

Chapter 3

The Manipulator

This isn't how I imagined I'd spend my Friday night. Digging around in the walls of an old-ass house with god knows what kind of creatures trapped inside.

I'm just waiting for a rabid squirrel to jump up and latch onto my outstretched arm, driven mad with hunger and willing to eat anything due to so many years being trapped in the walls, nothing but bugs to keep it fed.

My arm is shoulder-deep in the goddamn hole Greyson created, a flashlight held tightly in my grip. There is just enough space to fit my arm and part of my head in at an odd angle to look around.

This is stupid. *I'm* stupid.

The second I heard the door hit Greyson's ass on the way out, I inspected the damage. It's not a massive hole, but what gave me pause was the rather large gap between the two walls. At least three or four feet of space. And why else would it be built this way if there wasn't a reason?

It feels like a magnet is pulling me towards it. And every time I try to pull away, a deep vibration travels through my bones. The tips of my fingers buzz with the need to reach out. To just look inside the fathomless void and find what is calling my name.

Now here I am, bent over and stuffing myself in a hole. Suppose if I couldn't get mine stuffed tonight, I might as well get my action this way.

The flashlight on my phone reveals wooden beams, thick cobwebs, dust, and bug carcasses on the inside of the wall. I turn the other direction and point the light down the other side. Nothing. The webs are too thick to see much, so I use my phone like a baton and start tearing down some of them.

I swear if I drop it, I'll be *pissed*. There will be no getting it back and I'll have to get a new one.

I wince from the feel of the hair-like webs brushing across my skin, imitating the sensation of bugs crawling on me. I turn back towards the left and shine the light one more time.

I bat down a couple more cobwebs, ready to just give up and ignore the siren call that got me into this dumbass situation in the first place.

There.

A little way down the hall is something glinting off the light. Just the barest hint, but it's enough for me to jump in excitement, knocking my head off the thick drywall and sending flakes tumbling down in my hair.

Ow.

Ignoring the dull throbbing in the back of my head, I rip my arm out and rush down the hallway, guesstimating the distance on where I saw the mysterious object.

Grabbing a picture frame, I unhook it from its nail and gently set it down. I do this several more times until I come across a picture of my great-grandmother sitting on a retro bike, a bundle of sunflowers sitting in the basket. She smiles wide, and even though the picture is black and white, I know she's wearing red lipstick. Nana said she'd put on her red lipstick before she'd put on the coffee.

I pull the picture from the wall and stifle a gasp when I see an army green safe in front of me. It's old, with a mere dial for the lock. Excitement burns in my lungs as my fingers drift over the dial.

I've discovered a treasure. And I suppose I have Greyson to thank for that. Though I'd like to think I would've taken these pictures down eventually for the sake of no longer having my ancestors look down on my extremely questionable decisions.

I'm staring at the safe as a cold breeze washes across my body, turning my blood into ice. The sudden freezing temperature has me turning around, my eyes sweeping the empty hallway.

My teeth chatter, and I think I even see my breath puff out of my mouth. And just as quickly as it came, it dissipates. Slowly, my body warms up to a normal temperature, but the chill down my spine lingers.

I'm unable to tear my eyes away from the empty space, waiting for something to happen but as the minutes tick by, I end up just standing there.

Focus, Addie.

Gently setting the picture down, I decide to brush off the weird chill and google how to break open a safe. After finding several forums that list a step-by-step process, I run off towards my grandfather's toolbox collecting dust in the garage.

The space was never used for cars, even when Nana owned the house. Instead, generations of junk collected here, consisting mainly of my grandfather's tools and some odds and ends from the house. I grab the tools I need, run back up the stairs, and proceed to force my way into the safe. The old thing is pretty shitty in terms of protection, but I suppose whoever hid this box here didn't actually expect anyone to find it. At least not in their lifetime.

Several failed attempts, bouts of frustrated groaning, and a smashed finger later, I finally crack the sucker open. Using my flashlight again, I find three brown leather-bound books inside. No money. No jewels. Nothing of value really—at least not monetary value.

I hadn't been hoping for those things honestly, but I'm still surprised to find none, considering that's what most people use safes for.

I reach in and grab the journals, reveling in the feel of the buttery soft leather under my fingertips. A smile breaks across my face as I trail my fingers over the inscription on the first book.

Genevieve Matilda Parsons.

My great-grandmother—Nana's mother. The very woman in the picture concealing the safe, notorious for her red lipstick and bright smile. Nana always said she went by the name Gigi.

A quick look at the other two books reveals the same name. Her diaries? They have to be.

Dazed, I walk to my bedroom, close the door behind me and settle down on my bed, legs crossed. A leather cord is wrapped around each book, holding them closed. The outside world fades as I grab the first journal, carefully unwrap the cord, and open the book.

It is a diary. Every page has an entry written in a feminine script. And at the bottom of each page is my great-grandmother's trademark lipstick kiss.

She died before I was born, but I grew up hearing countless stories about her. Nana said she inherited her wild personality and sharp tongue from her mother. I wonder if Nana ever knew about the diaries. If she's ever read them.

If Genevieve Parsons is as wild as Nana said she was, then I imagine these diaries have all sorts of stories to show me. Smiling, I open the other two books and confirm the date on the first page of each book to ensure I'm starting from the beginning.

And then I stay up all night reading, growing more disturbed by each entry.



A thump from below wakes me out of a restless sleep. It feels like being ripped from a deep, persistent fog that lingers in the recess of my brain.

Blinking my eyes open, I stare at my closed door, focusing on the faint outline until my brain catches up with what I heard. My heart is well ahead of me, the muscle beating inside my chest rapidly while the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

A cloud of unease rolls in the pit of my stomach, and it's not until several seconds later that I realize the sound I heard was the shutting of my front door.

Slowly, I sit up and slide out from under the covers. Adrenaline is coursing through my system now, and I'm wide awake.

Someone was just inside my house.

The sound could have been anything. It could have been the foundation settling. Or shit, even a couple of ghosts roughhousing. But just like when your gut is telling you something bad is going to happen—mine is telling me that someone was just in my fucking house.

Was it the person that pounded on my door? It has to be, right? It's too much of a coincidence to have a stranger deliberately trek over a mile to the manor just to bang on the door and leave. And now they're back.

If they ever left at all.

Shakily, I get up from my bed, a cold chill washing over me and puckering my skin into goosebumps. I shiver, nabbing my phone from the nightstand and pad lightly over to the door. Slowly, I open it, cringing at the loud creak that rings out.

I need the Tin Man to oil the hinges on my door just as much as I need the Lion's bravery. I'm shaking like a leaf, but I refuse to cower and let someone walk around my house freely.

Flipping the switch on, the few working lights flicker, illuminating the hallway just enough for my mind to play tricks on me and conjure shadow people residing just beyond the light. And as I slowly make my way towards the staircase, I feel eyes from the pictures lining the walls watching me as I pass by.

Watching me make yet another stupid mistake. As if they're saying *stupid girl, you're about to get murdered.*

Watch your back.

They're right behind you.

The last thought has me gasping and turning around, though I know no one is actually behind me. My stupid fucking brain is a little bit too imaginative.

A trait that works wonders for my career, but I don't fucking appreciate it in this very moment.

Forging on at a quicker pace, I make my way down the stairs. Immediately, I turn on the lights, wincing from the brightness that burns my retinas.

Better than the alternative.

I would die on the spot if I was searching around with a single beam of light and found someone lurking in my house that way. One second no one is there, and the next second *hello*, there's my murderer. No fucking thank you.

When I don't find anyone in the living room or kitchen, I whip around and turn the knob on my front door. It's still locked, which means that whoever left somehow managed to relock the door.

Or they never actually left.

Sucking in a sharp breath, I storm through the living room and into the kitchen, gunning straight for the knives.

But I catch a glimpse of something resting on the island out of my peripheral, freezing me in place. My eyes jump to the item, and a curse escapes my lips when I see a single red rose resting on the countertop.

I stare at the flower like it's a live tarantula, staring straight back at me and daring me to come closer. If I do, it'll surely eat me alive.

Letting out a shaky breath, I pluck the flower from the countertop and roll it in my fingers. The thorns have been severed from the stem, and I get the strange inclination that it was done purposely to save my fingers from being pricked.

But that notion is crazy. If someone is sneaking into my house at night and leaving me flowers, their intentions are the exact opposite of virtuous. They're trying to scare me.

Curling my fist, I crush the flower in the palm of my hand and throw it in the trash, and then I resume my original mission. I rip open the drawer, the silverware clanking loudly in the silence, and then slam it shut after selecting the largest knife. I'm too pissed to be quiet and sneaky.

Whoever is hiding in here will hear me coming from a mile away, but I don't care. I have no desire to hide.

I'm seething now.

I don't like someone thinking they can just break into my home while I'm sleeping upstairs. And I especially don't like someone making me feel vulnerable in my own house.

And then to have the audacity to leave me a flower like a fucking weirdo? They may have made that rose powerless by clipping its thorns, but I will gladly show them a rose is still fucking deadly when it's shoved down their throat.

I thoroughly check the main and second floor, but don't find anyone waiting for me. It isn't until I'm at the end of the hallway on the second floor, staring at the door that leads to the attic, that my search comes to a screeching halt.

I'm frozen to the spot. Every time I try to force my feet forward, berating myself for not searching every single room in the manor, I can't bring myself to move. Every single one of my instincts is screaming at me to not go near that door.

That I will find something terrifying if I do.

The attic was where Nana would often retreat, spending her days up there knitting while humming a tune, several fans blowing at her from every direction during the summertime. I swear I hear those tunes coming from the attic some days, but I can't ever bring myself to go up there and look.

A feat that I apparently won't overcome tonight, either. I don't have the courage to go up there. The adrenaline fumes are running out, and exhaustion is weighing heavily on my bones.

Sighing, I drag my feet back down to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. I chug it in three swallows before refilling and emptying it again.

I slump down on the barstool in front of the island, finally setting the knife down. A thin layer of sweat dampens my forehead, and when I lean over and rest it against the cold marble countertop, it sends chills throughout my body.

The person is gone, but my house isn't the only thing they intruded on tonight.

They're in my head now—just like they fucking wanted.



"Someone broke into my house last night," I confess, my phone trapped between my ear and shoulder. The spoon clinks in the ceramic mug as I stir my coffee. I'm on my second cup, and it still feels like I have dumbbells for eyes, and my lids are in a losing weightlifting battle.

After the creep left last night, I couldn't fall back asleep, so I went through the entire house, confirming all the windows were locked.

Finding that they were unsettled me more. Every single door and window had been locked before and after they left. So how the fuck did they get in and out?

"Hold on, you said what? Someone *broke* into your *house*?" Daya shrieks.

"Yep," I say. "They left a red rose on my countertop."

Silence. Never thought I'd see the day Daya Pierson is speechless.

"That's not all that happened, though. Just the worst of it in the grand scheme of last night's fuckery, I suppose."

"What else happened?" she asks sharply.

"Well, Greyson is an asshole. He was in the middle of trying to locate a mysterious hole in my neck with his tongue when someone pounded on

my front door. And I mean, like *hard*. We went and looked, and no one was there. I'm assuming it was my new friend that did it."

"Are you fucking serious?"

I go on to explain the rest. Greyson's douchery—I got hung up on complaining about that just a bit. Then his fist going into my wall and his dramatic exit. I don't mention the safe and the diaries I found, or what I read in them. I haven't processed it yet, or the irony in reading her sordid love story and then someone breaking into my house the same night.

"I'm coming over today," Daya declares when I finish.

"I have to clean out the house today to prepare for renovations," I counter, already exhausted from the thought of it.

"I'll help then. We'll day drink to keep it interesting."

A small smile forms on my face. Daya has always been a great friend to me.

She's been my best friend since middle school. We kept in contact after graduation, even after we both moved away to different colleges. Our lives only allowed us to see each other for holidays and an annual haunted fair the past several years.

I dropped out of college after a year and pursued my writing career, while Daya got a degree in Computer Science. Somehow, she wormed her way into some hacker group and is pretty much a vigilante for the people, exposing the government's secrets to the public.

She's the biggest conspiracy theorist I've ever met, but even I can admit that the shit she finds is disturbing and has too much evidence to be considered a theory anymore.

Regardless, both of our jobs allow us ample amounts of freedom in our day-to-day life. We're luckier than most.

"I really appreciate that. I'll see you soon," I say before hanging up.

I sigh and look over at the diaries sitting on the island in front of me. I haven't finished reading the first book yet, and I'm nervous about continuing. With every passing word, I want to reject Gigi.

Almost as much as I want to be her.

April 12th, 1944

He came back again. I dare say I would be disappointed if he didn't. John left for work, and Serafina went off to school. The minute the house emptied, I waited by the window. Not my proudest moment, I must admit.

This time, he walked into the house. I froze when he did. Terrified of what he would do, but also anticipating his next move.

When he revealed the entirety of his face to me, without shadows concealing his features, my breath caught.

He's beautiful. Piercing blue eyes. A strong jawline. And big. So, very big.

He approached me, still refusing to speak. He caressed my face with his fingers. So gently. He circled around me, letting his fingers drift across my skin.

I shivered beneath his touch and he smiled. His smile made my heart stop in my chest.

And then he left. Walked out without a word.

I almost pleaded for him to come back, but I stopped myself.

He'll be back.

