

TED DEKKER

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



EYES WIDE OPEN

BOOKS 1-4

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EYES WIDE OPEN

The Full Story (Books 1-4)

TED DEKKER

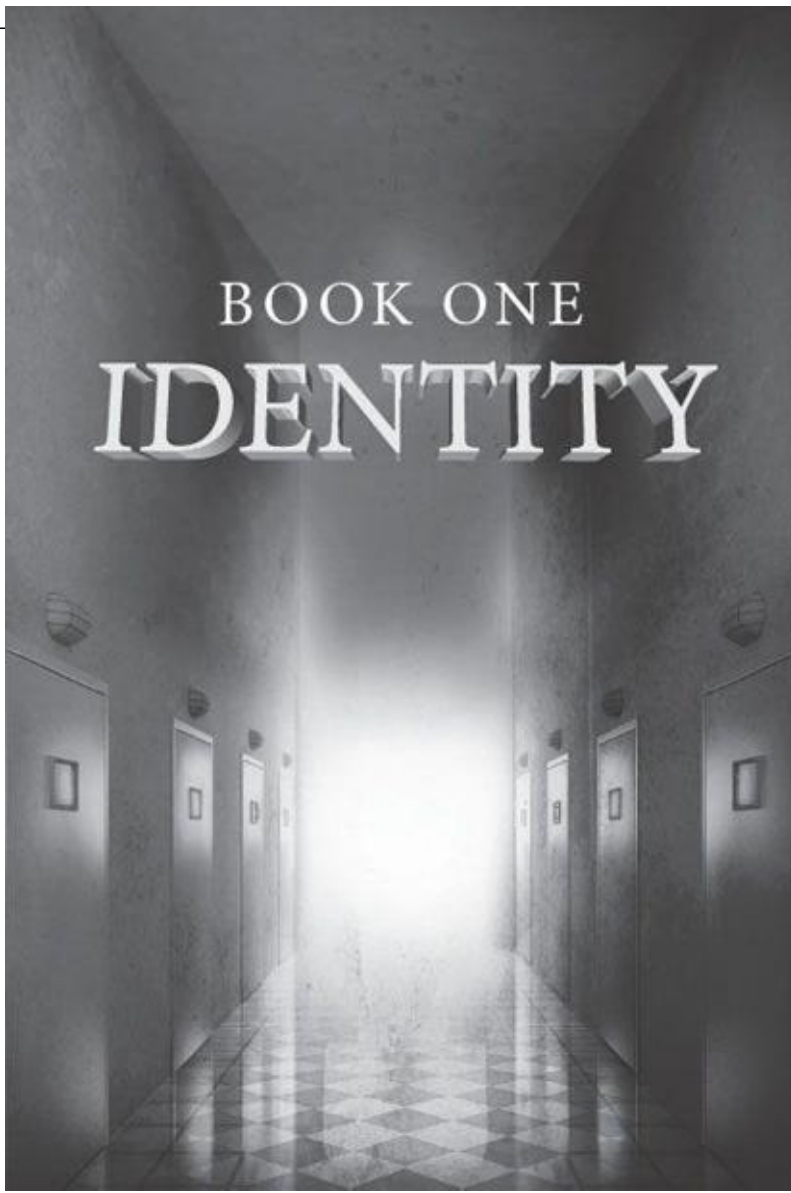
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BOOK ONE
IDENTITY





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

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

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

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

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

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

This *isn't* my grave.

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

Like the fact that it's all a mistake.

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

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

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

How did this happen to me?

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

Christy Snow's locket held no such image because she had neither a boyfriend nor a perfect family. No family at all, in fact. No mother, no father of her knowing. She was an orphan, age seventeen, disturbingly in the dark about her entire existence prior to age thirteen, when she entered the orphanage.

The picture in her locket was the same black-and-white placeholder that had come with the necklace when she bought it for \$19.99 at the Target on Steel Street two years earlier—a constant reminder worn near her heart, a promise that she would one day at least know who her real mother and

father were. Maybe even recover her childhood. How could she love herself if she didn't even know who she was?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A wave of emptiness washed through her chest as she passed the man on the bench. He wasn't

dead yet, but he'd given up on life, and isn't that what inevitably awaited everyone?

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

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

Nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How lame was that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hello?"

Only silence answered her.

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

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

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

been used to pull the panel down like an attic access.

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

Slowly the nature of her predicament settled into her mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She had to move.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She hesitated.

You have to do this.

She took one last deep breath and scooted forward slowly.

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

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

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

"Hey!"

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

"Anyone there? Hey!"

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

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

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

She didn't mean to place the sole of her right foot against the crate that supported the plank behind her.

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

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

She froze. What had just happened?

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

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

She was sealed inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ring... Come on, please... Just ring.

It rang.

Pick up, pick up, pick up...

“You’ve reached me. Do what you do.” Click.

Voice mail. *Oh please...*

“Austin...” Her voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. “I’m trapped in your...”

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

And then dead.

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

No one knew where she was.

No one could hear her.

She was in her grave.

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

She was going to die.



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

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

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

Just what he needed.

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

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

But his mind set him apart.

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

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

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

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

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

He'd chosen the two-bedroom loft for its proximity to Harvard, but its open floor plan was the clincher. It was a practical consideration, because he needed every inch of the twelve hundred square feet.

The living room was a yawning space with painted concrete floors and stark white walls, almost monastic in its plainness. Two thick beams rose from the floor and seemed to prop up the entire

building. Near the front door, an L-shaped granite countertop hemmed in the small kitchen with stainless-steel appliances that he rarely used, except for the refrigerator, which was stocked mostly with flats of coconut water and Red Bull.

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

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

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

Where are those pills?

Kitchen.

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

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

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

Why hasn't he called yet?

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

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

With a last look behind him, he pulled the door closed and joined the land of the living with his mantra pushing him forward.

I think, therefore I am.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He'd just slumped into the seat when a loud marimba ringtone cut through the quiet. His phone

He'd forgotten to silence it. The doctor?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He leaned on his podium and waited.

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

"Which is?"

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

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

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

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

"Then what does?" the professor asked.

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

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

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

Austin scooted forward in his seat.

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

Austin felt his palms go clammy. He swallowed.

"What makes us human?"

“Yes. Speak up, please.”

Austin cleared his throat. Given the choice between being with books or people, he'd always choose books. You could always tell what a book thought without needing to have a confrontation. People, on the other hand, defensively clung to their need to be right no matter how flawed their thinking.

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

“Our awareness makes us human then?”

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

“And how can we trust our thoughts?”

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

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

Austin nodded as he stood.

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

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

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

“Yes sir. I know. Migraines.”

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

“Heard about me, sir?”

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

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

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

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

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

“A curious one, I guess.”

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

“Help me how?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes sir.”

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

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

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

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

“Austin... I’m trapped in your...”

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

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

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

Something was wrong.

Trapped in your... His what?

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

Dr. Bishop.

A prick of dread needled the back of his mind.

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

“Austin Hartt?”

“Yes.”

“This is Melinda at Dr. Bishop’s office. I’m calling because your MRI test results came back.”
beat. “The doctor would like to meet with you as soon as possible to review them.”

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

“Is there a problem?”

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

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

“Mr. Hartt?”

“I’m sorry, I’m here. Of course I can meet with him today. When?”

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

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

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

“I’ll be there.”



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Something popped on the seventh or eighth strike. At first she thought it was one of her bones

But it wasn't.

~~The wood?~~

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

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

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

She blinked. She'd broken through!

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

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

Free.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't you worry, honey," the patient said, smiling toothless, "just stay away from the Frodo Loops. They're poison. Rot your teeth right out of your head."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Can I help you?"

Christy jerked her head around and pulled up sharply, three feet from a nurse who stood in h

path, clipboard in hand. The door beside the woman whispered shut.

“No, I’m good.” She started forward.

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

“I was just leaving.”

“Leaving?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have something?”

“I think we can find something.”

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

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

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

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

“Status of Britney Hunt?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Christy,” she said. “Snow.”

“Driver’s license?”

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

~~"Not on me."~~

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

Clack, clack, clack.

"No Christy Snow."

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

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

Her cell phone. It had her name on it.

"My cell phone?"

"Might help."

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

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

"No?"

"Well... I, no. I must have lost it when I..." She couldn't quite bring herself to betray Austin's secret.

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

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

"Go on in."

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

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

"I'll be right with you."

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

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

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

"Apparently she's not Britney," the nurse said. "We're checking now."

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

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

"Christy Snow," she said.

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

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

“Christy Snow. You’re new here?”

“No, I’m not here at all!”

“You’re not?”

“I mean I’m not supposed to be here.”

“And where are you supposed to be?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She swallowed, nodding. So here it went.

“I lost my locket last night.”

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

“In the storage room. Off the alley.”

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

“Go on.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Not really, no. How?”

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

She thought about it and saw his point.

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

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

long. Fair enough?"

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

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

"Sure. Can you describe it?"

"A silver heart."

"Photograph inside?"

"Yes."

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

"No. Nothing like that."

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

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

"It's just the picture the locket came with. I don't have any parents."

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

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

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

"I'm Christy Snow. I live at 456 Blanard Drive, and I need to get home to feed my cat."

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

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