

## Truly Madly

### Chapter One

“I heard that after Daniel Connelly killed his wife, he wrote her name in blood on the wall. Then, he shot himself.”

“The way I heard it, he wrote the name of her *lover* in her blood.”

The voices came from the next aisle over, but they were increasing in volume, getting closer. I froze, my face burning with mortification and rage. They were talking about me, or rather, about my parents.

I recognized Deanna Summers’ voice, but I couldn’t identify her companion. I closed my eyes, willing their hateful voices away. When I opened them, the cashier at Truelove’s Grocery, Brandon, was looking at me, his kind, brown eyes sympathetic.

Although it made me feel mean and small, I hated the pity almost as much as the gossip.

“You know,” Deanna continued, “Carmen, Isabelle’s sister, is locked up in some crazy hospital out in California.”

The two women rounded the aisle then faltered when they saw me standing at the counter. I recognized the woman Deanna was with as Mindy Crawford, the librarian. Mindy had the decency to look ashamed; Deanna only gave me a self-satisfied smile.

“Brandon,” Deanna said as she and her items crowded in next to where I stood waiting for Brandon to finish bagging my purchases, “I’ll take an apple pie, too.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Deanna. I just sold the last one to Isabelle.” He turned to the bakery case behind him and retrieved a pie. He slipped it into a bag and added it to my purchases. I hadn’t bought the pie. It was Brandon’s sweet little dose of revenge. All the sweeter since Deanna was his sister.

Brandon was twenty-two, six years younger than my twenty eight, and he had a huge crush on me. I don’t think it was so much my looks—which I thought were, at best, average—as it was the ‘town bad girl’ thing I had going.

Not that I'm *unattractive*. To use one of my father's expressions, I wasn't so ugly I had to sneak up on a water fountain to take a drink, but I'm far from beautiful.

People said I looked like my mother, but the features I shared with her were somehow muted on me, plainer. Where my mother's jet black hair had been long and glossy, I was a brunette with shoulder-length hair that sometimes seemed to have a mind of its own. My unruly mane almost always made me appear as if I'd just crawled out of bed, no matter how much I tried to tame it. Where my mother's eyes were a dynamic, electrifying, sapphire, mine were simply blue. Her skin had been flawless, her full lips always smiling, her makeup seemingly applied with an artist's brush. Although I made my living creating art, I was doing well if I managed to slap on eyeliner and lip gloss.

The appeal I held for Brandon might have more to do with the fact that I was something of a pariah in the small town of Jessup, Missouri, where I'd grown up, escaped from seven years ago, then returned to almost a year ago.

Just as Deanna and Mindy were doing now, people in town seemed to shrink from me, as if whatever had made my relatives lunatics might be contagious.

Although the two women thought they knew a great deal about my family, they had some of their facts wrong. My father did not write my mother's name, or her lover's, in blood. He simply shot her, wrote a note, and shot himself. My sister, Carmen, was not in a mental hospital. She was living in sunny California, and frequently visited a luxury spa in Palm Springs.

I had also been living in California until the murder/suicide, at which time I'd returned to Jessup. I intended to stay only long enough to settle my parents' estate and tie up loose ends, but here it was nearly a year later, and I was still here. I'd given up a successful design business to stay in Jessup and take abuse from the townspeople.

Maybe what they said about my family being insane was true, because only a crazy person would have stayed here this long.

Eyes down, anxious to flee from Deanna's not-so-subtle hostility, I grabbed the plastic bags from the counter and headed out of the store. I walked briskly toward my Jeep Cherokee, but before I made it, I collided with something large and solid, almost dropping the pie Brandon had given me.

“Oh, God, Isabelle, I’m sorry.” Sheriff Rick ‘Hutch’ Hutchings grabbed my upper arms to steady me, and I looked up and found myself staring into his eyes. Concern had darkened their silver hue to gunmetal grey. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It was my fault. I wasn’t paying attention.”

He studied me a moment then dropped his hands. He indicated his cruiser, which was parked near my jeep. “Damn thing won’t start. You’d think a county vehicle could get better maintenance than this, but I’ve had it in the shop twice this month.”

I nodded, not sure what kind of response that required. Hutch was wearing his uniform, including the hat that concealed most of his dark hair. He had a smudge of grease on one sleeve, and a bit on his cheek.

He took a rag from his back pocket and wiped at the grease on his hands, not very successfully. “Did I get any on you?” he asked, studying my torso for the effects of our collision.

“No, don’t think so. No big deal.”

“Good.” He smiled. “I haven’t seen you around much lately. How have you been?”

I shifted uneasily, adjusting the grocery bags in my arms. Every time I saw him, which fortunately wasn’t often, I thought about our past, about how things had been between us when we were both much too young to know anything about life, or love.

I looked away, afraid he could read the emotion in my eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Here, let me get those bags for you.”

I stepped back and shook my head. “No, I’ve got them. Thanks, though. See you around.”

I carried my bags to the jeep, threw them inside, and drove out of the parking lot, tempted to take the highway that led out of Jessup to freedom. Freedom from the gossip, freedom from the lingering attraction I felt for Hutch, and freedom from the strange hold this town had on me.

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It was almost dusk by the time I finished my errands and headed home. As I drove, I squinted through my windshield at the overcast sky. Ominous black clouds seemed ready, at any moment, to spew a torrent of water on the land. I felt a kinship with them. My mood was also black, and I was ready to do some spewing of my own.

Even though I empathized with the clouds, I hoped they'd hold off until after I arrived home. The road that led uphill to my property could be tricky under normal conditions. It was positively treacherous in a heavy rain.

If my mood had been rotten before, when I pulled into my drive, it became as rancid as an open, festering wound.

An older model, baby-blue, Ford pickup sat in my driveway.

*Patrick.* Damn.

Patrick was my uncle, my father's brother, but he and I were not on the best of terms. I'd never been close to him. He and my father had been estranged because of an argument over their inheritance. My father had invested his share and done quite well. Patrick spent his on booze and women.

I climbed out of the jeep and waited. The truck's door gave a creaking protest as Patrick shoved it open. I could smell the rain in the air, and I took a deep, soothing lungful of it, bracing myself for the battle ahead.

Patrick staggered toward me and when he was within six feet or so, the smell of sour booze eradicated the sweet smell of the rain.

Patrick had once been good-looking, a ladies' man, but years of hard living and heavy drinking had changed that. His longish, dark brown hair was scraggly, and although he was only thirty-eight, it was mostly gray. His blue eyes were rheumy and yellowed. Purplish veins spidered over his always red nose.

He pointed a finger at me, but missed his aim and directed it somewhere to the left of me. "You owe me some money, missy. You're nothin' but a damn thief." He ran the words together, canting slightly to the side as he spoke.

Since my parents died, Patrick had been regularly dunning me for ‘his fair share’ of the money my parents had left me and my sister. I refused to give him a dime. Partly because he wasn’t entitled to it, partly because I didn’t particularly like him, and partly because it would never be enough. Whatever I gave him, he’d drink up, and then he’d be back for more.

“I can’t deal with this today, Patrick.” I started around him, but he lurched into my path. I drew back, not wanting to get any closer to him than I was already.

“You’re *gonna* deal with it. I want what’s rightly mine.”

I shook my head. “You need to get help.”

“Get help?” He tried for a sneer, but all he managed was a drunken, clownish grimace. “Did you tell your loony-toons daddy to *get help* before he offed your mama?”

I gritted my teeth, determined not to engage in a war of words with him. “That’s enough, Patrick.”

He came closer, ducking his head, staring into my face. “We all got it, ya know.” His eyes became even more unfocused, the pupils almost disappearing in the yellowish-blue orbs. “Yer daddy killed his. I chose to aneste...aneste...” He frowned, brushing his hands along his shirt pocket as if he’d tucked the elusive word inside there. He blew out a breath and said, “...to numb mine. How do you make yours go away, Issy? How do *you* push back the crazy?”

I’d always regarded Patrick with a sort of pitying dislike. But at that moment, I hated him. Hated his weakness, his greed, his deluded sense of entitlement. But mostly, I hated his words, because I’d wondered that myself.

I had escaped, had been moderately successful and well adjusted, content. But the death of my parents had brought me back and now I didn’t believe I’d ever really been free of it. It was as if I’d been on a boat, sailing over the waters of my family’s madness. My father’s desperate, tragic act had been my iceberg, and now I was punctured and being sucked into insane waters.

Patrick looked at me, his eyebrows raised as if for my answer, but I didn’t respond. Instead, I took out my cell phone and dialed Rodney Sandford.

“Ah, shit, whatchyadoin?” Patrick whined. “Calling the sonofabitchin cab? Screw that, I’m leaving.”

“You’re not driving,” I said.

“The hell I’m not. It’s not like you give a damn what happens to me.”

“It’s not you I’m worried—” I stopped as Rodney answered the phone, saying to him, “It’s Isabelle.”

His heavy sigh came over the line. “Be there in a few.”

We’d been through this so many times, more words were not necessary.

Patrick whirled toward his truck, but forgot to move his feet and nearly toppled to the ground. He righted himself and mumbled, “I can drive my own damned self.”

“You will not. I don’t care what you do to yourself, but I won’t be responsible for you killing someone else. You’re not leaving.”

Without turning around, he waved a hand back at me in a ‘go away’ gesture and lurched for the truck.

I followed.

“I said you’re not leaving. You can either ride with the cab or the cops.” I held up my cell phone to substantiate my threat.

By now, he had the driver’s door open. He looked back at me, then away. He stared off for a moment then sighed, bowed his head, and dropped onto the seat, his feet still hanging out to the ground, waiting, defeated.

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After Rodney and I loaded Patrick into the cab, and the two of them drove off, I spent the rest of the evening puttering around my house, a two-bedroom log cabin I’d purchased after selling the family home. I didn’t want to live in the house where I’d grown up. It was too big and held too many memories.

My current abode suited me much better. It was rustic and cozy with its hardwood floors, hand-woven rugs, and comfy, overstuffed furniture. The house sat among towering pines and oak trees, and came with a detached shop I'd turned into a studio, which was where I should be right now. I should be completing the handbags for the fall festival coming up. I made purses for a living, and I intended to donate twenty of them to the festival, for which all proceeds would go to the children's hospital.

In California, I'd had a boutique where I sold the purses, but since moving to Jessup, I'd begun taking orders online. The purses I made were customized to buyers' specifications. If they chose to do so, they could send me items and I'd incorporate them into the design. People sent things like concert tickets, locks of hair, photos, baby shoes, etc, although once I'd received a used condom. I'd declined that particular sale.

I currently had an order for a special handbag that I'd almost completed. The customer, Tamra, had sent me a tie, along with a heart-wrenching letter. Her father had died tragically in a plane crash, and the tie had been his favorite. He'd worn it on his wedding day, and again on the day each of his six children had been born. She and her siblings wanted the purse to give to their mother for Christmas. I'd basically completed it and was in the process of embedding the gray and black tie into the soft leather, after which, I would seal it over with a plastic protector.

It wouldn't take me long to finish it if I'd just get started, and I could also work on the festival purses. But I couldn't stop thinking about Patrick. I was antsy and restless. I didn't do my best work under these conditions.

A little before ten, I slipped on my 'Kiss Me I'm Irish' nightshirt, knowing already I wouldn't be able to sleep. Not without some help.

I took one of the sleeping pills my doctor had prescribed almost a year ago. I didn't take them often—which was why I still had some—but there were nights when I knew one would be my only chance at respite. Tonight would be one of those nights.

I slipped between the cool sheets, beneath the thick comforter, and lay on the feather pillow, pulling the covers up to my chin. I felt cocooned, shut off from the world. The narcotics and my comfortable bed worked together like synchronized swimmers. My limbs grew mercifully heavy, relaxed, and my mind drifted closed. My body shut down, and I slept.

Some time later, although I wasn't sure how much, something jerked me from my slumber.

I lay there, heart thudding, my stomach a flutter of unease, listening for the noise that had awoken me. I knew it had to be something out of the ordinary, or I wouldn't have been pulled from my state of nocturnal euphoria.

I heard it again and looked at the clock. Four a.m. Damn. What was it? It sounded like someone had dropped something very heavy, or hit something with a hammer...my brain wasn't functioning well enough to identify the noise.

Then I heard a car door slam and the rev of an engine.

I kicked off the blankets and struggled out of bed, fighting the cotton-headed, lethargic, zombie thing, which was the only drawback to the little white bits of heaven. If I could stay in bed for at least eight hours after taking them, I was fine. If not, I was as muddled and stumbly as Uncle Patrick.

I pulled my fluffy, mint green robe on and grabbed a flashlight. Walking out onto the porch, I swung the beam around my property, stopping when I saw the door to my studio.

It was open.

A tremor of fear buzzed through my veins, but I still stepped out into the night and made my way toward the studio. Halfway there, I realized I didn't have a weapon. I didn't own a gun, which suddenly seemed foolish since I lived out here alone, and half the town either feared me or hated me, or both.

I hefted the flashlight in my hand. It was one of those heavy-duty Coleman lanterns and might do in a pinch if the intruder wasn't much bigger than I—and didn't have a weapon of his or her own. I gripped the Coleman in both hands and held it in front of me in what I hoped was threatening manner.

Almost to the studio, I stumbled over something on the ground and I gasped, afraid to look down, afraid it might be a body. But it had been hard. Too hard for a corpse. I shone the flashlight at my feet and gave a nervous, relieved laugh.

A chunk of concrete. The damn walk was cracking so badly, there were places where it was just chunks of loose stone. I'd have to get that replaced before long.

When I reached the studio, I eased the partially open door all the way back and swept the light over the room.

I did it once more because I couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. The adrenaline kick had erased most of the cobwebs, but my head still felt a little befuddled. Maybe that's why I had to look a third time before I really grasped the scene.

I didn't turn on a light, because I didn't want to view the carnage that closely. Walking slowly forward, I gazed in horror at the handbags I'd worked so hard to create. They were a jumble of slashed leather, almost indistinguishable from one another. Something red, paint, I hoped, was smeared all over them, all over the room. The words 'Crazy bitch, you'll get yours' were written in red on the floor next to the mess.

I'd had fifteen of the twenty purses for the festival complete, and they were in the mangled pile. But the object I focused on was not part of that batch. It was the gift for Tamra's mother. The whole thing was shredded, the tie in pieces and soaked in red. Ruined.

I dropped to my knees and picked it up, cradling it against my chest as the tears flowed.

I don't know how long I knelt there, holding the purse, but when I stood, my thighs had gone to sleep and they tingled painfully as feeling returned.

I made my way back to the house, barely noticing the morning dew that dampened the hem of my robe. The sun had just started to rise and the sky was tinged pink with its appearance and the passing of night. It was early. Very early. But when I went inside and found my cell phone, instead of dialing 911, I called Hutch.