

Fatal Mistakes is a psychological novel that deals with issues surrounding teen pregnancy. With guidance from a psychotherapist, the protagonist discovers that decisions which ignore emotions can wreak havoc in what seems to be a normal life. The plot also interweaves the stories of two minor characters that have experienced similar problems but with different outcomes.

## **Fatal Mistakes**

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FATAL



Mistakes

DENTON GAY

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **ERIC**

November, 1993

I awoke with an excruciating pain inside my head. A sterile white ceiling with its fluorescent lighting made opening my eyes difficult. The stiff feel of a hospital bed confirmed the feeling that something bad had happened. Blinking, I turned my head to the right. IV tubes extended from my right arm and some sort of contraption beeped every few seconds.

A window with the blinds partly open gave me a glimpse of an old house that I recognized. As a boy I'd played in the backyard with the kid who lived there. It was on Oak Street, right behind the Blue Springs Memorial Hospital, two blocks off Main. I'd been here several times, but never as a patient.

Did someone shoot me? Not very likely in a mid-sized Missouri town like ours.

Maybe somebody beat me up? Seems like I'd remember that. Closing my eyes, I tried to figure out what could have landed me in a hospital. The last thing I remembered was walking inside the police station to report for work.

Definitely had something to do with my head because I'd never had a headache like this. Felt like throwing up. Could it have been a stroke? I'd never heard anyone say anything about a stroke being so painful.

The sound of my mother's voice startled me. "Eric?"

I turned my head to the left.

Worry lines creased my mother's face. A feeling of dread knotted in my stomach. "Mother?"

Her eyes looked strained, slightly bloodshot. Whatever had happened must have really concerned her. I'd never seen

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that look on her face, even when I'd broken my arm at age twelve.

She moved close and placed her hand on my forearm. "How do you feel?"

"Got a splitting headache. Worst I've ever had."

"I'll get the nurse." She turned and walked out.

As I placed my elbows on the bed and tried to push myself up, a stabbing pain shot through my chest and abdomen. I fell back against the bed and felt my chest with my hand. A bad bruise, maybe some cracked ribs. If someone had beat me up, he must have been one tough bastard.

A nurse came in with my mother trailing behind. "How are you feeling, Mr. Thornton?"

"My head and chest are killing me. Could you give me something for the pain?"

I closed my eyes, not wanting to look at Mother. She was tense and upset. What on earth had happened?

The nurse lifted my arm and I opened my eyes enough to see her inject something into the IV. She checked my temperature and blood pressure, and made some notes on the chart.

Mother smiled at the nurse. "He's doing a lot better, isn't he?"

"Yes, Mrs. Thornton. He'll be back on his feet in a day or so." The nurse turned and left the room.

Mother came close and held my hand. I didn't really want her to do that — after all, I was a grown man. But if it made her feel better, so what?

"I've been very worried about you."

Couldn't think of what to say. "Thanks for coming."

She looked into my eyes, like she wanted to know something. I shut out the image with my eyelids. "Sorry,

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Mom, this headache makes it hard for me to carry on a conversation."

She gripped my hand for several minutes. "You know, Eric, you were such a fine child. Always wanted to do the right things. Didn't like to see anybody get hurt."

"I haven't changed much. So why don't you give yourself a break and go home to get some rest? You look pretty tired."

She didn't budge. "Son, can you tell me what happened?"

Her tone was steady and low, one I'd never heard her use. She stared at me as her hand trembled on mine.

"I wish I knew. Did someone beat me up?"

"You can't remember?"

I shook my head. "It feels like a bad beating, but it hurts twice as much. Did I get shot?"

"You were in a car wreck...a *bad* car wreck."

That seemed odd. I hadn't had an accident since I was sixteen. "Was anybody else hurt?"

"No."

Relaxing a bit, I exhaled.

She gripped my hand even tighter. More to come.

"Eric, I want you to tell me the truth. Are you mixed up in something that might be illegal?"

"Of course not. I'm a cop. You know better than that."

"The paper said you were driving drunk. Is that true?"

Oh shit. That might cost me my job. Worse yet, that was a pet peeve that she'd preached about since the day her cousin was killed by a drunk driver.

"Is that true, Eric?"

"I don't know. I can't remember anything like that."

Her grip remained tight. "Eric, are you having problems in your love life?"

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Why would she ask me a question like that? She never asked me about who I was dating. I always figured she'd rather not know. "No. I haven't even dated anybody in a good while."

She began to tremble. What was she so worked up about?

"Please tell me what's going on. I'll try to understand."

"I don't know. Look, if I was DWI, I am sorry. I know how you feel about that."

She began to cry.

Damnit. What could I do about it now? "Look, Mom, I'll quit drinking. I promise you this will never happen again."

Between sobs, she sputtered, "You won't even have the opportunity."

What did she mean by that? "I don't know what else to tell you. I made a mistake and I've promised not to do it again. What else do you want me to do?"

"This DWI is the least of my worries. It's the—" She broke down again, and held her face in her hands as she cried.

"What is it? You said nobody was hurt."

She pulled a Kleenex from her purse and blew her nose.

"Eric, do you know a man named Jerrod Johnson?"

The name sounded familiar but I couldn't place it with a face. "Doesn't ring a bell, but it could be somebody I've pulled over or ticketed. Why do you ask?"

"They... the newspaper says you killed him and you're going to jail." She burst into tears again.

I killed a man? Who's Jerrod Johnson? "There must be some mistake. You know I wouldn't do anything like that intentionally, unless it was absolutely necessary."

She nodded but was too emotional to carry on a conversation. I wished I could just go back to sleep. Maybe

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this awful pain in my head would go away. This felt like a bad dream that I couldn't wake up from and it left me with a weird feeling. Mom was all torn up and I was helpless to do anything about it.

The pain medicine made me feel drowsy. Might help me escape this mess where I didn't have a clue what was going on. Maybe when I woke up I'd remember what happened. I hope this is just a dream.

Several hours later, I awoke again, only to find out my problems were real, and much worse. Found out that I would be facing charges associated with the car wreck and with a shooting. The doctor told me the police would be transferring me to jail as soon as he released me from the hospital. There was nothing more humiliating for me, or any other cop I knew, than being caged in a jail cell.

What had I done?

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, Sergeant Pagnozzi rapped on the door, then came inside my room. He'd been with the Blue Springs police department about thirty years. A balding, heavy-set man who some of the guys called 'dad', he always gave advice whether you wanted it or not.

"Afternoon, Eric," he said. "How you feeling?"

"Pretty rough. Like somebody implanted a pain machine in my head."

"Well, you're lucky it isn't worse." He looked me up and down. "Captain sent me over to check on you."

"Tell him I'm enjoying all this good food and pretty nurses while I can. They tell me I'll be moving into the penthouse suite in the gated community tomorrow."



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Pagnozzi's eyebrows moved upward, he sighed, then nodded his head.

"What are the charges?"

"Captain said not to discuss your situation."

"Surely you can tell me something."

"Nope," he said. "Maybe you can tell me something."

"Wish I could. But the trouble is I can't remember anything about this trouble I'm in. The doctor said it's because of a concussion."

"You're kidding."

"No, Pagnozzi, I'm not."

Walking around my bed, Pagnozzi stroked his chin. "Eric, if you're thinking that you can get out of this by pretending you don't remember, I'm compelled to tell you that's a bad idea."

"Look, Frank. We've known each other since I started work there. You know that I'm nothing if not honest. Right?"

He nodded a bit. "Yes, but a man will do things to get out of a jam."

"What kind of jam am I in? I've heard about a DWI and something about a shooting."

"I can confirm the DWI. That's the only charge pending right now. I can't comment on the shooting."

"Frank, you've got to tell me one thing. What is my status with the Blue Springs PD?"

"You don't remember your last conversation with the captain?"

"No. I'm trying to get this through your thick skull. I can't remember anything about these things."

He frowned and paced the length of the room and back. "I don't see any reason why I can't tell you. You've been

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suspended without pay until the results of the investigation are in."

The word suspended struck a nerve inside. I closed my eyes. That meant I'd done something very stupid. Nobody had been suspended during the six years I'd worked there. "Frank, what did I do?"

"Can't discuss it with you Thornton. I've already told you that."

Of course he wouldn't. He was a black-and-white kind of cop.

"Okay, Frank. Can you tell me if the wreck was in a squad car or my pickup truck?"

"It was in your truck. Look, Eric, I'd like to talk with you about this but I can't. I will say you might be thinking about a good bail bondsman and a lawyer."

"You wouldn't call me a hypocrite if I bonded out?"

"Why would I do that?"

"You know the line. If you do the crime, you do the time."

"Well, that's if you're convicted of a crime. You may be innocent for all I know. Look, I've got to get back to work." He turned and walked out.

A few minutes later the doctor walked in. "Good afternoon, Eric. How're you feeling?"

"About the same. Can you give me something stronger for this headache?"

He studied my chart. "We've been giving you Amitriptyline. Not sure there is anything stronger that you can take. We can try something different if you like."

"Okay, I'll try anything."

He poked and prodded and then listened with his stethoscope at different parts of my chest. Then he probed

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my eyes with a small light. "Have you been able to remember anything more?"

"No. Not a thing." Would he ask the same questions as he had yesterday? I decided to beat him to the punch. "And, yes, it's still 1993 and Bill Clinton is still president."

Smiling, he switched off the light and began making notes on my chart. "I'm optimistic that your memory lapse will improve. I'm going to refer you to a psychologist, Dr. Preston, to help with your post-concussive symptoms like this memory loss. Her office is on Spring Street.

"Psychologist? Don't they work with people with mental illness?"

"Among other things, yes. But they can help with other issues like memory loss, cognitive disability, and disorders caused by head trauma."

He handed the clipboard holding my chart to a nurse "I'm going to research another medication for Mr. Preston's headache. I'll send an order shortly. Any questions, Eric?"

"When will you release me?"

"Probably tomorrow. We want another day for observation more than anything else."

"Believe me, I'm in no hurry."

Looking out the window, I dreaded what was to come.

\* \* \*

The next day, a burly cop named Mulligan delivered me to the police station and I received a ticket for DWI. Under the circumstances, they didn't arrest me. No charges on the shooting because the State Police were conducting an investigation. They gave me a phone number and asked me

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to call him, even though they had already given him mine. Then Mulligan drove me home.

When I went inside, I could think of nothing to do but go into my bedroom, draw the blinds, and collapse onto my bed. I hoped that a good night's sleep in my own bed would cure the pounding inside my head.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST**

Twenty-four hours a day for the past three weeks, pain radiated throughout my brain, keeping me from thinking clearly. From the back of my eyes, temple to temple, to the top of my skull, and all the way to that small knot on the back of my head, the aching raged. And I still couldn't remember what had caused it.

The events that occurred during this time were even more painful, though in a different way. The State Police investigation had been completed the day after my interview and submitted to a grand jury. Two weeks after that, they recommended that I be prosecuted. Gene said they felt bothered that police procedures had not been followed and disturbed by an excessive use of deadly force.

The day after that I went through a humiliating arrest and was sent to jail. The bond was \$200,000 and because of my miserable headache I decided to just stay in jail. What savings I had would be needed for the lawyer's fees. Besides, I couldn't have held down a job, even if I could find one.

Gene did manage to convince the powers that be to allow me to be escorted to doctor's visits. That even included the psychologist. After a couple days in a jail cell any reason to get a break meant a lot to me.

Today, Dr. Marsha Preston sat in an old-fashioned chair across from me, writing in her notebook. I knew very little about psychology and had my doubts whether any of this would help. But, this might be my only hope, because the pills sure weren't doing a lot of good. The only relief so far had been this short break in her questioning.

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An old lamp with a shade that looked like burlap cast a yellowish light, a nice contrast to the gray winter sky outside the window. Though this was an upstairs room in an old Victorian house, I couldn't see anything through the glass but cloud cover. Still, it beat the heck out of a jail cell.

She flipped back a couple of pages in her notes. She had shoulder-length black hair, a pale complexion, and serious look on her face. Maybe in her early forties, ten, twelve years older than me. She looked appealing in that dark suit.

"Eric, if I am to help you, I need you to open up, really express yourself."

"I'm trying. Honest. It's this headache. Can you get me something stronger?"

"You'll need to discuss that with the neurologist."

Resting my elbows on my knees, I clasped my head in both hands, hoping it would stop the throbbing.

"Eric, do you remember anything before the accident?"

"Yes. Like I said last week, everything except the day of the accident."

"Nothing about the day of the accident?"

"No."

"Can you remember anything that happened that evening?"

Nothing there. "The last thing I remember was going to work."

"As a police officer?"

I nodded and massaged my temples.

"Do you remember an incident, an altercation, involving a man and a child?"

I shook my head. "Look, Dr. Preston. Couldn't you call the neurologist and see if he could give me something stronger?"

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She stopped writing and paused until I looked up at her. "Dr. Morton explained to me last week that you are taking the strongest medication available. Take a deep breath and try to relax."

Relax? Hard to get comfortable in the metal cuffs around my wrists. "It's difficult when I can't remember something so important."

"You do remember our last discussion?"

"Yes. I remember what you said."

"Dr. Morton believes your memory will improve as your brain heals."

What if that didn't happen before the trial? Would it matter to a jury that I couldn't remember what I'd done? "So what do you want me to do?"

She looked back at her notes. "Last week, we talked about your family relationships. I felt you simply defended your family. You seemed to be describing your thoughts, but nothing about your feelings."

What did she expect me to say? "Look, Doc, I had good parents and there just isn't anything bad to tell."

"I'm asking you to *focus* on your emotions, not think about them, and then decide whether they warrant expression. Would you be willing to simply tell me how you feel?"

Not sure I could feel anything besides the aching. "I'll try."

"Okay. Let's focus on something outside family. Do you remember a girlfriend?"

What could be the point in me blabbering about old girlfriends? "Not really."

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"A good place to look for some emotion would be in a relationship you cared about. Now, think about the word girlfriend and try to connect an object."

"An object?"

"Yes. Something that might link you to a time or place. It may help to close your eyes once you think of the object."

Nothing rose through the din inside my mind. Pink flowers in a vase on the table beside her caught my attention. I closed my eyes.

The image of pink peach blossoms flashed through the pained muddle of my brain. An orchard full of them, tiny leaves on the limbs, a thin covering of new grass on the ground. I remembered. On my horse, loping around trees. Someone on a horse in front of me. Katherine.

With an involuntary jerk, I lifted my head and opened my eyes.

The therapist smiled. "Did you make a connection, Eric?"

"Yeah. I just remembered. Katherine."

"Great. Try to return to those images and see what you feel."

I closed my eyes again.

The sunny spring day had transformed the blossom-filled orchard into a blazing pink wonderland. Katherine turned in the saddle and shouted, "Catch me if you can."

I opened my eyes. One eyebrow arched on the psychologist's face.

"A playful feeling. Like having fun. Except for this hurting in my head, I feel exhilarated."

"How old are you? And Katherine?"

Closing my eyes, I saw the sunlight reflecting highlights of auburn in her light brown hair. The orchard was near my home. Spring of our college year. "Nineteen."



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"Great. What else can you remember?"

We were playing tag. Riding my first horse, a bay named Ol' Pride, Katherine nudged the horse's flank with her tennis shoe, trying to get away from me. I kept the reins taut in my hand because I didn't want to tag her right away.

Her hips moved back and forth in perfect rhythm with the horse. She rode as if born in a saddle, though she had grown up in a city.

When I loosened the reins, my horse took the hint and galloped close.

Katherine reined her horse around a tree and changed directions. After a couple of those evasive maneuvers—

"Eric, what do you remember?"

"I'm remembering a day in my past, with Katherine."

"How did you feel about Katherine?"

"What has that got to do with anything? Am I not here to try to find some memory about this murder I supposedly committed?"

"I'm trying to see how you handle emotions. So far, you've almost convinced me that you can't access any."

The first woman I'd ever really cared about was Katherine. But that had been ten years ago, and things had changed. "Okay. I cared about Katherine."

"Good. Take a moment and reflect back on those images in your mind and be aware of how you are feeling."

I sighed, closed my eyes and returned to the game. I could hear the horses' measured breathing and the rhythmic beat of their hooves as we loped through the orchard.

Katherine cut left around one tree and right around another. I probably could have caught her, but I just wanted to watch her ride.

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She glanced back at me, probably checking the distance between us.

I nudged my horse for more speed and we followed on Pride's tail. Noticing a pattern, I rode around a tree opposite from her and tagged her on the leg as we passed by each other.

Then she chased me. I'd let her get close, then speed up to a gallop or cut around a tree.

When I thought she might be tiring of the game, I slowed to a lope.

She tagged me and I chased her again. Whenever she could elude me, she laughed, and I could see her confidence building.

Clowning around, I rode backwards in the saddle, then tried to make her think I'd been thrown by hiding on one side of my horse. That almost caused my undoing, as I felt the saddle slip.

Pulling my horse to a stop, I dismounted and re-cinched the girth strap.

She came bounding up on her horse. "What are you doing?"

A light sweat around the saddle blankets of both horses, along with their labored breathing, told me they weren't in good physical condition. "Letting my horse rest. Get down and we'll see how well you do on foot."

I draped a rein around a tree limb. As she dismounted, I tied her horse to an adjacent tree.

She tagged me and took off. I chased her. She tried to cut, but I soon had her in my arms.

Laughing, we both paused, out of breath, her cheeks flushed. She seemed comfortable in my embrace.

"You like this, don't you?"

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The sunlight brought out a copper tint in her hair as she brushed it out of her face. "This is the most fun I've ever had."

"I'll make a cowgirl out of you yet."

"How do you make a cowgirl?" Her brown eyes locked onto mine.

"With a strong rope." I couldn't help cracking a smile.

She laughed and placed her hand on my cheek. "You won't need a rope."

Then, it just happened. Her lips on mine. A kiss, lips parted. My thoughts were flying as I tried to figure out how it's done. My first real kiss. Not one of those pecks I'd had before. So physically startling that it scared me.

Her breasts pressed against my chest. Body heat. Arms around me. My heart beat faster. Sensations I'd never felt before and didn't understand.

I guess it surprised her too, because we both backed away at the same time. It reminded me of grabbing an electric fence. The power makes it hard to let go, but the shock forces you.

For the next few hours the hint of cinnamon-flavored lipstick on my lips kept the feelings alive. And that scent stayed fresh on my mind for days afterwards, whenever I replayed the experience behind closed eyelids. I'd kissed other girls before, but nothing compared with this.

"Eric, can you express what you're feeling?" The sound of the therapist's voice caused my eyes to jerk open. "That's the first smile I've seen on your face."

I didn't want to tell her about Katherine. I couldn't speak of some things. A vow must not be broken.

"Well?"

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"I was remembering a good time we had together. A kiss in a peach orchard."

"How did you feel?"

"I felt a lot. Playful, nervous, curious, and a certain sense of passion, maybe just wanting her to like me. Seems like I felt everything, all at once."

Smiling, the therapist resumed making notes.

Looking back, the whole thing seemed almost Biblical. Instead of an apple tree, it had been a peach tree. Somehow that felt right though, because she was my sweet peach. No more tempting fruit had ever been created. At least, not for me.

"So Eric, tell me more about Katherine."

The throbbing grew stronger. I stared deep into the therapist's swirling dark eyes until I saw a flicker of uneasiness. "I don't want to talk about it."

She didn't look away, like most people did when I let them know I meant business. "Eric, would I be correct to assume that you cared very much for her, and that discussing your relationship would be painful for you?"

No doubt about it. That was the day I fell head over heels in love with Katherine. "It's not too hurtful; I just don't see the point in talking about something that happened ten years ago."

"In order to—"

"I said, I don't want to talk about it." I glared at her.

She raised her palms toward me. "Okay. But please think about what I've said about emotions and relationships. If you're not willing to discuss those, then what will you discuss with me?"

Damnit. What could I say to get her off Katherine? "Well, tell me this. Why can you get me to remember something I'd

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forgotten a long time ago, but you can't help me remember what happened a couple of weeks ago?"

Relaxing a bit, she smiled. "That's an interesting realization on your part, Eric. What triggered this particular memory?"

"The pink flowers in the vase. That's all."

"Consciousness works in strange ways. You have many memories available to you at any instant. Yet for some reason this one surfaced. I'm betting there is a connection."

To what? "This has something to do with my problems? I'd take that bet."

There was an unusual energy in her eyes. Being a cop, I pay attention to a person's eyes, and I'd never seen a pair like these. Her eyelids narrowed.

"Well, gambling is illegal, and ethically I couldn't bet with one of my patients. You can imagine the implications." She laughed.

I understood that it might not be fair to someone who was suffering some kind of mental disease. "Yes, but I'm under the impression that I'm relatively sane."

"That's true so here's what I'll do. I will enter into an agreement with you. If you'll answer my questions honestly, if only to yourself, and we are unable to establish a connection, I'll refund any co-pay or deductible that applies to my fee."

No need to think about that one. "You're on." I extended my hands, right one forward, and tried to conceal the metal handcuff with the left.

She shook it. "Good. Between now and next week I want you to think about events that were important to you and how you felt at the time."

"I'll try. If I can get rid of this splitting headache."

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She glanced at the old tarnished clock ticking away on the coffee table beside my chair. "Our time is up. Do you need any assistance getting down the stairs?"

"No thanks, Doc."

She stood and waited, cradling the notebook in her arms.

I struggled to my feet, and then ambled out of the room and down the stairs.

There sat my escort, Mulligan, thumbing through a magazine. He was a big, strong cop, and I'd found out the hard way during a training exercise. He'd effectively demonstrated how to arrest a disorderly perp and I had been playing the role of the perp.

As I reached the last step, he rose and extended a hand.

"I'm fine, Mulligan. Just give me a minute." My left leg was still bruised and sore from the accident.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the cute receptionist looking at me. Probably wondered about a client in an orange jailbird uniform and cuffs. I couldn't bring myself to face her.

"Mr. Thornton, shall I reschedule you next week, same time?"

"Yes, please." I looked up at my escort. "That fit your schedule, Mulligan?"

He nodded and led me out the door.

When we reached the squad car, he opened the rear door and I collapsed into the seat. A groan slipped out as another bolt of pain shot through my head.

He crawled behind the wheel. "You okay, Thornton?"

"No, I'm not. You got anything for pain?"

"No."

"How about stopping by the liquor store and buying me a pint of Ireland's finest?"

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"You know I can't do that."

Good old Mulligan. Always followed regulations.

On the way back to the jail I wondered whether the therapist could really do anything to help me with just talk. So far it hadn't given me any relief.

If I believed that I'd taken the life of an innocent person I might go for Mulligan's gun once we got to the station. But he wouldn't shoot me, and I couldn't stand the thought of the pain that would surely swarm me during a scuffle. And I knew I didn't have the courage for anything that drastic as long as I believed I was innocent.

No, I couldn't risk not having an opportunity to get out once in a while. Besides, I wanted to win this little deal with the doc.

Still, for all I knew, the rest of my life would be full of pain, and it could go on for a long time in prison. Surely not. The feeling of innocence seemed strong. Could I really have killed a man? For no reason? I just couldn't accept that. I couldn't think of any reason. No enemies, nothing. There must be some mistake.

Or could I have been framed? Who would have any reason to do that? I couldn't think of a soul.

I'd been brought up to be independent, stand on my own two feet. Now, I needed help. If someone had told me I'd need help from a psychologist, I'd never have believed them. Could she help me at all? She hadn't done a lot so far.

The person I really felt sorry for was my mother. I could still see her crying beside the hospital bed when I awoke. She was still crying last time I saw her. Damn it. Made me want to start bawling myself.

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The police station came into view. Mulligan parked and helped me in. I set my jaw and did my best not to groan. Not a word spoken between us.

Later that night, while drifting off to sleep in the dim light of my cell, I tried to remember the taste of cinnamon, the image of Katherine underneath the peach tree, and the look of love in her eyes.



Fatal Mistakes is a psychological novel that deals with issues surrounding teen pregnancy. With guidance from a psychotherapist, the protagonist discovers that decisions which ignore emotions can wreak havoc in what seems to be a normal life. The plot also interweaves the stories of two minor characters that have experienced similar problems but with different outcomes.

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