



## CHAPTER 1

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# SALEM

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## Eight Years Later, Present Day

Salem was pretty sure there was a dead body on the beach. She couldn't say with full certainty, not with the lack of light on the moonless, cloudy night. But from her vantage point at the top of the cliff, seeing the dark lump suspiciously shaped like a human made her certain enough to investigate.

It wasn't just about her interest in the subject or her major that was leading her to confirm her suspicions. For as long as she could remember, she had wanted to study criminology, specifically forensics, and understand death in detail. But no, it wasn't only her academic curiosity leading her. It was the thought that her sister had once been that dark mass on a beach somewhere and no one had seen her for a while. Nothing else explained why she was making her way toward it in the middle of the night when she should have been in bed. In her place, someone else would have immediately called the cops. Someone

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else would have immediately turned around from the edge of the cliff and run back to campus. Someone else would have definitely accepted the danger in the situation, especially after the last two years.

Anyone but her.

No, not Salem Salazar, the black sheep of her family, the black mark on their lineage, the black scar on their reputation. Though, she wasn't the one with the most notoriety anymore. Who would've thought? Not her.

Her mother hadn't wanted her to enroll in Mortimer, and Salem had promised that she wouldn't do anything during her time at the university to bring any more gossip to the Salazar name. But there she was, walking down the steps carved into the side of the cliff, with her phone's flashlight guiding the way.

The ground was moist under her boots, the soil pressing down easily between the stones as she carefully made her way down the cliff. She had discovered these steps two nights ago on her evening stroll across the campus. Having been at Mortimer for only a week, she was enjoying spending time in the late evenings checking out the property rather than going into town and getting drunk on orientation week like most of the other students. The woods on one side of the campus, the sea at the front, the quiet buildings at night felt more familiar to her than the hordes of students with newfound freedom.

The sound of the waves and wind made her pause on the steps. Salem took stock of herself, realizing she should have worn something rainproof because the light mist in the air was going to thicken soon. She didn't like the rain, didn't like the feeling of moisture on herself, which sucked especially since she had the next few years to spend on a cliffside coastal campus. But she had to move past it, especially in the kind of profession she hoped to go into.

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She looked back at the way she'd come, realizing she was almost halfway down. No sense in going back, especially when there was possibly a body waiting for her. Though she wasn't particularly overjoyed that someone had died, the investigative insects that infected her brain couldn't let the opportunity for information pass.

Just to be sure nothing was lurking around, she cast her gaze over the dark, narrow beach barely visible under the clouds, seeing nothing but a small lump.

Well, then.

Slowly, she made her way down again, holding her phone up in one hand to light the way and leaning against the side of the cliff with her other to keep her balance. After a few minutes of silently descending, she finally stepped onto the sandy shore and let out a breath. Physical exertion wasn't something she enjoyed at all, but it was a part of the package, especially on a campus this vast.

Taking another breath to steady herself, she turned to immediately make her way toward the dark lump. It was certainly a body. She just had to verify if it was animal or human.

Her heart began to pound with each step, the lump taking the shape of a human body, and something giddy filled her veins. She knew it was not the natural reaction to witnessing something like this. She had been told that more than enough times through the two decades she'd been on this earth. It still tore at her sometimes, what she felt and what she was supposed to feel, the dichotomy sending her own moral compass spinning. But the closer she got to the corpse, the more the compass stilled, and for the moment, alone in the night and away from social expectations of who she should be and should have been, she let herself feel exactly what she felt.

Excitement.

Not just for a dead body, but for the information she might be

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able to glean from it, the possibility of finding another piece to the puzzle she had been working on for two years, all alone.

Finally reaching the mass, she came to a stop a few steps away, and let her brain do what it loved doing the most—observe, analyze, conclude.

Putting the phone flashlight on her subject, she tilted her head to the side in an instinctive habit she had never been able to get rid of, and opened her notes app, letting her eyes rove over everything clinically.

*-Female.*

*-Young, maybe late teens or early twenties.*

*-Light hair, color undetermined, length mid-back maybe? Ripped from the root in a place near the scalp. Caught on something accidentally or deliberately pulled?*

She paused, realizing the body wasn't too wet or swollen, as she would've expected from one that had washed up on the shore. Frowning, she went down on her haunches and leaned down, seeing a small dark pool behind the skull. Which meant . . .

Salem looked up at the cliff, tall, imposing, and higher up than she had realized.

*-Blood around skull indicates blunt force trauma. Impact from height or an object?*

The woman's hands were by its sides, dark circles around its right wrist.

*-Dark, thin bruises around right wrist look old, possibly one week. Marks from bondage or captivity?*

A small, almost imperceptible tattoo was behind the woman's ear.

*-A symbol of some kind behind her ear, unclear. Size of a grain of rice.*

*-Murder or suicide?*

*-Is this the scene of the crime? The blood is minimal, so did the sand ab-*

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*sorb most of it with the moisture or was she moved from the actual scene?  
If she was moved, then why? To dump or to stage?*

She walked slowly around the body, taking notes, engrossed in her task.

That may have been why she didn't realize she wasn't alone sooner.

Something in the air shifted, molecules moving and rearranging themselves to accommodate another physical form, and she felt the shift of those molecules behind her. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, sweat mixed with the fine sheen of moisture, the awareness of another person breathing in her vicinity seeped in as a centuries-old human instinct for survival blared inside her.

It was then, standing beside a body with her flashlight on like a beacon, that she realized how it could appear to someone else on the outside watching in. She would look like a perpetrator, or at least suspicious, to anyone.

Unless it was someone who knew she wasn't, because they were involved.

The breeze lifted the strand of her curly hair that had escaped her usual haphazard bun, the scent of the sea and salt getting stronger the more aware she became of someone else.

She quietly turned her flashlight off, plunging the area into sudden darkness, and blinked rapidly to adjust her eyes behind her square glasses to the blackness.

"Stay still."

The masculine voice spoke from behind her, not too close but not too far behind.

The sound, strong and husky, merged with the waves like the sea itself rumbled and spoke.

*Sea and smoke.* Her brain noted the words elicited as a reaction to the auditory stimuli.

There was another sound.

*Rustling paper*, she made note.

And then the sound of something scratching over it. She knew the distinct sounds very well because she liked background noise to help her focus when she was working on something. Sounds had always elicited some kind of a reaction in her brain.

*What is this man doing?* Unless he was planning to murder her with a paper cut, she didn't understand why he'd asked her to not move. And why was she even following his command?

She opened her mouth, thinking of the words she was going to say, then called them back. She wasn't much of a talker. In fact, until recently, she had completely given up speaking for a few years. It was only two years ago that she had begun again, though not as frequently as expected, and only after . . . she shook it off, not letting herself go there while being in the situation she was in.

*Stay in the present*, she reminded herself as she did often, biting her cheek in a routine that worked in grounding her.

"Don't come closer or I'm calling the cops," she threatened him, her voice even, almost icy, none of her inner turmoil reflected on the outside.

"I've called them already," he scoffed, the scratching sound on paper picking up speed. "The question is, why haven't you? You got curious, didn't you?"

His tone shifted in the last of the words, turning softer, more sensual, almost cajoling. That tone did something to her brain. As someone sensitive to auditory information, she could understand why, but it didn't explain the little shudder that ran down her body.

It was dangerous, his voice, a weapon sheathed until he chose to expose it. She could imagine him in a time of empires, using that voice to make a mob mad, inciting them to a riot, influencing au-

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diences to herd to an arena, tempting them to step inside, cajoling them to their own demise as he chopped their heads off clean.

“Curiosity is a perfectly healthy response,” she said instead, keeping her own voice low and steady, trying not to let his words pick at the scabs of her mental wounds.

A deep chuckle, more scratching on paper, and then, “I wouldn’t call what either of us are doing here healthy.”

Maybe her metaphor was wrong. Literature wasn’t really her strong suit after all. His voice was more unexplored sea than bloodied sand, like the fables of creatures in the oceanic dark, luring unsuspecting sailors, dragging them to the depths.

Her poetic thoughts surprised her. No one could ever accuse her of being so. In fact, she was the opposite, completely methodical and rational. This, whatever these thoughts were, was a novel experience and not a good time to have one.

It was disturbing. She didn’t like it.

Steeling herself and her mind, her eyes finally having adjusted to the night, she focused on his silhouette, whatever little she could see of it. He stood a few feet away from her, a tall, broad form against the lighter grayish backdrop, one of his hands holding a notebook of some kind and the other moving freely all over it.

He was *drawing*?

*What in the freaking hell!*

“You . . . you’re drawing?” she asked him, the suspicion clear in her tone. If he was, it was an act indifferent to a degree even she didn’t reach. While she was detached when looking at death and examining things, this was a different response, one she didn’t understand—he was feeling and yet unbothered.

His hand didn’t pause but she saw him glance up once, the movement making something else about him visible to her eyes—longish hair and a killer jawline, pun’s intention yet to be decided.

“It’s art.” He shrugged those broad shoulders, as though that explained his bizarre behavior, speaking in that low, soft tone again. “Let your hair down.”

The audacity and sheer bizarreness of the whole encounter had a huff of unbidden laughter escape her chest. She almost raised her hand to touch the spot in the center where the sound had come from, but didn’t want to betray any vulnerability to him.

“Go fuck yourself,” she replied in the same flat, icy manner, almost calling the words back. She never cursed, not on the outside at least. It was a mix of both not speaking most of the time and the manners with which she’d been raised. Most of them hadn’t stuck, much to her mother’s dismay, but this one for some inane reason had. It was funny though. Opening dead bodies? Sure. Saying *fuck* in public? Absolutely not.

He chuckled again, the sound waves hitting a vibrato in her chest. “I will when I get home, thanks.”

Lord, he was insufferable. And possibly psychotic. Who the hell laughed and drew over a dead body? As weird as she was, she didn’t disrespect the dead. They could invade dreams and steal peace of mind. She knew because they had done it to her dreams and peace.

“Loosen up, little asp,” he spoke, finally closing the notebook and sticking the pen or pencil, whatever it was, behind his ear, bringing her attention to something glinting in it. A piercing?

Then his words penetrated. *Asp*? Why the hell was he calling her that odd name?

Salem was squinting, trying to see more as her mind worked, when he was suddenly in motion, taking a few steps to close the distance between them. She stiffened, her hand tightening over her phone in an attempt to keep calm and not let her erratic thoughts overwhelm her. For all she knew, she was going to join the body at her back.

“Don’t come any closer,” she warned him again, pulling her



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phone up and pointing it at him, backing away slowly, away from the body and toward the cliff steps she'd come down.

Sounds of people and flashlight beams swinging came from the end of the beach. The authorities most probably.

He stopped moving, but she felt his eyes on her, watching her motion almost hypnotically.

Logic won over foolishness. She didn't know this man, didn't know why he was goading her, and the circumstances in which she had met him were more alarming than alluring, or so she told herself as she finally reached the bottom of the steps.

"Who are you?" The words escaped her before she could put a stop to them, echoing in the silence that followed.

She paused a heartbeat, then the next, waiting for some kind of reply. That was her usual trick with everyone—ask a question and hold out for the answer. People usually filled it out in a few beats, unwilling to sit in the uncomfortable silence. Yet he didn't speak, didn't rush to fill it. In fact, he seemed to be waiting *her* out.

The lack of an answer settled between them, the question ringing heavy. Was he silent because he didn't want to tell her? Or was he just toying with her with the same disregard he had shown in the previous few minutes?

Who the *hell* was this guy?

She couldn't explain why she did what she did next. It could have been the heavy silence unnerving her, a rare occurrence in her lifetime, or it could have been some deep-rooted instinct to preserve evidence, or her own curiosity he had captured in the encounter. Whatever it was, it made her open the camera on her phone and press the button.

Bright white flash blinded her momentarily, making her blink rapidly to clear her vision, the sound of the shutter alarmingly loud for a split second before it died under the rushing waves.

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“Tsk tsk tsk.” His chiding pierced the air. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

She swallowed but stood her ground.

He began casually walking backward, to the opposite side of the beach. “You just put yourself smack in the middle of a game you know nothing about.”

Salem shook her head, not understanding his cryptic words but not needing to, not with that dark tone. Maybe she had been stupid, but she wanted the evidence and damn him if he thought she wasn’t going to keep it.

Turning on her heels without a word, she ran up the steps, back in the direction of the campus, away from the mysterious stranger and the approaching authorities, and the dead body on the beach.