

LESS IMPORTANT THINGS

The day Louise finally returned to a salon it was full of people wanting to get their nails done. None of the old crew was there, but it had the same vinyl chairs and tables for feet and hands. All the chairs and tables were being used, but it was quieter than before. The old music was gone, and the sounds were mostly just low talk by customers on their phones and the soft noise of water going in and out of basins.

There were several people waiting on chairs near the front door, mostly younger women on phones and a few older ones reading magazines. Louise may have been the oldest, but that was hard to tell. The others had spent time on makeup and hair before coming, but Louise wore no makeup, and her hair was a tangled gray mess; and her clothes were old and rumped, and fit like a parent's might on a child. Then there was her manner: the others looked mostly bored or impatient, but Louise had been shifting nervously from the time she first sat down. And she flinched with every little change of position, as if even those were painful for her.

She'd lost track of those who'd arrived before her and those who'd come after, and had been wondering for several minutes if they forgot her. She shifted and winced again, too nervous to ask. When someone finally called her name she shrank back into her chair. The young woman walking towards her wore the same white smock they all did, but her hair was in purple and green spikes that dotted her head, and she had silver piercings in her nose and chin.

"I can help you now," the girl said, eyeing Louise up and down.

Louise didn't move.

"Ma'am?" the girl said.

Louise stared at her, trying to decide whether to get up and leave. She'd promised her counselor she'd do this. She'd resisted for a while, but Chalik made it seem like such a small thing, and kept after her with so much calm that in the end Louise had agreed just to get her off her back. Something to remember. When Chalik finally did get her to talk it never seemed about anything important. She never once asked about the accident, nor even about what she'd done with the first counselor. But this was hard. Fucking promises.

She took a deep breath and forced herself up, nodding towards the strange girl.

"Choose a color?" The girl motioned to dozens of bottles along the right wall. The movement revealed tatoos up and down her arms.

"I brought my own," Louise said uneasily. She followed the girl, but had trouble walking and fell behind. The girl noticed and slowed, then stopped and waited.

"Can I take purse?" she offered.

That seemed a little suspicious to Louise. "No, thank you," she said.

The girl shrugged, but waited, and went the rest of the way with her. Louise put the purse next to the chair, then struggled to step up into the chair. Her foot only went half way. She tried again, but it hurt. She groaned softly. The girl held out her arm.

“I help you, Ma’am.”

“I can do it,” Louise insisted. She tried again, but couldn’t, and once again it was painful. She shook her head, ready to give up. But the girl leaned forward and cupped her hands to make a half step.

“Put hand on shoulder, and step into me,” she offered.

This was surprising. It didn’t fit the girl’s threatening look. Louise hesitated, still unsure of herself. She put her hand cautiously on the girl’s shoulder and lifted her foot as far as she could. The girl slid her cupped hands under the foot.

“Okay, go ahead,” she said.

It worked. Louise was able to get up. She settled back and studied the girl as she helped slip off her shoes and started the water. It was hard to look past her appearance, but when the girl tested the water with both hands Louise finally said it:

“Thanks.”

“Sure. Is it too warm?” the girl asked.

“No,” Louise replied. “It feels good. But I should tell you. I have some problems with my legs and feet.”

The girl looked down at the aging feet. They were badly misshapen. A toe was missing from the left foot and there were thick keloid scars that started at the top of each foot and went up the ankles until they disappeared beneath the legs of her pants. The girl shook her head sadly, “This must have going very painful.”

Louise tensed, waiting, but the girl said nothing else. It was quiet between them, until the girl began to gently rub one of her feet.

“Please!” Louise cried, pulling back.

The girl let go, confused. “Sorry. Sorry. I can do softer.”

“No. Please don’t,” Louise said quickly. “But please don’t...I...” She stumbled between thoughts and words. *How to say it, without having her ask...* The girl waited. Louise drew in a breath to compose herself, then decided. “I’m sorry. This was a bad idea.” And she started to get up.

“If you want go, but it’s okay, really,” the girl said quickly, and now there was a little sympathy in her voice. “What if skip massage and just do nails?”

Louise stopped again. She *seemed* nice, and hadn't asked any questions, not even to wonder what was wrong. There were too many times she'd been asked to explain it, and been forced to relive things. Some had to ask, of course: police, paramedics, nurses and doctors, all had their responsibilities. But it was so hard to go back through in daytime, what she couldn't escape in her nightmares. At least Chalik didn't make her do that.

But this girl was surely no Chalik. Then again, there was that promise.

"All right, Just...just try to be careful," she said. "It's the legs, and sides of the feet that are the problem."

"Okay," the girl said. She slid her hand beneath the right foot, cupping the heel almost as you might a piece of fine China. She raised it a little, then lightly touched the large toe with her other hand. "Does hurt?"

Louise tightened her grip on the arms of the chair. "No.... well, a little. It will be okay if you do it like that."

The girl turned the foot slightly, then back. "Is okay?"

Louise nodded silently, but kept her grip on the chair.

The girl turned to her assortment of instruments, selected one, and settled herself around the foot. She began with the little toe and tried a small cut to check the thickness of the nail. Louise flinched, but it was more in response to the sound, for there was only a little pain.

The girl looked up. "Is okay?"

"I'm okay," Louise replied, her hands tight on the chair.

The girl started clipping. She moved slowly, working in tiny segments. It took a long time to finish the one nail, longer than any Louise could remember, but that didn't seem to bother the girl.

When the first toe was done the girl leaned back, nodding. She glanced up at Louise, as if for permission to continue. Louise nodded. The next toe was larger and took longer, but then that too was finished. The girl went on to the rest, developing a slow but steady momentum, and as she did Louise's nervousness faded. Her wincing ebbed to the occasional flinch. By the time the right foot was finished Louise had relaxed her grip on the chair.

The girl started to go to the other foot, but then a harsh bark came from behind her. The man at the front reception desk was calling her with a scold, in a language Louise couldn't understand. The girl replied sharply over her shoulder. The man barked again, but the girl turned back to Louise, apparently ignoring it.

"Are we taking too much time?" Louise asked her.

"Fuck him," the girl said quietly. Louise blinked.

She felt a surge of gratitude, and had the impulse to thank the girl, but her throat tightened around the words. She forced herself, and it came hoarsely, "Thank you."

"No problemo," the girl said quietly. She'd begun with the four toes of the left foot. Once again she moved with careful, tiny cuts, and in a deliberate rhythm. Louise winced from time to time, and each time the girl stopped to see if she was okay. Neither said anything else. When it was finished the girl inspected both feet critically, then selected two files and gently smoothed the nails. With that completed, she carefully set pads between the toes, then asked for Louise's polish.

"There's a bag at the top of my purse," Louise replied. Then she added, "What's your name?"

The girl glanced up with a faint smile. "I Orchid."

"That's a lovely name." Louise said, and she meant it. "I'm Louise, Orchid."

"Hi," Orchid shrugged, retrieving the polish. It was an old bottle, but the polish was still smooth and thick. She applied it in careful, deliberate strokes. A greater relief came into Louise, and her hands relaxed on the chair.

Orchid took a spray can and dried the polish, then helped her up. They moved together to one of the tables. Orchid pulled out the chair for Louise, and as Louise sat, she patted Louise's shoulder gently. It affected Louise. It was a little thing, but added to the fact Orchid hadn't asked questions. The impulse came again to Louise, but once again her throat tightened. She coughed roughly to dismiss the trouble, but still couldn't speak. She reached over and squeezed Orchid's hand.

Orchid seemed not to notice. She took up her station, then paused, waiting. Louise had leaned forward to admire her feet.

The man at the counter barked again. Orchid shrugged as if it was no matter, but Louise pulled her chair forward. She leaned over, and was finally able to say it again.

"Thank you."

"Not necessary to thanking me, Louise," Orchid replied, with a soft tone. Louise slid her hands forward, but then hesitated and pulled them back. She hadn't told Orchid that it wasn't just her legs and feet that were tender. And there was the other thing about her wrists.

"Come, Louise," Orchid said gently, and she motioned to bring them forward.

Louise tightened, but slid them forward. Orchid inspected the backs of her hands, the fingers and nails, then turned the hands slightly. It was enough to see the lines across the underside of each wrist. They were even darker than the surrounding black skin, and not yet flat. Orchid hesitated a second, but said nothing and turned them back. Louise waited for her to ask, but Orchid was studying the nails as if nothing had happened.

“Nails are need love,” she murmured, moving her finger over each nail gently. But then she did it. She looked up, “So how long it has been for you?”

It came off -handedly, but brought Louise’s nervousness back full force. It was the kind of question she hated, and not just because of her wrists.

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It was six months earlier, during Louise’s second hospitalization that Deborah Chalik had been asked to help. The lawyer had asked to speak with her, and came to the hospital to do it. They met in the Clinical Director’s office.

“You’re supposed to help?” he demanded.

Chalik answered calmly. “I’ve been told to take over management of her care from Dr. Brozda.”

“But he was helping us.”

Chalik didn’t respond.

“What do you know about this case?”

Chalik nodded and tapped the thick file on her lap. “I have background from hospital records, the notes by Dr. Brozda’s assistant, and the Director. There’s very little about the accident. I gather it happened about three years ago—”

“Three and a half.”

“—and that there was recently a serious attempt by the patient. She’s still your client?”

“Of course. Her father insisted I get involved. But there was a misunderstanding about the attempt. Some are apparently saying Rudy—Dr. Brozda—contributed to it, but that’s not right. I’ve used him on other big cases, and he’s excellent. Harvard, Johns Hopkins. All he did was try helping her come to grips with this thing, and at the same time helping us get this case ready. I really don’t get them taking him off, but without him it’s critical you help us get the case ready.”

“I don’t usually get involved in litigation matters.”

“You’ll have to here.”

“My instructions are simply to work with the Director to take over from Dr. Brozda.”

“That’s the thing. There was just a difference of opinion about how to handle her.”

“What’s your understanding as to the differing opinions?”

“Rudy—Dr. Brozda—feels she has something called ‘Avoiding Problem Disease—”

“Avoidant Personality Disorder?”

“Right, but she has to confront it. Dr. Brozda has made that clear. He thinks she’ll probably have to be institutionalized, for her own sake, so they can medicate her and control it.”

“Wasn’t he in charge when she made the attempt?”

“Sure...sure, but he...everyone realizes now her condition is more serious. This accident devastated her. It was a horrible experience, and she was destroyed, not just physically, but emotionally, and there’s really just no way she’s coming back to what she was. She needs to be...well, needs stronger medications, and a much more controlled environment. He’s recommending his own facility.”

She flipped through the file, then stopped, reading. “He had her on some very strong medications already.”

“Well, relatively, but not really. Dr. Brozda says she needs more.”

“Why?”

“The attempt itself shows that. All he did was try to make her confront this thing, but—”

“He made her what?”

“It’s his treatment. He used hypnosis and medications to force her to break through this Avoidance thing.”

“When? How long ago?”

“Well...about three weeks ago.”

“So right before the suicide attempt?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m just trying to get the timeline correct.”

“You’re not even a psychiatrist, are you?”

“I’m a behavioral psychologist.”

“Well Dr. Brozda is a board-certified psychiatrist. Are you even qualified to deal with post-traumatic stress injuries?”

“That’s—”

“Just how much experience do you have?”

“About forty years, mostly on referral by other doctors whose patients made at least one attempt.”

“Well...okay. Well, let’s not get into aspersions here, all right?”

“I have no intention of doing that.”

“So how much do you even know about this patient?”

Chalik leafed through several additional pages of notes. She came to a handwritten sheet and spoke while reading. “Louise was an inner-city kid—East Harlem, right?”

“Right.”

“She’s a shy girl from a tough background. Apparently with a difficult home life?”

“Exactly.”

“There was some abuse. Her sister—Michaela helped her escape it. They got to LA. Her sister got a job as an extra. Louise worked as a waitress. Michaela eventually introduced Louise to another woman named Trish.”

“Right, a stunt woman.”

“And this woman—Trish—was strong, like Michaela. She and Louise were attracted to each other. They developed a loving and intimate relationship, went through a civil marriage ceremony, even adopted a little girl?” She looked up.

“Right. Crystal.”

Chalik went back to her notes. “But then Trish died in some sort of accident?”

“Doing stunt work. We had that case too.”

“Okay. So Michaela stepped back in to help, and was taking Louise and Crystal to Trish’s funeral when the accident happened? Correct?”

“Right.”

“So after losing her spouse, whom it appears she loved deeply, Louise lost her sister—a major source of strength in her life—and her daughter in the kind of traumatic event that could crush even stronger people.”

“Right. It’s a very big case.”

“But Dr. Brozda apparently felt she needed to relive that event to achieve some sort of cure.”

“Well...basically, but—”

“Well, there are different schools of thought on this, but there’s a much higher incidence of second suicide attempts—which are generally more successful—in people who have to relive the horror over and over again.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!”

“Well, you don’t think it possible that making her to go through it might have tipped her over the edge?”

“She needs stronger meds, and an institution where she’s under greater controls.”

“But he put her in a completely controlled environment, with strong medications and under his own hypnosis, didn’t he?”

“But...That’s not...Look, she probably would have tried this sooner if Dr. Brozda hadn’t tried to get her to face this thing, to get her to come to grips with it.”

“You said you’re working with him?”

“On this and many other cases. We’ve gotten very large verdicts, and should on this one.”

“Well, what do you and Dr. Brozda think she needs to face?”

“The accident.”

“What about the accident?”

“All right. Let’s see. Okay. Actually, we made a reconstruction film for the trial. I can show you.”

“Just tell me about it. Tell me what she experienced, and that you think she needs to face.”

“All right. Michaela was taking them to Trish’s funeral, when they were by a semi. The truck driver t had been driving fourteen hours straight. So he fucking fell asleep—excuse me. The truck was about four feet into the Volvo’s lane, and hit them head-on, with three to four feet of overlap.”

“So a major collision.”

“That’s an understatement. The impact folded the Volvo’s left front like an accordion all the way back to the A pillar. The Volvo was forced down to its left knee, but the truck was still coming. The car spun around, the A pillar fractured, and the car came loose and spun to the shoulder, caught the curb, flipped it up, and went through two and a half complete somersaults until it came to rest on its driver’s side.”

“All three of them still inside?”

“Right, and at this point they were all still alive.”

“How do you know that?”

“The police and doctors at the hospital, and then Dr. Brozda had her go through it with the hypnosis and medications.”

“The day before she attempted?”

The attorney sighed. “You’re going in the wrong direction here.”

“Go on. The collision happened. The car ended up on its side.”

“Right. The truck driver realized what happened. His truck was damaged, but he was able to back up, close to the Volvo. He got out, but smelled the gas and ran away.”

“He smelled gasoline?”

“His truck had 150-gallon tanks on each side. The one on the Volvo side was damaged, and with the slope of the roadway, the fuel drained out towards the Volvo. Okay.”

He paused, leaning forward. “Now this next part is one of the really major parts of the case, one we need her to testify to. Brozda knows this, and knows how important Dr. Brozda it is to get her to deal with it—”

“You mean important to the case?”

“Not just that! For Christ’s sake! For her sake!”

“Please just go ahead.”

“All right. The car came to rest on the driver’s side. Her sister Michaela was driving, so she’s near ground side. Louise was shotgun, hung up high in the passenger seat. Her little girl was in a child seat, down and behind Michaela. And now...well, like I said, the trial video we put together shows this really dramatically. I can show you.”

“Just tell me what she experienced.”

“All right. Now this is all from the hypnosis session. Anyway, she remembers that at first it was quiet. The car rocked a little, but it was quiet. Then her baby began crying. First thing she remembered was hearing Crystal crying. And then, in between sobs by the baby she remembered was her sister trying to say something.”

“Now Louise was shock, and pain herself. The impact shoved the engine compartment and firewall partly into the front passenger compartment. Louise’s legs and ankles were broken, and part of her left foot was sliced off. And the dash and glove box crushed both forearms. So she’s hears her daughter and sister, but can’t move herself.”

“Michaela was hurt badly too—the steering wheel and dash were smashed into her, but she was alive, trying to say something. Louise had trouble understanding at first, because of the baby, but in the spaces where Crystal is struggling to breathe, she finally understood what Michaela was saying. She was telling Louise, ‘Get out,’ ‘Get out,’ over and over, probably because Michaela smelled gasoline.”

“At some point Louise remembered smelling the gas herself, but only for a moment, and right about the time she smelled it, something sparked, and suddenly the left side of the car was on fire. It came in through the gash at the front of the driver door, right by her sister’s legs, and right away her sister’s legs were in the fire. Michaela was wearing a long black dress, and the fire caught that and came up very fast. It came up over Michaela, and the next thing Louise remembered was Michaela screaming. Louise started screaming herself, but the fire hadn’t gotten to her yet. She was panicking, because her sister was on fire and screaming. The fire was all over Michaela, and then she remembers Michaela is *inside* the fire, right next to her, on fire, and then—and this is really important, and remember, we only got this because Rudy—Dr. Brozda—did what he did, Louise remembered Michaela’s hand coming out of the flames towards her, trying to push her away from the fire and up towards the door.”

Chalik shook her head sadly, but said nothing.

“All right? Now she *has* to testify to this. You understand?”

Chalik shook her head grimly. “Go on.”

“All right. So Louise remembered this going on for a long time, her sister burning, Michaela’s screaming, Michaela is reaching out to try to help Louise, but Louise couldn’t move. She couldn’t move to help her sister or her daughter, and couldn’t move to get out of the car. Now our expert says this part in which Michaela is burning could only have gone on for a few seconds, maybe ten, fifteen at the most, but the whole time Michaela’s hand is there, coming out of the fire, trying to push her sister. But then finally Michaela’s hand dropped back into the flames, and her screaming stopped.”

“The thing is, then Louise remembers her baby screaming louder, probably because the fire had spread into the back. So now her sister is still, but heard her baby screaming, and can see the flames all over that part of the car, until her baby disappeared in them, and the baby’s screaming stopped, and it was just the fire, which started coming to Louise’s side of the car.”

“It started at her ankles and left side, and then her dress caught and it was all over her legs. And she remembered feeling, *knowing* that her sister had died, and her baby was dying, and that she was about to die. But then she saw foam, and heard a loud noise—metal sawing, and being torn away, probably the jaws of life—and hands came in to grab her. Then she passed out, until she woke up in the hospital.”

He paused. It was quiet for several seconds. “You get why it’s so important that a jury hear all this?”

“For a trial, yes, but for her? No.”

“Brozda feels she has to, not just for the case, but to start dealing with it.”

Chalik made several notes while shaking her head. She looked up. “There are some things nobody can fully come to grips with, things beyond the human capacity. I’ve had other patients, soldiers mostly, who were in situations like this, things that are impossible to deal with. Making them relive often just makes things worse. What some need more is to come to grips not with what they went through, but what they have left, and use that to move on with their lives.”

“Maybe some can, but you yourself said she was a weak person—”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But the point is she’s been destroyed. She’ll never be able to function in the real world again. She’ll need care—medicines, counseling, supervision—the kinds of things she can only really get in an institution. Maybe his advice would have been better received if it hadn’t just happened before her suicide attempt, but that’s where we could use your help in clearing up the misunderstanding. He feels, and I agree, the only reason that attempt was made was because she needed stronger medications. That’s as much the hospital and her other doctors’ fault—”

“I doubt that. If she’s to be helped I doubt it will be by forcing her to relive the kind of trauma hardly anyone could cope with. She made the attempt right after that was tried, which suggests pretty strongly it was the wrong approach.” She glanced down at her notes. “And I understand she’s cut herself off from friends and anyone else who might ask her about it, even just greet her with the usual ‘How are you’s. That more tends to indicate—”

“But she needs to get through that! For her own sake, and for this case. She’ll have to go through it here, in deposition, in trial, but they’re only offering five now.”

“Five?”

“Five hundred thousand.”

“That’s not enough?”

“It’s worth millions.”

“Well, as I said, I don’t get involved in litigation, and that should clearly be secondary to her well-being.”

“You can’t think they’re mutually exclusive!”

“If the litigation means she’s got to relive this again, then they may well be mutually exclusive.”

“I think that’s nonsense, and I think Dr. Brozda would agree with me.”

“Well, the Clinic Director agrees with me. She’s taken over from Dr. Brozda, and has put me in charge of her care for the next six months—”

“But Dr. Brozda is—”

“Dr. Brozda will be kept apprised, but he needs to sit back, for a while. You as well. You’ll both need to work through me. Don’t contact her directly for the next six months, unless you clear it with me and the Director.”

“You can’t do that. We have a trial date.”

“It’s been done, counselor. You’ll have to ask for a continuance, or whatever. We can give you whatever medical documentation you need to support any request for delays, and since she just made a serious attempt, I can’t imagine a judge wouldn’t allow it.”

The attorney shook his head irritably.

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It was six months later that Louise sat in the salon, unsure of how to answer Orchid’s question. *How long has it been since I’ve done my nails?* She stared at the young woman, then took a deep breath. “Almost four years,” she said.

“My, my,” Orchid said. She glanced up with the next question in her eyes.

A sense of dread started inside Louise. Part of her thought again of getting up and walking out, but another part—for the first time since she’d come in—wanted to say something. *What?* she thought. *How much?* She took a deep breath, then answered, “An accident,” hoping that was enough.

Orchid nodded as if to shrug, and returned to Louise’s fingers without asking anything else. When the cutting and filing were done, the polish applied and the drying complete, Louise paid and gave her a nice tip. “Thanks,” Orchid said, “but we not able to charge for all toes.” And she smiled.

“You’re funny,” Louise said.

Orchid offered her arm. Louise took it, and the two went slowly together to the door. Orchid opened it, then walked her to the car.

“You will be okay?” Orchid girl asked, as Louise unlocked her car.

“Of course,” Louise said.

Orchid held the door for her. “Where you go now?” she asked.

“Home,” Louise said. She put her purse in the back seat.

“Do you mind I can ask something, Louise?” Orchid asked

Louise froze. She said nothing for a moment, then tried to shrug.

“Sure.”

“Or maybe make suggestion?” and without waiting for another response she went on, kindly, but with a critical look at Louise’ gray hair. “I am thinking you can have use for getting hair done too, Louise?”

Louise let out the breath. *My hair?* “I thought about it. Hold on—” She checked her phone. A call had come in.

The lawyer.

It had been six months since she’d heard from him. She stared at the phone, then clicked it off and looked back to Orchid.

“I have other job at a hair salon,” Orchid said. “I can do hair for you.”

“I don’t think so,” Louise said, peaking upward at Orchid’s ‘do’.

Orchid laughed. “Not worry, Louise. I have customers older. I can do what you want, cornrows, or cut, color, blow dry. Anything. You will like it.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Louise said. Then she lied: “I have a friend who does hair.” She started to get in her car, then stopped and turned awkwardly back, trying to speak as the two women stood facing each other. Once again, her throat tightened, and she couldn’t say it.

They stayed like that for a moment, then Orchid said, “Is okay,” and moved lightly into Louise. Without touching any other parts of her body, she leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Louise felt the dread disappear, and her loneliness shift a little. She nodded tightly and got into the car. Orchid handed her the seatbelt. Louise began to close the door, then hesitated. She looked up.

“When?”

“What when?” Orchid asked.

“When could you do my hair?”
