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# Chapter One

## *The Manipulator*

**S**ometimes I have very dark thoughts about my mother—thoughts no sane daughter should ever have.

Sometimes, I'm not always sane.

"Addie, you're being ridiculous," Mom says through the speaker on my phone. I glare at it in response, refusing to argue with her. When I have nothing to say, she sighs loudly. I wrinkle my nose. It blows my mind that this woman always called Nana dramatic yet can't see her own flair for the dramatics.

"Just because your grandparents gave you the house doesn't mean you have to actually *live in it*. It's old and would be doing everyone in that city a favor if it were torn down."

I thump my head against the headrest, rolling my eyes upward and trying to find patience weaved into the stained roof of my car.

How did I manage to get ketchup up there?

“And just because *you* don’t like it, doesn’t mean I can’t live in it,” I retort dryly.

My mother is a bitch. Plain and simple. She’s always had a chip on her shoulder, and for the life of me, I can’t figure out why.

“You’ll be living an hour from us! That will be incredibly inconvenient for you to come visit us, won’t it?”

*Oh, how will I ever survive?*

Pretty sure my gynecologist is an hour away, too, but I still make an effort to see her once a year. And those visits are far more painful.

“Nope,” I reply, popping the P. I’m over this conversation. My patience only lasts an entire sixty seconds talking to my mother. After that, I’m running on fumes and have no desire to put in any more effort to keep the conversation moving along.

If it’s not one thing, it’s the other. She always manages to find something to complain about. This time, it’s my choice to live in the house my grandparents gave to me. I grew up in Parsons Manor, running alongside the ghosts in the halls and baking cookies with Nana. I have fond memories here—memories I refuse to let go of just because Mom didn’t get along with Nana.

I never understood the tension between them, but as I got older and started to comprehend Mom’s snarkiness and underhanded insults for what they were, it made sense.

Nana always had a positive, sunny outlook on life, viewing the world through rose-colored glasses. She was always smiling and humming, while Mom is cursed with a perpetual scowl on her face and looking at life like her glasses got smashed

when she was plunged out of Nana's vagina. I don't know why her personality never developed past that of a porcupine—she was never raised to be a prickly bitch.

Growing up, my mom and dad had a house only a mile away from Parsons Manor. She could barely tolerate me, so I spent most of my childhood in this house. It wasn't until I left for college that Mom moved out of town an hour away. When I quit college, I moved in with her until I got back on my feet and my writing career took off.

And when it did, I decided to travel around the country, never really settling in one place.

Nana died about a year ago, gifting me the house in her will, but my grief hindered me from moving into Parsons Manor. Until now.

Mom sighs again through the phone. "I just wish you had more ambition in life, instead of staying in the town you grew up in, sweetie. Do something more with your life than waste away in that house like your grandmother did. I don't want you to become worthless like her."

A snarl overtakes my face, fury tearing throughout my chest. "Hey, Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Fuck off."

I hang up the phone, angrily smashing my finger into the screen until I hear the telltale chime that the call has ended.

How dare she speak of her own mother that way when she was nothing but loved and cherished? Nana certainly didn't treat her the way she treats me, that's for damn sure.

I rip a page from Mom's book and let loose a melodramatic sigh, turning to look out my side window. Said house stands tall, the tip of the black roof spearing

through the gloomy clouds and looming over the vastly wooded area as if to say *you shall fear me*. Peering over my shoulder, the dense thicket of trees are no more inviting—their shadows crawling from the overgrowth with outstretched claws.

I shiver, delighting in the ominous feeling radiating from this small portion of the cliff. It looks exactly as it did from my childhood, and it gives me no less of a thrill to peer into the infinite blackness.

Parsons Manor is stationed on a cliffside overlooking the Bay with a mile long driveway stretching through a heavily wooded area. The congregation of trees separates this house from the rest of the world, making you feel like you're well and truly alone.

Sometimes, it feels like you're on an entirely different planet, ostracized from civilization. The whole area has a menacing, sorrowful aura.

And I fucking love it.

The house has begun to decay, but it can be fixed up to look like new again with a bit of TLC. Hundreds of vines crawl up all sides of the structure, climbing towards the gargoyles stationed on the roof on either side of the manor. The black siding is fading to a gray and starting to peel away, and the black paint around the windows is chipping like cheap nail polish. I'll have to hire someone to give the large front porch a facelift since it's starting to sag on one side.

The lawn is long overdue for a haircut, the blades of grass nearly as tall as me, and the three acres of clearing bursting with weeds. I bet plenty of snakes have settled in nicely since it's last been mowed.

Nana used to offset the manor's dark shade with blooms of colorful flowers during the spring season. Hyacinths, primroses, violas, and rhododendron.

And in autumn, sunflowers would be crawling up the sides of the house, the bright yellows and oranges in the petals a beautiful contrast against the black

siding.

I can plant a garden around the front of the house again when the season calls for it. This time, I'll plant strawberries, lettuce, and herbs as well.

I'm deep in my musings when my eyes snag on movement from above. Curtains flutter in the lone window at the very top of the house.

The attic.

Last time I checked, there's no central air up there. Nothing should be able to move those curtains, but yet I don't doubt what I saw.

Coupled with the looming storm in the background, Parsons Manor looks like a scene out of a horror film. I suck my bottom lip between my teeth, unable to stop the smile from forming on my face.

I love that.

I can't explain why, but I do.

Fuck what my mother says. I'm living here. I'm a successful writer and have the freedom to live anywhere. So, what if I decide to live in a place that means a lot to me? That doesn't make me a lowlife for staying in my hometown. I travel enough with book tours and conferences; settling down in a house won't change that. I know what the fuck I want, and I don't give a shit what anyone else thinks about it.

Especially mommy dearest.

The clouds yawn, and rain spills from their mouths. I grab my purse and step out of my car, inhaling the scent of fresh rain. It turns from a light sprinkle to a torrential downpour in a matter of seconds. I bolt up the front porch steps, flinging drops of water off my arms and shaking my body out like a wet dog.

I love storms—I just don't like to be in them. I'd prefer to cuddle up under the blankets with a mug of tea and a book while listening to the rain fall.

I slide the key into the lock and turn it. But it's stuck, refusing to give me even a millimeter. I jimmy the key, wrestling with it until the mechanism finally turns and I'm able to unlock the door.

*Guess I'm gonna have to fix that soon, too.*

A chilling draft welcomes me as I open the door. I shiver from the mixture of freezing rain still wet on my skin and the cold, stale air. The interior of the house is cast in shadows. Dim light shines through the windows, gradually fading as the sun disappears behind gray storm clouds.

I feel as if I should start my story with "it was a dark stormy night..."

I look up and smile when I see the black ribbed ceiling, made up of hundreds of thin, long pieces of wood. A grand chandelier is hanging over my head, golden steel warped in an intricate design with crystals dangling from the tips. It's always been Nana's most prized possession.

The black and white checkered floors lead directly to the black grand staircase—large enough to fit a piano through sideways—and flow off into the living room. My boots squeak against the tiles as I venture further inside.

This floor is primarily an open concept, making it feel like the monstrosity of the home could swallow you whole.

The living area is to the left of the staircase. I purse my lips and look around, nostalgia hitting me straight in the gut. Dust coats every surface, and the smell of mothballs is overpowering, but it looks exactly how I last saw it, right before Nana died last year.

A large black stone fireplace is in the center of the living room on the far left wall, with red velvet couches squared around it. An ornate wooden coffee table sits in the middle, an empty vase atop the dark wood. Nana used to fill it with lilies, but now it only collects dust and bug carcasses.

The walls are covered in black paisley wallpaper, offset by heavy golden curtains.

One of my favorite parts is the large bay window at the front of the house, providing a beautiful view of the forest beyond Parsons Manor. Placed right in front of it is a red velvet rocking chair with a matching stool. Nana used to sit there and watch the rain, and she said her mother would always do the same.

The checkered tiling extends into the kitchen with beautiful black stained cabinets and marble countertops. A massive island sits in the middle with black barstools lining one side. Grandpa and I used to sit there and watch Nana cook, enjoying her humming to herself as she whipped up delicious meals.

Shaking away the memories, I rush over to a tall lamp by the rocking chair and flick on the light. I release a sigh of relief when a buttery soft glow emits from the bulb. A few days ago, I had called to get the utilities turned on in my name, but you can never be too sure when dealing with an old house.

Then I walk over to the thermostat, the number causing another shiver to wrack my body.

Sixty-two goddamn degrees.

I press my thumb into the up arrow and don't stop until the temperature is set to seventy-four. I don't mind cooler temperatures, but I'd prefer it if my nipples didn't cut through all of my clothing.

I turn back around and face a home that's both old and new—a home that's housed my heart since I could remember, even if my body left for a little while.

And then I smile, basking in the gothic glory of Parsons Manor. It's how my great-grandparents decorated the house, and the taste has passed down through the generations. Nana used to say that she liked it best when she was the brightest thing in the room. Despite that, she still had old people's taste.

I mean, really, why do those white throw pillows have a border of lace around them and a weird, embroidered bouquet of flowers in the middle? That's not cute. That's ugly.

I sigh.

"Well, Nana, I came back. Just like you wanted," I whisper to the dead air.



"Are you ready?" my personal assistant asks from beside me. I glance over at Marietta, noting how she's absently holding out the mic to me, her attention ensnared on the people still filtering into the small building. This local bookstore wasn't built for a large number of people, but somehow, they're making it work anyway.

Hordes of people are piling into the cramped space, converging in a uniform line, and waiting for the signing to start. My eyes rove over the crowd, silently counting in my head. I lose count after thirty.

"Yep," I say. I grab the mic, and after catching everyone's attention, the murmurs fade to silence. Dozens of eyeballs bore into me, creating a flush all the way to my cheeks. It makes my skin crawl, but I love my readers, so I power through it.

"Before we start, I just wanted to take a quick second to thank you all for coming. I appreciate each and every one of you, and I'm incredibly excited to meet you all. Everyone ready?!" I ask, forcing excitement into my tone.

It's not that I'm *not* excited, I just tend to get incredibly awkward during book signings. I'm not a natural when it comes to social interactions. I'm the type to stare dead into your face with a frozen smile after being asked a question while my

brain processes the fact that I didn't even hear the question. It's usually because my heart is thumping too loud in my ears.

I settle down in my chair and ready my sharpie. Marietta runs off to handle other matters, shooting me a quick *good luck*. She's witnessed my mishaps with readers and has the tendency to get secondhand embarrassment with me. Guess it's one of the downfalls of representing a social pariah.

*Come back, Marietta. It's so much more fun when I'm not the only one getting embarrassed.*

The first reader approaches me, my book *The Wanderer*, in her hands with a beaming smile on her freckled face.

"Oh my god, it's so awesome to meet you!" she exclaims, nearly shoving the book in my face. Totally a *me* move.

I smile wide and gently take the book.

"It's awesome to meet you, too," I return. "And hey, Team Freckles," I tack on, waving my forefinger between her face and mine. She gives a bit of an awkward laugh, her fingers drifting over her cheeks. "What's your name?" I rush out, before we get stuck on a weird conversation about skin conditions.

*Geez, Addie, what if she hates her freckles? Dumbass.*

"Megan," she replies, and then spells the name out for me. My hand trembles as I carefully write out her name and a quick appreciation note. My signature is sloppy, but that pretty much represents the entirety of my existence.

I hand the book back and thank her with a genuine smile.

As the next reader approaches, pressure settles on my face. Someone is staring at me. But that's a fucking stupid thought because *everyone* is staring at me.

I try to ignore it, and give the next reader a big ass smile, but the feeling only intensifies until it feels like bees are buzzing beneath the surface of my skin while

a torch is being held to my flesh. It's... it's unlike anything I've felt before. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and I feel the apples of my cheeks heating to a bright red.

Half of my attention is on the book I'm signing and the gushing reader, while the other half is on the crowd. My eyes subtly sweep the expanse of the bookstore, attempting to scope out the source of my discomfort without making it obvious.

My gaze hooks on a lone person standing in the very back. A man. The crowd shrouds the majority of his body, only bits of his face peeking through the gaps between people's heads. But what I do see has my hand stilling, mid-write.

His eyes. One so dark and bottomless, it feels like staring into a well. And the other, an ice blue so light, it's nearly white, reminding me of a husky's eyes. A scar slashes straight down through the discolored eye, as if it didn't already demand attention.

When a throat clears, I jump, snatching my eyes away and looking back to the book. My sharpie has been resting in the same spot, creating a big black ink dot.

"Sorry," I mutter, finishing off my signature. I reach over and snag a bookmark, sign that too, and tuck it in the book as an apology.

The reader beams at me, mistake already forgotten, and scurries off with her book. When I look back to find the man, he's gone.



"Addie, you need to get laid."

In response, I wrap my lips around my straw and slurp my blueberry martini as deeply as my mouth will allow. Daya, my best friend, eyes me, entirely unimpressed and impatient based on the quirk of her brow.

I think I need a bigger mouth. More alcohol would fit in it.

I don't say this out loud because I can bet my left ass cheek that her follow-up response would be to use it for a bigger dick instead.

When I continue sucking on the straw, she reaches over and rips the plastic from my lips. I've reached the bottom of the glass a solid fifteen seconds ago and have just been sucking air through the straw. It's the most action my mouth has gotten in a year now.

"Whoa, personal space," I mumble, setting the glass down. I avoid Daya's eyes, searching the restaurant for the waitress so I can order another martini. The faster I have the straw in my mouth again, the sooner I can avoid this conversation some more.

"Don't deflect, bitch. You suck at it."

Our eyes meet, a beat passes, and we both burst into laughter.

"I suck at getting laid, too, apparently," I say after our laughing calms.

Daya gives me a droll look. "You've had plenty of opportunities. You just don't take them. You're a hot twenty-six-year-old woman with freckles, a great pair of tits, and an ass to die for. The men are out here waiting."

I shrug, deflecting again. Daya isn't exactly wrong—at least about having options. I'm just not interested in any of them. They all bore me. All I get is *what are you wearing* and *wanna come over, winky face* at one o'clock in the morning. I'm wearing the same sweatpants I've been wearing the past week, there's a mysterious stain on my crotch, and no, I don't want to fucking come over.

She flips out an expectant hand. "Give me your phone."

My eyes widen. "Fuck, no."

"Adeline Reilly. Give me. Your. Fucking. Phone."

"Or what?" I taunt.

“Or I will throw myself across the table, embarrass the absolute shit out of you, and get my way anyways.”

My eyes finally catch on our waitress and I flag her down. Desperately. She rushes over, probably thinking I found a hair in my food, when really my best friend just has one up her ass right now.

I procrastinate a little bit longer, asking the waitress what drink she prefers. I'd look through the drink menu a second time if it weren't rude to keep her waiting when she has other tables. So alas, I pick a strawberry martini in favor of the green apple, and the waitress rushes off again.

Sigh.

I hand the phone over, slapping it in Daya's *still* outstretched hand extra firm because I hate her. She smiles triumphantly and starts typing away, the mischievous glimmer in her eye growing brighter. Her thumbs go into turbo speed, causing the golden rings wrapped around them to nearly blur.

Her sage green eyes are illuminated with a type of evilness you would only find in Satan's Bible. If I did a little digging, I'm sure I'd find her picture somewhere in there, too. A bombshell with dark brown skin, pin-straight black hair, and a gold hoop in her nose.

She's probably an evil succubus or something.

“Who are you texting?” I groan, nearly stomping my feet like a child. I refrain, but come close to allowing a little of my social anxiety to air out and do something crazy like throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of the restaurant. It probably doesn't help that I'm on my third martini and feeling a tad adventurous right about now.

She glances up, locks my phone, and hands it back a few seconds later. Immediately, I unlock it again and start searching through my messages. I groan