

Uncharted Depths, a contemporary romantic suspense, travels from the Midwest to a tropical island where the characters search for the truth about a murder. Events and personalities collide in a tense dance, as the story unravels a conspiracy.

Uncharted Depths

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/3512.html?s=pdf>

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

Copyright 2008 by Ida Kay Miller

All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-1-60145-524-6

Published 2008

Published by Ida Kay Miller, P.O. Box 760, Savoy, IL 61874-0760, United States of America.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

Taylor Nash

PROLOGUE

December 3rd
Broward County Journal
Broward, Illinois

BRADEN LOWDER CONVICTED OF INVOLUNTARY MANSLAUGHTER

Former Resident Maintains His Innocence

Local residents of Broward were shocked today when a Chicago jury found their former high school superstar turned famous model, Braden Lowder, guilty of involuntary manslaughter in the death of prominent plastic surgeon and philanthropist, Dr. Richard Cransten. Mr. Lowder was convicted of killing Dr. Cransten during a domestic dispute on the doctor's yacht last summer on Lake Michigan.

Dr. Cransten's wife, who witnessed the altercation, sealed the case for the prosecution as lurid tales of the rich and famous were revealed. She testified Mr. Lowder struck Dr. Cransten in the head with an oar during the struggle causing the doctor to fall overboard and drown.

TAYLOR NASH

The doctor's badly decomposed body was found three weeks later and positively identified by his wife and dental records.

Mrs. Cransten wept as the verdict was read. When stopped briefly to address reporters, she was asked how she felt about the verdict.

"We're disappointed Mr. Lowder wasn't convicted of first degree murder and put away for life, but regardless of the verdict, nothing will bring back my husband. Nothing."

A spokesperson for the Lowder family indicated Mr. Lowder continues to maintain he is innocent of the charge, and he wants to end this excruciatingly painful process for his family. An appeal is being considered by the Lowder family.

TN

Trisha Reilly read and reread the front-page article from her hometown paper. Her hand shook. She pressed her pounding temple with her index finger.

"Braden. My God, what's happened to you?"

The Lowder family had treated her like one of their own after her family's death and fond memories flooded back. She hadn't returned to her hometown since graduation, not wanting to face reminders of her tragic loss.

As she studied Braden's picture, her pulse quickened, her chest was heavy. Her hand quivered as she cut out the article and tossed it in an old scrapbook along with others she had collected during the trial.

Staring blindly, she blinked to hold back tears, but they rolled down her cheeks for the man who had been like a brother to her - and so much more.

Chapter 1

7 Years Later

Trisha's stomach flip flopped nervously as she turned down Lowder Lane, worried she might run into Braden Lowder for the first time since that night.

The farm was surrounded by overgrown weeds and the two-story farmhouse and wooden fences had peeled and were desperately in need of paint and repair.

She pulled up between two rusty pickup trucks and turned off the engine. Her breath caught in her throat. Braden was throwing heavy bales of hay next to the barn. As he labored, his shirtless rippled torso was shiny from sweat. Ragged denim jeans slid past his navel, hugging his narrow hips.

It was undeniable he was model material and why women swooned over him – just like in high school. The longer she watched, the more her blood boiled. He was one man she didn't intend to allow into her life - ever again.

The car door jerked open. She gasped and almost fell out.

"Hey there, lady," Jennifer Parker said as she held the door open.

TAYLOR NASH

She jumped out and hugged her best friend from high school. Two years younger than Braden, Jennifer couldn't deny the relationship to her brother.

"I was beginning to think you changed your mind about dinner. I should've known you'd be late – you've never been on time in your life," Jennifer teased.

As they embraced, she glanced over Jennifer's shoulder. Braden had stopped working and was staring at her. She quickly looked away, but her heart pounded wildly in her chest.

"So, how you doing today? I know yesterday was pretty difficult, burying your aunt and everything. I'm so sorry for your loss. You okay?" Jennifer asked.

"I'm numb and overwhelmed, but hopefully things will settle down soon. I've had enough stress for a lifetime. It was really sweet of you to invite me to dinner, even though you know I would have stopped to see your folks anyway. You know how much I love you guys."

"You can't believe how excited they are to see you too. But, before we go to dinner, like I mentioned at visitation, I need to talk to you about something serious. Let's slip into the barn." Jennifer looked around.

Not looking forward to any serious discussions right now, she inhaled deeply. The smell of hay reminded her of childhood days on her family farm. Simple, quiet days. The warm aroma of horses and hay soothed her rattled nerves.

Jennifer sat on a bale of hay, pulled out a piece of straw, and chewed as she crossed her legs.

"By the way, you look great, lady. Big city life and being a private investigator must agree with you. Are you really doing okay? I mean, you've been through so much with your family's death, your divorce, now your aunt's

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

passing away...I'm so glad you came back, even if it is for a few days. Wish you could stay forever."

"I suppose so." She hugged Jennifer tightly, not wanting to release old feelings that rushed back. "As good as anyone can. It'll take time, but I'll be okay. You know me – the rebounder and eternal optimist. So, don't keep me in suspense. What's up? Is something wrong between you and Bill? Are the kids okay?"

There was a moment of silence before Jennifer answered. "What I'm about to tell you - you can't tell anyone - and I mean no one. I know you're the one person I can trust and confide in. But if Braden finds out, he'll kill me."

"Okay, what?"

"Braden got a letter," Jennifer whispered as she glanced around the barn.

"What kind of letter?"

"It said - Braden didn't kill the doctor."

"What?" Her chest tightened as though someone had sucked the air out of her lungs.

"Braden got a letter last week. It said he didn't kill the doctor. Each letter was cut out individually and glued on lined school paper. Postmarked Chicago, last week," Jennifer replied, her voice wavered.

"Think it's a prank? Think someone in prison did it to spook Braden or get back at him? Or maybe some idiot in town to get his goat? Do your parents know?" she replied, stunned by the news.

Jennifer grabbed her hand and held it tightly. The calluses and dryness were noticeable against her own smooth hands.

"Braden only showed the letter to me, but Mom overheard us, but Braden doesn't know that. You've got to

TAYLOR NASH

promise you won't breathe a word of this to anyone - 'specially Dad. We're afraid if he gets upset again, he'll have another heart attack. But I'll tell you one thing. Braden's *totally* freaked out. He's been really touchy the last few days."

"Well, yeah, rightfully so. You can't help but wonder," she said as she peered into Jennifer's worried eyes, "eight years after the fact. That's odd - it's probably just a prank. I don't think I'd take it too seriously."

"You know, after all this time, you're still my best friend." Jennifer fell back on the bale of hay. Streams of sunlight beamed on her face and over the interior of the barn. Her skin looked as though it had aged more than seven years. "Almost all my friends in town have either moved or conveniently disappeared because of Braden. Through all of this, I haven't been able to trust anyone - except I knew I could always count on you."

"You know you can always trust me." She leaned on the bale of hay next to Jennifer, and as she propped up her head, hay scratched her bare arm. "You're like my sister." No sooner had the word, sister, left her mouth than her heart sank. She thought of her deceased sister, Lacy.

They sat up simultaneously and faced each other.

"Don't know how much you followed the trial," Jennifer said, "but Braden told me he doesn't remember much about that night. The evidence was stacked against him from the beginning. Braden was modeling, hanging out with rich and powerful people. He sold his soul to get out of this town. Something happened in Broward to drive him away, but he would never tell me what it was. We have always been close, but that's one thing he has never confided."

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

Jennifer hesitated before continuing. “Most of this came out in the trial, so I guess it’s really no secret. My folks stopped going to the trial ‘cause they couldn’t take all the terrible things said about Braden. Then Dad had his heart attack during the trial. Braden got involved in drugs. Cocaine mainly, and alcohol. Wound up being an escort to rich women.”

She stared into Jennifer’s hazel eyes and tried to absorb the information the woman was entrusting to her, but couldn’t believe she was talking about Braden. Her first love - the man who had broken her heart - and stolen her soul.

“I hate the word, but he was a gigolo, or that’s what the reporters called him.”

“I know – doesn’t sound like our Braden, does it?” She cleared her throat.

Their eyes remained locked on each other.

“No, not my brother. He’s always been the sweetest person I know and would do anything for anyone. I don’t know what happened. But his so called *escort* job gave him money to afford bad habits. Can you believe he touched drugs? The names of some of his *clients* came out during the trial and I’m sure you would recognize some of them. They paid over a thousand dollars a day to have him at their beck and call - a *thousand dollars* a day, Trish.”

“I can’t believe he sold his body for money and got into drugs.” She pulled a piece of straw out of her hair and twirled it nervously with her finger. “He was always down on anyone that did it in high school. I don’t understand what turned him around.” Her hand was numb and sweaty from Jennifer tightening her grip.

TAYLOR NASH

“He’d been *escorting* Dr. Cransten’s wife for about six months when...” Jennifer stopped.

The barn door opened, creaking so loudly it startled her.

Braden appeared in the doorway and slowly walked over to where they sat on the hay. He stood in front of her.

She broke out in a cold sweat.

“Sorry to hear about your Aunt Ethel passing, Rosie. She was such a sweet lady. So, how you been? Hear you’re a big time private investigator now.”

“I don’t know about big time, but yes, I’m an investigator and I’m enjoying it.” Her voice didn’t sound natural as her blood pressure soared, mixed emotions spilled over. Why did he have to call her by the nickname she hated so much?

“So, what are you two doing in here where it’s so damn hot?” he asked. His tone was hardened, as though he had overheard their conversation.

No - she wasn’t going to let him intimidate her by his presence. Still, she couldn’t help but notice how handsome he still was. One second she wanted to embrace him - the next slap him.

“Oh, we’re just catching up and Trisha wanted to see Bonnie before dinner.”

Their eyes locked. His deep blue eyes sent chills down her spine.

“Mom needs you in the kitchen, Jenn. I’ll show Rosie Bonnie,” Braden ordered, nodding his head toward the barn door.

Jennifer patted her on the leg. They exchanged stares and Jennifer’s eyes widened. “Be right back, lady.”

She turned her attention to Braden who had walked into Bonnie’s stall.

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

“So, Rosie. How much has Jenn spilled her guts to you?”

She jumped off the bale of hay and entered the stall, nervously contemplating her response, but determined not to let him get to her.

“First of all, don’t call me Rosie. I’ve definitely outgrown that nickname. Secondly, she hasn’t told me anything I didn’t already know from the papers and news. I’m really sorry this happened to you, Braden. We all are.” Her voice was firm as she tried to portray an assertive and confident woman.

He picked up the brush and stroked the bay mare’s brawny shoulders without responding or looking at her. When he stopped, he wrapped his muscular arm around Bonnie’s sleek neck and placed a kiss on her face.

“It’s the luck of the draw. Got myself into this one and wasn’t able to get myself out. It’s done with now. It’s over. Gotta move on with my life. I want *everyone* to stay out of my business. Know what I mean?” His voice firm, he glanced up.

Their eyes locked again. His deep blue eyes looked different – sad and older. She searched for a familiar sign of friendship or acknowledgement of their feelings in high school. She had perceived it as love, but he obviously never had.

“You know I would do anything for your family. Is there something I can do?” Afraid to leak out anything about the letter, she chose her words carefully.

He stopped brushing the horse’s neck and walked over to her. She stepped back until she was pinned against the wooden planks separating the stalls. With his large hands on each side of her head, he slowly lowered his face to hers. He was so close, the steam rose from his

TAYLOR NASH

bare chest, his manly scent strong and seductive. His unshaven chin and hairy chest shimmered in the light and reflected off his golden body.

Heat radiated from her face. Her heart pumped fast. She held her breath, afraid to move or say anything.

As he put his mouth up to her left ear, his stubbly face brushed against her cheek sending chills throughout her body, and he leaned into her.

“Don’t need any help, Rosie. Just want to go on with my life. Understand?” he whispered as his warm breath lingered in her ear. Without warning, he placed his moist, soft lips on her heated cheek and kissed it.

She quivered, her body said more. But her strong willpower reminded her how much she hated him for what he had done to her. She closed her eyes and held her breath; knees buckled. Liquid heat filled her veins. When she opened her eyes, he had pulled away.

Jennifer ran into the stall, interrupting their confrontation.

Braden turned and continued to brush the horse, as though nothing had happened.

“Dinner won’t be for another half hour, so want to ride, Trish? Would you help me saddle up, Braden?” Jennifer asked, out of breath.

She stared at the ceiling of the barn, took a deep breath and inhaled the aroma from the hay and manure. This time it stung her nostrils, as though her body heat made the aroma lethal. Temples throbbed with each beat of her heart. She placed her shaking hand over the affected cheek, hoping to retain the memory of the kiss.

Why did he do that? Is he trying to intimidate me?

It only took his presence to set her aglow inside. And why in the hell was she letting him do this to her? Again.

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

Jennifer and Braden grabbed the reins and led the horses out of the barn. She kept her distance behind them.

“Okay, Rosie. Hop up,” Braden instructed as he held on to Bonnie’s reins.

She grabbed the saddle horn and slid her left foot in the stirrup, determined to pull herself up and avoided eye contact. She jumped up and swung her right leg over the horse’s withers. His hand slid up her leg and butt as he gave her a boost. Totally flustered, she centered herself on the hard saddle and gazed straight ahead, fuming she had allowed him to affect her.

“You ladies be careful now. Hang on, Rosie. The old gal still likes to run,” he warned as he stroked Bonnie on the hindquarter.

She peered into Braden’s eyes, trying to read what he had done - trying to understand what was going on in that head of his. But, why should she care? Even though she had been part of his family once, she would never let him hurt her again.

She followed Jennifer’s lead, galloping through open fields; dust filled her mouth and eyes. When they reached a clearing with a spring fed lake where they use to swim, they slowed to a trot.

Jennifer dismounted first and broke the silence. “Think your firm would take Braden’s case?”

“What? Are you serious? Why?” Her foot hung up on the stirrup. She untangled it, jumped off Bonnie into the deep grass, twisting her right ankle in the process.

“Mom asked me to talk to you. We can’t discuss this at dinner with Dad and Braden there, so Mom thought this would be a good time for me to ask. Can Mom hire your firm to investigate the letter Braden got?”

TAYLOR NASH

They tied their horses to the majestic oak tree whose massive leaves formed a canopy of shade and coolness. Then Jennifer led the way as they walked over and sat on the bank of the lake surrounded by tall grass.

The dampness of the ground seeped through her jeans, and she squirmed as moisture penetrated her underwear. She pulled off her sneakers, dipped her sweaty feet in the cool water and leaned back, staring at the blue sky filled with puffs of white clouds.

"I think you should contact the police or his attorney and let them handle this. I don't think I'd open up a can of worms over something that you have no idea is legit. Braden's been convicted and served his time. He obviously wants to get on with his life and put this behind him. You should know better than anyone."

"Dad's not well. His heart suffered major damage with the last heart attack. He told Mom before he goes to his maker, he has to know Braden didn't kill that man. His gut instinct tells him he's innocent. Mom's got inheritance money stashed and can afford to hire someone. But *no one* can know except the three of us. *And never Braden.* He'd go berserk if he knew I told you about the letter. We may not find out anything, but if this is what Dad wants, Mom wants to try. *Please?*" Jennifer's eyes pleaded.

"I don't know, Jenn." Tendrils of wet grass tickled her neck, and as she took a deep breath, the sweet smell of wild honeysuckle wafted in her nostrils. "You're probably talking about a costly investigation that won't prove anything. I know it's what your mom thinks she wants for your dad, but what about Braden? I'm not sure it's a wise move all the way around for you guys. I personally think it's a no win situation. But, I'll ask my boss. Knowing Lou, he's going to tell you to contact Braden's attorney and let

UNCHARTED DEPTHS

him handle it. I know how much you want to help your parents and Braden, but I think you've got to be realistic here."

"Will you do it for Dad? And for me and Mom? You know I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important." Jennifer leaned into her side, her hazel eyes pleaded.

She hugged her friend, tears sliding down her cheeks. How could she deny the family that had pulled her out from emotional ruin, took her in, and supported her when her family died in the house fire? They were the only family she had left now, except Lou and Mae.

"I'll try, Jenn. But no promises, okay? Don't be disappointed if we can't do anything to help."

The picture perfect lake should have had a soothing effect as she stared at the reflection of the white clouds on the water. Instead, her stomach churned as she thought about getting involved in Braden's murder investigation, knowing it would stir up old emotions and memories.

Her gut instinct told her to run and run as fast as she could away from this town - and Braden. Why did she have that sinking feeling she was about to make the third biggest mistake of her life?

Uncharted Depths, a contemporary romantic suspense, travels from the Midwest to a tropical island where the characters search for the truth about a murder. Events and personalities collide in a tense dance, as the story unravels a conspiracy.

Uncharted Depths

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/3512.html?s=pdf>