Hi, Sarah. How's little Timmy doing?"

Sarah looked up, grateful for the distraction. "He's growing like a weed! We're reading a lot of those animal adventure books you suggested. Do you have more?"

Abby nodded, pointing to a section. "Absolutely. You'll find a new series over there that's just as captivating."

Despite her warm interactions and the satisfaction of helping her customers, Abby's mind wasn't entirely on the shop. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Bill's mysterious death and the tangled web of secrets she sought to unravel.

As the last customer left, Abby called her assistant to watch the shop. "Emily, can you handle things here for a few hours? I need to step out."

"Of course, Abby," Emily replied, taking her place behind the counter.

Abby slipped Pip into a large tote bag and grabbed a scarf for her neck. She gave the store a final glance, ensuring everything to be in its proper place, and then hurried out the door. Finn's name had recurred in several conversations, and it was time to confront him.

Abby found him at the marine research center, sorting through documents. He looked up, his eyes growing warily when he saw her. "Abby, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

She took a breath, steadying herself. "Finn, your name keeps coming up in relation to Bill. I need to know about your connection to him and what you were both involved in."

Finn's expression shifted, becoming guarded. He motioned for her to sit, and after a moment's hesitation, she did. Pip peeked out of her bag, his single eye observing the room curiously.

Finn sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Alright, Abby. I suppose it's time to come clean. Bill and I knew each other from way back. We were partners in a marine research project a decade ago. We were looking for evidence of a rumored shipwreck, believed to be laden with treasure."

Abby's eyes widened. "A shipwreck? Is that why you came to Salty Shores?"

Finn nodded. "Yes. I found old maps and documents suggesting the shipwreck was somewhere off this coast. Bill and I had a falling out when he decided to keep the findings to himself, believing it was his ticket to riches. I came here to continue the search, hoping to find the shipwreck and prove its existence."

"So, you think Bill might have found something?" Abby asked, her mind racing.

"I believe he did," Finn admitted. "But he didn't share the details with me. I think he was planning to go after the treasure alone."

Abby absorbed the information, her mind piecing the puzzle together. "So, you think his death might be connected to this treasure hunt?"

Finn nodded grimly. "It's a possibility. Bill had a lot of enemies, and if word got out about the treasure, it could have made him a target."

Abby stood, her resolve hardening. "Thank you, Finn. That helps a lot. But I have to ask—were you involved in Bill's death?"

Finn looked her straight in the eye, his gaze steady. "No, Abby. I didn't kill Bill. I wanted to find the treasure, not destroy lives."

Abby studied his face, searching for hints of deception. But all she saw was sincerity and regret. "Alright, Finn. I believe you. But I need to find out who did it and why."

As she left the marine research center, she didn't know what to think. Finn's confession added another layer to the mystery, but it also brought her one step closer to the truth. The hunt for the treasure and the secrets of Salty Shores were more complex than she ever imagined, but she was determined to find the answer.

With Pip peeking out of her bag and the salty breeze prompting her, Abby walked back to Booked by the Bay, her mind already planning the next steps in her investigation. She knew she was on the right track, and she wouldn't stop until she uncovered the truth.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bill's wife, Margaret, said with a quavering voice, "... and he just seemed so distant these past few weeks. Like he was here, but his mind was somewhere else entirely."

Abby nodded sympathetically, her gaze shifting between Margaret and Bill's two grown sons, Jack and Peter, sitting across the kitchen table. The tension in the room was thick, Bill's death pressing down on all of them. Abby went to the Higgins' home to speak with Bill's family and gather more insight into his recent activities.

Jack, the older son, leaned forward, his expression a mix of anger and confusion. "I can't believe Dad would be involved in something so dangerous, Abby. He was always so careful about his work."

Abby took a deep breath, preparing to lay out what she had learned. "I believe Bill found something significant—a clue to a long-lost treasure. Several people mentioned him being secretive and taking unusual routes with his boat. He even had a heated argument with Tom Callahan over money."

Peter frowned; his hands clenched. "Tom Callahan? That old rivalry was always simmering, but I don't think it would have come to murder."

Margaret's eyes widened at Abby's words. "Bill never mentioned anything about treasure to me."

Abby nodded. "I don't think he wanted anyone to know. He likely thought he could handle it himself. But the hunt for treasure made him a target."

Jack's face darkened with realization. "And you think someone killed him for it?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Abby replied. "It's clear that Bill was onto something big, and it made him a target. Do you remember if he brought anything unusual home? Maps, old documents, anything that might give us more clues?"

Margaret hesitated, then got up and disappeared to another room. She returned with a worn leather-bound journal and a rolled-up map. "I found these in his study after—after he was found. I didn't know what to make of them."

Abby took the items, her heart pounding. She carefully unrolled the map and saw markings that matched the routes Bill had been navigating. The journal contained notes and sketches detailing his search for the shipwreck.

"This is exactly what I needed," Abby said, amazed. "These documents could hold the key to understanding what Bill found and who wanted him dead."

As she prepared to leave the Higgins' home, Abby felt a storm brewing—not just the literal dark clouds gathering on the horizon, but the sense that she was closing in on the truth. The

stakes were higher than ever, and the danger was real. But she couldn't turn back now.

"Thank you for your help," Abby said, hugging Margaret and shaking hands with Jack and Peter. "I'll keep you updated on what I find."

As she headed home, Abby began to piece together the mounting evidence they had so far:

There was the matter of Bill's recent change in behavior, noted by multiple people, which indicated he was hiding something. He had been taking unusual routes with his boat, suggesting a search for something specific in deeper water.

Both Jake the bartender and she herself witnessed Bill having heated arguments about money and a big score. Those conflicts pointed to a treasure hunt gone awry.

Then Finn O'Malley, previously her number-one suspect revealed his past connection with Bill and their shared interest in a rumored shipwreck. Finn admitted Bill had likely found something significant, which could have led to his demise.

The mysterious phone call Bill received at the tavern, overheard by Jake, suggested he was meeting someone about the treasure shortly before his death. And

Abby herself received a cryptic threat, warning her to stay away from the story, implying deeper and darker secrets at play.

She absently made dinner for herself and the cat, and later as she pored over the journal and map, she could feel the pieces of the puzzle coming together.

Bill must have found something suggesting the location of a shipwreck rumored to contain treasure. But someone else

caught wind of his plans—someone wanting the treasure for themselves.

What will you do now, Abby?

"I have to find out who else knew about this map and journal," she said firmly. "And I have to talk to Finn again. He might know something more about these documents."

Abby called Bea and invited her over for tea, hoping her friend's insights would help make sense of Bill's findings. They sat at the kitchen table with the journal and map spread out before them.

"Look at these notes," Abby said, pointing to the journal. "It's filled with marine terms and coordinates. I can't make heads or tails of it."

Bea peered over her glasses, scrutinizing the sketches and cryptic entries. "Bill certainly was thorough. But without understanding the marine language, it's all gibberish to me."

Abby sighed, frustration mounting. "I think Bill found the treasure. These notes suggest he was closing in on something significant. But there's also mention of someone threatening him, demanding a share."

Bea looked up sharply. "A partner, perhaps? Someone who felt entitled to Bill's discovery?"

Abby nodded. "That would explain a lot. The arguments, his secretive behavior ... it all points to a falling out over the treasure."

Bea took a sip of tea, contemplating. "We need someone who can interpret the marine language. Someone who can help us make sense of Bill's notes."

Abby's eyes lit up with realization. "Finn. He's the only one who can decipher this. We have to take these documents to him."

They found Finn back at the marine research center, examining some charts. He looked up as they entered, surprise crossing his face.

"Abby, Bea. Back so soon? I thought I was no longer a suspect."

"No, this time we need your help, Finn," Abby said, holding out the journal and map. "Bill left these behind. We can't understand them, but we think they hold the key to his death."

Finn took the items, his eyes widening as he scanned the pages. "This ... this is incredible. Bill was on the verge of finding the shipwreck. These coordinates and notes detail the search. But there's something else here."

Abby and Bea leaned in closer as Finn pointed to a section of the journal.

"Bill mentions a 'partner' who became threatening, demanding a share of the treasure. That partner could be our prime suspect."

Abby's heart raced. "That's exactly what we needed to know. But we have no clue who the partner is."

Finn nodded. "If Bill's partner was threatening him, they might have been in contact recently. His call records could reveal who he spoke to before he went to the docks."

"Excellent thinking, Finn. Want to tag along?"

But Finn held up two hands with a firm shake of his head that had both women laughing.

Abby and Bea arrived at the small brick police station in the heart of Salty Shores. The building was bustling with activity, managing the crowds and logistics of the ongoing Lobster Festival. Sheriff Dawson, a tall man with a stern but approachable demeanor, greeted them at the door.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, tipping his hat. "What brings you here today?"

"We need to know what you've found out about Bill's case," Abby said, cutting to the chase. "We've gathered some information, but we're hoping you have more."

Sheriff Dawson sighed and led them to his cluttered office. He gestured for them to sit while he took a seat behind his desk. "Honestly, I don't have much. My deputies are stretched thin with the festival, and we're trying to keep the town in order with so many tourists here for the week."

Abby leaned forward; her eyes intent. "Sheriff, I think Bill's death is tied to a treasure he was searching for. We need to look at his call records to see who he spoke to last. That could lead us to his killer."

The sheriff appeared skeptical but intrigued. "You think his last call might have something to do with his death?"

"After that call, he left the tavern and the next thing anyone knew, he was killed so it's a strong possibility," Abby insisted. "But I need your help to get those records."

Sheriff Dawson leaned back, his fingers drumming on the desk. "I can't just hand over call records. You'll need permission from Mayor Marjorie Plum for that."

Abby exchanged a glance with Bea. "We'll talk to her. Thank you, Sheriff."

The mayor's office was located in the old town hall, a grand building with white columns and a stately presence. Mayor Marjorie "Marmalade" Plum was known for her flamboyant style, and today was no exception. She greeted Abby and Bea in a bright pink hat adorned with feathers, her usual eccentric flair on full display.

"Abby! Bea! What a pleasant surprise," Marjorie exclaimed, her voice filled with enthusiasm. "What brings you here?"

Abby wasted no time. "Mayor Plum, we're investigating Bill Higgins' death. We believe it's connected to a treasure he was searching for. We need to see his call records to find out who he spoke to last."

Marjorie's eyes widened with interest. "A treasure, you say? How thrilling! But what do you expect to find in his call records?"

Abby explained, "The last call might tell us who he met at the docks. It could be the key to uncovering his killer."

Marjorie thought for a moment, then nodded decisively. "Alright, Abby. If it helps bring justice, I'll grant you permission. Consider it done."

Back at the police station, Sheriff Dawson handed over the call records with Marjorie's authorization. Abby and Bea scanned through the list, locking on the most recent call made by Bill.

"Here it is," Abby said, pointing to a name. "John Dick junior."

Bea raised an eyebrow. "John Dick junior? That name doesn't ring a bell. Do you think Finn might know him?"

"It's worth asking," Abby replied. "Let's go find him."

At the marine research center, they found Finn reviewing charts. He looked up as they entered, a hint of surprise crossing his face.

"Abby, Bea. Back so soon?"

"We have a question for you, Finn," Abby said seriously. "Do you know a John Dick junior?"

Finn's face went pale, and he looked away for a moment before answering. "Yes, I know him. He's ... well, he and his dad were involved in our treasure hunt. But his dad, John Dick senior, and Bill had a falling out years ago."

Abby's heart raced. "What happened between them?"

Finn sighed, clearly uncomfortable. "John and Bill were partners before I got involved. They found a clue to the treasure, but Bill didn't trust John. He thought John would double-cross him, so he cut him out. John swore revenge."

Bea's eyes narrowed. "So, John had a motive to kill Bill?"

Finn nodded reluctantly. "Yes. But I didn't think he'd actually go through with it."

"He may not but would his son?"

Abby felt a cold chill run down her spine. "We need to find both John Dicks. From the description, it was a young man arguing with Bill; it's likely the son. If he's back in town, he could be the key to solving this."

Finn reached for a framed picture that sat on the corner of his desk. A photo of fishermen standing on the dock. He turned the frame toward the ladies and pointed. "That's John senior and John junior standing next to Bill Higgins there."

Abby studied the photo, stamping the faces of both men into memory. Bea looked over Abby's shoulder, peering at the photo. With a nod and thanks, they headed for the door.

Finn looked troubled. "Be careful, Abby. John is dangerous. He's been obsessed with that treasure for years."

As Abby and Bea left the marine center, a storm was brewing on the horizon, with dark clouds gathering over Salty Shores. The revelation about John Dick added a new layer of complexity to the case, and Abby knew they were getting closer to the truth. But with each step forward, the danger seemed to grow.

"Let's find John junior," Abby said, determined, especially with information falling into place. "It's time to uncover the full story and bring Bill's killer to justice."

With the storm looming both literally and figuratively, Abby felt the urgency of their mission. The secrets of Salty Shores were on the verge of being exposed, and she was ready to face whatever challenges were ahead to see justice served.

The following morning, Abby arrived at Booked by the Bay to find the front door ajar. Her heart skipped a beat as she cautiously pushed it open. Inside, the normally pristine and orderly bookstore was in disarray. Books were scattered on the floor, shelves ransacked, and the cash register tipped over.

"Oh no," Abby whispered, her mind racing. She quickly checked her office at the back of the store. Papers were strewn everywhere, but thankfully, she'd left the journal and map with Finn.

Emily, her assistant, arrived moments later, gasping at the sight. "Abby, what happened?"

"Someone's trying to sabotage the investigation," Abby replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "They're looking for something, probably the journal and map."

As they started to clean up, Abby's phone buzzed with an unknown number. She answered hesitantly.

"Abby Vaughn," the voice on the other end announced low and menacing. "Stop digging into Bill's death. You have no idea what you're getting into."

The line went dead. Abby's hands trembled, but she quickly regained her composure. "This just confirms we're on the right track. We need to find John junior before it's too late."

The lobster race was the highlight of the Lobster Festival, drawing large crowds and a festive atmosphere. Despite the tension and danger, Salty Shores continued the celebration, unaware of dark undercurrents swirling beneath the surface.

Abby and Bea arrived at the docks, scanning the crowds for any sign of John junior. The race was about to begin, with brightly colored lobster boats lined up ready to compete. With excitement in the air, Abby focused on the task at hand.

The crowd erupted in cheers as the starting horn blared, signaling the beginning of the race. The boats surged forward, engines roaring as they cut through the water. Spectators lined the docks, waving flags and shouting encouragement to their favorite teams.

After Abby told Bea what had happened at the shop, she wanted to call the Sheriff but Abby told her there was no use. "Even if he wanted to send someone, I'm sure every deputy will be at the docks."

Bea nodded. "But let's be careful and stick together."

"Keep your eyes peeled," Abby said as they moved through the throng of spectators. "John junior might be here watching the race."

As they wove through the crowd, they spotted Sheriff Dawson overseeing event security. Abby made her way over to him.

"Sheriff, we need to talk," she said urgently. "I think John Dick junior is here. He might be involved in Bill's death."

The sheriff was instantly alert. "I'll have my deputies watch anyone acting suspiciously. We'll be extremely vigilant."

As the race commenced, Abby and Bea continued searching. Suddenly, Abby spotted a tall, young man lurking near the docks, eyes darting suspiciously. Her heart pounded as she recognized him from the photo.

"That's him, John junior," Abby whispered to Bea. "Let's go."

They approached cautiously, but John junior saw them and backed away. "Wait!" Abby called out. "We just want to talk!"

John junior hesitated, then turned and bolted. Abby and Bea chased him, weaving through the crowd. Sheriff Dawson noticed the commotion and followed suit, calling for backup.

They cornered John junior near an old warehouse, breathless from the chase.

"Why did you run?" Abby demanded. "What do you know about Bill's death?"

John junior was pale, his eyes wide with fear. "I didn't kill him! I just wanted my share. My father was obsessed with that treasure, and he made me swear to get it if anything happened to him."

"Then who killed Bill?" Bea demanded.

John junior hesitated, then broke down. "I don't know. But I received a threat, too. Someone told me to back off or I'd be next. I thought it was Finn."

"Finn?" Abby echoed, shocked. "Why would he threaten you?"

John junior shook his head. "I don't know. I thought he was my father's partner. Maybe he didn't want anyone else getting the treasure."

As the lobster race continued, the urgency escalated. Sheriff Dawson detained John junior for further questioning, but Abby knew they were running out of time.

CHAPTER FIVE

"We have to confront Finn," Abby told Bea as they watched the lobster boats speed through the water. "If he's behind this, we have to stop him before someone else gets hurt."

John junior was alarmed. "Who has the map and journal?"

Abby and Bea exchanged startled looks of shock, and exclaimed together, "Finn has the map and journal!"

Panic set in as Abby and Bea realized their grave mistake. "Come on," Abby said urgently. "We need to get to Sheriff Dawson and request a deputy to accompany us."

They hurried to Sheriff Dawson overseeing festival security. Breathless, Abby explained the situation. "Sheriff, Finn has the map and the journal; he might be the one behind Bill's murder. We need a deputy to come with us to the marine research center."

Sheriff Dawson didn't hesitate. "Deputy Harris, accompany these ladies and make sure they're safe. I'll coordinate backup."

Deputy Harris, a burly man with a stern expression, nodded and grabbed his radio. "Let's move."

When they arrived at the marine research center, it was eerily quiet. They rushed inside, greeted by one of Finn's puzzled coworkers.

"Can I help you?"

"We need to see Finn!" Abby said urgently.

The man frowned. "He just left in a hurry in his diving suit, packing some gear. He had an old book with him."

Abby's heart sank. "We need to find him right away! Do you know where he might have gone?"

The coworker shook his head. "I'm not sure."

Abby and Bea returned to John junior, held by the deputy sheriff. "John, Finn is gone; he has the map and journal. Do you know where he might have gone?"

John junior thought for a moment, then nodded. "If he's looking for the shipwreck, there's a spot he always talked about—an old dive site a few miles offshore. I can take you there."

Deputy Harris spoke up. "We need to move fast. Let's take one of the boats."

They boarded a fast boat and set off to the dive site, the wind whipping and storm clouds gathering ominously above. John junior steered the boat with a fixed expression, his eyes on the horizon.

As they approached the site, they saw Finn's boat anchored nearby. Deputy Harris readied his weapon, and Abby's heart pounded with terror.

"Stay behind me," Deputy Harris ordered as they pulled up alongside Finn's boat. They climbed aboard cautiously, finding

the deck empty and equipment indicating preparation for a dive.

They found him at the edge of the boat, adjusting his diving gear. He was surprised and angry to see them.

"What the devil are you doing here?"

Abby stepped forward. "Finn, we know you're behind this. You have the map and journal, and we know you killed Bill."

Finn's eyes slitted. "You don't know what you're talking about. Bill was a fool; he was going to ruin everything."

"Bill trusted you," Abby accused him, trying to stay calm. "But you betrayed him for the treasure."

Finn's face twisted with rage. "He didn't deserve it! He was going to cut me out, just like he did with John Dick senior. I couldn't let that happen."

Deputy Harris stepped closer, his hand on his gun. "Finn, it's over. Time to surrender peacefully."

Finn backed up to the edge of the boat by his diving gear. "You don't understand. That's my treasure!"

Abby realized they were about to lose him. She needed to push him further. "Finn, you killed Bill, didn't you? You lured him out here, then murdered him to keep the treasure for yourself."

Finn gripped his diving knife with white knuckles. "No! It wasn't supposed to be like this!" he shouted, his voice breaking. "Bill was too stubborn. He was going to ruin everything, all our hard work."

Abby saw a flicker of doubt in Finn's eyes and pressed further. "You've been planning this for years, ever since you found

out about the treasure. But Bill got in the way, didn't he? You couldn't let him take what you thought was yours."

Finn's eyes darted, looking for an escape, but the realization of his situation set in. "I didn't want to kill him," he said, his voice trembling, "but he was going to sell me out. He wanted to cut a deal with someone else, leaving me with nothing."

Deputy Harris moved slowly, his hand still on his gun. "Finn, drop the knife. It's over."

But Finn wasn't ready to give up. He shook his head, desperation growing. "You don't understand! That treasure was going to change everything for me, but Bill ruined everything; he left me no choice!"

Abby stepped closer, soft but firm. "Finn, you won't get away with this. The storm is coming in fast; there's nowhere for you to go. Think about what you're doing."

Finn's shoulders slumped, all fight draining away. He dropped the knife, falling to his knees. "It was supposed to be mine. All of it."

Deputy Harris moved quickly, handcuffing Finn and securing him. "You're under arrest for the murder of Bill Higgins."

The storm finally broke, with pouring rain and lightning splitting the sky, Abby felt a sense of relief that the nightmare was over. They found Bill's killer and uncovered the truth.

Back on shore, Abby and Bea stood together, watching Finn taken into custody. John junior approached them with relief and sorrow. "Thank you for believing me. I didn't know how serious this was."

Abby nodded. "We couldn't have done it without your help. Maybe now we can finally have peace in Salty Shores."

With the storm clearing, the annual lobster race reached its zenith. The bright red boat crossed the finish line first, and the crowd cheered. Spectators waved flags and applauded wildly as the winner raised his arms in triumph, beaming with pride.

Mayor Marjorie "Marmalade" Plum took to the stage, her flamboyant presence commanding attention. She wore a vivid purple hat adorned with peacock feathers, matching her equally vibrant dress. Her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, and her larger-than-life personality shone through as she addressed the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what a spectacular race!" Marjorie exclaimed, her voice carrying to the crowd. "Congratulations to our winner, who showed incredible skill and determination. This cup is a symbol of our town's spirit, and this year, I dedicate it to someone very special."

The crowd fell silent, listening intently.

"Bill Higgins," Marjorie continued, full of emotion. "Bill was as much a part of this town as the ocean and its currents. He will be deeply missed, and this cup is a tribute to his memory and his contributions to Salty Shores."

The crowd erupted in applause, their appreciation of his legacy evident. Marjorie handed the gleaming cup to the winner, who accepted it solemnly.

After the ceremony, Marjorie approached Abby and Bea, her flamboyant hat bobbing with every step. She pulled them aside, her expression sincere and grateful.

"Abby, Bea," she said, her voice softer now. "I thank you both personally for what you've done. Solving Bill's murder brings

a sense of closure to Salty Shores. Your unique sleuthing skills and determination made all the difference."

Abby smiled, with a warm sense of accomplishment. "Thank you, Mayor Plum. We're just glad we helped."

Marjorie nodded, her eyes shining with gratitude. "Your dedication to justice and your love for Salty Shores prevailed. This town is a safer and more peaceful place because of you."

Bea added, "It was a team effort, and we couldn't have done it without everyone's support."

Marjorie placed a hand on Abby's shoulder. "You've done more than solve a murder. You've reminded us all of the importance of community and looking out for each other. For that, we are all grateful."

Abby and Bea exchanged a satisfied relieved glance. The mystery was solved, with peace returned to Salty Shores. The town's appreciation and seeing justice served were their greatest rewards.

As the Lobster Festival ended, Abby knew that while her sleuthing had come to a close, she looked forward to the relative peace and quiet of her bookstore, and a secret part of herself would always be ready for future mysteries, should they occur. With Bea by her side, they were a formidable team, ready to spring into action the moment need arose. But in the meantime, a cup of tea and a good book would be perfect.



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