

Chapter 7

The Manipulator

“You need to get out of the house,” Daya concludes, staring at me with fear and distress swirling in her sage eyes. I just told her about my mom’s visit yesterday.

By the look on her face, I can tell that she’s well and truly scared for me.

“I need to finish this manuscript,” I argue, my thoughts straying to the massive plot hole I’ve fallen into. It doesn’t seem to matter how many times I press the proverbial Life Alert—I can’t get up. I’m going to have to roll out my whiteboard and sticky notes to map out the plot tonight, so I can figure out how to solve the issue once and for all.

Sometimes I wish I could just simplify my books and call it a day, but then I wouldn’t have the readership I have.

“Uh uh,” Daya snipes, shaking her head at me. “Get ready. We’re having a girls night.”

I slump, the whiteboard and sticky notes going *poof*. But I don’t argue. I’m an indie author, so I publish when I’m ready to. I hardly set deadlines for myself because the pressure suppresses my creativity. I can’t write when I’m too ridden with anxiety to get the book done by a specific time. And as great as my readers are, there’s always that pressure to get the next book out.

Of course, Daya knows this and now wields this knowledge as a weapon.

Dick.

Groaning, I let her hurdle me up the stairs and into my bedroom, my eyes immediately finding the mirror and chest—they always seem to do that now after finding out what really happened in here.

Those two pieces feel like beacons in the room now, glaring at me as if to say *I know who killed her*.

It doesn’t matter that I slapped some black paint on them. The bones are still the same.

The walls and floor are smooth black rock now, with white ceilings and large white rugs to lighten up the room. I also installed a heating system in the floors. Otherwise, getting up in the middle of the night to pee and stepping on ice-cold floors would just be cruel and unusual punishment.

I decided I love the sconces in the hallway so much that I wanted a few in my room, too. Placed artfully on the wall my bed is against, surrounding a massive, beautiful art piece of a woman.

Straight ahead of the bedroom door is my favorite part—the balcony. Black double doors open up to a terrace that overlooks the cliffside. It has a way of making you feel small and insignificant when you're standing before a sight as beautiful as that.

The entire house has now been modernized, though I kept most of the original style. The sconces, checkered floors, black stone fireplace, and black cabinets, just to name a few. Most importantly, I kept Gigi's red velvet rocking chair.

I'm living in a Victorian gothic dreamhouse.

"We're going to make you look hot and find you a delicious man to take home tonight. And if the stalker comes around, he can kill him, too."

I roll my eyes. "Daya, it's hard to find a man these days that can even fuck right. You think I'm going to find a man that will kill in my honor, too? That's cute."

"You never know, baby girl. Crazy things have happened."



The bass pumping through the speakers vibrates throughout my body. My black, ripped skinny jeans cling to my curves, and the plunging low cut red tank shows off my ample cleavage along with the small glistening beads of sweat between my breasts.

It's fucking hotter than Hades's ballsack, and the alcohol pumping through my veins doesn't help matters.

For a solid hour, Daya and I stick close to each other and dance. We both briefly separate to dance with a few men, but I tend to tire of the groping hands quickly and always find my way back to my best friend.

Suddenly, a heavy presence crowds into my back, his hands sliding around my waist and pressing in close. A whiff of spearmint and whiskey invades my senses right before I feel his breath on my ear.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispers, his spearmint gum stinging my nose now that he’s closer. I wrinkle my nose and turn my head to see a tall, attractive man leaning over me.

He has strawberry blonde hair, pretty blue eyes, and a killer smile.

Just my type.

I grin. “Why, thank you,” I respond sweetly. Social situations nearly send me into hibernation, but I’ve always been skilled at flirting. Too bad most times, I can’t stand to do it.

Men have a unique way of killing my mood every time I come within ten feet of them.

“Come upstairs with me,” he yells over the music. His voice isn’t aggressive by any means, but it’s not a question either. It’s a demand that leaves little room for argument.

I like that.

I cock a brow. “And if I don’t?” I ask.

His smile widens. “You’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

The other brow joins its twin, hiking halfway up my forehead.

“Really,” I say demurely. “What kind of plans do you have for me that I’d regret missing out on for the rest of my life?”

“The kind that leaves you naked and sated in my bed.”

“Bitch, let’s go already,” Daya cuts in. My head turns to her, but I feel the man’s eyes linger on my face, caressing my cheek like a feather tracing across skin.

Daya is standing in front of us, impatiently waving her hand towards the stairs that lead to the second floor. She must've been eavesdropping, and she doesn't look the least bit ashamed.

When we both just stare at her, she huffs and rolls her eyes.

“We get it, you’re hot for each other. And she doesn’t go anywhere without me. So, let’s go already.” She waves her hands at us more urgently, shooing us towards the stairs.

The man laughs and seizes the opportunity provided by my dear best friend. Grabbing my hand, he leads me towards the black metal stairs at the back of the club.

But not before I shoot Daya a narrow-eyed look. One which she dutifully cackles at.

Upstairs is for VIP members only. The stairs lead up to a balcony that overlooks the entirety of the club. It's where the rich, important people drink, staring out at us like a bunch of bugs trapped in a science experiment.

The atmosphere up here is darker, denser, and has a vibe that has my instincts flaring red. Walking up here feels like sticking my head into a hornet's nest. And the bastards won't stop stinging until they tire of you, or you're dead.

Four men are draped across a black leather booth formed in a half-moon. In the center is a black marble table occupied by several glasses of amber liquid, along with a few crystal ashtrays. There's barely a hint of color in here, the décor reminding me of Parsons Manor.

A man eyes the both of us with a predatory and calculated gleam. He looks eerily similar to the man who has his hand wrapped around mine. Same strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes, though this one appears younger and a tad more wicked.

The other three men are equally handsome, all sporting the same dark and dangerous type. One man appears European with white-blond hair, fair, pale skin, and sharp angular features. His hooded icy blue eyes are locked on Daya as hers sweep across the small, intimate room. His gaze is already tracing the dips and curves of her body hungrily. My instincts spike again, telling me to pop the man's eyes out of their sockets and throw them over the balcony.

The remaining two men are twins with tanned skin, dark hair and eyes and killer bodies. Their suits can barely contain the muscles threatening to rip the expensive fabric at the seams.

One twin has long hair tied back in a bun and several rings adorning his fingers, while the other has his hair cropped close to his head and a diamond nose ring.

All four of them could easily ruin my life. And I would be hesitant to stop them.

"So, you finally grew the balls and got her," the blonde man says, grinning devilishly at me. He's the only one out of the four that isn't eye-

fucking us. Honestly, he looks like he'd be far more interested in eating babies for dinner.

There's a dark aura around him. If I could guess, the unsettling atmosphere up here derives directly from him. His energy sprouts and festers until it makes you feel like you're trapped in a room breathing in black smoke.

"Quiet, Connor," the man says from beside me, his tone low and full of warning.

I nearly roll my eyes. He *looks* like a Connor. The frat boy that hangs around unoccupied drinks and sneaks his phone under girls' skirts to take pictures.

"Ladies, sorry for his rude behavior," my new friend says, his smile not quite reaching his eyes. "That's my brother, Connor. The twins, Landon and Luke. And then Max."

He points to each man respectively. Landon being the twin with the man bun, and Luke the one with a nose ring. I train my gaze on my companion with an expectant brow raised.

"And your name?"

"I'm Archibald Talaverra III. You can call me Arch."

"Sounds pretentious," I muse, smiling at the fact that he gave me his full name.

Who actually introduces themselves to a stranger that way? *Archibald Talaverra, the third. Just call me your Royal Highn-ass.*

His brother, Connor, laughs in response, seeming to agree.

Arch opens his mouth, but I cut him off. "I'm Addie. And this is Daya," I introduce, pointing towards my best friend. She offers a smile, but her stare is sharp and assessing. She's too keen and intelligent to get sucked into danger like I tend to do.

"Nice to meet you, ladies," Max murmurs, his attention still glued to Daya. Matter of fact, the twins have hardly looked away from her since the moment she walked into the room, either.

Every bit of me wants to step in front of her and protect her from the prying, feral eyes. But Daya can handle her own, so I stay beside her. Ready to attack if needed.

"Sit, please," Arch urges. There's plenty of room on the booth but the two of us decide to sit on the end, closest to Max.

My phone buzzes as soon as my ass hits the soft leather. Noticing that Daya has been immediately sucked into a conversation with Max, and Arch is filling up a glass of expensive bourbon, I sneak a peek at the text.

UNKNOWN: Sneaking off with random men, little mouse? If I catch his hands anywhere near you, they'll end up in your mailbox by morning.

My heart stills in my chest. This is the first time he has actually communicated with me outside of an ominous note.

My eyes snap up towards the balcony. No one can see us from here. We're too far back from the railing. But yet, someone is clearly watching me.

But how?

And how the hell did he get my number? Scratch that, that was a stupid question. He's a fucking stalker, for god's sake. Of course, he has my number.

Arch walks over and hands me a drink, a smile on his face. He thinks he's getting laid tonight.

Normally, he might have. But it looks like I might have to save his life instead and get the hell away from him.



An hour passes, and I grow more nervous as each minute ticks by. I haven't received another text, but it's sitting there, weighing down the back of my brain. I fear my brain stem will snap from the tension.

Arch's hands definitely touch me. One currently rests on my thigh, dangerously close to my center. I stare down at the star tattooed on his thumb, my mind conjuring images of holding it—without his body attached.

Yet, I let it happen, even though I shouldn't. And because I shouldn't, I can't stop staring at them, imagining them chopped off at the wrist and bloody. Sitting in my mailbox.

I don't even have a mailbox.

My house is too far back from the road, so my mail is just left on my front step.

Shouldn't a stalker know that?

What a shitty little shadow.

"You having fun?" Arch asks, nudging me with his shoulders. I nod absently as I continue to abuse my lip trapped beneath my teeth.

I should run. I should tell this man to get his hand off of me if only it means it'll never be severed from his body and left in my nonexistent mailbox.

"You're tense," Arch observes quietly. I clear my throat and open my mouth, but another buzz from my back pocket interrupts me.

I can feel the color leech from my face. Arch's brows dip with concern, and it reminds me of the poor man that I nearly gave a heart attack by the cliff's edge.

He glances down towards the sound. "Are you okay?" he asks, his voice only seeming to quieten further.

I'm growing tired of the concerned looks, but yet, they feel like lifelines. Like there's people out there that will notice my strange behavior and speak out if something ever happens to me.

A news reporter will interview Arch, and he'll speak of how I seemed spooked by a text message. The construction worker who built my porch—his story will be broadcasted and talked about for weeks. A girl standing at the edge of a cliff, seeming to contemplate jumping and then nearly falling off.

It all connects to the fact that I had a stalker. And the police brushed it off when I made my reports of random roses. But it won't change anything for the next girl that's being stalked.

It never does.

In the end, I'll be another statistic but will fade away as just that. A beautiful girl stalked by an unhinged man. And no one bothered to help her until it was too late.

"I'm fine," I force out through a stilted smile. It feels wooden and disingenuous, but it does the trick nonetheless. His face relaxes, and the concern bleeds away.

Or rather, Arch is just letting it go because he doesn't actually care.

“Do you want to leave?” he murmurs, his voice now full of promise and intent. His bottom lip disappears between his white teeth, the act in itself primal.

The word *no* is on the tip of my tongue, like a little ballerina dancing precariously at the tip, dangerously close to falling off and breaking her ankle. Because if I say no to this man, I’ll spend the rest of my night—week—possibly longer, regretting it.

Hating myself for letting a freak control my life and rob me of a good time with a delicious man.

He’s beautiful, with a shade of darkness surrounding him that’s as enticing and mouth-watering as chocolate cake. There’s a promise that I would be ending the night with him entirely satisfied.

And what if it evolves into more? What if I’m saying no to something beautiful? Those are a little girl’s hopes and dreams, but I can’t help thinking them anyways.

He looks like a man that I could settle down with but dangerous enough to keep me excited.

“Yes,” I say quietly—finally. “But after I know Daya gets home safely.” Arch smiles slowly. Salaciously. “I can see to that.”

July 7th, 1944

Ronaldo likes to tease.

Only an hour after I send Seraphina off to school, he comes in and tells me to sit in my dining room chair.

I follow his orders eagerly. His fingers whisper across my flesh. When I talk to him, he doesn't respond.

He unbuttons my blouse, baring my breasts. Then onto my trousers. He pulls them down and leaves me in nothing but my undergarments.

He smiles when he sees the excitement in my eyes.

Yet he still denies me. He never touches me where I want him to. Where I need him to.

His fingers taunt me. And then he leaves.

And it takes everything in me not to beg for him to come back. One of these days, I won't be able to control myself any longer.

