
ADJUSTING ADDIE

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Prologue

The splattering of rain on the windshield turned into a torrential downpour, and she hoped her wipers could keep up with the frequency and volume of water surging from the sky. She looked in the rearview mirror at the beautiful, sleeping girl in the back seat. The child was her motivation, her reason for fighting back. The pitch blackness all around her reminded her of his soul. There was not a light on the road nor in the sky; it was so dark that even the mountains were hidden from view. Escaping was her priority; she had to get away as quickly as possible. A few hours ago, the courts had awarded her an order of protection, but she knew the order wouldn't stop him. The monster wouldn't hesitate to walk right through the flimsy piece of paper that sat in the seat next to her. If anything, he would be infuriated and spurred on by the decree. She knew the second that he was served would be the second that he would come looking for her.

Her eyes darted back and forth across the road, scanning for other cars and checking the rearview mirror obsessively, afraid she was being followed. She hadn't seen another set of headlights

for at least five miles. Her heart was racing. Her anxiety, mingled with trepidation, prevented her from being able to slow down the fast thumping of her heart in her chest. The beat of the bass drum that was her pulse sounded loudly in her ears. She wiped her palms on her pants for the third time in ten minutes, drying the sweat from them. With a white knuckled grasp on her steering wheel, she checked her speed and slowed down. She had to escape him but not by killing them in a car accident. What good would it be if she escaped her death at his hands just to die at her own? A destination hadn't been determined; she wasn't yet sure where she was going. All she knew was she had to get away from him.

Across the highway, a car came into view. She watched it, waiting for it to pass her so she could let out the breath she was now holding. Her eyes grew large when she saw it start to drive across the median and head straight towards them. Instinctively, she hit the gas and jerked the wheel to the right, driving onto the shoulder of the highway. If her calculations were right, the car should miss hitting them and drive right behind their car and off of the road into the grass field beyond.

She watched in horror as the car corrected course to her new location. The beams of light grew brighter, blinding her, as the vehicle rushed towards them. Crash! The sound of metal hitting metal filled her ears as her body jerked forward, her head slamming into the steering wheel upon impact. The squeaking of the car door opening revealed his figure and she knew he had found her. She painfully lifted her head, her gaze going to the large rock in his hands. Her eyes widened in terror, her lips parted to beg for mercy, but before the first word could escape and make her pleas known, his arm rose, and everything went black.

THE BUZZING SOUND in the distance woke her, but she was slow to open her eyes or move. Her head was throbbing like a sorority girl on a Monday morning after a weekend of pounding wine coolers and vodka. The buzzing in the distance wasn't helping her headache. The intensity of the pain made her thoughts foggy. She shivered as she felt air from a fan hit her face and bare arms. The cold hard ground pressing into her legs added to her discomfort. Goose bumps rose over her exposed flesh; she wasn't sure if they were caused by the temperature or the feeling of dread that was pooled like a rock in the bottom of her stomach. Ouch! The pain in the back of her head grabbed her attention, her hand going to it. The large, golf ball sized knot was hard to miss and the warm sticky residue in her hair transferred to her hand. Without opening her eyes, she knew it was blood. Something wasn't right. Where was she? How did she get here?

Finally, she opened her eyes, quickly regretting it when the light above her stabbed into her eyeballs like the sharp ends of icicles falling off her grandpa's porch roof in the winter. She squeezed her eyes closed tightly again and, taking a deep breath, reopened them. She stared directly ahead at the wall while allowing the room to come into focus. The task took longer than she would have liked. The initial stabbing sensation dulled some, but the room continued to spin in circles. She fought back bile rising in her throat and knew instinctively that she had a concussion. Her chest rose and fell as she sucked air in through her nose and out through her mouth using a technique she had mastered to keep from hyperventilating. She was seconds away from having an anxiety attack. *Breathe. Assess. Attack. Breathe. Assess. Attack.* Years of panic attacks had taught her how to formulate a survival plan. *Breathe and get your heart rate under control. Assess the situation. Formulate an attack strategy to overcome the obstacle. Breathe. Assess. Attack.*

The rock in her stomach turned into a boulder as the sound

of his laughter sent terror down her spine. She raised her head towards the sound. Her cries of pain as she turned her neck permeating the room. Her hand flew up to her mouth, squashing the noise. She knew how her pain fueled his lust. At the sounds of her cries, his lips turned up into the snarl she was all too familiar with. She wanted to slap the look of satisfaction off of his face. His eyes darkened, his lips pressed together, and his eyebrows rose as his gaze raked over her body.

Her fight, flight or freeze instinct kicked in, and she put her hands on the ground beside her, willing herself the energy to push herself to stand. The clinking sound and the heavy weight on her ankle drew her gaze downward at the links imprisoning her to this place, following the chain's path to a cemented anchor in the ground. Her eyes darted around the room then, fully taking in the surroundings of her personal cell. The buzzing was coming from the generator she had bought for their house after one too many snow storms had knocked out the power. She recognized the large metal fans that were circulating the air around the room—she had bought them for her art studio. The walls looked to be metal or aluminum, and she knew instantly what he had done. He had spoken many times over the years about making tiny homes out of storage sheds. He had promised to make one in the backyard for Lindsey as a playhouse.

"This is all your fault, you know. You defied me one too many times. Stupid girl. If only you had been reasonable and listened to me, you wouldn't be here now. If *only* you had done what you were told. Why did you have to defy me? Why did you have to run? Nothing will keep me from what is mine. There is no judge, no piece of paper, nothing and no one that can stop me."

"Lindsey! Where is Lindsey?" she screamed at the figure now standing next to her.

"I warned you. I fucking warned you. You never learn!" He raised his arm and slapped her hard across her left cheek, her face whipping to the side from the impact. "Maybe, now, you will

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see that I am a man of my word!" He laughed that evil laugh that haunted her nightmares. She watched him walk to the door.

"Better make yourself at home. You are going to be here for a very long time." Click. Click. Click. Three locks. There was not one but three locks on her prison. He was tempting nothing. Terror shot through her.

Chapter 1

The shrieking of the alarm awoke Doctor Bradley Murphy from a deep sleep. Groaning, he stretched his arms above his head and stretched, his stomach grumbling as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. He walked into the kitchen and plopped a K-cup into his Keurig and sighed contently as the rich smell of his strong, dark roast coffee helped awaken his senses even before he took the first sip of his hot, velvety addiction. A man of habit, he broke two eggs into a hot frying pan, watching the clear turn to white before putting two pieces of whole wheat bread into the toaster. He listened to the sound of the precooked bacon sizzling in the pan. He liked his bacon extra crispy and buying it already cooked saved him time in the mornings. Soon, his eggs were ready; it didn't take long to cook over-easy eggs. He turned at the loud pop of the toaster, grabbed the toast and tossed the hot bread onto a plate before buttering it and sitting down to his breakfast. Ten minutes later, he was grabbing his gym bag and heading out the door to his local YMCA.

Brad could afford one of the swankier gyms in town. In fact, he often had to shrug off the teasing from his buddies about the

YMCA being for old people and young mothers. All joking aside, the YMCA held a special place in Brad's heart. Raised by a single mother, Brad and his younger sister, Lauren, spent every summer of their young childhood at YMCA summer camp. Brad also attended the Y's before and after school program during the school year. His first job was at the Y, and he looked back fondly at his employment there. Over the years, he had progressed from camper to camp counselor. His supervisors had become his mentors and they had saved him from some pretty big trouble his sophomore year in high school. He would never forget how much he owed them. If it hadn't been for their willingness to give him a second chance, Brad would have never made it in to the United States Marine Corps after graduation. The Y was more than just a gym to him; it was home. There were certain values that had been impressed upon Brad from a very young age, values that were honed at the YMCA and very much part of his military career. Loyalty was at the top of the list. Decades later, Brad continued to work out five days a week at the Y and often soaked in the hot tub after an especially grueling workout—something Gold's Gym did not offer. Besides, Brad rather liked the family atmosphere. He loved seeing the small children running around in the childcare center. They made him think about his nephews, and he couldn't help but imagine having his own, someday.

Brad had just sat at the end of the bench with his weights when he noticed the new girl working out again. The regulars all "knew" each other by sight and would say "hello" and sometimes have a bit of small talk. A new member walking in was much like waiving a red flag in front of a bull; everyone peeked up and took notice. Around the January timeframe, the place would be inundated with the "New Year's Resolution" crowd, but by Valentine's Day, it would wean out again. Normally, now, in early June, the crowd would thin tremendously. People would be on vacations or outside enjoying the sunny weather. The crowd was pretty

routine this time of year and newcomers were unlikely, so Brad was sure that he wasn't the only one to have noticed her presence.

He had noticed her for the first time a few days before while she had been working out with her personal trainer, Kimberly. He had been drawn to her strikingly beautiful, large blue eyes. They were bluer than he had ever seen before, so blue that he was convinced she was wearing colored contacts. They reminded him of a mermaid's tail, deep blue with flecks of greens and teals. The next time he saw her, she was wearing glasses, and he realized his error. She wasn't wearing contacts; her eyes really were naturally that color. He had only seen her hair pulled up but noted the dark brown color and the thickness and length of the ponytail. He thought about what it would look like cascading down her back—where would it fall to? Was it straight, wavy or curly? While he could see that she had a couple extra pounds around her middle, she was proportionate and curvy in all the right places. Brad had always preferred a thicker woman. His size made smaller women too fragile to him. He guessed she stood right around five-foot-eight. Brad, being a bit of a giant at six-foot-six, appreciated the height. He had found himself scanning the room for her when he came to the gym in the mornings. He wondered if she would be one of the short-term members or if she was going to stick around for a while.

I hope she sticks to it. Brad shook his head. What had gotten into him? She was a stranger. Brad didn't know why he was drawn to her. It wasn't something that he had ever had happen before. He was one who was generally pretty oblivious of women. He never looked for women anywhere, least of all the gym. He came to the gym, did his thing and left. When one would approach him, then he would engage with her, but he never sought them out. He wondered why his eyes kept going back to her, trailing her. It was as if she had magnetic properties or something. He tried to concentrate on his workout, but he was

near enough to hear the conversation between her and Kimberly and he couldn't help but listen in. He couldn't exactly *not* hear their conversation, either, with how close they were standing. He found himself wishing he hadn't forgotten his headphones at home. He felt like a naughty kid eavesdropping on an adult's private conversation.

"What are your goals for this program?" Kimberly asked.

"I want to lose weight to get healthier, increase my endurance and build some muscle mass to help my metabolism work better," the woman replied. Brad grinned. She was not only pretty but intelligent, too.

"Those are great goals. Now, I have to be honest with you. I am a stickler on form and doing things the correct way. This means that you aren't going to drop a ton of weight right off the bat. If we do it right, you will keep it off, instead of yo-yoing and gaining it all back the second you can't fit going into the gym daily into your schedule. How much weight are you wanting to lose? Let's set a long term and a short-term goal." Brad had always appreciated Kimberly being consistent on form and safety. He had seen too many of his Marines get injured from making mistakes in the gym.

"Long term, I'd like to lose one hundred pounds, at least," the new girl said. Brad bit his tongue from interrupting their conversation. What? Where was she going to lose a hundred pounds from? He chided himself again. She was not his; why did he care?

"That is a lot, Addisyn," Kimberly said. "I think we will need to revisit that in the future. Let's talk about short term goals." Brad took note that her name was Addisyn. *A unique name for a unique woman*, he thought. *Unique?* He corrected himself, *you don't know a thing about this girl, nut job!*

"Please call me Addie. No one ever calls me Addisyn unless I am in trouble!" Brad heard her say. Feeling guilty about listening

in, although he wasn't done with his sets, Brad rose and headed to another section of the weight room.

After Addisyn left the room, Brad went back to finish the sets he had started. He grunted as he lifted a heavier than normal weight off of the ground, determined to beat his personal record.

"She's going to be a handful," Brad heard Kimberly say to someone. "Addie has the motivation and drive to succeed, which is fantastic. She is also stubborn, and I don't think she agrees with taking it slow. She wants to lose a hundred pounds."

"Did you do a full body assessment?" Brad heard the male voice respond and knew she was talking to the athletic director.

"Of course," Kimberly replied, and Brad could hear the offense in her tone. "I calculated about fifty-five pounds to being at the top of her healthy BMI and ideally about sixty to sixty-three pounds from being right in the mid-range healthy."

"Where is she getting a hundred pounds from?" the male voice countered.

"No idea. According to her body mass, lean muscle, water weight and dry body weight, her ideal weight is around one hundred fifty pounds. She is at right around two hundred ten."

"Well, keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't end up obsessed or with an eating disorder. If you start to see anything concerning, please send her to me, and I'll get her help."

"Will do, boss."

Brad agreed with Kimberly. Silly girl didn't need to lose a hundred pounds. He felt slightly guilty for eavesdropping again, but in his defense, the free weights were right outside the personal training office and the door was open. He would never have guessed Addisyn weighed over two hundred pounds! Her weight was distributed evenly and she carried it very well. He thought she was beautiful. If she wanted to lose some weight to be healthy, that was one thing, but to want to lose *that* much weight, well, that was ridiculous. He didn't know why it bothered him; she was just a

stranger at the gym. Once again, he found himself asking, *Why do I care how much weight she wants to lose? Why am I letting her get to me like this? She hasn't said two words to me! What is it about her that is drawing my attention?* He racked his weights and headed to the cardio room. Why was this girl getting under his skin and into his mind so much?

Brad was surprised to see the very woman he was trying to shake from his thoughts in front of him, in the cardio room. Kimberly had just told her not to overdo it! Damn girl was going to injure herself. He had seen her finish her entire workout, including the cardio portion, over twenty minutes ago. Part of him wasn't shocked to see her, he had a feeling that she was stubborn just by the way she spoke and carried herself. When he walked behind her elliptical to get to the treadmill, he noticed her time. She had been on it for twenty-two minutes and counting.

"Hey!" Brad said, coming up beside her, deciding to introduce himself. "Didn't I see you with Kimberly a bit ago? I'm Brad."

She didn't even turn her head to acknowledge him. She appeared to be fixated on the TV screen ahead of her.

"Hi," Brad heard her respond breathlessly. "Kinda busy." Brad's medical training picked up on how hard she was breathing. Brad looked down at her machine and saw the damning evidence before him. He confirmed what his intuition was telling him; she was working too hard. Her heart rate was up in the high one hundred eighty range. That was unacceptable. He stepped in, reached over and took charge of the situation by lowering the speed.

"Hey, so, Addie, your heart rate is in the upper end of one hundred eighty. You need to slow down there some, killer." He didn't understand why she was on the machine to begin with. Kimberly told her to take it slow and this was anything but slow. She had already worked out for over an hour with her trainer, which included twenty minutes of intense cardio. Surely, she

shouldn't be working out any more that day. Brad found himself getting protective over her, and he didn't like it. *She is a stranger. She is a stranger*, he repeated in his head, knowing damn well his Dom side was about to rear its head. He had a sixth sense about these things, and something about her was pulling him that direction.

"Hey!" Addie said, irritation clear in her tone. "Who do you think you are?" She aggressively punched the speed dial back up to where she had it. Brad narrowed his eyes and raised his eyebrows simultaneously before he realized that she was still staring straight ahead.

"This isn't a healthy heart rate!" Brad lowered his voice an octave, his face starting to flush from frustration, before reaching over and pushing both the speed and the incline buttons down. He hit them so hard, he could hear the click with each button push. He didn't know what had gotten into him. He wasn't one to normally top strange women at the gym. It must be the doctor in him, *sure*, he thought to himself, *let's go with that*. He knew that being a doctor had nothing to do with his desire to keep her safe.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are, but I didn't ask for your advice," she said angrily, finally looking at him with her beautiful blue speckled eyes. "Stop touching my damn machine!" Addie bumped the speed up once more. "Get away from me, asshole!"

"I am a doctor, and I know that this heart rate is really dangerous." Brad said, aware of the tingling in his palm as the urge to spank her butt overcame him. He wanted to warn her about her language and to let her know what talking to him like that would accomplish. He briefly envisioned pulling her off the machine, planting his leg on the edge of the elliptical and pulling her right over his thigh before administering a much-needed wake up call to her curvy behind. The next time he spoke, his voice dropped in volume and deepened in tone even more. It was a very practiced maneuver; he had used it on many of his young

Marines when they stepped out of line. It got them right back on the straight and narrow, for they feared what would happen next. Brad watched Addie look at the screen, blink hard and then hit the button to slow it down.

"Fine. Are you happy?" She glared meanly at him. "Now, if you don't mind," she growled, stepping down and trying to push around him.

"Happy isn't the word I would use, but thank you for having some common sense and stopping. I hope you will follow Kimberly's advice. She's a fantastic trainer and knows what is good for you."

"I know what is good for me!" Addie spat back, reminding Brad of a lioness. "Now, please get out of my way!" She pushed by him and stomped to the women's locker room.

The desire to spank her grew with each passing second. Brad had a feeling it wouldn't be his last run in with Addie. Oddly, he found himself looking forward to the next one.