

Foreword

Thanks to Austin Freeman's short story "The Puzzle Lock" for this story's cipher inspiration and to Arthur Conan Doyle for the title's. The short story you're about to read is a prequel to [*Salem's Cipher*](#), occurring six years earlier in Salem's life and introducing Crow, the Moriarty to her Holmes.

The Adventure of the First Problem

a Salem's Cipher Short Story

by Jess Lourey

Salem blew on her hands, erasing the smoke-scented October chill from her flesh before aiming her phone at the mausoleum. The structure was grand, backlit by a full moon, built to resemble a miniature Greek Revival mansion. Her heart beat pleasantly. She hadn't yet glanced at the crypt's lock. She was going to save that treat for last, working methodically from the top down.

Bel stood behind her, sighing deeply. "Only you, Salem Wiley."

Salem grunted by way of answer.

Bel stepped closer. "This is a Scooby Doo-quality adventure, you know that, right? Taking creepy crypt photos under a full moon?"

Salem pushed a frizzy curl out of her eyes. Her first take hadn't flashed.

Bel was undeterred by Salem's lack of engagement. "You'd be Velma, clearly." She tugged a brown paper bag out from under her arm and took a pull of the wine, her voice dropping. "And I'd be Fred because then I could boink Daphne."

Salem rewarded Bel with a smile, keeping her eyes pinned to the upper half of the mausoleum. "Fred's definitely a better choice than Shaggy. If you were Shaggy, you'd probably have to arrest yourself. He smoked more weed than Cheech and Chong." At least, that's what she'd read on the Internet. She wasn't a hundred percent on who Cheech and Chong were, and she'd missed the drug references in the cartoons growing up, but she studied pop culture with the focus of a medical student cramming for the boards.

Bel took another swig from the crumpled bag. "No premature arresting for me, I'm afraid. Turns out the real police officers frown on students cuffing people. But hey, in

two years, watch out Shaggy! I'm coming to getcha!" She held out the bottle. "You sure you don't want a bump, for old time's sake?"

Salem shook her head, studying her phone. No wonder it hadn't flashed. She'd set that feature to "off." *Dumb*. She swiped the button and tried again. This time, the inscription over the tomb's marble door lit up like a red-carpet movie star: I CHRISTI OSTENDERE VIAM: CVLTVS PAX, VERITAS, LVX, ET VITA. FINIS

Salem's brain snapped a photo of the words at the same time as her phone. It was pidgin Latin, loosely translating to "At the end, Christ shows the way to peace, truth, light, and life." She clicked twelve more photos, some of the inscription, others, finally, of the delicious lock below. She was grinning when she answered Bel's question. "Maybe if you hadn't brought Arbor Mist. There's taking 'old time's sake' too far, you know?"

A cool fall breeze picked up papery brown leaves and skittled them farther along, forming loose pyres at the base of headstones. Minneapolis's tony Lakewood Cemetery was eerily gorgeous in the moonlight. It housed standard gravestones but also obelisks, pyramids, marble pagodas, and Grecian statues with flowing robes. The cemetery was arranged around the enormous Memorial Mausoleum, which had been crafted in Modernist style in the 60s, a cross between a Cold War high school and the Jefferson Memorial.

Next to the Memorial Mausoleum was the chapel, modeled after the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. The exterior had a distinctly Persian feel. Salem and Bel had lost many a middle school afternoon in the chapel, soaking up the art and peace, talking about puzzles and their parents and where they'd be in ten years.

It made sense that they'd return here with Bel in town for the week, on fall break from the University of Chicago. Salem was midway through her first semester at the U of M. It'd taken her two years after high school to work up the courage to go. It wasn't grades or money. She'd been offered scholarships from every major college in the country and some international ones as well. She just didn't like to travel far from her childhood house, wouldn't. She had a routine that made the world feel manageable—home, college, work.

There were exceptions, like grocery shopping or a doctor's appointment. Any place she had been to before her dad had killed himself in front of her eyes was a safe zone, as long as she went to it with the same people as she had before. Other than those rare exceptions, she only traveled between home, college, and work. If she veered off the routine...well, she just didn't.

Bel understood. That's why they were here, at one of their favorite preteen haunts. "You like your classes?" she asked.

The change of topic compelled Salem to change her mind, grabbing the frosted bottle from Bel's grip. Cherry Moscato. She smelled it before the liquid hit her mouth. It was cheap, sweet, a snow-cone topping without the ice shavings. They'd drunk gallons of it in high school. Everyone had.

"They're fine," she said, the wine making her teeth ache. "Mostly generals now, but I get to take some cryptography classes next semester."

She wanted to tell Bel about the Crypto Club, Bel who was set to graduate from the Criminal Justice program with honors, gorgeous, smart, perfect Bel. But they were no longer the pig-tailed girls who could finish each other's sentences. College had taken all of Bel's positive traits and cemented them. She walked into every room like she owned it. How could Salem confess to someone that lionhearted that she'd lingered outside the Crypto Club door the last three weeks, listening to their jokes about cryptographers being makers and cryptanalysts being breakers, wishing she was part of it? She'd gotten as far as curling her grip around the cool doorknob, but then her pulse began pounding too loud to hear anything else, her vision narrowed to black, and her stomach heaved toward her mouth.

She'd run.

The best she could do was drag Bel to the Lakewood Cemetery to stand here at the base of Samuel Medary's mausoleum. Medary, the governor of Minnesota the year it became a state, had chosen to be interred in a puzzle-locked crypt. The device brought to Salem's mind a beautiful steampunk combination bike lock, inset in a half-ton marble door. Anyone with access to the Lakewood Cemetery could walk up and spin its ten tiny bronze wheels. All ten wheels were constructed around a hollow tube that, when the

wheels were correctly aligned, cued ten springs to release an equal number of master pins that freed the cylinder inside and voila—the door would open.

But while anyone with access to the cemetery could try their hand at the lock, it had yet to be opened. No one could crack Medary's code, which made it legendary. Well, famous in certain circles. *Dots*, really, if she was honest.

But the Crypto Club knew about the supposedly uncrackable puzzle lock, she was sure of that. They had to. It was one of Minnesota's only interesting unbroken codes. But how could Salem possibly tell Bel, who'd led her class in both firearms and self-defense training, that she hoped to crack the lock and somehow, impossibly, for the Crypto Club to find out and beg her to join?

Bel plucked the Arbor Mist bottle from Salem's hands for another swallow. "This stuff is shit, isn't it? Like drinking flat soda, yet I can't get enough of it. And by the way, I see you studying that freaky little lock. Don't *for a second* think I don't know that's exactly why you hauled us out here."

Salem smiled gratefully. Of course Bel had guessed what she was up to. They hadn't grown that far apart. She inhaled the scent of rotting leaves and wood smoke. The cemetery was smack dab in the middle of Minneapolis yet so forested that she couldn't even hear traffic. Part of her was whispering that it felt good to step out of her routine, with Bel at her side. She felt protected, safe. Maybe tomorrow she'd think about expanding her life routes.

Maybe.

Bel switched the Arbor Mist to her left hand, grabbed Salem's with her right, and started down the paved path, away from Medary's tomb. The only light on the cemetery's rolling hills came from the egg-colored moon glimmering through the nearly bare trees. "Why don't you get your nerd on and tell me all about that lock while we walk to the old chapel?"

Salem flung a final glance at the mausoleum as she allowed Bel to lead her away. "I'm afraid my nerd is always on," she said. "That was a bronze puzzle lock, related to any cylindrical combination lock in that you have to know the pre-programmed sequence to open it. Samuel Medary had that super-lock commissioned before he died, but no one

knows why. Most mausoleums are accessed with a standard key, but there's no way to open Medary's tomb unless you know the code."

Bel snorted. "Easy peasy. How many possibilities could there be? The lock looked like it only had eight numbers."

"It has ten."

A cracking noise to the right drew their attention. The sugary wine lurched in Salem's stomach. The late hour was not the only reason the cemetery was deserted. Three weeks earlier, a young woman named Mackenzie Swenson had disappeared from a nearby neighborhood.

Salem's neighborhood.

The college freshman lived four houses down from where Salem still resided with her mom. Mackenzie was a math major at the U of M, same program as Salem, yet Salem's agoraphobia meant she only knew the woman in passing. Mackenzie was a goth chick, hood always up, lipstick dark, liked to be called Mack, a bit of a numbers genius if the rumors were to be believed.

She was last seen on October 1 boarding the city bus. The police didn't show up at the Swenson house until the next day. Mrs. Swenson had appeared on the lawn, pointing angrily at an officer, her face rough and red, tears pouring out. Salem hadn't seen the police back since, though missing person posters began papering the neighborhood. They were treating her as a runaway.

Salem shook off the sad image of Mrs. Swenson weeping for her daughter and finished her description of the lock. "And they were letters, not numbers."

Bel continued to search the unlit ink surrounding them for the source of the cracking sound. When it wasn't repeated, she finally gave up. "Probably other kids doing exactly what we are. It is almost Halloween."

Bel started walking again, around a wooded curve and toward the cemetery's center, her hands held a little higher than they had been earlier, ready to defend. "Ten letters, then. How many options does that leave for cracking the code?"

The full moon lit their path, but the gravestones to each side were shadow and shade. Salem kept peering over her shoulder as they walked, running the calculations in

her head. “With 26 letters in the alphabet, that means there are over 141 quintillion possibilities for that lock.”

The breeze picked up again. Faraway laughter banked off the headstones and rose toward the moon. Bel gave Salem’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “Whoever runs the cemetery must have the key to the code, right? So they can do maintenance work, or stuff Medary’s relatives in there to keep him company.”

Salem shook her head. “No one has the code. It died with Medary. That’s why it’s so legendary.”

She thought of the pale-skinned, dark-haired members of the Crypto Club and blushed in the night. “Well, legendary to *some* people anyhow. It’s supposedly a two-way lock, which wasn’t unusual back when people were sometimes buried before they’d actually died. So, if Medary woke up in his crypt, all he had to do was light the candle placed next to his resting spot, hold it to the interior lock, enter the code, and let himself out.” She swallowed. “Hypothetically, if the cemetery needed to get in, they would use the same code. But whatever it was, it’s been lost to time. The only way in or out of that mausoleum now is by solving that puzzle.”

Bel smiled. “Or with a jackhammer. Not that it matters. Medary’s probably not going anywhere.” She tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Hey, can we change the mood? No more dead old white guys locked up for eternity. Let’s talk about something good. Like sex.” Her grin turned wicked. “Are you having any?”

Salem flushed for the second time. “Only with myself.”

Bel hooted. “That counts! But not forever. You need to—”

A scream neatly sliced her words in two. It flew from the direction of Medary’s tomb and was knit of pure terror. Bel ran back toward it without a second thought, Salem on her heels, her pulse battering her veins.

The woman’s shadow appeared around the curve before she herself did, dark hair askew, tears streaking across her swollen face. For a crazy second, Salem thought she might be looking at the missing Mackenzie, but when the moonlight hit the woman’s face square, it was clear that she was too old, late twenties, a stranger.

“My little girl!” the woman yelled at Bel. “She’s in trouble.”

Bel dropped straight into take-charge mode, grabbing the woman's arm. "Show us."

"You can't help me," the woman panted, pulling free of Bel. "I need the police. But there's no cell phone reception here!"

"What kind of trouble is she in?" Bel asked.

The words tumbled out in a manic jumble, punctuated by sobs. "She's trapped inside one of the crypts. It— it was an accident." The woman ran off toward the cemetery's entrance.

Bel followed without a thought.

Salem yanked her phone out of her purse. The woman had been right—no service. She raced behind Bel until they spotted the man crouching in front of Samuel Madery's tomb. The woman kept running toward the entrance, her phone held up toward the moon.

Bel shouted at the man. "Is this where the girl is?"

He glanced up at Bel.

Salem's breath caught.

She recognized him, even in profile. He was small and tight, lean but not quite skinny, with curly black hair. She didn't know his name. He was a lurker, and it took one to know one. She'd regularly spotted him on the periphery of Vincent Hall, the University of Minnesota's math building. In fact, she'd nearly run him over the day she'd chickened out going into the Crypto Club's room.

He pitched his worried glance from Bel to Salem.

The tender skin below Salem's ears tingled as he stared at her. He was sexy and he was creepy, the two blending together like black and blue. His dark eyes showed no recognition. "Yeah, she's inside." He returned his attention to the puzzle lock. "Katrina says the kid has asthma. She's only seven. We were goofing around."

"Don't touch it!" Salem leapt forward and slapped his hand away from the lock. "If the girl somehow guessed the code, it might still be on the lock."

He scowled. "All the letters were set to 'A' when I got here. That didn't open it so I've been messing around. I had to try something."

Bel pushed him aside to stand in front of the door. "What's the girl's name?"

“Jinny.” He tossed an unreadable look toward Salem. “But it doesn’t matter because she can’t hear you. The walls are too thick. I’ve been yelling this whole time. No response.”

Salem swallowed past a queasy burning in her throat. If the girl was having a panic-induced asthma attack, thick walls might not be the only reason she wasn’t responding. But something was still nagging her about this guy. Like she’d seen him somewhere besides Vincent Hall, except she didn’t really *go* anywhere else.

Bel raised her voice. “Jinny! My name is Isabel. Help is on the way. I’m not going to leave you. I’m going to stay out here until we get someone to break the door in. It won’t be long, so don’t panic, honey.” She and Salem exchanged an anxious look. It would take big machinery to break that door down, and there wasn’t any in sight.

“Salem,” Bel said firmly, her eyes glassy, “you need to crack that lock.”

A chilly breeze gusted, organizing eddies of leaves around Salem’s feet. She ran her hand along the scar on her cheek and glanced down at the phone she held. Still no connection, still no internet. She thought of her dad, and how she hadn’t been able to save him. Time and sound became tangled and sticky. Salem’s vision began to narrow. The ground shifted beneath her, opening to swallow her whole. She wanted to melt into nothingness, except Bel was squeezing her arms.

“Salem! Can you break it?”

Her vision expanded. The moon was shining. She was standing outside Samuel Medary’s tomb. Bel’s voice was urgent. This strange man was reading her, she could tell that much, but his expression was otherwise inscrutable. Why wasn’t he panicking?

Salem shook her head to clear it. “I can try.”

She knelt on shaking legs in front of the lock. The man couched next to her, close enough for her to feel his body heat in the cool fall night, to smell the peppery musk of his cologne. She had to fight the overwhelming urge to run.

“Are you a codebreaker?” he asked.

His voice had a taunting quality, but that didn’t make sense, not with a little girl locked inside the crypt. She couldn’t risk glancing at him. “Can you light the lock with your phone? The moonlight isn’t cutting it.”

He drew out his cell, shining its brightness on the neat little letters, everyone one of them an identical capital “A.” That was odd. Salem had seen him shuffling through them, rotating each letter’s wheel. Either he’d lied about all of them originally being set at “A,” pretended to be moving them, or the lock had an automatic reset. In the background, Bel was talking steadily to Jinny, speaking as if the child could hear her, honeyed words about safety and toys and love.

He repeated himself, this time with more intensity. “I asked you if you’re a codebreaker.”

He was still too close. His breath was laced with alcohol and something else, something smoky and raw that she couldn’t identify. She pressed on the icy metal of the first “A,” its cold scarring her fingertip like a tiny brand. All ten letters were part of their own 26-point wheel, each point a different letter of alphabet. She attempted the most basic sequence first: A-B-C-D-E-F-G-H-I-J. The door didn’t budge.

“I’m interested in codebreaking,” she said, fielding his question as broadly as she could. He didn’t need to know that she’d read every book ever written on the subject and had even published a paper hypothesizing a potential break to the Dorabella Cipher in a math journal. The little girl was the only thing that mattered.

“How’d Jinny end up inside?” Salem asked. “This door hasn’t been opened since 1864.”

The man pulled away from her, but not so far away that she couldn’t still smell him. She decided the smoky scent was from clove cigarettes. She’d smelled them before around the U of M campus. She had the oddest sense that he was smiling, though her eyes remained on the lock, attempting one letter sequence after another.

“I dunno. We were all hanging out. Then Katrina had to take a leak. We told Jinny to wait by this tomb. Kat went behind that tree over there, and I was on lookout. I glanced back at the crypt, just in time to see Jinny step inside.” He leaned forward, returning to Salem’s field of vision. “The door closed before I could reach her. *Boom*. It must be rigged because it slammed shut so quick that she didn’t even have time to grab her doll.” He pointed to a ratty teddy bear in the shadows, a shredded red bow around its neck.

Salem’s brow furrowed, and she paused with a new code—M-E-D-A-R—halfway entered. “You said when you ran over here, each wheel was set to the letter ‘A’?”

“Yeah.”

She yanked her phone out of her pocket, opened up the photo stream, and scrolled to her clearest photo of the puzzle lock. She tapped the screen with her pointer finger to enlarge it. Ten “A”s, all in a row. Salem’s cheeks burned. She shouldn’t have accused him of lying, even in her brain. Yet, something about him troubled her. Of course, most people troubled her, but this was different somehow. This was—

The squeal of approaching sirens pierced the air, commanding her attention.

Bel stopped her stream of soothing words, head whipping toward the cemetery’s entrance. “I’m going to make sure they take the shortest route here in case Katrina gets lost.” She took off down the walkway, her sneakers pounding.

When Salem faced the lock, all the letters had returned to As. She gasped. What had triggered them? Were they on a time sensor?

That seemed unlikely considering Medary had been interred nearly 150 years earlier. Timed technology had been uncommon then. It was more probable that the reset had been triggered by some movement, either hers out here or Jinny’s on the inside.

Her strange companion tapped her shoulder. “Here they come.”

She turned her attention toward the cemetery’s entrance. White, red, and blue lights flashed off the ceiling of the sky, maybe a half a mile away. They would arrive in less than a minute, and then what?

Her eyes scraped the mausoleum’s door. Its surface was flat except for a smooth knob perched above the puzzle lock, protruding like the emergency handle inside an industrial freezer. On impulse, she applied pressure to it.

The heavy marble of the door creaked. A wash of rotten air kissed Salem’s face.

“Holy shit!” The man jumped. “You opened it?”

She didn’t think she had, but the stink of decay was followed by the tiniest of whimpers. She dragged the door the rest of the way open, stepping into the ethereal dark.

“Jinny?”

Salem reached into her pocket for her phone and its flashlight. Distracted by her own movement, she tripped over a soft bag lying on the crypt floor. Her cell flew from her hands and skittered into the absolute black at the rear of the tomb, the screen still black.

The crypt door closed behind her with a guttural moan.

Panic swamped her.

She was trapped in a darkness so complete that her eyes tried to make shapes against the black. There was no illumination of any kind. She was drowning, dying, buried alive. She couldn't breathe.

She dropped to her knees and grabbed at the nearest object: the soft bag that had first tripped her.

But it wasn't a bag at all.

Salem knew this as soon as she touched it, the moment she felt the icy, unyielding grip of death under the rough cloth. She scrambled away from the corpse, her back slamming into the door.

"Jinny?" The word came out more as a wail.

A whimper from somewhere back in the chamber answered her.

Salem's breath caught. Of course the dead body wasn't the child's. She couldn't be that utterly cold already. A searing burst of relief pierced Salem's panic. "Jinny? Is that you?"

"There's a dead lady in here." Every tiny word came out in a hitch, followed by a wheeze. "I saw her when he closed the door on me."

Salem's gut clenched. "I know. I think I tripped over her."

"I have asthma," Jinny wheezed. "I can't breathe."

Salem began moving toward the child's voice, even though it meant feeling her way around the corpse. "My name is Salem, and I'm here to help you. Do you have your inhaler?"

"My mommy has it in her purse."

And Katrina hadn't thought to leave it behind when she ran to summon help. Salem forced herself to ask the question she didn't want to ask. "Who did you say closed the door on you?"

"Crow did it. At least I think maybe he did, but I don't really like him. He's my mom's friend. I wish he'd go away. He said we were playing hide and go seek. He brought me over here and said it would be a good place to hide."

Crow. A perfect name for that snake-sexy man. She'd been right to be creeped out by him. "Did Crow open the door?"

"I didn't see. But he didn't even let Teddy come in." The girl's words were further apart, the effort to produce them painful to hear. Salem kept moving toward the child, hands searching every inch of the floor as she crawled. From the outside, the mausoleum had looked to be about twelve feet by ten. Medary was the only person buried in here.

The only official burial, anyway.

Jinny thought the man called Crow had trapped her in here on purpose. Something he'd said when she and Bel had first come upon him was nagging at her, but she couldn't grab a hold of it. "OK, honey. I need to find my phone. Can you help me?"

"Phones don't work in the cemetery. That's what my mom said."

Salem continued to feel along the cold stone floor, trying not to think of the odor, sweet and rotten tied together like a trick. The smell reminded her of the reek of a dead squirrel that she'd once found in her garden shed. She continued feeling the ground in a grid pattern. "I really need the light from the phone."

Assuming the thing hadn't broken when she dropped it.

Her hand brushed against something hard that moved, but she was searching too fast and lost the spot. Where was it? Had it been her phone? It took her five forever seconds to find it again. Her hands gripped the cool plastic. She moaned in relief.

Her phone.

She swiped the screen, bathing the mausoleum in a sanitized white. She drew her first full breath since she'd been locked in here. Jinny was tucked in the far corner, almost within touching distance, all hair and eyes and tears. The tiny child rushed toward Salem the moment the light appeared, grabbing her hard enough to draw blood. She shivered in Salem's arms, fragile as a bird and breathing like Darth Vader.

The panic rose again in Salem's throat. She swallowed it. She had to keep her head or this girl wasn't going to make it out of here. Hell, she might not make it out of here herself.

She aimed the phone's flashlight around the space. It was the size of a low-ceilinged dorm room. Samuel Medary was entombed in the east wall, and he'd been there since November 7, 1864, well beyond emitting any sort of odor. An altar next to his crypt

displayed a vase that had at one time held flowers. Now there was only dust sprinkled over the white stub of a candle and what looked like a ragged piece of flint.

Hands shaking, Salem trained her light to the only spot in the crypt she had yet to survey: the corpse just inside the door. She covered Jinny's eyes with her free hand. She could already see by the outer ring of light that the body was lying face up. She aimed her cell at the feet. Women's tennis shoes, size 8.

She moved the light up the jeans, to the fall coat, hands splayed out at the side. They were purple-black and broken-looking. She must have spent her final hours beating at the door, terrified to the point that she'd used her arms like clubs long after the hands had been shattered. The pain must have been excruciating.

Hot tears stabbed at Salem's eyelids, and she felt lightheaded. She forced herself to keep the flashlight moving toward the face. When she got there, she couldn't stifle the shock.

It was Mackenzie Swenson, goth chick, liked to be called Mack, missing since October 1. Even with her face frozen in a rictus of fear, Salem was sure it was her.

A picture of Mackenzie's mom, weeping, terrified for her daughter, flashed across the movie screen of Salem's brain. Salem bit her tongue to keep from moaning, not wanting to scare little Jinny any more than she already was.

Jinny's breath stopped, yanking Salem back to the surface.

"Jinny!" She squeezed the child in her arms.

The pause lasted a lifetime.

Finally, a ragged, gasping breath answered Salem. It was weak, but it was something, a harsh reminder that Salem did not have the luxury of panic. She needed to commandeer her own resources and set her mind to the task.

"We'll figure this out," she said, more to herself than Jinny. She was thankful the child hadn't seen the distorted face of the body by the door.

She steeled herself. She knew from her years of cryptology research that in the puzzle lay the solution. Yet, she couldn't keep her mind from straying.

Somehow, Mackenzie Swenson had been locked in here to die.

Not somehow. *Crow*. That's what Jinny had called him, and it fit. He was sleek and beady-eyed. The memory from earlier in the cemetery that had been nagging at her came

into full view. He'd told Bel it was no use to yell for Jinny, that he'd been hollering her name since she'd disappeared into the crypt. But he hadn't been yelling at all. Salem and Bel would have heard it if he had.

He'd lied.

With absolute clarity, Salem also knew Crow had locked Mackenzie Swenson in here to die.

Then he'd locked Jinny in.

And now he'd locked in Salem.

He was a psycho who liked trapping females in tombs.

An angry fire began to crackle through her, burning up the fear. If he'd locked them all in here, that meant that goddamn code was breakable. She swallowed hard. She would have to move Mackenzie's body to reach the door. There wasn't time to hesitate.

"Jinny, I need you to sit over here, a couple feet away from me. I need to move this lady so I can open the door. Can you do that? Jinny?"

The little girl was limp in her arms. Salem flashed the light on the child's face.

Jinny's cheeks and lips were blue-tinged, her eyes closed.

Biting back tears, Salem tugged off her coat and quickly rested the child in it before turning to the corpse. She slid her hands underneath and lifted, whispering apologies to Mackenzie's ghost. The body was clumsy and dense, as unwieldy as a bag of soup, the festering-sweet smell of decay burning Salem's nostrils. Her stomach lurched but she kept the bile down, even through the slide and settling of loose flesh as Mackenzie's corpse shifted in her hands like an enormous rotting peach. She set the body down as gently as she could, just to the side of the door, her breath escaping in small green gasps.

She knelt in front of the lock.

Its setting was identical on this side of the door, except for the tiny hourglass embedded in the stone above the row of letters. The lock *was* programmed to reset on a timer—that's what the hourglass was for—but that didn't help Salem crack the code.

Whereas the outer lock had displayed all "A"s, in here, it was a row of "M"s, the opposite letter on the wheel. What possible sequence could Samuel Medary have chosen out of the trillions of possibilities? Or maybe it wasn't locked at all? She tried the knob, a twin to the one she'd pushed on outside.

She may as well have tried to move a Buick. The door was unyielding. Next, she tried variations of the words “Medary,” the word she’d been locked inside the crypt, cutting and adding letters, rearranging, spinning the letter disks like tiny roulette wheels.

The door stayed locked.

Even worse, grains of sand were now sliding through the hourglass. Watching it, she calculated that it was programmed to reset the lock every 10 seconds. That was hardly enough time to input the code if you knew it, let alone guess at it. But she didn’t have time for that kind of thinking. Jinny had only minutes, if that. She tried variations of the letters in the word “Minnesota.”

Still nothing.

Jinny wheezed once, then stopped.

One forever second later, she breathed again, like a balloon losing air. Salem wiped the tears from her eyes. *Crack this code, dummy! You have to!*

She was spinning the wheels so fast they grew warm to the touch. Variations on James Buchanan, the president who’d appointed Medary to be governor of Minnesota. L’Étoile du Nord, Minnesota’s motto.

St. Paul. Mississippi. Minneapolis. Fort Snelling.

Nothing.

She slammed her fist into the tomb’s door. The action only served to remind her of what must have been Mackenzie’s final moments. She looked at the phone she’d poised on the floor, wishing she could go online to pull up Medary’s family member’s names. The photo she’d taken of the front of the crypt was still up on her screen.

She minimized it and saw something so obvious that she would have laughed if not for the direness of the situation: the inscription above the crypt’s door.

Of course.

The solution had been in front of her face, *everyone’s* face, for 150 years.

It was a motherloving chronogram! It must be!

She nearly wept with relief. She’d first read about chronograms in a tiny Jewish codebook her mother had picked up for her at a garage sale. A chronogram, or “time writing,” was the use of letters to represent numbers, which, when rearranged, revealed a date. Gravestone chronograms were popular in the mid-500s, fell out of favor,

reappeared during the Renaissance, and hadn't been heard of much since. In fact, Salem wouldn't have heard of them if not for that slim yard sale book.

"Jinny, I think I figured out how to open the door!"

The child didn't respond. Not a sound. Not even a breath.

Salem bit down on a sob. She was sweating despite the crypt's chill. She needed to move faster. She enlarged the photo she'd taken of the chronogram, mentally recording which letters were also Roman numerals:

**I CHRISTI OSTENDERE VIAM: CVLTVS PAX, VERITAS, LVX, ET VITA.
FINIS**

All laid out, that gave her: I, C, I, I, D, V, I, M, C, V, L, V, X, V, I, L, V, X, V, I, I, I.

Her gut plummeted. That was 21 letters! The puzzle lock had only 10 spaces. Jinny wouldn't survive, and Salem was going to suffocate. Every time she blinked, all she could see against her eyelids were Mackenzie's swollen purple-black fists, the terror of dying alone in a tomb forever frozen on her face.

Salem bit back a sob.

And then she remembered.

In a true chronogram, the letters alone meant nothing. They had to be added to reveal the date they represented. Salem pushed aside Mackenzie's gruesome image to make room for a long mental equation:

$$100 + 1 + 1 + 500 + 5 + 1 + 1000 + 100 + 5 + 50 + 5 + 10 + 5 + 1 + 50 + 5 + 10 + 5 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 1858$$

1858!

The year Minnesota became a state, with Governor Samuel Medary at its helm. Salem would have cursed her stupidity if there'd been time. She translated the number back into Roman numerals:

MDCCCLVIII

Ten letters.

Fingers trembling, she input the letters into the puzzle lock's dials. Each one created a whisking sound that vibrated in her bones. Grains of sand fell like bombs in the

hourglass, erasing her life by seconds. At the final letter, I, the lock's tumblers fell into place.

Click.

The door opened with the quietest of sighs. Salem pushed against the handle and was instantly bathed in red and blue lights and a cacophony of voices, the squawk of radios, the smell of coffee and worry and panic. Bel pushed through the crowd and crushed Salem in a bear hug, her eyes red from crying.

Salem broke free and grabbed Jinny, scooping her into her arms and stumbling outside with her. "She's not breathing!"

EMTs rushed in, oxygen mask at the ready, and began performing emergency services. Once Jinny was in good hands, Salem pointed at the corpse. The law enforcement flashlights swarmed over it like macabre Christmas lights.

"I think that's Mackenzie Swenson," Salem said weakly.

Bel steered Salem to the side, out of the way. "Salem, what the hell happened. How'd you end up inside that damn crypt?"

Salem searched the crowd that had gathered, mostly emergency personnel plus some hangers-on. Crow and Katrina were rushing toward the ambulance that Jinny had been taken to. Katrina stepped inside to be with her daughter, but there wasn't room for Crow. He stood worriedly at the rear of the vehicle. His concern appeared genuine.

Until he flashed Salem a look.

Followed by a smile that landed like a punch to the gut.

Salem's heartbeat stopped for a moment, and then came thudding back with a vengeance. She knew where she'd seen Crow before, somewhere other than Vincent Hall. It had been outside Mackenzie's house the day after she'd disappeared, the same day the police had come to interview Mackenzie's mother. There had been a shadow across the street, a glimpse of a man near a tree. Salem had been too distressed over the activity at Mackenzie's house to pay him much mind, but seeing that same man now, she recognized on his face something like pride as another group of people acted out a gruesome play he'd set in motion. She felt a cold oil slide down her spine.

"Ma'am? Can we check you out?"

Salem recoiled. An EMT had come up behind her. "What?"

He indicated the back of a second ambulance. “Just a quick check-up.”

“How’s Jinny?”

“The child? She’ll be fine.” He led Salem toward a folding chair and took out a blood pressure cuff, Bel following as close as a mother hen. “They’ll take her to the hospital and run a full panel. Probably keep her overnight, but she’s breathing normally now. A few minutes longer in there, I don’t know that she’d have been so lucky.”

Bel squeezed Salem’s other arm. “You cracked that code, didn’t you?”

Salem nodded, still numb. “It was a chronogram.” She listened to the beeps of the blood pressure cuff, terrified to look at Crow again. He’d chosen her and Mackenzie for reasons she didn’t know. She had survived. *For now*. “How did Mackenzie die?”

The EMT grimaced. “That’s up to the county medical examiner. Don’t worry about that now. We have to make sure you’re okay.”

“I need to know,” Salem begged.

He removed the cuff and shrugged. “In a place like that, my guess would be asphyxiation, but if she had enough air and went in there without any other injuries, it could even have been thirst. Tough way to go.” He patted her gently on the back. “Your blood pressure is a little high, which is to be expected. Any cuts or scrapes I should know about?”

Salem shook her head. A police officer stepped into her line of sight.

“Ma’am, I’m Officer Webster. Can I ask how it is that you came to be trapped inside that tomb?”

Salem squeezed her eyes shut. The truth was that no one had pushed her. She’d stepped inside willingly. She also hadn’t observed Crow close the door behind her. Even Jinny had said she wasn’t sure if she’d been pushed, or how the door had shut. “I don’t actually know for sure.”

The officer nodded. “For now, we’re treating this as an accident. We might have to seal the tomb’s door, unless we find evidence of malicious intent.”

Salem was sure they wouldn’t discover anything, not a lick of evidence linking Crow to this, no fingerprints on Mackenzie, no witnesses to him luring her here. The best she could do was tell the police and then Katrina her fears and make sure neither her nor Jinny was never left alone with Crow again. She had a hunch that she wouldn’t need to

worry about those two, that they were only unfortunate pawns in whatever plan Crow had constructed to get to her.

But why? she thought.

She hadn't realized she'd closed her eyes but when she opened them again, she found she had a clear sightline to him. He stood alone in the wake of the ambulance driving away with both Jinny and Katrina. Creepily handsome, and as she now knew, insanely intelligent. His shoulders were slumped, the perfect posture of a worried boyfriend. But then he turned and locked eyes with Salem once again. The sly smile was back, intended for her only.

But why not? his eyes said.

Then he winked.

See you around, he mouthed, before disappearing into the crowd.

THE END

Afterword

Appointed by President James Buchanan, Samuel Medary was in fact the governor of Minnesota when it became a state. He died in November 7, 1864, as represented in the story, but he is actually buried in Ohio in a standard tomb without a puzzle lock.

Minneapolis's Lakewood Cemetery exists and is gorgeous, but with the exception of its Memorial Chapel and Mausoleum, all other details have been made up, as have all the characters and incidents in this story.

About Jess Lourey



Jess Lourey writes about secrets.

She is the bestselling, Edgar-nominated, International Thriller Writers Award-winning author of nonfiction, YA adventure, magical realism, suspense, and thrillers. Jess is a tenured professor of creative writing and sociology, a recipient of The Loft's Excellence in Teaching fellowship, a regular [Psychology Today](#) blogger, and a [TEDx presenter](#). Check out her TEDx Talk for surprising insight into her first published novel.

She lives in Minneapolis with a rotating bunch of sweet foster kittens. You can find out more at www.jessicalourey.com, where you can also sign up for her [newsletter](#).

Also by Jess Lourey

THE MURDER BY MONTH ROMCOM MYSTERIES

[*May Day*](#)

[*June Bug*](#)

[*Knee High by the Fourth of July*](#)

[*August Moon*](#)

[*September Mourn*](#)

[*October Fest*](#)

[*November Hunt*](#)

[*December Dread*](#)

[*January Thaw*](#)

[*February Fever*](#)

[*March of Crimes*](#)

[*April Fools*](#)

THE MURDER BY MONTH ROMCOM MYSTERY BUNDLES

[*Summer \(May, June, July, and August\)*](#)

[*Fall \(September, October, and November\)*](#)

[*Winter \(December, January, and February\)*](#)

THE MURDER BY MINUTE ROMCOM MYSTERY NOVELLAS

[*Monday Is Murder*](#)

SALEM'S CIPHER THRILLERS

[*Salem's Cipher*](#)

[*Mercy's Chase*](#)

REED AND STEINBECK THRILLERS

[*“Catch Her in a Lie” \(Amazon Original Short\)*](#)

[*The Taken Ones*](#)

TRUE-CRIME-INSPIRED THRILLERS

[*Unspeakable Things*](#)

[*Bloodline*](#)

[*Litani*](#)

[*The Quarry Girls*](#)

WOMEN’S FICTION

[*The Catalain Book of Secrets*](#)

[*Seven Daughters: A Catalain Book of Secrets novella*](#)

YOUNG ADULT

[*The Toadhouse Trilogy: Book One*](#)

CHILDREN’S BOOKS

[*Leave My Book Alone! \(Starring Claudette, a Dragon with Control Issues\)*](#)

NONFICTION

[*Rewrite Your Life: Discover Your Truth Through the Healing Power of Fiction*](#)

[*Better than Gin: A Coloring Book for Writers*](#)

NOVEL AND MEMOIR WRITING COURSES

[*Jess Lourey’s Writing Retreats for Women*](#)