

# Welcome to The Salty Manor

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Dark malicious clouds shroud the once clear sky in a blanket of darkness. I incline my head upwards just in time for a roll of thunder to erupt from the clouds, making me jump.

I chose to come on the Low Valley Hike today because no rain was called for in the forecast. Now as I gaze up at the angry sky and listen to the ferocious waves crashing on the shore adjacent to the trail, I send a silent curse to whoever predicted that today would be filled with nothing but sunshine.

I quicken my pace to a light jog to try and outrun the rain, hating the way my massive bag makes every stride ponderous. Despite my efforts to escape, ten minutes later, the rain starts pouring from the sky in heavy torrents. I can already feel the water seeping in through my clothes, creating a chill that blossoms throughout my body. I take a deep breath and hoist my pack higher on my back and run faster as the rain pummels me from all angles. *I need to find shelter now* is all I can think about as I continue to run along the trail, doing my best to dodge protruding roots and low-hanging branches.

I am visiting my friend, Violet, this weekend and we are supposed to meet at her place in an hour, but there is no way I am making it there in this downpour.

I continue on the trail, approaching a clearing, when I see a house. The trail has come to an end and as my eyes travel downwards, I see a large drop to the ground below where the house is located. The structure looks quaint, like something I would see in a magazine. From here, I can see a bright red door positioned at the front of the house. Hanging above it is a sign, but I can't make out what it says. Large windows are located in the front of the building and I swear I see a silhouette of someone standing in the window. Watching me. Then I blink and the shadow is gone. Must be the rain messing with my vision.

I wrap my arms around myself in a futile attempt to stay warm as I ponder my options. I can turn around now and walk the ten kilometers I've already traveled back to Violet's house, or I can take my chances with this picture-perfect place and get out of this relentless rain. I feel drawn to the place below the hill, but I don't know why. It feels like it's calling out for me, pulling me forwards. *I don't even have to stay long*; I reason with myself. I just want to wait out this rain and get into some dry clothes.

I turn around looking for a way down the steep incline that separates me from the house, but I turn too fast. My foot slips on some mud and before I know it, I am tumbling down the hill. I desperately try to grab onto something to steady myself, but my hands, coated in rain and mud, just slip off anything I try to grasp. My hair is covering my eyes and I try to move it out of my way to watch for potential hazards, but I am too late. A large, jagged rock juts out from the ground and before I know it my head slams into it with force. I come to a stop at the end of the hill just as everything fades to black.

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I wake up to the smell of lemon wafting into my nose. I quickly jolt upright, instantly regretting the decision as sharp pains shoot into my head. A sense of panic settles over me as I touch my hand to my head, instantly feeling the swelling of a large goose egg underneath layers of bandaging. Bandaging... somebody must have brought me in from outside. I start to check out my surroundings, registering that I am in a bed, covered in soft quilts. The bed is a large four poster with an ornate wooden headboard that matches the hand-carved nightstand, dresser and bookshelf that are also located in the room. On the nightstand table is a cup of tea, which must explain the delicious smell of citrus. Floral patterned wall paper is plastered all over the walls that match the thick rose-coloured curtains that frame the large window. The curtains have been pushed aside so that I have a view of the ocean. Outside the rain still pours.

I notice that my clothes have been removed from my body and I have been dressed in a flowy white night gown that makes me look like a ghost. The thought of someone removing my wet clothes while I was unconscious makes me a little uneasy, but I try to push the thought aside. Someone was nice enough to bring me into this cozy home while I was unconscious and made sure I was taken care of. They can't possibly be harmful. I swing my feet over the bed, ignoring the dizziness in my head and I am going to get up when I glance to the doorway and see a woman peeking her head in through the doorway. I jump slightly, startled by the appearance of this woman. She observes my frightened demeanor and cautiously makes her way into the room. She looks middle-aged and has wrinkles around her blue eyes that look at me with kindness. I am struck by her pale, translucent-like skin.

"I am so sorry! Did I startle you," she asks, concern written all over her face.

"Just a little bit," I confess, feeling a little anxious. She sits on the bed beside me, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"I do apologize dear, how jarring all of this must be for you! Waking up somewhere you're not familiar with and then having me nosing around. How absolutely inconsiderate of me," she says with sincerity.

"It's ok," I reassure her, starting to feel a bit more at ease in her presence. "Where am I?" I question.

She slaps her hand over her face and looks at me with a smile. "I should have started by telling you that! Forgive me, I'm a bit scattered today," she says. "You're at The Salty Manor, dear. You see I was watching out the window when I saw you fall down the hill and hit your head. Then you stopped moving and I panicked and brought you inside from the rain immediately! I fixed you one of the finest rooms in this place and dried you off. Not to mention that head wound was pretty nasty, so I bandaged it up for you," she said. "I am really glad to have found you, Kelsi, I think you will enjoy your stay here very much." I swear I hear a darkness in her voice but instantly it is replaced with her high-pitched chuckling, making me doubt if it was ever there.

"How do you know my name," I ask, baffled.

"You told me already dear. Well, I guess that bump to the head is messing with your memory!" She responds with a chuckle.

I don't remember giving her my name, but maybe my head injury is worse than I expected. I glance down at my watch to check the time. If I don't leave now, I am going to be late to meet Violet.

"Thank you so much for bandaging me up and drying me off, but I really have to go. I am supposed to meet my friend soon and I don't want to be late so I'll be leaving," I explain to her, trying to push past her to the door. She grabs my wrist before I can leave. Her hand is ice cold. Suddenly, the doorway bursts into flames, licking their way down the door frame.

"Fire!" I scream as I move back into the room. I look away from the door, trying to find a way out and I glance back towards the doorway, seeing how much the fire has grown, but the vicious flames that were there seconds ago have vanished. I sit back down on the bed.

"The doorway was on fire, I swear," I tell her.

"Oh sweetie," she says as she looks at me sympathetically, her hand no longer on my wrist, now on my back. "My dear, your head injury is causing you to see things, there was no fire. Honey you are in no state to meet your friend. You could further injure yourself," she tells me, her eyebrows knit together in worry. "Why don't you stay the night, ok? I've already fixed you the nicest room and it's just one night. Your friend will be waiting for you tomorrow, hon. Come on, I'll give you a tour of the place,"

I soak in her words. I must be going crazy if I just thought I saw fire and she's probably right. I'm a danger to myself right now. "Ok," I utter defeatedly. She grins and takes me by the elbow, leading me deeper into The Salty Manor.

The entire place is like something from the early 19th century. She leads me into room after room filled with beautiful decor and hand carved wooden features. The crown molding, the wallpaper, everything is like it has been stunningly preserved.

"It's incredible," I remark quietly, still looking around.

"It is something spectacular. My father built this place what seems like ages ago now. It was always my dream to run it. I loved tending to the guests and talking to them, so when he passed, I took over," she says proudly.

"Do you get many visitors?" I ask, genuinely curious as the area is very remote.

"Not as many as I used to, but people love it here. They usually stay for a long time," she explains to me. "I take in people who don't have any place else to go, or people like you who need my help and happen to stumble upon the place. I do get lonely living out here sometimes," she confesses, a sadness in her voice.

I feel sorry for her, recognizing how tough this isolation must be.

"Well, the place is simply gorgeous, with so many amazing details," I say as I run my hand over an ornate mirror. I accidentally nudge the mirror off its hook and it falls off the wall. Before it hits the ground, I catch a glimpse of the woman on fire, her heavy dress turns to ash and her auburn hair blends in with

the flames that engulf her. Then the image is gone. I step back from her, feeling scared by what I just saw. What is going on with me?

"I'm so sorry," I apologize. "I will pay to get it fixed and..." I begin to say but she cuts me off mid sentence.

"No need to worry about that, dear! Tell you what, I will clean up the rest of this mess while you go wander around the Manor. Take it all in," she suggests.

"Alright," I say as I turn around.

"Oh, Kelsi?" She says softly.

"Yes?" I ask, slightly afraid of what she might say.

"Don't mind the other guests here if you run into them, alright? Some of them are... how can I put this nicely. A little," she pauses, "strange," she gives a barely audible chuckle and bends down to clean up the mess. I hesitantly walk away, my heart now beating slightly faster.

As I slowly make my way down a hallway near the entrance, I stop to look at a photo hanging on the wall. The woman is in the photo, smiling as The Salty Manor looms over her. The photo is in black and white, a slight yellow tinge making its way onto the edges. As I stare at the photo, I hear a voice in my head. The voice of the woman.

"Run everyone, Run! Get out now!" she shrieks. Then the voice disappears. I step away from the photo, my heart thumping loudly. Her voice...I heard it as clear as if she were standing right in front of me. The visions of the fire, now the voice in my head. I must be going insane.

Outside, a large fork of lightning cracks across the sky and all the light flickers out. I am left in complete darkness. A noisy creak captures my attention from down the hallway where I glimpse the figure of a man illuminated in the darkness. Then he is gone. A scream escapes my lips as I desperately try to find a light switch, but I know the effort is futile. There is no power. I turn to run, not sure where I'm going when I feel cold, strong hands grab my arms tightly. Instead of screaming and thrashing my fear holds me stiff as a board in his arms, my breathing hitched in my throat. "You need to get out of here," he whispers, as his nails dig into my arms. Lightning flashes and I can see that he has gray eyes and a large scar on his chin. "This place is full of danger, full of tragedy, you need to get out, you don't want to be like me. She will come for you. She is already coming; you need to get out!" His voice sounds panicked as he shoves me towards the doorway. Desperate to get away from his clutches, I scramble for the door handle, but it doesn't budge. I feel around for the lock, but I can't find it. "It's not here," I yell, not sure if it's to him or myself.

"What's not here, dear."

I whip my head around to see the woman standing behind me, holding a lantern in her hand. I jump back from her, wondering how she got here so quietly, remembering what the man had said about her.

"There was a man h-he-ere," I stammer.

"Oh, don't mind him, he's just one of the silly guests I told you about earlier. He loves to scare everybody. Don't worry about what he said to you," she says, a sickly-sweet tone dripping off every word.

"How do you know what he said to me?" I ask, my voice quivering.

For a moment she looks at a loss for words, but she quickly recovers. "He says the same thing to all the guests. Things about this place being dangerous, and me wanting to harm the guests, but it's not true dear, not one bit. Now come on, it's getting late. I'll bring you back to your room and get you all tucked in." Her crimson lips stretch into a smile.

"I don't want to stay here," I say through gritted teeth. Something is weird about this place. Guests don't just pop out of the shadows and hostesses don't follow you around. I turn for the door, but she blocks my path.

"It's too late for you to leave," she says, her tone now quite serious. "Leave in the morning." Before I can protest, she starts dragging me to my room.

"Have a good sleep, Kelsi. I'll see you in the morning." I grip the covers she insisted upon tucking me into, as if I were a small child. She leans against the doorframe, her pale skin now glowing in the light of the lantern she still holds.

"Goodnight," I manage to croak out.

She sets the lantern down on my dresser and leaves the room, shutting the door behind her. I instantly leap out of the covers and dash over to the door. I've had enough of this place; I just want to get out of here. I turn the door knob, but it doesn't budge. She has locked me in.

"Sweet dreams, Kelsi," I hear her whisper from the other side of the doorway. Her seemingly harmless words have a dark edge to them. I sprint over to the window, desperately hoping that it will open, but it doesn't. I pound my fists on the glass, but the panes never give way, trapping me inside. Now utterly terrified, I stumble backwards into the bookshelf near the window with force, knocking down a large book that just misses my head as it falls. It lands with thud on the wood floor, stirring up a cloud of dust. The book is dark brown and I notice it has a leathery texture as I run my fingers over the cover that reads *Guestbook*. As I begin flipping the cover back, a cold feeling of dread settles in my gut. The pages are fragile, yellowed and covered in names, dates and to my surprise, photos. The pictures are disturbing, each face either contorted into a scream or grimace. I continue flipping pages, until one particular photo catches my eye. It is a man with silver eyes and a scar on his chin, his face twisted into a howl. *The man who grabbed me in the hallway*, I recall with a chill. His name is Roger Ellis and he stayed here in August of 1955. *Why is he still here?* I wonder. My question is answered as I glance further down the page and notice the words "Date of Death". I let out a strangled noise. No guestbook I've ever seen before has had a date of death. I feverishly flip through the guestbook analyzing more and more photos. They all have a date of death. None of the guests are alive. Which means...

The sound of my phone ringing makes me lose my train of thought. I had completely forgotten about my phone amidst all the commotion. Maybe I can call someone to get me out of here. I race over to where the phone is ringing and answer it. "Hello," I answer, my voice shaking.

"Hey Kels, it's Vi. Where are you? I've been at the house all day and you never showed. I couldn't find my phone for the longest time and just found it stuffed in a couch cushion, so I'm sorry for the late call. I thought you might be dead," she chuckles jokingly. I don't answer her right away, still thinking about the guestbook.

"Kels, you still there?" she asks, bringing me back to the present.

"I need you to come get me, Vi. Now. Something bad is going to happen to me," I squeak out.

"What is going on? Kelsi, where are you?" she says, panic now creeping into her voice.

"I'm at The Salty Manor. It's a long story, but I needed to get out of the rain so I came here, but now I'm in trouble. I'm locked in my room and.." she cuts me off.

"Kels, is this a joke or something? The Salty Manor burned down like over 50 years ago. It was a big thing. It killed all the guests and the owner. Some say the area's haunted, that the owner is looking for company, but that is all make believe. Come on now, where are you really?" She continues talking, but the phone drops from my hand. The visions of the fire, the quietness to her movements, the silver eyed man's words of warning.

None of this is real. At least it isn't anymore. This house, this woman, these guests. Not real. If I don't act soon, I am going to be trapped here. Forever.

I start pounding on the door with immense force praying for it to give way. I need to get out.

I hear a light scraping on the floor behind me and quickly pivot to see the woman now standing there, her head slightly tilted to the side. Her face breaks out into a devilish grin when I notice her.

"Leaving so soon, Kelsi?"

THE END