

# **THE PAIN COLONY**

**SHANON HUNT**



# 1

Layla scurried down the path to the community building, eager for today's caning. Morning devotions began promptly at five thirty, and inductees would be scolded for showing up late. She pulled her white wool poncho tighter around her and stepped up her pace, barely able to see the cracks in the river stone in the predawn darkness. It wasn't easy jogging in the sandals she'd been given. Back in her impure life, she could full-out sprint in six-inch heels. She was sure of this, even though she couldn't remember ever having done it. But these standard-issue thong sandals, known among the inductees as "slides," required her to shuffle to keep them from sliding right off.

The morning bell bonged as she trotted through the wooden double doors into the great room. She exhaled with relief, found a spot in the back of the room, and knelt on the unforgiving cement floor. She carefully folded her poncho and glanced at Isaac in the next space over. He gave her a terse nod. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he panted, unable to get control of his breathing. His face contorted as he shifted to one side and rubbed his bruised shins. She offered a sympathetic smile. Not everyone had the same

tolerance for pain or devotion to purification.

She carefully removed her sandals and rolled her pant legs just past her knees. She paused to collect her inner strength and then rolled onto her swollen, knotted shins, leaning back onto her heels in the heel-sit position. Then just as she'd been taught, she closed her eyes and exhaled into a whisper. "Thank you, Father."

All around her, she heard the same breathy whisper from her fellow inductees. "Thank you, Father."

She imagined a blue sky. *With pain comes peace. With gratitude comes the Father's love.* She selfishly stole a moment to reprimand herself for being late. Even after months at the Colony, she still struggled with the sleep schedule. *Father, please help me adjust.* The Father was testing her resolve. He needed her strong in mind, body, and spirit before she would be allowed to begin purification. Until then, she would dazedly crawl through her daily schedule on the six hours of sleep inductees were allowed each night.

Her legs throbbed as she offered one last whispered "Thank you, Father." The front door opened, and she smiled, thrilled to see that Brother James would be leading the devotions today.

At six foot four, Brother James towered over the inductees in their heel-sits. Layla dropped her gaze as she always did when he was in the room. She feared he would read her mind, see her attraction to him. Her chances for purification would be ruined.

"Good morning, everyone," he said softly. "Let's start today's devotions with five minutes of meditation to release the pain."

The meditation eased the throbbing in her legs, melting it away into the numbness she'd grown to love—to need—in order to reach a state of physico-mental openness. She took a deep breath and exhaled to the count of four, visualizing pain dissipating into the air along with the poison she'd built up over the years of her impure life.

Brother James walked among the inductees, gently touching their shoulders as he passed, and Layla smiled at this obvious gesture of love and support. Many of them were sweating or shaking from the weight on their

painful bruises. Like her, they were finding their own methods of reaching a higher state.

Her mind wandered back to the day she decided nothing could be more important than being pure like Brother James. It had been months ago, after she was promoted from the recruiting program, and she'd been excited for her cleanse. She arrived at the purge room a full two hours early. Olivia, who'd been inducted before her, had told her that the Father would be pleased by her eagerness and would bless her with a deeper cleanse. She'd tingled with excitement and fear as she ducked into the small candle-lit chamber. The drab cement room felt like a tomb, and the flickering light of six candles barely illuminated its only feature, a long, narrow stone bench with leather harnesses anchored into the floor at each end, one for each wrist and one for each ankle. *Make sure the harnesses are tight*, Olivia had said. *You don't want to reflexively pull out of them. The whip hurts a lot more than the cane. Even the Princess of Pain will jump on that first lash.*

Layla felt a squeeze on her shoulder. "Layla, love, are you with us this morning?"

She opened her eyes, startled, and glanced around the cavernous community room, her head cloudy. Brother James rested his hand on her back and smiled down at her tenderly. Others around the room eyed her.

"Out partying too late last night?" he asked with good-natured suspicion.

The others giggled at the ludicrous suggestion. There was no partying during induction. No drugs, no alcohol, and no sex.

Her face turned beet red and she lowered her eyes to her legs. "I'm so sorry, Brother James."

His soft voice didn't falter. She'd never heard him speak anything but kind words. "No need to be sorry, beautiful girl. I can only assume you were with the Father."

He glided to the lectern, where he picked up a heavy wooden rod and addressed the whole room. "Shall we begin? Today is Tuesday, and you know what that means. Let's line up."

Layla hopped up, ignoring the pins and needles that stung the soles of

her feet, and shuffled toward the front of the room, intent on being first to show her commitment to devotions after that shameful daydream.

Brother James gave her a crisp nod as he gestured for her to sit on the austere wrought iron stool. “Layla, the Father is very pleased with you today. I’ve witnessed a warmth from him this morning. Today’s caning will bring you closer to him.”

It was a great commendation coming from Brother James. He was pure, and as such, he had the immense privilege of communicating directly with the Father.

“I am at his will.” She inhaled deeply and aligned her toes at the edge of the black rubber mat. Brother James liked precision.

The inductees chanted in unison. “With pain comes peace.”

She exhaled to the count of four and looked Brother James in the eye. She steeled herself.

He lifted the cane over his head and brought it down hard across her shins. She winced ever so slightly.

“Thank you, Layla, for your devotion to purification.” He gave her a satisfied smile.

“With gratitude comes the Father’s love.”

Layla rose with a respectful nod and returned to her spot without limping as the canings continued.

“Crystal, welcome. The Father is with you.”

“I am at his will,” Crystal croaked. Her head was lowered, and Layla assumed her eyes were squeezed shut. Most new inductees had trouble with their first few canings.

Layla couldn’t suppress a grin as she rolled onto her newly inflamed shins. She breathed deeply to release the pain and closed her eyes.

Her day was off to an outstanding start.

## 2

Allison Stevens stood beside the stage, hands clasped tightly as her boss clicked to the summary slide for his presentation. Every seat was full, and conference attendees lined the back wall of the auditorium. All eyes were trained on Dr. Harris, CEO of Quandary Therapeutics, enchanted by him. No one even glanced down at their iPhone.

She wondered if they would all leave when she stepped up to the lectern. Austin was a hard act to follow. He moved so easily across the stage, spoke with such confidence and conviction. He wasn't just a great presenter; he was a passionate artiste.

“Just think how far science has come.” His voice boomed over the speakers with a dramatic flair. “Two centuries ago, patients depended on magic potions and local plants to heal life-threatening diseases. And the first antibiotic, penicillin, isn't even a hundred years old yet—I have a grandma older than penicillin.” He grinned. “Granny smells a little like mold herself, but don't tell her I said that.” He winked at the audience.

The crowd laughed. Allison laughed too, even though she'd heard about Austin's moldy granny a dozen times before. He loved that line, and it worked every time.

“In the last hundred years, we've developed thousands of drugs for hundreds of diseases. In the last thirty, we've moved to new approaches for

reaching even more targets and curing more diseases using more complex molecules like proteins and monoclonal antibodies. And now in the twenty-first century, with the surge in biotechnology and a better understanding of immunology, we can design and build compounds with multiple objectives—bispecific antibodies with one leg that finds a cancer tumor and another that calls in the body's own killer T-cells.”

Her heart jumped as he neared his final point. She was up. Her mouth filled with cotton. She glanced at the lectern for the third time to ensure that her bottle of water hadn't disappeared.

“We can remove specific cells that aren't doing their job, reprogram them, and put them back into a patient's body, curing cancers and diseases that can't be treated with conventional medications. What would Granny have thought if she'd heard this outlandish science fiction when she was a child?”

Again, another round of laughter.

He lost his smile and put on his serious scientist face. “But where we are today with gene editing is a whole new level addressing the very foundations of what makes us human. It's truly remarkable to live in these times, and I'm so privileged to work with a team of brilliant scientists and clinicians who've taken the next step with me in this journey into gene therapy.”

As Austin pivoted, a surge of adrenaline raced into her legs. She stood tall, trying to look worthy of the crowd's attention. Despite the over-air-conditioned room, her armpits felt damp.

“One of my brilliant scientists happens to be here with me today. Allison Stevens is my right-hand man at Quandary, and she also leads our most advanced clinical program, Enigmax.” He held his hand out to her as if asking her to dance. “Allison?”

Smiling, she stepped onto the stage and gracefully took his hand. He dropped her hand and put an arm around her shoulder. It was a move they'd rehearsed many times to make it look natural. He'd seen a TV evangelist use this move to give the audience a feeling of wholesomeness, and he thought it might dissuade the skeptics from believing the work they were doing was

ungodly. It wasn't easy being a trendsetter in medical advances.

"Allison is going to show you what you've all come here for today, the astounding early clinical results of Enigmax gene therapy in young patients with Duchenne muscular dystrophy."

The audience applauded as Austin stepped off the stage, allowing her one quick second to take a sip of water, a feeble attempt at replacing the saliva that just wouldn't come. She picked up the slide advancer, reluctantly stepped out from the lectern, and peered into the audience. Unable to see a single face beyond the blazing stage lights, she tried to focus on the small red dots of phones and recording devices.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for the opportunity to share with you the important work we've been doing in Duchenne muscular dystrophy, or DMD. And thank you, Austin, for the introduction.

"DMD is a genetic disorder characterized by muscle degeneration and weakness that begins at a very young age in some children."

She kicked off a video of a young boy playing on the grass in a sprinkler with other children. He was limping and listing to one side. "This is one of our patients from Norway, Jakob. At three years old, he's struggling to walk and can't run like the other children."

Jakob, now a bit older, walked across a doctor's office. His legs moved slowly, his knees buckled inward, and he moved with an unnatural waddle. "And here is Jakob at age five. His large-motor control had become worse, and he was diagnosed with DMD by a genetic test. By the time Jakob joined our study a year ago, he was confined to a wheelchair."

Her voice cracked. She sidled to the lectern for another sip of water, glancing back at a still photo of Jakob sitting awkwardly in his small wheelchair. He was smiling, though, and his eyes twinkled with the energy and optimism of youth. Smiling Jakob had had no quality of life the day Allison had met him, but he'd smiled because he had hope. This was why she loved her job.

"There is currently no effective medicinal therapy for DMD, and unfortunately, Jakob did not respond to the only available gene therapy at

the time, Exondys 51. This isn't entirely surprising, since Exondys works in only thirteen percent of DMD patients. So Jakob joined our clinical trial and was treated with Enigmax eight months ago."

She clicked the slide advancer, and a new video of Jakob began. He stood up from a chair and walked down a long hall toward his mother. He didn't limp or waddle; he walked like a perfectly normal child. His mother got down on one knee and opened her arms, and he broke into a weak jog and fell into his mother's embrace.

The audience murmured in approval.

Allison smiled back. "Jakob gets stronger every day. He goes to school, plays on the playground with the other kids, and has a very bright future. In fact, I received a call from his physician just yesterday. He told me Jakob can now do a somersault."

Scattered applause gathered momentum quickly, and Allison blinked from the eruption of a hundred camera flashes. Damn, Austin was right. *Start with Jakob*, he'd told her. *Trust me. Jakob will take away your stage fright. He brings out the best in you.* At that moment, her mouth remembered how to salivate, her hands stopped shaking, and her smile came naturally.

She strode toward the edge of the stage. "Now let me tell you about Quandary Therapeutics' amazing new gene editing technology and our future plans for Enigmax."

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"Bartender, bring this incredible woman a beer."

Austin's voice was boisterous, as if he were announcing the winner of the World Cup. Despite the tavern's proximity to the conference center, they sat alone at the bar. Apparently Boston didn't start drinking before eleven in the morning, despite the city's reputation. Good. Allison settled back on her stool. She was thrilled to have some time alone with Austin, a rare moment when he was neither presenting nor managing an important stakeholder meeting.

He raised his beer in the air. "To a well-deserved celebration."

She beamed and clinked his glass.

He moved closer, swept her hair off her neck, and punctuated each of his next words with a sensual kiss. “You. Were. Perfect.”

“Austin? I’m phasing you out.” She’d read enough self-help books to know that threatening a man wouldn’t make him leave his wife, but she at least wanted him to think she wasn’t the spineless gull she knew she was.

He sat up slightly and smirked. “Are you, now?”

“I’ve decided you’re not my type.”

“I believe I’m exactly your type.” His grin widened.

Cocky bastard.

“No, it’s become clear to me by your actions—or inaction, as the case may be—that you’re not as serious about our relationship as I am, so I’m going to look for someone more—”

He booped her nose. “Insecure?”

“Funny.”

“Beer-gutted?” He moved in on her again, playing with her hair, then tracing his fingers down the inside of her bare arm.

“No.” She set her beer down, slightly shaky.

“Unemployed, living with his mother?” His eyes glistened with lust, following his hand as it wandered down her side and across her thigh.

God, he was irresistible. But she wasn’t going to wane. She removed his hand. “Someone more *unmarried*.”

Whoops. The last word came out with a bit too much emphasis.

“Ah, baby, you’re such a perfectionist. And I love that about you.” He pulled her off the bar stool, spun her around, and pressed her back against the wall, kissing her hard on the mouth.

She folded instantly. Another failed attempt to regain her dignity. Maybe dignity was overrated.

“Austin Harris?” A deep voice came from behind them.

Mortified, Allison wriggled out from his grasp and turned away to put some space between them.

“Yes?” Austin asked. “What can I do—”

“Dr. Harris, you’re under arrest for identity fraud and conspiracy to

commit securities fraud. You have the right to remain silent.”

She spun around. “What?”

The deep voice had come from a stocky man with a cleanly shaved head. He wore a sensible gray suit and red tie, and he held out a badge prominently identifying him as FBI. His dry, croaky voice reminded Allison of Vin Diesel’s portrayal of the human-alien Riddick, and his monotone delivery of Austin’s Miranda rights made him seem just as intimidating. Standing beside Agent Riddick was another suit, much taller and sporting a thick blond 1970s mustache. He eyed Allison briefly before scanning the empty bar, stopping at the bartender, who busied himself organizing clean glasses in an obvious attempt to avoid the confrontation.

The whole scene was a cliché straight from a CSI episode; it had to be a joke. She examined Agent Riddick’s badge, searching for a tell, before realizing she had no idea what a real badge looked like.

Austin stoically listened to his rights, nodding slightly. She desperately searched his face, but it held no readable expression. She instinctively backed up, not daring to utter a word, fearful that whatever this was would be made worse by drawing attention to herself.

“Do you understand these rights?” Agent Riddick concluded.

Austin nodded. His face still showed no sign of emotion, fear or otherwise.

Agent Mustache stepped forward, pulling handcuffs from his pocket.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary, will it, Dr. Harris?”

Austin’s expression finally changed to a brief, sad smile. “No, of course not.”

He followed them to the door.

“Austin!” She couldn’t let him go like this, with no explanation. What was she supposed to do?

But he didn’t turn back.

Instead, Agent Riddick turned and acknowledged her with a slight nod. “Ms. Stevens.”

She stood alone next to the bar, her heart still drumming between her

ears, and stared as the door banged closed, the dangling COME AGAIN! sign swaying back and forth.

# 3

“Layla, you can come in now,” Dr. Jeannette called from her office.

Layla put down her copy of *Little House on the Prairie* and walked carefully but with purpose into Dr. Jeannette’s office. She took a seat on the soft brown leather sofa, straining to sit upright. She really didn’t like the cushy, pillowy sofa. It was impossible to make a good impression half reclined, and her legs were too sore to cross.

Dr. Jeannette noticed her discomfort. “How about we sit at the table.”

She offered a hand to help Layla up, but Layla pushed herself out of the sofa and moved to the rigid armchair angled next to a small round pedestal table that held only a small box of tissues.

“You’re my best adapter to pain, Layla. You should hear the others complain about the soreness and bruises.”

She knew this to be true already. She could hear their suffering during devotions. She eased into the chair while Dr. Jeannette poured two cups of green tea. She admired her therapist’s grace as she moved across the office. Dr. Jeannette was fit, not thin and frail like Layla, and she appeared strong, healthy, and worry-free. But most important, she knew that Dr. Jeannette genuinely wanted to help her.

“Thank you.” She graciously accepted her teacup.

“Of course, my dear. How are you doing this week?”

“I think very well. I’ve been spending extra time in meditation group and yoga. I’m getting stronger. My weight is up to one sixteen now. That’s almost a whole pound this week, and I got my period.”

“That’s excellent! Congratulations. Dr. Jeremy must be thrilled.”

She slid forward on her chair. “Oh, and remember that cooking contest I was going to enter, over in the rec center? Well, I did enter, thanks to you not letting me back out, and I won third place. It was the curry. Curry’s such an intense flavor. Hard to beat.”

Dr. Jeannette beamed. “And how have you been progressing with your past memories?”

“Um, okay, I guess.” She picked at a hangnail on her thumb.

“Can we talk a little about your father today?”

“Um, sure.” Her eyes remained fixed on her hands. She’d practiced several ways of describing the beatings, but none of them sounded convincing. “Um, my father was a mean, horrible, abusive man. He, um, used to come home drunk and he would, um, you know, hit me.”

Dr. Jeannette sighed and removed her glasses, setting them gently on the table. Layla had seen this nonverbal response many times before, and her eyes filled with tears. It was the wrong answer. Dr. Jeannette wasn’t happy with her progress.

“Layla, let’s do the chant together.”

She reluctantly lifted her eyes, willing the tears back. “A poisoned life cannot be purified until it is fully understood. As an impure, I must acknowledge, accept, and despise the poison inside of me so that I can be free of it.”

She dropped her eyes back to her lap. She felt Dr. Jeannette staring at her, pitying her.

“I know how difficult this is. I do. I’ve seen so many before you struggle to accept their pasts, unable to learn how to despise them. I promise you’ll get there—but you have to work harder, Layla. You have to listen to what I’ve told you about your poisoned life. You have to feel the pain he caused you. This isn’t just an exercise in telling me what you think I want to hear.

You need to feel it. Believe it, down to your core.”

Layla’s nose ran, and she plucked a tissue from the box on the table. She knew her inability to remember her childhood trauma was holding her back from progressing.

“Let’s talk about something else. This will make you happy.”

Layla searched her face hopefully.

“Last week during your hypnosis, you told me a fun story. You were maybe eight years old, or at least that’s how old your voice sounded to me.” Dr. Jeannette let out a small chuckle.

“Really? What was it?”

“Well, okay, let’s see. How did it start? You were at a birthday party for one of your classmates. It was at a roller skating rink. You were holding hands with a friend, skating around the rink, when your friend fell down. She pulled you down too, and you both giggled madly. Do you remember?”

She squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could, hoping the memory would pop right out of her unconscious mind and project itself onto the backs of her eyelids like a movie. But all she could picture was a large oval cement floor with kids smiling as they skated around the circle, as though she were looking at a picture in a book.

“It’s okay, my dear. So then neither of you could stand up. Your skates kept rolling out from under you every time you tried to stand, and that made you laugh even harder. What happened next is the best part. Another group of girls who were also holding hands tripped over you while you were trying to get up, and they fell on the floor with you.”

Layla giggled. Just the idea that she might have been part of this silly group, invited to a roller skating birthday party, made her feel so normal, so human.

“And all of you just gave up trying to get up and just lay on the floor and laughed and laughed. All the other kids had to skate around you.”

She wanted to hear more. She wanted the story to go on forever.

“See?” Dr. Jeannette put a hand over hers and gave it a squeeze. “I told you not every moment in a poisoned life is bad. There are happy moments,

too. And this is why I think you're special, my dear. You have all this beauty inside you. Your foundation is rich and complex. And when you've released the poison during your purification, you'll be able to help so many others become pure just like you."

The words gave Layla chills, and her resolve returned. She would work harder. She would do whatever it took.

Dr. Jeannette stood up and held out her hand. In her palm was a small white tablet. "Now take your pill and finish your tea so we can begin today's hypnosis."

She swallowed the pill with the last gulp of the now lukewarm tea. She got up and took a step toward the sofa. Then, changing her mind, she turned back to Dr. Jeannette and hugged her tightly.

Dr. Jeannette laughed and hugged her in return. "Hey, what was that for?"

She bounced on her tiptoes. "I'm just feeling really optimistic about my future."

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Layla left Dr. Jeannette's office feeling refreshed. The weather had grown quite a bit cooler, so she slowed to a stroll toward the yoga studio, enjoying the light, arid breeze carrying the peppery smell of sagebrush. She hummed a tune. She wasn't sure if it was a song, but it didn't matter. She felt better than she had all week. Dr. Jeannette's sessions had a way of giving her a new outlook.

She swerved over to the fruit stand, where her slightly pudgy friend Nicole hovered over the snacks. Layla selected a pear as Nicole grabbed her arm and pulled her to the side.

"Layla! Oh my god, I have to tell you something—two things, actually. Are you ready? One, I've been selected for purification. I'm. Starting. Purification!" She danced an excited jig. "And two, I'm being considered for a position outside the Colony with a sponsor, and it might be New York. A sponsor in New York!"

Nicole had always dreamed of going to New York and living among its

tall buildings and flashing neon billboards. This was the perfect outcome for Nicole.

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Layla said, trying hard to sound as enthusiastic as she should have felt. But in truth, she was crushed. Nicole had been at the Colony only a few months. She’d completed the same inductee program Layla had. But it wasn’t right that she should get her call to purification first. Layla was a model inductee. She was completely engaged in her daily schedule, she lived and breathed by the Colony’s code of ethics, and she was so ready for purification.

“I know. And Brother James told me I’m like one of the fastest inductees to progress through the program.”

Layla stepped back, wanting to escape this conversation.

“Anyway, I have to run now. Dr. Jeremy says I need to have a physical before I can start.” Nicole rolled her eyes. “Like I could be any healthier.”

She grabbed Layla in a hug, then skittered off without a goodbye.

Layla looked around to make sure no one was watching, then tossed her unbitten pear in the trash can.

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Layla lay unmoving in the sensory deprivation tank for what must have been hours. Long durations in the tank were forbidden, but the staff trusted her after all these months, and they turned a blind eye to her extended sessions. She’d hoped that the isolation might help, but her poisoned life would simply not come to her. She tried to focus on the individual features of her dad’s appearance, as she’d been told to do. *He had dark blond hair, Layla, a bit darker than yours, but thinning on top. He had a bald spot. No good. Nothing. He had a small gap between his front teeth, and you told me he had bad breath.* Still nothing.

Why was this so hard? What was wrong with her?

Anger got the better of her and her muscles involuntarily contracted, disrupting her motionless state. Irritated, she dipped her towel into the salt water and spread it across her face, reveling in the sting of the salt in her eyes and the bitter taste in her mouth. *Release the pain.*

After what felt like another hour, she finally knew what she must do. She left the new recruit center and headed uphill toward the administrative building, where she hoped she would find Brother James.

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Brother James looked up from his journal with his customary warm smile when Layla knocked. He swept his hair to one side and pulled on his black-rimmed glasses over eyes that appeared impossibly blue. She blushed and dropped her gaze, but only for a second before she remembered her newfound resolve. She lifted her chin and took one step toward his desk, then stopped, second-guessing herself. She stepped back just a bit and began picking a new hangnail.

Maybe she should just accept that she wasn't meant to be pure. She should just leave the Colony and go back to her poisoned life, whatever that was.

She frowned. Dr. Jeannette would scold her for being self-critical. She gathered her strength again and stepped forward, holding her arms stiffly at her sides.

Brother James still hadn't spoken. He waited patiently.

"Brother James?"

"Hello, Layla. To what do I owe this lovely visit?"

She blushed again and glanced away. She hadn't stepped into Brother James's office in a long time, and it felt smaller. His shelves were lined with medical books and journals and stacks of folders. More books and journals were stacked on the floor around the perimeter.

Brother James was obviously an extremely busy and important man and certainly had no time for her. Her confidence waned again, and she stalled.

"Um, are you, um, working?" It was the dumbest question she could have asked, and she grimaced in disgust.

"Yeah, a little. I'm just reviewing the profile of a new recruit. Come here, let me show you."

She took one step closer. Why was she so terrified to be close to him?

Brother James got up with his folder and walked in front of his desk. He

stood next to her, holding the folder open. “This is Kelly. She arrived yesterday. Here, take a look.” He held up the file with a photo so she could get a good look.

She gasped. The girl in the picture was only about twelve years old but so emaciated that Layla couldn’t believe she was able to stand up on her own. Her face, turned upward and directly into the camera, was gaunt and ashen, her eyes sunken. She appeared mournful. She looked like she might be dying.

“What happened to her?” she breathed, unable to turn from the image.

“She was found on a busy city street, staggering around aimlessly in only a long shirt with no identification or money. Our recruiters saw her and offered to help. They had fruit and sandwiches in the truck and a warm blanket. She accepted, and we brought her here.”

“Is she sick?” The emptiness in Kelly’s eyes unsettled her.

“Sort of. Kelly’s a drug addict. She’s in the infirmary now, getting treatment for her addiction. Our doctors are trying to remove the poison from her.” He gave her an encouraging smile. “When she’s able to join the group, I hope you’ll befriend her. You have so much love to give, and you could really be a good mentor for her.”

“But what about her parents?”

“She’s nineteen, so she can make her own decisions.”

She leaned in closer to the picture, incredulous. Kelly looked like a child.

Brother James closed the folder and lifted her chin so she would meet his eyes. He spoke to her in a serious tone. “Do you see how important our work is here at the Colony?”

She nodded.

“All your friends and all these people who live and work here are here on their own accord, to try to make a better world for you and Kelly and everyone else who had a poisoned life. We have doctors and therapists and nutritionists and exercise instructors, and they’re all here because they believe in making a pure society.”

“I understand.”

“And you have an important role in that.”

“Purification.”

“Exactly.” He smiled, and her courage returned.

She cleared her throat, even though she didn’t need to. “I came here to ask for your help. Dr. Jeannette says the Father will not allow my purification until I can remember my poisoned life. Will you perform another cleanse? I think it might help me release my memories from my unconscious mind.”

“Of course, beautiful girl.” Brother James enfolded her in his arms, and for just a moment she indulged the warmth. The comfort. The faintly musky smell of his linen shirt.

Then she pulled away, embarrassed and ashamed. *Please forgive me, Father.*

# 4

Allison glanced at the clock: 4:22 a.m. She rolled over in bed and opened her laptop—she’d slept with it again—and scanned her emails, desperately looking for Austin’s name. Nothing. She snatched up her phone. No messages. It was Thursday morning, a full forty-one hours since she’d watched Austin escorted out of the tavern, and she hadn’t heard a word from him. The arrest hadn’t made the local news, and apparently no one at the office had even heard. She’d come home yesterday before lunch to wallow in self-indulgent misery. How could he do this to her?

She scrolled through her texts. She’d sent him twelve texts since Tuesday, not one of them answered, not even the embarrassingly truthful one from last night at 10:42 that read, “Austin, please, PLEASE! I haven’t slept. I haven’t eaten. I can’t stop crying. I don’t know what to do. PLEASE!”

God, she sounded like a pathetic jilted girlfriend.

She hurled her phone across her bed. Was it really possible he’d had no opportunity whatsoever to contact her? She was certain he wasn’t sitting in a jail cell somewhere. People like Austin Harris didn’t do time, not even overnight time.

Her swollen eyes stung as she rubbed them, and her stomach churned with dread. She pulled the blanket over her head and tried to sleep.

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The phone was vibrating. Allison jerked awake and dug frantically through the blankets, her heart hammering. There it was—on the floor. She grabbed it and instinctively swiped to accept the call before she noticed the caller ID.

“Al, where the fuck are you?” Ryan. Damn it. Ryan Garner, Quandary’s chief business officer, was barely thirty with all the maturity of a frat boy. He was likable but not nearly experienced enough for his position, as evidenced by his greeting.

“I, uh ... What time is it?” She rolled over to look at the clock. 9:20 a.m. Christ.

“Kiran’s on his way over for a major announcement at ten. Do you not read your goddamn email?”

Shit. Why hadn’t she thought to contact Quandary’s legal counsel herself? Obviously, that’s what a chief of staff would have done. She felt like such an idiot.

“Um, right. Okay. I was, uh, just finishing up something. I’ll be there in thirty.”

She dropped the phone and flew out of bed. She was never going to have any credibility with these guys if she didn’t start acting like a professional. She grabbed her jeans, thought again, and tossed them aside. Kiran would expect her in business attire. And, damn it, Austin had trusted her to take on this role. He believed she could do it. She found one pair of unwrinkled dress pants and pulled on a shirt and sports jacket.

She looked in the full-length mirror. Good enough—for someone who was the last to know about an announcement she herself should have initiated.

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“I’m so sorry about all this, Allison.” Kiran Parsons was waiting in her office when she arrived.

“Thank you so much for coming.” She leaned in for the loathsome East Coast cheek kiss. “I’m sorry, I should’ve called you. I just wasn’t sure how to proceed in a situation like this.” She’d practiced several excuses during

her drive into the office. This one was the best she could do.

“Of course. Listen. Austin was released on bail yesterday, and he’s staying home today to be with his family. He’s asked me to make an announcement to the whole team, but I thought I should share it with you first. We should be on the same page.”

She knew it. He wasn’t holed up in some jail cell. She couldn’t decide if she was hurt or angry that he hadn’t called. She smiled to try to be polite, but she was sure Kiran could see how distressed she was. She closed her office door and turned to face him.

Kiran leaned back to half sit on her desk. “Austin was arrested for illegal insider trading and fraud. He’s allegedly been trading call and put options on Quandary, then leaking information to investors to manipulate the stock price in his favor.”

She stared at him, unable to speak.

“The SEC was alerted of suspicious trading activity on Quandary’s stock by an anonymous tip about a month ago. The FBI and SEC followed the money coming in and out of Austin’s various accounts and discovered a trading account and a trust had been set up using the identity of his wife’s deceased brother, a guy by the name of William Chase Stetson. Does that name ring a bell to you?”

The phrase “insider trading and fraud” looped through her head like a stuck record.

“Anyway, allegedly Austin has been trading with this account. The SEC is focused on the insider trading, hundreds of thousands of dollars, but the FBI has built a case for identity fraud.” He offered a sympathetic smile. “It’s a white-collar crime. Unfortunate, but it does happen more than you think.”

She felt like a house had fallen from the sky and landed on her. Or maybe she just wished one would.

He stood up and gazed out her office window into the lobby, as if this was just a routine legal status report. “Not gonna lie, the SEC has a strong case. The penalties for this kind of fraud are a bitch. If Austin’s convicted, he’ll be on the line for stiff fines and even jail time—usually only Club Fed,

but a felony's still serious business."

A wave of nausea ran through her, and she leaned on her desk to keep from fainting. She sucked in air, hard.

"Are you all right?" He sounded concerned but he didn't move to help.

"Fine." She squeaked out the next question, not wanting to hear the answer. "And Quandary?"

"I don't know that yet. Quandary stock will fall when this gets out. You could be a target for acquisition. Plenty of sharks out there who will smell blood."

She clenched her jaw, grinding her teeth together so hard they hurt.

Kiran said gently, "We need to get out there, get this over with."

She envisioned the lecture room filled with all eighty-two Quandary employees. They would feel angry, betrayed. How could this man they'd trusted for years have deceived investors? They would ask about their jobs, remind her that they had families to support. They would need answers and emotional support she was unable to give.

Allison felt as though she was shrinking.

"Are you ready?"

They already hated her. She was sure of it. They believed she was too inexperienced for her job. And as soon as she stepped out there with Kiran, she would prove them right.

She glanced at the clock: 10:10.

She scooped the pen and notepad tidily left on the corner of her desk and followed him down the hall. What would she jot down? *How do you spell "fraud," Kiran? Do you happen to know the visiting hours at Club Fed for homenreacking girlfriends?*

The air seemed thick and hot, as if she were breathing in a steam room. All her strength left her body, and she felt simultaneously sweaty and cold.

"Kiran."

He glanced back questioningly.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this. I can't go out there."

His piteous look at her—Allison Stevens, Quandary's chief of staff and

program leader for the life-changing DMD drug—validated what she'd always known deep down. She was an imposter, an unworthy fake who'd built a career by fucking the boss.

Without a word, he hurried onward to the lecture room alone.

# 5

Six weeks into this damn case, and he'd gotten nowhere. DEA Special Agent Peter Malloy eyed the stack of folders in the tray labeled DEA-994. He'd combed through the case files day after day, looking for connections between the six victims he'd identified so far. Nothing. It didn't help that four of the vics were Does, three Johns and a Jane, and their case files were little more than an autopsy report and a few postmortem pictures.

As he waited the usual ten minutes for his computer to boot, courtesy of the agency's excessive IT policies, he got up and stood at his window, sipping his urn coffee and admiring his view of the parking lot. The sun was already beating down at ninety-three degrees, and he could see heat haze coming off the asphalt. Ironically, the day would be significantly less gloomy if it would just fucking rain. But this was the desert southwest, not known for moisture.

He polished off his coffee and sat down again when his DEA login page appeared. The machine whirred loudly like it might die at any moment. Goddamn government-issue technology. How could they be expected to keep up with the bad guys with bullshit tools more than a decade old?

His brain seemed to be spinning in the same hateful blue cursor of death. He'd gone over these cases a dozen times. Six bodies across Nevada, Arizona, and Southern Utah. His team had interviewed the families and

friends of their two identified victims. The case profiles were damn robust.

What frustrated him the most, however, was that this case was like nothing he'd ever seen—and he was certain that over the course of twenty-five years with the DEA, he'd seen everything. Two months ago when Cramer had approached him, he'd tried to avoid taking this case. Opioid pumps were rising in popularity but still within the purview of physician practice, and this didn't feel like an illegal drug case. Pumps certainly weren't being implanted at the local opioid den, not to mention that he was short-staffed and had his hands full with the meth problem. But he'd lost the fight, and the files had landed in his lap. It hadn't taken long to figure out that opioids weren't the problem. Whatever was going on didn't involve any known controlled substance, narcotic, stimulant, depressant, or performance drug.

He poured another cup of coffee and pulled the two identified victims' folders from the stack. He rubbed his tired, gritty eyes and scratched at his beard stubble before pulling on his reading glasses.

Eric Sparks, age twenty-one, African American, played football for UNLV, wide receiver. Died of traumatic brain injury after six days in a coma, and his autopsy revealed multiple recent severe skull fractures for which he hadn't received medical care. In fact, his medical records showed he hadn't visited the team's physician at all since his physical exam at the start of the school year. The autopsy report also mentioned Eric had three broken ribs and a broken clavicle, which his brother had said probably occurred when he jumped out of his second-floor dorm room window a month ago and landed on a cement stair rail below his room. Yet Eric hadn't missed a game or even a practice.

Why hadn't Eric seen a doctor after a stupid stunt like that? Improperly healed injuries might've cost him his scholarship, not to mention his future if he planned to go pro. Malloy made a note to have his guys talk to the team physician about the injuries.

He tossed his reading glasses back onto his desk and sat back in his chair. He wasn't doing his best work. And dammit, he owed it to these families to

try harder. He put his glasses back on and picked up the second folder, then stood up and paced while he reviewed it.

Karen Richmond, twenty-three-year-old Caucasian woman, living with her father and three younger siblings in Tempe, Arizona. Karen was a long-distance runner who'd completed most of an ultramarathon in the Yukon Arctic before collapsing and dying of hypothermia. According to other competitors, she'd shown signs of hypothermia at mile 148 but refused help from the support crew, insisting she was fine. They'd allowed her to continue to the mandatory checkpoint at mile 156, eight miles ahead. Her body was found on the course at mile 180. There was no record of her stopping at the mandatory checkpoint, and given the distance and her time of death, she couldn't have stopped, slept, or eaten. That would have been nearly twenty-four hours of continuous running in subfreezing temperatures and a foot of icy snow.

"The most she'd ever run without resting was thirty-eight miles, which took her six hours," reported her father, Lyle Richmond. "She'd been excited about this race because the longest leg was only thirty-four miles. She ran these races for the social part, makin' friends and talkin' about running with other like-minded folks."

Malloy tried to put himself in her head. Even if she'd taken a drug that made her feel—what? elated? superpowered?—why would she have attempted such an absurd distance? What told her she should just keep going? Based on her psychological profile, which admittedly came from anecdotal reports from friends and family, her behavior didn't fit the kind of person she was.

He closed her file and opened her online file, scrolling through the images until he found the one he was looking for. He enlarged it on the screen and focused on the subcutaneous port surgically implanted at the base of her spine—the one and only physical feature that linked all six victims.

"Talk to me," he growled. "What are you hiding?"

Barely the size of a quarter, the port would probably have been

overlooked on anyone not lying on an autopsy table. The small, round chamber with a silicone center had been found embedded under the skin between the L2 and L3 vertebrae on every victim, next to a two-inch incision scar. In both the Richmond and Sparks cases, not a single friend or family member had ever seen the port or knew anything about it. It was the best-kept secret he'd ever encountered in a case, confirmed by the fact that no one else had come forward either with a port or knowing someone who had a port, despite widespread communications to local hospitals and clinics.

He'd spent an entire day with his team researching the device and discussing how such an apparatus might be used. An opioid pump was the obvious first idea. Pain pumps were available for patients with terminal illnesses, and perhaps they'd made their way to the street by some ethically challenged or disgruntled jackass doctor who didn't like his cut from the HMOs. But the autopsies showed no implanted intrathecal pumps. The ports appeared to be nothing more than a simple way to inject a drug directly into the spinal cord in a precise location.

That led the team to their second idea, injectable morphine. To their astonishment, not one of the victims had even a trace of morphine or any opioid or analgesic drug in their bodies. No performance enhancers. Not even goddamn Tylenol. The labs had been such a shock that he'd ordered a second report for every victim from a different lab. The results had been the same.

Someone suggested that perhaps the victims were on an experimental medication. He consulted colleagues in the Diversion Investigations to see if any pharmaceutical companies might be conducting ongoing clinical studies in the US or Mexico requiring a spinal fluid port. No luck.

He groped for his phone without looking and speed-dialed.

Danny Garcia picked up at one ring. "Yeah."

Garcia was his youngest but best agent, well trained in Malloy's no-nonsense work style. Malloy appreciated that Garcia didn't wear him down with unnecessary greetings.

“Did we ever find a manufacturer of the spinal ports?”

“Nope. Called every supplier I could find and showed ’em the pictures. All legit suppliers have product numbers imprinted on their devices.”

“What about residue? Did Forensics find anything?”

“Nah. Nothin’, boss. The ports were clean.”

“Shit.”

Malloy hung up. This case was nothing but dead ends, and it was only a matter of time before the media got ahold of it and turned his case into a goddamn circus.

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Malloy glanced up from his lunch as Garcia entered his office without knocking. Even though Garcia was over six feet tall, Malloy figured he must weigh maybe a hundred forty soaking wet. He kept his jet-black hair in a ponytail most days, but today it hung over his shoulders. If he’d been wearing some eye makeup and bell bottoms, he could have doubled for a young Cher.

Garcia dropped a folder onto his desk. “Latest vic.”

Victim number seven.

Malloy glanced down at the file, labeled with a name and the picture of a teenage boy. He tossed the rest of his sandwich in the trash. “All right. Spill it.”

“Mark Vespe, a freshman at ASU, living in a frat house. His body was found in the basement after a party early this morning at”—he opened the folder—“3:24 a.m. One of the kids called the police saying Vespe had cut his wrists, so the university police show up expecting a suicide scene. But you’re not gonna fuckin’ believe this—it was a five-finger fillet game that ended badly.”

Garcia pulled out two enlarged photos of Vespe’s hand, one taken before it had been cleaned of the blood. His hand was in fact completely filleted. Although the fingers were still intact, it looked like the hand had been pushed through a material shredder.

Jesus. He didn’t have the stomach for that kind of thing, despite working

in crime so many years.

The cleaned photo showed much more detail: inch-long cuts, maybe fifty or a hundred even, from each fingertip to his wrist. In some places the flesh was missing and the thin metacarpal bones were visible.

He turned away.

“I haven’t even gotten to the fun part yet.” Garcia pulled out a flash drive, his expression saying *You ain’t gonna like this, boss*.

Malloy plugged the drive into his USB port and sat back in his chair, as if distancing himself from the screen might make it less horrifying. It was a video clip, apparently taken by another student at the party. It was shaky and often bounced around the room, but it was good enough to clearly depict what had happened. The screaming and yelling in the video were so loud he lowered the volume on his speaker.

Vespe stood in front of a poker table with his left hand flat on the table, fingers spread wide. In his right hand, he held a long-bladed kitchen utility knife, which he stabbed madly into his left hand. He alternated between singing the five-finger fillet song and laughing maniacally, his eyes wide with excitement. Or delirium. He wasn’t watching his precision, as the game’s supposed to be played; instead, he was watching the crowd and looking into the camera. It was eerie; it reminded Malloy of a guy on PCP. Then a loud male voice shouted *Stop it!* Vespe startled, and his stabbing hand shifted. The next plunge of the knife went straight through his forearm.

The video ended.

“Holy fucking mother of god,” Malloy said in one long exhalation.

Garcia seemed unfazed by the horror. “The cops questioned everyone at the party, though a lot of them had already taken off. Supposedly Vespe stopped the game and walked casually to the bathroom. They said he sounded completely lucid, assuring everyone it was just a cut, and he wasn’t hurt, and he was just gonna go wash it up. Then he locked the door to the bathroom, and someone called university police. By the time they arrived on the scene, Vespe had bled to death sitting with his back against the locked door.”

Garcia stopped talking and sat down in the chair opposite Malloy.

“And the kid has a port?” Malloy didn’t know why he asked such an obvious question.

“Yepper.” Garcia pulled out the picture taken by the medical examiner.

“I need those labs. Let me know when the autopsy report comes in. And can we please send our forensics guys over there immediately? Those mall cops will just fuck everything up.”

“Got it.” Garcia stood up and walked out.

“And get interviews from everyone in that video!” he yelled after Garcia.

He clicked Play to watch the video again. The senseless stabbing had continued for twenty-two seconds before the scream. Twenty-two long seconds—Vespe had stabbed himself repeatedly for the same amount of time his own son ran the two hundred meter. His stomach churned, and he mindlessly reached for his bottle of Tums, shaking a couple directly into his mouth.

His runner was now in graduate school. How many times over the past twenty-four years had he tormented Robbie with his nuggets of parental wisdom? *You know marijuana is a gateway drug, don't you?* Robbie’d always had a smart retort. *Really? Wow! That's news to me! Guess the son of a DEA agent is always the last to know,* followed by a smile and an eye-roll. *Dad, come on. Seriously?* And somehow, he felt sure that Vespe’s parents were no different than he was. They’d brought up a fine young man, prepared him for the road ahead, made sure he had pizza money. They probably couldn’t wait for him to come home for Christmas. A tragic, drug-related death wasn’t in the cards for their little boy; illicit drugs killed addicts with unfortunate upbringings or who made too many bad choices, not college students with loving parents and bright futures.

That’s what everyone thought.

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Malloy stood outside his car, waiting for the AC to cool it down to something that wouldn’t melt his skin. Even though the sun was nearly setting, the temperature hadn’t dropped one degree. He hated Phoenix in

the summer.

The image of Mark Vespe played back in his head as he waited. That freakish look on Vespe's face, the PCP look. Why? Why'd the kid do that? What was he thinking? For that matter, what had Karen Richmond been thinking? Whatever they'd been pumping through that port had to be a psychoactive. Maybe a hallucinogen. A new type of LSD?

He got into his car, checked the rearview mirror, and put the car in reverse. As he took his foot off the brake, he was startled by a loud knuckle rap on his window.

He rolled down the window. "Christ, Garcia. What the hell?"

"They found vials and a syringe."

