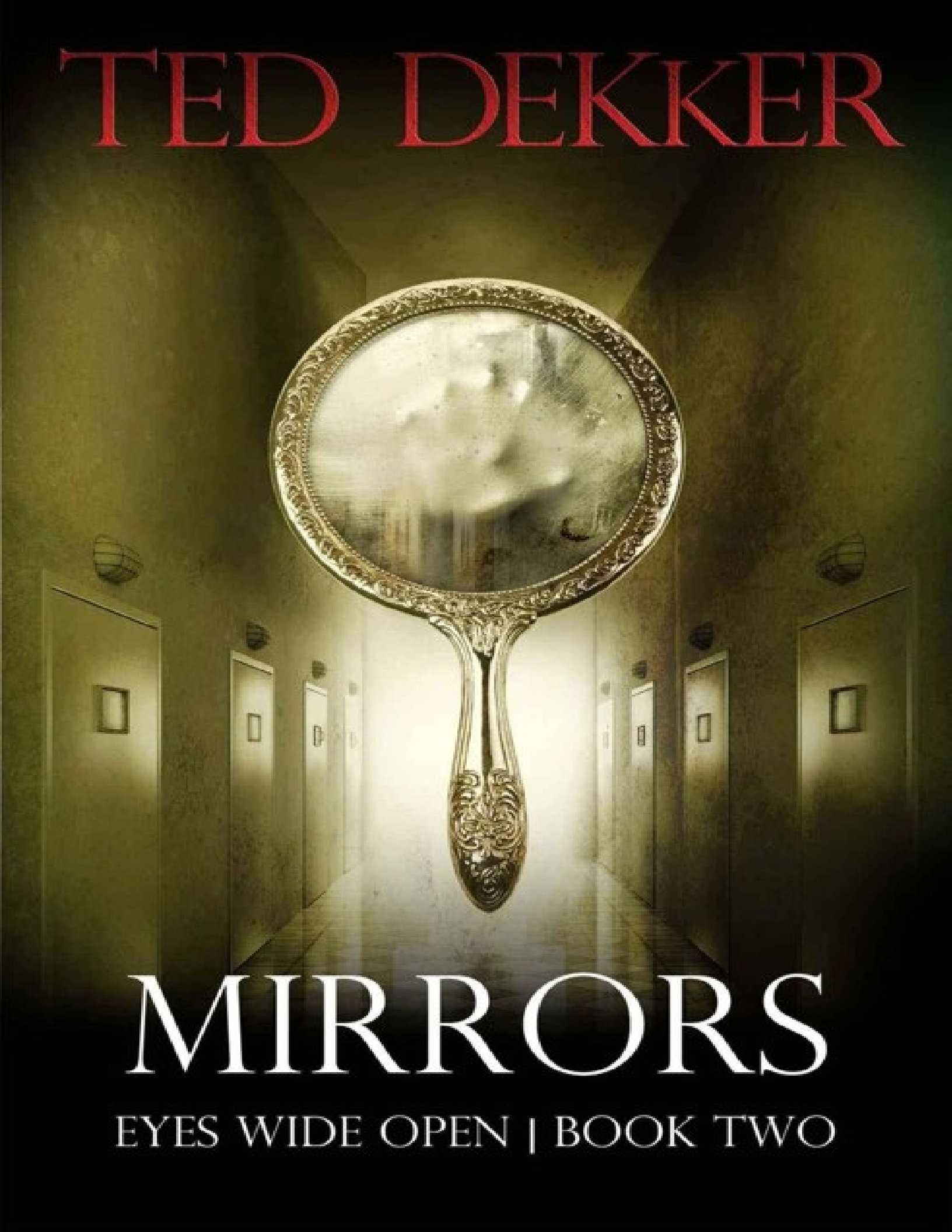
TED DEKKER



MIRRORS

EYES WIDE OPEN | BOOK TWO

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MIRRORS

EYES WIDE OPEN | BOOK TWO

TED DEKKER



OUTLAW
STUDIOS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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CHRISTY PACED behind the table, chewing on a fingernail she'd already worn to a nub. Austin sat, nervously tapping his fingers, staring at the wall. They'd been led to the same room in which she'd been profiled by Nancy Wilkins. At the time the therapist had seemed reasonable and understanding. But wasn't it Nancy who'd concluded that she was mentally cracked?

"Do you mind sitting down?" Austin glared at her. "You're going to wear out the carpet."

Austin had remained quiet, lost in thought, which was his way when he became engrossed. To say he was single-minded didn't begin to describe just how cut off he could become when he put his mind to a task—anything from reading a thick textbook to watching a boring lecture, one leg bouncing, eyes fixed on the screen.

How often had she told him things in his flat only to learn that he wasn't even hearing her? Nothing short of yelling seemed to yank him out of his fixation. In this way, she'd always been invisible even to Austin, her closest friend. She'd always known that she didn't belong to anyone or anything, and Austin's preoccupation with his own inner world only reinforced that certainty.

Christy ignored his request to sit.

"We have to get out of here, Austin."

He said nothing, which only increased her anxiety. He was hearing her perfectly, and it wasn't like Austin not to have some answers. She'd never seen him quite like this.

She could understand most of the logic behind most of the events that had put them both in the psych ward. But something seemed out of balance in her mind, something that prevented her from shaking the one thought that had buried itself in her mind like a stubborn tick.

What if the administrator was right?

What if she was delusional?

“Austin?”

He offered her a halfhearted grunt.

“I’m worried.”

Austin looked at her for a few seconds. Took a long breath.

“I know you are. But it’s going to be okay. I’ve already explained that.”

“Tell me again.” When he hesitated, she said, “Please? Just for my reassurance.”

He closed his eyes briefly and then glanced up at her.

“You stumbled into the wrong place at the wrong time. I followed you and stumbled into something no one was meant to see.”

“Alice.”

“Yes, Alice. Fisher needed to get rid of Alice and get rid of me. So he made you Alice, which takes care of her—”

“He killed her.”

“No, we don’t know that. But he got her out of the picture. Don’t make things worse than they are.”

“Sorry.”

He continued. “He took care of me by admitting me as a patient who suffers from delusions of grandeur, given to fanciful stories. Nobody on the inside or outside is going to believe a word I say. Nor you. So now we have to figure out how to either get out or get word out before anything worse happens to us.”

“What if we can’t?”

“We will. It’s only a matter of time. But we have to play it smart, and that means keeping our heads on straight.”

Her mind stalled. *And what if my head isn't on straight?*

Austin saw her hesitation.

"How many times do I have to tell you, you're not schizophrenic or delusional, Christy." His voice was stern yet calm. And he anticipated the subject of her greatest concern without waiting for her to ask yet again.

"Everything that happened in Lawson's office has a perfectly logical explanation. Knowing that unstable patients might try to get out, they set up the reception room to fool them, like it fooled us. The door without the exit sign is the way out to the main hospital. The buzzer opened one that leads to Lawson's office."

She nodded, pacing still. "There's another buzzer or something that opens the real exit."

"Of course. But getting out that way will probably be impossible. They're too smart to let anyone out through the front door."

"And the closet is just a mechanical trick," she said.

"A false closet that slid into place at the push of a button. Enough to freak out anyone not thinking things through. Easy enough to construct. The main point is that anyone who would go to such elaborate planning has thought this through very carefully. We aren't just going to walk out of here."

To this she had no response. Her mind was stuck on what he'd just said about the closet being enough to freak out anyone not thinking properly.

Like her.

"We have to think our way out," Austin said. "Talk our way out. Scam our way out. Something they haven't thought about. Until we figure what and how, we have to play along. The last thing we can afford is to push Fisher's buttons. We don't need him thinking he needs to go further."

He'd said this much repeatedly. She got it. His repetition of the concern wasn't helping matters.

"And there's no way they could be right about us, right?"

"We aren't nuts," he said with a little too much defensiveness for her

comfort. “It’s absurd. I was in a lecture hall at Harvard this morning. I got a call from you. The professor asked me if I would be interested in attending full time! I can assure you there’s not one loose nut in my head.”

He was right, of course, although she would have put it differently. They had both always been different. And neither one of them could remember much of their childhoods.

“What about your headaches?”

He blinked several times, then spoke in no uncertain tone.

“Neither one of us is remotely unstable. You just remember that. Don’t let them get in your head. We’re going to get out. Soon. I have a doctor’s appointment to get to.”

The door opened and she startled. Kern Lawson walked in, shut the door behind him, and faced them, void of expression. He put on a smile that made Christy think he savored both his role and his element.

“Hello, my friends. Sorry to keep you waiting. Wait, wait, wait.” He flipped a hand. “Sometimes I think all there is to life is waiting. Waiting for things to get better. Waiting for things to get worse. Waiting to find out what’s going to happen or not happen. Life can be a pain.”

He walked to end of the table and pressed his fingertips on the surface, like one of those jungle trees that had roots above ground, reaching down. He was now wearing a white lab coat.

“I like to give our new arrivals a cursory orientation personally. Have a seat, Alice.”

Alice.

Christy glanced at Austin, who remained calm, then slid into the chair opposite him.

“There we are.” Fisher stood erect and paced slowly to one side then back before continuing.

“The first day is always the hardest for any patient, but I’m not one to throw sedatives at the first sign of resistance like most understaffed facilities. It only

masks the illness and prevents true healing. The sooner you both accept your conditions and adapt to your new environment, the sooner we'll be able to appropriate the correct therapy. Make sense?"

He didn't wait for a response.

"By now you already know that getting out isn't a solution. Neither is it possible. Please tell me that you understand at least this much."

Waiting for Austin to take the lead seemed natural, so Christy let him give his nod before she did.

"Now, Scott…" The man held his smile for a few seconds. "I know that your particular condition probably has you thinking through solutions without end. You're certain you don't belong here, and you're probably already hatching a way out, so let me help you by cutting to the chase."

His smile vanished.

"All the exits are electronically controlled, and I'm not talking about the simple push of a button. There's no cell service inside. The few lines out of the facility are monitored twenty-four hours a day and require electronic signatures to operate. We have a total of forty-seven patients on two floors. This floor is for those who present neither a flight risk, nor any threat to patients or staff. The upper level is reserved for our more challenging cases. We employ rather advanced, unconventional treatments on the upper level. Extremely effective, I might add."

Two floors? She hadn't seen any exit sign leading to another floor, but then she hadn't been looking for one.

"It can be accessed only by a secure elevator and is operable only by qualified staff. There is no other way in or out. None."

Lawson reached into his lab coat pocket and came out with a small box of toothpicks, one of which he withdrew before returning the box to his pocket. He slipped the sliver of wood into his mouth and rolled it with practiced ease as he studied Austin curiously.

"And since I'm sure you're wondering, the crawlspace Alice found in the

basement has been sealed. I was admittedly quite surprised to find it. Thank you, Alice, for bringing that to our attention."

He looked at her, and then pressed when she offered no reply.

"A 'you're welcome' would be appropriate here. Let's try to be cordial, shall we?"

Play along, Austin had said.

"You're welcome," she said.

"Well, thank you for saying 'you're welcome,' Alice."

She just looked at him.

"Are you going to say 'you're welcome' for my saying thank you for saying 'you're welcome'?"

She blinked.

"No, you aren't, because that would be circular, wouldn't it? I'd keep saying thank you, and you'd keep saying you're welcome. It would be insane. And your brain is working overtime trying to convince you that you're not insane. Not even disturbed. Not even a little bit. Classic delusional behavior."

"It's also classic sane behavior," Austin said.

"True enough. Only this time we know that's not the case. Deep inside, Alice knows that. Like many in her shoes, she's so accustomed to being the way she is that she honestly thinks it's all completely normal. As is the case with you, my friend. You can see that, can't you?"

Austin thought a moment, then followed his own advice.

"Yes."

"Yes, of course. You see how much better this is than resistance. Simple acceptance is always the first step to freedom."

"Makes sense," Austin said.

"Everything I say will eventually make sense." Lawson withdrew his toothpick and pocketed it, maybe for future use.

"All the therapists conduct their cases under my strict supervision," he continued. "On occasion, I take cases on personally, which is what I've decided

to do in your case, Alice. If you're agreeable, that is."

Christy wasn't sure how to take him. The man that stood before her now seemed quite different from the one she'd first met in his office. And yet quite the same. She didn't know when he was toying with her and when he was serious.

She looked at Austin, who still sat in stoic control. He offered her a slight dip of his head.

"Yes," she said.

Lawson glanced between them.

"I can see that you two have formed a bond. Scott, you will remain on this floor until we develop a more thorough treatment plan. Based on your file, your illness is severe, but I see no manic behavior that concerns me."

He faced Christy.

"Fortunately for you, Alice, we have an effective treatment for patients who display the kind of extreme dissociation you've exhibited. You'll be taken up to the second floor as soon as we're done here."

"What?" The thought of being separated from Austin and placed in some secretive upper floor pushed her mind over some unseen cliff.

"I'm not a problem!" she cried, feeling her control slip. A voice somewhere told her to *play along*, but she couldn't stop herself. "I'm not some nut and I'm no worse than Scott."

"Maybe not, but make no mistake, Alice. You are a problem. You've been in here less than a day and you've already gone to great lengths to escape, once through the basement and once out the front. You injured yourself in the first attempt and took another patient with you on the second."

"That's not how it happened," she snapped, but she saw immediately how Lawson could see it differently.

"That's not how you've *convinced* yourself it happened," Lawson said. "And that's okay—you're in a manic cycle now. You just called him Scott—that's a good start."

“Because you called him Scott.”

“Because his name is Scott. The truth is you are very ill, darling. So delusional, in fact, that you are completely unaware that your name is Alice. Most psychiatrists would already have you on medication. But the meds noted in your file clearly haven’t produced the kind of results we like to see. You’re a perfect candidate for our more progressive programs.”

“I am not!” Her hands were shaking. So was her mind. Screaming objections to his accusation that she wasn’t who she thought she was. Protesting the thought that he might be right, however impossible that seemed.

However much sense that actually did make.

She spun to Austin, frantic. “Tell him!” She jumped to her feet. “Don’t let him do this to me.”

“You see how emotional you become, Alice,” Lawson said. “I think you’re making my case as we speak.”

“Please, Austin!” She found her hands pressed together, begging. Tears flooded her eyes as her panic swelled. “Please…”

His eyes were calm, but his fingers were trembling.

“It’s going to be all right, Christy.” Then again, without offering any solution. “It’s going to be okay.”

But she knew it wasn’t.

Nothing was going to okay.



ONE THING was certain: Austin's quick trip to the storage room to check on Christy had pulled him into a hellish scenario that reduced the threat of a brain tumor to a mere sideshow. Fact was, he was in way over his head. That much he could no longer deny.

Showing no interest in Austin's request for an extended audience with Lawson, the administrator had instructed the staff to leave Austin in his room, door locked, alone with his thoughts. Food would be brought to him. His therapy would wait a day.

He'd watched them lead Christy from the interview room, offering her assurance that everything would be okay. The pleading look in her tearful eyes had broken Austin's heart. He was in a position to keep his senses about him, but she was already drowning in her own fear and desperation.

He spent the rest of the day pacing in his room, powerless and alone. Mind obsessing over their predicament.

Over Christy's fate. Where was she? Upper floor, but where and under what conditions? Had she stabilized? Had they broken her down and given her drugs?

What now?

There was nowhere to go, no one to reason with, no connection to the world outside of his mind—nothing but the precarious balance between what he knew and what he did not know. At times, the distinction between the two blurred.

His mind refused to shut down and sleep.

The meal tray the nurse had delivered last night sat untouched at the foot of the bed. Next to it: a small paper cup that held three blue pills. Also untouched. Something to take the edge off and help him sleep, she'd said.

He wasn’t interested in sleep. Anything that wasn’t focused on the singular objective of escape was a waste of precious mental energy, sleep included.

Surviving this ordeal depended on his ability to outthink and outwit Lawson. Both his and Christy’s lives depended on him now, and only him.

He rubbed his head gently as he walked incessantly between the room’s farthest walls. A dull constant pain sank into his forehead and spread behind his eyes. Exacerbated by fatigue and stress, his migraine had worsened through the night. Then there was the high-pitched ringing in his ears, which had started during the meeting with Lawson.

He’d spent some time considering the possibility, however remote, that Lawson was right about both of them. There were a few logical threads that supported the notion that he was, in fact, suffering dissociative delusions of grandeur, but in the end, that reasoning couldn’t compete with the evidence that supported his sanity.

Still, the way his world had unraveled so quickly yesterday was unnerving. And if it was unnerving for him, it must be mind-numbing for Christy.

Who could say how far they would push her? Fisher needed them both insane to cover his tracks. He would go as far as he needed.

Some people were inclined to identify with their trauma, even to the point of falling off the cliff into madness. Christy might be such a person. He’d always known she had her issues, but maybe they cut deeper than he guessed.

Lawson, it seemed, was either in on Fisher’s plot or truly convinced that Christy was Alice. And that he was Scott. Possible? Technically. Realistic? So far from it that Austin had dismissed even the possibility of it in his mind.

They needed to get out of the psych ward, period.

Lawson said there was no way out, but there had to be. Finding it was simply a matter of outthinking the man. Austin had mentally rehearsed a dozen escape scenarios a hundred times, but like a mythical Hydra, each problem he seemed to solve sprouted two new heads, two more problems.

The facility was designed to keep its occupants in, and every eventuality

had likely been taken into account. Getting out through any conventional means was almost certainly impossible. And he could think of no unconventional means except one.

Alice. Assuming she was alive.

Everything led back to Alice. More specifically, to the words he'd overheard.

I've been there. I've seen it. I know.

Finding Alice might mean finding a way out. She might know what was really happening, information that might break this place wide open. Doing that might mean getting her out too.

So find Alice, but how? Where would Fisher have put her?

Upper floor? Maybe.

Basement? Maybe.

Killed her? Maybe.

Readmitted her with a new identity? Maybe.

Without more information, Austin was at a loss. What he did know at the moment, was that Christy was on the second floor and in dire straits, suffering treatment that was likely not sanctioned.

His desire to reach her overrode his desire to find Alice. Reaching Christy first was the most important thing, if only to know that she was safe.

He taxed his mind to the point of exhaustion, working incessantly to think of a way to her. Every course of action seemed to form a twisted knot of trouble.

But even the most tangled of knots could be unraveled, couldn't they? While the rest of the world slumbered in peace, he had methodically dissected the challenge—but he could think of no feasible way to reach Christy.

His mind wasn't processing thoughts properly. There was a way, there had to be, he just wasn't thinking about it right.

"Lost in thought, Scott?"

Austin jerked his attention toward the door. Nancy Wilkins, the therapist Christy had mentioned, stood in the doorframe holding a small stack of folders

under her arm.

It was strange to hear her call him Scott. *Scott Connelly*. An imaginary patient Fisher had fabricated to lock Austin in this twisted world.

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t hear me opening the door.” She stepped in and pulled the door shut.

“Sorry. Just… thinking.”

“I can see that. Did you sleep well?”

“I never sleep well. Insomnia. Chronic, actually.”

A look of genuine concern softened her face as she glanced at the still-made bed, then back at him. “Sometimes goes with the territory.”

He was tempted to correct her but thought better of it. “So they say,” he said.

“Well, as you grow accustomed to your new surroundings, Saint Matthew’s will begin to feel like home. You’ll see.”

She considered him for a long beat. Austin noticed the methodical movement of her analytical gaze. In a single smooth sweep of the eyes, she had taken in him and the entire room. Question was, what did those eyes see?

“What time is it?” he said.

“Just past ten. You’re free to leave your room. Maybe go to the recreation room or grab some breakfast in the cafeteria.” She nodded toward the food tray. “Looks like you could use some food.”

“Maybe.”

She paused. “If you’d like, I can walk down with you. Show you around if that would make you feel more comfortable.”

“No thanks. I’ll be fine. I can find the way.”

“Of course.” She reached for the door, hesitated, and then turned back. “We’re here to help you, Scott. This is a safe place for you. You can trust me. Okay?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

She opened the door. The faint sounds of people talking drifted in from the hallway. “I’ll see you later. We’re scheduled for a two o’clock session in room 408. Sound good?”

“Looking forward to it,” he said with a smile, trying to suppress any sarcastic edge.

“Good. We’ll find you. Any questions, feel free to ask the staff.”

“I will. Thank you.”

She closed the door behind her as she left. Unlocked.

He was free to roam the floor. He’d been through the halls once before, but now he had enough time to inspect the rest unhurried.

An image of Christy filled his mind. Upper floor. His failure to settle on a clear course of action coaxed sweat from his pores.

He took a deep breath, opened his door, and peered out. Wilkins stopped in front the next patient room, knocked twice, and entered. Morning rounds.

Austin exited his room, pulled the door quietly shut, and walked toward the recreation room, ahead and to the left.

Lawson had said the upper floor was accessible only by a secure elevator. Since Austin hadn’t seen any stairwells or elevators he had to assume it was in a secure section of the building.

He might force his way in, or he might get killed. Regardless, he had no force. No gun, no knife. Even if he had a weapon, he didn’t have the skill to use it.

What he did have was his brain. Problem was, his brain was fried.

He paused at the door marked RECREATION ROOM and peered through the long rectangle of reinforced glass set in the middle of it. Inside, about two dozen patients sat around the room in various stages of disinterest. Some stared blankly at a TV on the far wall while others rocked to a beat that played only in their heads.

He was about to step in when laughter to his left drew his attention. A man dressed in white scrubs emerged from the patient room two doors down from his

own. He wheeled a gurney through the doorway and guided it into the hallway, followed by a second attendant.

On the gurney: a patient, face to the ceiling. A girl, vaguely familiar even from this distance. His heart rate quickened.

He stared, uncaring that he was in full view. It was a psych ward, after all, and he was just another patient. The details of the girl became clearer as they drew close.

Young. Dirty-blond hair. She lay beneath a white sheet that was cinched taut. Her arms lay at her sides on top of the sheet. Four straps crossed her body—one across her upper chest, one at her waist, one at her thighs, one across her ankles.

A leather mask covered the lower part of her face. His mind completed its circuit of recognition as they drew abreast.

He knew this girl. Her name was Alice.

Time crawled as his eyes met hers. The gurney's squeaking wheels and the distant sounds from the recreation room fell away as if the entire world had been plunged underwater.

The words she'd spoken in the basement loomed in his mind. *I've been there. I've seen it. I know.*

She stared at him without expression, unblinking, neither sad nor frightened. Just… there. She seemed to be looking both at him and through him at the same time.

His eyes flitted to the wristband cinched on her left wrist as they passed. He could see it through the bedrail. MICHELE MILLER.

After admitting Christy as Alice, Fisher had readmitted Alice under a new identity.

Or had he?

Austin dismissed the thought as the attendants made their way down the hall. Just another patient to be transported.

Austin wanted to run after them and rip the mask from her face. To ask her

which way was out. How he could get to Christy. How they could get their lives back. He just needed to know the way, and the simple answer was locked in that damaged mind of hers.

But he couldn't. Not now, not yet. Now he could only stare after them and wonder where they were taking her.

The question had barely formed when the answer crystallized.

The attendants pulled to a stop at the end of the corridor, in front of the double doors marked ADMISSIONS. One of the attendants waved his hand in front of a small black pad next to the door. An electronic lock. A loud buzz echoed through the narrow hall and the doors automatically yawned wide.

An anxious twitch needled every nerve in Austin's body. He could barely keep his feet from launching him into a sprint.

Wait, Austin. Just two more seconds…

The men passed through and the doors eased shut with a pneumatic hiss.

Go…

He covered the distance to the admissions doors in long strides, hoping he wasn't drawing undue attention from hidden cameras. He slowed to a stop in front of them.

Twin narrow windows were set into the doors, steel-mesh-reinforced glass. He leaned close, then stepped aside so the attendants wouldn't see him if they looked back.

The men stood in a shallow alcove to the left of what appeared to be the admissions office. In front of them: a polished steel door, inset deep in the wall.

An elevator.

They were taking Alice to the second floor.

One of the attendants waved his wrist in front of a black pad identical to the one in the hallway, then punched the elevator button.

The secure access required some form of keycard, though Austin hadn't seen the man use one. A chip in the man's skin?

The elevator doors parted and the men pushed the gurney into it. Alice was

slipping away.

As the doors eased shut, something in Austin's mind shifted. It came in an instant, unbidden and unexpected, as if a fog that had hovered at the fringes of his mind now pushed deep into his thoughts.

So close. He had been so close to her that he could've reached out and touched her.

He heard the mechanical hum of the elevator as it rose. Watched the glowing red digit above the door as it changed then stopped.

Alice was gone. Right now they were wheeling her onto the upper floor, where they'd locked Christy away from the rest of the world. From him.

Austin stepped away from the door and leaned against the wall. Stared down the long hallway that stretched in front of him, lost in thought.

The fog in his mind thickened into darkness as the situation settled on him. Hope was slipping away. Every moment they spent behind these walls diminished their chances of escape. His control was beginning to slip and he felt powerless to gain any traction.

Still, his mind swept through new thoughts that had been out of sight until now and began connecting the dots methodically. The hall, the recreation room, the sight of Alice restrained, the elevator. The security measures…

Like a mirage taking shape in the distance, a thought formed. A solution. However fragile, he clung to it as if it were a lifeline.

It was bold in its simplicity, but it might work.

He stood unmoving for a full minute, lost in his thoughts, considering his options. It could work. It had to work.

Then again, it might not. And if it didn't…

Austin settled on his course of action, took a deep centering breath, faced the recreation room, and started walking, a whirlwind of objections crowding his mind. He shoved them to the edge of his consciousness and moved forward. One foot in front of the other. He knew what he would do.

He pushed into the recreation room and stood inside the door for several

moments, watching. Fourteen patients all dressed in blue scrubs sat throughout the room. Most slumped in metal folding chairs on the left side of the room, staring at a cartoon playing on the flat-panel TV that hung halfway up the wall.

A nurse on the far side of the room offered a smile, then returned to her conversation with a patient. No other staff members in the room at the moment. Two sets of double doors flanked the room, the one behind him and a pair on the opposite side of the room.

To his immediate right, a young patient sat motionless in a wheelchair, staring straight ahead with vacant eyes. The boy he'd seen yesterday. His name dangled at the edge of Austin's memory. Jacob.

Austin walked past the boy and crossed the room calmly, feet padding softly on the linoleum floor. A strange sensation hatched somewhere deep inside his gut. It swelled with each step, feeding on the adrenaline that drove him forward.

The nurse glanced up when he stopped in front of her.

"Can I help you, sweetie?"

Her name was Claire, according to the name badge clipped to her pocket. She was a slight woman huddled next to a patient at a squat table, overseeing a crayon drawing of a purple dragon and a unicorn. Two cups filled with markers and pens sat in the middle.

Austin reached for a blue ballpoint pen. "Just need one of these."

"Why, sure. Help yourself."

"Thank you." He slipped the pen into his pocket, veered left, and made his way toward the TV, eyes fixed ahead.

Odd how detached his body felt. Everything seemed to move at half speed. The better part of his logic began to suggest that what he had in mind would end very badly. But it presented no reasonable alternative, so he ignored those thoughts and followed his intention.

Without breaking stride, he grabbed an empty folding chair with one hand as he passed by it. Dragged it loosely behind him as he rounded the first row and

angled for the wall.

Last chance, Austin. Are you sure? A chill cascaded over his scalp.

He stopped in front of the TV and gripped the back of the chair with both hands. In one smooth motion, he lifted it and, jaw clenched, swung it with as much force as he could put behind it. The chair came forward hard and fast, and the impact shattered the TV screen.

He spun around and stared at the horrified faces. The room filled with gasps and cries as fear swept over the fragile-minded patients. A girl pressed her hands to her ears and rocked back and forth. Another pointed at the TV with a trembling hand, shouting something Austin couldn't understand. Others pulled at their hair, peace shattered by the angry man.

He screamed full-throated and flung the chair away. It ricocheted off the wall with a deafening clang and unleashed chaos. Now patients were scrambling, trying to get up. Trying to escape.

Adrenaline surged through his veins, and Austin surrendered to the surge of emotion that raged inside him. He was on a rollercoaster, plunging—too late to turn back now.

He strode toward Jacob, quickly now, intent. The boy just stared at him, unaware it appeared. All the better.

The nurse rushed to the back of the room and jabbed her thumb against a red button. A security alarm.

A tremor took to Austin's hands and his lungs heaved thick breaths as he picked up his pace. At the exit next to Jacob, he stepped over to the red box housed in a Plexiglas case on the wall. He flipped the safety case open, wrapped his fingers around the white lever, and tugged down.

The fire alarm's deafening scream shrilled above the din, and patients scattered, driven by the unbearable sound.

Austin crossed to Jacob, rounded the wheelchair, and gripped the handles.

"Come on, Jacob. Let's go for a ride."

The boy didn't respond.

The doors banged open as he backed into them, pulling Jacob into the hallway. He swung the chair and pushed down the hall, heading in the same direction of the ill-fated escape attempt he'd taken yesterday.

Austin moved with measured steps that matched the drumbeat of his heart. For the moment he felt the thrill of perfect control. Strange how intoxicating it was.

They'd just taken the turn and sped to a quick clip before any sign of pursuit reached him—the sounds of the rec room's door crashing open, and running feet.

So… This was it.

He spun the chair around and faced four attendants all focused on one thing: Stopping him before he caused any more damage—to himself or others, especially Jacob.

The fire alarm fell silent; someone had shut it down.

Austin slipped the blue pen from his pocket, gripped it tightly with his fist, and pressed the sharp point against the side of Jacob's throat.

"No farther," he said evenly.

The attendants slowed, but they didn't stop. They spread across the width of the hallway and moved steadily, arms at their sides, palms open and forward, wide stance.

"I said no farther!"

Austin grabbed a fistful of Jacob's hair and jerked his head back. Pressed the pen deeper until he felt the resistance of the windpipe against the ballpoint. The boy didn't resist. Made no sound.

"I swear. If you take another step, he'll die." Austin's voice sounded strangely distant to himself. "I'll punch him so full of holes…"

The attendants stopped, eyes locked on Austin, but none of them spoke.

His hands were shaking, and he couldn't stop them. Again, the voice of logic told him he was going too far. But another told him he hadn't gone far enough, and the second voice rode the crest of his adrenaline.

He jerked the pen away and gripped the wheelchair handles with both hands. Began backing down the hall toward the exit doors at the far end. Then spun around and pushed the chair at a full run.

They gave chase, but he rounded the next turn safely and headed toward the doors that opened onto the reception room where he'd picked the lock yesterday.

Behind him, they made gains. Didn't speak, didn't attempt to restrain him.

Halfway down the hall, he spun to face them again, pen back at Jacob's neck.

"Stay back!"

They pulled up, eyes on him, still spread across the hall. Still no warning, no urging him to stop. It was almost surreal.

Austin started backward, feet shuffling across the hard floor as he pulled the wheelchair. Every few steps he'd glance over his shoulder. Except for them, the hall was empty. Why wasn't anyone trying to cut him off from the other direction?

Within seconds he'd closed the distance to the reception area's double doors.

"Come closer and I'll push it into his throat," he said.

They pulled up, ten feet away now, still unfazed by his threat. Why?

He glanced down at the boy, who stared forward unaffected except for tousled hair, which fell across his freckled face. A thin smear of blood had formed where Austin nicked the boy's pale skin.

Could he have pushed it into the boy's neck? He was playing a role, but how far would he have gone?

He pushed the thought aside and reached back for the door.

A sudden rush of jagged heat entered his body and climbed his arms the moment his hands connected with the door's cold steel handles. White-hot light exploded behind Austin's eyes. A million needles pressed against his skin as electricity coursed through his body.

He felt himself convulse. His jaw locked tight. His legs gave way beneath

him and he crumpled to the hard ground.

His vision narrowed. Darkness crowded the edges of his sight.

Then the world simply disappeared.



EVERYONE HAD voices in their head, right? Thoughts were just unspoken words. If someone invented a speaker that could be hooked to the brain and give voice to every thought, the whole world would sound like a crowded auditorium before the guest of honor took the stage.

Christy remembered taking a bus downtown to city hall once to sign some emancipation forms that would give her full autonomy as a minor. She was seated two rows from a woman who kept mumbling to an imaginary person in the empty seat beside her. “I’m so glad I’m not like you. If they knew what kind of person you are, they’d lock you up.” On and on.

The rest of the bus sat in an uneasy silence, staring at the oblivious woman. After getting off the bus, Christy headed into city hall, pondering what she’d just witnessed. *Poor woman has totally lost it*, she kept thinking. *I’m glad I’m not like that.*

She suddenly became aware that, instead of only thinking the last sentence, she’d said it, unaware of the others walking down the hall. She’d actually said, aloud, “I’m glad I’m not like that.”

The only difference between her and the woman everyone regarded as plain crazy was that Christy kept most of her thoughts to herself, whereas the woman seemed either unable or uninterested in doing so.

The whole world was full of incessant, often crazy, often cruel and judgmental thoughts that were rarely given voice.

The chatter whispering through Christy’s mind told her that she had to get a grip or she really was going to lose it. *This is crazy, I’m not insane. I’m not Alice*

and I’m not fractured. This is all a mistake.

Something was on the verge of breaking, and when it did, she would collapse into a mumbling heap of subhuman insanity.

But strapped in a wheelchair, wheeled first into the elevator and then onto the second floor, she was so acutely aware of the unspoken thoughts that she wondered if she had already lost it.

She knew it wasn’t true. That her thinking was only the consequence of a tragic series of errors in an inhospitable environment. But her grip on that certainty was slipping.

The facility’s second level was dimensionally similar to the first floor—wide halls in a U shape with doors on either side. But the hall floors were tiled in a glistening black-and-white checkerboard pattern. The walls were spotless, shiny-white as if only freshly painted. And the doors were made of polished aluminum, giving the appearance that the whole floor was germ-free.

The wire-mesh reinforced windows on each door were too high for Christy to see through from the wheelchair. She could only imagine the worst, but those, too, were only thoughts.

The attendant who transported her didn’t say a word. She asked him where the other patients were as they rolled down the hall, but he kept silent, which only filled her with more uneasy thoughts.

He angled for a door near the end of the hall, turned her chair to face it, then stepped around her and unlocked it by passing his wrist in front of a small black pad on the wall. She looked back down the hall. The steel elevator doors at the end made her think of a vault door.

Austin might be more intelligent than most, but his mind wasn’t going to break down any doors. She was on her own. More than anything, she hated herself for being alone, like she’d always been.

The attendant wheeled Christy in, freed her arms, and left without taking the wheelchair with him. The lock on the door snapped into place as the door closed.

A thick silence settled over her like a heavy blanket.

She looked around the large room, lost. Pressed white sheets covered a single bed to her right. The walls were shiny, like the walls in the hall. Same checkerboard tiled floor. Just past the bed, a door, maybe to the bathroom or a closet. One small chest of drawers beside the bed topped with white Formica.

To her left, the room ran twice as wide as the one downstairs. In the extra space sat a large white desk with a brushed-nickel lamp. One high-back chair behind the desk and one smaller chair facing it. A whiteboard on the wall behind the desk. A mirror on the adjacent wall. Likely unbreakable.

Christy sat in the wheelchair for several long minutes, unsure what she was meant to do. Even less sure she wanted to do anything at all.

The ceiling vents were narrow. No way out there. Nor would there be a way out anywhere. She couldn't shake the feeling that they'd built this place to house deranged psychopaths or insane sociopaths.

She finally stood up, walked to the door by the bed, and peered inside. Plain bathroom with a toilet, a shower, and a sink with a mirror above it. No vanity, no soap or shampoo, no towels.

She stepped up to the mirror and blinked at the image staring back at her. Her eyes were swollen and her cheeks had flushed a ruddy red. Lips dry and cracked. Strands of hair had come loose from her ponytail and were sticking out haphazardly, giving her the appearance of a crazed woman just out of an asylum.

She tapped the mirror. Chromed metal. Of course. Nothing would be breakable in this place.

A slow tour of the bedroom confirmed her thinking that everything was designed for permanence. The drawers on the desk were locked, the lamp had a sealed bulb and was bolted to the desk. Even the chairs were affixed to the floor, and the screws that fastened them down had no heads.

When she ventured to the narrow pane of reinforced glass set in the door and peered out, the hall was vacant. Not a soul.

Christy finally retreated to the bed and lay down, feeling deprived and

lifeless. She stayed liked that, staring at the ceiling, for what felt like an hour and still no one came. Had they forgotten about her? Of course not. She didn't know what "progressive treatment" meant, but she could imagine that leaving someone to their own thoughts indefinitely might qualify.

There was no clock, no sunlight, no switches on the walls, nothing on the ceiling but the narrow vents and two banks of bright fluorescent lights. It could be the middle of night and she wouldn't know it.

Slowly her concerns began to sag into that place where meaninglessness meets hopelessness. She kept rehearsing the events of the day—her break in, her mistaken identity, Austin's attempt to free them.

The *what ifs* swarmed her mind like angry crows.

If only she'd left home with her wallet, she would have walked out of the ward the moment she proved that she was Christy. Lawson would have checked his patient roster, found no Christy Snow, and let her go.

If she hadn't made the call to Austin, he wouldn't have come looking for her. If he hadn't come looking, he wouldn't have stumbled upon Fisher and Alice. If he hadn't stumbled on Fisher, the man wouldn't have had any reason to cover his tracks and hide Alice. He'd have had no reason to admit Christy to replace the girl who'd gone missing on his account.

If only…

Christy paused. Somewhere in the back of her mind the *if* became an *unless*. Unless she was completely wrong about all of this. Unless she hadn't left home without her wallet because she'd actually never left her home at all. She'd never left her home because she lived here, not there.

She'd seen a documentary about a patient whose brain damage had so affected his long-term memory that he couldn't hold more than one day in his mind.

But the details of her life as Christy were too real. She had a couple dozen journals in her apartment that spelled out her last few years in great detail.

Hours slogged by and no one came. She made a dozen trips to the door to

peer out and not once saw any movement. If there were other patients on the floor, they were in a different section.

What if she was alone?

Christy had drifted into a mind-numbing stupor when the sound of the lock snapping open jerked her back to the room. She caught her breath and sat up as the door swung open.

“Hello, Alice.”

Kern Lawson closed the door behind him and headed for the desk.

“Sit with me.”

She rose and crossed to the seat facing the desk. Sat down as he sank into the chair opposite her.

For a long time he studied her as if trying to decide what to do with her. A minute went by and still he said nothing.

“This is crazy,” she finally said. Her voice was thin, not the kind of convincing tone she wanted to project.

“It is. Very. Which is why we are here, darling.” He opened his palms. “Plum nuts, bonkers, crazy. You’ll note that up here we don’t use terms like *mentally challenged*. We tend to go right for the heart of the issue. It’s controversial, but we find it produces wonderful results with the right treatment.”

She was at a loss.

“How do you like your treatment so far?”

“What treatment?”

He chuckled and she was surprised to find a sliver of comfort in the sound after hours of solitude.

“What treatment, indeed,” he said. “The first step here is for me to help you see through your illusions, *capisce*? You have to see yourself for who you really are before we can begin to break down that false self. The delusional self.”

“I’m not delusional.”

“No? Truth is, you’re not seeing what is real even now, as we speak. But I’ll let you discover that on your own. See the illusion. Then break with it. That’s

all I'm asking of you, Alice."

"I'm not Alice."

"Okay, we can start with that. You don't think you're Alice. But the fact is, you don't really know who you are. Are you ugly? Are you pretty? Are you an outcast? You're broken, Alice. You aren't whole. Correction is needed. The first step is embracing that. I can fix you."

A distant, high-pitched whine sat at the back of her mind.

He leaned forward on his elbows.

"You're living in denial, Alice. You're so afraid of what you might find if you really get a good look at yourself that you've shut your eyes. Permanently. I can help you see the truth. But you have to face the truth, beginning with fundamentals, like how you really look, in the real world."

Her heart worked its way through thick beats.

"You think this"—he motioned to her—"is the real you. It's not. The real you is actually not quite this pretty. Most therapists feed their patients a load of lies, pump them full of sunshine, which helps in the short term but doesn't fundamentally change them. I prefer to help the patient see the real truth themselves. I call it *ther-I-py*. And I let you be the *ther-I-pist.* It upsets some."

He paused.

"Dive off the deep end with me, Alice. Think of me as the law, again, no pun intended. A measuring stick for what's good and what's bad about you. Let me reveal who you really are so we can make the appropriate corrections. What do you say?"

"You're saying I'm ugly?"

"Ugly? That's a matter of perspective. But your refusal to admit that you're ugly is triggering denial on a much deeper level. You're broken. Correction is needed. I can make you whole again."

"But you actually think I'm ugly?"

"Isn't that what you secretly think every time you look in the mirror? My nose is too big. My cheeks are too fat. I need to lose twenty pounds. No one

loves me the way I am. I don't have any really good friends. No family. Isn't that why you secretly hate yourself?"

She felt her fingers trembling on the armrests.

"The problem, my dear, is that you're delusional about many things. Drop the illusion and you'll see who you really are. It might be a bit uncomfortable at first, but it's the only way to make you whole."

"You don't understand," she said with a little hesitation. "I don't even belong here. I may not like some things about me, but I'm not the person you're talking about."

He stared at her for a long moment, then abruptly rose.

"I'll make you a deal, Alice. You give it a good thinking tonight, there's no rush. Look at yourself in the mirror long and hard, and let's see if you can see through the illusion you've created around your cozy little life. Convince me tomorrow that you love everything about yourself, and I'll consider a different form of therapy. Maybe electric shock treatments. We'll see."

"Shock?"

"Just a little something to get the juice flowing. No pun intended." He headed for the door and she pushed herself to her feet. "Your call, Alice. Go deep or keep it shallow, the choice is yours."

He unlocked the door, opened it, and turned back.

"Get some sleep."

The door shut and the lock engaged.

"Wait!"

As if responding to her voice, the overhead lights blinked out. Darkness engulfed her. Pitch. A thin line of light peeked out from under the bathroom door but it wasn't enough to give the room any shape.

"Wait!"

If Lawson could hear her, he was paying her no mind.

She stood still, trying to let her eyes adjust to the darkness, mind spinning with the realization that she had no control of the lights.

The bed was straight ahead, next to the bathroom door.

She crossed the room, stepping carefully even though she knew there was nothing to trip on. Reached the bathroom door and pulled it open, half expecting to see Lawson leaning against the sink, waiting for her.

White light spilled past her. The bathroom was as she'd left it. Pristine. Clinical. Not even a water spot on the sink. Perfectly quiet.

Anxious and once again alone with only her thoughts, Christy walked back to the bed and sat for a while, staring into the dim, bathroom-lit room. She finally settled to her side and curled up.

It was there, staring at the outline of the desk across the room, that she began to consider Lawson's jumble of words. Any sane person could see through them. This was his progressive ther-I-py, a clever play on the word which set the focus on the self. She being the ther-I-pist.

Words, nothing but.

Unnerving words, but only that.

Unless…

And it was that *unless* that began to get to Christy. *Unless* there was some truth to what he had said. There was. It was true, for example, that she had a rather low self-image. But she didn't *hate* herself.

Unless he was right and she secretly did.

She blinked in the darkness and thought about that.

The *what ifs* started to cycle through her mind. What if she did hate herself and had only convinced herself that she was okay as a coping mechanism? What if Lawson knew more about her than she did? What if her file contained details about her past that she'd forgotten?

What if she didn't know Christy's past because Christy was only a fabrication of her mind?

Fear washed down her back and she sat up, heart pounding.

It was true. She really did secretly hate many things about herself. Why else did she persistently withdraw from others? Why else did she keep a locket with a

fake picture around her neck? Why else did she secretly want to be anyone other than who she really was?

Beautiful, put together, attracting men as she walked confidently across the floor to a stage that waited her appearance—who wouldn't want that?

But that wasn't her. She was the girl who'd been born plain. Ugly, even.

She rose unsteadily to her feet, Lawson's words ringing in her head.

Look at yourself in the mirror long and hard, and let's see if you can see through the illusion.

Christy rounded her bed and walked to the bathroom. She walked in and tentatively stepped in front of the mirror.

The plain face, so familiar to her, stared back. Christy.

Slowly, she began to relax. Christy, not Alice. There was no illusion here, only a very plain image of a girl who'd been born into obscurity. More than once, Austin had told her that he thought she was pretty. What did Austin know? But at least it was something, right?

She lifted her hand and pinched the flesh around her neck. Pulled it back to see what a thinner neck would look like.

The difference produced a stunning result. At least as far as her neck went, the slight shift in body mass transformed her into something far more appealing.

She squeezed her nose, which she'd always considered too fat, particularly around her nostrils. Much better. She let go and looked at herself again. Truth was, she did hate the way she looked. A few thousand dollars might fix it when she got up the nerve. But they couldn't lengthen fingers.

He's talking about your insides, Alice.

The room suddenly felt ominously quiet. She'd called herself Alice?

You hate who you are. And for the record, what can Austin know if you only made him up?

The door to the bathroom slammed shut and Christy spun, heart in her throat. The air had come in and pulled it shut?

She was about to yank it open, but something in the corner of her eye gave

her pause. The mirror was there, right in front of her, and the memory of Lawson's voice was whispering through her mind.

Look in the mirror long and hard, it said.

She turned back to the mirror and stared.

The girl looking back at her was her. Christy knew that because she looked enough like her to be her. But she was more than a few pounds heavier. Her neck was thick, nearly the width of her head. The end of her nose rose too high. There were more than a few pimples on her chin and cheeks, a couple too pronounced to cover with makeup. Her teeth weren't straight.

It was an illusion, of course. But it was strong enough to stop her cold, awash with horror.

She slowly backed from the mirror, mind stuttering. *This isn't real. This can't be real. I'm not that ugly. This is just an illusion. This isn't even an illusion—it's just a dream.*

But her face refused to change.

And then another thought edged into her mind. It had to be an illusion, of course it did, but that meant she was capable of having illusions. Ones that looked this real.

So then she was insane?

Her heart slogged thick and heavy in her chest. Chills washed down her arms. She lifted them and saw that they, too, were thick.

This was her?

She couldn't accept that!

You're delusional, Christy. And maybe this isn't the delusion.

The thought swept over her like a frigid wave from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet. She was breathing heavily, fixed and unmoving, as if her feet had been nailed to the floor.

She had to stop this! She had to get out!

Uttering a low moan, filled with horror and disgust, she tore her feet from the ground and staggered toward the door.

Grabbed the knob with thick fingers and twisted.

The door was locked.

She grabbed with both hands and tugged, twisting with all of her strength, but the door refused to budge.

Christy whirled, smothered by the realization that she was trapped alone in a small bathroom. But it wasn't a small bathroom.

It was, but the walls had changed. Instead of white paint, the walls were made of mirrors. She backed into the closed door. Bumped into it. Felt that it too was made of glass.

She was in a room of mirrors reflecting infinite images of her grotesque body. The new, ugly her, not the plain her. Hundreds of hers. Her legs began to shake.

Everywhere she looked she saw only the singular sickening image of someone she despised. Her mind began to fold in on itself.

Grunting with panic, she tried again to get the door open without even a hint of progress. Then again. She erupted into a flurry of frantic attempts to fix what was wrong, wheezing, sweating, sobbing, slamming the door with her fists.

None of it made a difference. The images were still there, mimicking and mocking her every move.

You're an ugly girl, Alice. Look at yourself. Look long and hard and see just how ugly you are, inside and out.

Christy closed her eyes, sank slowly to her seat along the bathroom door, wrapped her arms around her head, and began to rock gently.

Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.



AUSTIN WOKE with the tang of metal in the back of his throat. His tongue throbbed in lockstep with his pulse. He slowly moved his jaw and was rewarded with a sharp pain that stabbed down his neck.

Details of his ordeal filtered into his mind. As he'd hoped, they'd taken him. The question was, where?

He'd been nearly electrocuted by the hallway door the moment he'd made contact. This explained why the attendants had made no attempt to chase him. The voltage had immobilized him almost instantly and made short work of the attendants' security problem. His whole body still prickled with pain.

He pried his eyes open. They felt like they'd been packed with glass. A white ceiling came into focus.

Austin rolled his head to the right and looked down at his feet. He was strapped to a gurney with two thick bands that ran across his chest and waist. Each of his wrists had been lashed to the bed rails with double-loop zip ties—one cinched tightly around each arm and the other secured to the gurney's steel railings. Plastic, not the padded cuffs that had secured him earlier.

There was a little play, but not enough to slip through the restraints.

The room was cold and clinical, well lit by banks of lights in the ceiling. An air-conditioning unit hummed softly, pumping frigid air into the room.

A long stainless-steel table with a large articulating lamp used for medical exams stood in the middle of the room. Next to it, a tray of surgical instruments.

A medical exam room. But not just an exam room. Something more. The realization dawned on him as his attention settled on the trough that rimmed the

table. Then his eyes went to the opposite wall and the four stainless-steel doors, each three feet square, which stared back at him.

He was in a morgue. The table in the middle was used for autopsies.

Acrid fear slipped down his spine.

Alarmed, Austin tuned his head to his left and blinked at the sight that greeted him. A row of gurneys, and on the last one, a body. A girl, who was strapped down, motionless. His pulse hammered. He didn't have to see her up close to know who it was.

Alice.

He was on the second floor.

Everything snapped into place. Why he was here. Why Alice was here. And why this specific room.

Fisher's intentions were clear. Why else would they be in a morgue?

But he was reading into what he saw. There had to be another explanation. The man already had covered his tracks. It made no sense to kill them both now.

Then again, he didn't know who Fisher was or how deep this all ran. Either way, in conspiring to get himself onto the second floor, Austin may have inadvertently played right into the man's hands.

His breathing grew thick and heavy. He had to find Christy and get out of here. And he was staring at the one person who gave him any hope of doing so.

He swallowed. "Hey."

No response. Of course not. She was wearing a muzzle. But she didn't turn either.

His fear swelled to a panic that threatened to paralyze him. He had to find a way to shove everything except the problem from his mind. Just another problem to solve. Get her loose. Find Christy. Get out. Before anyone came.

How, he still had no clue, but he had to move quickly.

He jerked his arms violently and knew immediately that trying to break the plastic restraints was futile.

He snapped his head to the surgical instruments next to the exam table.

Only a short distance separated him from them. No sound of approach from the hall.

Austin drew his legs up, bringing both knees toward his chest, then planted his feet squarely against the wall to his left. If he could kick the gurney away from the wall he might be able to reach the table.

He gauged the distance. There would be no second try. Push too lightly and he'd be stuck between the wall and table. Too hard and he'd likely knock the tray over.

He tested the gurney with a gentle push on the wall. The wheels budged, which meant they weren't locked.

One chance. Taking a deep breath, he tensed his legs and pushed off as hard as he could. The gurney shot away from the wall, then began to slow.

Not fast enough. He was going to come up short!

Austin jerked on the gurney, hoping to coax more momentum into the rolling. The gurney surged a little and he repeated the motion, desperate to reach the center table.

With a clang the gurney struck the metal stand, nearly toppling it and sending its the tools to the floor.

Nearly.

The room quieted. He waited a few seconds, sure that someone had overheard the clashing of metals. The door remained closed.

Alice lay on her back, open eyes fixed on the ceiling, seemingly oblivious.

Working quickly, Austin slid the zip tie along the bedrail until it was as close as possible to the work tray. A scalpel teetered dangerously on the edge. His fingers grazed the tray. On the third try, his fingertip snagged the edge. He inched it toward him slowly.

Close enough for him to grab the scalpel's cool handle.

He couldn't stop thinking that Alice might not be able to help him in her current state. If not…

Austin carefully turned the scalpel in his hand until the blade rested against

the zip tie that secured him to the bed. After a few tries the blade sliced through the plastic, freeing his right hand.

He sat upright and made quick work of the other restraints as well as the wristband that read SCOTT CONNELLEY. He slid off the gurney and onto the tile floor, which felt ice cold against his bare feet.

Scalpel gripped tightly in his hand, he circled around the autopsy table and hurried up to Alice's gurney. The doors were still closed.

She looked up at him with the same expressionless eyes he'd seen earlier. She either hadn't heard all the commotion or wasn't in a mental space to react. Drugs?

He scanned her arms for needle marks. None that he could see. They could've given her oral medications. As far as he could tell, she had no bruises or cuts or any other signs of abuse, though he knew what he could see was barely half the story. The trauma she'd likely experienced in her life undoubtedly ran much deeper than her skin.

He sawed through each of the straps that held her body down, snapping each one quickly. Only when he reached her hand restraints did he realize they were made of thick leather. Cutting through them would be difficult without injuring her. He'd have to find another way.

He set the scalpel down and leaned over her bedrail. His trembling fingers worked at the buckle and strap that held the leather muzzle to her face. It came loose easily.

He peeled it gently from her head and dropped it on the floor.

The girl he'd found in the basement stared up at him, pretty, with blond hair and a serene face. Her rainwater eyes were bright, without the deadened look that sometimes accompanied drugs.

But she made no attempt to speak.

"Alice," he whispered. "Remember me?"

No response. Her eyes stared into his, unblinking.

"I'm going to get us out of here, but I need your help. Okay?" He glanced at

the door. They were okay for now.

"Can you hear me?"

She blinked once.

"Yes? You can hear me? Please tell me you can hear me!"

"Hello," she said in a simple, sweet voice.

Hope surged. "My name's Austin, I saw you in the basement. Remember? With Fisher."

He could see by her stare that she either wasn't tracking or didn't see the urgency of their situation. She might not be catatonic, but she didn't appear entirely lucid either. There was no telling what Fisher had done to her since the incident in the basement. Austin had to get through to her.

He cradled her face in his hands. Her cheeks were cool against his palms and the moment his thumb grazed her lower lip it nudged into a gentle smile.

"Listen to me, Alice. I overheard you in the basement. You said you already know the way out. 'I've been there. I've seen it. I know.' Been where? What did you see?"

"It's going to be okay," she said.

"*What's* going to be okay?"

She held her faint smile.

"What did you mean by *I've been there*? Where?"

"He knows," she said.

Austin removed his hands, relieved that she was talking, albeit in cryptic terms.

He glanced at the door again.

"Please, I need your help. You know something that Fisher doesn't want you to know. He's trying to keep you quiet. What you know may be able to save us." He hesitated, then pushed more directly. "Tell me the way out of this place."

Nothing.

"Do you know where we are?"

"We're here," she said. "I've seen it."

“Seen what!?”

No response. For all he knew, she was in a totally different zone, deluded by fanciful images that connected with a reality only privy to her. Austin felt his frustration rise. He briefly thought he might have a better chance at searching for Christy on his own.

Time was running out and he was getting nowhere.

“Alice—”

“It’ll be okay,” she said.

“No, you don’t understand. Maybe you *can’t* understand. This place is not okay. It’s dangerous and we have to leave as soon as possible.”

“You can see too.”

“See what, Alice? What!?”

“The key. The way out. I saw the lamps.”

Austin’s heart lurched. “There’s a key? Where? A key to what?”

She searched his eyes, apparently fascinated with him.

“Where’s the key? Please, Alice. I’m begging you, just tell me where.”

Her smile softened.

“In the basement,” she said. “Where I was.”

His mind spun. “You mean where I saw you with Fisher?”

She looked at him a moment, then spoke in a calm, reassuring voice.

“It’s going to be okay, Scott. I promise.”

Scott? He took a step back from the gurney.

“I’m not Scott. Who told you my name is Scott?”

“When you came in.”

“But I didn’t tell you my name was Scott. Fisher told you my name was Scott?”

Alice’s eyes shifted to the ceiling as if something there was drawing her attention. He followed her gaze but saw only the florescent lights.

Still no one at the door, but someone could walk in at any moment.

His mind spun with Alice’s words. She’d called Christy ‘Alice.’ And him

‘Scott.’ But that was explained easily enough. Fisher had worked on her before readmitting her. Schizophrenics had highly suggestible minds.

Unless by *when you came in* she was referring to their being admitted at the same time, which, according to the administrator, they had been. Yesterday morning. He, Christy, and Alice, all new cases at Saint Matthew’s. Him being Scott, and Christy being Alice.

Only problem was that couldn’t be. He was Austin. Always had been; always would be.

“I’ve seen it,” Alice said, smiling gently at the lights above them. “I’ve been there.”

The hinges on the door behind them creaked and Austin went rigid. For a moment he refused to turn. He was only hearing things.

But then he turned and he knew: the door was open.

Fisher stood in the entry, considering Austin with a flint-hard face, arms loose at his sides.

He closed the door quietly behind him, then calmly removed his glasses, blew a speck of dust from them with a single puff, then returned them to his face. Without speaking a word, Fisher approached a wheelchair in the corner, his hard-soled shoes clacking against the tile.

If he was surprised by Austin’s attempted escape, he didn’t show it. It was as if he’d expected as much.

Fisher reached the wheelchair, bent down to unlock the wheels, swung it around, and pushed it toward them.

Austin stood unmoving, feet rooted to the hard floor. He wasn’t sure whether to run away or rush the man. Neither, of course. He didn’t stand a chance against Fisher, who was twice his size.

Even if he was able to get out of the room, then what? Break down every door until he found Christy? Get on the elevator and stroll out of the building? His logic had delivered him to the upper level, but it now failed him completely.

Fisher stopped three feet away, strangely calm. He looked at Alice, who

wasn’t paying either of them any mind. Her gaze was still on the ceiling. But Fisher had to know that she’d spoken. The implications settled into Austin’s gut like a steel shot-put.

His attention drifted down to the wheelchair in front of him, then back up to Fisher, whose eyes were back on him.

“Sit down, Scott,” he said. There was no anger in his voice. No malice, no emotion.

Austin hesitated. “My name is Austin Hartt.”

“You really want to play games with me?” Fisher asked.

No, he thought. *I don’t want to play games with you.*

But Austin’s mind was otherwise too busy spinning through complicated thoughts to come up with a reasonable answer.

“If you want to live out this day, sit.” Fisher held his gaze. “I won’t ask again.”

Austin did the only thing he knew he could do. He took a tentative step forward, turned around slowly, and lowered himself into the wheelchair.



CHRISTY FELT herself being pulled from a dream—one in which she was a student at the Special School for Advanced Placement, which ironically, was best known for its football team. And its cheerleaders.

As the law would have it, every student had to participate in a sport. The problem was, Christy wasn't exactly cut out for sports. And, worried about morale, the faculty had come to the conclusion that putting her on the cheerleading squad would dampen school spirit. She was too ugly, you see? The fans in the stands would spend the entire game wondering why such a prestigious school would put such an ugly mug directly in their line of sight. The fact that she often broke down in tears didn't help matters either. They couldn't very well have a weeping cheerleader.

But a solution had been identified. Christy could be of great use to the school by helping with the sports field.

"How?" she asked the board.

"Why, by watering the grass," an old board member with a crooked nose said.

"Water the field? How?"

"With your tears, of course. Every night while the rest of the world is sleeping, you will come down to the field and water the grass with your tears."

Christy opened her eyes and let the dream drain from her head. She was sitting on a floor. The bathroom floor.

As if dumped from heaven, the events of the prior night thudded into her mind. She'd seen herself in the mirror. In the bathroom, which had become a

room of mirrors that she could not escape.

Her pulse quickened. White walls. Tiled floor. One mirror above the sink. Only one.

She lifted her hand and saw with great relief that her fingers, although far too stubby, weren't as thick as those she'd seen last night. Scrambling to her feet, she lurched to the mirror and stared at her face.

At Christy's face. Still one pimple, angry red, but not perched on a fat face that would scare away fans in the stands. It had been a dream then?

She twisted to the door. If so, what was she doing in the bathroom?

Because it wasn't a dream, Christy. You were awake and delusional.

Maybe.

She took several calming breaths. Maybe, but maybe just a dream.

Then why is the door locked? From the outside.

Christy hurried to the door, reached for the knob, and twisted. Locked.

Oh no… Oh no…

Knuckles rapped on the wood and she jumped back, thinking that maybe it wasn't over.

Oh no… Oh no!

Her heart was thudding in her ears as the door swung open. She stared up into the face of the Kern Lawson, who was chewing on a toothpick, expressionless except for what might be slight curiosity.

He glanced at the room behind her, then fixed his eyes on her again.

"Good morning, Alice."

She blinked at him.

"You look like you could use some sleep," he said.

"I…" She wasn't sure what to say. "I'm fine."

"Better now?"

"Not really. No."

"No," he said. "Not really. But you will be. Let's go, shall we?"

"Go where?"

“You have an appointment with destiny, my dear. A little ther-I-py to help you see your way to the ugly truth.”

He walked into the room and Christy followed, not sure what to make of the man. Somehow, he didn’t seem as strange to her. More like the man she’d first met than the one who’d spoken to her last night.

Lawson walked to the door, waved his hand over a pad on the wall, and pulled the door open, facing her.

“Tell me, Alice. Did you see anything last night?”

She stopped in the middle of the room, at a loss. *Play along*, Austin had insisted. She had to get out, but right now she was helpless.

No games, just play along.

“I had a dream,” she said.

“I see. And what did you see in this dream?”

“That I was ugly.”

A smile slowly formed on his face. He withdrew his toothpick and flicked it across the room.

“Good. Progress, and so soon.”

She looked at the toothpick lying in the middle of her bedroom floor. She was making progress; let him think that. The sooner she convinced him she didn’t belong here, the better.

“The problem is, my dear ugly duckling,” he said, grin now gone, “you still aren’t making the proper distinctions between what is illusion and what isn’t.”

“Of course I am. I looked, didn’t I? I saw the real ugliness that I secretly imagine in myself. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Ah.” Lawson wagged his finger. “But you still don’t understand, sweetheart. You weren’t having a hallucination in the bathroom last night. You’re actually having one now. As we speak.”

For a brief moment, her heart stalled.

She wanted to play along, but doing so felt obscene.

“Of course I’m not. You’re saying this room isn’t real? That you aren’t

real? That's not possible."

"I'm not saying this room and I aren't real, Alice. I'm saying the you that you see right now isn't the real you. You've suffered some kind of trauma that makes your mind see yourself differently than you really are. I'm guessing that you saw the real you last night."

She couldn't help but to glance down at her hands. Christy's hands.

"Your mind sees only what it can handle. But not seeing the truth is keeping you locked up in delusion." He paused. "When you walk into the bathroom, what do you see?" he asked.

"What do you mean? A plain bathroom."

"And the walls?"

What was he getting at?

"Just walls."

"Color?"

"White."

"You see? At this moment, you see this room, you see me, as we really are. Plain as day. But you see yourself as Christy, a far more palatable rendition of the true you. And when you're in your delusional state, you don't see that the bathroom is actually walled in mirrored glass, all the way around, every square inch." The administrator grinned, pleased with himself. "It's one of the things we do here—a little physical change can often trigger a change in thinking."

"That was only a delusion!"

"So you admit that you are delusional. Good. But I can assure you, the bathroom doesn't have white walls. You just see it that way because your mind can't bear to see you for who you are. It can tolerate one little mirror, maybe, but not a room full of them. It's too much. Last night you were able to emerge from your delusion long enough to see yourself for who you really are. When you woke, the real you had retreated and the false you had reasserted itself. Capisce?"

The tremors took hold of her bones, deep down where no one could see

them yet.

“That’s impossible.”

“Not at all. Entirely common in my trade.” His eyes shifted in the bathroom’s direction. “Now that you’ve heard the truth, you might even be able to take a peek and see for yourself. Maybe it’s too early.”

His eyes alighted on her.

“Would you like to try?”

His suggestion, that she really was the girl she’d seen last night, was screaming though her mind, stopping up her lungs, tilting the world.

Something’s really wrong with you, Christy. Something is very, very wrong with you.

“It’s all right, Alice. Let’s take this step by step.” He extended his hand, palm down. “Come with me. Let’s get you to your appointment with Nancy.“

She pushed back her fear. He was messing with her. He had to be. She couldn’t possibly be the girl she’d seen last night and still have all the memories she had of herself as Christy. The orphanage, Austin, high school…

“Alice?”

She walked forward and took his hand.

“That’a girl.”

Lawson led her from the room, turned to their right, and walked down the empty hallway. His hand was large and warm, and she felt comforted by his gentle grip.

“You remember Nancy, don’t you? The kind lady who interviewed you yesterday?”

“Yes.” She kept wondering if the bathroom would have mirrored walls if she took a peek now, as he’d suggested. But that was absurd.

He stopped at the fourth door on their right, released her hand, and twisted the knob.

“You’re doing well, Alice. Just a little deeper now.”

He opened the door and ushered Christy into a cozy room with a couch and

an armchair. Tan walls with bookcases. An aquarium on a credenza, paintings… The first inviting room she'd seen since arriving.

Nancy Wilkins stood from her chair behind a wooden desk looking as pretty as she had yesterday. Dressed in a blue blouse with a black skirt.

She smiled warmly and removed a pair of glasses from her face. "Hello, Alice. Good to see you again."

"Hi."

"Have a seat." She motioned to the sofa.

The door closed behind her. When she sat, she saw that Lawson had left them alone. His departure was more comforting than his hand. With Nancy, at least, Christy felt heard.

The psychiatrist settled into the armchair and spent a few minutes asking her about her experience so far, not once addressing Christy's concern that she didn't belong here. Naturally she didn't. Many patients felt the same way. It was par for the course in their world.

Play along. Just play along.

With Lawson's suggestion still gnawing at her mind, she took every opportunity to glance at her arms and legs, reassuring herself that he was wrong.

When Nancy asked about the night, she decided that talking about it wouldn't hurt her. She put it out there in summary, avoiding the details, focusing only on Lawson's conclusion that she was, at this very moment, delusional.

"But I know he's wrong," she said. "I mean, really… Do I look fat to you? This is me, right?"

Nancy smiled kindly. "Of course you're not fat, Alice. These are only perceptions and labels. Dr. Lawson is only trying to help you see the truth."

"But you see me. How can I be that girl I saw last night?"

The psychiatrist folded one leg over the other, elbows on the armrests, lightly tapping her fingertips together.

"I don't know who you saw last night or who you see now," she said. "But you're going to learn that the illusion is as powerful in its effect as the truth.

When you have a delusion, it will feel just as real as any other perception of reality. Remember that."

Christy considered each word as she spoke them aloud.

"The illusion is as powerful in its…"

"Effect," Nancy filled in.

"As…"

"As the truth."

"As the truth," Christy repeated. "The illusion is as powerful in its effect as the truth."

"Good."

"Then how do you know which is the illusion?" she asked.

"Very few people do."

That was odd. Most people were confused? But before she could think about the matter more, Nancy redirected the session.

"I'd like to help you see into your repressed memories, Alice. Often, understanding what happened to us and why it happened helps us deal with hidden emotional blocks that imprison us."

Her pulse surged. "What memories?"

Nancy hesitated, then smiled warmly.

"Memories of your childhood."

"My childhood?" She had no memories. How much did Nancy really know? "I… How?"

"Using a tool we call hypnotic therapy, which is a fancy way of saying we calm the mind enough to allow memories to surface. You'll be entirely aware the whole time—it's not like what you see on television. You can stop it any point you like. I will only help you relax and see into yourself."

The appeal of knowing more about her childhood blossomed in her mind.

"Would you like to try?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I would."

—

THE EASE with which Nancy Wilkins methodically and gently led Christy away from her current concerns and into a place of deep peace felt at once strangely beautiful and surprising.

No swinging pendulum, no bright lights, no crystal balls.

She'd only asked Christy to enter a room with gentle music playing, then led her down a flight of steps that led to a door which opened to a beautiful garden, where they spent some time around a pool.

Then down another concrete staircase, even deeper under the ground into a magical place with doors. It was through those doors that Nancy asked her to see her childhood.

"Open the door, Alice. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

She put her hand on the round metal knob and turned it. The door slowly swung open on creaking hinges.

"Tell me what you see."

"I… I can't see anything."

"Is it dark?"

"Yes."

"Can you step inside for me?"

She hesitated. "It's dark."

"It's okay, Alice. Nothing will hurt you. Just put one foot in front of the other and step inside. I'm right here behind you."

Christy took a tentative step over the threshold. Then another, and another before stopping three feet in.

"I can't see anything."

"Can you see your feet?"

She looked. "Yes."

"What does the floor look like?"

"It's hard. Concrete or maybe cut stone."

Nancy paused for a moment, then spoke again, tone light and low.

“Good. Now look around and tell me if you can see anything?”

Slowly her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Walls took shape.

“I’m in a basement with concrete walls. It’s dark.” She could feel her heart rate begin to rise, a steady, dull thumping sound faintly echoing off the walls.

“Take a deep breath, Alice. It’s all going to be okay. I’m right here. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s important that you stay calm, because you know that I’m right here, and we can leave any time we want to. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now I want you to walk forward and tell me if you can see anything else that might help you understand where you are.”

Christy slowly walked forward.

“It’s dark ahead. I can’t see anything ahead of me, only on the sides. The sides are stone or concrete. They’re wet.”

“Is it warm or cold?”

“Cold.”

“Good. That’s good. You’re doing well, sweetheart. Just keep walking forward.”

She did, one tentative foot in front of the other. She knew that she was under hypnosis, only looking into the deepest parts of her mind, but it felt so real. Almost as if she were there.

“I can’t see anything ahead of me…”

“Look back at the door that you came through, Alice. Can you do that?”

She twisted and looked back. The door was there, gray. Metal she thought.

“Yes.”

“You see, it’s right there.”

Christy swung back around and peered into the darkness.

“Yes.”

“Keep walking forward.”

She'd taken two more steps when a faint outline emerged from the darkness. She stopped.

"I see something."

"Tell me what you see."

"I…" She took another step. "It's… it's bars."

"You see bars on the wall?"

"No. The bars are the wall. I… I think I'm in a prison cell."

"Are you sure it's a prison?"

The bars come into clearer focus. Beyond them was a dark hallway made from the same kind of concrete as the walls in the room she was in.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I'm in a prison somewhere."

"I want you to ask yourself where you are, because you do know. Just ask yourself where you are."

Christy thought about it and immediately had an answer. She felt her hands begin to tremble.

"I'm underground, in a room. I can't leave this place. I'm… I'm stuck here."

"Take a deep breath, Alice. Try to stay calm. Remember, the door is right behind you. We can leave anytime we want to. Okay?"

She looked back again and took comfort in the door, gray against the darker walls.

"Now tell me again, where are you right now?"

"I'm in a big house. In the basement. I can't leave."

"Why can't you leave? Is someone making you stay?"

"Those are the rules. I can't leave."

"What will happen if you do leave?"

"I… I don't know. Something horrible. I don't want to think about it."

"It frightens you?"

"Yes."

"But you don't need to be frightened now, Alice. We're just remembering.

It’s very safe.”

Christy tried to calm herself and managed to do so, thinking about Nancy sitting close by.

“Okay.”

“Good. Now I want you to walk up to the bars and touch them.”

“I can’t.”

“I think you can. They aren’t real. It’s important that you touch them so that you know they can’t hurt you.”

They were just bars. Just iron bars running from the ceiling to the floor.

Christy edged forward, lifted her hand, and placed her fingers on the cold steel. Nothing happened.

“I’m touching the bar.”

“Good. See, it’s going to be all right. Can you see anything else?”

She looked down a long, dark hall that reached into darkness in both directions.

“No. It’s just a dark hall. Like a tunnel.”

“You’re in the basement of a big house that has passageways and a room with bars. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me who owns the house?”

She thought. And she knew.

“A man.”

“Do you know his name?”

Nothing came to her but the dark shadow of what she knew was a man.

“No. I’m sorry… I can’t remember.”

“That’s okay, Alice. Now, I want you to listen very carefully and tell me if you can hear him. Can you do that for me?”

Almost immediately she heard a whisper.

“I hear something!”

“What do you hear?”

The voice became clear, thin and innocent, a girl singing just above a whisper.

“Oh, be careful little eyes what you see.” A sweet giggle sent a chill through Christy’s bones. “Be careful little eyes what you see. For the Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful little eyes what you see.” The little girl’s voice morphed into to a low, guttural, accusing tone on the heels of the song. “Ugly girl. Still too ugly to be seen. Just as ugly as the day you got on your knees and begged for mercy.”

The fear that welled up in Christy’s chest plunged her into a raw panic. She spun, screaming, running for the door, chased by a low chuckle.

Beyond her scream, she could here Nancy’s voice, just barely: “It’s okay, Alice. It’s okay, just take a deep breath. You can come out. It’s okay.”

Christy reached the door and grabbed the knob knowing that it would be locked. She twisted it anyway, awash in dread.

The knob refused to budge.

Fear had closed off her throat and she had to push hard to get words out.

“I’m trapped! I’m trapped!”

“Open the door, Alice. Just open the door.”

“I can’t!” It refused to move. She had the horrible realization that she would be caught in this hellhole forever, and it made her want to rip the skin from her face so that she wouldn’t be so ugly.

“I can’t!”

Something slapped her face. “Wake up, Alice.” Again. “The door’s open, wake up.”

She suddenly became aware that she was back in the office, bent over her knees, sobbing and retching. Nancy was gently stroking her back, comforting her.

“Shh, shh, shh. It’s okay, sweetheart. You’re safe. You’re here with me. It’s okay.”

Christy caught her breath and forced herself to calm down. A steely resolve

slowly began to replace the terrible emotions that had thrown her into hysteria.

"It's okay, sweetheart. Let it out. Everything is going to be okay."

Anger more than resolve. Bitterness.

"That's better. You see? It's all okay."

But Christy wasn't hearing anything that comforted her, because she now knew some things about herself.

She knew that the room she'd seen was real; she'd been there in the dark days, before she'd turned thirteen. She'd been a victim with a tragic past.

She knew that she really was ugly, inside and out.

And she knew just how deeply she despised herself.

Beyond that, she didn't know too much.



ON HIS fifteenth birthday, July 10, Austin traded his childhood for whatever freedom his modest trust fund stipend could buy. He was free, and he had an official court document that said as much. No longer a ward of any state, person, or organization.

Paul Matheson, the orphanage headmaster where Austin lived in New Jersey, had insisted on going to the courthouse with him, but after a long discussion, Austin convinced him that he should go alone. Figure it out.

He was an adult now, after all.

The bus trip across town was short. He'd navigated the courthouse halls without getting lost and, dressed in dungarees and a button-down shirt, stood before a judge who was quite taken with the articulate teenager.

All told, the proceeding took precisely fifteen minutes. Fitting.

On the way out, a portly woman in a loud flower-print dress snapped a photo of him that she promised to e-mail as soon as she got home. Just her way of paying it forward, she'd said. "It's a sad shame that no one had the decency to be here on your special occasion."

She told him with great enthusiasm how she and her rail-thin husband were there to finalize the adoption of the blue-eyed five-year-old who clung to the man. Sweet Bethany, their angel from God. The kind of child every family wanted to adopt.

The e-mail never came, of course. He didn't expect it to.

Austin thanked her for the photo and wished her well, suddenly overwhelmed. What family did he have? None. Never had, never would. Sweet

Bethany didn’t know how good she had it.

He’d sat on the courthouse steps for a long time, fingering the embossed seal on his document, staring at the world as it flitted by—people coming and going, rushing about like mice in a field. How many of them sensed the meaninglessness of their lives—here today, gone tomorrow, forgotten the day after that? The boredom of such an existence might kill him.

And yet, they all belonged. To someone, somewhere.

In that moment, in every way that counted, Austin had felt strangely lost. Lost to his past. Lost to the world. Lost in thought. He was free, but he wasn’t sure what that really meant.

For a brief moment he considered turning east and just walking until he hit the ocean. Then taking a boat to the far side of the world and walking some more, all the way around in search of nothing, or something. Sooner or later, though, he knew that if he walked long enough he’d end up exactly here again, in the same place he started.

Here.

Here, where he was no longer a child but not yet old enough to be considered an adult. Living in two worlds but belonging in neither.

That thought boiled his emotions until hot tears welled up in his eyes. He’d wiped them with his sleeve before anyone could see and left the courthouse steps chiding himself for breaking down so easily.

Allowing emotions to control him was ridiculous. Irrational. How many times had he explained this to Christy during one of her many emotional tailspins? They were dangerous. Master your thoughts, he’d told her, time and again, and the emotions will follow.

That was then.

Here he was now, drowning in emotion, unable to hold it at bay. Smothered by his own weakness and totally lost to the world, he was without friends or family to even know he was in terrible trouble.

Trouble so deep that he was unsure he could survive it.

Fisher had secured him to the wheelchair with straps and wheeled him down a vacant hall with checkerboard floors to the room adjacent to the morgue, which he'd accessed by pressing his right wrist against a security pad. He'd checked Austin's restraints and left him without explanation.

Austin found himself in a stark white operating room. Why would a psychiatric ward have a surgical space? Lawson had said they employed progressive therapy, but by invasive means?

Medical equipment on mobile stands lined the far wall. Heart monitors and ventilators. Something like a dentist's chair sat in the corner behind a state-of-the-art operating table, which was surrounded by clusters of light stands.

A door on the room's far side suddenly swung open and Fisher entered, pushing another wheelchair.

At first the operating table blocked Austin's view. He couldn't see who was in the wheelchair, only that it wasn't empty. But when Fisher rounded the operating table in three long strides, the wheelchair came to a halt directly in front of him, six feet away. The solitary figure sat motionless, hands cupped almost prayerfully in his lap.

Jacob.

The boy's pale face was neither surprised nor perturbed. His slight frame and slumped shoulders made him look weak. Jacob was oblivious to the world around him.

Fisher engaged the wheel brake and walked toward a cabinet across the room.

Austin tried to steady his trembling hands, but they weren't obeying so well. The air conditioner hissed too loudly in the cavernous room.

Fisher returned, a pair of blue surgical gloves dangling from his hand. He stopped and gazed down at Austin.

"You should know that no patient has ever escaped from the facility. Like you, several have tried, of course."

Austin didn't reply.

“I can assure you, you won’t succeed. Still, I appreciate your initiative. It’s”—he paused—“enlightening.”

Fisher considered him for a moment, stone cold, void of expression. “Curious, isn’t it? At first glance, you appear complicated. Not all people do, so please take that as a compliment. You relish the fact that people see you as complex. It’s your mask. It’s what makes you different from those around you, but the truth is you’re really quite simple.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Oh? I think I can read you like a book, Scott. It’s not that hard, really. Despite what most people believe, hiding behind our own skin is impossible. Every day, we betray ourselves in a thousand ways without realizing it. The true self always claws its way to the ugly surface.”

He shoved his chin at Austin and glanced at his hands.

“Take your mannerisms, for instance. Even a moderately observant person could deduce that yours is an obsessive mind, always thinking, thinking, thinking. That nervous tick you have with your hands is a manifestation of such angst.”

Austin realized he had been mindlessly touching his fingertips. He stopped abruptly and balled his hand into a fist.

Fisher continued. “If you have an obsessive mind, you also probably suffer from a bit of insomnia, the bane of a brain that won’t shut off. I suspect yours is quite severe. I can only imagine how many nights you’ve suffered in an endless loop of data, questions, and reasoning as you stare at your ceiling in the dark, lost in thought.” He paused. “How am I doing so far?”

Austin shifted his weight in the seat.

“You’re an avid reader, I presume,” Fisher said, pacing now, eyes on the walls as if only half interested. “Most obsessive thinkers are. You likely devour a wide variety of subjects, doggedly in search of pieces to the puzzle in your mind that never quite seems to come together. That driven nature is what makes you

special, but it's also what drives you from others. And that's lonely for you, isn't it? Have many friends?"

"Enough."

"And yet you and I both know you'd choose a book over a friend any day."

Austin sat quietly. Heat spread across his neck.

"So you could say that, yes, I do know you. I would guess that you have a deeply rooted addiction to your mind. You find your identity in your intellect. Knowledge is your drug and without it you're afraid you'll die. At the very least, your life would feel meaningless."

"An arrogant diagnosis informed by only a few observations," Austin said.

"Is it?"

"Everyone thinks. It's what humans do. Our ability to think separates us from the animals. Everyone pursues knowledge."

"A romantic notion, but let's be honest, shall we? You ride high enough on your horse to think that most people traipse mindlessly through life without asking a single meaningful question. Tell me I'm wrong."

A beat.

"Unlike most people," Fisher said, "questions are what make you tick. *Knowing* is what gives you a reason to roll out of bed in the morning, because you're not just in search of knowledge. Facts are never enough. You're after something else, something more fundamental. You're after the truth."

Fisher stopped his pacing and regarded Austin directly. "But the problem with believing you can think your way to the truth is that you can't know the unknowable."

"All things are knowable."

"Is that so?"

"With enough time, yes."

"Then tell me, where did you come from? In the very beginning."

The question caught in Austin's mind.

"It's a simple question," Fisher said. "Surely you know the answer."

The question turned over in his mind. “No one knows.”

“Of course not. Just as you can’t know with certainty the other questions that drive you to the brink of madness. Is life eternal and if so, where were you before you were born? Does God exist? Do you even matter in this great big universe of ours?”

“Esoteric questions,” Austin said, wondering why Fisher was taking the time to give him a philosophy lesson.

“But those are the ones that will eventually drive you crazy. Our minds ask questions we can’t know the answers to with certainty. Our answers depend on when and where we were born, which myths and legends we were taught to believe, our perceptions that mold our very small realities. A few hundred years ago, you would’ve believed the world was flat and sickness could be cured by leeching the blood from your body. And you would’ve been right as far as you knew. Which of your beliefs today will turn out to be obviously false tomorrow?”

The blue surgical gloves in Fisher’s hand were starting to concern Austin.

“You’re obsessed with figuring out the truth, but you can’t. It’s unknowable, a mystery sunken so deep in the universal ocean that the only way to reach it is to die. You’re going to spend the rest of your life chasing illusions of certainty, but you will never find peace. You see, it’s not what you know that matters, it’s how you *are*. And you, Scott, are ill.”

A thick silence passed between them.

“You say I’m ill,” Austin said, “but where’s your data? In the file you fabricated, of course.”

“Fabricated? Tell me, how are your headaches?”

“What?”

Fisher lifted his index finger to his left brow. “They radiate from here, don’t they? Is it a throbbing pain or more like a jagged ice pick?”

Austin could hear his own pulse in his temple. How could Fisher know about his headaches? From his file? Scott’s file.

No. He could have found Austin's medication in his jeans pocket. It wasn't too much of a stretch.

"Frontal lobe lesions are quite common in patients who suffer from delusional maladies, particularly those of a grandiose or schizophrenic nature. Severe headaches are quite common among patients like you."

"You keep saying I'm delusional."

"Like you, I follow the data wherever it leads. But rest assured, I'm here to help you. I want to help you find peace."

Fisher crossed to Jacob. Stepped next to the boy and placed a hand on his shoulder. "What do you think Jacob knows? Hmm?"

"He doesn't know what's going on around him," Austin said. "He's in his own little world."

"And yet he is quite happy." He turned to Jacob. "Tell us, Jacob. Are you afraid?"

The boy blinked. Slowly shook his head.

"No, of course not. Is anything upsetting you at all right now, Jacob?"

A slow response again, but a definite shake of his head. This time Austin was sure that he smiled, although his lips didn't move per se.

"You see."

"He's practically a vegetable," Austin said.

"Or so you say. And even if that were the case, is that so bad? Look at him. Jacob enjoys an enviable state of being, peace that you can only dream of. You may have read about it in your books, but Jacob… Jacob experiences it."

"He's unaware of any danger, of course he isn't worried!"

"He's very aware, just not of any danger. If he is aware of danger, he doesn't care, because he sees no threat to his life or his well-being. Survival isn't a concern to him. He's practically a Zen master, and yet you see him as a vegetable."

The comparison gave Austin some pause, but his mind was still on those blue gloves, which Fisher periodically slapped against his palm.

“Haven’t you ever watched a bird on a sunny afternoon and wondered what it would be like to live completely free, to have no concern for anything? Or a cat who must accept life only as it is in the moment—no worries, no problems to be solved, nowhere to get to. What must that feel like? Welcome to Jacob’s world. He’s at complete peace.”

“You can’t know that. You’re not in his mind.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Emotions are simply chemical responses to thought patterns, the physical manifestation of which can be accurately measured in the body with the proper instruments. I’ve helped Jacob for quite a while, and I can tell you with absolute certainty that he’s at perfect peace. You, on the other hand, are looking at the gloves in my hand, and, filled with knowledge of what they might mean, are filled with anxiety.”

The simple truth of it hit Austin. Needled him.

“So tell me, who is better off? You… or Jacob?”

Austin looked across at the boy. His serene eyes were void of any concern, any confusion, any anxiety. There was a gentle air of peace about him, but what Austin really saw behind those eyes was a detached human with a broken mind.

“He’s not all there,” Austin said.

“Not fully human, is that it?” Fisher said.

“Not really, no.”

“You think a body part, like a leg, makes you more human than someone who doesn’t have it? If I were to remove your leg, you would be less than you are now?”

The gloves loomed large in Austin’s mind. With them, a saw.

“No,” he said.

“No. Are you your hands? Your face? Your brain? Or are you something else?”

“I’m my mind.”

Fisher regarded him for a while, staring directly into his eyes.

“So then Jacob, with less of a mind, is somehow less human? I don’t think

he would appreciate your opinion, frankly."

"He can't even process my opinion."

"Maybe not. Which perhaps gives him an advantage over you. He's at peace."

Fisher began to pull on the surgical gloves.

"Let me ask you a very important question, Scott." Fisher's eyes drilled him. "Given the choice, would you rather be in perfect peace, or would you rather be right?"

Austin's mind spun. He did want peace. In fact, being right gave him peace.

Or did it? Actually, in all honesty, the need to know answers with absolute certainty kept him in a constant state of low anxiety.

"There are two ways we can do this," Fisher said, pulling on the second glove. "I can sedate you and treat you while you're unconscious, but I think it would be far more effective if you face your fears now. My data sets indicate that a willing entry into therapy has a markedly positive influence on patient outcomes." He released the tight elastic latex glove and let it snap loudly on his arm.

"Your choice."

Austin's heart rate was at a full gallop, and he seemed powerless to calm himself. He realized that his knees were bouncing nervously, but he no longer cared about appearances. He only wanted out of this chair, out of this madness. The idea of being sedated terrified him. Images of catatonic patients filled his mind. No mind, no self.

His anxiety raged unchecked. Part of Fisher's argument made some absurd kind of sense, which only pushed Austin deeper into fear. The man wanted him out of the way. Fisher wasn't going to kill his body, he was going to kill his mind, which was worse.

"Nothing? So be it," Fisher said. He removed a vial and syringe from his lab coat pocket. Uncapped the syringe and carefully drew a clear liquid into it. Tapped the side to remove the air bubbles.

“Please…”

Fisher looked at him. “Please? Please what?”

“Please don’t do this.”

“No sedation?”

His mind didn’t seem to be processing his choices properly. He knew that he was already giving himself over to fear, but he couldn’t stop it.

“No,” he said.

The man nodded lightly. “An excellent choice.” The edge of his mouth nudged into a faint smile as he capped the syringe.

“Let’s help you find perfect peace, shall we?”

Fisher walked behind his wheelchair and rolled him toward the corner, where a dental chair waited. No, not a dental chair. This one had circular head restraint with bolts above it.

Austin saw the contraption and knew immediately what Fisher intended. He was going to secure his head in that device and surgically fix his brain. Permanently.

Terror unlike Austin had ever felt swept down his body in sudden, unrelenting waves. His arms were fastened to the chair, but that didn’t stop the tremor in his hands.

“You’re going to lobotomize me?” His voice was high and it cracked.

“Far too rudimentary,” Fisher said, wheeling him. “We’ll use an advanced procedure—a single small-gauge needle through your right nostril up into the brain. The chemicals I inject will kill the appropriate matter. Clean.”

Austin’s mind stuttered as his grip on his own awareness began to dissolve. The tremor spread up his arms and consumed his entire body. Swallowed him whole.

A high-pitched ringing screamed in his ears as Fisher’s voice faded to a muffled drone. His chest heaved uncontrollably, sucked at the thick air in long draws. He was going to die.

In the sliver of the space between two breaths, the world around him slowed

as his mind collapsed. Austin saw himself as though he stood outside himself. The room. Fisher. Jacob. The pulsing of his heart hung in the air like the sound of a distant drum that came from nowhere and everywhere at once.

He blinked.

Unbidden, a swell of rage rose from somewhere deep inside and shook him. He screamed, ragged and full-throated. Every fiber in his body strained, stretched taut to the breaking point.

Driven by a primal instinct to survive, Austin violently threw his head back, then pitched his weight up and backward with only one thought in mind.

No.

No, he would not die.

No, he *could* not die.

There was no calculation in his movement, only raw impulse, but that basic drive to live followed a logic of its own, previously unknown to Austin.

The momentum carried Austin up off the seat and over. The ceiling came into view, then Fisher's body.

The movement was so sudden, so forceful, so unexpected that it caught Fisher flatfooted. Before he could move, Austin's knee slammed into his face, crushing his nose with a loud crack.

With a grunt, Fisher dropped to the ground.

Austin's trajectory carried him over, then stalled. He crashed to the tile floor, facedown, arms still strapped to the wheelchair, which was now above him.

He gasped in pain. He was on his knees with the wheelchair on his back and Fisher was behind him, momentarily stunned, but the large man would quickly recover and crush him.

Then kill him.

Austin jerked one leg under his torso and shoved up. He staggered to his feet. But he could hear Fisher's heavy breathing, wheezing, another grunt. The man was getting up!

Blinded by rage, Austin whirled, taking the wheelchair with him. He roared, as if by the sound of his voice alone, great strength would flood his body.

He was halfway through his turn when he saw Fisher, just pushing up from the floor, blood streaming from his broken nose. The man's hand was at his face, feeling the flow of blood.

Only then did it occur to Austin that he actually had a weapon in his hands. At his back.

The wheelchair.

It was metal. It was heavy. It was already swinging around behind him, strapped to his arms.

Austin threw all of his weight into his turn and spun through and around.

The wheelchair connected with a jarring thud, jerking Austin to an abrupt halt. He couldn't see what impact the contact had made behind him, and he had no desire to twist and look. He only wanted to get away.

But when he tried to run, he found that the wheelchair was snagged.

He twisted viciously, pulled it free, and staggered forward. Only when he'd taken three full strides did he glance over his shoulder and see the damage he'd caused.

Fisher was on his knees, staring at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. Blood ran from a gaping hole near his right temple. He didn't seem capable of moving.

Austin caught his breath and spun back to face the man, stunned. For a moment they remained fixed, staring at each other. Something about the man's eyes sent a chill down Austin's spine. Why wasn't he pursuing?

Fisher's body tilted forward and then fell face-first onto the hard floor with a sickening thump. Blood seeped from the wound in his temple and began to pool around his head.

Unconscious?

Austin twisted his head around and looked at the wheelchair strapped to his arms. At the right wheel, the protruding chrome brake-lever was slick with blood.

His heart plowed through three heavy beats.

And then he knew. He knew as much as he'd ever known anything in all of his life.

Heaving with exertion and panic, Austin slowly faced the director of admission's prone, unmoving form on the floor.

He had killed Fisher.

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