

The PURGATORIUM

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Chapter One: The Island

A morning fog was just beginning to thin in the sticky, ocean breeze. Whether it was the sharp smell of dead fish or lingering anxiety from the plane ride, Daphne could not eat when Cam offered to buy her a snack at a stand in the harbor. He bought himself a baked pretzel, and then the two of them followed Dr. Hortense Gray up the ramp and onto the catamaran, pulling their bags behind them.

They maneuvered through a crowd of school-age children in matching yellow t-shirts. Of the twenty or so other passengers, most were men in their thirties and forties. She and Cam were the only teenagers aboard.

Daphne stood at the railing overlooking the water with Cam on one side of her and the doctor on the other. The wind whipped her brown hair around her face despite her efforts to tuck it behind her ears. She missed this beauty. She'd forgotten how breathtaking it was. Her parents used to take her and her brother and sister to the beach all the time. There was nothing like gazing at the ocean where it met the sky on the horizon.

But the beauty could not stop her from trembling, could not stop the dread gripping her chest. Cam had said a wildlife refuge and a resort with pristine beaches. He hadn't said a thing about therapeutic exercises. She'd had to hear it from this strange doctor who had met them at the airport in Ventura. Was the doctor like a life coach? Would Daphne have to climb a rock wall or plunge down a zipline? She should have known her parents wouldn't let her go with Cam to a getaway resort just for fun. She should have been more suspicious. Tears pricked her eyes. She felt betrayed. Betrayed by her parents and her best friend.

As the catamaran reached the open sea, a pod of dolphins leapt ahead of them, as if guiding them to their destination.

“Look!” Cam pointed at the group of four leaping in turns from the water beside the boat.

Daphne’s cheeks stretched into a smile in spite of everything. The dolphins were amazing.

“Just wait,” Cam said, his blond hair flattening against his head with the wind. “We might see a humpback whale. Keep your fingers crossed.”

She stood close to Cam’s tall, wiry frame as though the two years they had rarely spoken had never existed. She hadn’t even so much as texted him a happy birthday wish last month when he had turned eighteen. For the millionth time, she wished she could go back to that night she had failed to get out of bed.

An hour passed with no humpback sightings, but soon a great mound of rock could be seen—bald, solid, smooth like the skin of a whale, and round like a bowling ball. Daphne couldn’t imagine how such a rocky place could hold any kind of paradise. Then a long, narrow pier became visible, and beside it, a rocky beach. The boat docked at the end of the pier, and all but Daphne, Cam, the doctor, and the captain climbed out.

Where were the pristine beaches?

The captain then turned the boat north and skirted around to another part of the island, where there were more rocky crags with waves crashing into and away from them, tossing the boat side to side, until they came into a large harbor full of other boats.

To Daphne’s right were hundreds of pelicans roosting on a rocky beach of shale. Some slept standing up, others cleaned their feathers, and still others walked around inspecting the shore line and the shallow waters surrounding it.

Kara would have liked this, she thought.

“They’re looking for sardines in the kelp beds,” Cam said.

Daphne used her hand as a visor. “Look at them all.”

An even longer pier than the first shot out into the harbor, and they were now moving to it.

“Prisoners Harbor,” Cam said.

This side of the island was certainly more beautiful than the eastern point at Scorpion Anchorage, but Daphne still saw no evidence of pristine beaches. A wildlife refuge this island may be, but where was the resort?

Once they docked, Daphne and Cam followed Dr. Gray up five rungs on a ladder to the pier, and then they dragged their luggage across the narrow row of boards toward several flights of steps. Descending from the steps ahead of them were two people, an African-American boy and girl in their teens. The girl was bald as the rock at Scorpion Anchorage, as though she had undergone chemotherapy.

“Look at me!” the girl growled at Dr. Gray, and Daphne thought perhaps they were related, having the same round dark eyes and high cheek bones.

“Come along, Daphne,” Dr. Gray said, ignoring the girl.

The girl grabbed Daphne’s wrist and started to say something, but Cam moved between them.

“We don’t want any trouble,” he said.

“Are you okay?” Daphne asked the girl, trying to see around Cam, but the bald teen turned away, scuttled down the pier, and quickly boarded the boat.

“What’s her deal?” Daphne asked Cam.

“Don’t know,” he said, leading her onward.

“That was odd.”

“Yeah. It was. Come on.”

The squawking of the pelicans could be heard from the several flights of wooden steps, but they were less visible until Daphne reached the summit near a dirt road, where a jeep and its driver waited. The driver

was an older man, maybe in his forties, with tanned skin and a straw cowboy hat. He nodded at them as they approached.

“Hello, Roger,” Dr. Gray said.

“Nice to have you back, Hortense,” the driver said with a southern drawl. “The island ain’t the same without you.”

From this point, Daphne looked out over the ocean and, although the view was spectacular, she frowned. This wasn’t what she had expected.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t asked a lot of questions. Cam had gone the summer before, and then, this summer, one rare evening while she’d sat in her tree in the backyard, the thick oak leaves forming a shield around her, he had told her about it.

She hadn’t seen him in the tree-house on the other side of the six-foot wooden fence that separated their two yards. When he called out to her, she’d been crying again, and although she had wanted to scramble down the trunk and run inside and hide, he’d asked her a question that had made her pause.

“If you could spend your final days anywhere in the whole wide world, where would it be?”

“Are you drunk?” she had asked.

“No. Just curious. ” Then he had added, “I miss you, Daph.”

“I’d spend my last days on a beach somewhere beautiful,” she had said.

“I know just the place.” He had jumped from his tree-house, had bolted over the fence, and had landed at the base of her tree faster than she had been able to wipe her eyes.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to see a humpback,” Cam said beside her now. “Maybe on the way back.”

They drove by picnic tables, trees, a kayak rental, and an outhouse as the driver took them along a canyon ridge toward the center of the island. A few minutes later they came up on two other buildings

with solar panels turned toward the sun, a long wooden deck, and two greenhouses. To their right was a deeper valley with a stream running down the middle and pine trees.

“Look there!” Hortense Gray pointed above the valley. “A bald eagle. See it?”

“Oh, yeah,” Daphne said.

“Isn’t it fantastic?” Cam handed her a pair of binoculars from his bag. “Use these.”

She took them and looked closely at the majestic bird as it soared through the sky above the valley.

“See if you can spot any foxes,” Cam said, full of enthusiasm.

Daphne scoured the landscape for wildlife. Gulls flew to and from the sea up high above where the eagle soared. The valley looked like a manicured fairway on a top-notch golf course with a stream running down the middle of it and branching off into smaller ones. Along the sides of the “fairway” were pines and shrubs and grassy knolls. The spring ran heavily from the highland but narrowed in places where it gently rushed over rocks.

A figure stepped into her view through the binoculars, but it was no fox. She watched it, focused the lenses. It was a person. A hiker? A girl with long black hair trailing behind her ran along the stream, turning back to look, as though she were being followed.

Just then a man grabbed the girl by the hair and dragged her back up the hill and into a copse of trees.

Daphne’s stomach dropped. “Oh my God!”

“What?” Dr. Gray asked.

Daphne’s tongue twisted in her mouth as she stammered, “A man...and a girl! He’s hurting her!”

The doctor took the binoculars and pointed them toward the valley. “Where? I don’t see anything?”

“I swear they’re out there,” Daphne said, her stomach forming a knot. “I saw them. We have to do something!” She gave Cam a pleading look, and said again, “We have to do something.” Why wasn’t he more alarmed? “We have to go down there and help her. What are we waiting for?”

“Roger, take us down into the valley, please,” Dr. Gray said.

The driver sped downhill. The road ended about twenty yards from the spring. Roger stopped the jeep, and all four climbed out.

Daphne pointed to the ground, insistently. “They were here, I swear I saw them. He was pulling her by the hair.”

When the adults looked back at her blankly, she took off running through the nearby trees, her heart beating wildly. Why wasn’t anyone taking her seriously? Panic had overtaken her and she couldn’t think. She couldn’t think. “Hello?” She saw and heard no one.

The others also called out and began to search the trees.

After several minutes, they all met up again.

Dr. Gray said, “Oh, this is no good.”

“What should we do?” Cam asked, out of breath.

The doctor put a hand on Daphne’s shoulder. “Please don’t be offended by what I’m about to say.”

Daphne couldn’t believe the patronizing look on the taller woman’s face. “I didn’t imagine it,” she said, panting.

“It’s been a long, tiring trip, and islands are famous for their mirages, especially this one,” Dr. Gray said.

“Not mirages,” Roger said. “Ghosts.”

“Please, Roger. Don’t start.” Dr. Gray shook her head.

“What ghosts?” Daphne asked. Even though she didn’t believe in ghosts, goose-bumps popped up along her arms.

“Let’s go on to the resort,” Dr. Gray said. “I’ll phone the naval guards when we get there and tell them what you saw.”

“What ghosts?” Daphne asked again in the jeep in the backseat beside Cam. She twisted back with her eyes held up to the binoculars, scanning the stream and nearby woods for signs of the girl and her attacker as the jeep climbed toward the canyon ridge.

“We aren’t going to talk about nonsense,” the doctor said.

“She has a right to know about the island’s legends,” Roger objected.

“Is this the one about Misink?” Cam asked. “The guy who threw the men in the ocean and took the women on his rainbow bridge?”

Hortense Gray turned from the front passenger seat. “The Chumash believed the first people grew from seeds planted on this island by the Earth Goddess, Hutash. When the island became overpopulated with people, she sent down Misink, the guardian of nature, to set things right. They say each year Misink threw six young men into the ocean where they turned into dolphins. That’s why the Chumash consider the dolphins to be their brothers.

“Misink also took six unmarried women and had them for himself. They say he took them into the sky by way of his rainbow bridge, and they were never seen alive again.”

“What does this have to do with ghosts?” Daphne put down the binoculars, the deep valley now out of view.

Roger said, “People say Misink comes for women about your age to take with him to the skies, and sometimes they come back and wander this here island.”

“Interesting legend, but you don’t expect me to believe that was Misink out there in the valley, do you?” Daphne smelled a set-up. “Is this some kind of joke?” She expected one of them to say, *Bwahahahaha*, any minute now.

Roger coughed and cleared his voice.

Cam whispered, “Apparently Roger is a believer.”

“Like you can talk,” she whispered back. Cam had made plenty of claims throughout their childhood of having seen his grandmother in his attic. Her brother, Joey, a year older than Cam, still believed Cam’s grandmother spoke to him.

Roger said, “I dare you to spend one night at the old Christy Ranch, and then you can laugh at me all you like.”

“What’s old Christy Ranch?” Daphne asked.

“It’s on the western end of the island,” Roger said. “That there ranch house is haunted by the wife of a slave trader.”

“Have you seen her ghost?” Cam asked.

“No, but I’ve heard the screaming.”

“What screaming?” Daphne asked.

“Out on Haunted Bridge,” Roger replied. “I’ve heard the screaming with my own ears. My pal and I searched all over in the morning and found no trace of anyone and no explanation for the screams. People say the wife of the slave trader was horrified when she learned what her husband done, and, once when he was headed back for more slaves, she sunk his ship with him and his crew aboard. They say she went crazy until she died. They say she’s responsible for a lot of the ships that wreck in that there part of the sea.”

As they made their descent into the canyon, no one said more about the incident Daphne may or may not have seen. Daphne was tired and had eaten little. Maybe she *had* imagined the figures in the valley.

Joey, her brother, saw people who weren’t there all the time. Daphne worried one day she would begin to see them, too.

No. She knew what she had seen. They’d been real, flesh and blood, living people. But something gave her the feeling that Dr. Gray and Roger were messing with her.

Chapter Two: A New Friend

As the jeep topped the ridge, the resort came into view at the bottom of the canyon. It consisted of a swimming pool, tennis courts, and a large central building surrounded by fifty or so smaller, single cabanas, which reminded Daphne of Tiki huts.

The jeep pulled up to the cabana marked with the number one on a bamboo post. Hortense Gray climbed out and crossed onto the patio in front of the unit, where there were two rockers and a table. So far so good. The bright red door where the doctor stooped with a key was flanked by two windows. The wind was milder down here in the canyon. Roger carried in Daphne's bags behind Dr. Gray and then returned to the jeep. Daphne and Cam followed the doctor inside.

The unit was small but nicely decorated, cool, and comfortable. To the left was a queen bed with a rich red duvet that seemed to invite Daphne to crawl beneath it and rest. To the right were two upholstered chairs in stripes of red and gold with a coffee table in front of them. Perfect reading chairs, she thought. (She had brought along two books that had always been on her bucket list: *Gone with the Wind* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.) Straight ahead, was a wooden armoire, and above it was a painting of Hercules slaying the Hydra.

A bit intense, but whatever.

"Do you have any questions before we leave you to settle in?" Dr. Gray asked.

"Do we get Wifi out here?"

"No, not yet," the doctor replied.

"Cell reception?"

"Sorry."

"Television?"

Dr. Gray smiled. “Yes. That we do have. I believe there are forty-one channels.”

At least there was some connection to civilization, Daphne thought.

“Oh, one more thing,” Daphne said, and Hortense Gray turned from the door to look at her again. “When do those therapeutic games you mentioned begin?”

“Soon, dear.”

Before Daphne could ask more about them, the doctor added, “Now make yourself at home. I’ll see you at dinner.” With that, the doctor left the room.

Daphne looked at Cam with narrowed eyes, but he kissed her cheek and said, “I’ll be right back. Just going to unpack.”

As upset as Daphne felt over Cam springing this surprise therapy on her, she hoped to carry out her plan within the next couple of days. She went to the kitchenette to open the drawers. Yes, there were knives. She hadn’t seen kitchen knives in months. She took one from the drawer and brought it closer to her eyes, running a finger along the blade. When the time was right, this would do.

When she returned the blade to its drawer, the hair on the back of her neck prickled as she heard someone whisper her name. “Daphne.”

She looked around the kitchen and the other rooms and saw no one. What the heck? She knew she was tired from the plane and boat rides and still freaked out about what had happened in the valley, and the wind was blowing a palm against her room. Maybe it was only the wind she had heard.

After she found her bikini and purple bathing suit cover and dug out her small case so she could brush her teeth and comb her hair, the doorbell rang.

“That was fast,” she said, opening the door, but the guy standing on the other side was not Cam.

“Oh,” she said, stuffing her hands into her bathing suit cover pockets. “Sorry, I was expecting someone else.” She felt the blood rush to her cheeks.

The man grinned. He was taller than Cam and handsome, tan and nicely built, maybe mid-twenties, with golden brown eyes and dark curly hair on his head and bare chest. He had a cleft in his chin and dimples when he smiled. He wore swim trunks and sandals and a towel across one shoulder.

“Can I help you?” Daphne asked.

“I’m behind you in Unit Two and wanted to introduce myself. I’m Stan.”

Daphne fished her hand out of her pocket and awkwardly took his. “Nice to meet you. I’m Daphne.”

“Hey, Stan, how’s it going?” Cam walked up to the door. “Looks like you’ve met Daph. I was just going to show her the beach.”

“I was heading over myself. I’ll catch you there.”

“See you in a bit, then.”

“See you,” Daphne said.

Cam came in and Daphne closed the door. She looked him over. She hadn’t seen him in a bathing suit in years, and he’d filled out nicely.

“Wow,” he said, giving her a once over. “You look hotter than the twin suns of Tatooine.”

A sharp laugh rose from her throat. “Oh, God. I’d thought I’d heard the last of your *Star Wars* jokes.”

“Glad to see I haven’t lost my touch,” he said. “It still makes you laugh like a little girl.”

“You must have missed my eye rolling. Let me do it for you once more.” She rolled her eyes with exaggeration.

“So what do you think of the place so far?” he asked.

“You mean except for the girl who might be dead in the valley?”

His face sobered. “The naval guards are looking into it. We did what we could.”

“You don’t seem too upset about it. You do believe me, don’t you? Or do you think I imagined it?”

“I believe you.” He squeezed her shoulders, making her heart hammer against her ribs. “But we did what we could.”

She slipped on a pair of flip-flops and followed him from the room.

“Do you think Dr. Gray and Roger were messing with us?” she asked.

Cam kicked a stone from the sidewalk. “What do you mean?”

“What happened in the valley was just so odd, you know? Like a set-up.”

“But why would they do that?”

“You tell me.”

They walked down the sidewalk, past the pool, where a few sunbathers lounged on the deck, and past the main building, where others were going in and out, and continued toward a steep cliff edge of the canyon. Built along the cliff edge were several flights of wooden steps, like the ones they climbed from the pier at Prisoners Harbor.

“More steps,” she said.

“I promise it’s worth it.”

As they reached the summit, the wind blew Daphne’s hair every which way, so she pulled it back into a ponytail, using the band she wore on her wrist.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, looking out over the sea.

The beach below was indeed pristine, with soft white sand along the shoreline, foamy waves gently lapping up and back, gulls flying overhead, and as they made their way down a few more steps to a boardwalk, she couldn’t stop saying, “It’s so beautiful.”

There were no boats in the U-shaped cove. To their left was an endless hill of yellow poppies rising up toward the horizon, and to their right, chalky bluffs spotted with sparse mounds of grass. Below were the white sandy beach and the bluest water Daphne had ever seen. The waves were gentle, inviting. Sitting on the sand with his feet in the water, sandals and towel beside him, was Stan, throwing a stone into the sea. There were no other people around.

When they reached him, Stan said, "There you are. I was about to go in without you."

Daphne took off her flip-flops and stood where the water reached her feet. "It's so cold! Oh my crap, that's cold!" She stepped away.

"It's refreshing," Stan said.

"Exhilarating," Cam added. "I'm going in."

Cam ran into the sea. Soon, he was far out and in deep to his chest, jumping up and down like a big ape, beckoning her in.

"He's crazy," Daphne said. "I think I'll just bathe in the sun awhile." She pulled off her cover and sat in her bikini in the sand beside Stan.

He climbed to his feet and said, "Oh, no. You're not getting away with that." He picked her up in his arms, despite her screams of protest, and carried her into the water.

"Stop! This is freezing!" She found herself hoping he wouldn't put her down. His arms, his chest, his chin and mouth so near hers, were intoxicating. "Eeeh!" she squealed.

Cam swam over to them, glistening in the sun with the water dripping down his hair, face, and shoulders. He looked like a golden god. "Hey! Give her back!"

Cam reached out for her, and every part of her skin touched by the two guys broke out in goose bumps. She was sandwiched between them and hyper-aware of their skin on hers when Cam ripped her from Stan's arms, lifted her, and tossed her into the icy water.

She was laughing hysterically when she popped back up. She couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed. *Really* laughed. Interacting with people wasn't something she did much anymore, but this was okay, wasn't it? Kara wouldn't begrudge her one last hurrah before Daphne joined her in the afterlife.

Before thoughts of Kara sobered her, she pushed them down and returned her focus to the boys. Stan splashed her, laughing, and then swam away. Cam picked her up and heaved her in the water, and when she resurfaced, his legs were pointing to the sky, making her laugh again. They used to do handstands in her backyard pool with Joey and Kara, and they'd make her mother judge. Her mother would sit on the white wrought iron chair in the shade with a book in her hand and her frosted hair pulled back in the headband she still wore every day of her life. Now, Daphne went down and pressed her hands against the cold sand, wobbling a bit as she worked to keep her legs together and point her toes. Before she'd mastered her form, she could feel Cam tickling the bottoms of her feet, and she was awash with childhood memories. Happy ones. She came up laughing.

Then she climbed onto Cam's shoulders like she used to for chicken fights, back when it was always Joey and Kara against her and Cam. Then Cam fell back and pulled her under with him. The joy surged through her. She was elated that her final days would be happy ones. Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing at all. There was just this moment, right now, and nothing else. No horrible past, no dreadful future. She felt free.

They played for a while longer before Cam challenged her to a race back to shore, which he won.

"If we were swimming, I'd 've won hands down!" she said.

"That's why it was a foot race," he said. He took her hand.

"Come on."

They walked along the beach to the bluffs and back and then stretched out on the warm sand beneath the sun to dry. Daphne lay on her stomach on top of her swim cover. Stan later came and joined them, lying on his back beside Daphne, breathing heavily from his swim. She watched the rise and fall of his chest until it slowed down to normal. Then she closed her eyes.

As nice as it felt lying between these two gorgeous guys, Daphne missed Brock. He was as tall as Stan but thicker, with hair as dark as his, but not as curly, and he had the bluest eyes. His lips were soft, pouty, and thick. They were luscious when they swept across hers and really sweet when he smiled.

She turned over to watch the gulls and the waves, trying to forget.

On their way back, the three of them went to the main building and played a game of pool. Daphne played on both teams, since she wasn't that good, until she and Stan won and gloated over Cam with their high fives. Then Stan left to rest before dinner, and she and Cam played ping pong until two guys and a girl about their age came in to play billiards. Cam briefly introduced them, and then she and Cam decided to check out the pool.

It was an Olympic-size pool. At one end, it formed an "L" where it bent to a deeper end with a diving board and water slide. A hundred or so white loungers and chairs with tables were lined up along the deck, straight and orderly. Only two were occupied by sun-bathers. The water in the pool was clean and, presently, empty.

Cam took Daphne's hand and led her to the edge of the pool, gently at first, and then with force.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

"Trust me." He pulled her into his arms and tumbled the both of them over the edge.

When she opened her eyes, she couldn't believe what she saw below her: a glass bottom revealing a sea cave with dozens of colorful

fish and coral. Daphne swam up for a breath and then dove back down, overwhelmed by the beauty and the novelty of this aquarium-like pool. Cam took her hand and pointed at a moray eel wedged in the wall of the cave. Sea urchins waved their colorful tendrils as they fed from a bed of kelp. Daphne felt incredibly happy and in awe of this amazing place as she and Cam each took another breath and submerged, hand in hand and gazing at the sea-life beneath them. They resurfaced and returned to the pool edge, holding on to the stone deck while their bodies dangled in the water.

“It’s incredible.” She gulped air and dove down for one more look. Then she joined Cam on the deck loungers to dry in the sun.

She turned to study him while his eyes were closed. Although he had filled out, she could still see the little boy that had been her friend for so long. She missed those days when her brother and sister and Cam and she shared carefree days together. Tears threatened to run down her cheeks, and before she could bat them away, Cam opened his eyes and saw her looking at him.

“You okay?”

She giggled and sniffed. “Just overwhelmed.” She couldn’t tell him the whole truth—about the immense relief she felt over the fact that she would never have to face her parents’ disappointed faces again. No more past. No more future. It was liberating. “This whole place is amazing. Thank you for telling me about it. I can’t believe my parents let me come.”

“You’re welcome.” He gave her a sweet smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

She felt mixed emotions threatening to wash over her, and she didn’t want to cry, so she asked, “So what’s the scoop on Stan?”

“He’s been here a few weeks now, I think. Came from Arizona. He goes to a university there. Studies history and anthropology, I think. Why, do you like him?”

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