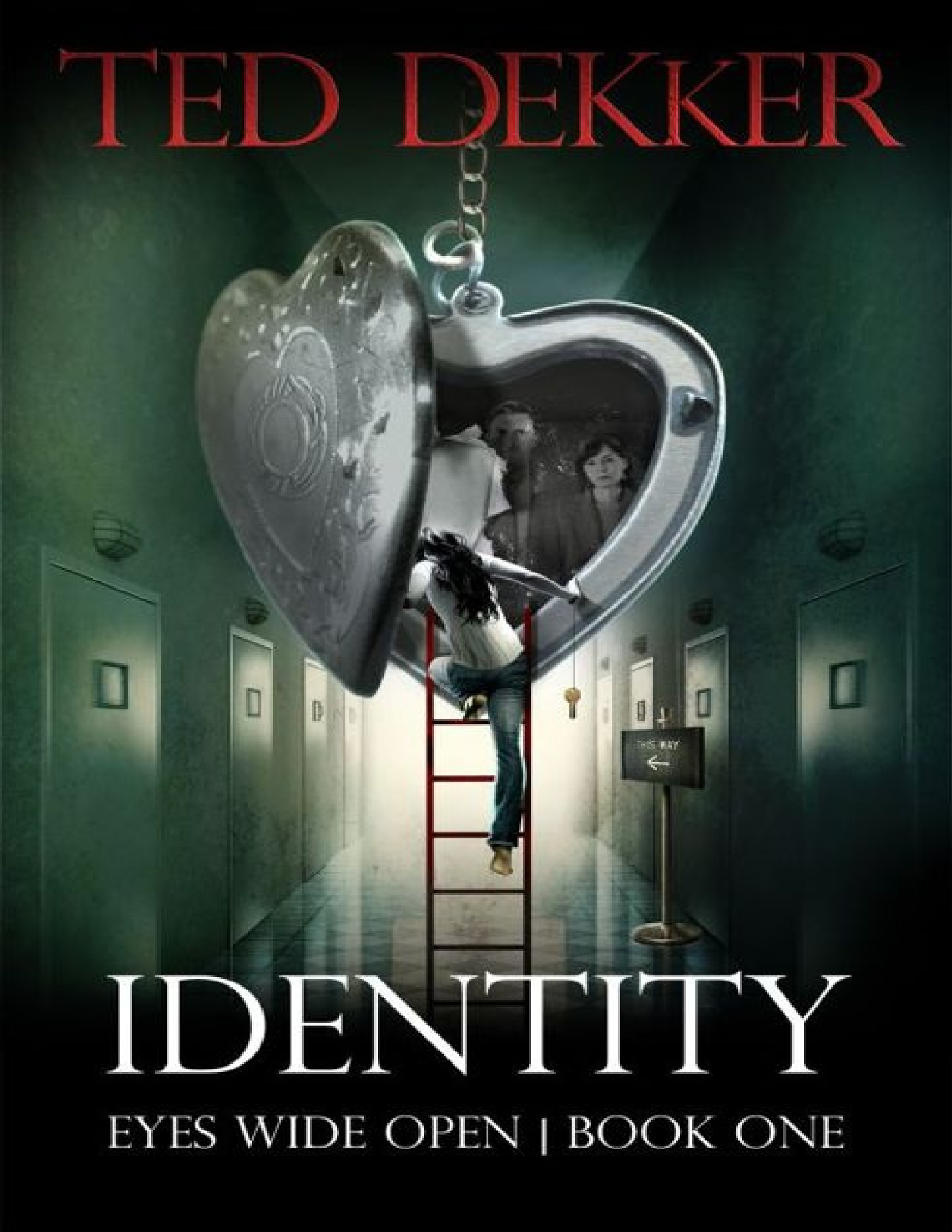
TED DEKKER



IDENTITY

EYES WIDE OPEN | BOOK ONE

Eyes Wide Open
Ted Dekker
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Smashwords Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

MY HEART sounds like a monster with clobber feet, running straight toward me. It's pitch dark. I'm lying on my back, soaked with sweat from the hair on my head to the soles of my feet. I'm lying perfectly still, but my hands and knees won't stop shaking.

I'm in my grave, and I know I'm going to die here.

It's only about eighteen inches high, and my forehead is bruised from hitting it more than once. I can feel both sides with my hands if I reach out. Just longer than me, maybe by a foot. I'm claustrophobic. Very claustrophobic.

I saw the coffins. I saw them, and now I'm in one, buried under tons of concrete. It's all I can think, over and over, and I can't stop thinking it.

Breathe. Just Breathe, Christy. Close your eyes and breathe.

It's not like this. It can't be like this. It's all a mistake. I have to calm down or I'm going to have a heart attack. It's all a mistake. They'll find me. This is Boston, not Africa. People in Boston don't die like this. People don't die like this *anywhere* in America. It's all a mistake.

This *isn't* my grave.

I close my eyes and try to slow my breathing. Try to think different thoughts—not the old ones that keep shoving me under tons of smothering earth. Good thoughts, like the fact that I'm still alive. Like the fact that my imagination has always been my biggest enemy.

Like the fact that it's all a mistake.

But that's not true, is it? My whole *life* is a mistake—one tragic error after another, and this one's going to be my last.

I'm in a grave, and I'm going to die.

My heart sounds like a monster with clobber feet, running straight toward me. It's pitch dark. I'm lying on my back, soaked with sweat from the hair on my head to the soles of my feet. I'm lying perfectly still with my eyes closed, trying to think new thoughts, but my hands and knees won't stop shaking.

How did this happen to me?

—

IT ALL began with a little heart-shaped silver locket, the kind that typically holds a small picture of a smiling boyfriend or a perfectly framed family at their best, frozen in time on photo-reactive paper to be forever cherished.

Christy Snow's locket held no such image because she had neither a

boyfriend nor a perfect family. No family at all, in fact. No mother, no father of her knowing. She was an orphan, age seventeen, disturbingly in the dark about her entire existence prior to age thirteen, when she entered the orphanage.

The picture in her locket was the same black-and-white placeholder that had come with the necklace when she bought it for $19.99 at the Target on Steel Street two years earlier—a constant reminder worn near her heart, a promise that she would one day at least know who her real mother and father were. Maybe even recover her childhood. How could she love herself if she didn't even know who she was?

It wouldn't be beyond a psychiatrist to suggest that the silver piece had become her identity. As such, she was lost in the deeply held fear that she didn't belong. Not to a family, not to a man, not to a friend, not even to herself.

Christy, like the image in her locket, was only a shadow, living as a fraud. Although she did her best to pretend that she was happy with her life, she secretly hated herself for being forgotten by family, by anyone who might have said she belonged or had value.

She took the necklace off only when she went to bed because she tended to toss and turn in fitful nightmares of being thrown away as a child. Twice, she had broken the chain in her sleep. But last night, when she'd reached for the necklace around her neck, it was gone.

A thorough, frantic search of her studio flat had turned up no sign of the locket. She remembered glancing at it before heading out to meet Austin late in the afternoon. The chain must have broken somewhere along the route they'd taken to the old storage room, or in the storage room itself. She would retrace her steps as soon as she woke.

The sun was already well up when Christy woke at nine—no reason to get up any earlier. She'd graduated from high school six months ago and was still trying to figure out what to do with her life. The trust fund had kicked in when she turned seventeen, so getting a job wasn't critical. Two thousand dollars a month wasn't exactly pay dirt, but the anonymous account turned over to her by the orphanage she'd entered when she was thirteen was enough to buy her time.

She decided to walk the three miles to the hospital in case she'd lost the locket on the street somewhere. She pulled on a pair of jeans, slipped into a red blouse, pulled her hair into a ponytail, and forgave herself for avoiding any makeup before heading out.

No one to impress; she was searching for her locket, not a man.

Truth be told, she wasn't interested in men if the ones she'd known were representative of the entire species.

Despite an ugly overcast sky, the day was already uncomfortably hot by the

time she reached the south end of Saint Matthew's Hospital. She wasn't in the best shape, maybe even fat if ten pounds too much was the rule of men. And it was; so, yes, she was plain fat and she secretly hated every one of those ten pounds. She was sweating now because of them.

But she wasn't there to be seen by anyone, or to be judged and found lacking. She was there to find her locket.

The south end of the building was called the old hospital. It was made of red brick and adjoined the much larger new construction. One block north, the streets and landscaping looked pristine, but approaching from the west as Christy was, no one would guess they were approaching a hospital.

Quincy Street was home to several shops—everything from antique stores to Bill's Round Bar at one end. A dirty yellow taxicab rolled past on dirty asphalt, followed by an ambulance. The street was otherwise vacant, except for an old bum slouched on a bench under a picture window just ahead.

Someone had dropped sections of the morning paper along the sidewalk without bothering to use the trash bin on the corner. If her locket had fallen off here, some vagrant had surely found it and taken it to the pawnshop for a few dollars.

The world was ill, she thought. Building a hospital in the middle of that sickness didn't change all the suffering. If anything, the building was only a sad reminder of the fate that awaited every last soul helplessly born into such a cruel world.

A wave of emptiness washed through her chest as she passed the man on the bench. He wasn't dead yet, but he'd given up on life, and isn't that what inevitably awaited everyone?

She wasn't any different from him, not really.

Christy turned into the alleyway that ran between the old hospital and the shops. No sign of her locket. She kept her eyes down, searching for any flash of silver on the ground around the base of the four large green dumpsters that hugged the wall to her right.

Nothing.

The door to the hospital's storage room was made of metal, covered by mottled gray paint, dented in several places as if someone had taken a bat or hammer to it.

Two years earlier, during a discussion with a doctor about how medical equipment had advanced so rapidly, Austin had learned about the old artifacts all but forgotten in the storage room. Curious, he'd broken in and found a haunting space that became a bit of an obsession for a few months. Its secrets still drew him from time to time.

Christy angled for the door. Austin had gone to the trouble of jimmying the lock so it could be opened with a key of sorts, which he hid in a crack between two bricks.

Picking up a splinter of wood, she pried the ‘key’ out of the crack, then walked up to the door, glancing left and then right to make sure she was alone.

She inserted the thin metal piece into the keyhole and wiggled it until the lock sprang. With one last glance both ways, Christy opened the door, slipped through, and shut herself inside.

She found the switch and flipped it up. The single incandescent bulb strung from the ceiling filled the room with passable light.

For a few moments, Christy stood still, taking in the silence, aware that she’d just broken some law likely punishable by time in a jail cell.

The thought fell away as she scanned the room. Twenty feet wide by ten deep, Austin had said, and he was dead accurate about such things. Two wooden wheelchairs, some rusted IV stands, dirty bottles, and some wheeled trays in the corner to her left. A bookcase filled with old medical books stood along the wall beside them, spines wiped of dust. Austin had scanned most of them. He stuffed his mind with more information than most people could read in five lifetimes.

A gurney and two hospital beds were stacked on the wall in front of her. Some old crates full of medical stuff of some kind.

The west side of the storage room had interested Austin more. Another old wooden wheelchair, wiped clean of dust by the seat of Austin’s pants. He liked to balance on two wheels and think. An old writer’s desk hugged the far end, complete with old writing pens and an inkwell supplied by Austin.

He was a writer. The desk had drawn him. Of all the artifacts in the room, she understood this attraction the most because she, too, was a writer of sorts if filling journals counted as writing. Sometimes she thought she was trying to make up for her forgotten childhood by writing down every detail of her life now.

Four old, plain wooden coffins were stacked in pairs along the wall. Yesterday she’d sat on a fifth casket and leaned against the wall for an hour, talking with Austin.

A quick scan of the grime-smeared concrete floor revealed no sign of her locket. She walked over to the desk, searched it quickly, and then crossed to the coffin.

Nothing on its surface, nothing along its base. Her heart began to sink. She was about to turn away and search the floor near the desk—she’d spent some time there, sitting in Austin’s wheelchair, flipping though a medical journal—when she saw the gap between the coffin and the wall.

Christy bent over the casket, supporting herself with one hand. Peered down the crack. Too dark to see, so she pulled out her cell phone.

The tiny battery icon in the corner of the screen glowed red. She'd have to charge it when she got back. Should have plugged it in last night. She thumbed to the flashlight app and brought the bright screen up to the gap.

Her silver locket lay along the base wall, glinting like a tiny star. Her heart soared.

Shoving her phone into her back pocket, she grabbed the wooden box, found that it was quite light, and tugged it back from the wall several feet. It was strange how finding the little $19.99 piece of jewelry affected her. This was her life, caged in a silver heart: a fake picture.

How lame was that?

Christy hurried around the coffin and stepped behind to retrieve her necklace. She was already leaning down with her right arm extended when she planted her foot on the wooden floor.

One minute she was reaching for the locket, the next she was falling. Forward and down. Through a trapdoor in the floor.

But it wasn't the initial fall that got Christy. It was her survival instincts.

In that first split second, she knew that she was too far off balance to abort her fall, but she impulsively threw both arms wide anyway, grabbing for the coffin on one side and the wall on the other, hoping to stop herself from going through.

Her head slammed into the wooden trapdoor that had opened under her.

The impact elicited another knee-jerk reaction, this one to save her head. If she hadn't grabbed for her head, she might have stopped her fall.

She free-fell less than a second before landing on hard concrete, this time with her hands and feet first. She grunted and rolled into her right shoulder, still pushed by adrenaline and the basic call for survival.

The trapdoor slammed shut above her, plunging her into darkness. She saw it from the corner of her eye halfway through her roll.

Half up and reeling, she crashed into a wall and dropped hard to her seat.

For a brief moment, Christy didn't know how to process what had just happened to her. She'd fallen into a basement or hole of some kind.

Then her mind reengaged and started spinning. Thoughts of sewers and broken bottles and snakes scurried through her mind like frightened mice.

Terror set in and flashed down her spine. Ignoring any thought of what the fall might have done to her bones, she scrambled to her feet and backed against a concrete wall, where she stood frozen by dread.

It was too dark to see. The room smelled musky, dry not wet. Not a sewer. No sound of rats. The silence was as thick as the darkness.

“Hello?”

Only silence answered her.

No light through cracks in the wooden floor above her. Austin said the old hospital had once been a hotel in the early 1900s. Maybe this was a part of the old building. But none of that mattered. She had to get out.

She grabbed her back pocket and felt a stab of gratefulness as her hand closed around the familiar square phone. Thumb and forefinger trembling, she jerked it out and blinked when the screen emerged blazing with light. She’d left the light app on.

Christy turned the screen into the darkness and saw that she was in a square room maybe eight feet to a side. Cinderblock walls rose to the wood floor. A hinged, spring-loaded trapdoor rested shut ten feet above her. The old rusted latch that held it closed was broken. As was the rope that had once been used to pull the panel down like an attic access.

There were several six-inch crates along the far wall, a handful of empty bottles, and scattered sections of newspaper that looked as old as the room. Nothing looked remotely useful. Even if she stacked the crates on their ends, she didn’t stand a chance of reaching the trapdoor.

Slowly the nature of her predicament settled into her mind.

Stay calm, Christy. Breathe. It’s all a mistake.

But the mistake was that she illegally broke into a hospital storage space. For that, she blamed Austin, because Austin didn’t know the first thing about following the law like ordinary people.

Fighting back fear and frustration, she tried to think of a way out short of calling for help. Austin was auditing a class at Harvard this morning, and it would take him an hour to reach her. The idea of spending an hour in this dark pit terrified her.

Only then did Christy see the six-foot plank pressed against the wall at floor level. It was held in place by channel irons that ran a good eighteen inches up the wall on both ends, as if the heavy board was designed to be raised. A two-inch eyehook was screwed into the center of the board.

Why someone would build such a device, she didn’t care—she only wanted to know if it hid a way out.

She tilted her phone up and saw the pulley bolted into wood where the ceiling met the concrete wall. A rope, long gone, had once been used to pull the plank up.

Hope lit her mind, replaced almost immediately with an image of crawling under the hospital in old ducting overrun with rats. Maybe it would be better to call Austin and wait.

But her battery wouldn’t last long, and the thought of waiting in darkness until Austin could get to her was more than unnerving.

She had to move.

Christy stepped over to the board, grabbed the big eyehook, and pulled up. The board budged but was too heavy to move with one hand. So she set her phone on the ground, wrapped both hands around the hook, and tugged.

The heavy plank slid up with grating protest and falling debris on either end. She got her fingers under the wood and dropped to her knees.

An opening just over a foot high and six feet wide gaped to show darkness beyond the board. Too dark to see how deep it ran.

Wedging her knee between the plank and the floor, she reached for her cell phone, shone the light inside, and bent for a better look.

It was a concrete causeway that ran four or five feet in and ended at what looked to be a plywood plank. Maybe a utility room in the basement. That would make sense, right? The room she’d fallen into was probably some kind of abandoned plumbing room or something.

She stared at the opening for a good minute before deciding she would prop the plank open with one of the crates and at least see if the wood on the far side could be pushed out. The passage was dry. No rats. If she got into the basement, she could just exit out of the hospital, come back around for her locket, and be gone as if nothing had happened.

It took her some maneuvering to shove one of the small crates under the plank to brace it open. Sweat had turned the dust on her arms into a brown mess, and the condition of her red blouse would be hard to explain if she got out, but she didn’t care.

She had to get out. That was all. Just out.

Christy lay on her belly, cell held tightly in one hand, stared into the opening for a few seconds, and gathered her courage.

You can do this. It’s not that small of a space. Just five feet, check that wall, and back out if it’s not open. You can do this.

She hesitated.

You have to do this.

She took one last deep breath and scooted forward slowly.

Head to foot, she was just over five feet tall, but with her arm extended she was over six, and she reached the far end with her feet still dangling out next to the crate. The plywood board refused to budge when she pushed with stretched fingers. But she couldn’t get enough leverage to apply any real force.

She glanced back, saw nothing had changed, then scooted in farther, so that her head was up next to the board. A harsh shove still produced no movement.

Maybe if she called out, someone on the far side would hear and come to her rescue.

“Hey!”

Her cry filled the small space and sent a shiver down her spine.

“Anyone there? Hey!”

She listened for the slightest sound but could hear only her own pulse. She was alone. Buried under tons of concrete. She had to get out! Back out where she could at least breathe.

In that last moment before retreating to the larger room, Christy gave the wood plank in front of her one last, grunting shove, using all the leverage she could muster, with more frustration than hope it would pop open.

She wasn’t aware of her feet moving as her body clawed for the leverage.

Didn’t mean to place the sole of her right foot against the crate that supported the plank behind her.

She didn’t know she was in danger until the heavy board struck her shoe as the crate slid free.

Christy did what her body told her to do: she jerked her foot out from under the crushing weight. The board dropped to the concrete with a solid thump that echoed through the narrow passage.

She froze. What had just happened?

But she knew very well what had just happened, and she clawed around to get that board back up, bumping the back of her head as she twisted in the tight space.

The next thirty seconds produced a flurry of frantic activity. She tried to dig her fingers under the board, and when her attempt with one hand failed, she dropped the phone and tried with both. Fingernails, fingers, palms, it didn’t matter. No effort managed to budge the plank. And none would without much more leverage.

She was sealed inside.

Christy slammed the board with her fists, screaming out for help. But the sound of her voice was trapped in that crushing space with her and only pushed her terror deeper.

She stopped screaming and lay sweating, trying to still herself. She had the light, she had the light…

And then she didn’t, because the light on her phone went out, leaving her in utter darkness.

Christy rolled to her back, breathing hard, stabbing the main button with her thumb to get the phone back up. She had to call Austin. She had to. If she couldn’t make the call…

The menu came up in dimmed color. Battery-save mode. *Thank you, thank you…*

She had difficulty navigating to the call log because her fingers were shaking, but she managed. Austin Hartt, 4:35 pm yesterday. It was now 10:36 am. She tapped the screen and brought the phone to her ear.

Ring… Come on, please… Just ring.

It rang.

Pick up, pick up, pick up…

"You've reached me. Do what you do." Click.

Voice mail. *Oh please…*

"Austin…" Her voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. "I'm trapped in your…"

The tone that cut her off might have been a sharp stake that did not stop at her ear. She knew it too well: the descending tone announcing that her phone was now dying.

And then dead.

She dropped her arm to the ground and stared up into pitch darkness, aware of the concrete only inches from her forehead.

No one knew where she was.

No one could hear her.

She was in her grave.

Christy was familiar with panic attacks, but she had never faced the kind of fear that now settled over her like death itself.

She was going to die.

Chapter two

SPIKES OF morning light nailed Austin Hartt's eyes shut. His hand fumbled for the stack of books he'd sneaked out of the old hospital the night before. His fingers bumped against his sunglasses. Grabbed them. He slipped them on, swung his legs over the edge of his mattress, and pushed unsteadily to his feet.

The glasses mercifully dimmed the world and he blinked the sleep from his eyes. The digital alarm clock's scream echoed from the countertop across the living room, placed there so he would have to get out of bed to shut it off.

He crossed the floor and slapped the alarm button. Ten twenty-six. He'd slept through the alarm and would now be late for ten o'clock class.

Just what he needed.

It hadn't always been this way. Until recently, he'd never set an alarm, never even owned one. He'd simply lie in bed, eyes shut, and repeat seven times what time he wanted to awaken as if programming his mind. Without fail, his eyes would snap open precisely when he'd decided. Or at least close enough.

That was before the headaches began. The pain meds he now needed to sleep dulled his mind, which he despised. His mind was everything. In every other way he was quite average: average height, average weight, average athleticism.

But his mind set him apart.

I think, therefore I am. The mantra cycled through his thoughts. It was a mental anchor for him, a beam of light that burned through the fog. With each syllable, he rhythmically touched his right thumb to each of the fingertips on his right hand. It was a compulsion, he knew, but it somehow grounded him.

He drew a deep breath, fingers moving. *I think, therefore I am.*

He stood at the window of his fourth-floor apartment and squinted at the thick bruise of clouds festering over Boston. The dull throb thumped at his temples, keeping time with his pulse.

He crossed the living room, sidestepping the twin mattress in the middle of the floor. The pillow lay askew and the blanket was shoved to the foot in a bunched heap. Other than the forty-two-inch flat-panel TV hanging on the wall and a black leather chair he'd bought online, the makeshift bed was the only furniture in the place.

Christy thought it strange that he slept in his living room, but it suited him. When he wasn't in a library or attending a class, he was here in his sanctum, devouring books and thinking. Always thinking.

He'd chosen the two-bedroom loft for its proximity to Harvard, but its open

floor plan was the clincher. It was a practical consideration, because he needed every inch of the twelve hundred square feet.

The living room was a yawning space with painted concrete floors and stark white walls, almost monastic in its plainness. Two thick beams rose from the floor and seemed to prop up the entire building. Near the front door, an L-shaped granite countertop hemmed in the small kitchen of stainless-steel appliances that he rarely used, except for the refrigerator, which was stocked mostly with flats of coconut water and Red Bull.

Except for a six-foot wide passage that connected the rooms, nearly every inch of floor space was occupied by neatly stacked columns of books—thousands of them arranged meticulously by subject. He had read every one, many of them multiple times, from philosophy to religion to advanced scientific theory. The apartment was one part library, one part temple. If he had a religion, it was Knowledge.

The landlord had first refused to rent the space to him. Being only seventeen, Austin couldn't legally sign a contract, she said. His offer to pay the first year's rent up front in cash, however, changed her opinion.

He scanned the room as he moved through it, looking for the prescription bottle.

Where are those pills?

Kitchen.

He plucked a gray T-shirt from a laundry basket on the floor and pulled it on. Rounded the kitchen counter and picked up one of the dozen amber medicine bottles lined up next to the sink. Three left. He emptied the tiny pills into his hand and tossed them back, swallowing them dry.

The headaches had started a month ago. They always began as a niggling pinprick at the front of his skull, like an insect burrowing deep into his brain. Lately, the pain was only bearable with a steady dose of Imitrex. He was supposed to take only one at a time, but two barely made a dent.

Two MRIs, two CT scans, and three doctors later, the headaches hadn't improved. Austin hoped Dr. Bishop would have some answers today.

Why hasn't he called yet?

It had been four days, one day longer than promised. He checked his cell phone. Nothing. Pocketed it. All he could do was wait. Wait and hope his brain wasn't rotting from the inside out.

Austin snatched a Red Bull from the fridge and shrugged into his backpack. Campus was within walking distance, and he could still make the last half of the lecture if he hurried.

With a last look behind him, he pulled the door closed and joined the land of

the living with his mantra pushing him forward.

I think, therefore I am.

—

A LIGHT rain fell as Austin pushed through the twin doors of Abraham Hall and found lecture room A13. The newest addition to the campus was named for the distinguished alumnus who'd recently been considered for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Austin paused at the door, heard the muffled drone of a professor's voice beyond it. He would slip into the room and find a seat in the back, hopefully unnoticed.

He leaned into the door, opening it just enough to pass through the narrow gap, then eased it shut as he entered.

Four tiers of seating, occupied by thirteen students, arced around the room and converged on a small platform at the front.

Dr. Thomas Riley paced slowly at the front, obviously making a point to the class. He glanced up and his eyes met Austin's briefly before the professor continued his talk.

Austin descended the steps to an empty seat two rows from the back, feeling more conspicuous than he liked on his first day in a graduate class, never mind that he was only auditing it.

He'd just slumped into the seat when a loud marimba ringtone cut through the quiet. His phone. He'd forgotten to silence it. The doctor?

Dr. Riley stopped pacing. Several heads turned in his direction.

Austin fished the phone from his pocket, muttering apologies. "Sorry. Sorry."

He looked down at the screen as he thumbed the button to silence the ringer. CHRISTY.

He pressed the button a second time, sending her call to voice mail, and then shoved the phone back in his pocket.

When he faced the platform, all eyes were on him. "Sorry."

A young woman with fat blond curls that fell to her shoulders smiled. He averted his eyes. His face felt hot with embarrassment.

Without missing a beat, Dr. Riley drew the class's attention back to himself.

"As we survey the observable world of phenomena, what is it that truly sets *Homo sapiens* apart from the rest of the animal and plant kingdoms? This is a cornerstone issue, the answer from which rise our personal and communal ethics, our perceptions of life's value, and our own sense of meaning. What is it, then, that comprises our deepest selves and gives us worth?"

He leaned on his podium and waited.

A male student with close-cut dark hair spoke up. “Your question presupposes a position that neither science nor philosophy can afford if it hopes to be objective.”

“Which is?”

“That humankind *is* unique and that such a thing as intrinsic worth exists in any absolute sense. Centuries of scientific inquiry have proven that humans are genetically no different from the rest of the animal kingdom. We may be more developed, yes, but that’s thanks to billions of years of evolutionary mistakes that, thankfully, worked in our species’ favor.”

Dr. Riley paced to his right. “Then the universe is a lottery and we’ve just happened to hit the jackpot.”

“If it’s helpful to think in those terms, yes,” the student said. “The universe is a harsh place and we just happen to be at the top of the food chain. For now.”

An agitated young woman in the third row lifted her hand. “I couldn’t disagree more. It’s precisely that line of thinking that has been used to justify mass genocide and a whole host of other atrocities throughout human history. What makes us human isn’t simply a matter of genetic coding or our dominion over lesser forms of life.”

“Then what does?” the professor asked.

“Our ability to love. Compassion. Our yearning to feel, to inspire and be inspired, to admire beauty and creativity—those make us human. We are the only species with a soul, and the only one that seeks transcendent meaning.”

“Those are all evolutionary developments that we’ve used to our advantage,” the male student said. “Religious myths, creativity, beauty—all of those exist only because they serve our long-term survival. The truth is, we’re little more than carbon and water, no more valuable to the universe than a clod of dirt. We think we’re important because we want to be.”

“Said the Ivy League grad student,” she replied. “I wonder how valuable you’d think life is if someone had a gun to your head.”

Austin scooted forward in his seat.

Irritated, the man began to speak but Dr. Riley cut him off. “Interesting points, and passionate. I like that.” The professor shifted his eyes and looked at Austin. “Mr. Hartt? What would you say?”

Austin felt his palms go clammy. He swallowed.

“What makes us human?”

“Yes. Speak up, please.”

Austin cleared his throat. Given the choice between being with books or people, he’d always choose books. You could always tell what a book thought without needing to have a confrontation. People, on the other hand, defensively

clung to their need to be right no matter how flawed their thinking.

“Consciousness enabled by our particularly well-developed brains is what sets us apart,” he managed. He continued with a little more confidence. “*Homo sapiens* have a uniquely evolved neocortex, prefrontal cortex, and temporal lobes that make us capable of abstract thought, language, problem solving, and introspection.”

“Our awareness makes us human then?”

“No. It’s not simply a matter of passive awareness. Even slugs and plants have a level of sentience. It’s our ability to harness the power of our minds to gather knowledge, organize it into something relevant, and advance to a more evolved state. Our thoughts are the gateway. We think, therefore, we are.”

“And how can we trust our thoughts?”

“It’s a matter of intelligence and careful observation. You said yourself that ours is a universe of observable phenomena. The only barrier to apprehending the truth is our own unwillingness to see the world as it is instead of how we prefer it to be.”

The professor’s lips nudged into a smile. “Perhaps. Well said, Mr. Hartt.” He turned toward the class. “Our time’s up today. For next class, please read chapters twenty through forty-five. And”—he glanced up at Austin—“be sure to arrive on time for the discussion.”

Austin nodded as he stood.

“Mr. Hartt, a word with you please?” Dr. Riley said, stuffing his papers into a leather briefcase as the class filed out of the room.

Austin approached the platform. “I’m sorry about the phone.”

The professor waved off his apology. “No need. I’m just pleased you’re attending my class.” He stared at Austin’s sunglasses. “Are you feeling all right? It’s a cloudy day, you know.”

“Yes sir. I know. Migraines.”

“I see. I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

“Heard about me, sir?”

“A colleague of mine, Dr. John Ferriss spoke highly of you.”

“I sat in his quantum theory class at MIT last semester.”

“You made quite the impression. He said you’re the most gifted mind he’s seen in a long time.”

“He’s the one who suggested your class.”

The professor smiled. “I had to see for myself. So tell me, what kind of young man with a GED and perfect SAT scores audits quantum theory at MIT and graduate-level philosophy at Harvard?”

“A curious one, I guess.”

“Young man, you have the kind of gift this world needs. I’d like to help you develop that gift. Assuming you’re interested.”

“Help me how?”

“Attend Harvard as a full-time student. I can see to it that finances aren’t an issue. I’ll make sure a course of study is designed for you that will unlock your full potential. You can’t waste this gift, Austin. Minds like yours come along but once in a generation.”

“Thank you, sir. I don’t know what to say.”

“Start by saying yes, or at least think about it. You don’t have to decide today.”

“Okay. Thank you,” he said, feeling self-conscious for the awkward way the words came out. “Thank you.”

The professor handed a business card to Austin. “Call my office and we’ll schedule a time to meet. All right?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good.” He pointed to Austin’s pocket. “You should get back to whoever was calling you.”

“Right. Thank you, sir.” He shouldered his backpack as he walked up the stairs.

Attending Harvard officially? He smiled at the thought and pulled out his phone.

Austin pushed the voice mail button then pressed it to his ear.

“Austin… I’m trapped in your…”

The frantic sound of Christy’s voice was cut short. Was that the whole message? Two seconds? Strange. He listened a second time. Her voice seemed distant, hollow, like she was in a bathroom. Or a tunnel.

Christy was always the emotional type, but she’d never left such an urgent message.

He quickly pressed the call-back button and waited for her to pick up, but her phone went straight to voice mail.

Something was wrong.

Trapped in your… His what?

His phone suddenly vibrated and he glanced at the screen, thinking it was her.

Dr. Bishop.

A prick of dread needled the back of his mind.

He took a short breath and answered. “Hello?”

“Austin Hartt?”

“Yes.”

“This is Melinda at Dr. Bishop’s office. I’m calling because your MRI test

results came back." A beat. "The doctor would like to meet with you as soon as possible to review them."

There was concern in the woman's voice. He could hear it through her practiced professional monotone.

"Is there a problem?"

"I'm not qualified to discuss that information with you. Dr. Bishop would like to go through the test results with you himself. Are you available today?"

The needle in his mind pushed deeper. The only thing he could think was *tumor*. There could be nothing worse. Just last night he'd read the case study of a physicist in Switzerland who'd been diagnosed with an inoperable tumor. It had ravaged his brain in a matter of months, transforming him into a vegetable.

"Mr. Hartt?"

"I'm sorry, I'm here. Of course I can meet with him today. When?"

"His last appointment just canceled. I can slot you in, but you'll need to come within the next forty-five minutes. Otherwise we'll need to schedule two weeks out when the doctor returns from vacation."

His heart pounded like a fist against his ribcage. Something wasn't right, not just with him. Christy's call gnawed at him.

"Can you make it in the next forty-five minutes?"

"I'll be there."

chapter three

BREATHE. Just Breathe, Christy. Close your eyes and breathe.

How many times had she told herself that in the last half hour? She was trying to trick her mind into thinking the thick fog of fear would lift. That light would suddenly stream into the darkness in the form of a flashlight held by Austin, who had come to her rescue.

But she kept remembering that it was only a trick. In reality, light wasn't going to come. She really *was* trapped in a grave of her own making. She didn't even know if her short call to Austin had gone through.

Her head was bruised from banging it on the concrete ceiling during a particularly bad panic attack. She'd tried to kick out both ends of the grave more times that she could remember. Her body was soaked in sweat.

Christy now lay on her back, feeling another wave of fear wash through her body from head to toe, as if it was the breath of death itself. Her mind spun through memories of the last four years, the only ones she had.

She couldn't remember her first week at the Saint Francis Orphanage. The first month was mostly a haze. They told her that she'd been picked up wandering the streets without any identification. The nuns and the counselor who cared for her and the other eleven children, most of whom were younger than she, were kind and affectionate and repeatedly assured her that her condition wasn't so unusual. Clearly, she'd faced some kind of trauma, but knowing its nature wouldn't necessarily ease her passage into a well-adjusted life.

She'd formed a bond with Austin in her third month, after learning that he, too, suffered from amnesia. Being the consummate cerebral junkie, he dismissed his past as an aberration that had no bearing on his future. He gave it no more attention than a shrug. She, on the other hand, obsessed over her identity, which only made her more insecure.

In her grave now, she wondered if this particular death was her karmic obligation. Maybe this was how she was supposed to die.

The fear riding her breath began to descend into that familiar space that spawned panic attacks. The thought that she might suffer even deeper terror than she already had shifted her emotions.

Anger welled up in her gut. Anger at her parents, whoever they were. Anger at herself for being so weak. Anger at the anger itself.

And then it wasn't just anger… It was rage.

Without thinking, she swiveled on her backside, screaming full-throated, eyes shut tight in the darkness. She slammed her heels against the plywood barrier with every reserve of strength her legs still possessed. Then again, fists clenched, not because she had any illusion of breaking what she'd failed to break before, but because she could.

And still again, and again, using her heels, not caring if she bruised herself or scraped her back on the hard floor.

Something popped on the seventh or eighth strike. At first she thought it was one of her bones. But it wasn't.

The wood?

Christy jerked up to see and hit her head again, but the thought of getting out overrode the pain. She twisted and saw dim light outlining the long, thin panel that had sealed her in.

She kicked again, frantic to be out. The bottom of the door popped open several inches before striking something that blocked it from the other side. But that something had moved as well, filling her grave with a distinct scraping sound.

She scooted her butt closer for more leverage and pushed out again. This time whatever was blocking the exit slid noisily and the plywood swung up and open on hinges behind a row of large steel drums. Fresh air flooded the small space.

She blinked. She'd broken through!

Scooting feet first, she placed her heels on one of the drums and shoved it into the room beyond, then slid around and crawled out the same way she'd first entered—like a crab, this time scuttling for her very life, hardly aware of the tearing sound of her blouse as it caught a sharp edge and tore right down the back.

The moment she cleared the door, she clambered to her feet, panting. The door dropped shut behind her.

Free.

Christy spun and saw the plywood door that had resisted her kicking for so long. The screws that had anchored a sliding lock on either end had popped out of the concrete. Each of the large metal drums was stenciled with red letters: ST. MATTHEW'S.

She didn't care what it all was for, only that she had escaped with just a few scrapes and bruises.

She turned and took in what appeared to be an old boiler room, judging by the large hot-water tanks and labyrinth of pipes along the unpainted concrete walls. It was old but still in use by the looks of it. She must be in the basement of the hospital. The door from the boiler room was closed to her right.

Her course now was plain. She would cover her tracks here, exit through the hospital, return to the storage room for her locket, and put the whole incident behind her as if it had never happened.

She quickly shoved the drums back into place to cover the door and its broken latches. MATTHEW'S

Christy quickly crossed to the door, found it unlocked, and pushed her way through. She was halfway to a door topped by a sign that read STAIRS before any thought of her appearance entered her mind. She glanced down.

Sweat mixed with dust stained every inch of her shirt, not to mention the large tear in back. Walking down a hospital corridor looking like she'd crawled through a sewer wouldn't go unnoticed. Her face must also be a mess. Maybe she could clean herself up in a bathroom.

She hurried to the first of two doors on her right and peered through a small glass window. Inside, stacks of linens and a sink. A laundry? She pushed the door open and stepped in.

Five stacked washers and dryers hugged one wall; the other ran with racks of neatly folded uniforms, towels, and linens. Several bulging cloth laundry bins beside the washers awaited processing.

It took her less than a minute to strip out of her filthy, torn blouse, discard it in a waste can, and shrug into a light blue smock from one of the bins. Her blue jeans had fared better than her shirt, and a damp washcloth made quick work of the dirt on her knees.

She cleaned her hands and arms in one of the two sinks, then her face. Did her best to fix her hair. A bruise darkened her forehead—bangs hid the worst of it. What a mess.

She stepped back and looked at herself in the mirror above the sink. For a few seconds her mind, however relieved at having escaped such a harrowing ordeal, took time to notice her imperfections.

A red pimple on her right cheek had tenaciously resisted the acne medication she'd applied over the past three days. Her neck was fat and her nose too stubby. She'd left her flat without a trace of makeup.

Austin had once said that her obsession with body image was patently absurd. How could anyone have fingers that were too short? They worked, didn't they? And long nails only got in the way. Better to chew them off.

What did a left-brained male who'd yet to open the cover of *Cosmopolitan* know about body image anyway? She was too fat, plain and simple. Ten pounds might as well be the weight of the world. He could never understand that.

Christy turned from the mirror feeling disgusted. And foolish for feeling disgusted. Maybe Austin was right; maybe she really was a basket case.

At least she wouldn’t stand out like a street urchin now.

She entered the stairwell and took the steps at a run, mind on her locket.

The stairs emptied into a short, vacant hallway. The distant sound of voices reached her. She crossed to a large door operated by a crash bar and pushed into what looked like a standard hospital corridor. A glance in either direction revealed no exit sign.

An older female patient with wispy gray hair, wearing a smock similar to the one Christy now wore, ambled toward her aided by a squeaky walker. Beyond her, the hall ended at a sign that read ADMINISTRATOR.

“Don’t you worry, honey,” the patient said, smiling toothless, “just stay away from the Froot Loops. They’re poison. Rot your teeth right out of your head.”

Christy gave the woman a slow nod. “Can you tell me where the exit is?”

The woman stopped in the middle of the hallway and stared at her as if she hadn’t heard. “You drink coffee?” she said. “Cause it’ll rot your gut and give you gas.” She paused. “I got gas right now.” She proved it without breaking eye contact.

Clearly no help. Christy turned to her right and headed to the far end of the hall, which jogged left toward what was hopefully the exit.

Twenty feet ahead, across the hall, a door swung open and a man with brown hair and square glasses, wearing a white doctor’s coat, stepped out of a door marked ADMISSIONS. He led a young patient out by her arm. Blue smock with name tag: ALICE RINGWALD. Shoulder-length dirty blond hair hung around her apprehensive face. The girl’s eyes met Christy’s for a brief moment before Christy looked down.

She angled across the hall and walked past them, keeping her attention averted, hoping she didn’t look out of place in her jeans.

She’d never spent time in a hospital herself—only visited twice, once with Austin when he’d gone for an MRI. Her own self-consciousness seemed absurd in a place like this. Her heart went out to the young girl, who was probably contending with testing and procedures and questions of life and death.

All while Christy worried about a single pimple on her cheek.

The sound of a door opening behind made her wonder where the man in white was taking the girl. She glanced over her shoulder and saw them step through the same door she’d just exited.

“Can I help you?”

Christy jerked her head around and pulled up sharply, three feet from a nurse who stood in her path, clipboard in hand. The door beside the woman whispered shut.

“No, I’m good.” She started forward.

“You sure?” The nurse, Linda Roper by the brass badge on her red blouse, took in Christy’s jeans.

“I was just leaving.”

“Leaving?”

“I was just visiting.” Christy looked down the hall. “That way, right? I got a bit turned around.”

The nurse smiled. “Don’t we all? We don’t have visiting hours in here, dear. That’s what the lounge is for, Britney.”

Christy glanced down at the name tag on her blue smock. How was she going to explain this without looking like a fool? She was busted, pure and simple.

She smiled apologetically. “It’s not mine. I…” What was she supposed to say? She couldn’t think of anything but the truth. Kind of.

“I got lost and ended up in the basement. My shirt ripped and I found this shirt down in the laundry.”

The nurse studied her as if trying to decide if she would buy such an unlikely story.

“Crazy, I know, but I’m not stealing it. I swear, if you have anything else I could wear… I just didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s okay, dear. Crazy things happen to the best of us.” She stepped forward, gently rested her hand on Christy’s elbow, and turned her back the way she’d come. “Come with me.”

Christy turned with the woman. “Can I just bring it back? I don’t live far, I swear I’ll bring it right back.”

“Of course. But it’s property of Saint Matthew’s psychiatric ward. I wish I could let you leave with it, but I can’t. We’ll find you something more appropriate.”

“You have something?”

“I think we can find something.”

Good. It was all going to work out. She’d left the storage room unlocked. What was the chance that some bum would get in there before she could retrieve her locket? Her mind spun through the possibilities as they headed down the hall.

The nurse led her into the administrator’s office and nodded at the receptionist, who sat filing her nails behind a desk.

“Can you pull up a file for me, Beverly?”

The receptionist glanced at Christy’s smock. “Sure.”

“Status of Britney Hunt?”

The receptionist set her file down, brought her long nails to the keyboard, and clacked away.

“That’s not me,” Christy said. “I’m just wearing the shirt.”

“We just need to check on her status, dear,” the nurse said. “Protocol. Patients tend to misplace themselves, you understand.”

She didn’t, not really. She was in a psychiatric ward. Images of the two patients she’d seen earlier now made more sense. They also quickened her need to put this all behind her.

“Britney Hunt is in 405.” She picked up her phone. “I’ll have the station attendant check her room.”

“Thanks, Bev.” To Christy: “What’s your name again?”

“Christy,” she said. “Snow.”

“Driver’s license?”

Christy blinked. She’d left her purse at home.

“Not on me.”

“No?” Linda nodded at the receptionist. “Anything on a Christy Snow?”

Clack, clack, clack.

“No Christy Snow.”

“Of course not,” Christy said. “Do you have anything else I can wear? I feel a bit stupid in this shirt now.” She felt her face flush.

“As soon as we check. I’m sure it’ll all be fine but we simply need to run some checks. If you had your license this would be quicker. Any other identification?”

Her cell phone. It had her name on it.

“My cell phone?”

“Might help.”

Christy brought her hand to her back pocket. No phone. Her heart spiked. She’d left it in the space under the foundation.

“I…” She hesitated, thinking she should just tell them the whole story. But she would also have to explain why and how she’d broken into the storage room.

“No?”

“Well… I, no. I must have lost it when I…” She couldn’t quite bring herself to betray Austin’s secret.

“That’s okay,” the nurse said. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you just explain this to the administrator.” She addressed the receptionist. “Is Kern available?”

The receptionist made a quick call, then hung up the phone.

“Go on in.”

Christy’s mind was reeling as she followed the nurse around the receptionist’s desk into an office with a golden placard that read ADMINISTRATOR. They way she saw it, she had no choice but to tell all now. And there was no reason why she had to bring Austin into it. They would probably lock the storage room

up tight, but she saw no other way.

The administrator sat behind a large, shiny wooden desk, scanning the contents of a file through narrow reading glasses. His eyes glanced over the wire frames for a moment, then back down to his file.

“I’ll be right with you.”

Dressed in a dark blue suit with white shirt and red tie. His finger traced what he was reading as Christy sat in one of the two stuffed chairs facing his desk. Books lined the case behind him, most of them psychology journals and textbooks. A family portrait, which showed him with his wife and a young adolescent boy, sat on the desk.

Kern Lawson, Administrator. She looked up from the nameplate at the edge of the desk and met his light blue eyes as he set the file down and sat up.

“So. What seems to be the problem”—his eyes darted to her smock —“Britney?”

“Apparently she’s not Britney,” the nurse said. “We’re checking now.”

The administrator’s phone rang and he scooped it up. He listened for a moment before thanking his receptionist and hanging up.

“And apparently she’s right,” Lawson said with a kind smile. “Britney Hunt is in her room. So that would make you…?”

“Christy Snow,” she said.

“I have to get back to my rounds,” the nurse said.

“Thank you, Linda.” The administrator dismissed her with a nod and folded his hands under his chin.

“Christy Snow. You’re new here?”

“No, I’m not here at all!”

“You’re not?”

“I mean I’m not supposed to be here.”

“And where are you supposed to be?”

“At home, where I was this morning, on Blanard Drive. I came in this morning, trying to find my locket and I got stuck…”

The look in his eyes said he’d heard a thousand similar stories from patients looking for a way out. She had to tell him everything. He would check the basement, find that she was telling the truth, and that would be that.

“Look,” he said before she could speak. “This isn’t rocket science. If you are Christy Snow and we have no record of your admission, then you can be home within the hour. But we have to know, I’m sure you can appreciate that. Many of our patients have very deep imaginations.”

“There’s no record of a Christy Snow in admissions. They already checked. Please, this is a bit ridiculous.”

“Yes, of course. Still, you have no identification, I take it?”

“Not on me, no. But you’ll find my cell phone in the basement.”

“All right. Do you mind telling me how you came to be in the basement?”

She swallowed, nodding. So here it went.

“I lost my locket last night.”

“Your locket?” he made a note of it on a scratch pad. “Where?”

“In the storage room. Off the alley.”

Lawson peered at her. He set his pen down and sat back, crossing his legs.

“Go on.”

She told him everything, from the time she woke up until the time she entered the main corridor, sparing no detail.

“So, yes, I probably broke the law by breaking into the storage room, but I can assure you that I’m not a patient here. I just want my cell phone and locket, and if you want to report my crime to the police, that’s fine. Either way, I don’t belong here.”

He nodded, jotting down more notes. “Don’t worry, I have no interest in your breaking in. I wasn’t aware there was a trapdoor under those caskets. We’ll have to take care of it.”

She exhaled, letting her anxiousness fall away. “Someone could get hurt. I could probably sue the hospital.” She thought better of it. “Course, I won’t. I just want my locket back. That’s all.”

“I understand. I’ll have to check this out, naturally. You can see how this could look differently.”

“Not really, no. How?”

He shrugged. “For all I know, you’re a recent admission whose name is Jane Doe and you found a clever way to attempt an escape. Failing, you returned with a clever story—it’s not unheard of. This is, after all, the psychiatric ward. All kinds come to us and many are quite intelligent.”

She thought about it and saw his point.

“Then check it out. You’ll find the entrance I told you about, and inside, my phone. Christy Snow, home number 435-7897. I live at 456 Blanard Drive. Trust me, that’s me.”

“I’m sure it is. Procedure requires that I account for all patients to make sure no one is missing. When that comes up whole and we check out the basement, you’ll be free to go. Shouldn’t take too long. Fair enough?”

She thought about it and again saw the reason in his being thorough.

“I suppose. Can you please have them bring me my locket as well?”

“Sure. Can you describe it?”

“A silver heart.”

“Photograph inside?”

“Yes.”

“Of? Boyfriend? Parents? Maybe they could help us out here.”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Then what?” he asked. “It would help us identify the locket as yours.”

She hesitated. The standard picture had the small words *Sample Only* printed on the side of the image.

“It’s just the picture the locket came with. I don’t have any parents.”

Dr. Lawson looked at her with kind eyes for a few seconds.

“I see. Not knowing who your parents are can mess with your identity. An all too common phenomenon these days, but in reality, most people have no idea who they really are. Do you know who you are, Christy?”

The question threw her into a momentary tailspin. A part of her wanted to tell him everything about herself—maybe he could help her. But she put the compulsion aside and took a calming breath.

“I’m Christy Snow. I live at 456 Blanard Drive, and I need to get home to feed my cat.”

He smiled. “All right. I’ll get you home. You can wait in our lounge while we run a quick inventory and check out your story.”

Chapter four

AUSTIN HESITATED as he approached the alleyway. Glanced at his watch. *Thirty-two minutes.* It'd taken longer than he hoped to get here, but there was time.

He'd decided to check the storage room because it was, one, on his way to his doctor's office in the hospital and, two, a logical context for her urgent call.

He'd eliminated his apartment quickly. Or hers for that matter. It was possible she'd hurt herself and couldn't reach a landline or cry out for a passerby's attention, but highly unlikely.

Given the fact that they'd been at the storage room last night, and its relative isolation, he would at least check. That her message had been cut off midsentence concerned him the most. Probably a dead battery, but what if someone had taken the phone from her?

If there was one person that he identified with, it was Christy. They were about as similar as fish and fowl, but they were both loners and they shared a similar history.

Truth was, he found her emotional approach to life more interesting than annoying. She was one person he honestly felt he could help. The fact that she was attractive didn't hurt. The thought of harm coming to her unnerved him as much as the thought of the tumor in his head. Assuming he had a tumor.

He looked down the street.

Saint Matthew's Hospital was in sight, just two blocks away. The sprawling complex rose above the madness of city life. The austerity of its modern steel-and-glass exterior was simple but impressive, an architectural citadel of reason that gazed upon the world with detached indifference. Inside, the finest minds in medical science relentlessly pursued empirical facts.

Like Austin, they valued data above all else—radically impersonal and objective answers, however harsh they turned out to be.

He could attest to that himself.

Fact: His headaches had become more intense and frequent in the past seventeen days, and meds had a decreasing impact on his symptoms. Likely the result of a tumor forming beneath his skull, but that wasn't yet fact.

Fact: All diagnostic tests had been inconclusive until now, but inside in his doctor's office sat a man about to tell him if he was going to live or die.

Fact: Christy had called him, but he didn't yet know why.

He veered left, leaving the sidewalk, and entered the alley that separated the

shops from the hospital.

“Austin… I’m trapped in your…”

The desperate sound of her voice hung in his mind. He passed the dumpsters and angled for the door.

With each step the pain in his head grew worse. How long had it been since his last meds? An hour? The intensity was likely psychosomatic, a result of obsessing about his test results. Put under continued stress, the mind could create physical conditions within the body to match the thought patterns—a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Screw it.

He stuck his hand into his jeans pocket and withdrew two pills, which he didn’t bother bagging anymore, then swallowed them.

He pulled up in front of the old battered door and fingered the crack where he kept the makeshift key.

Gone?

He peered into the crack, suddenly alarmed. Christy was the only other person who knew where the key was.

Austin reached the door and tested the knob. It twisted easily in his hand. He leaned into the door and pushed into the musty room. It fell shut behind him.

Austin scanned the room. The light was on. He was meticulous about shutting it off every time he left. Someone was here, or had been.

“Christy?”

His voice echoed.

A swirl of dust motes orbited the light bulb overhead. No sign that anything had been disturbed, except for…

The stack of caskets beside the far wall drew his attention. The one Christy sat on last night had been moved. However stoic he might be, logic didn’t preclude the sudden rise in his concern.

Austin slowly approached and leaned over the coffin, half expecting to see the worst. Nothing but a wooden floor. And a piece of jewelry he could hardly mistake.

He reached down and plucked the object from the floor. Christy’s locket.

Austin held it in front of him. The small heart dangled from the thin silver chain and swung under his hand. She must’ve dropped it last night and come back for it. So then, where was she?

He looked again and only then noticed the hairline seam in the floor.

Setting the locket down, he knelt behind the casket and traced the splintered boards with his finger. A trapdoor?

His mind cycled through the scenarios. It was possible that she had fallen

through, but into what? What was below? He'd never moved the caskets before.

He braced one hand at the edge of the trapdoor and, with the other, gave the floor a sturdy shove. It opened downward. Spring-loaded.

He leaned close, careful not to fall forward.

"Christy?"

His voice disappeared into the smudge of shadows below.

Again he called her name, this time louder.

Silence.

She could've been trapped or might be lying injured in the darkness. Unconscious.

He pulled his hand away and the door snapped back into place. He had to assume that she'd gone down. He also had to assume she was hurt. Or worse.

Moving with urgency now, Austin hurried to the corner of the room where an old wooden extension ladder leaned against the wall behind the cluster of IV stands. He could use it to prop open one side of the trapdoor and climb down, assuming the old ladder wasn't rotted through.

It took him less than a minute to haul it over to the trapdoor, shove it down and through to prop the door open, and descend carefully, testing each rung as he lowered himself to the floor below.

Light filtered in from above and illuminated the small concrete room around him. It was some sort of abandoned storage room. No sign of Christy.

He dug his apartment key from his pocket and thumbed the attached penlight with RadioShack logo. He'd purchased this two years ago and never used it. Still worked.

"Christy?" He walked to his right, sweeping the bluish-white circle of light from one side to the other. Crates of dust-covered bottles. Scattered newspapers. To his left, a large timber with an eyehook on it—a sliding door to a storage compartment maybe. Christy wasn't here but someone had been recently: prints covered the dusty concrete.

He peeled one of the old newspapers off the ground.

December 18, 1923. A paper from the Prohibition era. The old hospital had been a hotel then. Someone had built this room to store and move illegal moonshine.

His light zeroed in on the thick sliding timber in the wall. A way to pass illegal alcohol in and out of the building.

He tilted his light down at the base of the wall. One of the bottle trays lay beside the tracks on the floor.

The thought that he might miss his appointment hardly mattered to him in light of the unfolding evidence. If she'd fallen in, she'd also managed to get out,

and the only way he could see was past that board.

Austin held the light between his teeth, squatted, and gripped the bottom of the plank. It slid open with some effort, but it wasn't terribly heavy. Christy could've managed.

He nudged the crate into the gap with his foot and lowered the beam, wedging the crate between it and the floor.

He shone his light inside what appeared to be a crawlspace that connected this room to another. The far end of it was covered by plywood. A sliver of light edged its perimeter. A way out. But it was the cell phone on the concrete floor inside that snagged Austin's attention.

Christy's. The yellow case was plain enough.

He reached in and grabbed the phone. Pressed the power button. Dead. But why leave it behind?

It had been a long while since Austin felt the kind of concern that swept through him as he considered the possibilities.

He crammed her phone into his left pocket and crawled inside, moving as quickly as the low ceiling would allow. She'd probably made the frantic call from here before managing to kick her way out the other end.

At the far side he shoved the plywood into something that blocked its path. Another grunting shove and the wood slid, pushing several large barrels out of its way as it opened.

Another worry crossed his mind as he pushed the drums aside and stood. Someone had taken the time to slide the drums back in place. Christy, trying to cover her tracks? If so, why?

He stood in a boiler room, no doubt belonging to Saint Matthew's Hospital. Rows of thick pipes hugged the left wall and ceiling.

If she made it this far she'd probably found her way to the main lobby and was already on her way home. But why hadn't she returned for her locket or her phone?

He looked at his watch. Already late. Dr. Bishop was as punctual as they got. Austin would have to rebook the appointment.

He stepped toward the exit, hitting dial on his phone as he moved. The call connected to voice mail. He left a quick message saying he'd been delayed and would like to rebook as soon as possible.

Pocketing his phone, he slipped out of the boiler room and headed for the EXIT sign. He surged forward, passing beneath banks of fluorescent lights that buzzed in the ceiling.

He'd reached the exit, taken one step into the stairwell, and was already releasing the door when he heard the distant but unmistakable sound of a

woman’s voice speaking urgently enough to stop him. A male voice rumbled through the walls, just barley audible. Again, fairly urgent.

For a moment his mind spun through a reasoning cycle that led him to the thought that this might be Christy. She hadn’t returned for her locket. She hadn’t called from a landline to say she was all right. She’d essentially broken into a hospital.

She was being detained?

He left the stairwell, eased the door shut, and crossed to the other side of the hall, letting the speakers lead him. The exchange became less urgent. The voices were coming from beyond the last door on his right. SUPPLIES, a black plastic sign read in print and braille.

He leaned close to the door and listened.

The girl’s voice came again. She was crying?

Austin twisted the knob quietly and slipped inside.

To his left, large gray cabinets lined two walls. A squat metal desk was shoved against the third. A single banker’s lamp, the only light in the room, cast an amber halo across the tabletop. Straight ahead, the room faded to a patchwork of shadows and a drawn curtain that hung from a track in the ceiling.

“And if I say yes?” He could hear the girl’s soft words clearly now, just beyond the curtain. It wasn’t Christy’s.

“I’ll let you out,” a gentle male voice said.

“I already know the way out. I’ve been there. I’ve seen it. I know.”

“You’ve seen nothing, Alice.”

“I’ve been there. I’ve seen it. I will get out.”

“Not unless I allow it, which I won’t. I just explained the rules. Or weren’t you listening?”

“I don’t care about your rules.”

“Then you’ll suffer.”

“I’m used to it,” she said.

Austin felt his heart rate surge as the low voice chuckled. The old hospital was now a pysch ward. All he could think was that he was overhearing some craziness between two patients. It wasn’t Christy—he should just leave.

And he was about to, but what the man said next stopped him cold.

“If I say you’ll suffer, you will, make no mistake.”

Austin turned toward the curtain, reacting only to that part of him that overrode common sense. This wasn’t his business. Christy was. This wasn’t Christy. Therapists had their ways… this might just be one of them. A good one, for all he knew. Mental illness sometimes brought cycles of suffering that could only be broken through atypical therapy. Was he a psychotherapist? No.

But none of that held him back. He approached the curtain carefully, walking as if the floor was made of cracked glass. They'd stopped talking.

He turned his head and listened intently. One second stretched into five. A faint ripping sound. What, he had no idea.

Leave, Austin. Find Christy.

The movement of the curtain being swept open on its tracks sealed his course.

Austin jerked back and blinked as light stuttered to life overhead. A man in a white coat stood before him, regarding Austin without expression.

Austin took him in with a single glance.

He was tall, six-two, with close-cropped hair. Brown. Sure eyes stared through black-rimmed glasses that perched high on his angular nose. His facial features were chiseled and square. He was meticulously groomed from his starched white dress shirt and perfectly Windsor-knotted crimson tie to his pleated gray slacks, the hem of which fell perfectly to the top of his coal black shoes. A badge with his picture and name clung to his lapel.

DOUGLAS FISHER, it read. Below his name: ADMISSIONS DIRECTOR.

Austin drew a breath and tried to calm his startled heart.

"Lost?" the man said calmly.

Austin searched for the right response. Nothing presented itself, so he just said, "Yeah."

For a long time the man looked at him like someone watching a common animal in a zoo. There was nothing threatening about Douglas Fisher, nothing that seemed out of place. Only the exchange that Austin had overheard.

A smile slowly formed on Fisher's face. "You strike me as the kind of person who thinks he knows what he doesn't."

"No, not really. I'm looking for a friend who's missing."

"I see. And what would your name be?"

His mind spun, but he saw no reason not to answer. "Austin."

"Austin?"

"Hartt."

"Austin Hartt. That's strange. I don't think I know you. Being the Director of Admissions, I should at least be aware of everyone in our care. But I don't recall an Austin Hartt." He paused. "And you say you're looking for a friend who's missing?"

His own predicament settled into his mind. He wasn't exactly eager to explain his path of entry. Giving his name had been a mistake.

"Yes, but I must have taken a wrong turn and wandered into the ward. She's probably in the main hospital. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"No, I'm sure you didn't. Strange how easy it is to miss the right door." The

man’s smile said he was congenial but the circumstances weren’t adding up. Fisher must know that Austin had overheard part of their conversation. And yet he seemed unworried, which could only mean that what Austin had overheard presented no problem for Fisher.

He shrugged. “True. I should be going,” he said, and as he spoke, he glanced past the man. A white porcelain sink with exposed plumbing was bolted to the wall. A wooden stand in the corner next to it. A bar of soap, a glass with a toothbrush sticking out. A six-inch handheld mirror, resting against the corner.

In the mirror: An image of girl with brown eyes and dirty blond hair sitting on what appeared to be a gurney, staring directly at the mirror, seemingly unconcerned.

There was gray duct tape over her mouth.

Austin’s eyes flickered back to the director of admissions, who’d turned his head and was looking at the same mirror.

Fisher faced him, one eyebrow cocked. For a moment, they stood still. Then the man took one step toward the sink, retrieved the mirror, and returned. He lifted it and looked at his own image. Stroked his chin as if checking his shave.

“Interesting things, mirrors,” he said. “You see something that isn’t real. It’s only reflective glass, and yet it reveals something entirely new.”

Austin was telling himself that he should run, but the man was so calm—so precise and reasoned in his demeanor—that Austin found himself caught off guard.

Fisher flipped the mirror around so that it faced Austin. “What do you see?”

All he could think was: *I just saw a girl with duct tape on her face. I’ve just stumbled into something horrific and I don’t know what to do.*

“Hmm? Your face, right? But the mind easily deceives itself.” He set the mirror on top of a cardboard box to his right, lifted his hand, and motioned *come* to his right without removing his eyes from Austin.

“You think you saw something in the mirror that took the red out of your face,” Fisher said, still relaxed.

The girl stepped into view and stood beside Fisher. Maybe seventeen or eighteen. There was no duct tape on her face.

“And yet the tape was there, just a few seconds ago.” He looked down at the girl and smiled kindly. “Wasn’t it, Alice?”

She kept her eyes on Austin and slowly nodded. No expression.

A wadded up ball of tape slipped from her fingers and plopped on the floor. She’d taken the tape off herself.

“Go sit down, Alice,” Fisher said.

She turned and retraced her steps.

“You see, Mr. Hartt, we employ some rather unusual therapies at Saint Matthew’s. Very effective, I might add. We take some of the hardest cases and produce results other facilities only dream of.”

“I can see that.”

“Can you?”

“Sure.” Half of him couldn’t, but the other side knew that science had few limitations, if any.

“Then feel free to see yourself out. The stairs are just down the hall. If you run into any trouble just follow the exit signs. They’ll lead you out to the main hospital.”

His mind still trying to makes sense of what he’d seen, Austin gave the man a short nod, backed up a step, and turned toward the door.

By the time Austin saw the man’s sudden move in his peripheral vision, it was too late to avoid him. A fist crashed against the side of his head with the force of a sledgehammer.

Austin’s head snapped sideways, and his legs collapsed beneath him. He crumpled to the ground. Thick shadows swirled and crowded the edge of his sight.

He felt a sharp kick in his side. The force rolled him flat on his back.

Austin’s eyes fluttered as Fisher stood over him, then the world grew dim as he felt himself being dragged across the floor.

The girl said something but her voice faded, replaced by a high-pitched ringing that he was sure would kill him.

Austin felt a sharp sting in the crook of his arm and a warm sensation rushed through his body.

His eyes drifted closed, and he surrendered to the darkness.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LOUNGE they'd led Christy to while they cleared up the confusion was located near the administrator's office. It was a typical waiting room with two groupings of blue cushioned folding chairs set around oak coffee tables, several large ficus plants, magazines, and a counter that offered coffee and water.

The round white clock on the wall had clicked off forty-three painful minutes, and still, no one had come for her. Why everything concerning doctors took so long, she would never understand.

One of two doors led into the administrator's reception room, where Christy had met Beverly, Kern Lawson's secretary. The other led into what appeared to be a larger patient lounge or recreation room.

She knew this because she'd opened it, poked her head through the door, and looked around the room for a full minute before retreating to the relative security of the lounge.

There had been about a dozen patients in the room, half gathered around a television, the rest either sitting at one of the tables playing games, or seated alone, some still, some repeating obsessive behavior. All wore blue smocks.

She'd watched Linda, the nurse who'd found her, talking quietly to a woman seated cross-legged on the floor, hands shaking incessantly. The patient's abject fear reached Christy like a wave of unseen energy that seeped into her bones. She'd withdrawn and closed the door softly.

Her own problems seemed absurd next to what some people faced. She should be grateful for her life. Sure, she had her issues, but she wasn't destitute or homeless. It was all a matter of perspective. After this, a calm settled over her for a while, but her anxiousness slowly returned as the minutes stretched.

She consoled herself with the confidence that Austin would eventually track her down, and they would laugh about being in such an unlikely mess. All because of a cheap locket from Walmart.

The door suddenly opened, and Christy unfolded her legs. Beverly faced her, unconcerned. Just another day at the office.

"You can come back now, honey."

Christy stood and crossed the room. "It's all good?"

"It is." She smiled. "Kern just wants a word."

She stepped into the reception room, waited for the secretary to close the door, and followed her to the administrator's office, where Beverly turned.

"Anything I can get for you? Some water?"

“No thanks.”

“All right.” She ushered Christy through and shut her in.

Kern Lawson removed his feet from his desk and tossed a toothpick in the waste bin. He’d loosened his tie and rolled his sleeves up. The day was getting on.

“Have a seat. Just going over what we have here. You need anything? Water?”

“She already asked. I’m fine, thank you.”

“Good. I’m sorry to keep you waiting, but as you can imagine, taking inventory when the patients are up and around isn’t as simple as when they’re asleep. You caught us during a shift change to boot.”

“But all’s good, right? I really need to get back home.”

“You’re at 456 Blanard Drive, right? Yes, we checked on that too. Rented by one Christy Ray Snow, just like you said.”

“Just like I said.”

He clicked his mouse, eyes on the monitor. “You understand why we check these things. Not that we really need to—anyone who knows where Christy Snow lives could claim to be her. But we like to cover all of our bases. Lawsuits these days can be a real pain.”

Something about his demeanor triggered her concern.

“It’s fine. As long as it’s all cleared up, I’m fine.”

Lawson’s eyes peered over his reading glasses at her. He took them off and set them down.

“Well, that’s the problem we’re having. Everything’s not quite fine. We’ve confirmed that we have a patient missing. Until we find her, we’re prohibited by hospital rules from releasing anyone from the wing.”

Christy sat up, alarmed. “That’s ridiculous!”

“My words exactly. I ordered a second count. We have one patient unaccounted for.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m her. Give me a break. It’s obvious I don’t belong here!”

“I understand. But protocol is protocol. What really concerns me is this other bit.”

“What other bit?”

“They searched the basement, like you suggested. Problem is, we found no cell phone.”

Christy felt the blood drain from her face. “They checked the door behind the drums?”

“They did.” He picked up his glasses and wiped the lenses with a Kleenex. “I

didn’t know the door was there. This place was once a hotel during Prohibition. Moonshine runners. Crazy thing.”

“And you’re saying they couldn’t find my phone? Tell them to search again!”

“There’s no sign the door was breached. Certainly no cell phone. If you came in that way, you did one heck of a job covering your tracks. But it’s the no-cell-phone thing that doesn’t add up. So you see how this is looking—”

“This is crazy!” Christy blurted, jumping to her feet. She knew that she was losing it, but she made no attempt to calm herself. “They’re lying. I was there!”

“Sit down, Christy.”

She remained standing, beside herself with frustration.

“Or should I call you Alice?”

“Alice?”

“Alice Ringwald. The name of the girl who’s missing. The new arrival. You can see how easy it is for me to conclude that you tried to escape through an old crawlspace in the basement, found a dead end, and then came up with a clever story using the name of a girl you knew from the outside.”

She did follow his logic, which only made things worse.

“Please sit down,” he said, this time with less patience.

She sat. “I don’t know what’s happening or who took my phone, but my name is Christy, not Alice.” The name echoed in her ears. “Alice Ringwald?”

“Alice Ringwald.”

“I saw her in the hall! Blond, right? She was with a doctor, I saw her! You’re saying she’s missing.”

“Seems so.”

“And you really think I’m her?”

“I’m not saying that. She came to us this morning. I’ll know more when they bring me her file. The director of admissions is processing it now. Should be here shortly, but I didn’t want to keep you hanging. In the meantime, I would like to know more about you. Just a few questions. Sound fair enough?”

Christy felt trapped. Not by Lawson, but by what was clearly a series of tragic errors compounded by the fact that someone had found her phone but didn’t report it. Why would anyone do that? For a two-hundred-dollar phone?

Stay calm, Christy. It’ll all work out. Just do what they say and this will all work out.

“This isn’t right,” she said. “What about my locket? Did you search the storage room?”

“No locket, I’m afraid, though it’s clear someone’s been in there. Unfortunately, this isn’t exactly the safest neighborhood.”

She could think of nothing more to say.

“Fine. Ask your questions. I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“Good.” He pressed his intercom button. “Beverly, can you come in?”

The door opened a few seconds later.

“Please take our guest to Dr. Wilkins. She’s waiting in room 2.”

Receiving parting assurance from Lawson that this wouldn’t take long, Christy followed Beverly yet again, this time to a room two doors down the main hall on the left. The sign on the door identified it as a counseling room.

Christy was ushered in and introduced to a young woman, maybe in her late twenties—a professional type wearing heels and a skirt with a white satin blouse. She wore her dark hair up and studied Christy through wire-frame glasses.

“Have a seat.” She glanced at an open folder on her side of a table. “Christy. Christy Snow, correct?”

“Yes.”

The room was plain, with white walls, a darkened window that Christy thought might be one-way glass—maybe for observation in the event a patient got violent? One six-foot table with four simple chairs.

“Nancy Wilkins.” She extended a hand that Christy took. “Please sit.”

Christy sat opposite the woman. “The administrator said you need to ask me some questions. What kind?”

“Just a standard profile. Apparently there’s been some kind of mix-up. I’m sure you’re eager to get this all cleared up.”

“Dr. Wilkins—”

“Call me Nancy,” Wilkins said with a genuine smile. “I’m not your doctor.”

Christy settled, warmed by Nancy’s casual tone and demeanor.

“You know about the mix-up then?”

“No. I’ve only been asked to run a standard profile on you. Just a few questions. It’s nothing, really.”

Christy nodded.

“I can see that you’re tense, but I’m only doing what I do. I could be a waitress for all you care. I just get to know you a bit. That’s all.”

“All right.”

“Truth is, most people don’t really know who they are. And I think that includes me. We do the best we can, more often than not stumbling along in the dark. And that’s okay.”

The gentle words came to Christy like a soothing balm. The events of the morning flashed through her mind. Being trapped in the crawlspace, being mistaken for a missing patient… It was all a tragic comedy of errors. She really had no reason to be so uptight.

She felt herself relax.

Nancy smiled, eyes warm and inviting. “That’s better. Let’s get you out of here, shall we?”

Christy gave up a shy smile. “No argument from me.”

“So let’s start with the basics.”

Nancy went through a series of innocuous questions about Christy’s current living situation, her education, work experience—the typical kind of questions that might fill out a résumé. It was more like a conversation than an interview, and Nancy offered up some interesting facts about her own life in the mix.

She once thought she would be a professional dancer before an injury ended the dream. She’d become so distraught about having her dream yanked out from under her that she’d fallen into a deep depression. Her interest in psychiatry began then. Seven years later, she became a professional with a doctorate, albeit one who consumed shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* as if they were crack.

Like Christy, Nancy had no boyfriend. She too lived alone and was a little surprised that Christy was so independent and well adjusted for being only seventeen. Nancy was thirty-two.

They both had cats. They both listened to Coldplay and Mumford & Sons. They both were neat freaks. They both dreamed of having children one day. They both wanted to fall in love. Today if possible, and that made them both laugh.

Nancy’s occasional glance at her watch brought Christy back to the fact that she was in a pysch ward, possibly mistaken for a girl named Alice, but talking with Nancy rooted her in more important things that mattered outside these walls.

Twenty minutes became thirty and then forty, and still no one came for her, probably because the interview wasn’t finished. But the urgency she felt earlier had dissolved.

She found herself wondering if becoming a therapist might be a good career path. She could tell the story one day of how losing her locket and crawling into a basement set her on the path to a whole new life.

She said as much to Nancy, who tilted her head back and laughed.

“So this all began with a missing locket?”

Christy told her the story in short summary.

“No wonder you were so anxious when you came in,” Nancy said. She made a note in her folder. “Tell me about this locket, Christy. Why is it so important to you?”

She explained and the tone of the conversation turned more somber.

“So your locket really represents a missing childhood,” Nance ventured. “A part of you is missing. You’re searching for yourself.”

The room grew very quiet.

“I guess so.”

“I can understand that.” Nancy leaned back and folded one leg over the other. “I’m going to ask a few questions and make some observations that might trigger some feelings in you, is that okay?”

She shrugged. “I guess.”

“When you look in the mirror, what do you see?”

“Me.”

“And do you like what you see?”

A pause.

“No.”

“No? What don’t you like about what you see?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged again, feeling suddenly awkward. “I could lose some weight.”

“What else?”

“Specifically?”

“Specifically.”

“Well… My neck is too fat. I have a stubby nose. Ten pounds could come off my stomach.”

“What else?”

“My fingers could be longer. My hair gets too frizzy.”

“Do you hate the way you look?”

“Sometimes.”

“More often than you like it?”

Much more, she thought. “I guess.”

“Do you feel misunderstood by society?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t guess, Christy. Just say the first thing that feels true.”

“Yes.”

“Of course you do. We all do at times.” She smiled. “What kind of dreams do you have?”

Christy blinked. A slight chill washed down her back. “Not so good ones.”

“Nightmares?”

“I think so. I can’t remember them, but I wake up sweating and I don’t sleep very well.”

“Considering your history, it’s no wonder. Such large-scale memory suppression can only be triggered by intense trauma. Usually severe prolonged

distress.”

The chill down her spine doubled back, now laced with anxiety. She found she couldn’t address that last statement.

“How much of the day would you say you spend wondering if you measure up?”

All the time, she thought. But saying it sounded stupid so she only said, “Quite a bit.”

“You feel lost. Missing, just like the real photograph for your locket.”

Christy hesitated, which was answer enough.

“In fact, a day doesn’t pass without you suffering some kind of deep anxiety linked to your true identity.”

The turn in the conversation had taken Christy from a state of relative ease to one of smothering fear.

“Even now you feel a kind of terror, and the worst part of it is that you can’t figure out why. It’s just there, like a monster lurking behind your brain.”

She still couldn’t seem to find the right response. She felt naked, disrobed by a few simple words.

“You hate being so weak,” Nancy said. “You can’t understand why you hate yourself and think no one else could possibly be as bad off as you. Is that true?”

Christy’s face was hot. Sweat had beaded on her forehead—she could hardly pretend that she hadn’t been exposed.

“Yes.”

“Yes. It’s okay. We all get to discover who we really are at some point, and when we do, it can be quite unsettling.”

Christy felt her eyes misting and averted her stare. She wasn’t sure what to say. It was true, she thought. All of it.

“There’s a part of your mind that’s shattered. You feel isolated and lost. You don’t know who you are, so you try to be what they say you should be, and that leaves you incapable of coping, hating yourself, hating those who want you to be someone you aren’t—even though you yourself don’t know who you are. You’ve lost your true identity and are desperately looking for a new one even though that’s impossible.”

The volume of disquiet that swept through Christy’s mind and heart at those words could not be properly expressed. She felt desperate to run from the room, but there was nowhere to go.

“You live alone and keep to yourself because you’re broken. Your mind is fractured. Even at your best, you suspect that something is wrong, because it is. The only time you feel good is when you’re able to pretend that it is, but deep down you hate everything about yourself. The way you look, the way you feel,

the way you think, even the way you sleep, because that time that should be peaceful is full of nightmares."

Christy's fingers began to tremble ever so slightly. She lowered them to her lap. She recognized the onset of a panic attack, and none of her attempts at self-assurance put a dent in the one rushing up to meet her now.

"My observations bother you, don't they, Christy?"

Her throat was frozen shut. She managed a soft, "I guess."

Nancy addressed her in a kind voice laden with compassion, but the words could not have been more upsetting.

"You see the world through broken glasses, Christy. Your mind is wounded."

She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run.

But she could only sit as tears leaked from her eyes.

And she hated even that.

The door opened, jerking her from her thoughts. Kern Lawson glanced between them, then nodded at Nancy, who smiled congenially at Christy, thanked her for being so vulnerable, gathered her files, and stepped out with the administrator.

Christy wiped her eyes and quickly gathered herself. Nancy's words still buzzed through her head. Austin had once suggested that a good therapist might help her find tools to deal with her despondent emotions. Maybe he was right. Her reaction to Nancy's observations bothered her more than the words themselves.

Five minutes later Lawson walked in wearing a congenial grin. He sat in the chair Nancy had occupied and folded his hands together.

"Nancy tells me that you were very cooperative."

"She seemed nice enough."

"Yes. Nice enough. And now it's time to put this behind us so we can both get back to our lives. We have a nice room ready for you, Alice. I'm sure you're going to like it. That staff is very excited to learn of your safe return."

Christy felt gut-punched. His words slammed into her like the crushing fist of God himself.

She stood, knocking her chair back and over. "This is insane!"

"We don't prefer that expression on this floor, Alice. *Challenged* is more becoming."

"I'm… not… Alice!"

"The charade is up, my dear. There is no cell phone, no locket, nothing but your own delusion, something that comes quite naturally to you based on the history in your file, supported by Nancy's assessment. Your name is Alice Ringwald, dark hair, five foot two, 121 pounds, brown eyes. You were processed

this morning. Welcome to Saint Matthew's."

For a moment the thought that she might actually be hearing the truth spun through her mind. If she was delusional, everything she remembered from this morning could be a kind of wild fabrication. Something about the possibility rang true.

Something deep in her mind snapped, and Christy found herself running for the door, desperate to be out. Anywhere but here.

She flung the door wide and threw herself forward, aware that the administrator wasn't reacting to her flight.

She collided with a guard, who grabbed her arms and tried to calm her, but she was powerless to suppress the panic, powerless to still her thrashing arms and quiet her scream.

A second guard assisted and a sliver of reason told her she had no hope. No escape. She'd been here before, maybe, and knew what to do now.

She stopped her thrashing and stood still, breathing hard. Mind swimming with confusion.

"All right," she said, staring through the door at the administrator, who still sat, watching calmly. "All right. I'm fine. Let me go, you're hurting my arms."

The grip on her left arm eased and she jerked it free.

For a moment, Lawson just looked at her.

"Take her to her room," he finally said.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ROOM they'd taken Christy to was small, no more than ten feet side to side and maybe fifteen feet deep. White walls with a single metal bed supporting a white-sheeted mattress, one tiny wooden desk with chair, no windows, one empty closet. Hardly the kind of accommodations that matched the staff's jovial attitude.

It didn't matter. Christy had no intention of spending the night.

She'd used the last reserves of her energy to manage her panic and suppress her need to make them understand that they were making a terrible mistake.

A counselor named Mike Carthridge had ushered her to the room, assisted by one of the two guards stationed outside the interview room. She'd tried one last time to make her case to the young man, but he'd only nodded and offered his sympathy. Clearly none of them believed a word she said.

The worst of it was her own words, whispering through her mind, asking the impossible: *What if they're right, Christy?*

Fighting back the dread riding her mind, she'd made a decision: She would play along, earn herself some space, and then go. She didn't know how to get out, but she was going to go. She had to, if only to know that she wasn't crazy. Eventually Austin would track her down, but she wasn't going to wait for him. For that matter, if they locked up the storage room tight, there was always the possibility he might not find her.

She'd spent the last twenty minutes sitting or lying quietly on her bed, mind drained and frenzied at once. Her skull tingled, screaming for relief, and her face was flushed. She wanted to move, to pace, anything to work off her nervous energy. But she wanted to appear defeated in the event anyone came to check on her.

She could make her way to the cafeteria or lounge whenever she felt up to it, Mike had told her. They didn't seem concerned about her leaving the room, which didn't help. They obviously were confident in whatever security measures they had in place.

Still didn't matter. She had to try.

No cameras in the room that she could see.

Christy sat up, heart pounding. No sign of anyone outside. If she entered the hall and met any of the staff, she could always tell them that she was headed for the lounge, right?

She stood and steadied herself. They placed a plastic band on her wrist that

identified her as Alice Ringwald. It had her number and few letters—S A D, P D—whatever that meant. Maybe her diagnosis. The blue smock they gave her had no name tag. Said they would get her some clean clothes later.

It was now or never.

Christy walked to the door, opened it slowly, and slipped her head out. The hall was clear. Same hall she'd first entered, along the same wall that opened to the stairs to the basement, only two doors down from the administrator's office.

She gathered herself for a few seconds, listening to the silence. No sign. She would get to the far end of the hall and take the corner. It was really the only way she could go.

Just walk easy, Christy. Nothing wrong. Nothing wrong.

She stepped into the hall and turned to her right. Still no one.

Breathe. Don't run.

She headed down the hall, feet numb, eyes on the end where the hall turned to the left.

The patient rooms all had small windows, six by twelve inches, allowing a clear view of the interior. She cast a glance into the first room she passed and saw that it was empty.

Still no sign of traffic. She picked up her pace.

Passed a third room and glanced in as she passed. Patient asleep on the bed, facing the window. She was glad they hadn't sedated her. If they had she wouldn't have—

Christy pulled up sharply, the image of the sleeping patient she'd just passed large in her mind. She spun back and peered through the narrow window.

A male. Dark hair. Restrained at the wrists.

Austin?

But…

She blinked away the image, but the face refused to change. How could Austin be a patient in the same ward she was in? And in restraints? Nothing made sense.

She was losing her mind?

Christy didn't think to check the hall again. She twisted the knob, slipped into the room, and stood trembling, facing the apparition before her.

Only it wasn't an apparition.

It really was Austin.

—

"WAKE UP! Wake up!"

A sharp pain set fire to Austin's cheek. Spread into his jaw.

His eyes fluttered open. Drifted to his right where Christy's face hovered over him, eyes puffy and red. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail that struggled to keep her tousled locks in check. Beads of sweat glistened on her forehead.

He blinked. "Christy?"

She looked at him with fear-fired eyes. "Tell me you're real. Please, just tell me I'm not imagining this."

"Where am I?"

She hesitated. "The psych ward."

He was flat on his back with his arms at his sides. In bed?

His attention flitted between her and his surroundings. He tried to force the world into focus, but his mind was sluggish. He was in a white room with cinderblock walls. Windowless.

"How…?" Christy looked frightened. "You're real, though. Right?"

"Of course I'm real."

"Then how did you get here?" She jerked her head toward the door. "They could be coming soon. We have to hurry!"

"Hold on." His chest and his heart surged. "Just hold on."

Thoughts raced. He had to stay calm. *Think, Austin.* His mind cycled through what happened in the basement. With Fisher. With the girl.

Fisher.

He scanned the room and tried to sit up, but his attempt to rise to his elbows was stopped by the thick padded restraints that secured his wrists to the steel bedrails. The metal chain links clinked in protest. He tugged at them.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Where is who?"

"Fisher. Where is he?" He knew the man was nearby. Had to be.

Christy was confused. "I don't know who Fisher is."

"Okay, listen to me."

She muttered to herself. Held her head in her hands. "They're coming."

"Look at me. *Look* at me."

She faced him.

"I need you to get me out of these." He pulled at the restraints. "Can you do that?"

Her trembling fingers fumbled with the fat leather straps. Her breathing was shallow. After several tries she managed to free his right hand.

He slipped it out of the leather cuff and reached across his body. His fingers made quick work of the second restraint and he sat up. Excruciating pressure

bloomed in his head with the rush of blood.

He grabbed a fistful of the bedding. Clenched. Waited for the pain to settle to a dull roar.

“Are you okay?” Christy asked.

“I’m fine.” He wasn’t though.

Austin scooted to the foot of the bed. He dropped his feet to the floor and stood.

Fueled by a potent mix of pain and adrenaline, his mind crackled with renewed clarity. It might be temporary, he knew that. He had to think quickly.

“Christy…”

He turned and saw that she’d closed the distance between them. She slipped her arms underneath his, around his body, and lay her head on his chest.

He stood there for a moment feeling her body tremble.

“I knew you would come,” she said.

He held her gently. They were alive and together—that was good.

They were in a psych ward. As patients. That wasn’t so good.

Her shoulders heaved.

“Hey, listen,” he said softly. He pulled back and held her at arm’s length. Fat tears carved trails down her cheeks. “It’s gonna be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“It will be. We just need to figure this out.”

She bit her lower lip, on the edge of a cliff somewhere in her mind. What had they done to her? He needed to keep her head in the game.

“Good,” he said. “We have to reason our way through this. Right? Don’t go crazy on me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Crazy? You think I’m crazy?”

“Bad choice of words. I need you to get hold of yourself.”

“I’m not crazy.”

He checked the door with a glance. “Keep it down. Of course you’re not crazy.”

“I’m not.” This time her words came out as barely a whisper.

“But you’re obviously stressed out, and you’re not thinking straight. The only way we’re getting out of here is if we stay calm and figure this out.”

“You’re right.” She ran her hands through her hair. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He paced across the room. With each passing moment the cloudy layer in his mind burned away.

“Tell me *everything*. Focus. What happened to you this morning after you got here?”

The story spilled out of her in one rush of ragged emotion. The panic she felt

in the passageway. Her phone call to Austin. The run-in with the hospital staff. The mix-up that led to her admission. Lawson. All of the pieces clicked into place for Austin.

"You had no ID on you?" he asked.

"No. I left everything at home."

He noticed the blue plastic wristband on her left hand. He reached down and twisted it. A series of numbers were printed on it. Next to the numbers, a name: RINGWALD, ALICE.

Alice.

Austin jerked his left hand up. A similar band snugged his wrist. The name on it: CONNELLY, SCOTT.

A pang of terror rose in his gut.

"What?"

"Of course," he said. "Fisher."

"Who's Fisher?"

"After I got your call, I traced your steps to the storage room. I found the way into the hospital that you took. While I was in the basement, I stumbled onto something I wasn't supposed to see. A hospital employee was down there. A man—Douglas Fisher. His name badge said he's the admissions director. He was performing some form of therapy on a young girl. Whatever he was doing, I wasn't supposed to see it."

"He did this to you?" she asked.

"He injected me with some kind of sedative. That's the last thing I remember."

"Oh no."

Austin churned through the possibilities, but there were too many to process so quickly. He was midstride when he saw the red folder peeking from a wall tray next to the light switch.

His folder.

He covered the distance in three steps and pulled the chart out. Flipped it open. His finger traced the record as he scanned it.

"Scott Connelly. Age seventeen. Paranoid delusional." He closed the folder. "Same name on my wristband. This is me."

"What?"

"You've got to be kidding." Fisher was smart. Dangerously so.

"What?"

"Keep your voice down."

"What is it?" she asked for a third time, this time in a whisper.

He held up the folder and spoke quickly, his own urgency rising. "He

admitted me as a patient. That's what he did after he knocked me out."

"But you're not a patient. How can he just… *do* that?"

"Fisher's the admissions director. Think about it. He has access to the system. He controls the records. After the basement he must've taken my phone, my wallet—everything that proves I'm Austin Hartt. I had your phone on me too. He has both of them now."

"But why? Why would he do that?"

The realization steamrolled him. "Whatever I saw him doing was dangerous enough that he couldn't simply let me walk away. It had to have been illegal, probably some kind of experimental therapy that the hospital would never approve. Something that would cost him his job. That has to be it."

"Then we'll just find a phone and call someone. The police," Christy said. "It's all a mistake. They'll see. It's all just a mistake."

"There won't be any outgoing lines except in the offices." He tapped the folder against his open palm quickly, thinking. "Besides, this isn't a mistake. It's a calculated move. We're patients in a psych ward. No one's going to believe anything we have to say."

"Of course they will. They have to."

"Why? He stripped me of my identity." Another realization dawned on him in that moment. "And he took yours too." He motioned to her wristband. "You said they think you're name's Alice, right?"

"Right."

"And why do they think that?"

"Because she's the patient that went missing."

"Precisely. Look at it from their perspective. You show up inside a secure facility with no identification. No phone. Nothing. Think about it. Who breaks into a mental facility? No one. And who would be in charge of a patient population? Fisher—director of admissions. But Fisher suddenly finds himself in a tight spot because he's been found out. By me. He's got to cover his tracks."

A beat.

Her face went slack. "He has to get rid of the real Alice. She knows too much."

"Exactly. She knows what he did to me. But he can't just get rid of Alice because Alice is in the system. Instead, he turns you into her. She was just checked in. You are her. End of story. No missing patient."

"So he turned us both into mentally ill patients…" she said.

Austin didn't bother responding. It seemed plain enough.

"If he's willing to do that, what's to stop him from doing something worse to us?" she said. "What's to stop him from killing us?" Her voice escalated.

“Calm down,” he whispered through clenched teeth. “They’ll hear us.”

She pressed, this time in a harsh whisper. “What’s to stop him from killing us?”

He hesitated. “Nothing.”

“Wait. Alice. She’s the key, right? All we have to do is find her. She knows the truth. You said she’s in the basement, right?”

“*Was*. Fisher’s not stupid. By now, he’s cleaned up whatever evidence was down there and has put Alice somewhere else. Or worse.”

There was a long silence.

“So we’re trapped,” Christy said. “What now?”

“We’ve got to get out of here. We get out of here and we go to the authorities. We tell them what’s happening here. Whatever I saw goes deep. Deep enough that Fisher’s willing to falsely admit two perfectly sane people into a psych ward to cover his tracks.”

“But which way is out?”

“How did you get in here?”

“I walked down the hall.”

“Your door wasn’t locked?”

“No.”

“Were there guards in the hall?”

“Not that I could see.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’m sure.”

“They must have some other security measures in place. Video cameras probably, which means we have to move fast.”

“Don’t they lock these sorts of places down? It’s not like we can just walk out of here.”

“We have to try. There’s got to be an exit somewhere.”

“What if they see us?”

“We’ve got nothing to lose. Fisher probably thinks I’m still sleeping off the sedative.” He grabbed Christy’s hand and led her toward the door. “What did you see in the hallway?”

She glanced through the door’s narrow window. “There’s an administration office to the left. It dead-ends there.”

“To the right?”

“Just more hallway.”

“Where does it go?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s fine. It’ll lead somewhere. We’ll follow it until we find a door. We’ll

find a way out.” He squeezed her hand. “You ready?”

She nodded.

“We run and we don’t look back, understand?”

“Okay.”

“No matter what you hear behind us, keep running forward. Stay close.”

Austin pulled the door open gently. Peered out. Except for an old woman with a walker, the hallway was empty.

“Okay, let’s go.”

They turned down the hall and started to run. Doorways lined the hallway on either side every ten feet or so. Patient rooms.

They skirted past the old woman, who shuffled slowly in the middle of the hallway.

She smiled a crooked smile and waved. “Don’t touch the whiskey, you hear? Stuff’ll rot you dead.”

They both ignored her.

“Hey, kids,” she said, “got any whiskey on you?”

A plastic sign hung next to a fire extinguisher. A fire evacuation chart.

“Over here,” Austin said. They pulled to a stop in front of it. A rough schematic of the facility was etched into it. The psych ward was U-shaped. They stood where the left side of the U met the bottom.

He glanced down the hall. “Down that way and to the left. Main exit. Hurry.

They followed the hallway until it jogged left again. Took the turn at a run.

Deserted except for two patients: One, a bald Asian man who stood in a doorway doing nothing. Just beyond him, a teenage boy sitting in a wheelchair backed against the wall. He watched them without expression. Just another day for a patient without much of a mind.

Austin veered to the left side of the hall to keep distance between them. “Keep going, don’t stop,” he whispered.

The Asian patient lifted his arm and pointed at them as they passed but addressed the boy in the wheelchair. “Jacob. Look, Jacob. Two birds running. I hear the wolf snap-snap-snapping at their heels. I hear him. Do you hear him, Jacob?”

The man’s laugher filled the hallway.

“Snap-snap-snapping. Gonna chew ’em up.”

Double doors, straight ahead. Austin quickened his pace to a sprint, and Christy matched his stride. As they moved his eyes scanned for video cameras, but he hadn’t seen any.

They were going to make it.

His hand slammed down on the lever and they pushed through.

The stark clinical lights of the psych ward faded as the doors closed behind them. They pulled up in a warmly lit room. A reception area of some sort. To the far right, an unmarked metal door. Ahead, another door with the word EXIT glowing in green letters above it. To the immediate right, a small receiving area enclosed in Plexiglas. It reminded Austin of the reception area at a family physician's office. To the right of it, another door no doubt opened to the office area behind the glass.

"There's no one in there," Christy said. "Let's go."

She rushed forward and pushed the release lever on the EXIT door, but it wouldn't budge. She tried again. Locked.

Austin walked to the receptionist's window. Empty. Lunch time? "It's a secure door, probably an electronic lock. There's got to be a button they use to buzz people in and out."

He pressed his face close to the glass. A plastic box of paperclips and a pen sat on the countertop. Beyond it and to the right was a small green button. Out of reach.

"We have to hurry, Austin!"

The paper clips drew his attention. He grabbed the box and pulled it out. Walked to the office door and dumped them on the floor. Handed his file to Christy.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "We have to open this door."

"The only way we're going to do that is by pressing the button behind the glass." He scattered the clips on the floor and selected two larger ones.

"How are we going to do that?"

"Tumbler manipulation," he said, reshaping it into an L-shaped tension rod.

"Pick the lock?"

He bent another clip into a J-shape then knelt in front of the lock. Fed one clip into the lock then the other. "Simple mechanics. Opening a lock is easy if you know how they work."

After another twist, the lock disengaged and the handle turned. He pushed it open and went through.

"Go to the door," he said.

Christy ran to the door. An electronic lock clicked the moment he punched the button on the counter.

"It's open!"

He hurried to the exit, took the file from her, and stepped through. "Follow me. Hurry."

A dimly lit hallway stretched in front of them. Recessed lights in the ceiling created puddles of light on the linoleum floor every twenty feet. No doors that he

could see and no exit signs. It ran for another hundred feet before disappearing around a corner.

"Where's the exit?" Christy said.

"It's gotta be ahead. Just keep running."

They ran to the end of the hall where it turned left.

"Did we miss a turn somewhere?"

"No." He was certain of it.

"Are you sure?"

"It's this way," he said and started walking. "It has to be. We just haven't gone far enough."

Christy followed close on his heels.

Austin knew they would eventually find a door, and that door would lead outside.

They hurried to the end, where the hall angled hard left and followed it. When they did, an identical hallway lay in front of them.

What? But there was no other way to turn. No patient rooms. No doors in the hallway like the ones in the psych ward. Just smooth, white cinderblock walls. New construction?

He said nothing. Kept them moving forward.

They reached the end of that hallway, pushed through the door, and pulled up sharply. Another hall.

"What's going on?" Christy said, the panic rising in her voice. "Is this right?"

"It has to be. I haven't seen any other exits. Or doors, for that matter."

What had he missed?

He pushed the question from his mind and ran for the single door at the end of the hall they were in. "Come on!"

No alarm had sounded. Austin had the file that would incriminate Fisher. They would be out soon enough.

Austin reached the door first and slid to a halt. He cranked the knob and leaned his shoulder into it.

Christy came too fast and collided with him, pushing him through the door. He stumbled forward and pulled up hard, half expecting to see yet another long hall.

But it wasn't another hall.

They were in an office.

A sharply dressed man sat behind a desk, combing through paperwork of some sort. He glanced up casually, looking over his glasses at them. If he was surprised by their dramatic entry he didn't show it.

The door clicked shut behind them.

Christy gasped.

The man behind the desk smiled. “Hello, Alice. Nice to see you again. And so soon.”

She backed to the door they’d come through.

“I can assure you. That door is now locked.” He reclined back in his seat. “Go on, check it if you like, but I assure you it’s quite secure.”

She tried, desperate to get out. It was locked.

“Those doors can be quite deceiving, can’t they?” the man said. “Which one to take?”

The nameplate on the man’s desk read KERN LAWSON. The administrator Christy told him about.

The man pulled his glasses off and tapped his chin with one of the earpieces. “And you brought a friend, I see. I don’t believe we’ve met. You are?”

“Austin Hartt.”

“Ah, I see. The other new arrival. Fisher told me about you.” He glanced at the red folder in Austin’s hand. “You brought your file.”

Austin felt his pulse thrumming in his temples. His mind spun through their options. He could make his case now—accuse Fisher of foul play—but in doing so, he would only tip his hand. Lawson would take his man’s word over a patient’s without hesitation.

He could take more time to think through their options. Maybe telling Lawson would end up being the right course. Maybe not. He had to give it more thought.

“Please, have a seat.” Lawson indicated the two stuffed chairs facing his desk. Beyond them, a wood-panel door stood closed. The main entrance into the office. They’d entered through a side door.

They sat.

The administrator picked up a jar of jelly beans that sat on his desk. “Candy?”

Christy sat still, face as white as a ghost’s. Austin had never liked jelly beans.

“All right. Plenty more of these in the lounge if you change your minds.”

He popped one in his mouth and set the jar down.

“Now then. Let’s be clear about one thing. I understand how disorienting it can be for those with your particular challenges to adjust to a new space, but I want to assure you both personally, as the administrator, that there’s nothing to fear here.”

He spread his hands, palms up, indicating the facility.

“We’re here to help you, not hurt you. Can you accept that?”

Austin hesitated, then dipped his head once. Christy didn’t move.

“Good.”

“I have copies of both of your files right here.” He picked up two red files from the corner of his desk and plopped them down in front of him, eyeing them over his reading glasses.

Lawson flipped open the top file.

“Alice Ringwald. Acute anxiety disorder. Psychosis. Subject to paranoid delusions with a four-year history of the same kind of behavior we’ve seen from you today. The rest is all here, in perfect order.”

He set the file aside and opened the cover of the second.

“And one Scott Connelly. Delusions of grandeur, acute paranoia, psychosis among other things. Evidently you have quite the mind, Scott. We’re here to help you free that mind.”

He closed the folder, stacked them neatly in the corner, and folded his hands in front of him.

“But we can’t help you until you first accept the truth. Both of you are quite ill. Some would say mad. Insane. Bonkers. I prefer *challenged*. I need you to embrace that much if nothing else. Fair enough?”

This time Austin couldn’t bring himself to react. He wasn’t sure if the man had an angle here or was merely deceived by Fisher. Maybe a bit of both.

“Just how deep that challenge runs will be up to you.”

The administrator pushed himself back from the desk and stood. “Either way, I can assure you that there’s no way out of this ward without my authorization. And I mean no way. Trust me on that.”

He walked over to the door they’d entered through and placed his hand on the knob. Turned back. “Please don’t try again. It will only delay your progress.”

He opened the door. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have to step out for few minutes.”

Lawson reached into what was now a shallow closet inlaid with wood paneling, pulled a long black coat off the rack, and shrugged into it as he turned.

Austin couldn’t tear his eyes from the closet. How?

He glanced at Christy, who was also staring at that closet, fried.

“Welcome to your new home, my friends,” Lawson said, then closed the closet door. “I’ll check in with both of you in an hour.”

With that he walked to the door, nodded at two security men who were waiting patiently just outside, and strode out.

“They’re all yours.”

TO BE CONTINUED IN

MIRRORS

Eyes Wide Open, Book Two