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town



Abigail's

REVENGE

PAT BALLARD

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Prologue

Despair settled over Abigail Avery like the thick fog that was moving in and engulfing the valley outside the dingy kitchen window.

Her father had finally fallen into the drunken sleep that claimed him every night after supper. She listened to his ragged breathing, and knew that he'd be kicked back in that horrible old recliner that he refused to let her throw away. Just like he'd forbidden her mom to touch it when she was still alive.

Abigail raised a work-reddened hand and touched the soft, pulpy area around her right eye. It would be blue by morning, from the impact of his balled up fist, which had slammed against her face because she'd burned the cornbread.

Oh! How she hated that man! It would be so easy to kill him as he lay there in his drunken state. He'd never know what hit him.

She took the shotgun from the rack where it hung over the kitchen door. The cold metal of the barrel sent a thrill through her. She slid her hands up and down the smooth shaft as if she

were caressing a lover. A smile almost made it to her full lips, almost brought a light to her dull, smoky blue eyes, when she thought of the freedom this object could bring her. Almost. But Abigail Avery didn't remember how to smile. Smiling was as foreign to her as knowing how to live without fear.

She raked her hand through her unkempt, golden-red hair as a shudder wrenched her skinny frame. *Maybe tomorrow*, she thought, as she pushed through the squeaky back door and headed for the barn to finish her chores.

Night was closing in. The fog added an eerie cast to the old barn, which was about a hundred yards from her house. It nestled picturesquely in the little valley of green pasture that separated the house and barn from the dense woods that surrounded them.

She should be afraid to be out here alone, this time of day. She sensed there were reasons for her to be afraid. But for Abigail, there was nothing out here that could possibly be any worse than what she'd just left behind. And, besides that, she had her friend with her. Her shotgun.

She stood the gun just inside the barn door and made her way to Betsy's stall. The cow watched her approach with huge, sad brown eyes. Abigail knew that Betsy would soon "dry up" and wouldn't be able to provide the milk they depended on from her.

Abigail's dad had sold Betsy's calf a few weeks ago, saying they couldn't afford to feed both animals. Actually, they couldn't afford to feed Betsy as much as she needed. A fact that the cow's emaciated frame made apparent.

She caressingly brushed her fingers across the skinny ribs of the hungry cow and felt guilty as she sat down on the stool to try and leach out enough milk for her father's breakfast.

"I'm sorry, old girl," she cooed, as her cold fingers wrapped around the wrinkled teats of the faithful animal. Betsy drew in a long breath and let it out slowly, as if she were trying

to push as much milk out as she could for Abigail.

Abigail's hands froze in mid-squeeze. She could never mistake the familiar squeak of the barn door being slowly opened. There was barely enough light left in the old building for Abigail to see Betsy and the milk pail, so she couldn't see the door. What had caused it to squeak? Had someone come in, or had the wind just moved it?

Her gun! She'd left the gun standing just inside the door, like she did every day. Could she make it to the gun if someone was in the barn with her? She had to try.

Easing the milk pail down and quietly standing up from the stool, she silently made her way to the door. Enough dusty light sifted through the cracks of the aged building to let her see that no one was around. Heaving a sigh of relief, she hastened to the place where she'd left the shotgun. She could have found it if she'd been blind. She went through the same routine every night. Placed the weapon in the same spot night after night, as if just having it leaning against the wall would protect her. She reached the spot where she'd left it and grabbed thin air. The gun was gone.

Flattening her thin body against the weathered boards, she strained her eyes, willing them to see something—anything, any movement, any shadows from the interior of the barn.

Nothing.

Then she heard it. The unmistakable sound of a shotgun being fired.

The sound came from the house. Not taking time to think, Abigail broke into a run. As she reached the back door, some semblance of sanity caused her to stop. She couldn't just rush in and accost the person who had fired the gun! But *who* had fired the gun? And at *what*?

She eased to the kitchen window and peeked inside. Nothing seemed out of place. Making her way farther around the house, she stopped and peered through each window, still

finding nothing out of the ordinary. Darkness, thickened by the fog, had settled around her. Shivering from the unknown, Abigail hesitantly made her way up the steps, across the front porch, and quietly pushed her way through the front door.

Her eyes fastened on the scene she had played over and over in her mind, but never actually expected to see. A blood-soaked hole in her father's recliner exactly where his head should have been.

Particles of hair, skin, and other matter that Abigail didn't want to put a name to dripped from and clung to the dirty, age-worn leather of the old chair. Her shotgun lay across the top of his lifeless hands. There was no way he had shot himself. Someone had killed him and placed her gun on his body.

Abigail became aware of distant sirens. But how? Their farm was too far away from anyone's house for the shot to have been heard. And even if someone had heard the shot and called it in, there wasn't enough time for the sheriff to already get out here from town.

Eighteen-year-old Abigail Avery, who knew almost nothing about life, knew, in that instant, that she was going to prison for murder. She just didn't know why.

It took the jury exactly twenty minutes to return a verdict of voluntary manslaughter. Judge Haney asked her to stand as he read her thirty-year prison sentence.

As he read, Abigail looked the jurors directly in the eyes and promised each one of them, silently, individually, that she would be back.

Bile, hot and burning, rose in Desh Elliot's throat as he watched the hairy hand of Sheriff William Lucas guide the beautiful mass of red hair into the patrol car. He knew it would be a long time before he would see that hair again. Hair

that he'd watched blowing in the wind. Blazing in the sun. Falling gently around the beautiful face of the girl he'd loved ever since he could remember.

Love, unnoticed. Love, unreturned. Love, without hope. Because even as a child, and then as a young man, Desh Elliot knew that Abigail Avery didn't believe she was worthy of anyone's love. He knew, somehow, that she could not conceive of the idea that he, of all people, would love her.

Now, nineteen-year-old Desh Elliot knew what he must do with his life. While he waited for Abigail to serve her time in prison, while he waited for her to return to him, he knew what he must do.

For she would return. He was sure of that. He'd read and understood that message on her face as she'd stared down each juror. He had watched her enough, through the years, to read, feel, experience almost any emotion she could have.

And what she was promising those ass-kissing, paid-off jurors was that she would be back, and she would get to the bottom of this trumped-up charge against her.

Well, she wouldn't be alone when she returned. He'd make sure of that.

Chapter 1

Leaky Springs—30 miles. Abigail watched the sign go by as she shifted in the seat of the Greyhound bus bringing her back to the only place she'd ever known, except the prison she'd been in for the past ten years.

“Prison” is a harsh, scary word for some people, but for Abigail it had been a respite from the hell she'd grown up in. She soon found out that if she did what she was told, life was okay. At least when she did what she was told, she didn't get beat, anyway. There was always enough to eat, clothes to wear, and most of the time everyone left her alone.

And there was the library. The place that had become Abigail's best friend. She'd read every book in that library at least once, and some of them two times. Especially the law books. She'd studied and memorized cases where people had been railroaded into prison, like she had been. She'd embedded in her mind what her rights were as a wrongly imprisoned person. She knew how far she could go and how much she could get away with in the revenge department.

And now she was ready to wage war on a small Southern town. A backstabbing little hole-in-the-wall place that had no idea she was quickly making her way toward them to raise more hell than they'd seen in years.

She'd forced herself to stay on her best behavior in prison. Even when that bull-dyke Josey Jones put the make on her and she wanted nothing more than to slash her throat, Abigail managed to hold her temper and negotiate her way out of the situation. She found out that Josey had some nasty habits, like smuggling drugs into the prison, that she didn't want the warden to know about. So Abigail made a deal with her. She wouldn't tell anyone about the drugs if Josey kept her hands and mouth to herself. Josey knew that Abigail had wormed her way into the trust of the prison personnel, so she didn't have much of a choice. But on her last day, Abigail had told all. Let Josey suck on that!

So now, Abigail Avery was a free woman. Free. What a concept. A concept that she'd never experienced before. She'd never been free as a child. She'd been a slave to a mean, violent man who thought the women in his life were put on earth to wait on his sorry ass while he did nothing but make demands.

She'd read enough books to have an idea of what freedom meant, but when she tried to imagine it for herself, she felt no emotion. No sense of what it actually meant.

Probably because she still wasn't free. She was imprisoned by a determination to find out why she'd been sent to jail for a murder she didn't commit. She was consumed with the desire to get to the bottom of the mystery. To ferret out and make every jury member answer to her why they'd found her guilty, when they all knew she wasn't.

And she was coming back to Leaky Springs with an advantage. Hopefully, it would take the townspeople a while to recognize her.

To her amazement, when she'd started getting regular,

healthy meals, her body had filled out in all the right places. She'd changed from the emaciated slip of a girl who'd left town to a full-figured, well-endowed, voluptuous woman. At least, that's the way Josey had described her. The only thing that hadn't changed about Abigail was her hair, her mysterious blue eyes, and her flawless, fair complexion, which had gotten even better as her health improved.

The screeching of brakes brought Abigail out of her reverie. The bus pulled to a stop in the middle of the town square. Abigail's insides lurched to her throat as she became aware of the sameness of what she saw. After ten years, nothing seemed to have changed. Her heart pounded painfully as she stepped from the bus. This moment that she thought she'd been so ready for was scaring the hell out of her.

As she stepped from the bus, a gust of wind lifted her mane of red hair and swirled it around her head. Natural curls spiraled in all directions. She looked like Athena, the goddess of battle, with Medusa-like snakes twining around her head. And like Medusa, Abigail had returned to destroy—in order to recreate balance. To purify.

Desh Elliot's entire body jerked to attention when he glanced out of the window of his upstairs office in the century-old courthouse. Each morning as the Greyhound bus screeched to a stop, it was his habit to look down and see who got off the bus—wondering if each day would be the day she came home.

Today was the day. He'd recognize that hair anywhere! But the body was a body he would never have recognized. Full. Curvy. Luscious. His Abigail had grown up. And as recognition filled his brain, sexual awareness charged through his lower body. Abigail had *really* grown up!

And she was his, dammit! The thought of another man's hands on that body shot a blaze of anger through his system

that staggered him. He had earned the right to claim her. He had loved her when no one else did. He had patterned his future life for her protection. Her liberation. Her exoneration.

As his eyes followed her progress across the street, he claimed her. Branded her as his. Desh Elliot had learned in the past ten years that he was a strong man. A man to be reckoned with. A man who got what he wanted. And he wanted Abigail Avery. He wanted her name cleared. He wanted the scheming, low-life crooks in this small town brought to their knees. And he wanted, finally, to hold Abigail Avery in his arms and tell her how much he'd always loved her.

He swiped a large hand through his blond hair, as a gleam formed in his emerald green eyes.

"It's time to get this show on the road," he growled in a sultry Southern drawl as he reached for the phone.

As Abigail stepped onto the sidewalk in front of what had always been Ma Tucker's Cafe, the sudden opening of the tattered front door startled her. A burly man came out whom she immediately recognized as an older Judge Harry Haney, toothpick dangling from his fat, watery lips. Her steps almost faltered as she looked up into his sleazy brown eyes. Would he recognize her?

"Good morning!" he said, in a suggestive voice that Abigail remembered all too well.

"Hello," she mumbled, but didn't slow her pace.

"You're new in town, aren't you?"

She'd have to stop and answer him. If she didn't, it might throw suspicion on her. Thinking fast, she turned partially toward him and answered, "I'm just here for a few days checking out some real estate for a client."

He looked her up and down, and an old memory crept unwanted into her awareness. She fought to contain the shudder that threatened to vibrate her body. Fought to hide

the contempt she felt for this slimy man.

“Oh? And where might this real estate be located?” His body tensed with total attention. Abigail was sure he didn't recognize her. He showed no awareness of who she was, but a great interest in what she was saying.

“Oh, nothing in particular,” she covered quickly. “I just have a client that wants me to check to see if there's anything available in this area.”

“Ain't nothing much for sale in these parts, so you might as well pass that on to your client. But if there's anything else I can help you with, just let me know,” he said, giving her a knowing wink.

“Thanks,” she answered, and left before he could say anything else. She felt his eyes on her until she rounded the corner of the building.

She would save him until last, she decided. She already had enough on him to bring him down, but she wanted to get more, if there was more. And she wanted him to sweat as he watched his cohort go down all around him. This was going to be so sweet.

As she headed out of town, she dreaded the long walk to the farm where she grew up. It was at least two miles, maybe more, she couldn't remember. But she didn't dare ask anyone to take her out there. That would make it too easy to guess who she was. She'd just have to walk.

She knew the house was still there. She knew because at least every six months since she'd been in prison she'd gotten a letter from Don Morrison, the only lawyer in Leaky Springs, requesting that she sell her property to the town. The letter always requested the “land and house,” so she knew the house was still there. What she couldn't understand was why the small town of Leaky Springs was interested in buying her father's old rundown house and the forty acres of nothing that went with it.

That was almost as big a mystery to her as why she'd been framed and sent to prison. Was there a connection? The question had haunted her ever since she'd received the first attempt to buy the place, six months after she'd been imprisoned.

It was mid-April, but already getting humid and warm in southern Mississippi. Beads of sweat glistened on Abigail's forehead, and she quickly became aware of the rocks in the cheaply laid blacktop road as they ground into the thin soles of her shoes.

She set the suitcase with her few meager belongings in it on the ground, then carefully eased herself down on it to rest for a few moments. The distant chugging of a tractor brought back memories of a childhood when her mom was still alive and things weren't so bad for Abigail. Times when she was able to go outside and sit with her beat-up old rag doll and listen to the birds sing, and the neighbor plowing his field, getting ready to put the new crops in the ground.

So lost was she in her thoughts that the big black car was slowing to a stop beside her before she even noticed it.

"Would you like a ride, Miss?"

He was an old man now, Abigail realized, as she recognized Ted Elliot. His hair was snow white, and his eyes had taken on that bleary, watery look that some old people's eyes have. He'd been the principal of Leaky Springs High School. Might still be, for all she knew.

"Yes, I would love a ride, if you don't mind." Why not? She'd let him take her to the driveway of her old home. The house couldn't be seen from the driveway, so maybe he wouldn't connect the two of them. She doubted if he'd even known she existed as a person, much less where she had lived. The school hadn't taken a lot of interest in her, one way or another.

After placing her suitcase in the back seat of the car, she got in beside it and closed the door.

He didn't say a word. Didn't look at her. It was almost as

if he didn't remember she was in the car as he slowly navigated the narrow, curvy road, in some cases barely keeping the big car out of the deep ditches on each side.

As soon as she recognized the driveway to her house, she told him, "I'll just get out up here at this old rusty mailbox."

"Ah, yes. The mysterious Avery place," he mumbled, barely above a whisper.

"Mysterious?" she asked, as she opened the door to get out.

"Oh, don't mind me, missy, I'm just an old man who hears things when I shouldn't," he answered, and waited for her to get her suitcase. Obviously, for him, the conversation was over.

As Abigail watched the car disappear around a bend in the road, she had the sudden urge to run after him and make him talk to her. Did he really know something? Or was he just being dramatic?

Reluctantly, she turned and headed down the driveway. She'd walked several yards before she finally figured out what was niggling at her brain. She'd been gone from here for ten years. The property was still hers. So why was this driveway so well used? Multiple sets of tire marks made grooves in the sandy soil. Different types of tire marks. Who was using her driveway, and why?

With even more questions swirling around her head, Abigail stopped abruptly at the sight of the old house. It was the typical crackerbox style that was so popular in the rural South. Peeling paint had almost disappeared, leaving the weathered boards open and vulnerable to the elements. Oddly enough, all the windowpanes were still in place, with none broken. The steps that led up to the front porch were beginning to rot and crumble, but the boards on the porch still felt sturdy as she walked across to the front door.

Remembering what she had seen the last time she'd come

through this door, she was hesitant to push it open. Unlocked, it squeaked open at her touch, and she entered the dimly lit room. As her eyes adjusted to the faint light that filtered through the dirty windows, she could see that nothing had changed since the last time she was here, except ten years of dust that covering everything.

An old picture of her parents in their younger days still hung on the wall over the fireplace, just like it always had. That's one of the few things her father had kept that had any link to her mom. He'd gotten rid of everything else, angrily stating that she'd left him alone to raise their brat, so she didn't deserve to be remembered. But Abigail always suspected that he drank himself into a stupor every night looking at that picture. Because when she'd go in and see him, his face was always turned toward the photo.

Slowly, reluctantly, she allowed her eyes to make their way to her father's chair, which was in the exact place it had always been. She half expected to see him in the chair, glaring back at her. But he wasn't there. A sense of relief coursed through her, almost making her feel guilty. Almost.

She hadn't been allowed to go to his funeral, but someone had sent her the small write-up about it that had been in the Leaky Springs Gazette. She never knew who sent the article. She didn't really care. If someone had been trying to befriend her, they'd waited a little too long.

Abigail didn't inspect the old chair closely. She was sure the residue of his head still clung to and had become one with the dried, wrinkling leather. She'd take it outside and destroy it as soon as she could. She'd love to see it go up in flames, but she couldn't do anything to alert anyone that she was here. Not yet. She had to keep a very low profile.

Which meant she couldn't get the electricity or gas turned on. She'd even be afraid to try and use the old fireplace, since it had been unused for so long. She'd probably burn the house

down if she tried to start a fire.

She slowly walked through the house and marveled at the flood of memories that overtook her. Marveled that all of them weren't bad. Again, Abigail realized that while her mom had been alive, she'd formed a few good memories. She didn't open the doors to her room or her dad's. Not yet. She wasn't quite ready to face those memories. She'd explore the kitchen first, and then she'd go face her room and hopefully be able to fix the bed to sleep on tonight.

She looked out the dingy kitchen window at the old barn. It still looked exactly like it had ten years ago. It had never been painted, so there was no dried, curling paint to distract from its rustic form. She remembered that last night, and how she'd been milking Betsy when—*Betsy! What happened to Betsy?*

Running from the house, Abigail headed for the barn. As she creaked open the door, she was engulfed with the musky scent of old hay, old wood, and dried cornhusks.

Her eyes adjusted to the inside light that seeped through cracks and knotholes as she made her way to the stall where they'd kept Betsy. The stall where she'd been milking Betsy that night.

Opening the door to the stall, Abigail stopped in mortified revulsion. There was her stool and milk pail, just where she'd left them. And curled around them were the skeletal remains of the old cow. She'd been left to starve to death. No one had rescued her. Probably no one even knew she was there.

Slumping slowly to the ground, Abigail Avery finally wept. She wept for the faithful old cow who had died alone and hungry. She wept for her mother who had died at such a young age. She wept for the little girl who had never known a normal childhood or young adulthood. And, finally, she wept for a father who had lost his way somewhere in life and had turned out to be a mean old drunk.

When she had cried until no more tears would fall,

Abigail realized darkness was settling around her. How long had she been out here? As she attempted to get up, strong hands encircled her upper arms and helped her to her feet.

Abigail screamed and fought the person who had helped her stand. Fought with all her might until the quiet, calming voice finally made its way into her consciousness enough for her to know that danger wasn't imminent.

She looked up into a face that held an expression she didn't recognize. If she had to put a name to it, even in this dimly lit barn, she'd say it was concern. Compassion? Surely not pity. She could tell his hair was blond and his eyes were green. And he looked, somehow, vaguely familiar.

She should be afraid, but her fear had subsided. She was in the land of enemies. She was sure she had no friends in this place. And yet she wasn't gazing into the eyes of an enemy. She was also sure of that.

"Abigail Avery—" his voice was like the caress of a soft Southern breeze. "The time for crying is over. It's time for you to rebuild your life."

About the Author

Pat Ballard lives in Nashville, TN. She writes motivational romance novels to show that plus-size women can be just as sexy, romantic and exciting as their slim sisters.

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