

PROLOGUE

Most days Saleena Salah longed to walk the beach of white sand, to let the turquoise waters rush across her feet, to breathe in the thick, salty air, but today was different. She wasn't lathered in sunscreen or taking her skimboard into the water. Today she was working. Instead of a swimsuit under a linen cover with a matching pair of flat sandals, she wore a business blouse, pair of slacks, her holstered gun and her detective shield. She corralled and fastened her thick hair into a bun, but still couldn't contain every one of the million loose springs.

"Good morning, Jared. Odd one, huh?" she asked the Manatee County sheriff's deputy who raised the yellow crime scene tape for her. She bent at the waist and slipped smoothly beneath.

"Bizarre is more like it." He pointed to his right, out toward the sea shore. "Lt. Davis is running point."

Salah saw her rotund supervisor, Lance Davis, standing with two other detectives. Between them, a square had been erected with four small posts and more crime scene tape. It looked like the protective structures built to defend sea turtle nests from humans' destructive feet. But turtle nests weren't typically that close to the water.

She looked beyond her peers. The beachline, usually bustling with activity and dotted with tents, umbrellas, towels, coolers, and the like, were all gone. She'd never seen the seaside so empty. All that remained —

for about a mile down the shoreline — were more of the same type of four-post structures.

“Lieutenant,” she greeted her supervisor, interjecting herself into the group of three.

“Sal, you made it.”

She detected a layer of displeasure. Davis hated when detectives were late to crime scenes. “I was in court.” She ignored his tone. “What do we have?”

“Cord and Dallas will fill you in,” Davis said, motioning to her detective peers, Cordrey Phelps and Alex Sanchez.

Everyone in Davis’ unit had a nickname. That is, everyone except him. He was simply called *lieutenant*. Everyone called her Sal because her first and last names both began with the same three letters. Cord’s name was self-explanatory, like Sal’s, but Alex was called Dallas because that’s where he grew up.

“Walk her down the beach and show her. It’s way too hot in this goddamn sun, even for autumn,” Davis said. “Wife would kill me, being out here without a hat or sunscreen. If they cut more skin cancer off my face, I’ll need plastic surgery just to look normal.”

“What makes you think you don’t need it already?” Salah joked.

That was one of the good things about Davis. He was egotistical enough that you had to call him lieutenant, but he didn’t mind someone taking a jab at him now and again. You just had to pick your timing.

Davis laughed, but didn’t respond. He just turned, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and headed back toward the parking lot.

Dallas joked outside of Davis’ earshot. “I’m not sure there’s enough plastic surgeons in all of Florida to fix all that.”

It was one thing to take a humorous swipe at the lieutenant while staring him in the face, but Salah wasn’t going to do it behind his back, even though she knew Dallas was joking and meant no harm. As a female in the department, she had to religiously protect her reputation. She had

fought extremely hard to prove herself and continued to do so every day. The last thing she needed was to be seen or heard talking behind someone's back and be marked a petty, gossipy female. If the lieutenant ever thought she was undermining him, then she'd never be promoted again.

"I heard they found a hand. Just a hand. What is all that up there?" Salah asked, pointing at all the four-post structures down the beach.

"There was just a hand. At first," Cord said. "Then a foot. Then another hand, a lower leg up there, and a couple more hands."

"Then another foot. A thigh," Dallas continued.

"Then yet another hand. There's two arms down the way too." Cord chuckled, not out of humor but out of the weirdness of the situation. "Damndest thing."

"Holy shit," Salah said. "What time is it?" She checked her watch. "We only have about two hours before high tide. Is CSU coming out?"

"Yeah, everyone is on the way. Holmes Beach PD is coming. Bradenton. All the neighbors."

They stopped at the next four-post. A water-bloated foot laid there. Covered in sand, damaged by the water, and nibbled by fish. Toes sticking straight up in the air. It looked almost like the rest of the person's body was buried in the sand, and only the foot stuck out.

Salah squatted down for a closer look.

"Ain't nothing to see, Sal," Dallas said.

"Just the bone," she said.

Cord snickered. This time, he found humor, not weirdness. Salah sensed the weirdness this time because she knew his sense of humor was juvenile.

"Whatcha mean?" Dallas asked.

"It was cut. Like, with a saw. Nice and clean."

She stood up and looked down the coast again, thinking about the count of what was found.

“There are five hands here, you said?” she asked.

Dallas lifted his notepad and pushed up his sunglasses to read his writing. “That’s right,” he confirmed.

“So, we’re at least talking about three people here.”

Cord did the math. “True.”

She turned and looked out at the clear water, wondering when the sixth hand would wash up, when the other four arms would come ashore, if there were torsos bobbing around out beyond the waves, or heads even?

“We may want to get the Coast Guard out here,” she said.

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The nights were tricky. Attacks of all kinds broke out. Scores settled. New alliances made. Old alliances broken. Nerves on edge. Sleep seldom restful. Careful eyes ignore what they see. The guards seemed to only be present if the warden felt something was brewing. Such was nighttime life in the general population, bootcamp style bunking house at the Florida State Prison. None of that mattered to Kenneth Lamont Duncan, who operated above all of that activity, who generally caused the majority of that activity. This prison belonged to him as much as it did to the Warden. In some ways, it belonged to him more.

The rigged tattoo gun aimed at him. The motor had been ripped from a CD player and attached to the empty barrel of an ink pen. The power for the gun came from a battery pack the artist had purchased in the commissary.

“You said you were ready,” Duncan objected to the wait.

“I need fire for the needle.”

“You need to hurry.”

The part of the prison that belonged more to the Warden were the guards – *most of them* – and the rules. If they were caught in the act, the

artist would get 90 days ripped off his good time served and Duncan would get solitary. Neither mattered to Duncan. He liked being alone, and the artist accepted the risk simply by being the in-house artist. However, getting caught would complicate his plan.

The artist used a spoon to pop the cover of the electrical socket. Nimbly, he jammed a pencil behind the outlet and exposed an electrical wire. He'd done this a hundred times. He used the metal eraser bracket to generate a spark. He pushed a sheet of toilet paper against the wire and threw another spark. The tissue lit up. He dropped it into an empty can of boot polish, where it combined with a small amount of cooking oil his contacts in the kitchen smuggled for him. He dropped a black checkers piece into the can then added more oil. While the plastic piece melted, the artist took the spring from a pen and unraveled it as best as he could. He then held it over the fire and used the heat to straighten the metal. Soon the spring popped, splitting it into two pieces. The artist took the sharper of the two spring pieces and sanded the edge, making it the ideal needle – *under the circumstances*. He inserted it into the tattoo gun. As he secured the needle, the fire began to die, leaving behind the soot of the checkers piece.

“Show me,” the artist said, taking another tissue and another can of cooking oil to use as lighting for the job at hand.

Duncan ripped apart his jumpsuit, separating the Velcro holding the two sides together.

“The heart. Cover it.”

“Are you shitting me?”

Duncan nodded.

“That took us for-fucking-ever.”

Duncan didn't respond. He didn't have to. He said what he wanted. No objection would change his mind.

“I'll need more checkers pieces.”

The artist clicked the power on the motor. The needle kicked into action. He dipped the ink and went to work. He traced a circle around the heart tattoo, dipping the needle when necessary. Then his agile hands began coloring in the circle, covering the heart tattoo.

“I was really proud of this work,” he said.

Duncan remained silent. Grinded his teeth. Refused to acknowledge the pain.

An hour passed. Four additional checkers pieces were melted and used. The needle dulled, and the pain increased. And the work was only half finished.

“I need to change the needle.”

He killed the power, which exposed the sound of nearing footsteps.

“Shit,” the artist said, scooping up his equipment and blowing out the fire acting as their light.

“Shut up,” Duncan demanded, grabbing the artist’s arms.

They could hide in the darkness. There was a possibility that the guard wouldn’t see them. It was a slim possibility, but it was real. With luck, the guard was a friendly guard – one that kept the peace but allowed the prisoners freedom. But that possibility was slim, too. The warden was weeding out those guards and replacing them with others who were more aligned with his regulations.

The cone of a flashlight came into view. *We’re caught*, Duncan thought. Three more measured steps and the guard and his flashlight were right in front of Duncan. He raised the light.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” Duncan asked.

“I’ve been here long enough to know who you are.”

“So you’re moving on and letting us alone?”

“Afraid not.”

The guard reached for his radio.

“It’s not done yet,” Duncan said.

The guard stopped and asked, "What's not done?"

Duncan put his hand over his heart.

"I'm sure after your solitary stint, you'll figure out how to finish
it."

The guard radioed for assistance.

No, Duncan thought, *this will have to work*.