

Chapter 21

The Manipulator

I'm stewing.
I Nana used to make this god-awful stew when I was young. It smelled like a dumpster fire and tasted even worse. My attitude is about as foul as that stew right now.

"I don't even know his name," I groan, my voice muffled by my hands. They've been glued to my face ever since Daya got here, and I confessed he broke in again.

I haven't gotten around to what happened yet. There's not an ounce of courage in my bones. She's been patiently waiting, knowing that I'm holding something back. Something terrible and shameful. And something I can't stop fucking thinking about.

"You fucked him, didn't you?" she asks calmly.

My eyes bulge, and I unglue my hands from my face so I can pin her with a glare.

"No, I did not fuck him," I snarl, as if she's suggesting something insane and I didn't come really damn close to it. I can feel the blood rising in my cheeks and my left eye twitches.

Fuck. Daya knows that's my tell.

"You did!" she bursts, standing up from her chair and looking down at me with shock.

"I didn't! I promise," I rush out, grabbing her hand. "But... something did happen."

She puffs out a breath and settles back down in her chair, scooting back into the island in my kitchen and grabbing her margarita. She sucks down two huge gulps, trepidation on her face.

"You sucked his dick?" she guesses, lifting a hand to fiddle with her nose ring.

The images those words just put in my head have my blood pressure rising to dangerous levels. I bite my lip and shake my head slowly, the guilty look still present on my face.

“He sucked you?”

When I just stare, the guilt in my eyes burning brighter, her mouth pops open and her eyes round.

“Bitch, what the fuck!” she shouts. She leans in closer, an unreadable emotion flaring in her eyes. “Was it consensual?”

And this is where I get tripped up. Because it wasn’t. But had he kept going, had he stripped his clothes from his body and fucked me—I can’t say with absolute certainty that I would’ve stopped him. Or that I would’ve wanted to.

Still, I shake my head no.

Fury flares in her sage eyes, and her lips twist into a snarl. I lean back, honestly a little afraid of her.

I put my hand on hers. “Daya... I-well, it wasn’t consensual... at first?” I say the last part like a question, embarrassed that I’m even admitting something like that.

She blinks. “At first,” she echoes. “Meaning what? He was that good that he changed your mind?”

My hands cover my face, but she forces them away, nearly bumping her nose into mine as she intently waits for an answer.

“You have such pretty eyes,” I tell her.

She snarls at me. “Spill, slut.”

I close my eyes with a resigned sigh. “That man ate the soul out of my body, and I don’t think I’ve gotten it back yet.”

She jerks back, surprise in her pale green irises.

“I know, you can judge me. I’m judging me too,” I say pitifully. I slide her margarita over to me and finish it off. Mine’s been gone since I first told her he broke in.

“Baby girl, I am *not* judging you. But let me get this straight. You egged him on in a text because you felt like a bad bitch. And then he broke in to make good on his promise, tied your ass up, and you freaked out at first, but then ended up riding his face?” she summarizes slowly.

Several emotions swirl in her eyes. Confusion, shock, maybe even intrigue. But not judgment. And that’s only because I didn’t confess to her

about the gun incident. I don't think I'll ever be able to talk about that one.

I roll my lips. "Pretty much."

Without taking her eyes off me, she leans over and grabs the bottle of tequila we used to make the margaritas. She pours a shot into both of our empty cups and then hands one to me.

We take the shot, cringing at the taste, and then stare at each other in silence.

"I'm just not even sure what to say."

I groan. "Daya, I don't know what to do. He didn't hurt me, but he did. He definitely forced himself on me. But I would've let him go farther had he tried. I'm so fucking confused. And I feel dirty and wrong, but when it was happening, it felt..."

I trail off with another groan, and this time I just bang my head against the granite countertop.

"Really good?" she fills in. "Amazing? Out of this world?"

"All of the above," I confess. "I have never come so hard in my entire life."

"Damn," she breathes, a note of awe in her voice. "Has he contacted you since then?" she asks gently, running her fingers through my hair in a comforting gesture.

I lift my head, a frown on my face. "Yes. He just... he said he didn't want me to fall in love with something fake. He pretty much said he's showing me who he really is, instead of lying to me about it. The fact that he thinks he can make me fall in love with him in the first place goes to show how deranged he is."

"That's... oddly nice? But really fucked up. There's something wrong with him. But we knew that from the chopped-off hands."

I snort. "Yeah, just a bit."

"Have you, uh, asked him about that yet?"

I nod. "Yeah, he basically played his usual macho man act and said not to worry about it and that he'd take care of it." I roll my eyes, but in all honesty, I'm glad for it. If I can count on my shadow for anything, it's to fuck someone up.

He's made that more than clear.

I sit up and bring Gigi's journal back towards me. "Anyhoo, let's just focus on figuring out what happened to my great-grandmother."

It's not hard to put Daya back into hacker mode. She slides her laptop towards her and immediately starts tapping away on the keyboard. The quickness of her fingers gives me a run for my money when I'm in a particularly good part in writing my book. She's been known to have to replace a few keys from how hard she types.

"So, time of death for Gigi was estimated about 5:05 P.M. Your great-grandfather claimed that he had run to the grocery store and when he came home, he found her dead in their bed. I found some witness reports claiming they did see John in Morty's grocery store around 5:35 P.M. But they didn't specify if they had seen him walking in or out of the store, or if they just saw him shopping during that time."

I nod my head, twisting my lips in contemplation. "In her last few journal entries, she was frantic and kept saying that he was coming for her. She never said who *he* is. But it has to be Ronaldo, right?"

"So, maybe he waited until John left and snuck in and killed her while he was gone. He stalked her after all, he'd know exactly when my great-grandfather would've left."

Daya shrugs a shoulder, looking a little unconvinced.

"But don't the diary entries say that John was getting aggressive, and Gigi said she was going to divorce him, right?" she questions.

I frown. "Well, yeah, but I don't think he would've killed her. He loved her too much."

"Couldn't the same be said for her stalker?"

Noting my expression, Daya sighs and rests her hand on mine.

"Addie, I love you and I'm going to say this with all my love. But don't project. I'm starting to get the feeling that you *want* Ronaldo to be the killer because in your head, that will criminalize your stalker, too. Please tell me that's not why you're seeking justice for Gigi. Because you're looking for a reason to hate your stalker when in actuality, you don't."

I pull my hand from under hers and look away. Uncomfortable feelings invade my body, preventing me from speaking right away.

"I don't need to look for a reason to hate him," I grumble.

Daya cocks a brow, unimpressed with my attitude. I sigh, a headache blooming right between my eyes. I rub at the spot, stalling as I try to figure out what I want to say.

Because she's not entirely wrong.

Maybe I just want to be able to say that all stalkers are crazy, and that it's not possible to fall in love with one. I want to be able to say it's never happened before. And I want to say it's absolutely impossible to find myself in a loving, passionate, and healthy relationship with a person who invaded every aspect of my life unapologetically.

As much as I hate to say it, my shadow might not be wrong either. The man has a magnetism about him that rocks me to my core. He's shifted my entire life out of balance.

He scares the fuck out of me. But just like watching a horror flick, it thrills me too. He was right when he said that if he had approached me in the bookstore and took me out like a normal man, I would've fallen for him. The way he carries himself, the way he speaks, and his passion are irresistible.

And he's also right that if I had fallen in love with a lie, I would've been devastated. I just *wish* he wasn't such a bad guy.

But then he'd be a different man—a man you might not be able to love.

Doesn't matter.

I refuse to love my shadow. And I'm not going to fuck him, either. What happened two nights ago was sexual assault and I'm not going to spin it any other way.

"That's not why I want justice for her," I say quietly. My hand drops and I meet Daya's soft gaze.

Never one to judge me. Even when I probably deserve it.

"I obviously never met Gigi, but Nana loved her to a million pieces. And I don't think she ever quite got over it. Not only do I want justice for Gigi, but for Nana, too."

That seems to placate her. "Good. Because I did find a lead on one of Seattle's most notorious crime families in the 40s."

I perk up, leaning over to look at the laptop screen. She turns it towards me for a better view.

"Back in the 40s, the Salvatore family ran the streets. Angelo Salvatore was the crime lord." She points towards a picture of five men.

In the middle is what you would expect from an Italian mafia boss. Deeply tanned skin, large bulbous hooked nose and incredibly handsome, with his wide smile and sparkling brown eyes.

Surrounding him are four men, their ages ranging from what looks to be eighteen to late twenties. Based off the white hair peppered through Angelo's black hair, these must be his sons.

They all look like him and are equally good-looking. Two of them are wearing military fatigues, most likely having been drafted in WWII.

"Those are his four sons," Daya confirms. "But they're irrelevant, sexy as they are. Look in the background behind them. Do you see him?"

She points to a grainy, slightly blurred image of a man looking off in the distance behind the Salvatore family. Most of his body is concealed but what can be seen is a handsome face, part of a nice suit, and a top hat.

"This is the only picture I could find but I think there's a possibility that's Ronaldo."

My nose is nearly smushed into the screen, I'm staring so hard. It's a reach. Any man could be in a suit and a top hat in the 40s. But something is different about him.

"You see what I see?" Daya questions, excitement in her tone.

"He has a black eye, and his lip looks busted..." I trail off when I note Angelo's right hand, gripping a glass of alcohol. "Angelo's hand is busted too!"

I look to Daya and it's like looking into a mirror. I know the excitement burning on her face reflects my own.

"And guess the date on the picture," she says, smiling wider.

My eyes round. "Bitch, just tell me. "

"September 22nd, 1944. Four days after that entry from Gigi saying Ronaldo came in beat up."

My mouth pops open, and I look back at the picture. Staring at the man that could've possibly been Gigi's stalker.

And her murderer.



I'm drunk.

I ended up drinking two more margaritas, and Daya had the bright idea to take more tequila shots.

My world spins as I stumble up the stairs, a giggling Daya on my heels. We're both on all fours, our hands planted on the dirty wooden floors so we don't fall.

"Bitch, why did you make me drink this much?" I ask, giggling harder when I almost topple sideways.

"I felt it was appro-ahh—appro—priate while we're inveshtigating a murder," she stutters, her voice wobbly and filled with giggles.

I snort in response, my vision still playing tilt-a-whirl with my head.

I walk her to the guest bedroom and help her get to bed. I'm not much help, considering I nearly send us both crashing to the ground a time or two when I try to help her get her jeans off.

"How are you going to get yours off?" she asks, staring at my jeans.

I wave a hand. "I'm sure the stalker will help me," I retort. She widens her eyes comically.

"If he puts his peen in you, record it. I want to watch it later."

Right now, the prospect of fucking my stalker seems hilarious. We'll both regret it later, I'm sure. If we even remember.

We giggle like schoolgirls, her laughter following me out of the room. I lean heavily against the wall as I stumble my way to the bedroom.

I don't even bother trying to take my jeans off. I just plop on the bed, on top of the covers and everything, and I'm out seconds later.



A brush of skin across my cheek wakes me. I groan, my world still spinning as I open my crusted eyes and see my shadow standing by my bed, brushing the hair from my face.

"Oh, great," I grumble. "You're here."

"Little mouse, are you drunk?"

"Way to ask the obvious," I mumble, slurping up some drool that's leaking out of my mouth.

I'm still too drunk to be embarrassed. Shakily, I sit up and stare around the room. The lights are still on—I guess I forgot to turn them off—and it feels wrong to see my stalker in anything but the darkness.

It makes him more real, and I don't like it.

"Turn the light off," I demand, refusing to meet his eyes. I much prefer when I can only see shadows of his face.

He turns and does what I say. I'm so surprised that he listened that I almost snap out another demand when the light clicks off, just to see what he'll do.

He's once again hidden in the shadows. When he walks through the room, it's like the darkness clings to him. He *is* darkness.

I can't figure out what scares me more—him in the dark, or him in the light.

"I need to take my jeans off. I suppose you're going to watch me, aren't you?"

The alcohol is making me feel bold right now. I'm not thinking about consequences or his threats. Even the fear I feel swirling around is muted.

Right now, I feel like I can say or do anything. Like being drunk somehow gives me a protective armor, when in reality, it just makes me more vulnerable.

He leans against my door, his arms crossed as he watches me unbutton my jeans and slide them down my thighs.

"You know," I start, stumbling as I try to get the pant leg around my foot. Who the fuck invented skinny jeans, and why am I wearing them? "I don't even know your name."

"You never asked," is his reply.

"I'm asking now, kitty cat."

Finally, I get my foot through the hole and slide my leg out. I straighten and look at my freed leg in victory. One down. One to go.

"You know," I say again, before he can even open his mouth. "I do quite like calling you kitty cat."

"But it wouldn't sound so good when you're screaming it," he taunts, his voice a little closer than it was before. I look up to see he's stepped away from the door, his form creeping through the darkness.

I snort. "You don't think so? I bet I could make it sound good," I challenge.

It looks like his entire body turns to stone. And that makes me feel even bolder. I slide the other pant leg off, this one going a little smoother than the other.

And then I climb up on the bed, in nothing but a bra and t-shirt and my purple thong.

He gets a good view of my ass, but that's the least of my concerns. I grab a pillow and straddle it.

"Addie," he growls his warning. The deep rumble has dampness gathering between my thighs. It's unfair how his voice has a physical effect on my body, but I guess right now, it works for me.

I grind on the pillow, tip my head back and moan out, "Kitty cat."

I squeak when I see his hand flying towards my face from my peripheral. The alcohol has sucked away all my reflexes, so when his hand grabs my hair roughly, I can do nothing to stop it.

My back arches as he yanks my head back. His beautifully scarred face appears above mine. Those goddamn yin-yang eyes, with thick lashes framing them.

He's terrifyingly beautiful. And right now, he looks pissed.

"What?" I breathe out innocently.

He leans down and softly brushes his lips against mine. Electric shocks ignite from where our lips touch. I suck in a sharp gasp, appalled by the reaction his body creates within my own.

"Zade," he whispers against my lips. "That's the only name that will ever leave your lips from now on, especially when you're making that little pussy feel good. And when *I'm* making that pussy feel good, then you can call me God."

All the oxygen in my lungs evaporates. If he had given my soul back, it would be gone again.

"I think Lucifer would suit you better," I whisper, my lips sliding against him as I speak.

A sinful smile flashes across his mouth, baring his straight teeth for a brief second. The one second was a stark reminder in my drunk-addled brain that I have someone very dangerous in my face right now.

And I need to get him away from me.

I arch further back, pulling my face away from his.

"You gonna assault me again? Is it going to be you forcing your dick in my mouth this time?" I spit at him, narrowing my eyes in thin, hateful slits.

"I thought about it," he admits in a contemplative murmur. "I would love to see you swallow my cock tonight."

There's a *but*, and in my drunken state, I'm almost offended.

I quirk a brow, but even I know it doesn't have the same effect as him doing it.

"But you're still inebriated. And you'd vomit all over my cock the second it touched the back of your throat."

Okay, now I'm really offended.

My mouth pops open in shock. "I would not, you asshole!" I squirm away from him, but he reinforces his hold in my hair and keeps me still.

Always fucking forcing me.

Who could love this man?

He laughs—a dark, cruel laugh. But it also transforms his face right into the devil's. Handsome and ruthless.

"Are you saying you want to try?" he taunts, his eyes glittering in the moonlight.

I scowl at him. "Never. You know what, you're right. I *would* vomit, but not because I can't handle your puny dick. But because I would be so disgusted by it." The venomous words spew from my mouth without preservation.

My fear is muted so my mouth is uncensored.

He arches a brow, and my mouth dries.

Fuck. Why does it look so scary when he does that?

He stares at me, and I hold my breath, waiting for him to snap. To murder me. Hurt me. Do something.

When his free hand reaches to his zipper and slowly pulls it down, I know I fucked up.

You just couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you, Addie?

I stare at his hand movements like he's about to open up a jar of spiders. He pops the button on his jeans and then stills for a beat.

A gasp bursts from my throat as he wrenches my head roughly to his pelvis right as he pulls out his cock.

Fuck. Fine. Okay.

So, *maybe* his dick is the exact opposite of puny and would surely kill me if he did decide to choke me on it. And *maybe* it wouldn't be the worst way to die when it's the most mouth-watering thing I've ever seen.

It's otherworldly.

He holds his cock in his hand, and my pussy weeps in response.

I'll never tell him how glorious he looks because right now, I want to fucking chop it off. Just like he did Arch's hands. He wouldn't be a man without his cock, and I wouldn't have to worry about him using it as a weapon and crushing my windpipe.

He yanks my head closer until it's inches from my face. Musk and the scent of leather and spices waft to my nose. Of course, he smells as tempting as he looks.

"You think you can handle this?" he asks darkly.

I swallow, desperate to lubricate the dryness in my throat. The false bravado is steadily slipping away, and now the fear is coming back full force.

"Yep," I say, my voice wobbly. "But I will bite it off if you try it."

I'm too busy staring at his cock to notice the smirk glide on his face. The tip caresses my jaw, the soft skin sliding against me, sending shivers down my spine.

I stare at him in disgust, but my face is a mask of lies. And the fucker knows it.

He starts to pump his cock, gripping it tightly, the veins bulging beneath his grip. Even swallowed in his large hand, it looks intimidating.

"What are you doing?" I snap. He slaps the head of his dick on my cheek in response, silencing me with a sharp gasp.

The *asshole*.

He continues to pump his cock, and when I realize that he's jacking off on my face, I start to struggle.

His hand tightens painfully, needle-like pricks of pain blooming along my scalp.

"Let me go," I hiss, pushing both of my hands against his thick thighs.

He lets go of his dick and darts his hand up to my face, squishing my cheeks painfully together. My teeth bite into the sensitive flesh, but he doesn't let up. Tears line the edges of my lids, threatening to spill over as he leans down and bares his teeth in a vicious snarl.

That fear holds me completely immobile. Finally, I feel the terror penetrate my thick skull. Because this man could easily kill me. My bravery is sucked out of me like a vacuum, and I melt into a puddle of fear and hatred.

“You want to act brave, then I’m going to show you exactly what happens to smart mouths. You’re going to swallow my cum like the fucking bad girl you are, and I don’t give a fuck if you don’t like it.”

He roughly lets my face go, and the hand still tangled in my hair yanks me back to its previous position. I glare up at him through blurred eyes, but if anything, the sight only spurs him on.

He pumps his cock in quick, rough tugs. It doesn’t take long before he’s growling again, the veins in his neck tightening.

“What’s my name?” he growls.

“Kitt—” he briefly lets go of his dick to deliver a sharp slap to my cheek. It stings, but it wasn’t enough to actually hurt me.

I snarl. “Zade.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “Open your mouth, little mouse. Now.”

When I refuse, he slaps his dick across my face again, this time harder. I’m getting tired of him slapping me. Rage burns hotter, and I’m tempted to reach over and bite the tip of his dick until it’s severed completely.

“You really want to test me right now?” he challenges, cocking that damn brow and breathing heavily. Desire shines in his yin-yang pools, and although he’s punishing me, he’s staring down at me like I’m a priceless jewel.

With reluctance, I open my mouth, hatred spewing from my eyes. He flashes a sinister smile before he says, “Now thank me.”

I go rigid, fury spiking hot. He wants me to do *what*?

“Fucking thank me for letting you swallow all my cum, Adeline.”

A dark edge creeps into his tone, and I just can’t let go of the fear, even as I work up the nerve to deny him. Images of him holding a gun to my face and pinning my tied-up body to the bed as he took what he wanted flash through my mind, fortifying the terror in my bones.

“Thank you,” I choke out angrily. As soon as I say the words, ropes of cum are spurting from his dick and right into my mouth.

A deep, rumbling growl releases from his throat, traveling straight to my core. I clench my thighs as my tastebuds are invaded with the flavor of his saltiness. Desperately, I want to spit it out right in his face.

“Fuck, that’s a good girl,” he breathes.

In response, a tear slips from my eye. I shiver from the words, just as my hatred for him burns brighter.

When the last bit of cum drops from his tip and onto my lips, he grabs my face again, pinching my cheeks together and preventing me from spitting it all back on him like I planned to.

“Swallow,” he demands, his voice dark and full of warning.

I do because I have no other choice. His seed slides down my throat, alongside a mouthful of hateful words I want to spit at him.

I refrain for now. The situation has cleared the alcohol-induced fog, and at the moment, I feel stone-cold sober.

He tucks himself back into his jeans and stares at me as if he can't tell if he wants to eat me or hurt me.

“Your pussy is wet for me, isn't it?”

“Fuck you,” I snap back, my tone uneven and filled with unshed tears. So much for refraining.

“Let me see, little mouse.”

My brow plunges, and I stare at him in confusion.

“Stick your hand in your underwear, dip one of those fingers into your pussy, and show it to me.”

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off, but he squeezes my cheeks again. Another tear slips free.

“Did you not just learn your lesson about having a smart mouth?”

My fists curl, bleaching my knuckles white from the force.

And to think this man believes I'll fall in love with him? I want to laugh in his fucking face. No, I want to add my own scars to his face. Cut it up until he's nothing but ugliness, just like he is on the inside.

Again, I do as he says. I slide my thong to the side, plunge my middle finger in deep, and present him with the only *fuck you* I can give, my arousal glistening on the digit.

He smirks at my dig, not the least bit bothered. Embarrassment clouds my vision, but I don't let him see it. He's getting nothing but poison from me.

He grabs my hand and brings my finger to his mouth. I resist his hold, but I'm powerless against him. His warm, wet mouth wraps around my finger and sucks off my juices in one swirl of his tongue. I hiss through my teeth, those electric waves shooting from where he licks me and throughout my body. His eyes roll backwards, acting as if he's sucking on the best lollipop he's ever had.

I can't control how my stomach tightens, and thighs clench in response. I'm drenched and embarrassed.

He pops my finger from his mouth, and it takes massive strength not to send my fist into his dick.

He finally releases my hair from his grip, and I scramble away from him.

Zipping up his jeans, he looks down at me. I can only see a sliver of his face from the moonlight, but what I do see makes me feel murderous.

He's not looking down at me smugly like I had expected. His face is arranged into a blank mask as if what just happened didn't affect him at all. And that—that is so much worse.

"You want to know the best part?" he asks quietly. "I was going to tuck you into bed and leave you alone tonight. But you seem to forget that just because I am wholly yours, little mouse, I am not a nice man."

September 27th, 1945

The world has seemed to relax now that WWII is over. Soldiers are coming home, and though many have fallen or have been injured, I think we're all thankful it's over.

But the war has not ended in Parsons Manor.

Ronaldo is taking me out today while John is at work and Sera is at school. It'll be nice to get out of the house and get some fresh air before the weather starts to chill.

He's taking me on a lovely picnic and then out to a movie.

With John's growing aggressiveness, I'm not sure how to tell Ronaldo. I've only been able to see him about twice a month lately. He said his job is demanding.

And I haven't confessed to him about John and our demise.

I'm sure he'll be glad to hear that we might be heading towards a divorce. But I fear what he'll do when I confess just how angry John is.

I pray he keeps his temper. Ronaldo has a short fuse.

Maybe even shorter than John's.

