

Chapter 16

The Manipulator

Millions of thoughts run through my head on what I could possibly say to get out of this. *I'm sorry* clearly wasn't good enough.

"You're going to shoot me?"

My bladder is threatening to explode, and the knowledge that I might die in a puddle of pee brings tears to my eyes.

"I've already said I'm not going to kill you," he responds, his tone dripping with impatience. He punctuates his response by dragging the tip of the gun down through the valley of my breasts. The gun continues its path down my stomach, stopping at the edge of my leggings.

"Take these off."

My lip trembles and a single tear slides down my temple.

"Please, don't do this."

He cocks a brow, and the act is damning. He looks so damn unimpressed with my pleas, causing another tear to trace the path of the first.

"Now, Adeline."

Sniffing, I finally listen. Hooking my thumbs in the band of my leggings, I pull them down. I'm only able to reach mid-thigh before his body gets in the way.

He takes the hint, lifting up and ripping the leggings down the rest of the way.

More tears follow suit.

"T-shirt next," he orders, jerking his gun to signal his order. I lift up and slide the shirt over my head, laying back down with a huff.

"Fucking beautiful," he murmurs, his eyes tracing over the curves of my body. Fucker is lucky I'm wearing my black lace set tonight.

He doesn't fucking deserve it, either.

He leans over me again, his mouth kissing the last bruise he left on my shoulder.

“Do you know what these mean?” he whispers, kissing another spot. I shudder beneath his touch, electricity sprouting from the point of contact and dancing across my skin.

I don't answer, but he doesn't seem to mind.

“They mean that I own you. Marked you as mine.”

The tip of his tongue darts out, trailing my flesh as he moves down towards my breasts.

“Don't—”

His teeth pierce the swell of my left breast before I can finish my pointless demand. I gasp, squeezing my eyes shut as he leaves another mark on my skin.

Once he's satisfied, he renews his path with his mouth, leaving hickeys on both of my tits and several across my stomach. And all I can do is just take it. Because that gun in his hand is keeping me pliant—just like he planned.

When my body is well and abused from his teeth and tongue, he lifts up and forces my thighs open. I strain against him, but it only hurts me in the end. He's too strong.

His pointer finger curls in the edge of my thong, tracing the lining from the juncture of my thigh, down towards my center. Before he reaches my clit, he pulls the material out and runs his finger up and down the fabric, his finger a mere inch from my pussy.

I want to cover my face because I know he's feeling my body's betrayal.

“These are soaked,” he rasps out, his lips still wet from his saliva.

“That's called discharge,” I snap, hoping my lie turns him off. He smiles in response.

“As much as I hate to say this to you, I'm no stranger to a woman's pussy and what it feels like when it weeps for me.”

I curl my lip in disgust. “Last time I checked, most girls weep because they're upset. Take a hint.”

He chuckles. “Little mouse, that's exactly what I'm doing.” He then pulls my thong to the side, baring my pussy to him, and the arousal glistening from within. He mutters a curse under his breath as his eyes devour every inch of me. Another tremble of my lips has me biting down on the traitorous flesh.

Keeping one finger hooked in my underwear, he points the gun in my face with the other. I recoil, pinching my eyes shut and letting loose a startled yelp.

“Relax, I just want you to suck on it.”

It takes several seconds for his words to process. To process that he didn't pull the trigger, and I'm not dead. When they do, my eyes snap open, and I glare at him.

“Why the fuc—” He taps the tip of the gun on my mouth, effectively cutting me off. The rest of my words dissipate as he slides the gun across my lips, as if he's painting them with lipstick.

“Suck,” he orders, his tone deepening with finality. Closing my eyes against more tears, I open my mouth and let him guide the gun between my teeth. I squeeze my lids tighter as I twirl my tongue over the cold metal, cringing from the nasty taste.

“Such a good girl,” he says, pulling the dripping gun out, a trail of saliva following until it snaps.

My entire body locks when I feel the cool metal slide against my clit. I flinch against the foreign touch of an incredibly dangerous weapon.

Pure terror washes over me, and it takes all of my strength to keep from full on sobbing. Holding a gun to my head is far less intimidating than it being held between my legs. A gunshot to the head is instant death, but this? This would be slow and painful. Torturous.

He leans down, close enough for his hot breath to fan across my core. I lift up for a better view just as he looks up at me through long, thick lashes, his mismatched eyes sparkling with delight. Right when I open my mouth to ask what he's doing, he sticks out his tongue, saliva pooling to the tip and dripping off onto my pussy.

"Can never be too wet, can you, little mouse?"

Sitting up, he circles my entrance with the tip of the gun, the metal slipping against my skin.

“Oh my God, please do—” This time, my words are cut off from the feel of him dipping the gun past my folds. Just the tip, but enough to close my throat, only allowing a startled squeak to escape.

He laughs cruelly. “You even sound like a mouse.”

I'd snap at him if I wasn't frozen solid. I can't look away. I just watch him push the gun inside me, my rounded eyes barely processing what I'm

seeing. What I'm feeling.

Slowly, he works the gun inside me, drawing out both pleasure and pain. I clench my jaw, shuddering from his ministrations but refusing to make a sound. I won't give him that satisfaction.

He works the weapon halfway in before the gun retreats to the very tip. I'm allowed a moment's breath before he buries the entire barrel inside me. I suck in a sharp gasp and let my head fall back, no longer having the strength to watch.

This is so, so fucked up. Beyond fucked up.

But when the gun pulls out and sinks back in again, a noise does slip through as a wave of pleasure rocks through me.

"Good girl," he breathes. "Open wider, baby." The hand still holding my thong to the side nudges against my thigh. Without thought, my thighs instinctively fall further apart.

Another praise, but I barely hear it over the beating of my heart.

"I can feel how tight your pussy is. The way it grips onto my gun when I slide it out—so fucking pretty."

I bite my lip, but it isn't enough to hold in the next moan. Or the one after that. I can hear the suctioning and slurping noises as he fucks me with his gun, and shame fills me in response.

The embarrassment nearly overrides the fear. But neither of them is more potent than the pleasure my body is being forced to succumb to.

When he angles the gun in a particular way, he hits a spot inside me that sends my eyes to the back of my head and an unchecked moan to slip free.

He growls in response, my back arching as he continues to hit that spot. My thong grows impossibly tight, biting into my flesh before it's ripped away from my body, the sound getting lost in another cry.

The tattered fabric is tossed aside, freeing his hand to grip my thigh in a bruising hold.

My heart jumps when he leans down, but he only clamps his teeth on my inner thigh. I cry out from the sharp bite, but it quickly morphs into pleasure when he hits that spot again.

His mouth sucks and his movements quicken until I feel the beginnings of an orgasm settle low in the pit of my stomach.

"Please," I beg, but I don't know what for. He tears his mouth away just to clamp down again, lower this time, but still far away from my center.

Too far away.

"Tell me what you learned, Adeline," he demands, looking up at me, his mouth wet from his biting. The sight makes my heart drop deep into my belly, right to where the gun is driving into me.

"Not to bite your cheek?" I guess, my voice trembling.

He answers by biting my thigh in a punishing grip. I cry out, the pain blinding. He loosens his jaw, allowing the pain to bleed into pleasure. A primal noise slips out as he pushes the gun deep.

"Are you going to make me ask again?"

I open my mouth, but no answer comes out. My silence allows for me to hear his warning loud and clear. He cocks the gun.

"Okay, okay, *fuck*," I relent on a terrified hush. "I-I learned not to let another man touch me."

Those words bring tears to my eyes. Because saying them out loud makes me feel well and truly trapped by this man.

"Who's the only one allowed to touch you, Adeline?"

I close my eyes, hating the lie that's about to slip from my mouth just like the tears are from my eyes.

"You," I whisper, the bitter taste of the words clogging my throat. A battlefield rages in my body. The side that wants him to make me come, and the other side that wants him to turn the gun on himself and fire it.

I glance down at him and note the way he's staring up at me. And I have the terrifying realization that he doesn't believe my lies.

"You have ten more seconds to come, little mouse. No more after that," he warns before nipping at my thigh again. "Rub your clit, baby."

I hesitate. The last thing I want to do is allow this man the satisfaction of making me come, and even worse, helping him do it.

He doesn't fucking deserve it. And though my body is strung tight with desperation for it, my brain revolts against the thought.

"Now," he growls, his eyes blazing with something carnal and dangerous.

Muttering a curse, I reach down and twirl my fingers over my clit, too scared of the repercussions. If it's between orgasming and getting shot, I'm going to have to choose the option that will cause the least amount of damage.

"Good girl," he whispers. It takes two more thrusts of the gun before I'm tipping over the edge, my ass shooting clear off the ground as the orgasm

rips through me.

I'm screaming. I can feel the sound vibrating the muscles in my throat. And I can feel how hoarse it's becoming. But I can't hear it. Not when my entire being is consumed in fire and ice, and the only thing I can see is heaven.

The gun works inside of me faster and deeper, drawing out the orgasm until I'm literally begging for it to stop.

He rips the gun out of me, and my thighs snap shut instantly as the last of the orgasm dies.

I'm left a shuddering mess from the aftershocks, while he stands, his body towering over me.

I look up through half-lidded eyes, still jerking from the little shocks, when he lifts the gun and swallows the barrel. It feels like an out-of-body experience as I watch him lick the weapon clean, and then stick it in the back of his jeans.

My body is full of rage, humiliation, and shame—I know this. But it's like my brain can't process those emotions, so it's just choosing to feel nothing at all.

Is this what trauma does? Knowing you've been violated but your body chooses to go numb instead?

Like a magic trick, his hand comes back into view with a rose that must've been in his back pocket. The petals are crushed, likely from our struggle, but he doesn't seem to care. He twirls the rose in his hand before tossing it on me, the flower fluttering to my stomach.

With one last lingering look, he turns and walks out without a word.

And finally, the dam bursts as emotions crash through my body and flood out of my eyes.



For the next three nights, my shadow stood outside my window. Watching me, a red cherry blaring in the night as he puffed on a cigarette. What I wanted to tell him is how fucking disgusting it is that he smokes.

But the heat between my thighs likes the way he looks. I think my asshole of a vagina might've even been jealous of the cigarette. Apparently, it has a thing for inanimate objects.

And *that* reminder royally pissed me off. Enough to storm into the kitchen and pour myself an entire cup of wine. Wine cures everything for a little while.

Anger.

Trauma.

But now, with a glass of wine absent, rage causes my hands to tremble with the reminder of how he left me on the floor, tossing a rose on me like discarded trash and then leaving. I had never felt more debased as a human until that moment. Never more humiliated.

He hasn't messaged me since. Hasn't tried to come to me and wave another gun in my face. He just lingered outside the window.

And I stared back.

It's become our fucked-up routine.

He doesn't come around during the day, and as long as I'm not letting men feel me up and stick their hand down my pants, he doesn't text me any more threatening messages.

I don't tell Daya about our confrontation, and especially not about how that night ended. If my shadow doesn't murder me first, Daya will.

I was incredibly stupid. A fact I've never tried to deny. Especially now.

There's just no explaining the reactions he pulls from me. I'd love to pretend like confronting a scary man is so like me, but it's the exact opposite. I work myself into a panic attack if I have to ask a complete stranger a question.

So why is it every time he comes around, I slip into insanity?

"Why are you wearing a turtleneck?" Daya asks with disdain, shoving a bite of her salad into her mouth. We met at Fiona's to grab a bite to eat.

I needed to get out of the house. Desperately. The smallest things would bring me back to that night. And every time I looked in the mirror, I was overcome with the memory of his teeth sinking into me. And the bite of metal soon after.

I clear my throat. "I'm trying something new," I mutter. It was the only thing that would cover the marks staining my body. I had to order several of them in different colors through Amazon Prime, the need for them dire.

I can never let Daya see those marks. Nor could I ever confess the new meaning my stalker gave to finger-banging.

She shrugs her shoulders, looking down at her salad. "Only you can make a turtleneck, mom jeans, and a belt look fashionable."

I frown down at my outfit, disagreeing with her assessment. I hate this outfit, but maybe I only hate what it represents. Something designed solely to cover the bruises covering my body. Beneath these clothes is a map of purple hickeys.

"What about lover boy? Anything else happen with him?"

I hope the flush crawling up my neck stays down. If it doesn't, maybe I can blame it on the goddamn turtleneck.

"I'd much rather talk about Gigi," I say, eyeing the mozzarella sticks sitting between Daya and me. I've had four already and I want the last one. Noting my stare, Daya rolls her eyes and flaps her hand, urging me to take it.

I do so with a big smile on my face.

"I have some news on Ronaldo." Both brows shoot up, urging me to continue. "Last night I was picking through the diaries to see what I could find on him. Gigi would often mention him wearing nice suits and that gold ring, indicating that he was middle to upper class. And there was one entry where he seemed to have gotten jumped. Came in bruised and bloodied but wouldn't speak about it.

"So, I'm thinking he was involved in crime of some sort. He was very secretive about his life and told her at one point that he wouldn't allow his dangerous lifestyle to affect her."

"You think he was like a mob boss?"

I shake my head. "No, I think *his* boss was a mob boss. When Gigi spoke of him when he was beat up, she made it sound like he was punished for something. She quoted him saying, "it was nothing I didn't deserve," and that's all he would say.

"Gigi had noted several times in entries that she kept asking anyways, concerned for his wellbeing. The last thing he told her was that he had a very strict boss, and he couldn't know about her."

Daya nods her head, a spark of excitement in her sage eyes. "I'll look into crime families in the 40s. See if I can find anyone that might match his description."

I smile, feeling the same spark of hope. The high lasts for a total of five seconds before Daya's eyes widen, her gaze locked behind me.

My heart drops and the hairs on the back of my neck rise. My shadow wouldn't show up here now, would he? In front of Daya?

"Hello, ladies."

My eyes widen along with Daya's. Her gaze clashes with mine and a million things are said in the span of two seconds. Like that we need to be very fucking careful.

He sits down next to me, his body relaxing back into the chair as he stares at me with a wide smile that stops miles from his eyes.

I clear my throat and force a smile. "Hello, Max. Arch's friend, right?"

"The one and only," he responds, his stony blue gaze glued to my face. I can feel a blush creeping up my neck from the intensity of his glare.

"What can I do for you?" I ask casually, sipping on my quickly depleting margarita. I'm going to have to flag down the waitress soon because I'm going to need another to get me through the conversation, and one more to get me through the aftermath.

I'm going to need to call an Uber tonight, I already feel it.

He leans forward on the table, crossing his fingers and looking at me like he's really curious about something. His entire demeanor is hostile.

"I'd like for you to tell me exactly what happened when Arch went missing." His lips curl into a cruel smile as he tacks on, "From your doorstep."

I frown. "Didn't you already hear about it from the police reports?"

He narrows his eyes, that smile frozen on his ice-cold face. "I want to hear it from you, Ms. Reilly."

I do my best to keep my face blank, but I'm not sure how well I'm doing. Can't say I'm practiced in the art of handling a criminal. Matter of fact, three nights ago pretty much proved that I *suck* at handling criminals.

He said my last name to show me he looked into me. But that would be the one thing I'm used to by now. Being stalked.

"We went back to my place and had some fun," I start. A glimmer shines in Max's eye when I say that. "We were actually in the middle of having fun when someone banged really hard on my front door—"

"Has that happened before?"

My nerves flare because this is a question I don't know how to answer.

“No,” I say finally, refraining from gulping like I really want to. I also really want to pick up my margarita again, but my hands are shaking, and I don’t think I’ll be able to hide that.

So, I act like an imbecile and lean over to suck down more of the margarita with it on the table.

“Hmm,” he hums.

Max has to know I have a stalker now. It was something Sheriff Walters told me that would bite me in the ass with them, but I couldn’t *not* report someone stalking me. Max must’ve seen those reports. But one thing is for sure, I didn’t report his hands appearing on my doorstep.

“You see, Addie, I just can’t quite figure out the motive, ya’ know? Like, say, why would an enemy of Arch show up at *your* doorstep in the middle of Arch getting his dick wet?”

I flinch from his crass words, feeling almost ashamed that I let Arch touch me at all.

“Max,” Daya snaps. His cold eyes turn to her, but she doesn’t cower. “I’ve told ya’ll a million fucking times. Addie had nothing to do with it.”

His gaze thins again, and he leans further into the table, pinning Daya with a steely glare.

“That’s the problem, Daya. I don’t fucking believe you.”

She snarls, her hands clenching into fists.

“If you want answers, Max, you’re looking in the wrong place,” I cut in before this conversation blows up and Max murders us right here and now.

“I don’t think I am,” he responds, facing me again. “Because Arch’s hands ended up on your doorstep the next morning. And if I didn’t know any better, I’d say that’s personal. So why would Arch’s hands be personal to *you*?”

He smiles in victory when my eyes round with surprise. “How did you know that?”

“Something didn’t sit right with Arch going missing at your house of all places. The morning after, we sent a man to scope out your property. Just in time to see Daya here picking up a bloody box and driving off with it. They tailed her and after she buried it, they simply unburied it. Imagine our surprise when I saw my best friend’s hands in that box. And imagine my surprise when my men told me it was gifted to *you*.”

I don't look to Daya. I don't want Max to see just how alarmed I truly am.

My eyes thin. "Maybe it was put on my doorstep because whoever it was assumed I was connected to Arch's *dealings*."

He laughs then. "You think our rival assumed you were Arch's bitch? And that you were involved with our work?"

"Maybe," I snap. "Would they know if I wasn't?"

He doesn't answer. He just stares, sussing me out. And I stare back, letting him see the anger in my face. The frustration.

"Why did you have Daya bury them, Addie? Why not tell the police?"

I weigh my options and decide that telling the partial truth is my best bet. "Because there was a note in it threatening my life, along with any police officers involved if I called them. I was made aware of Arch's... *work* by then and thought it best to listen and not get further involved. In something I have *nothing* to do with, by the way."

Again, he just stares. My heart is beating out of my chest, and by the look in Max's eyes, I'm still not sure he believes me innocent.

Part of me just wants to confess to him that I'm being stalked. What difference would it make at this point, anyway? Now that Max discovered Arch's hands, there's no reason to keep it a secret.

But there is.

If Max discovers I have a stalker—one who is clearly violent and dangerous—he might use me as leverage to draw him out to get his revenge.

I'd become collateral. And I'm not sure I'd make it out alive.

At least this way, there's a chance that Max will leave me alone if he thinks I'm just some random girl who got caught in the crosshairs of gang activity.

Max hums again and stands, straightening his suit jacket and rebuttoning it. The suit drips class and money, and something tells me Max has taken over the Talaverra's dealings.

There's a new crime lord in town, and he's pissed. At me, no less.

"Enjoy the rest of your dinner, ladies."

He walks away, taking all of his bad juju with him. The air instantly feels lighter now that he's gone, but he managed to still leave an ashy taste in my mouth.

“They’re going to be a problem,” Daya says quietly.
I nod and flag down the waitress. “Add it to the fucking list.”

April 15th, 1945

This evening was awful. John drank too much, and when he does, he gets mean.

Frank had to carry him in the house and put him to bed. I was too angry to even help undress him.

Finally, the dam broke and he accused me of cheating. Frank was there and looked at me as if I killed his dog. This happened in front of Frank's work associates.

It was mortifying. But nothing I didn't deserve. I denied his claims of course, more worried about calming him down.

After Frank got John to bed, he asked me if it was true.

I said no, but I don't think he believed me.

He stormed out of the house after that. And I'm not sure what I said to upset him so badly.

