



*When a stalker
attacks, the only
person to stop him
is the worst
ex-boyfriend ever*

**PRACTICING
MURDER**

ERIN UNGER

Practicing Murder

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Dedication

To my husband Mike, who believed I would become a bona fide author someday, even when I doubted.

1

No amount of hiding at the carnival was going to change what Maddie Clare faced. She clutched a bag of pink cotton candy and bit the last of the caramel apple in her other hand, not really tasting the tart and sweet combination. The apple caught and then slid down her throat as she turned away and swiped at a tear. Maddie scooted past a couple with a stroller who weaved in front of her as they eyed the different games and food vendors along the long strip of carnival booths.

The dusky sky, the music, even the smell of popcorn and funnel cakes wouldn't send her belly into a frenzy of happiness. This was the break she needed, yet it only reminded her even more of her aunt. Her eyes stung. *No, no, please don't start crying again.*

Why couldn't God have let Aunt Lonna live? Why did her commuter plane have to have a landing gear malfunction just shy of the landing strip at the airport?

And here Maddie was once again, back at home with its claws of bad memories. If she could just get through the release of her aunt's body and the funeral, she'd rush back to college and bury herself in finals with her favorite Cheezits in one hand and the comfort of her best wonky pen in the other. Then there'd be no time for the gnawing sadness to bury itself in her belly.

Maddie wiped the moisture off her cheek and then

scanned the thoroughfare for a trashcan. The sky dropped into darkness, fighting with the glaring lights of the rides that dared to reach up and touch it. Was there a garbage can in this place? Had the carnival workers forgotten the clean parks campaign? The town of Anby had spent a decent amount of money enforcing it in the last year. A narrow alley separated a ring toss booth and a neon-painted dart game stand. She spotted a garbage can and bent to avoid the humongous purple unicorn that hung low from a wire of prizes as she walked deep into the makeshift alley. The shadows fought to hide the metal barrel overflowing with half-empty popcorn bags and plates smeared with pizza guts. Music seeped from the ring toss booth, and there was a crescendo in volume as if she'd stepped right up to the speakers that filtered the sound to the whole park.

Maddie raised her hand to gauge the distance to the trashcan and let the apple stick fly through the air. Hopefully, it wouldn't miss and land in the sea of waste on the grass.

Before she turned away, Maddie bumped against something hard. She stiffened. *What?* She hadn't thought there'd been a wall behind her. A millisecond later, all her senses enraged her fight or flight instinct, but a crushing force pulled her arm tight to the side of her body and pinned her.

The cotton candy bag fell to the ground.

Panic spun her into a daze, yet she tried to push away from the large form that held her. Maddie couldn't think. Blood rushed in her ears and her heart pounded. Even the breath in her lungs hissed out like a pressure cooker about to blow as the force that held her squeezed.

She bit against the salty palm smashing her mouth and pulled her jaw to the side with a wrenching force.

A scream echoed in her chest but died before it had air to release.

“You tell anyone and you’ll disappear forever.” The low whisper of a man’s voice streaked across her ear to her cheek, bringing tears to her eyes with the heat of his words.

She tried to shake free. Her heart drummed against her rib cage. Todd? No, please not him. Was she to be at his mercy again? She tried to block the image of his face leering at her as he’d seized her all those years ago. But she’d escaped once. Was he back after all this time?

The man’s grip tightened around her neck and stopped all airflow. “Your aunt didn’t know what she was talking about. And you’re going to keep your mouth shut about what she told you, or I’ll make you shut up.”

Not Todd. She kicked backward, made contact, and then grabbed his pinkie. Turning her head into his elbow, Maddie tried to suck in a breath and pulled with all her strength on the tiny appendage.

He yelled and tumbled backward, almost pulling her to the ground with him.

Maddie braced her knees and fought the tiny dancing lights that zigzagged at the corners of her vision like lightning bugs flashing their iridescent tails in a stand of trees. Before Maddie could turn, the force of his body throttled her forward once again. Her outstretched hand dropped to the ground as he pushed her toward the metal trashcan.

As if the carnival manager had flipped the power switch to the entire park, the lights in her eyes died in a

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flash of darkness.

2

Joze Evans pulled his EMT bag close to his chest and rushed past a group of teens in tight jeans and logoed T-shirts, who'd just dumped a load of trash onto the freshly mowed grass. Did they want a one-way ticket out of the park? Because they were going to get it if they dropped one more empty bottle onto the carnival grounds.

He swiveled and pointed at the mess as he took in the pinched face of one particular boy in the center of the clique. Travis, his boss's son. Of course, it would be him causing trouble. There was no time to deal with the delinquents, but he couldn't let the litter violation go. "Travis, please pick up that mess."

All of the teens eyed him with raised brows.

"Now."

A few girls tittered and stared. Travis drew a few inches from him before backing off and taking in his EMT uniform. "What you gonna do about it, Evans? Not like you're a cop or anything."

Of course, the ring leader would have the nerve to push his buttons tonight, even if he was trying to hide an ounce of fear in his squirrely eyes.

"Have some respect."

Without waiting to see if he obeyed, Joze rushed past them. Where was the kiddy Space Ride? A little

girl who'd caught her finger in the release shaft of the seat waited to be checked out. As he moved between two makeshift booths and into a narrow alley, he swung out his EMT bag. Man, trash littered the ground here too. Deep shadows shrouded an overflowing garbage pail that crowded the walkway.

He stumbled over something large and solid and tried to catch his balance before he slid headlong into the refuse. Wait a minute. Was that a body against his shin?

He retracted his booted foot and grabbed his LED flashlight off his belt. Blond hair fell over a woman's face. She moaned.

He knelt and gripped her shoulder. "Ma'am. Ma'am, can you hear me? Hold still."

She started to pull away from the glare of his flashlight.

"Don't move."

"Hu—"

"I said hold still. You could have a neck injury." Joze held her in place. "Do you know what happened?"

She raised a shaky hand to her hair and pushed it out of her face.

The cute nose. The soft jawline. *No*. With all the mental strength he could muster, Joze held his ground. *Please God, not this woman*. He worked his jaw to decrease the pressure that pounded through his ears.

"Madeline." No way was he going to let her keep him from doing his job, even if she was the last woman he wanted to help.

She cracked open dazed eyes. "What—happened?"

When her gaze focused on him, she tried to

wrench out of his grasp.

He grunted. "You need to remain immobile. I don't know the full extent of your injuries." Into the mic at his shoulder, he said, "Jim, I need a stretcher out by the ring toss and dart booths. Woman, twenty-six years of age, is down. Possible neck or head injury. Can you send another EMT to the child with the stuck finger? She's at the Space Ride."

The clear voice on the other end responded, "Sure thing. Be right there."

He was more than aware of the heat radiating from her shoulder and hip into his hands.

Think about the job. This was nothing more than a woman who needed his medical attention. Forget it was the woman who'd walked out on him and tried to ruin his best friend's life.

Maddie pushed his hand off her hip. "Let go of me." Her voice was clearer now. "I didn't injure...I mean injure...my neck...I don't think."

Garbled language. Could be a concussion at the very least.

"I can't, ma'am." He failed to hold back the emphasis on the word "ma'am."

Her eyes opened so wide.

Don't even think of falling into those baby blues.

She clamped her jaw and fought against him until he released her. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to help you."

"Leave me alone, Joseph Evans."

Had she forgotten how much he hated his given name? She'd probably used it on purpose.

She pushed with a force to rival one of his old wrestling buddies.

Before he could restrain her again, Maddie sat up

and put her hand to her head. Great. Non-compliance. And a woman who could get him in a world of trouble just by opening her mouth. Like before. And knowing Maddie, it would be her goal to do so. Yet there was a twinge in his chest. The red mark on her forehead began to swell as he stared at it. "I know I'm the last person you want to see." *You're the last one I want to be working on.* "But let me do my job and help you."

Her hand flew out and blocked his attempt to palpate her head for other injuries. Was that a stray tear? From Maddie? A tough girl...or at least four years ago she'd never have cried in front of him. He couldn't stop the softer tone that crept into his voice. "It'll only take a minute, and then you'll never see me again."

3

“Joze, back off.” The steel edge to Maddie’s voice didn’t stop him from checking her vertebrae with his nimble fingers. She tried to get her bearings. He was an EMT now?

He pulled back and ran a hand through his black hair. It was longer than he used to keep it. Still straight as an arrow.

Maddie shook off the thought and took in the tomato sauce and buttery-popcorn-scented trash she sat on. What was she doing on the ground? She scooted to the vinyl-walled booth behind her and held her temples. “Am I still at the carnival?”

There wasn’t enough space between her and Joze and his inquiring brown-eyed gaze. No distance was far enough. If she’d had the sheer strength, she’d have run to her car and escaped the carnival before he could answer, but her body didn’t want to comply.

Another EMT jogged over to Joze, followed by a third, shorter one. The stretcher bounced in between them from the ruts in the grass.

Memories overflowed Maddie’s conscience. Arms squeezing her tight. Someone whispered to keep silent.

The two men left the gurney and came closer, but Joze drew back a fraction. “Do you know what happened?”

She eyed him.

The taller EMT looked from Joze to her and back. Had he heard the end of their conversation? Her biting remark and Joze's almost pleading answer?

"I'm Jim. I'll be taking a look at you, OK?" His hand went up as if to ward off Joze. "Go get me the neck brace. I forgot it at the ambulance."

Joze frowned. "I have one in my bag."

The guy pulled Joze aside, but she could still hear their hushed conversation. "Man, I think she needs a little space. You have some history with her?"

He nodded but kept his mouth shut in a thin line. Like the last time she'd seen him.

"We need a minute to evaluate this situation."

"OK." Joze grimaced. He moved away, scratching the back of his neck.

Jim slid on gloves with care, wriggling his sausage-shaped fingers into them as if to keep them from tearing and then lightly examined her head with his fingertips. "You've got a good bump right here. You could have a concussion."

The other EMT shined a light on her forehead. "Any nausea, dizziness?"

Maddie pressed her hand to her overfull stomach. "A little."

With his strong, steady hands, Jim continued to check her over as the other man took her pulse. "Can you remember what happened? Did you fall?"

Maddie blew out a breath. "No. Well, yes. Someone grabbed me from behind and pushed me." Confusion reigned, her brain still addled.

She squeezed her eyes closed and shivered. "I don't know who it was."

He gave the other EMT a sharp glare. "Walk me through what you do remember."

"The guy squeezed me so hard." She laid her head back against the wall with care and tried to concentrate. "I almost managed to get away for a second." She gulped in air. "But I don't know what happened after that. And I don't know who it was."

Joze returned to them, throttling down the small makeshift alley. "Here." He almost threw the brace at his partner, his gaze trained on her. "Figure anything out while I was gone?"

Neither EMT looked at Joze but kept their attention on her.

Maddie pointed at the brace. "I don't need that. See, I can move fine." She bent her head back and forth. "It's my head, that's all." The movement shot pain through her eyes. "Ow." She held up a hand. "Don't worry. Just my head again. I moved too fast."

One of Jim's gloves ripped as he tried to adjust it. He reached in his pocket and pulled out another one. "Joze, call Officer Tuttle. She needs to make a statement, and the scene needs to be secured while we take her to the ambulance. Someone did this to her."

Maddie squeezed her eyes closed to stop the pounding in her head, but she couldn't help glancing in Joze's direction.

His jerky movements made her raise her eyebrows, and he stared at her as he called for the officer.

He looked worried. For her? He wouldn't care about her.

"Did you see your assailant in any way? Maybe his shoes or clothing? Do you recognize anything about him?" Jim interrogated.

"I don't know. He grabbed me from behind." She clutched her chest. Why her? What did the guy mean

by what he'd said? She didn't know anything. In fact, she hadn't been home for a long time. If it hadn't been for her aunt's death, she'd still be away at college getting ready to finish up her master's degree in environmental health and safety engineering.

Her body shook. How many years had passed since the last time...She shook off the growing pressure in her chest. *Don't give in to it. Breathe. Don't think right now.*

A police officer entered the alley and got a quick history on the situation from Joze and Jim. Then he turned to her.

Please let this go quick.

"Ma'am, what's your name?"

"Madeline Clare. I go by Maddie." She told him what little she knew. A tremble began in her hand and took over her body. Why wouldn't the shaking stop? Even clutching her hands together didn't settle her nerves.

When she finished, Jim went for the stretcher again.

She shot her hand up. "No. I'm not going to the hospital. I need a minute, that's all."

In unison, the EMTs protested.

"I don't need to."

Joze took a step closer. "You really should let a doctor decide that. You may need a CT scan—"

"I mean it." The nausea began to let up. If only the pounding would stop and the shakiness in her hands would subside.

He squatted in front of her, sending a whiff of his body wash her way. The scent brought back too many memories...of times she'd spent in his arms. *Don't go there.* Maddie shut her eyes and tried to think of

anything else.

"Well, can we at least take you to the ambulance to rest for a bit? You can talk more there with Officer Tuttle."

Maddie pushed up to a stand and put her hands out for a moment. The earth tilted. She gulped. It steadied, and she opened her eyes again. Why be dumb and take too many risks? "All right."

Officer Tuttle checked the ground around her and spoke into his mic, calling more officers. "I have a few more questions, but I'll have another officer meet you over there."

Her eyes darted back and forth as Jim held her elbow and they walked. It took all her strength not to lean into Jim.

Joze kept throwing glances her way but maintained his distance. She'd outright dismiss him if she could. Ignoring him for now would have to do.

Maddie shoved her hand into her left pocket. Wait a minute. Where was her wallet? The one Aunt Lonna had given her on her eighteenth birthday. The one she loved even though it was a twelve-year-old's dream with pink owls all over it. A shock wave of apprehension ran through her. "My wallet's gone."

Jim guided her forward. "Joze, can you alert Officer Tuttle?" To her, he said, "They'll look into it. Are you sure you had it at the time of the attack?"

"Yes."

She lifted her chin and begged herself not to watch Joze as he glanced at her before striding back toward the alley.

It wasn't working. Straight, dark hair fell across his forehead. Fine cheekbones. Brown eyes the color of her favorite milk chocolate bar.

She pulled her gaze from him. *Think of anything.* Cold arms squeezing the life out of her jumped to the forefront of her mind. *Not that. Think of anything but that.* But a chill had already set in her bones. And now her attacker had her driver's license, old address, and all.

4

Joze couldn't leave Maddie's side. Not now. She might run her mouth and lie to his buddies like she was so good at doing. He fought the urge to refuse a return to the crime scene. Why did he have to be the one to turn back and talk to the officer? But then he didn't need Jim reporting bad patient relations to his boss, either. He'd better hurry back before she had a chance to spread lies about him like she did about his best friend. Who knew what she'd come up with?

Joze approached Officer Tuttle, who continued to take pictures of the area where he found Maddie. "Have you seen a wallet? I think she said it was pink?"

"In this mess? Give me a few minutes." Tuttle continued snapping pictures. Joze couldn't stop shifting from foot to foot. He'd dive into the chaos and find it himself if it wasn't considered contaminating evidence. Anything to get back to Maddie pronto. But then what if this wasn't a real crime scene? What if it was a set up like before?

"Find anything important?" Sarcasm reigned. "Any real evidence to prove a crime actually happened?"

Officer Tuttle paused. "You don't believe the lady? You saw the bump on her head."

"Yeah, well..." It wouldn't be the first time she'd lied about something like this.