
DARK CLOUDS OVER SALTY SHORES

**AN ABBY VAUGHN MURDER
MYSTERY**

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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

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