

A Novel

# Before It's Too Late

Joann Schissel

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## **About the author**

Joann Schissel lives with her husband, Michael Van Natta, on a vineyard in a small town in south-central Iowa, where they make wine and write books.

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# Chapter 1

## San Francisco 2018

Melissa fidgeted in the plush chair of the psychologist's waiting area and past the time gazing out the floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the skyscrapers of San Francisco Bay. The morning fog had cleared away, but the gloomy light of the autumn afternoon lingered.

"The doctor will see you now," the receptionist said, ushering her into the consulting office that looked like a fabricated set staged for a photo shoot. Minimalist furnishings included two chairs, same as the waiting area, a mahogany desk and a table lamp covered with a green glass shade. A PhD diploma hung on the wall.

"How is your freelance work going?" Doctor Prescott asked after both settled into chairs across from each other. Round black spectacles made his eyes appear large, as if scrutinizing a specimen under a microscope. He brushed something from the sleeve of his suit jacket and opened his notebook.

"Work is not so great," Melissa said, fidgeting with her hands in her lap. "I lost a major account a few weeks ago. Madison Productions. The marketing manager said it was because of budget cuts, but I think it's because he didn't like my work."

"Why do you think that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've been unfocused lately. The anxiety is getting worse. The other day I misplaced my laptop."

I always have it on the work desk in my apartment and I swear I had no recollection of where I put it. I found it in the laundry basket."

His eyebrows ticked upward. "Have you been taking any illegal drugs or using excessive amounts of alcohol?"

"Christ, no." She rolled her eyes. "Just those anti-anxiety herbal chews you recommended." She rubbed her manicured nails. "Sometimes I drink a glass of wine with food from the local deli at dinner. But that's about it."

He wrote something in his notebook. "Are you still managing your stress with walks in the neighborhood park?"

She nodded. "Yes, every day, like you told me to. And also, I tried volunteering at the animal shelter like you suggested. I thought being around animals would help, but it just made me more fearful. Afraid the dogs would bite."

Dr. Prescott placed his notebook on his lap. "So, diet and exercise could improve but it's within a normal range. You're a healthy weight, and frankly, an attractive and intelligent woman. How about your social life?"

She dug her nails into her palms and shook her head. "Actually, it sucks. I haven't had any meaningful relationships since my divorce. I can't get close to anyone. As soon as I start to like them or worse, fall in love, they run away."

"Leave you like your parents did."

She bristled with the remark. "Like my mother did, you mean. Dad was the one who stayed. The dependable one."

"Yes, your mother. Maybe we should try to explore that again."

Melissa shook her head. "I told you, Doctor. I prefer not to talk about her."

The doctor leaned back in the chair and interlaced his fingers across his chest. "Melissa, tell me what you want to accomplish here. We can't work on your problems if you refuse to face them."

Melissa grimaced. "I just want to resolve this feeling of dread,



like something isn't right ... something missing and imbalanced."

"I can refer you to a physician who can provide anti-depressants if you want."

"No, I don't want to depend on prescriptions."

Dr. Prescott leaned forward. "It's common for many people at this time of their lives to seek to re-examine their circumstances. Mid-life crisis is real. Anxiety can leave one questioning the meaning of life."

Melissa took a deep breath and frowned. "I'm only 40 years old. I don't believe suddenly I'm having some kind of crisis. Frankly, Doctor, I feel like you're not helping me." She stood and gathered her purse, slinging the strap over her shoulder. "I appreciate your efforts, really, I do. But considering my financial situation along with my frustration with lack of progress, I think it's a good time to take a break from therapy."

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Trudging up the three flights of stairs with mail in hand, Melissa unlocked the door to her apartment. On the wooden end table, envelopes stamped final notice mingled with print-outs of resumes. A couple weeks after walking out of the doctor's office, her job hunt had failed to bring any good news. The meager amount in her savings would have to cover next month's expenses.

She browsed through the new stack of mail with hopes of a job offer. Instead, she pulled out a handwritten envelope post-marked from Iowa. An unfamiliar name of Gabe Murphy was printed across the return address.

Hesitant but curious, her fingers lifted the flap and removed the single sheet of stationery.

\*\*\*

Oct. 4, 2018

Dear Melissa,

I am writing to you because your mom is gravely ill and has been hospitalized. I beg you to set aside the past and come to Iowa before it's too late. She told me all about the history between you, and I just want you to know her situation and hope you will make the right decision. I'm sorry for the letter, but we didn't know how else to contact you. Please come as soon as you can. I will reimburse you for traveling expenses. My phone and email are below.

- Gabe Murphy

Frozen at her desk, she chewed her fingernail to a nub. Several years ago, Aunt Irene had called to tell her about her mom's remarriage to some Iowa farmer named Gabe, but she had shrugged off the news, not the least bit interested in Lydia's latest adventures.

The letter triggered images of the last time she saw her mother in their driveway on that frigid spring day in Iowa. Wind had whipped strands of light brown hair across Lydia's tear-streaked face, the sight of her mother's distress chilling and turbulent as Melissa's bewilderment. She stood helpless to stop her as her mother shoved a suitcase into the car and drove away.

Holding the letter from Gabe, Melissa paced into the kitchen re-reading its message. At least she had opened this one. There had been others, addressed with her mother's handwriting. Those had been promptly dispatched, unopened with "return to sender" scrawled on the front. The satisfaction of the act provided a much more powerful message than any reply.

This sudden plea from a man she had never met made her skin prickle. Why concern herself about a selfish woman removed from her life for decades? The idea of returning to Iowa where she

grew up reignited a knotted web of woolly nostalgia and dormant anger. What did this man, technically her stepfather, want from her? Why would he think this information could convince her to make a trip for someone who caused such bitterness? She held the letter for a moment. Curling her fingers around it, she crushed it in one swift movement, dropping it into the trash can.

That night, Melissa dreamed of wandering through a surreal landscape of luminous green grass and cartoonish flowers sprouting bright colors. Marshmallow clouds morphed into white doves and floated in a brilliant azure blue sky. Her mother and grandmother appeared beside her, conjured and shaped from adolescent memory.

Grandmother faded into the distance. Her mother's face came into focus, bright and smiling. Lips moved and radiated a shimmering tone. M-e-l-i-s-s-a. The sound of it stretched and hovered from far away.

The scene shifted in a flash, replaced with ferocious dark clouds, multiplying, and swirling into a furious storm. Lydia's face held a terrifying expression, exaggerated, and pulled into unnatural contortions. A giant vortex of wind and black dirt swept her mother into a deep abyss. Her elongated pink fingers reached out before dissolving into droplets.

The dream rattled her awake. The reverberating echo of her mother's voice calling her name faded into the hush of the night. She rolled over to check the alarm clock. The green digits glowed 1:23 AM. Closing her eyes, she replayed the scenes of the dream. Vivid, more than simply the impression of odd theater, its residue sparked an unexplained depth of emotional tugging and heart-breaking sadness. She lay awake, breathing deep to soothe the heaviness in her chest and the decision that weighed on her mind.

\*\*\*

The next morning, she padded the few short steps from bed-

room to kitchen to prepare her usual black coffee and dry, wheat toast.

She plopped her elbows on the counter, chin cupped in her hands and gazed out the solitary window.

The busy street three stories below filled the moment with mundane activities of the city. Cars rushed down the narrow hilly street at a frenzied pace only to be stymied at the red light. The blare of traffic seeped through the closed window with a familiar chorus of horns and sirens. A woman pushed a stroller along the sidewalk and stopped for a moment to adjust the infant's covering.

Turning away from the window, an object out of place caught her eye. A crumpled paper lay on the tiled floor.

Last night she swore the letter had been thrown inside the trash can. She retrieved it and flicked it back inside the receptacle, shoving it down with a determined punch. Done. Discarded. Just as she had been thrown away by her mother. An edge of the crushed paper quivered with a nearly imperceptible movement, like a rose blooming in slow motion.

How would it feel to never see her mother again? Never receive the satisfaction of an explanation and a deserved apology.

She reached for the wrinkled paper and smoothed it on the surface of the two-foot square dining table. The uncanny timing of the letter's arrival and the dream gnawed at her.

Perhaps the dream held some meaning in its vivid imagery and sense of urgency. Different than most dreams that are easily forgotten, this one stirred a feeling of raw emotion. A nagging itch that needed scratched.

Her eyes fixed on the letter. Grabbing her phone, she punched in several digits. After a few rings, a man's voice answered. "You've reached Gabe Murphy, please leave your message."

"Hello, Gabe, this is Melissa. I got your letter." She hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I'm coming to Iowa on the next available flight."