

The Treatment (Program)

By Suzanne Young

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Escaping with a group of troubled rebels, Sloane and James will have to figure out who they can trust, and how to take down The Program. But for as far as they’ve come, there’s still a lot Sloane and James can’t remember. The key to unlocking their past lies with the Treatment—a pill that can bring back forgotten memories, but at a high cost. And there’s only one dose.

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Editorial Review

From Booklist
In this follow-up to The Program (2013), Sloane flees with the last pill that can revive stolen memories, even as the threat of betrayal surrounds her. Sloane ruefully compares her life to a “low-budget action movie,” and the novel’s chase shows little sign of wrapping up. Amid the fast-paced adventure is the welcome resumption of Sloane’s sexy-sweet romance with James. The strong writing masks some plot holes (Really? Only one pill is left?), and there is little backstory provided. Still, fans of psychological thrillers will happily suspend small disbeliefs for the overall thrill of the ride. Grades 10-12. --Diane Colson

About the Author
Suzanne Young is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Program series. Originally from Utica, New York, Suzanne moved to Arizona to pursue her dream of not freezing to death. She is a novelist and an English teacher, but not always in that order. Suzanne is the author of *The Program*, *The Treatment*, *The Remedy*, *The Epidemic*, *The Adjustment*, *The Complication*, *A Need So Beautiful*, and *Hotel Ruby*. You can visit her online at Suzanne-Young.Blogspot.com.

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The Treatment

CHAPTER ONE

JAMES STARES STRAIGHT AHEAD, WITH no immediate reaction to what I’ve just told him. I think he’s in shock. I follow his gaze out the windshield to the empty parking lot of the convenience store off the highway. The building is abandoned, plywood covering the windows, black graffiti tagged on the white siding. In a way, James and I have been abandoned too, our former selves boarded up and locked away while the world moves on around us. We were supposed to accept that change, follow the rules. Instead we broke all of them.

The streetlight above us flickers out as the sun, still below the mountains, begins to illuminate the cloudy horizon. It’s nearly five in the morning, and I know we’ll have to move soon if we want to stay ahead of the roadblocks. We’d barely beat the one at the Idaho border, and now there’s an Amber Alert issued for our safe return.

Right. Because The Program is just concerned with our safety.

“It’s a pill,” James repeats quietly, finally coming around. “Michael Realm left you a pill that could bring back our memories”—he turns to me—“but he gave you only one.”

I nod, watching as James’s normally handsome face sags, almost like he’s losing himself all over again. Since leaving The Program, James has been searching for a way to understand his past, our shared past. In my back pocket is a folded plastic Baggie with a little orange pill inside, a pill that can unlock everything. But I’ve made my choice: The risks are too high, the chance of relapsing too great to ignore. There will be grief and heartache and pain. Realm’s sister’s final words to me resonate: Sometimes the only real thing is now. And here, with James, I know exactly who I am.

“You’re not going to take it, are you?” James asks, reading my expression. His bright blue eyes are weary, and it’s hard to believe that just yesterday we were at the river, kissing and ignoring the world around us. For a moment we knew what it felt like to be free.

“The pill will change everything,” I say. “I’ll remember who I was, but I can never be her again, not really. All the pill can do is hurt me—bring back the sorrow I felt when I lost my brother. And I’m sure there are others. I like who I am with you, James. I like us together and I’m scared of messing that up.”

James runs his fingers through his golden hair, blowing out a hard breath. “I’m never going to leave you, Sloane.” He looks out the driver’s side window. The clouds have gathered above us, and I think it’ll be only a matter of time before we’re caught in a downpour. “We’re together,” he says definitively, glancing back at me. “But there’s only one pill, and I’d never take it without you. I’d never take that choice away from you.”

My heart swells. James is choosing this life with me, a life I want except for the part where The Program is hunting us down. I lean over, my hands on his chest, and he pulls me closer.

James licks his lips, pausing before he kisses me. “We’re going to keep the pill in case we change our minds later, right?”

“My thought exactly.”

“You’re so smart,” he whispers, and kisses me. My hands slide up to his cheeks, and I begin to get lost in the feeling of him, the heat of his mouth on mine. I murmur that I love him, but his response is drowned out by the sound of squealing tires.

James spins to look outside. He begins to fumble with the keys in the ignition just as a white van screeches to a stop, barricading our SUV against the concrete wall of the highway behind us.

Panic, thick and choking, sweeps over me. I scream for James to go, even though the only way out is to ram them. But we can’t go back to The Program to be erased again. James yanks down the gear lever, ready to floor it, when the driver’s side door of the van opens and a person jumps out. I pause, my eyebrows pulled together in confusion, because there’s no white jacket, no comb-smoothed hair of a handler.

It’s a girl. She’s wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and has long bleached-blond dreads flowing over her shoulders. She’s tall, incredibly thin, and when she smiles, her bright-red lips pull apart to reveal a large gap between her two front teeth. I reach to put my hand on James’s forearm, but he still looks like he’s about to run her down. “Wait,” I say.

James glances over at me as if I’m crazy, but then the other side of the van opens and a guy stands on the running board to peer over the door at us. He has two half-moon bruises under his eyes and a swollen nose. The vulnerability of his battered appearance is enough to make James stop, though, and he restrains himself from stomping on the gas.

The girl holds up her hands. “You can relax,” she calls. “We’re not with The Program.”

James rolls down his window, the car still in drive and ready to launch forward—crushing her—at any second. “Then who the hell are you?” he demands.

The girl’s smile widens and she tosses a look back at her companion before turning to James. “I’m Dallas,”

she says. “Realm sent us a message to find you.” At the mention of Realm, I tell James to turn off the car, relieved that my friend is okay.

Dallas walks in front of the car, her boots echoing off the pavement, before she comes to pause at James’s window. She lifts one of her dark eyebrows and looks him over. “Realm must have forgotten to mention how pretty you are,” she says wryly. “Shame on him.”

“How’d you find us?” James asks, ignoring her comment. “We went to the border for Lacey and Kevin, but there were patrols everywhere. We barely got through.”

Dallas nods toward the car. “The phone Realm’s sister gave you has a tracking device. Pretty handy, but you should probably ditch it now.” Both James and I look in the center console at the black phone that was already in the car when we got in. There’s also a duffel bag on the backseat, along with a couple hundred dollars Anna left us for provisions. But is this it? Are we part of the rebels now? If so . . . they don’t look all that pulled together.

“Your friends,” Dallas says, “never made it to the border either. We found Lacey, huddled in her Bug and crying. Seems Kevin didn’t show. I think there’s more to the story, but I’ll let her tell it.”

My heart sinks. What happened to Kevin? “Where’s Lacey?” I ask. “Is she okay?”

“She’s a firecracker.” Dallas laughs. “She wouldn’t talk to me, so I had Cas try and coax her out of her vehicle. She broke his nose. We had to sedate her, but don’t worry, we don’t steal your memories.” She says it in a spooky voice, like The Program is just a monster living under our beds. I’m starting to wonder if she’s sane. “Anyway . . .” She sighs, slipping her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. “She’s already on her way to the safe house. And unless you’re trying to get caught, I’d suggest you get out of the vehicle and come with me.”

“In that van?” James scoffs. “You think we’re less conspicuous in a big white van?”

She nods. “Yep. It’s something a handler would drive. Not a group of people on the run. Listen—James, is it? You’re superhot and all, but you don’t strike me as a real thinker. So maybe just follow orders and bring your little girlfriend into the van so we can get out of here.”

“Screw you,” I say, offended on so many levels it’s difficult to pick just one. James turns to me, his brow furrowed.

“What do you think?” he asks quietly. I can see his indecision, but we don’t have any other options right now. We were on our way to find the rebels, but they found us first. Lacey is with them.

“We have to get to Lacey,” I say, wishing we could run off on our own. But we don’t have the resources. We’ll need to regroup.

James groans, not wanting to give in to Dallas. His aversion to authority is one of my very favorite things about him. “Fine,” he says, looking back at Dallas. “But what are we going to do with the Escalade? It’s a nice car.”

“Cas is going to drive it back.”

“What?” James asks. “Why does he get to—”

“Cas isn’t on the run,” she interrupts. “He’s never been in The Program. He can drive through any checkpoint he wants. He’s going ahead to scout the trip, get us to the safe house unscathed.”

“Where are we going?” I ask.

Dallas casts a bored glance in my direction, looking annoyed that I spoke to her. “All in good time, sweetheart. Now, if you’d both climb out, we have a little business to take care of first.”

James and I exchange a look, but ultimately we get out of the car. Cas starts toward us, and for a moment I have the fear we’re getting carjacked. Especially when Cas pulls out a fistful of zip ties.

“What the fuck are those for?” James yells, grabbing my arm to pull me back.

Dallas puts her hand on her hip. “Cas had his nose broken today, and to be honest, you seem pretty volatile. This is for our protection. We don’t trust you. You’re returners.”

The way she says “returners” makes us sound like we’re abominations, like we disgust her. But it was probably just the right thing to say to catch us off guard, break us down enough so Cas could come behind us and slip the ties around our wrists, pulling them tight. Just then I feel the first drop of rain hit my cheek. I look sideways at James; he’s angry, watching as Dallas and Cas go through the Escalade, take out our money, and toss the canvas bag onto the pavement. The rain starts to fall in a drizzle, and Dallas scowls at the sky. She walks around to swipe our bag from the ground, hanging it lazily over her shoulder.

I feel vulnerable, and I can’t remember how we got here. We should have kept running. But now we hardly have a choice, so we follow behind Dallas as she leads us to the van and helps us into the back, slamming the door closed behind us.

* * *

James’s shoulder is against mine as we sit in the backseat of the white van. I’ve become hyperaware of everything—the faint scents of gasoline and rubber tires that cling to my hair; the murmur from the police scanner too low to understand. James’s fingers brush along mine, and I instinctively turn. He’s staring ahead, his jaw set hard as he broods about the restraints. We’ve been driving for hours, and the hard plastic has rubbed my skin raw. I imagine it’s doing the same to him.

Dallas glances in the rearview mirror in time to see James’s hateful expression. “Don’t worry, handsome. We’re almost there. There’s been a change of plans. Our warehouse in Philadelphia was raided last night, so we’re going to our safe house in Salt Lake City.”

Alarmed, I straighten up. “But Realm told us to head east. He said—”

“I know what Michael Realm told you,” she snaps. “But then there’s the reality of the situation. Don’t be a child. The Program is hunting us; we’re an infection they intend to cure. You should be happy we’re helping you at all.”

“I’ll be honest, Dallas,” James says in a shaky voice of barely contained rage. “If you don’t take the ties off my girlfriend, I’m going to be a real asshole. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Dallas looks in the rearview mirror again, without even a hint of surprise. “What makes you think you can?” she asks seriously. “You have no idea what I’m capable of, James.”

Her voice chills me, and I can see by James’s posture that he knows his threat didn’t have its intended effect. Dallas is hardcore; I’m not sure she’s afraid of anything.

We continue to drive and the landscape changes. Instead of the canopy of trees we left behind in Oregon, the sky here is wide open. But there are still flowers, rolling green hills. And then, towering over all of it, is a massive set of mountains. It’s breathtaking.

Behind my back, the zip tie is biting into the skin of my wrists. I wince but try to play it off when I see how angry it makes James. He adjusts his position so I can lean against him and relax, and together we watch as the country fades to chain-link fences and old mechanic shops.

“Welcome to Salt Lake City,” Dallas says, turning into the parking lot of a low-rise warehouse with crumbling brick siding. I expected a compound, and my panic begins to rise at the thought of being so exposed to The Program. “Technically,” Dallas adds, pursing her lips as she looks around at the neighborhood, “we’re on the outskirts. The city’s much nicer. But we’re more secluded here. It’s dense enough to keep us hidden during the day. Cas did a great job.”

Dallas parks behind the Escalade and cuts the engine. She turns in her seat, looking us over. “Will you promise to be good boys and girls if we cut the restraints?” she asks. “Because we’ve made it this far, and I’d like to trust that you won’t cause trouble.”

Please don’t say anything stupid, James.

“All I do is cause trouble,” James responds in monotone. I turn to glare at him, but Dallas only laughs and climbs out. James looks sideways at me and shrugs, not all that apologetic for antagonizing the rebels who are basically holding us hostage.

The van door slides open with a loud metallic scrape and we’re drowned in afternoon sunlight. We blink against it, and then Dallas takes my arm, pulling me from the van. I’m still adjusting to the brightness when Cas appears in front of me with a pocketknife. I suck in a frightened breath, but he quickly holds up his other hand.

“No, no,” he says with a shake of his head, sounding offended that I’d think he would hurt me. “This is to cut the zip ties.” He darts a look at James, who’s moved to just inside the door, ready to pounce. “Here, seriously,” Cas says, motioning him forward. “You’re not prisoners, man.”

James waits a beat, and then hops down onto the pavement. He turns his back to Cas, but keeps his gaze steady on me as Cas saws through the plastic binding. Dallas watches on, her high-arched dark eyebrows raised in amusement. It doesn’t last long. The minute James is free, he spins and grabs Dallas’s T-shirt in his fist, backing her against the van.

“If you mess with Sloane again,” he growls, “I swear I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Dallas asks coldly. “What will you do?” Dallas is nearly as tall as James, but she looks weak as her thin hand reaches to wrap around his wrist. She’s calling his bluff. I watch as James’s expression falters, and he lets her go. But before he steps away, Dallas’s elbow shoots out, catching James in the chin

with a sudden thud before her long leg hooks around his and she takes him to the ground. I yell his name, but James is still, lying there and staring at the sky. Dallas kneels next to him, smiling as she readjusts her crumpled shirt, the stretched-out material slipping off her shoulder.

“Such a temper,” she says. “Too bad you didn’t fight harder when they were dragging you into The Program.” Her words shock me, hurt me, because it’s such a cruel thing to say—as if it’s our fault we were taken. James rubs his jaw, then pushes Dallas aside to climb up. He doesn’t argue. How can we argue against something we can’t remember?

“Now,” Dallas says, making a loud clap, “we need to get inside.” She walks toward the entrance of the loading dock. James mumbles that he’s going to get our bag from the van.

The sun beats down on my cheeks. Without the shade of the trees, it’s hotter than I’m used to. The lot next to this one is empty, and I think Dallas was right about the seclusion. It’s quiet here.

Cas exhales and runs his hand through his long brown hair. On closer inspection, his nose doesn’t look that broken. There’s a small cut over the bridge, swelling in the nostrils, and of course the black bruising under his eyes. Lacey could have done worse.

“Dallas wasn’t always like this,” Cas says quietly. “She had a very different life before The Program.”

“She was in The Program?” I ask, surprised. “She made it sound like she hated returners.”

Cas shakes his head. “She hates what The Program does. Now she spends most of her time training.”

“Training for what?” I ask, watching as James spits a mouthful of blood onto the pavement. Dallas hit him harder than I thought.

“Self-defense,” Cas answers. “How to kill someone if she has to. Or wants to.” He pauses. “Look, I know it doesn’t seem like it, but we’re on the same side.”

“You sure?” I turn my shoulder so he can see the restraints still binding my hands. Cas apologizes, and gently holds my forearm so he can start cutting through the plastic.

“Who knows,” Cas says from behind me. “Maybe in the end we’ll all become friends.” My wrists pull apart as the bond is cut, and I rub the spot where the restraints have left my skin raw.

“I wouldn’t plan on that,” James responds to Cas, and walks between us. He drops the duffel bag at our feet and then takes my hands to look over the red marks. He runs his thumb gently over the creased skin, then lifts my wrist to his lips to kiss it. “Better?” he asks, looking sorry even though this wasn’t his fault.

I hug him, pressing my cheek against his neck. I’m not sure if our situation has gotten better or worse. “I’m freaking out,” I murmur.

James turns his face into my hair, whispering so Cas won’t hear. “Me too.”

And somehow those words remind me of something, a phantom memory I can’t quite place. The pill in my pocket could change that—I’d remember everything. I pull back from James and see the look in his eyes, an uncertainty, as if he senses a familiar memory too. He opens his mouth to talk, but then Dallas calls to us

from the front door.

“Unless you’re advertising for handler intervention,” she says, “you’d better get out of sight.”

The mention of handlers is enough to make me move. James takes my hand, and we walk toward the empty-looking building, toward what’s left of the rebels, and hope we’re safe from The Program. Even if for only a moment.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Jeffry Yanez:

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