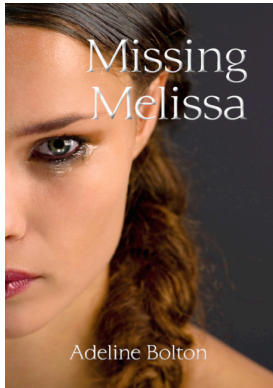




Missing Melissa

Adeline Bolton



In Stephanie is in the Outback of Australia recovering from the death of her partner when she receives news of the suicide of her best friend, Melissa.

Back in Ireland, as she attempts to come to terms with her friend's death, Stephanie starts to look at inconsistencies in the story of Melissa's apparent suicide. Stephanie becomes convinced Melissa was murdered and is drawn into a search for her killer.

And as Stephanie intensifies her search for justice, gets ever closer to discovering the true reason for Melissa's death, that search turns into a fight for her own life.

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by Adeline Bolton

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For Margaret and Stan

Books by Adeline Bolton

ROMANCE

Rachel's Dilemma

MURDER MYSTERY

A Killing Reprisal

A Deadly Greed

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Any mistakes are my own.

MISSING MELISSA

Chapter One

“Tell Mammy we’re here. And, Ciara, don’t slam...”

The rear door of her black Picasso slammed shut before she finished speaking. Ann winced. Her eyes followed the flying figure of her seven-year-old granddaughter as she ran up the driveway to the green hall door. Ciara pressed the doorbell, hard.

“Mammy must have gone without us, Granny,” she shouted. “She’s not opening the door.”

“Mammy knows we’re going into town with her.” Ann lowered her window and called, “Ring the bell again.” She hid a smile at the energetic pressure exerted on the doorbell. “Mammy might be in the shower, come back and wait in the car.”

Ciara ran back and scrambled into the back seat. “Mammy’s not in. She said she’d be waiting for us, Granny.”

Melissa’s silver Fiesta was still in the driveway. She hadn’t forgotten they were going to buy shoes for Ciara, had she? No, she wouldn’t. It would be totally unlike Melissa to forget anything to do with her daughter. She might be in the bathroom, mightn’t have heard the doorbell.

“You wait here, Ciara. I’ll hurry Mammy up.”

“I’m coming with you!”

Ann flinched as the rear door of her car slammed shut again. Exasperated, she frowned at her granddaughter but it didn’t stop Ciara’s headlong rush up the driveway. Ann followed more slowly. With her ear to the door, Ann pressed the doorbell. Other than the ding-dong sound of the bell, the house was quiet, too quiet. Melissa must be still asleep; probably tired; overdoing it again.

“Use your spare key, Granny.”

Ann inserted the key in the hall door, opened it. Really, Melissa was getting careless, Ann thought as she switched off the hall light.

“Ciara, you stay downstairs. I won’t be long.”

“I want to come.”

“Alright, but stop trying to get passed me or you’ll knock us both down the stairs.”

Ann pushed the bedroom door open and walked over to the bed. So unlike her daughter to fall asleep fully clothed. She must have been exhausted, wiped out. She put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“Melissa, hurry. It’s getting la... Oh my God! Melissa! Oh God, oh no! What...” Ann grabbed Ciara by the forearms. “Ciara, go downstairs immediately and ring Granddad. Use my mobile. It’s in my bag. Tell him to come quickly.” Ciara tried to break free, but Ann pushed her towards the open door. “Go. Now!” Panic rose in her like a tidal wave. Must keep my head, keep my head. “Melissa, wake up. Wake up! You’ve got to wake up.” She grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. “Melissa, you must wake up!”

Melissa’s head rolled sideways. Ann felt for a pulse; there wasn’t one.

“Granddad wants to talk to you, Granny. Here’s your mobile.”

Unaware that her granddaughter had re-entered the bedroom, she wasn’t quick enough to stop her seeing Melissa.

“Mammy! What’s wrong with Mammy?”

“Gerry, come quickly! Something’s happened to Melissa. Hurry,” she screamed into the phone.

Ann punched in 999. “My daughter... I think... dead... dead. Don’t know... Hurry!” She gave the address, cut the call, pressed Sophie’s number. “Sophie, could you come quickly? Something terrible has happened to Melissa. We’re in her house.”

“Downstairs, Ciara, Granddad’s coming.” When the child resisted, Ann grabbed her wrist and pulled her from the room. “We

have to let Granddad in,” was all she could think of saying, her mouth dry, her heart racing.

Gerry arrived and ran up the stairs into Melissa’s bedroom; felt for a pulse.

The doorbell pealed. It was Sophie. “Ann, what’s happened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t...”

When Ciara caught sight of her friend’s mammy, she screamed, “Sophie, mammy’s sick!”

“I know, pet.” Sophie scooped the screaming child into her arms and rocked her gently. “Ann, I’ll take Ciara home with me. Ring me, let me know what’s happening as soon as you can,” she begged before leaving the house.

Ann put her hands to her head and massaged her temples; went in to Melissa’s kitchen. Was this a nightmare? Would she wake up in Limekiln Close, in her bed? She heard footsteps in the hall. When she looked out, two uniformed Gardaí were standing there. Had Sophie let them in?

The male Garda asked, “Did you phone 999 to report a death?”

Ann nodded. “My daughter...”

Gerry came down and put his arms around Ann and held her tightly.

“Where is your daughter, Mr Brown?”

Words failed him. He just pointed. They climbed the stairs, went into Melissa’s bedroom. It was ages before the female Garda came downstairs.

Ann tried to grapple with what was happening... but her brain had shut down. She couldn’t think, but she had to think; Melissa needed her. She shook her head trying to clear the black cloud threatening to engulf her.

“My daughter needs an ambulance! She’s sick. She needs to go to the hospital. It’s all a mistake, she’s not dead. Melissa needs a doctor. Please, get a doctor!”

“Come. Let me make you a pot of tea.”

“I don’t want a pot of tea,” she screamed. “I want my daughter, my beautiful daughter.” Ann tried to loosen the Garda’s grip, but she had a firm hold on her arm.

“There’s nothing you can do at this moment,” the young Garda said soothingly.

“Oh God, what am I going to do?” she wailed as she was gently pushed into a chair beside the white and chrome table.

When the Garda handed her a mug of hot, sweet tea, her hands were shaking so much she spilt it. “My beautiful daughter can’t be dead. She can’t be dead. I made a mistake.” Tears slipped unchecked down her cheeks. “Please, don’t let her die.”

“I’m very sorry, Mrs Brown.”

She heard the front door open as she tried to drink the fresh mug of tea the Garda made for her. A tall man entered the kitchen and introduced himself. “I’m Jim Kearns from the Detective Division.” He looked at the female Garda. “Where’s the…”

“Upstairs,” she said quickly.

Gerry took the chair beside Ann’s; his face sickly green.

The detective left the room and was joined by another man, they went up the stairs. Ann heard them go into Melissa’s bedroom; heard their feet on the tiled floor of the bathroom. Then she heard them return to Melissa’s bedroom.

The female Garda answered her unspoken question. “Because it’s a sudden death of an apparently healthy young woman, with no visible signs of trauma, we have to find out what happened, Mrs Brown. A doctor will be called immediately.” She hesitated before asking, “Was your daughter on any medication?”

“No. Melissa was healthy. She rarely had to go to her doctor,” Ann said in a hoarse voice. “And Ciara is like her that way,” she mumbled inconsequently before everything went black.

There was nothing suspicious in the bathroom cabinet or the en suite, but Jim knew that didn't mean the dead woman hadn't taken something lethal.

"Kelly, find anything? A note or a letter?" he asked his partner when he re-entered the bedroom.

Kelly shook his head. "There's nothing here."

As Jim picked up a used glass from the bedside table and bagged it, he said, "Nothing in the bathroom either."

He looked at the body of the woman and thought how peaceful she looked, as if sleeping, he had checked for a pulse to be sure. There was no obvious sign of trauma, needle marks. Nothing to indicate the cause of death, nothing in the bedroom to suggest she had company before she died. No indentation on the other pillow on the king-size bed.

He looked at the uniform. "David, isn't it?" When he nodded, Jim asked, "Have you checked the house out?"

David nodded.

"Any sign of a break-in? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"No, nothing. The dead woman's mother, Mrs Brown," he looked at his notes, "picked up her granddaughter at nine-thirty from a sleepover with her friend. She had arranged with her daughter to go shopping for shoes for the youngster. She had to let herself into the house with her spare key when there was no response to the doorbell. She said everything looked normal when she entered the house except the hall light was still on. 'Unusual', she said."

"Ring the station and ask them to send the doctor."

Ronnie Bergin arrived half an hour later, pronounced her dead. He lifted a limb, checked her eyelids and looked at Jim. "Rigor mortis has set in. She's been dead approximately ten to twelve hours."

"Any idea, Ronnie, what killed her?"

"SAD or... Did you find a glass?" When Jim nodded, he said, "Could be an overdose. What was in the glass?"

“Coffee. An Irish Coffee. I could smell the whiskey.”

“Bringing a drink to bed, but not undressing, suggests there might have been something lethal in the coffee, along with the whiskey. However, we won’t know for sure until the PM and the glass is analysed.” He got to his feet. “Check with her doctor. See if she was on any medication.”

When Ronnie left, Kelly said, “Looks as if she planned it, doesn’t it.”

Jim looked again at the woman lying stretched out on the bed fully clothed, the empty glass on the bedside table had been within reach. Kelly was probably right.

“Find out her doctor’s name, Kelly, and ring the surgery. Ask if Mrs Riordan was prescribed anything we should know about.”

Half an hour later Kelly reported, “Her doctor hasn’t seen her recently, and definitely hasn’t prescribed any medication.”

“Ring the undertakers. Escort the ambulance to Marino, Kelly, and take David with you. Ask the pathologist to do the post-mortem as quickly as possible. We need to put this one to bed.”

Chapter Two

Teresa Connolly made the dreaded phone call.

Shocked, Stephanie exclaimed, “Melissa can’t be dead!”

“She is, sweetie.”

“What happened, for God’s sake? A healthy twenty-nine year old doesn’t just die!”

“Melissa didn’t just die. She took an overdose. At least that’s what they’re saying. Are you still there?”

“Overdose? Tessie, people like Melissa don’t overdose!”

“You don’t think I’d joke about something like that, do you?”

“When?”

“Friday night, they think.”

“Ciara?”

“She was sleeping over in a friend’s house.” After a brief pause, Teresa continued, “Ann collected Ciara from the friend’s house Saturday morning. They drove over to Melissa’s. When she didn’t answer the doorbell, Ann let herself in and found Melissa dead.”

“I can’t believe it; don’t believe it. Why would Melissa do such a thing?”

Her best friend dead! She couldn’t be. Even though they weren’t related they were like sisters. They’d done everything together: started infant school together; gone to college together and started working the same year. Was it really only seven years since they started working fulltime?

Before her aunt, and surrogate mother, could answer, she said, “Bloody Rory Riordan, I’ll bet!”

“Now, Stephanie, stop jumping to conclusions. What I want you to do right now is make arrangements to fly home as soon as possible. Let me know when you’re due. I’ll meet you at the airport.

The Browns are holding the funeral until you and an uncle can get here.”

“Will they be able to?”

“Yes. Melissa’s body is...” She stifled a sob. “They’ve tentatively arranged the burial for Thursday. If you or the uncle can’t make Thursday, they’ll rearrange it for Friday. Let me know when you’re travelling as soon as possible.”

“Call you back.”

Before she could say another word, Stephanie cut the connection. Teresa grabbed a bundle of tissues and wiped her eyes. Poor Ann. To lose your only daughter must be horrendous, but at least she had her son and grandchildren. If anything happened to Stephanie...

Teresa thought about Stephanie’s doting parents, her sister Jill and brother-in-law Gavin. They had died so young in that awful car crash. At two, Stephanie had been too young to miss them for long, but *she* had felt their absence through the years. Self-doubt used to assail her. She’d wondered umpteen times if her sister and brother-in-law would have approved of how she was rearing their daughter. If they had lived, they might even have had more children. And she could have married herself and had her own children. There might have been grandchildren, too, by now. Funny how things never worked out the way you planned. It hadn’t for Stephanie, either.

She hadn’t liked it when Sean and Stephanie moved in together without getting married. Teresa knew it was old fashioned to think like that, but she couldn’t help it. There was no reason why they couldn’t have married, that’s what so annoyed her at the time. When she started to suspect that Sean was drinking, she’d changed her mind. At least there was nothing legally binding them if Stephanie wanted to walk. And then the accident; Sean paralysed. It was the worst possible thing that could have happened. She knew her daughter - that’s how she thought of Stephanie now and had done for years - wouldn’t walk away from Sean when he was so ill. But she

suspected Sean hadn't made her life easy; once or twice she'd heard him whingeing. What must he have been like when they were alone?

Stephanie had had no life for the past five years. Not that Teresa would say that to her. Anyway, she would have been too stubborn to listen; a trait inherited from her own mother along with the red hair and fiery temper. At least now that Sean was dead Stephanie could get on with her own life.

Chapter Three

She leaned back against the headboard, surprised at her own calmness. Friends didn't commit suicide, she thought, they didn't. Only people who were depressed, or had terrible problems, overdosed. Melissa had had problems with her ex, but had got on top of them, hadn't she?

Oh no, not Melissa; not her best friend! They'd gone everywhere together; they'd shared everything; told each other their innermost thoughts. No, no, no! Not beautiful, bright, good-natured Melissa. An image of her flashed in to her head. She couldn't be dead. Melissa, who never saw any bad in anyone, was a good wife - not that that bastard, Rory, appreciated her - and a wonderful mother. How could someone so good and so young be dead? Never to see again the mischievous gleam in the blue eyes or the quirky lopsided grin. It wasn't true, it couldn't be true. Tessie was mistaken.

Stephanie went into the bathroom, turned on the shower full blast, stood under the cold spray and screamed until she was hoarse. The hammering on her door finally penetrated her numbed senses. She got out of the shower and grabbed a bath sheet, wrapped it around her body before opening the door.

The middle-aged woman from reception stood outside. "The occupants next door said they heard someone screaming. Is anything wrong?" The woman shouldered her way into the room.

Stephanie shook her head. "I've just had bad news from home. I'm sorry if I disturbed anyone."

She stared at Stephanie's ashen face. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, thank you. It was the shock..."

When the woman left, Stephanie sat on the edge of the bed. Melissa couldn't be dead; had she dreamt the phone call? A drink

might sharpen her wits. Getting off the bed, she opened the mini-bar and took out a brandy. Opening it, she swallowed the contents. The room spun. The taste and smell of the spirit made her feel sick. Air, she needed air. Sliding the patio door open, she took in gulps of hot air to clear the fuzz from her brain. In the stillness and eerie silence of the Outback, she stared unblinkingly at Ayers Rock. The red monolith slumbered in the shimmering heat of the early evening. It was the silence that appealed to her most since her arrival the day before, a silence which had been shattered by Tessie's phone call.

Sitting outside in the shade earlier, the eerie quietness had brought a sort of healing. Travelling alone had given her time to think about her life, to reflect on her mistakes, and there were plenty of those.

To recover from Sean's illness and death was the reason she'd taken this trip. Tessie had insisted she needed a long break. Planning the trip to Australia and New Zealand had taken her mind off the past three months, when she'd hardly been able to leave the house. She'd felt so much better before that phone call. But now...

A few minutes later, Stephanie went back inside and picked up her mobile again. "Tessie, tell me I imagined our conversation."

"I wish I could, sweetie."

"It's true then?"

"Yes."

"I'll ring you back." She snapped the mobile shut. Oh hell!

Her dark green wheelie sitting on top of the suitcase rack caught her eye. The travel agent's number. Where the hell was it? Unzipping the front pocket, she found the travel folder, picked up her mobile and pressed the digits. "Linda, Stephanie Matthews. I'm at Ayers Rock. You arranged this trip for me. How soon can you get me back to Perth and to Dublin?"

"Let me check availability." It was a couple of minutes before Linda came back on the line. "Next Saturday?"

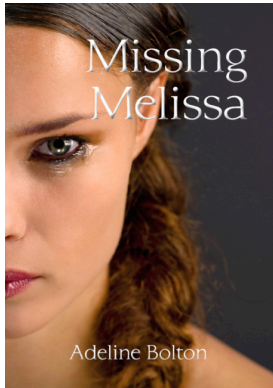
“Too late. I need to travel now. It’s an emergency; sudden death. See if you can get me out of here today or tomorrow morning at the latest and arrange a straight-through flight to Dublin. If not, a flight to London and a connecting one to Dublin. Ring me when you’ve organized it, please.”

She’d extended her Visa ceiling before the trip. As she was only halfway through her holiday, money wasn’t a problem. Flipping open the lid of the dark green suitcase, she started to throw her belongings in.

It was bad enough trying to put her life together after Sean’s death, now she had to contemplate a life without Melissa. Sitting on the end of the bed, she stared at her belongings hanging half in and half out of the suitcase, without seeing them.

She left Dublin three weeks after burying Sean. Now she was returning to bury her best friend.

“Oh, hell, where are the damn tissues!”



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