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Erin Flanagan

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The Usual Mistakes

FLYOVER FICTION

Series editor: Ron Hansen

The Usual Mistakes

Erin Flanagan

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Erin Flanagan

University of Nebraska Press
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To Charlotte Hogg

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The Usual Mistakes

The hospital where I work is actually a hotel—a renovated Best Western, just south of Omaha. The doctors kept much of the original décor, making only minor structural changes: the exercise room was expanded to include a pharmacy, the dank bar renovated into a chapel, although I don't think anyone's ever been there to pray. Check-ins sit on the same red and beige floral sofas vacationers would rest on while waiting for their sheets to be changed, in town for an Omaha Royals game or a trip to the Henry Doorly Zoo. Cora, the receptionist, stands behind the large, oak desk greeting patients and ringing the bell when their rooms are ready. The chandelier in the main lobby still glitters and tinkles when a breeze blows in, as if announcing the possibility of a wonderful time.

I worked for four years as night manager of this Best Western. When the hotel closed, I forged my credentials, created a pre-med degree from Creighton University with a 3.96 grade point, and voilà, I'm a medical assistant. I'm no more licensed to assist in medical procedures than I am to fly a plane, but I've been here almost eight months, and no one seems to notice.

Many of the patients look as if they're here for vacations, wearing what can only be described as cruise-wear: shiny fuchsia jogging suits with gold braided trim, khaki pants and pale golf shirts, an occasional visor. It's a private hospital specializing in reconstructive surgeries and prosthetics. We do plastic surgery, although I'm not allowed to call it that. Our patients like that the rooms are still decorated as hotel

rooms. They say it makes them feel less like they're staying at a hospital and more at home, ignoring that, other than the car wrecks and burn victims, they don't need to be here at all. In truth, the linens, beds, and curtains were thrown in at such a ridiculously low rate when the hotel foreclosed, that the hospital would have been foolish to pass on them.

I work banker's hours, nine to five.

Cora rings me in the nurse's lounge, room 143 next to the Coke and ice machines, and tells me the two o'clock is here. "Good thing you blocked a lot of time," Cora says. "She's a real code red, if you know what I mean." Cora is seventeen and last weekend, drunk on Zima, had her belly button pierced; I'm thirty-one, a dead husband not a year in the ground, and barely able to make my mortgage payment. I rarely know what she means.

In the lobby, standing next to a faux-antique red divan, is a girl no larger than a ten-year-old boy, wearing clean blue jeans and a long-sleeved green T-shirt, reading the bulletin board. She has straight, clean brown hair and an ordinariness to her features that could be feminine or masculine, depending on your attentions—a strong, block nose and long, soft lashes. Poking out of the cuff of her right sleeve on the underside of her wrist is a dark line that looks as if it were drawn with a thick, black, permanent marker. It corners at a perfect ninety-degree angle into another black line and I realize, with a start, it's a swastika.

The girl looks up and tugs at the sleeve of her shirt. Of course, how odd it is to see someone dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and pants in ninety-plus heat, middle of summer, Omaha, Nebraska. I wonder what other tattoos are under there and, when the girl turns to look at the clock, I'm sure I see the nickel-sized head of a snake coming out of her hair, a modern day neo-Nazi Medusa. I look down at my clipboard. "Abbie Nelson?"

"That's me," she says and picks up the army-green duffel bag at her feet. "You the doctor or what?" Over Abbie's shoulder, Cora leans her elbows on the oak desk and folds her hair in her fingers, wiggling the blond strands like snakes.

I hold out my hand as I've been taught to do; the patients, Dr. Stein believes, feel more comfortable dealing with a friend, as if they're here for lunch rather than a new body part. "Assistant," I say. "I'm Eleanor." Abbie slings the tattered bag over her shoulder and it momentarily pulls her off balance. Whatever's in there, it weighs a lot.

In room 217, Abbie Nelson looks around as if we've possibly been transported to the wrong building. The examination rooms still look like singles with king-sized beds and desks, although we've moved in exam tables. "Is this a hotel?" she asks.

"A Best Western."

She sits on the too-soft bed and I sit at the desk with the attached lamp and ask her medical history—any allergies, what medications, diseases running in the family blood. I'm anxious to get to it, to see what kind of damage has been done, but I follow the questions on the form. "How many tattoos?" I ask.

"Twelve," Abbie says. "I've got nerve damage from the one on the top of my foot." I write this down.

"Where are they?"

Abbie gives me a list that spans her entire body, beginning at the bottom of her foot, trailing up the left calf, jumping to the right thigh, right buttock, her pelvis, the knobs of her spine, left shoulder, right tricep, both wrists, the backside of her neck, and the snake, which curls around her scalp and down behind her left ear to the jawbone. "It's a lot of ink," she says.

We finish the form and I ask her to undress as I hand her a paper robe. "Right here?" she says. Looking around the hotel room it does feel illicit, the curtains drawn against the bludgeoning summer rain, the king-sized bed next to the exam table. The table, with the stirrups and pedals, gives the room an ominous bent, as if it is part hotel, part medieval chamber.

"You can go in the bathroom if you'd feel more comfortable," I say. "I'll be waiting in the hall. Just shout when you're ready."

A moment later she calls out, and I open the door.

Sitting on the bed in the robe, Abbie looks like she weighs less than a hundred pounds, maybe less than ninety, and she is covered like a

billboard of hate. Her legs are crossed at the ankle, and on her left calf is a blood-red “A” dripping inside a circle. Her upper arms are ringed with barbed wire. Swastikas inside both wrists. The top of one delicate pink foot reads “FUCK” in gothic script, a smiley face is impaled on a stick on her thigh. I do my best to offer a comforting smile, although I know it’s too late—she already saw the horror on my face.

“You did better than most,” she says. She traces the swastika on her wrist with a finger; I wonder if for years to come she will trace that pattern long after it’s gone, like those suffering from phantom-limb syndrome. “Wait,” she says. “There’s more. We might as well get it over with all at once.” And she takes off the robe. Her back is covered with two crossed hammers, there’s a closed fist circled by a laurel wreath on one buttock. Although I’m not sure what each symbol means, I know I’ve never seen so much rage. Her face is almost placid, and it reminds me of those games I’d play as a child where I’d match three tracing plates from pants, shirt, and hair to form an outfit. I never would have put this head with this body, and yet there’s something in her face, maybe sorrow, that completes the picture.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” I tell her. “You need to know what you’re in for with this kind of removal.”

She points at the tattoo slithering down her neck. “You think I don’t have an idea what I might be getting into?”

Over the next fifteen minutes, waiting for Dr. Stein, I explain how the laser works. It dissipates the ink approximately thirty-five percent, so the effectiveness will be less and less with each treatment—thirty-five percent of a hundred the first time, thirty-five percent of sixty-five the second, and so on. I can’t stop staring at the wreckage. Abbie nods along, fingering the frayed strap on her duffel bag. “You might be surprised,” she says, “but I’m good in math. I understand what you’re saying.” The procedure will take eight to ten treatments. In plastic surgery, we use terms like “procedure” and “treatment,” words that sound medical, so patients will feel they’re spending their money on something worthwhile. Abbie may be the first case I’ve seen in the past eight months that actually is. It’s 250 dollars per treatment of a five-by-five-inch surface; Abbie’s will cost up to 1,250 dollars a visit.

“I know,” she says. “I’ve done my research.”

I excuse myself for a moment and come back with the camera I keep in my locker. “I’ll need to take pictures for your file,” I tell her. Truth is, no one knows I take pictures of the patients. I focus on the skull and crossbones on Abbie’s thigh, the winged butterfly that flutters from one end of her pelvis bone to the other. The artwork itself is terrible—blurred lines as if the ink were cut into her skin with a rusty knife. She holds up her hair and I snap a landscape shot of the ss lightning bolts on the back of her neck. I put the camera in my pocket as Dr. Stein enters.

Dr. Stein is in his mid-fifties and has eyes that turn down at the corners, so he appears perpetually sad. He recently put his dog to sleep and now walks the halls like a ghost, haunting the hospital staff with pitiful questions of whether or not he made the right decision, although he doesn’t want our answers. He begins to tell Abbie the same things I have about the cost and effectiveness of the procedure. “We’re talking about a chunk of change,” he says. “And we don’t take checks.” Abbie doesn’t look at him, and he doesn’t look at Abbie. She keeps her eyes trained on me, nodding as he tells her, basically, he doesn’t think she can afford it. I reach out and brush the hair from her shoulder as if there were a piece of lint.

“I’ve got some money saved,” she says to me.

Dr. Stein writes “I want payment up-front” on his notepad and turns it toward me. We talk for five more minutes about follow-up, the antiseptic gel she’ll need to apply to each treated area for two weeks, the six-week wait required between sessions.

I follow Dr. Stein to the hallway and he writes her name on a manila file, puts in his notes, and hands it to me. “I’ve never seen anything like that,” he says. “With those people in the world, I’m almost glad Sheba’s gone.” Sheba was his dog, a reddish-tan Whippet with the sad, sleek face of a very thin woman.

As Dr. Stein gets in the elevator, I knock softly on the door until Abbie says, “Come in.” She pulls the T-shirt over her white belly just as I enter then slings the duffel bag over her shoulder, stumbling a step

before righting herself. We stand facing each other for a long, awkward moment.

“Do I need to fill out some more papers or something?” she asks.

“No, that’s it,” I say. “You’re free to go.”

She nods, and I walk her to the front desk where we make an appointment to start treatments the next day; we’re never so busy we can’t fit someone in on short notice. Cora comes back from break in time to watch Abbie climb into a rusted Chevy Impala. “What’d she want,” Cora says. “A nose job?”

On the way home I stop at Walgreens on Ninetieth and Center, and wait in the car for the film to be developed. It’s usually my favorite time of day—the sun beginning to set in a violent pink and purple—but this summer we’ve barely seen the sun. With the rains, I had to put a bucket down in my bedroom in late May, but there isn’t a room on the second floor now without a minimum of three buckets or pans. The longer I hold out, the worse it will become, but Frank didn’t have life insurance and, even with my new, better-paying career, I’m months away from affording a new roof.

An hour later I start home, the pictures in my purse in the passenger seat. I won’t look at them until I’m alone, safe in my house. As always, I feel a tug when I round the corner and see my home—the original brick from 1912, a smattering of irises by the front porch, an oak with a trunk the circumference of a poker table. Frank and I bought this house seven years ago and lived here in a-little-below-average happiness. When I pull into the driveway there’s a boy sitting on my porch. I assume it’s the Enger kid from down the block, a fifteen-year-old punk who’s shown up on my doorstep the past three Halloweens with a pillowcase bulging like an overgrown, obscene gourd. I pull down the garage door and walk to the porch, and for a moment I’m convinced I see his bag of loot protruding from behind the porch swing. I look closer and see that under the cap it’s not Mark Enger but Abbie, her duffel bag behind her, the tattoos covered under a button-down blouse. My breath catches; I’m sure she knows about the pictures, that I’m going to be called up on some kiddie-porn charge. I reach into my purse and

feel the cardboard of the envelope, relieved that the pictures are with me, not loose at Walgreens or nailed to the front door of my house.

“I got your ad,” she says and holds up a tiny sheet of paper with my phone number on it. “From the bulletin board at the hospital.” I’ve been running an ad for a tenant the past three weeks. I swore when Frank died it wouldn’t come to this, but ten months later I do what I can. It’s four hundred a month plus split utilities, no separate entrance or private kitchen. I haven’t gotten many calls—two actually, one placed from inside a prison, the other from Cora seeing if she could rent the space for keggers.

I’m not sure what to say to Abbie. In the context of the hospital I’d felt bad for her, but out here in my real world, on the porch of my house, I feel bad for only myself. “How’d you get my address?”

“Reverse directory at the library.” She scratches at the hat she’s wearing, and I see the rings of sweat collecting in her armpits, the damp neck of the long-sleeved blouse. The rain has done nothing to alleviate the heat.

“I don’t have air conditioning,” I tell her, and she shrugs. “Besides, it’s rented.”

“I doubt that,” Abbie says and continues to stare at me.

“Even if it weren’t rented, it’d be unethical—me living with a patient.”

Abbie picks at the ring in her nose. “We’re not treating AIDS here,” she says. “I just need a place to live.” I remember our brief contact—my hand brushing her shoulder—and wonder if she’s built that into compassion, or if only I do that: redefine the purposeful bump of a thigh on the public bus, the swoop of flesh on flesh while counting my change into a cashier’s hand. “I’ve got a steady job,” she continues, “and I’ll pay on time. Even early if you want, up to two weeks.” She holds out a sheet of paper and turns it right side up so I can read it—a pay stub from Super America. “See,” she says and shakes the paper.

I smile in what I hope is a sympathetic manner. “I would, but it’s already rented. I told you.”

Abbie gets up and puts the pay stub back in her pocket then reaches behind the porch swing. She pulls out the duffel bag, and I wonder if

she's got no place to stay tonight, if she's going to sleep at the Greyhound station, or Denny's, or in the back room of Super America. "I know it's not," she says and swings the duffel onto her back. It takes a lot of control to not rescue her as she walks off the porch, as she trails that duffel bag down the middle-class street I'm about to be kicked off of, but I don't.

Upstairs, only after I've poured a glass of iced tea and stripped to the bare essentials so I can sleep in the heat, do I finally look at the pictures. They're taken too close up so all I can see is the runny color on a doughy background, although the ribs give away that it's a person. In the pictures, the images are even more striking, although removed. It's as if I could be looking at a picture cut from a prison magazine, not a girl I'd met earlier that day. The lines and curves are so blurred on her skin you'd think they could be smudged off with a little spit and Kleenex, not cut into her skin with needles and ink. It's amazing seeing one clean calf against the other, what Abbie must have looked like before.

I open the nightstand drawer and put Abbie's pictures in with the others—a woman's stomach so fat it looks like the landscape of the moon; a seven-year-old boy who fell from a three-story building, crashing the cartilage of his nose to within two millimeters of his brain; a man's foot with only one toe, the other four removed by the man himself.

I'm fascinated by these patients and what they've endured, all those visible mistakes.

At the hospital the next morning, I watch a woman pass outside in a skirt so short, for a moment I think she's wearing nothing but a tank top and panties. She turns to open the door and I recognize Mrs. VanRockel, a sixty-eight-year-old patient who had her breasts done for the third time just last month. "Ooh la la," Cora says. "Lock up your grandsons."

Mrs. VanRockel rushes over and puts her fingernails in my shoulders and kisses the part in my hair. At least when this place was a hotel, I was able to avoid direct and extended contact with the same

customers. She's had so much work done that, compared to her, I feel almost *unnatural* in the skin, bones, and mortar I was born into. "I'm in for a follow-up," she says and pats her breasts on the outer sides. "Checking the girls," she calls it. Her breasts don't jiggle but move forcefully side to side as if caught on a train track.

I pick up my patient files for the day from an erratic filing system Cora's organized on the floor. It's pretty straightforward being a medical assistant; Dr. Stein won't let anyone else do important stuff, so I basically fill out forms, check blood pressure and pulses—all the basic medical tasks that I learned from a video I rented at the library. Mrs. VanRockel passes again and gives me a high five.

Cora dings the bell, a lollipop rolling suggestively in her mouth. "Creep-oid's back at 3:20," she says. "I hope we don't short-circuit the joint keeping the laser on that long."

"You shouldn't be so rude to people," I say, although secretly I enjoy it. I was raised in a household that didn't express rudeness, that discouraged blatant emotion of any kind. Three years ago when Frank and I began having problems, we tried to sugarcoat our way through, each of us making a list of ten things in our lives we loved. Out of desperation I wrote down *my husband* and *my job*, both of which I have since lost.

Abbie arrives around noon with her duffel bag.

"She just sits there," Cora says when she calls me after lunch break to tell me Abbie's three hours early. "It's like she's in some kind of white supremacy trance."

"How can you tell it's a white supremacy trance and not just an ordinary trance?" I ask.

"Don't get smart with me," she says. "I'm not the one zoning here like some sideshow freak. I'm just doing my job." Cora hangs up on me.

At 3:40, I usher Abbie to room 217, glad to be walking in front of her, not staring at the Nazi lightning bolts on the back of her neck, peeking below her hair. I don't know if she'll say anything about last night or how long I can hold out without bringing it up, apologizing for forgiveness, yet at the same time not offering her a place to live.

As she goes into the bathroom to change, I hand her the salve we use to slightly numb the areas we'll be lasering. It's basically a psychosomatic drug; I've put the gel on myself and could feel clear as glass as I slammed my toe into the door. When Abbie comes out, she says, "I can't reach my back," and hands me the tube, half her body already shimmering with the grease.

I open the back of her robe and rub the salve over her spine, every vertebrae detectable under her skin. It's like petting a dog that's too skinny, gross with those protruding ribs but still a dog, something you want to love. She looks over her shoulder at the work I'm doing. "Eleanor. How much is it going to hurt?"

I look at the right side of Abbie's face, the side without the snake. Although she wrote down her age as nineteen, her cheekbones have a smooth coating of baby fat, her hips are slender as if she has not yet hit puberty. "It's going to hurt a lot," I tell her. "I'm sorry." I want so badly to ask how this happened, if she believes what she's had blazoned on her skin. It's hard to imagine this tiny girl hating anyone, but no matter what her beliefs, she's going to have to come up with approximately ten thousand dollars to right this wrong. Not to improve herself, but to get back to square one.

I leave her alone with a copy of *Modern Maternity* for twenty minutes while the salve supposedly activates, then Dr. Stein and I come in wheeling the laser. "Are we ready?" Dr. Stein says as he pulls the yellow goggles over his eyes.

I hand Dr. Stein the laser gun with a queasy stomach. Up until now all we've done for tattoo removals have been short names and Greek letters—Delta Tau Deltas and Sigma Nus trying to cover up a past that admits they were spoiled. These procedures have taken no more than a minute to three each, nothing like the expanse of Abbie's body. Dr. Stein's wearing a gold Star of David around his neck, something I'm certain he's never worn before. "We'll start with the foot and work our way up," he says.

Abbie and I put on our goggles, and I flip on the laser as Dr. Stein points the gun at the top of Abbie's foot and pulls the trigger. She barely flinches, and I remember the nerve damage she suffered from

the tattoo; what should be the most painful, she can barely feel. Dr. Stein traces the “F” and moves to the “U.” Abbie has her eyes shut to squints and is gripping the sides of the examination table but for the most part is holding still.

Dr. Stein stops when he reaches the bottom of the “K.” “How you doing?” he asks.

She releases the exam table and shakes her hands a few times before gripping the edges again. “Let’s keep going.”

Dr. Stein points the laser at Abbie’s calf and presses the trigger. This time she screams and pulls back her leg, squirming onto her side. Dr. Stein keeps going and I rush over to push down her shoulders as she doubles up at the belly like she’s in labor. Dr. Stein stops the gun and looks at me. “I’m not going to be able to work like this. You’re going to have to hold her still.”

Abbie inhales deeply. “Just a minute,” she says. “I had no idea.” Dr. Stein stands, tapping his foot. “ok, let’s do it.” I offer her my hand.

We go over much of Abbie’s body—the butterfly, the fist and laurel, the crossed hammers on her spine. After one of the barbed wire rings on her upper arm, she says, “Stop. That’s all I can do today.”

“We’ve only got four left,” Dr. Stein says. “And no openings the rest of the week.” I know he has no idea what the schedule looks like but don’t dare call Cora to ask her.

We’ve already been going for over forty-five minutes, the heat and sharp, needling pressure of the laser on her body constantly. “We’re so close,” I tell her. “It’ll be over in no time.” She lays back down and Dr. Stein points the gun at her other arm, finishes that area, and moves to her right wrist. I can see the veins tinted yellow through my goggles, her skin so thin it looks as if the blood coursing through it is green. A racing pulse is detectable under a corner of the swastika, like the heart of a tiny animal. Dr. Stein finishes the left wrist and stops. “Only one left,” he says, but Abbie shakes her head.

“I can’t do the face,” she says. “Not today.” She has already decided not to shave her head to remove the body of the snake, and we will only treat what’s visible.

Dr. Stein puts down the laser—“We’ll start with it next time”—and steps out of the room.

Abbie is breathing in jagged gasps. Sweat wets her hair as if she has run a long race, and tears pour from the corners of her eyes. “We’ll try it for a month,” I tell her. “You can move in today if you need to.”

She nods and points to the duffel bag. “That’s all I’ve got. Shouldn’t take me long to get settled.” It’s already after five, so I gather my purse as Abbie gets dressed, and we meet in the lobby to go home.

It takes two months before I’m able to sleep through the night with Abbie in the house. When she’s home, I’ll wake around two in the morning and trail down the hallway, listening for signs of what, I don’t know—a noise downstairs, maybe a dull, unidentifiable thud that signals trouble. I never hear it. When Frank first died my sleep habits were altered from dreaming until the alarm went off to waking at odd hours, listening to the sound of no one else breathing. In the past ten months, between the hours of two and five in the morning I’ve taught myself tarot cards, regouted my bathroom, preserved my life in scrapbooks. Most nights Abbie’s not at home but working at Super America. Even though she wears long-sleeved shirts and pants, and heavy foundation on her face and neck, the shift manager figured out her secret and usually schedules Abbie for the graveyard. I wonder some nights just how big a mistake I’ve made asking her to move in. There are two Abbies—the one I see with her body of threats and the one I live with, who, for all I can tell, is a tentative and nervous girl. I know my house is only an object, a possession that holds more possessions, but I’ve put the past seven years into restoring these twelve-hundred square feet with unattached garage, and I’m protective of my house the way many are protective of their children and pets.

When Abbie’s at work during the night, and I’m up wishing I could afford cable, I’ll look in her room, justifying that it’s not snooping if I don’t touch anything. She sleeps in Frank’s study, a room I’ve always disliked. Frank insisted I not clean it, and when he died there were stacks of rubbish piled to the short ceiling by the dormer—*National*

Geographics from the '80s, copies of our 1996 taxes, old work schedules from his job at Drastic Plastic Records on Howard Street. In a corner, I found a petrified orange, furry and green like an exotic, unopened flower. I feel guilty looking around the newly painted white room, as if by Frank's death I've finally gotten my way. Abbie keeps her makeup on the cardboard dresser I bought, her duffel bag under the bed. Most nights there's not so much as a sock on the floor.

On a lingering night, in which I've stayed up until dawn studying the patient photos, we pass in the kitchen in the morning. "How long have you been up?" Abbie asks, shedding rain from her hair.

"Not long."

She sniffs the coffee pot and rubs a kitchen towel against her head. "You don't sleep much," she says and pours the rest of the bitter, three-hour-old coffee down the sink. "Let me make you some breakfast." Abbie, it turns out, is a wonderful cook. She's able to take any three cans out of the cupboard, some rice, and with a little cumin or cilantro, make something extraordinary.

"I used to work at an ethnic restaurant on Fort Street before all this," she tells me, motioning a hand toward the tattoos on her body. "Any kind of ethnic food you wanted, we'd make it. I had over thirty cookbooks on hand and a spice rack as big as a bank." It's not as exciting as the version I would have guessed—cooking for a houseful of brothers and sisters, a mom strung out on heroin, father unemployed and split—but it makes sense. She tells me about all the jobs she's had: chef, assistant at a tanning salon, three weeks as a Wal-Mart greeter. I want to ask when the tattoos came into play, when in the midst of being a responsibly employed adult she had the time to become a skinhead. "I got some good news today," she says. I savor a bite of eggs—she's prepared them with salsa and dehydrated black beans from a box. "A raise for my six-month evaluation. It's a quarter more an hour."

It occurs to me that the reason Abbie cooks and cleans so much is she doesn't want to be asked to leave. I sip the coffee. "Abbie, how are you paying for the treatments?"

She coughs into her hand. "That's almost fifty bucks a month." It's only forty—I've already done the math in my head.

Abbie peels off her red work vest and long-sleeved shirt down to the sports bra underneath. After two weeks she finally gave in and began wearing shorts and tank tops in front of me at home, rather than her usual long-sleeved garb. She catches me every now and again staring at the circled “A,” the barbed wire, but doesn’t acknowledge it. “You don’t have to tell me,” I say. “I’m just curious.”

“It’s cooled down a bit with the rain,” she says, rinsing the frying pan. “You want to sit out on the roof?” It bothers me that Abbie’s keeping secrets, while I’d spill my entire life from birth until now if only given the chance. She doesn’t know that I’ve been married, that Frank died in the car I was driving, that I have no right to be assisting in her laser surgery. It should be easy to confess to someone who’s done worse than you.

We take our coffee upstairs and climb out the dormer window to the roof and lie on the upward slant, the wet shingles rough against our backs. It never occurred to me to do this, but I came home one day after work and saw Abbie up here, her feet hooked in the eaves. My first thought was she was going to jump, until I saw the lazy elbow crooked over her eyes, the gentle way her knees swayed in the breezeless evening.

On the roof, my life feels quiet, the water misty on my face. Even at work, we’ve hit a lull. It’s the end of August, and it’ll be another nine months before this much skin is exposed on a daily basis. Around January we have another, shorter busy season as couples prepare for trips to Jamaica, the New Year’s resolutions more impossible year after year without a little help from the outside. Abbie holds out her wrists and swastikas. “Any chance you can’t tell what they are now?” she asks me.

I look at the pale blue skin, the dots of rain coming down on her wrists; the tattoos have begun to dissipate a bit, as if they’ve faded over the years, but not enough. “You can still tell.”

She nods. “I thought so.”

“The snake does look a little lighter,” I say.

She puts her hand to her jaw. “It’s the makeup.” We sit in silence, day six and counting of the rains. Abbie cups her hands until her palms hold an inch of water. “Dr. Stein doesn’t like me,” she says.

“I doubt he doesn’t like you,” I say, although I suppose she’s right. He only sees the shell: a girl with signs of the Third Reich tattooed all over her body. But in the past few months I’ve grown affectionate toward Abbie. How could I not like someone so repentant? I wonder, if given the chance, if we’d live our lives differently or go on repeating the usual mistakes. Maybe not with tattoos or dead husbands but different errors, the same results.

“He told me he’ll take my money because it’s his job and he thinks I’m doing something to better myself. He doesn’t really think that, though. He thinks I’m trash.”

I slept with only one other man while I was married to Frank: Don, the Coca-Cola distributor at the hotel. He was a lot stupider than Frank, but his body was smooth, almost hairless, and taut like a fresh sheet pulled tight across a mattress. He wore his name sewn above his heart, almost as good as his heart on his sleeve, and I slept with him three months before I drove my husband into an embankment, run off the road by an eighty-nine-year-old man who had not had a driver’s license in over a decade. Frank died, and I walked away from the accident, and three months earlier I’d slept with Don. “You’re a lot of things, Abbie, but you’re not trash.”

“I suppose not,” she says. “But it wouldn’t kill him to try and be nice to me.”

Sometimes what I regret most about Frank’s death is the chance to make it work. With all the bickering and emotional blows we’d gone through, it was obvious to me that, had he lived, we would have been divorced within a year. I spent six months in mourning eating neighbors’ casseroles, but what I really mourned was the chance to resurrect my marriage.

“It might,” I tell her. “Who knows what’s going to kill us.”

Mrs. VanRockel stops in for her next appointment dressed in bike shorts and a half shirt. “Let me see that pamphlet on liposuction again,” she says. “Just for kicks.” Mrs. VanRockel window-shops at the plastic surgery ward like it’s a Crate and Barrel.

We're sitting with Dr. Stein in his office, a space bigger than my living room. "Abbie doesn't think you like her," I say, looking at Dr. Stein.

"Who's Abbie?" Mrs. VanRockel asks. She does an elongated bend at the waist as she reaches for another pamphlet on forehead tucks from Dr. Stein's desk. It's depressing to see a sixty-eight-year-old ass that much better than mine.

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Stein says and holds out the coffee pot as invitation to Mrs. VanRockel, who waves it away and then pulls her eyes toward her hairline. "Caffeine," she says.

"It matters to me," I say. "Abbie's my friend."

Dr. Stein puts down the coffeepot and takes out a pen, writes something on a piece of paper, then shoves it in his pocket. It's not letterhead, and I wonder if he's making a grocery list or maybe a list of things he doesn't like about me. I've snooped through his office and know there's a good chance we might go under. People in the Midwest don't care about their bodies enough to support a ninety-room plastic surgery ward. "She's not the type I would guess you to be friends with," Dr. Stein says. He looks at me until I look away. "And no, I don't like her. Not that it matters." There's an eight-by-ten photograph of Sheba in a Santa's hat on his desk. Every other day another picture of Sheba pops up in Dr. Stein's office—Sheba's first bath, Sheba wearing roller skates.

"I don't think you should be rude to her, no matter how you feel."

He stands suddenly and claps his hands. "I'm going to take the rest of the day off," he says.

I pick up a glossy photo of Sheba in a raincoat. "What am I supposed to do?" I ask.

He takes off his white lab coat, pauses a moment, then continues, removing his shirt. His nipples glow red like two recent lipstick prints above a smallish belly. Mrs. VanRockel looks up and giggles. "Some bedside manner," she says. Dr. Stein pulls a T-shirt from his bottom desk drawer.

"Straighten some files," he says and pulls the shirt over his head, all the hair he has pulled forward like some magnetic oddity. The shirt reads #1 DAD. He looks around his office—there's nothing out of place,

and other than the dog photos, no clutter. It looks as if he has just moved in today or could be moved out tomorrow. "Take some blood pressure, what do I care." He laughs as he opens the door. "I'm off the rest of the day."

Mrs. VanRockel reaches over and pats me on the leg. "I don't know Abbie, but if she's a friend of yours I'm sure she's a fine person." Her skin puckers at the knuckles like stretched-out pantyhose.

"She is. She's just made some mistakes."

Mrs. VanRockel holds up her hands as if at gunpoint. "Who hasn't? You think I was born with a nose like this? We've all got a past." She sits for a moment, fingering the corner of the liposuction pamphlet. She smiles shyly. "My fiancé has no idea I've had work done."

"How can that be?" It strikes me as impossible—her body must look like a bad hem job, all those stitches and tucks in the fabric.

"I told him I was in a car accident back in my late teens. It was the sixties, everyone was crazy. That he believed."

I quickly do the math, knowing Mrs. VanRockel passed out of her teens in the early fifties. "Does it matter?"

She shrugs. "I suppose not. I just wish I'd been honest. I can't very well tell him now he's not getting the real deal."

"My husband died in a car accident," I tell her. "I was driving."

"We've all got to die some time," she says and pats my leg again, a few liver spots marking the backside of her hand. I give her two months before she investigates the bleaching process. "Why not get it over with."

"I killed my husband," I say again.

"I'll kill mine eventually," she says. "It's the way the world goes round."

I spend most of the afternoon snooping through Dr. Stein's office—real snooping, like pulling open drawers, reading medical-sounding memos I don't understand. He's got files on every patient we've seen—some files, like Mrs. VanRockel's, almost two inches thick. I've got pictures at home of about twenty of these people, the rest are run-of-the-mill nose jobs and skin grafts. In Abbie's file, Dr. Stein's drawn

rough sketches of her different tattoos, something he hasn't done for the other patients. On the inside of the manila folder, in Dr. Stein's handwriting, it says, "Terminate treatments."

I go through his desk looking for his home phone number, give up, and page his number for medical emergency. "We need to set up the next appointment for Abbie Nelson," I say when he calls back.

"Who?" He sounds distracted, and I wonder where he is. There's a scratching noise coming through the phone that could be static but sounds like someone trying to claw her way out of a coffin.

"The tattoos."

Dr. Stein sighs as if he is very tired; there's a high whistle, and the scratching noise stops. "We're not seeing her anymore—she's done."

"No, she's not," I insist.

I hear the phone bang against something. "Listen, Eleanor. She's just going to have to live in the bed she's made."

"You're not being fair." I think of the medical term: "Or ethical."

Dr. Stein is quiet for a moment. "I didn't want it to come to this, but you should know. The girl's a liar. She says you took photos of her, illicit ones, the hospital didn't approve."

The air-conditioned room suddenly feels as stifling as the weather outside, but my head feels empty, surprisingly cool; I know Abbie wouldn't have asked Dr. Stein about the pictures, even if she suspected I shouldn't have taken them. "That's odd," I finally say, "but not criminal."

"Either she's lying or you are," he says, and the scratching noise starts up again. "And I won't work with a liar." I'm not sure if Dr. Stein is talking only of the pictures or if he knows everything: that my degree is from a community college in hotel-and-restaurant management, that my only training for medical emergency was the night of Frank's accident. I used to think what we did here was trivial, that there could be no lower form of medicine than plastic surgery, but that couldn't be further from the truth. We might not extend lives, but we do give people the lives they want to lead. If Mrs. VanRockel wants to be fifteen years younger, why not let her? Dr. Stein tells me he'll be in tomorrow

but right now he's resting at home and is going to hang up. I say good-bye and shove Abbie's file into my purse before I leave.

When I get home from work there is a man sitting on my kitchen counter with track marks up and down his arm. I get closer, and he points to the scratches. "Cat," he says and holds out his hand. "I'm Sam, as in Son of." With a Mötley Crüe tank top and acne scars, Sam rides a fine line between repulsive and sexy. He pulls down the top of his shirt and points to a rose tattoo by his nipple. "This bud's for you," he says.

In the living room, a woman wearing a Canadian flag as a dress and a chain through her nose and ear picks through my CD collection. "Neil fucking Diamond," she says. When Frank died we had over three thousand CDs that he'd pilfered from the record store—I gave them away at the wake, to all his regulars who came to mourn. By the end of the afternoon, people I'd never seen before were lined around the block, and I was left with the handful that nobody wanted. "Where's Abbie?" I ask her. I hear a thump echo from the attic—it's this sound I've been listening for, moping through the halls at night—and I take the stairs two at a time.

Sitting on Abbie's bed is a man wearing the largest boots I've ever seen. They ride up his legs, past his knees, shiny strokes of black that appear to grow into his hips. He has muttonchops below his cheekbones and a moustache over unnaturally white teeth. The same snake as Abbie's slithers below the blondish-brown sideburns as if it is sneaking through long-dead grass. "Howdy do," he says. "You must be Eleanor."

It's now I notice Abbie. She's sitting in Frank's old rocker in front of the fan, her mouth opening and closing like a dying fish, her hair blowing from her face then settling to calm. We keep the windows open all the time, although the breeze is nonexistent, and we move fans from room to room depending on where we're sitting. The man stands up and moves to sit in Abbie's lap. Without the boots I would guess him to be no more than five-seven.

"What's going on?" I ask.

The man laughs and holds out his hand. “I’m Kurt,” he says. “Abbie’s boyfriend.”

“Ex,” Abbie says, and Kurt turns in her lap and puts a hand over her breast, squeezing until his knuckles turn white, although she doesn’t flinch. Abbie’s wearing more makeup than her usual cover-up—lipstick and rouge—although it’s smudged and unnatural, almost bruised-looking, much like the tattoos.

Kurt turns toward me slowly, crinkling his neck as if notch by notch. “We’re on a break,” he says. “Putting the spice back in the pudding.”

A slight, cool breeze bores through the curtains, and Abbie and I turn toward the window. For a moment I forget Kurt’s in the room; I listen to the sound of the incessant rain and can imagine for the first time the onset of fall. “You need to get out of my house,” I say.

Kurt turns toward Abbie. “You heard her, pack up. It’s time to get you back home.” He lifts himself from the rocker and opens the closet door. He begins pulling Abbie’s T-shirts and long-sleeved blouses from the rack. “You got a garbage bag, or what?”

“Abbie’s staying here.” I look at Abbie still sitting in the rocker. The bones in her face seem to have grown, her skin pulled tight at the eyes and mouth as if she has shed the baby fat of a few months ago. “I’m keeping the girl,” I say. She looks up at me like she’s found religion.

Kurt’s face is textured like the rind of a cantaloupe beginning to soften and go bad. “Now that I’ve found her, I’m just going to come back,” Kurt says. He kisses the sock in his hand, pulls out the waistband of Abbie’s jeans and shoves the sock down her pants, carefully sidestepping a bucket of stale water. “As often as it takes.”

I point to the door. “Sweet ride,” Kurt says and licks a finger then traces it against my neck, curving it down like the matching snake on his and Abbie’s jawbones.

Abbie and I stay in her room for the next hour until all of them leave—the woman in the Canadian flag, Son of Sam, and Kurt, who peers back at us in the dormer window and kisses his middle finger before shooting it at us. “He will be back,” Abbie says. The swastikas

on her wrists are covered by soft leather wristbands that look like a cut-up purse tied with twine. “Do you want me to move out?”

I can’t imagine going back to an empty house again, another two months of not sleeping when I’m just beginning to make it until dawn. “Ab, how are you getting the money to pay for your treatments?”

“If it were up to me, I’d be on the next plane out of this town,” Abbie says. “But what’s the point, looking like this?”

“How?”

Abbie pushes herself out of the rocker, and her bones sound frail, as if they’ve lived more than their share of life.

I follow her into the kitchen, where she opens and closes the cupboards until she finds a box of Bugle crackers. “I’ll make us corn horns,” she says and grabs the chive cream cheese out of the fridge, fills a Bugle, and eats it. “My father died in a house fire about two years ago.”

She smears another cone with cream cheese and sets it on a napkin in front of me like a dried, dead ear. I sit silently as Abbie explains how the case was chalked up to faulty wiring, leaving her with a settlement of eight thousand dollars, enough to start her treatment. “If they reopen the case and find something else,” she says, “the treatment will already be done. At least they can’t take that.”

“Was it really faulty wiring?” I say.

“Well, no,” she says. “But I don’t know what you want me to tell you, Eleanor.” She wipes the crumbs from the counter into her hand and throws them in the sink. “My dad was a real S.O.B. Then I meet Kurt. He’s an asshole but looks like a better option, and he decides to take matters into his own hands. You figure it out.”

“Why don’t you turn him in?”

Abbie laughs, a genuine laugh, not something dry and cynical like I might have expected. “You honestly think that’ll work?” She puts a spoonful of cream cheese in her mouth and sets her elbows on the counter, leaning in to whisper. “They’d take one look at me and throw me in jail. And the thought of threatening Kurt with jail, well . . .” She runs a finger across her throat.

I motion across the counter, up and down her body and the tattoos. “He did this to you, didn’t he?”

She shrugs. “I knew what some of the symbols meant, I just had no idea I’d be taken so seriously.” She wipes her hand on her jeans. “I’d never been taken seriously in my life.”

That night I don’t sleep. I spread Abbie’s file across my bed—Dr. Stein’s crude drawings next to the pictures I’ve taken, his notes on the laser procedure, including the intensity levels for different pressure points of the body. Her photos look different to me now from the others, as if her tattoos were inevitable, rather than an act of stupidity or weakness.

Dr. Stein calls me a little after six in the morning and wakes me from a shallow sleep to tell me, with a forced laugh, that he’s calling in “well.” “Eleanor,” he says. “I just can’t face it today.”

I sink my head back into the pillow, holding the receiver. “Me either.”

“Good,” he says. “Stay home, have a barbecue. We’re supposed to see the sun around noon.”

“Dr. Stein?” I say. He’s quiet. “I took the pictures.”

I hear the kitchen door open downstairs; Abbie throws her knapsack on the counter as she comes in from her night shift at Super America. “Not much we can do about it now,” Dr. Stein says. “Can’t go back and not take them. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Abbie knocks on my door ten minutes later, and I call for her to come in, remembering the first time I saw her on the bed at the hospital in the paper gown—all that ink. “You want some coffee?” she says and holds up a cup. I can smell the shaves of cinnamon she adds because she knows I like them.

I sit up and take a sip from the warm mug. “What if I told you I came up with a plan that would help you get rid of your tattoos and me get my roof repaired?”

She runs a finger over my dresser and checks for dust. “I’d say you were about to suggest something illegal.”

That night, as we sneak through the parking lot, there’s a part of me that believes what we’re doing is lawful, or at the least, the right thing to be doing. Abbie’s gone so far as to wear a denim jumper-dress—what she calls a suburban disguise, one I’d consider too maternally to wear

overseeing a group of orphans. The night is unusually quiet without the rain, the air thin without the thick humidity we've grown used to like another layer of skin.

Abbie ducks behind the shrubs outside the hospital. "I hear a cop car," she whispers.

"You're paranoid," I say, but sure enough, a few moments later a black-and-white Ford pulls onto the street and shines a light down the sidewalk.

"I've got a key," I remind her. "We haven't done anything illegal yet." We've agreed that I'll perform the laser surgery myself, and she'll pay me directly, a fifth of the cost that she'd pay to the hospital. If I raise the pressure of the laser there'll be scarring, but most of what remains of the ink will dissipate after tonight. We wait five minutes then proceed.

Inside, the hospital looks even more uninhabited than it does during the day. Most of our patients are outpatients, and other than the nurses' station on second floor and a handful of cases, the hospital is deserted. The overhead lights are off, the couches empty, and there is nothing medical in sight. I've seen this room at night only as a hotel still bustling with latecomers or the drunk crowd, and now it appears as if the festivities have been abandoned quickly due to natural disaster, like the ballroom of the *Titanic*. I'm certain we won't be open much longer.

"Welcome to the Hotel California," I say, and Abbie stifles what should be a giggle but comes out like the caw of a wounded pelican. The sounds are eerily silent, absorbed by the carpet without a hint of reverberation.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Abbie says.

"It never was," I tell her. "But we're in it now."

We climb the stairs with the help of my flashlight key chain, not wanting to activate the elevators. "We're breaking, like, four hundred laws," Abbie says. "I really, really appreciate this." She says it like she's the one who's asked the favor, like this is her idea and not mine. I want to ask if she's been planning this since we met in June, but it wouldn't make a difference one way or the other.

We pass the two doors, round the corner to room 217, and there I see it: a light is on in one of the empty, unconverted hotel rooms. My heart flutters, and I shush Abbie as I point to the laundry closet at the end of the hall. I stand still for a moment, raising my courage to look in room 246. *I have a right to be here*, I tell myself. *It's my place of employment*. As I approach the door I hear something and hold my breath. Someone is humming in the bathroom.

I push on the slightly ajar door and there is Dr. Stein in a white terrycloth robe, a foaming toothbrush in his mouth. He lets out a little scream and turns to spit in the sink.

"Eleanor," he says and bends to wipe his mouth on a hanging towel.

We stare at each other, unsure who is supposed to speak and what he or she is supposed to say. "I'm here for some files." It's the worst excuse I can come up with but the quickest to come to mind.

"Yes, of course," he says. "That makes sense." We stand for a clumsy moment as if we're at a cocktail party, both of us looking around the room for better company. Only difference is, he's in a bathrobe.

"I'm going to get the files now," I say and turn to leave.

Dr. Stein holds out a hand. For a moment I think he might try to touch me, not inappropriately, but in a way so awkward and desperate, I'll be able to do nothing but let him. "You're a good assistant," he says.

I know now that Dr. Stein's aware I've faked my credentials, although for how long he's known, I'm not sure. "Thank you," I say.

I turn to go, unsure what I'm going to do with Abbie huddled in a laundry closet, daylight five hours away. "Eleanor?" Dr. Stein says again.

"Yes?"

He fiddles with the ties on his robe. "Is it possible we're all good people?"

I smile, thinking it's one of Dr. Stein's odd rhetorical questions, but he stares at me long enough that I know he wants an answer.

"Statistically, no. There've got to be some bad apples out there." Dr. Stein worries over this answer for a moment. "But if it's any consolation," I add, "I don't think any of them are in the building tonight."

He walks me to the door, his hand leading me by the elbow as if we are about to emerge on a dance floor.

In the laundry room I close the door behind me and shine my miniscule flashlight into the darkness. Abbie pops her head out of a cart of linens with a bed sheet partially obscuring her face. “You look like you’re in the ККК,” I whisper. “That’s about the last thing we need.”

I pull her from the cart and we head to room 217, walking softly so not to disturb Dr. Stein. Inside, Abbie undresses, and I adjust the settings on the laser. With only the bathroom light on, we rub her skin with salve and don our goggles. I raise the gun.

Over the next hour, we work quietly. The pain is enormous, I can tell by the struggle on Abbie’s face, but she doesn’t so much as whimper as I finish most of her body and move onto the fading swastikas. It’s slow going without Dr. Stein’s experience, but I feel I’m doing a good job and half believe I can see the ink breaking up in front of me. Partway through the first line, she stills my hand with her own and cocks her head to the side like an attentive animal.

A moment later I hear the siren. I’d guess the police car to be no more than four blocks away. “I’ll tell them I made you do it,” Abbie says.

She pulls her hand away, but I catch it in my own. “It’s all right,” I say. “We’re in this together.”

She nods and holds out her arm; only four tattoos left, and we’re not leaving until they’re gone. I remember when I climbed out of the car, Frank’s body appeared asleep at the side of the road, his neck crunched far to the left. My first thought was how he’d bitch when he woke up about the headache that was forming. Abbie and I are willing to pay the penance for the crimes we’ve committed, although we don’t consider this one of them. I look down. Her scarred wrist appears to glow and pulse with a strange light until I realize I’m still wearing my goggles.

I bow my head and resume the treatments.