

Tales Out Of The Psych Office



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Chapter 1

“Next Tuesday at 3:30?”

“Sure,” Melissa said, biting the last bit of nail on her index finger.

Kathy handed her the small, white appointment card and opened the door. “Have a good week. And practice avoiding the ‘all or nothing’ negative thinking we’ve been discussing.”

“Yeah.” Melissa’s mouth twisted a little, and even tried to form a curve, but not anything close to what could be called a smile.

She walked past the waiting room and—froze—for just a split second, when she recognized a boy from her English class. Without turning her head, she quickened her step and left the office.

He was reading a magazine... I don't think he saw me.

She slogged through light slush to the closest bus stop on Mass Ave. Store windows were sprayed with snow and draped with gold garlands. Music invited folks to sing about Santa, but Melissa didn’t sing or look at displays. She felt none of the holiday merriment they tried to induce.

She leaned against a light post and looked down the busy Cambridge thoroughfare. No bus in sight; nobody waiting either. *Just missed one*, she thought. Glum thoughts settled on her shoulders.

How's it possible not to be negative about missing a bus?

An older man carrying a shopping bag soon joined her and stood a few feet back on the sidewalk. Melissa turned away. His half-gray and scraggly beard reminded her of Jim, her mother’s live-in boyfriend.

Hanging here, waiting for a bus, at least means I'm not home.

Ha! She laughed at the irony. *I hope I remember to ask Kathy next week if that's the right way to think.*

Kathy was a licensed mental health counselor and Melissa King had been seeing her for a month now, ever since the school nurse noticed cuts on Melissa's wrists. They hadn't been deep cuts, just nicks she'd made with dull scissors, and Melissa had tried to deny it. She said her neighbor's cat had done it.

But the nurse insisted on making an issue of it, first with the school psychologist and then with Melissa's mother, and before you knew it, Melissa was required to get screened by a professional.

Melissa actually liked going to counseling at Kathy Demming's. Kathy didn't overreact like the nurse and seemed to understand the scratching eased anxiety. But the anxiety always returned, as did the desire to cut.

Kathy had called it self-injury and said it was fairly common among teenage girls who felt lonely, empty, overwhelmed, or inadequate.

"Nevertheless," she had said, "it's harmful behavior and can become a dangerous method of trying to cope. I'm glad you're here. I think I can help."

After that first meeting Kathy gave Melissa a letter saying she was safe to return to school, and since health insurance paid for the visits, the counseling relationship continued.

Before long, a full-size city bus broke her trance. It came to a maddening halt, spewing diesel fumes and splashing wet slop on Melissa's new jeans. She boarded quickly and sat halfway down the aisle at a window seat. She fixed her eyes outside but saw nothing. The ride home to Arlington would take about ten minutes, and as

she sat there, the early darkness of the season sank into her soul.

It would be a long night, a long school year, a long life. If she lived.

Walking into her house—Kapow! Kapow!—Melissa was blasted by her twelve-year-old brother's video game.

“Oh yeah,” Jason shouted. “Gotcha.”

Her mother wasn't home from work yet and neither was Jim, the creep. *Thank God*, she sighed, taking a look in the refrigerator. The best she could find was American cheese. She unwrapped the plastic and bit into a corner. Jason had left a dish of bones of last night's fried chicken on the counter.

“Why don't you ever clean up your garbage, you slob,” she shouted. “And thanks for not leaving me any!”

She made a peanut butter sandwich and retreated to her room upstairs. It wasn't big and she had to share it with her nine-year-old sister, Lindsey, but they had their own beds and pretty much kept to their own sides.

Lindsey wasn't around. She usually spent afternoons at her best friend's house and her mother picked her up there on her way home from work. Jim sometimes came in right after work and sometimes he stopped for a few cold ones.

The kids' father lived in Methuen, forty minutes away. There was no bus to get there, so they saw him only rarely. About as rarely as he sent child support.

Melissa plopped on her bed and stared at the ceiling. The day had been crap. Just more of the same. Crappy kids, crappy lunch, crappy teachers.

My life sucks so bad.

She stuck a finger into her teeth. No more nail to bite, just raw skin, pulsing in its pinkness.

Her mom had taken the scissors away. *What a turd. As if I couldn't find something else to scratch with.*

Noises erupted downstairs.

“Are you hungry, Jason?” It was Mom. “Lindsey and I picked up pizza.”

Cabinet doors opened and closed and dishes rattled to the table. “Did you hear me, Jay?”

Kapow! Kapow! “Die, you demon,” Jason said to his game.

“Go get your sister,” Pat King said to her youngest daughter.

“I’m hungry,” Lindsey said, sitting down and picking up a slice of pepperoni.

“Meliss-saaa,” her mom called up the stairs. “Dinn-aaaah.”

Melissa rolled over. A dampness stung her eyes. She closed them tight.

“Meliss-saaa.” Her mother bristled again.

Melissa dragged herself downstairs and sat next to Lindsey at the table. She slid a slice of pizza onto her dish, leaving behind a trail of grease.

“Jaaasson,” Mrs. King called more loudly this time. She served herself a bulbous glass of wine from a box and sat down at the table.

Lindsey prattled on about needing a red sweater for the school-wide holiday choral production.

“How can school demand you buy a red sweater?” Mrs. King scowled. “Ask your father for the money. He certainly owes enough.”

Lindsey nibbled at the tip of her pizza and swung her little legs back and forth under the table. “But I need it by Friday.”

Mrs. King folded a piece of pizza in half and washed down a big bite with a slow swallow of wine. “Friday?” she snarled. “How can we get it by Friday?”

Melissa got up and poured herself and her sister a glass of Coke from a two-liter bottle in the fridge. “I can

take you after school tomorrow,” she said, “if you come right home. Do you have any birthday money left?”

“Ten dollars,” Lindsey said as she took the tall fizzy glass with both hands.

Melissa watched her mother wipe grease from her chin. “She needs more than that, Mom.”

“Call your father,” Mrs. King said.

The massive Victorian front door slammed, echoing a hollow pang against the high ceiling.

Kapow! Kapow! As usual Jim was greeted by Jason’s incessant obliteration of demons.

“What level you on?” he asked taking off his wool pea jacket and tossing it over the back of a computer chair.

“I almost got the ghost hovercraft,” Jason said, “but an enemy sniper ambushed me from behind.”

Jim rolled his chair next to Jason and picked up a control shooter. “Wanna play split screen?”

Jason dropped his shooter. “Nah. I gotta go eat now.” He left the computer corner of the living room and joined his mother and sisters in the kitchen.

Jim followed close behind. His hands were rough and dirty, but Pat King most often praised him for doing honest work whenever construction jobs were available. He snapped up a bottle of orange cleaner and squeezed a stream into his palm. He washed at the sink and dried off with a dishtowel.

He took a sixteen-ounce beer from the refrigerator, popped it open, and drank a long swig. He sat down next to Pat and pulled a slice of extra-cheese out of the box.

“I won twenty bucks today on a scratch ticket,” he said, raising his chin not only in pride, but also to catch the cheese drooping from the dinner he scooped from the big red box. He didn’t bother with a dish and he chewed with his mouth open.

“Quit that kickin’, Lindsey, will ya?” he said.

The little girl crossed her ankles and sat still. “Do you have any work I can do, Jim, to earn money for a red sweater I need for school? Do you want me to vacuum your truck or anything?”

“No point doin’ that in winter,” he said. “If you need money ask your father.” A bit of soggy crust clung to his unkempt beard.

“But Melissa is taking me tomorrow. Will you loan me ten dollars until I can get it from him?”

“Ha! You might get it from him by the time you grow boobs.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Jim,” Pat said. “Please don’t talk to her like that.” She got up from the table and retrieved her purse from where she’d left it by the door. “Here, honey. If you add this to your birthday money, you should be able to get something on sale.” She handed her a ten-dollar bill.

Melissa finished her Coke and carried her dish to the sink where Jim’s dirty suds dripped from the faucet. Melissa wiped them with a sponge, then filled the sink with hot water and dishwashing liquid.

“Anyone wants their dish washed, bring it here now,” she said. Lindsey carried over her glass and dish.

Jason went back to his computer screen. “No more video games until after your homework is done,” Pat said.

“I did it in school already,” he answered from within a hazy glow of electronic graphics.

“Your marks don’t exactly show that you been doin’ homework,” Jim said, marching into the living room to shut off the PC.

“You’re an ass,” Jason said, getting up and dropping the controller on the table.

“Jason!” Pat yelled. But he was already halfway up the stairs.

Jim belched. “Can hardly wait till that bugger asks me for a ride,” he said and sat down on the couch.

“I wish you’d be nicer to them,” Pat said, sitting next to him. “They’re just children.”

Jim put his arm around her shoulder. “You’re too easy on them. That’s why they get away with murder around here. They need the strong discipline of a man.”

“Give them time. It’s only been a year since the divorce.”

“That lowlife father of theirs never did much good for them. You’re better off without that loser.”

“Still,” Pat said. “They need to be taught respect. The psychologist Melissa’s been seeing told me the best way to do that is by modeling the desired behavior.”

“Huh?”

“You know,” Pat continued, “if we act respectful, they’re more likely to act respectful.”

“Good luck. You’re wastin’ time on that counselor. My father taught us respect with a belt.”

“Could be,” she said. “But times have changed. You can’t do that today.”

“That’s why this world sucks so bad.” He pulled her closer and planted a sloppy kiss on her mouth.

Pat pulled away. “Still, Kathy Demming was highly recommended by the school and we should try to follow her suggestions.”

“Are you givin’ me the cold shoulder? Your flaming red hair says H-O-T.” He placed one hand around her shoulder, his other on her breast, and squeezed nearer. “C’mon baby. Jim needs a little lovin’ tonight.”

“The children are still awake. Let’s wait until later when they’re asleep.” Pat sat back and clicked on the TV. “Maybe we can find a movie to watch.”

“You’ll be asleep before them,” Jim said getting up in disgust. “Watch your *Wheel of Fortune*. Maybe you can pick up some tips about touchin’ and ringin’ bells from Vanna. I’m goin’ down the Legion Hall to catch the Celtics.”

Pat tried to stop him from putting on his jacket. “We can put on the basketball here if you want.” She wrapped her hands around his back and tried to snuggle into his shoulder.

“Nah,” he said. “I might get lucky again and win another twenty bucks bettin’ on the game. ’Cause I sure ain’t gettin’ lucky here with you. No wonder your ex had a rovin’ dick.”

A gush of cold air slapped at Pat’s searing face as he opened the door and left.

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