

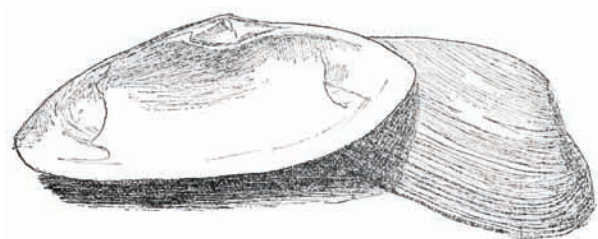
FRANCES
MCNAMARA

DEATH AT WOODS HOLE

An Emily Cabot Mystery



DEATH
AT
WOODS HOLE



Frances McNamara



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(top) Diagram of sea urchin, *Popular Science Monthly*, August 1881

(bottom) Marine Biological Laboratory class collecting specimens, 1895

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ONE

I couldn't leave that man in the stone tank with all those squid—even if it spoiled everything. And it did spoil everything. It was the start of what should have been a beautiful day. The sky over the harbor at Woods Hole was just beginning to lighten. It made me remember the fisherman who glided up to the dock the night before, while Stephen and I sat holding hands and watching a fiery sunset. “Red sky at night, sailor's delight,” he told us with a grin as he slid by.

I sighed at the memory. Through the wide open door to the tank room I could see the moored boats floating on the harbor. I could just hear the lapping of the water against stones down the hill from the laboratory. The tangy smell of salt barely tainted the air here. Just enough so that you knew you were at the seashore, not inland. It was not the strong smell of fish you breathed down on the rocks. But it was damp and chilly here among the stone tanks. There were six of them, large tanks, eight by ten feet each. The man was in the first one nearest the door. He was white and bloated, eyes open, bulging even. Small minnows swam by his face without stopping. He was no more than a coral reef to them. The line from Shakespeare, “those are pearls that were his eyes,” ran through my mind. There was no question of helping him. He was dead, very dead.

I had to force myself to look again. A squid crawled onto his chest and into the breast pocket of his gray suit. He was dressed in the same gray suit, white shirt, and tie that he always wore. I knew him. He was Lincoln McElroy. Perhaps if he had been a

better, more sympathetic person in life I would have felt more for him now, seeing his puffy face and thinning yellow hair floating in the tank. But he hadn't been a good person in life and, in death, he was just as obnoxious and unpleasant as he had been before.

"Emily, what are you doing here?"

I jumped at the voice. "Clara, you scared me."

She was tall, stately, a handsome young woman with dark hair swept up and away from her face. I couldn't help but envy that, as I was smaller and paler with mousy brown hair that frizzled up in the humidity of Cape Cod. Seen beside my best friend and classmate's high cheekbones and delicate nose, my oval face was plain. I thought of that now as I saw my features reflected in the water of the tank. Putting up a hand to button my blouse, I wondered what she was doing here. What were either of us doing here, when we should have still been asleep in the Snow Goose Inn, along with the other women scholars? When I left her there hours before, she was asleep, I thought, in her room on the second floor. Now she was stepping up to the tank. She looked down. I heard a sharp intake of breath. "It's Mr. McElroy. Oh, no."

I shook myself. Pulling away from my reflection in the water, which hovered like glass over the corpse, I hurried to her side. She stared down with horror and I felt her tremble as I put an arm around her. I shivered myself, but there was no time for sentiment. Taking her by the shoulders, I forced her to look at me. "Clara, listen. He's dead. There's nothing we can do for him now, but we need to get someone to help us get him out of there." She looked at me with a troubled expression. I shook her. "Listen to me. You and I just got up...early, and we were going for a walk. We came through here and we found him. All right? Clara, do you hear me? Do you understand?"

She pulled her gaze away from the body and looked at me again. "Yes. I was...I was just..." I realized she wanted to explain where she had been, but there was no time for that.

"Not now. We can discuss it later. It's irrelevant. We should

just say we were going for a walk. I need to go and get Professor Whitman or maybe Sinclair Bickford. You stay here.” Charles Otis Whitman was the head of the Marine Biological Laboratory. He was an eminent professor from the University of Chicago, which made me hesitant about approaching him. Sinclair Bickford, his graduate assistant, was more of a contemporary. Besides, he was courting our friend Louisa Reynolds back in Chicago, and Clara was working in his laboratory that summer.

I started to move away, but Clara grasped my arm. “No. I’ll go. I’ll find him.” She seemed just a little panicked. It was not like her, but then this was the first time we’d found a corpse together. I thought perhaps she didn’t want to be left alone with him.

“All right, I’ll stay here. But, Clara, do what I said. Just tell him we were out for a walk. An early walk.”

“Yes, yes.” She hurried away with one final worried look over her shoulder.

The water of the harbor was serene with just a light early morning wind. I heard sea gulls crying. What a horrible way to die. The large building had been part of a guano factory that produced fertilizer until it went bankrupt. Ships brought cargo to the dock just down the hill and the large stone tanks had been part of the manufacturing process. The harbor was quiet now, with only the tinkling of metal halyards from the masts of several pleasure sloops and the two schooners used for hunting specimens for the laboratory. I remembered there was an outing planned for the afternoon, which I’d been looking forward to. Stephen had promised me that he would leave his laboratory and join me.

The crunch of footsteps on the gravel path told me I would no longer be alone with the poor departed Mr. McElroy.

“Miss Cabot, dear me. Miss Shea found me on the way to the Mess. I cannot believe such an unfortunate thing could occur. Where? Oh, my yes, I see. Doctor, if you would help me, we cannot leave him there. How can this have happened? Luckily we ran into Dr. Chapman as we came up the hill.”

There was a messy struggle to get poor Mr. McElroy out of the tank. Stephen carefully felt the man's head and tipped him up. Obviously the body was stiff and did not want to bend. The short Professor Whitman, with his carefully groomed white hair and pointed white beard, attempted to grab the dead man's feet but had trouble getting ahold of them. I rushed to help him. We made a comical group trying to lever up the sodden corpse and barely held on to the slippery body as we transferred him to the canvas sheet Clara had sensibly spread out on the cold cement floor.

"How unfortunate." The professor wheezed a bit, bending over to get his breath. "He is quite dead, Dr. Chapman?"

Stephen knelt by the body, shaking his head with regret. "For quite some time. That's why he's so stiff."

"Most unfortunate." The professor straightened up. "I cannot imagine how it happened." He looked around. The tanks were laid out in regular rows down the length of the large, cool room. They came to just above the knees. How could someone stumble into one? And if he did, why wouldn't he just sit up? There were only a couple of feet of water in the tank. "Did he drown, Doctor?"

Stephen was examining the man's face. "I can't tell without dissection. Emily, come here, just help me turn him." His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his shirt unbuttoned at the top. I helped him turn the man onto his side and felt Stephen's hand reassuringly over mine. My heart was beating fast, but that calmed me. He looked up at the professor. "Not as much water coming out of his mouth as I might expect. There are other anomalies..." He contemplated the body, poking it here and there. Then we set McElroy on his back again. I was dripping as Stephen helped me to my feet. He squeezed my shoulder before letting me go and I felt his breath on my cheek, tempting me.

"Doctor, if I might ask you to remain, I will take the ladies to the Mess and telephone for the local authorities. This is most unfortunate." Despite his learning, the eminent scientist was at a loss for adjectives to describe this disturbing event. No one had

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found a dead body in a specimen tank before and it was at odds with all of the work done here.

The professor squired us down the hill to the wooden structure that housed the common dining room used by all the scholars and staff of the Marine Biological Laboratory. A few early risers were inside and I could smell bacon frying. My stomach was not ready for it, so I dropped down on one of the painted wooden rocking chairs that sat on the deep veranda overlooking the harbor. Clara took the one beside me. The professor hurried inside and I turned to my friend, only to find her trembling, as if overtaken by great emotion. She gripped the arms of her chair and rocked convulsively. Her shoulders shook silently, as if she were fighting to keep back sobs.

“Good lord, Clara,” I burst out. “Whatever was Lincoln McElroy to you?”