



Love Lies

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
Chelle C. Craze

love lies

WELCOME TO CUPID'S
COVE, SEASON 3

BLACKWELL BAYOU SERIES BOOK THREE

**usa today bestselling
author**

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To my children:

You are and will always be my greatest accomplishment. Every other thing that led up to you was only steppingstones, carrying me over life's darkened waters so I could get to you.

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synopsis

Love lied to me, and I lied to love.

Skip Turner ruined my life long before either of us met, only neither of us were smart enough to realize it. I didn't know why I expected more from a complete stranger when I walked into his music store, but I did.

I was feeling particularly miserable and begged the universe for a win. I only asked for a shred of kindness from him, but it was asking too much.

I learned some very valuable lessons the night we met:

1. Skip Turner was a monster incapable of caring for anyone except himself, and his agenda was always number one.

2. I could not let my guard down. No matter how gorgeous he was, it didn't change number one.

3. Never, under ANY circumstances, was I to let my guard down. He was the enemy, and my priority was to avoid loving

him at all costs.

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1 /

fiona

Past

“MOM?”

“What is it, child? Can’t you see I’m busy?” My mom waved me off with a flick of her wrist, ashes dropping from her cigarette onto her pants as a result. Her tongue slowly swiped between her lips, and she groaned as she dusted her jeans clean.

“Can you tell me one more time about Dad?”

“For the life of me, I will never understand why you want to hear about that piece of shit,” she huffed. I didn’t bother opening my mouth to give an answer neither of us wanted to hear now or ever again. Mom was a crap parent anyway you looked at it. She was too selfish to care about a kid as a mother should, but technically she reigned supreme over Dad because she was at least present in my life. The same couldn’t be said for Dad for quite some time now, but he had the ultimate get out of jail free card excuse for not being present in my life. Death. He had always been the attentive parent, the compassionate one. He had lived for his family, and Mom lived for herself, the latter part had not changed after his death.

All that aside, they seemed to balance each other out. After Dad died, it was like the passion for others that had lingered inside her was buried alongside him. Mom made sure there were ingredients in the house, but they didn’t necessarily go together. I wasn’t enough to keep her compassion alive, but I stayed by her side regardless of the many times she told me to leave. Another reason, and the most important one was, until recently, I wasn’t old enough to live on my own. Of course, I

could have gone through the process of emancipation, but just the thought of going to court only to have Mom paint me as the enemy made my stomach turn.

“He didn’t love us, you know?”

“Yes, he did!” I barked. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” My lip quivered as tears burned my eyes.

“Fi, he lied. What you think was love was something else entirely more messed up. I’m happy he’s dead, and you should be, too!” she scoffed through gritted teeth, snuffing her cigarette out before she stood. “You are such an ungrateful little brat.”

I stared across our makeshift coffee table, which was actually milkcrates stacked on top of each other covered with a sheet. Like most things in our home, it looked like one thing, but was something else. Mom and I fell under this category as well. I pretended I didn’t care. She lied to herself and everyone else around us about wanting me. I wasn’t sure when other people figured out the world was shit, but I had known for quite some time now. Sometimes, I thought she only kept me around so she wouldn’t feel guilty if something bad happened to me. Not that she would know if it did. I wasn’t a stranger to the darkness in the world, unbeknownst to her.

My attention focused out the window as I ignored her insult. I refused to look at her and give her the satisfaction of seeing me break. This was what she always did. She was relentless. She pushed and pushed until I snapped back at her, despite how hard I tried to remain calm and not argue with her. She was the one who was wrong on this, not me. I shouldn’t have to sit here and listen to her spew all these untruths about my dad.

“He loved me. He did. He told me every chance he got. It was you he didn’t love, and you were jealous of how he loved me. He was my best friend, Mom. He hated you! He freaking hated you, and I see why. You suck the goodness out of everything, and for what? Because you’re miserable, and you can’t stand anyone else around you to be happy. Can you?” Tears sprang free from my restraint, and a loud crack of

thunder boomed through our empty house. My eyes shot to her face as she stepped toward me.

“You know, Fiona, you *are* right. He *did* hate me, but not for the reason you think. He hated me for not wanting you, and I hated him just as much for feeding us all those stupid lies about love. Love is nothing but a bunch of lies people tell each other to make them feel better about each other. The fact that either of us ever thought it was anything else was stupid.” Her palm flattened, and her fingers quivered with anticipation as she sulked toward me painstakingly slow. “Love lies. Do you hear me? Wake up from all this love bullshit and start living, Fiona. The sooner you accept the truth, the better off you’ll be.” Her feet stilled a few inches away from mine, and I stared at her freshly painted pink toenails, knowing what was coming. I had pushed her to the edge, and she was barely teetering there on a thread. I didn’t care to walk on eggshells anymore. I was done.

“You’re the reason he left that night. Do you know that?” My voice cracked through my incredibly dry and burning throat. I lost the battle with myself about being quiet—not that I ever really stood much of a chance anyway. I was, in fact, my mother’s daughter as much as I would have liked to deny it.

Her palm smacked me across my cheek and mouth with such force specs of silver dance in front of my eyes. My body lurched sideways against the couch cushion, and I didn’t bother moving from where I landed. My tongue swiped against the corner of my mouth that throbbed with pain, and the familiar taste of rust soon coated its tip.

“Classic, Bonnie Jane, folks,” I narrated to the almost empty room. My fingers swiped across the fresh wound, and I swallowed a mouthful of blood. I pushed myself up to a sitting position. I was stubborn, but lying around on a couch moping wasn’t my style. Maybe I did in the beginning when the abuse first began, but now, it was all I would be what I would be doing the majority of my time.

When I opened my mouth to argue, I was already committed to the fight I knew was coming, but now, my claws

were out and dug so deeply into the situation that I could almost feel the air pulsate around me. My eyes darted from the white cushion and the red on my fingertips a few times before I made my mind up. Tonight was the last night I would allow her to treat me like this. Even if she'd forgotten about my birthday yesterday, I hadn't, and neither had Trinity. Trinity was the only person in my family who had never had a hidden agenda with me. Of course, Dad never asked for anything from me either, other than the normal things a parent would, but he wasn't here to add to the equation anymore.

"You wouldn't," she warned, her eyes blazing with hate as she caught onto my plan.

"Oh, I definitely fucking would, Mother." My fingertips pressed against the rough fibers of the stupid expensive couch Mom had no business having in our house—she literally had dodged the rental people so they couldn't repossess it and made me do the same—and I drug them down the surface as slow as I could manage, never breaking eye contact.

Her mouth twitched as her hands balled into fists at her sides. "Fiona," she breathed, "remember you asked for this." Her head shook slightly from side to side, and her eyes closed. "I'm not your mother, so..."

"I know. I know. I'm adopted, Bonnie Jane. You don't have to remind me," I scoffed after interrupting her, holding my hands above my head. It hadn't been a secret for a while that I didn't biologically belong to my mom. To be honest, I didn't know why Mom had not let me look for my birth mom after Dad passed. It would have been a lot easier for all of us. Despite every bad moment the two of us had spent fighting, this woman was all I knew for a mother, and I was under no illusion that I was any less of a jerk. "None of us are here to take responsibility for anything. I figured that out a long time ago. Don't worry, I'll be out of your hair soon enough."

"I wasn't saying that. You're not eighteen, so as long as you live under my roof, I deserve respect from you."

"That's fresh. Ha!" I sarcastically laughed to myself. "What I learned was in order to get respect, you have to earn

it.” I threw her words that she said on a regular basis when I asked to be seen at the very least as her equal back at her. Considering I had basically taken care of myself for five years now, I thought it was the least she could do.

I hurried to continue my rant, knowing if I didn’t get it out, I might never. “To be quite frank, I really don’t care anymore. Neither of us have to pretend we do after tonight. That’s all I ask for is tonight. Give me tonight, and I’ll be gone by morning. You will never have to deal with me,” my hand smacked against my chest, “the kid you never wanted. So now, after all these damned years, you get your wish. I’m gone. Okay? You can have your *perfect* kid free life back,” I assured her, forcing the words to find volume. One would think at some point in my life I would have grown numb to her verbal and physical abuse. This was the second most painful conversation I had ever had in my life. The one that held first place, gutted me when it happened, and its reality continued to do so daily. It was when I found out dad died.

“You don’t have anywhere to go, Fi. Where do you think you’ll go? No one wants you in their life, remember?” She threw my own words back at me from a fight we had earlier today in the car.

“I do, Mom. I want me in my life. There has to be something better than this,” I huffed while standing and pushing past her, half-expecting her to grab me and throw me back onto the couch. When she didn’t do it immediately, my heart hammered inside my chest, waiting for the moment she would snatch me up to teach me a lesson.

“Maybe you are right, Fi,” she answered so quietly I almost thought I made the words up in my mind. Truthfully, it was way out of character for her to admit I might right about anything, so maybe I had. I could count on two fingers the times she had admitted, and both had happened within the past hour.

“I don’t plan to ever speak to you again, Bonnie Jane,” I replied in a similar tone as hers, not caring if she had or had not actually spoken the previous sentence. I needed to get out of here. I couldn’t breathe. I guess we were both taken back in

this moment. I was really getting out of here, and she was finally getting rid of me. Waiting until morning wasn't an option anymore. The longer I stayed here, the chance of me actually leaving drastically dropped. The guilt of the hateful words I spewed toward her was already starting to sink into my bones. Despite how crappy of a relationship we had, somehow, I learned how to be a semi-decent human being. This was not how you were supposed to speak to your parent, and it absolutely wasn't how they should talk to their child, biological or not.

“Fi, oh my gosh!” my cousin, Trinity, gasped as soon as she opened the door to greet me. “Eli, get the first aid kit from the bathroom,” she instructed her fiancé.

“I’m fine, I promise. Bonnie Jane got one tiny lick in. It’s nothing.” I shrugged, nervously readjusting the backpack strap on my shoulder.

“Alf, leave Bart alone,” she huffed at her cat as he prepared to jump off the banister and pounce to scare Eli’s horse of a dog.

“See, they’re not worried, so you shouldn’t be either,” I reassured her in my thick southern drawl with a nod. How I pronounced words was rarely something I paid much attention to, especially living in Blackwell, Louisiana, but when I was around Trinity, I noticed. Although she had lived here for several years now, she didn’t grow up here as Eli and I had.

“Neither of them has a nurse for a cousin. ‘Sides the cat’s an asshole, and Bart is too gullible to have his opinion hold much weight,” Eli spoke in an accent similar to mine while opening the first aid kit and closing it before handing it off to Trinity.

“She really is a shitty parent, you know?” Trinity fumed, opening the kit and doing a once over of the interior of the plastic box, then closed it just as her fiancé had. Her eyes filled with tears, and she glanced over to Eli. “It’s empty. Just like her mother’s heart,” Trinity hissed, reaching over to hand it back to him.

“I know.”

“Why did you give it to me if you knew that?” she asked.

“A smart man never comes to his fiancée emptyhanded when she wants something.”

“But it was empty,” Trinity and I pointed out at the same time.

“The box may have been, but my hands weren’t. It’s all in the details,” he smirked, quickly kissing Trinity on the forehead.

“Only an ax murderer like you would think of things like that.”

“Still not. An. Ax murderer. I am a—”

“Businessman who reads contracts,” she mused as he wiped the tears from her cheeks.

My eyes squinted as I watched them with one another. I had no freaking idea how we went from my mother to ax murderers and contracts, but with Trinity, I learned she would share the meaning of things when she was ready. It wasn’t the first time the two of them had made the reference. I never asked the meaning behind it because I didn’t feel like I had the right to. The subject was more than likely personal, and judging by the way they acted, no one was actually hurt. I didn’t know a lot about Trinity’s past leading up to the day we met, but I knew enough to know it wasn’t a walk in the park by any means. One day, I might ask her, but somehow, I doubted that. I liked the mental image I had of her. The biggest reason I didn’t want to ask was fear of what I might find out. Many people asked things they never wanted the answer to and then were disappointed when they discovered something bad. If you didn’t ask, the chances of you being let down vastly decreased. Of course, there were people who overshared and told you stuff you didn’t want to hear, but Trinity absolutely did not fall into that category.

“Look at us, getting swept away in a moment in front of you. I’m a shitty big sister, huh? I’m sorry. Come to the

bathroom, I'll clean your face and put some ointment on that cut."

"Trin, really, I'm fine. We all know she's done a lot worse to me."

"I wish you could just stay with us," Trinity said, ignoring what I had said while her hand wrapped around mine and tugged me in the direction of the bathroom.

"That's actually why I'm here," I sheepishly admitted.

"It is?" Her eyebrows rose, and she released my hand, nodding toward the side of the bathtub as she took a seat. After snagging a washcloth off the shelf in front of her and dropping it into her open palm, I sat beside her. Even though it was nearly pointless to clean the dried blood off my face that I was too stubborn to do myself, it didn't matter. This was who Trinity was. She was her happiest when she was able to help others. Her heart led all of her actions, which was the complete opposite of how I planned to live my life from now on.

"Yup. I was kind of hoping I could stay here until I found a place of my own."

"It's not even a question. Except the last part. This is your home now."

"I can't do that to you all," I admitted the truth we both knew. She loved me. I never questioned that fact, but she loved Eli more. It was never a contest I would ever ask her to test, even if she didn't realize that was what she would be doing.

"Nonsense. It would be our pleasure."

"Trin, it wouldn't," I sternly said over the sloshing water soaking into the washcloth. Trinity and I weren't actually blood relatives. Honestly, we shouldn't be anything to each other, but she broke the rules to make it happen. One night, after Mom lost her cool, Trinity found me pacing outside the hospital. I was afraid to go inside. I didn't want CPS to take me into custody. Mom was an awful parent, but she wasn't the worst hand I could have been dealt. Anyway, Trinity patched me up off the record with the deal I would call her if it ever

happened again. I never planned to actually use her phone number, but when you literally didn't have anyone else to call in the event of an emergency, your hand was forced occasionally.

“It would. I'll figure out something,” I promised more to myself than her.



fiona

A few years down the road

“SHH,” I hushed Trinity when she walked into my small apartment, and I chewed on the end of my ink pen. My eyes roamed over the guitar staring back at me from my computer screen.

“Is that the one?” she asked in a normal tone, closing the door and locking it behind her.

“It is,” I mused.

“Oooo. It’s even prettier than I imagined. Where is it?”

“A music shop in...” My fingertip flicked over the ball of my mouse, and I scrolled to the bottom of the page. “Cupid’s Cove, Pennsylvania.” The time I spent away from my adoptive mother had given me time to clear my head and figure out what I wanted. My first priority was to find my bio mom. After that, I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do. Once I had found my real mother, I quickly hated myself for letting Bonnie Jane stand in my way all of those years.

I wasn’t able to find a ton of information on my bio mom at first, but once I got a hold of her name, Jonica “Angel” Highlander, it didn’t take long to realize my journey was a dead-end. Literally. According to the obituary she had “passed peacefully at home leaving behind her most prize possession, her one-of-a-kind guitar her dad had handcrafted for her.” I didn’t understand why a guitar would be listed in an obituary at all, much less why it was mentioned where most people’s family members were normally. That was until Trinity and I did some digging. The guitar was signed by Jimmy “Feather” Highlander, who not only was a rock legend, but apparently

her dad. My grandpa was famous, and my mom was a Hollywood kid. Learning that information alone knocked my self-esteem down eighty-seven more pegs lower than it already was. I had always figured my bio mom gave me up for adoption because she couldn't afford to take care of me and that she truly believed she was giving me a better life by not keeping me.

Years had passed since I had heard her name, but after I read it, it clicked. So many things made sense and then a thousand more confused me. Bonnie Jane had cussed anytime Dad or I played Feather's music. I never understood why exactly, always chalking it up to another thing she used as an excuse to treat us like shit. She never wanted me to find out who my bio mom was. That part made sense. What I was not able to fathom, despite how hard I tried, if she knew my bio mom came from old money, why hadn't Bonnie Jane blackmailed her for money or something equally as skeevy. There had to be more to the story, and seeing as I couldn't pry any of my lineage from my deceased parents, and I wouldn't talk to the one living, the only thing to do was find that guitar. It was silly. There was no particular rationale behind me finding Feather's guitar. It wasn't like it could magically play all of the answers I wished for by a simple pluck of a string. Nonetheless, it was the only thing I had connecting my bio mom to this world, and even if I had no right to it, I wanted the guitar for my own and would do everything in my power to make it a possibility.



skip

“CUPID’S COVE,” I huffed aloud, pressing the button to power up the open sign of the music store. I tried to keep a wide variety of things in the store, something for everyone. When I opened the doors to this place for the very first time, I had dreams of broadening the music taste of the town and maybe adding a little bit of refinement to said taste by helping musicians find their instrument of choice. For a while, that was exactly what I had in my life and shop alike. Nowadays, the majority of my clientele had zero to no interest in anything in the shop except me. Having anyone fascinated in me should be flattering, and it was, but I liked a challenge, and as of yet, life had failed to throw one at me when it came to the opposite sex.

The town had a population of three thousand eight hundred, and the number of patrons grew almost every day. Cupid’s Cove was notorious for all of its Valentine’s Day themed festivities and the festival, which had been a tradition for fifty years, half as old as the town. All of the lovey-dovey shit worked for most of the people who attributed to that population, again I was an exception to that factoid. None of the women in this town piqued my interest, or at least, that rang true for the ones that came into my shop or the ones who all but threw panties at me. Of course, any other guy would love to be in my position, but I was just bored with everything. I wasn’t your typical man, so really, it wasn’t fair to expect me to act like one when women put me in the situations they had in the past.

I never claimed to follow the traditions of this town. In fact, I hated Valentine's Day. In my opinion, it was a fictitious holiday people used to show their significant other how they could be treating them every day of the year. If, and it was a very big if, the day ever came I found myself in love, I fully intended to use every day to show how much the person I loved meant to me. However, I never expected that day to come; therefore, I was not holding my breath for that thought to ever transform into a reality.

My fingertip scrolled through my playlist while I tried to decide on an album to start out the day. Every year, I attempted to keep up the bare minimum for appearances, at least a little, because although I didn't feed into the holiday at all, it didn't mean I was going to ruin it for everyone. If they weren't in a direct beeline to me with expectations of being showered with gifts, then I didn't care what anyone believed or did. I had never participated in the Festival of Love or the Secret Valentine, and I didn't plan to start this year either. Thankfully, I still had a month and a half before Valentine's Day was here.

"Screw it, *Bad Omens* it is." I finally decided, double clicking their album. My eyes closed when my favorite breakdown of "Miracle" filled the speakers that had been placed with precision, and the sick bass drop pulsed in the air around me. I felt those lyrics in my bones. The band was singing about exactly where I was in my life and what I needed to get me through to March. It was exhausting being the town asshole, but hey, someone had to wear the shoes.

Any minute now, the walls would be filled with the hushed chatter, suspicions of who might be my potential date to the Founder's Day Dance or to the Sweethearts Dance. It never mattered that I hadn't stepped foot on either event's dance floor; there was always speculation if this would be the year someone would finally land Skip Turner. At that moment, I got it. I was the challenge I was looking for in a woman. Did that make me a hypocrite? Probably, but there was no way I was settling for less than what I wanted. Doing so was not fair to who I did it to or myself. I liked what I liked, and I refused to budge.

I just wanted something new and exciting, which for everyone else typically came around this time of year. It just never happened for me. Perhaps I was caught up with the idea of all the things and work that went into having a relationship with someone. Keeping my business up and running occupied a big part of my life, not that I wasn't able to devote my time to someone else; I chose not to do so.

“Wouldn't you just love to see what those hips could do on the dance floor?” A female voice coughed.

“I wouldn't mind watching them other places,” another said. I recognized them both at once but didn't bother opening my eyes at first. Maybe if I kept my eyelids closed, they would get the point and see themselves out the same way they stealthily came in. Clearly, I had been lost in my music and didn't hear them enter. My body stilled, and I sighed a little. Out of all the women in the town to enter my shop, I almost enjoyed these two. Almost. They at least kept me on my toes.

“Maryland,” Violet faked a gasp and giggled at her friend.

“What? I only said what we were both thinking. If I were thirty years younger...actually, if he'd let me test drive his stick shift, I'd give it my best shot any day of the week.” Maryland grinned as I opened my eyes and winked at her.

“Ladies, what brings you in today?”

“It's not whatever you call this.” Violet waved her hand in the air as “Miracle” repeated. I must have accidentally picked the loop option, but I didn't mind. I loved the song.

“Music?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Honey, this isn't music, at least not in my opinion. Now, those forty-fives you special order for us, that's what real music is,” Violet pointed out, moving a step forward.

“I think it's kind of spicy. I like it. It has an edge,” Maryland said, nodding her head along with the beat.

“I don't know what you're talking about, Violet. I don't do special orders. You know that.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, Skip Turner. We know the truth.” I would never admit she was right; they just happened to enjoy some of the same older music as me. The rest of her point was pure coincidence.

“Just like you tell everyone you don’t believe in love.”

“I never said I didn’t believe in, love, Maryland,” I answered her. “I said I didn’t feed into the Valentine’s Day bs like everyone else.”

“Same difference.” She waved me off. “Regardless of your beliefs, I hope you have a secret this year.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, cocking my head to the side as my nails raked through the scruff of my beard.

“Because I heard you’re about to be one lucky guy.”

“I’m not going to Vegas anytime soon,” I spoke in a tone right above boredom. You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what she was saying without saying it, but I wanted her to spell it out for me. I needed as many details as I could get, so I would have a better idea of how to avoid as much of what was coming my way as I could.

“You have quite a few secret valentines, Skip. Don’t act like you are clueless. It’s the same thing every year.”

“Yeah, and every year I refuse to entertain the women or give them false hope. I’m not interested. I wish people would accept that fact.”

“You’re not telling us anything we don’t already know, and let me tell you, I respect you for not leading them on. But the only way they’re going to accept it is if you die or get married.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” I laughed. “I wouldn’t fake my own death, but maybe a coma or a mail order bride.”

“That doesn’t scream Skip Turner, honey,” Maryland threw back at me, cupping her chin as she thought for a moment. “If you’re going off the market, you need fireworks and sirens. You can’t go out quietly. You would have to scream over a loudspeaker in the town square and pray it reached everyone.”

“I think a coma would suffice.” I shrugged, pretending to brush her off, but in reality, what she said truly resonated with me. Perhaps moving to a different town would be an easier option, but I refused to reach that level of pettiness. It was only fourteen days out of the year.

“Alright, ladies, we all know I would love to stand around and gossip, but I have work to do,” I said, leisurely strolling past them and opening the door, pretending to look at something in the distance. There were only a few people I went out of my way to soften the blow of my words for, and Violet and Maryland were two. Mom raised me to respect my elders, so despite my first response of wanting to tell them to get the hell out, I opted for something less abrasive and shitty.

“He’s kicking us out again, Maryland.”

“He always does, Violet. Why would today be any different?” Maryland batted her eyelashes dramatically as she ducked under my hand wrapped around the door’s edge. “You know,” she paused, pulling a breath into her mouth, “if you’re not going to give any of the ladies the time of day, you could at least roll your sleeves down. It’s a freaking crime for you to roll that Oxford up and show those juicy forearms.”

That comment took me by surprise. “I’ll take that into consideration.” I chuckled, shaking my head.

“Good.”

“Don’t let her speak for the masses. I’ll gladly bear witness to you being a repeat offender if I get to check these out.” Violet smiled as passed me by, her nail running down my forearm behind her.



fiona

“I’LL BE FINE. I promise, Trin. I’m going to tell the guy. Well, I have no idea what I’m going tell him, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Okay, but remember, I’ll be right here if you need me,” Trinity reassured me. There was no way she was going into that shop with me. She had been supporting me in one way or another for far too long. This trip, on her dime, was yet another example of that, but thankfully, it was a place both Trinity and Eli wanted to visit. After we discovered the history of this town, they insisted they were coming with me. Not that Trinity would have ever taken no for an answer, but I did try to talk her out of coming with me. This town could have been located in the seventh pit of Hell and she still would have been by my side.

I could have used the backup, considering the only thing I had to go off was a name and a guitar that I had only seen in pictures, but this was something I had to do by myself. If any of us were going to have any semblance of a normal life moving forward, I couldn’t let her get out of the car and hold my hand through this. I appreciated the offer, but this was my wild goose chase, not hers. I prayed that the owner, who the search engine reported to be Skip Turner, was a nice man. Hell, I honestly didn’t care all that much about what kind of guy he was as long as I was able to leave with what I wanted.

“You guys go check into the hotel. It’s broad daylight. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Well, he could have a secret torture room in his basement where he keeps you drugged and gagged until he eventually gets bored and decides to murder you,” Eli absentmindedly stated and then immediately clamped his lips together.

“Eli!” Trinity scolded and pinched the underside of his arm.

“Fuck, Trinity!” His fingers rubbed the skin that was now turning red. “I know, it was a shitty thing to say. Sorry, I didn’t mean it.”

“I forgive you. You were only being honest,” I acknowledged with a shrug of my shoulders. “Sides, all the true crime shows the two of us watch while Trinity is working the hoot owl shift probably didn’t have anything to do with it, right?”

Eli nodded.

“I don’t.” Trinity glared at him from the passenger seat and tapped the tip of her nails on the dashboard.

“I really didn’t mean to be an ass.”

“I know, Elijah. It comes naturally to some people.”

“It’s a blessing, right?” I spat out the short sentence, hoping to stop a humungous fight before it came to a head. They didn’t always see eye to eye, but they were the perfect fit for each other.

“Of course, you are right, Fi. Some people are born with the gift of gab, and others are a downright genius. I’m an ass. It takes all kinds to make up God’s children. Who am I to question the big man? It isn’t like there is a suggestion box where I can ask to switch departments or anything. I’m doing the work I was put on this earth to do.”

“Is that so?” Trinity snorted with a smile, then she chewed on the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, it is,” he replied, removing her hand from the dash to kiss the back of her hand.

“You all go have fun, like I said. I’m good. I have to do this on my own. I promise. And if I’m not, I know how to

fight.”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say the last part,” Trinity warned and closed her eyelids.

“Hey, whatever helps you sleep at night.” I raised my hands above my head as I backed away from the car and onto the curb behind me.

The rain was unnaturally warmer than I would have expected given the time of year, but the weather had been nuts down in Louisiana. I could only assume it was equally as crazy up here, too. As the almost lukewarm drops slid down my bare arm, creating an itching sensation, I wiped away what I was able and rubbed my skin. What Eli said hadn’t bothered me at first, but how truly stupid going in here by myself was sunk in as each droplet landed on me, especially given my outfit choice. Today shouldn’t have been the day I opted for my black suspender dress over a plain white tee-shirt. I should have checked the weather forecast ahead of time.

Shielding my face as best as I could with my arm, I sprinted across the street and to the door of the music shop. My feet stilled as soon as I was beneath the awning, and my pulse raced. This was the moment of truth. Walking into a random store and begging a stranger for something wasn’t my idea of a good time, but maybe it would bring me some sense of peace. Perhaps, it would make me angry I didn’t look for my family sooner. Both were possibilities I’d thrown around in my brain, but there was no real way of knowing my reaction without actually following through with my plan.

With a huff, after what had to be one of the world’s worst pep talks, I gritted my teeth and opened the door.



I PROPPED the door open no more than the width of the tip of the door stopper to let some of the fresh air into the shop and only the fresh air. I hoped no bright-eyed, lovesick fool mistakenly found their way in along with the breeze. I didn't have it in me to put forth the effort it took to upsell anything right now. If there were customers today, they would fend for themselves, act as their own salesperson, and browse through the endless titles on their own.

The place reeked of three-day old leftovers. Shaking my head for leaving takeout in the trash Friday evening, I pinched my nose between two fingers and scooped the black trash bag up with my free hand. Obviously, I'd been so preoccupied with trying to avoid all things V-day related, that simple tasks such as taking out the trash had slipped my mind. This was ridiculous! I refused to worry about something as obscure as a holiday anymore. I would find an out sooner rather than later. None of it should bother me as much as it did, and yet, with every passing year, the artist I used to be withered away and my hate for the holiday grew.

Today had been a slow day so far, but business never really picked up when there wasn't much going on as far as town events. I would never admit it, but February was always one of the highest earning months out of the year for me. Just because I didn't put much effort into participating in the celebration myself, I still, without a doubt, benefited from others celebrating.

This was the type of town where everyone knew everyone else's business, and if you didn't, the next person over would be able to tell you. There weren't scandals or murders here. It was a happy town with mostly happy people. No one's granny was turning up on the 6 o'clock news for holding up a liquor store or anything. The lack of all of those things was the biggest appeal to me when I moved here. I didn't want to be seen. I wanted to fly under the radar and listen to music. Doing those things and nothing else for so long was never my plan.

Before coming here, I lived on the road as a songwriter for a large number of well-known artists, but always remained in the shadows. Recognition was never the driving force for what I did—getting paid and hearing my songs on the radio was enough. So, it wasn't as if I was forced to move here. I sought this specific town out because of the low crime rate and thought seeing so many people fall in love would serve as a much-needed muse for my lack of creativity. I had believed if I surrounded myself with positive energy I would be able to think clearly and bust out songs left and right. Wrong. I hadn't composed a damn thing in nearly a decade. For that mere fact alone, I was bitter.

I needed an outlet for all of the pent-up rage that was inside of me. I blamed the town and those damn smiling happy people on the streets. I wasn't an imbecile; I knew the reason for my lack of inspiration, but knowing the problem and having a solution for it were two entirely different creatures. I was rude to people more often than not, sometimes for no other reason than being hopeful to find someone with as much bite as I had. Although, despite all of that, I was complacent with where I was in life. I had made my money and was basically retired, and I was only thirty-five. Many would kill to be in the position I was in, and I was more than aware of it, so I never spoke a word of it to anyone. Not to mention, I didn't really talk to anyone outside of the shop if it was not a requirement.

My mind raced while I went out the back door and tossed the garbage into the dumpster in the back alley. I was desperate at this point. Hell, I even considered picking up the phone and inviting Maryland and Violet over just to argue with

them for a moment, but I quickly shook my head and got rid of that thought. “Something’s got to give.” I blew out in a frustrated breath, not bothering to seek shelter when the rain picked up and pelted down on me. The weather was nasty today, and I was here for it. I stood ever so still, my chest rising and falling, enjoying how the droplets felt against my skin. It wasn’t perfect. In fact, it was the most imperfect thing that had happened all week, and I loved it.

“Hello?” a muffled voice called from somewhere inside the shop. “Well, piss. It appears this man isn’t here. Now what in the ever-loving hell am I supposed to do?” she asked herself and a loud bang followed. “Not that! Gah,” she huffed, as I opened the back door and crept in as quietly as possible. I didn’t recognize the voice, so the idea of a stranger being in my shop didn’t exactly excite me. She was more than likely here in search of something for her secret valentine.

“Who in their right mind puts an amp there?” she asked as she continued the conversation with herself. “Skip Turner, that’s who. I haven’t met this man, and I already don’t like him. His choice to put this in the middle of the walkway is an obvious statement about what a dumbass he is.”

My blood boiled as I stood silently listening to her bad mouth me. I didn’t come into her place of business and insult her. It was the other way around. The least she could have brought were her little manners. Another bang rattled through the store. She better not be destroying anything or she was paying for it. I was in no mood to deal with a debutant drama queen having a bad hair day due to the rain.

“Look, I don’t know who the hell you think you are...” My voice trailed off as soon as I rounded the corner, and my eyes landed on her. She flinched at the sound of my voice but didn’t bother moving from where she laid. Her face was covered by the sea of black hair, and her back was flat on the floor. One of her muddy black army style boots was propped on top of the best small tube amp heads I had gotten in last week, and she stomped her other boot against the floor. The root of the noise that I assumed was her in here breaking

things wasn't spot on, but she wasn't exactly in here tidying up things either.

She lazily rolled her head toward where I was and accentuated each word as it passed her perfect lips, "Who I am isn't exactly important until I figure out who you are, *couyoon*." I didn't know what the hell she'd just called me, but as soon my eyes connected with hers, I was willing to do anything to make her gorgeous mouth call me it again. The fire that burned behind her irises was what I needed in my life, and I didn't care in what facet.

"Would you mind removing your boot from the amp head? And I asked first," I prodded, keeping my tone level until I figured out the best approach to kindle her flame.

"Would I mind? No. Am I going to?" She shrugged. "I'll do it as soon as you tell me where Skip Turner is."

"Heard the guy's an asshole, and I asked you nicely to get your boot off the Blackstar," I said through gritted teeth as mud slid off her boot and onto the top of the amp head. After that, I stalked to where her stubborn ass continued to lay. My interest in her was fading fast. The tube head could be replaced with ease if she ruined it, but it wasn't the point. The sheer lack of respect she had for everything straight pissed me off.

"Guess you all have that in common, huh? And I don't care what kind of man he is. I need to see a man about a horse...Well, a guitar, but none of that concerns you unless you're him," she added, slowly lifting her foot from the floor and crossing her ankle over the one on the amp.

"What if I am?" I snapped, wiping the wet hair off my forehead with the back of my hand and blew out a frustrated breath.

"You're not. I can tell."

"How's that exactly?" I probed, gritting my teeth together again.

"Just can. That name is a manly name." She balled her fists and pounded them against her flawlessly round tits once as if

she were an ape. “Ya know? And you don’t scream manly to me.”

“Oh, I don’t, do I?” I all but growled.

“Nah. You’re more of a whisper.” She nodded, satisfied with her explanation.

“Fuck this! I tried being nice, but I’m not a nice guy, lady. The fact that I remained calm this long is a miracle in itself,” I spat out, shoving her feet off the amp with my shoe, and they thudded against the floor.

She gasped and clutched her chest. “Shocker,” she said in a bored tone, folding her arms beneath her head.

“And just what in the hell are you doing now?”

“I told you, I’m here for Skip Turner, and I’m not budging one inch until I talk to him,” she insisted and stuck out her tongue.

Without a second’s thought, my mouth opened, “Women like you trapse around the world, barking orders at people and expect them to fall in line. Well, I have news for you,” I lurched toward her, and she gasped, but didn’t move otherwise as I lowered my face, stopping only an inch from hers, “You. Are. Dead. Wrong. You won’t win a fight against me, you pretty little monster, because no matter how wicked you are, I promise you, I’m worse.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I’ve dealt with people like you. The ones who need to belittle poor defenseless little monsters such as me to make their strong man heart feel better. Men like you are all the same. You need someone to stroke your ego every now and then or you are cranky. That about sums it up, doesn’t it?” She breathed out heavily, her hot breath blew on my face as she spoke, and my cock bobbed with excitement. I wasn’t lying in the slightest when I told her I was certain I was worse than her. Her smart mouth spewing hate in my direction was my kind of foreplay and my very specific brand of drug. The big red flag here was that she wasn’t trying turn me on. Honestly, until this moment, sex was the last thing on my mind.

Her tongue swiped across her lips as her eyes widened. I didn't know how much time had passed as we stared at one another, waging a silent war with one another, but it was long enough that my biceps ached from holding all of my weight off her. I had already lost my mind and gotten in her space, but I refused to cross another boundary by touching her despite how badly I wanted to. I'd never loathed someone so instantaneously and wanted to fuck their brains out at the same time. I called her on her shit, and she did the same for me. I wasn't looking for her, I didn't need another fucking headache right now, but here she was breathing unevenly underneath my body.

She leaned forward ever so slightly, placing her cheek against mine, and whispered into my ear, "Or judging by how hard your cock is, maybe your ego isn't the only thing that needs to be stroked."

I gulped. How the hell was I supposed to respond to that? It wasn't like there was a fucking handbook on the etiquette of how to handle this kind of situation. For once, I was speechless. I didn't know how to reply to her. If I spoke my mind and told her how I truly felt right now, she would probably knee me in the balls and run screaming out of my shop, calling the cops on me on her way out the door.

"It's always the pretty little monsters you have to worry about because people have done despicable, unspeakable things to us to mold us into the broken beauties we are. I'm a fast learner, and I have you all figured out." A small sadistic laugh crept out of her mouth, and even though I wasn't able to see her face, I imagined there was a smirk plastered on her lips.

Two could play at this game. There was no denying my stiff cock's involvement at this point, so I didn't bother trying. I carried my hate for this town down to the bitter end and had wished for a challenge. The universe had pretty much said *hold my beer*. I had never been one to back away from conflict, and I sure as shit wasn't going to now. Knowing I might get the police called on me, I let her have the brunt of what I'd been holding onto since I saw her. I placed my mouth

at the edge of her ear as she had done mine. “Even monsters are afraid of the devil. Evidently, you still have things to learn. Oh, and you’d do well to remember this little tidbit of information if and when we ever see one another again. I usually fuck manners into smart mouths like yours.” I paused, counting backward from three, waiting for the guttural scream that would no doubt come.

When she didn’t respond, I pulled away from her and stared into her breathtaking pale blue eyes. “Is this manly enough for you, little monster?”

Her eyebrows knitted tightly together, and they were fast to relax as realization washed over her face. “Holy shit! You are Skip Turner, aren’t you?”

“In the fucking flesh,” I said in a hoarse voice. My insides were on fire, and my throat was suddenly the driest it had ever been in my life.

She dropped her head back onto the floor and stared past me. “Of course, you are. Why did I expect this to be easy? The only man who stands between me and what I want...I’ve not only insulted his ego but was moments away from who knows what.”

Checkmate. I got her. I was happy, or at least, I thought I would be after I finally bested her. What I was feeling wasn’t at all how I remembered happy feeling. In fact, I felt like an asshole, which wasn’t a new notion for me at all. The fact that I felt like an asshole for feeling like one was, though. I actually cared if I hurt her feelings. I was fucked.

In record time, I was on my feet and held my hand out for her to take. She was cautious, and I almost reassured her by being cliché and telling her *I didn’t bite*, but it would have been a lie. I most definitely did bite, and I fucking loved doing it. “Want to discuss that guitar now?”

Her hand hesitantly hovered in the air about a foot below mine, and I scooped her fingers into my palm. “Is that a yes?” I asked as soon as she was standing.

She shook her head. “It’s more of a I have to fucking leave. Thanks for the chat, Devil,” her full crimson lips said quickly, and I almost didn’t understand what she’d said. As soon as the last word left her mouth, she bolted out the door.



fiona

“SO, you’re telling me we came all this way, and the guy didn’t have the guitar anymore?” Trinity asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow as she stabbed her fork through a strawberry and popped it into her mouth. “The internet is nothing but lies.” Technically, I never told her he didn’t have the guitar. She assumed that had been the case when I said I didn’t see it in there. The fact Skip and I never made it to the actual reason I was in his shop hadn’t exactly come up with Trinity either. I didn’t like deceiving her, but there was no chance I was going to tell her that he’d threatened to fuck some manners into my mouth, and I was only seconds away from letting him. She wasn’t a saint by any means, but she would have had a problem with it. The plan I had come up with to get the guitar was something she would have a bigger problem with.

I didn’t answer her, shoving a sizable chunk of waffle into my mouth and then another. My skin flushed at the thought of how much I wanted him to be a man of his word. I knew Bonnie Jane was right when she told me my mouth would always get me into trouble, but I never in a million years would have thought I would have happily welcomed a punishment for it. Ever.

“The guy was an asshole, wasn’t he?” she asked. Finally, a question I was able to truthfully answer. She’d prattled on all morning, firing questions one right after another. Each time she asked another, I would stuff more food into my mouth, and I was almost out of waffles.

I managed to dodge Eli and her for the most part yesterday evening when I arrived at the hotel by suggesting they go explore the town. I was tired and wanted to be alone to figure out how to get my hands on Feather's guitar without ever seeing Skip again. Being around that man was a slippery slope, one I didn't need to fall down, and one I refused to jump on. When I was stupidly allowing him to hover over my body, I was exposed, despite being clothed. He saw me as much as I saw him, and I didn't fucking like it at all. I had never been in love, but what stirred between us gave me a glimpse of something too close for my comfort. The back and forth was too powerful, and although it in no way, shape, or form resembled what most knew as love, I had been honest with him. I was broken and wasn't sure if I'd ever been loved the way a person was supposed to be by someone who claimed to love them. Bonnie Jane's way of saying she cared was by not hitting my face so the bruises weren't visible.

I really did love her, or at least, I believed I did, and that was enough to give her the power to almost destroy me. Loving people made you vulnerable, and I promised myself after I left home the last time I ever let Bonnie Jane put her hands on me, that I would never feel like that again. I would never allow love back into my heart. Despite never wanting to become more like her, she had gotten her wish. I did agree with her on one subject. Love was nothing but lies and, in our case, abuse.

"Without question, he was one of the worst people I have ever met." I neglected to tell her every ounce of poison that crept out from his black heart consumed me because I would never admit it. That memory was one I would lock away from everyone but me. What happened between Skip and me was hands down one of the single hottest moments of my life. Even before walking into his shop, I was all too aware of how messed up I truly was, and when I left, I would never be the same.

"I was afraid of that."

"Eh, it is what it is," I brushed her off.

"So, I guess back to Louisiana it is?"

“Actually, I was thinking of doing some snooping around while we are still here.”

Her back straightened, and she smiled, “Does that mean you’re going to come shopping with Eli and me.” I absolutely hated shopping of any kind and despised buying things from the internet.

“No, thank you.” I shook my head.

“What kind of snooping are you going to be doing then?”

“Maybe see if I can get some info on Feather’s guitar without having to talk to Skip again.”

“Ooo, good idea. Let me get my shoes. We can postpone our shopping adventure. You know Eli will be heartbroken,” she sarcastically said, gathering our plates and tossing them into the trashcan.

“Huh?” Eli called from the bathroom as he opened the door.

“We’re not going shopping; I’m going to go with Fi.”

Eli lifted his fist into a ball and pulled his arm backward. “Cha-ching.”

“I kind of wanted to do this on my own. You know the whole embracing the baby bird leaving the nest thing?” I was honest with her.

“Oh, I get it.” She forced a smile and shot a hateful look at Eli.

“I mean, hey, we’re back on for night shopping, cha-ching.” Eli repeated the motion, but this time with less exuberance. Trinity shook her head and sighed.

“Trin, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. It is. I just worry about you, and we don’t know anyone here. You’re nineteen.”

“True, but I was pretty much taking care of myself when I was twelve. Mentally, I’m older than your average nineteen-year-old. I know how to survive. I’ll be okay. I promise.” I couldn’t exactly tell her I was trying to protect her. If I actually

went through with what I planned, she didn't need to be anywhere near me tonight.

“Fine,” she said after a loud huff. “But if you run into any trouble, you'll call?”

“Of course, she will, Trinity.” Eli scooped her into a hug. I would thank him for that later when Trinity wasn't around. I really did feel like shit for keeping this secret from her, but she would try and stop me if I told her. I wasn't leaving Cupid's Cove without holding Feather's guitar one way or another. Honestly, the fact that Trinity believed I would give up so easily made me question if she genuinely knew the real me at all.

This was by far the stupidest and most desperate thing I had ever done. I didn't know the man, but judging from our first encounter, I highly doubted Skip Turner was a man who accepted payment plans unless it was his idea. Not to mention, I had directly insulted his manhood. The rest of what happened between us didn't make sense then, and it still didn't make sense now. No clue what he thought of it because I didn't stick around to discuss our feelings.

The walk from the bed and breakfast to Skip's shop didn't take long, although, my guilty conscious had me hallucinating. Every person I passed seemed to focus their attention on me. I wasn't anyone, so I had to be making that up in my head. Maybe there was something on my face. Just in case, I popped my phone out and looked at my reflection. I moved the camera around, capturing myself from different angles for good measure. Nothing looked out of place, so either these people were all nosy, or it might be my anxiety getting the better of me.

The door to the shop was propped open again. Did this guy ever close the door? I passed more people on my way here than I would on a two hour walk back home. Either he was very trusting of people or didn't care if someone robbed him blind.

My fingers shook as I eased the door open the rest of the way and stepped inside. My eyes scanned the store for him, and I listened for his voice.

“Skip?” I quietly called into the dimly lit store. “Are you in here?” Only seconds passed, but it felt like hours were spent waiting for him to answer me. A bead of sweat trailed down my temple, and I quickly wiped it away. He didn’t strike me as the forgetful type, but in actuality, I didn’t know who the man was by any means. On the other hand, I typically was spot on when it came to my first impression of people. My gut feeling about someone usually turned out to be correct, and right now, it was telling me to turn around and run the other way. I couldn’t do it, though. I would never forgive myself I came this far only to leave emptyhanded.

Everything was in the same place or at least nothing seemed to stand out from how I remembered it from the last time I was here. The problem was, when I was here before, I hadn’t intended to have a reason to return, or I might have paid closer attention to the details. Seeing as I had essentially fallen over an amp that had no business being where it was as soon as my boots crossed the threshold, I didn’t get a lot of time to look around before my full attention was on pissing off Skip. He might not be here for me to work out some type of deal, but his absence wasn’t a complete loss. Without him here, I was given me more time to figure out what I was going to do.

To be honest, I considered breaking in here and straight up getting Feather’s guitar courtesy of the five-finger discount, but I wasn’t insanely keen on the idea of going to prison. The idea was still on the table, though, especially if I there was no chance of being caught. There was no crime in holding a guitar, though, so as soon as I found the damn thing, that was as far as my planning had gone. I figured I’d made it this far flying by the seat of my pants, so I would ride out the rest of this journey in the same fashion.

As soon as I saw the spotlight in the back of the store on a white and green guitar, I recognized the similarities. That was the one. It had to be. I took a step closer to get a better view; I had to be sure. With the stupid mood lighting or whatever it

was, I couldn't make out crap clearly from this distance. I needed to be close enough to read the inscription inside the sound hole and run my fingers over double the ivory angel wing inlays, but while it hung on the wall, that was impossible.

I snagged a stool and popped it underneath the display of the guitar, climbing on top of it after all four legs were on the floor. There was no time to waste. I had to move fast.

"Holy shit!" I murmured to myself, running my fingers along each of the glistening wings. I carefully lifted it from the hanger and placed my boots on the floor. After all the years of waiting to meet my biological mom, only to find she had already died, I had been gutted, to say the least. I thought holding the guitar would bring me some semblance of closeness, but that couldn't have been further from the truth.

"Why the fuck didn't you look for me?" I asked, reading the sappy words inside the opening of the acoustic guitar, "*Angel, may love always live in your heart and guide your soul back to heaven when you lose your way.*" I wondered what it would have been like to be raised in their family, and for a split second, I allowed myself to really feel the blunt of the words. Maybe if she had kept me, I wouldn't hate love and anything having to do with it. Perhaps I would have been in a healthy relationship with myself and wouldn't be the fucked-up individual I was.

Tears streaked down my face, and I didn't hold them back like I normally would. I just didn't have it in me right now. I sniffed, my heart literally aching as I stepped back onto the stool with the intention of returning the guitar to its hanger.

All it took was one solemn nod, and a swift mental kick in the ass to remember this wasn't who I was. Regardless of how I had turned out, those people did not raise me. I was able to honestly admit I was happy to have spent twelve years of my life with my dad. He taught me how to be tough and not take anyone's bullshit. With that, my mind was made up. I wasn't leaving without this guitar.

I rested the neck of the guitar against the black and silver Peavey stool, lifting my middle fingers in the air even though no one was here to see me do it. Fuck the consequences, and, most importantly, fuck Skip Turner. I didn't care how much money he had given for this. This guitar wasn't just some shitty little memorabilia that should hang on a wall and be forgotten. It was the only piece of my mom I had. I did the only thing any rational person would do in my position. For the second time, I ran toward the exit, only this time, I carried love with me.

**skip**

“I KNOW, Maryland, you don’t have to remind me again.” I blew out a long puff of air, giving it my best shot to convince her I wasn’t a complete imbecile. I had eyes, and they could read a calendar as well as hers, probably better considering I was a good thirty years younger than her. I wasn’t trying to be a dick, but it came naturally to me, so it was a challenge being around her.

“I’m only trying to help you, dear. There’s no ring on that finger, and you seem alive and well enough to me. You’ll be breaking countless hearts again this season. What about that gorgeous woman who ran out of here the other day? Maybe she could be your secret valentine. If you’re off the market, it would throw the others off your trail.”

“One, I don’t know her name, and two, how do you even know she was here?” I asked cocking my head to the side, noticing the shop door open wide. I didn’t bother adding I had no intentions of breaking my tradition of not participating in everyone else’s traditions.

“Fiona Dupree, and she’s staying at the bed and breakfast.”

“How?” I asked, giving the shop a once over and flipped on the overhead lights.

“It’s Cupid’s Cove, Skip. There’s no secrets in this town, or have you forgotten?”

I shook my head in response, holding my hand up when Maryland tried to follow me into the shop. She had been the last to leave here earlier, and the sanest explanation was she

hadn't closed the door, but it wasn't the only possibility. Someone could be waiting for us inside, and I refused to put her in harms way. "I have work to do, Maryland. Thank you for the coffee." I nodded.

"Skip, you do realize you have to actually allow someone in the door to kick them out of it, right?"

"Technicalities." I forced my voice to remain calm as not to alarm her when my eyes shot to the empty spot in the back of the store. Feather's guitar was gone. The normal thing to do would be call the Sherriff, but this was personal. I'd spent a small fortune getting it back into my hands after Angel passed, and I swore to myself it would never fall into ungrateful hands again. The inscription that laid inside was the first of my lyrics Feather ever sang on stage, so it was as much a part of my history as it was his family's. They didn't care about it as much as they let on they did; otherwise, they would have never let me buy it.

"Think about what I said, Skip."

"Will do," I absentmindedly answered her, closing and locking the door as soon as I was certain it wouldn't hit her.

"Move to Cupid's Cove they said. Nothing bad ever happens in Cupid's Cove. Idiots! Everything bad happens here," I said, roughly dragging my fingers through my hair out of irritation, taking the stairs to my office two at a time. The one time I'd forgotten my phone on my desk was the time this happened. Whatever the odds of that happening was it had to be extremely small.

Whoever stole from me must have gigantic set of cojones between their legs, accompanied by a peanut sized brain. Unlike them, any person with at least half a brain would never dream of leaving such expensive things unattended. The camera's feed would soon tell me who the dipshit was.

After angrily tapping my passcode into my phone, my fingertips swiped across the screen until I got to my security app. My eyes widened in bewilderment as I watched the last person in the world I would have expected to reenter my shop,

much less be my big-balled thief. I couldn't make sense of what I was watching.

“Why the fuck didn't you look for me?” her perfect lips said in a voice barely above a whisper, and then she read my lyrics out loud, “*Angel, may love always live in your heart and guide your soul back to heaven when you lose your way.*” I could admit, after she ran away from me the other day, I never expected to see her again and almost felt sorry for the way I treated her. *Almost*. All of those remorseful feelings were obliterated when she put all but two of her fingers down and spun in place, making sure she flipped off every inch of the store before sprinting off with my guitar.

The woman was delusional, downright certifiable. When we met, I went out of my way to be a dick to her, but she was no ray of fucking sunshine herself. She warned me that she wasn't someone to mess with, and I'd assured her nothing good would come from her smart mouth. Hell, I almost flopped my cock out in broad daylight, giving her the ultimatum to suck it or get the fuck out. To say I lost my mind was an understatement.

I was fuming. My mind raced as a blur of how to handle this raced through my mind. To think, I had started feeling guilty about how I treated her. One thing was for sure, I had zero remorse for my behavior now.

I rewound and paused the video feed to find a clear shot of her face. *Conveniently*, the only time she looked directly at the camera was while she flipped me off. This left no lingering questions. She not only knew about the cameras but had intentionally waited until that precise moment to stare at me through the camera.

“Checkmate, pretty little monster. The devil is coming for you,” I promised her, taking a screenshot of her while staring at her smug face.

**skip**

EVEN THOUGH THE bed and breakfast wasn't all that far from my store, I hadn't actually been inside it a day of my life. I didn't see a point staying there since I had my own place with a perfectly good bed I could sleep on. Why would I pay to sleep in a bed when mine was in the same town?

With each step that brought me closer to where she was with my guitar, I lost more and more of my sanity and my ability to remain calm. My teeth ground against each other so hard my jaws ached from the pressure. About halfway there, I stopped. Nothing good would come from me losing my shit in front of everyone at the front desk. I needed to find out which room she was in and get her alone before I went off on someone else. Making it further than that was a fucking absurd expectation that I would never meet.

My breaths came in an erratic pattern as the hate for this woman eroded inside my body, and fire scorched my soul, leaving me to deal with the aftermath. I refused to be held responsible for what I was about to do.

Regardless of how this day started, it would end with my revenge. When I reached the door, I stopped. I needed a minute. Nix that, I could stand here the rest of the damned day trying to level my breathing, while figuring out how this should be handled, and still would come up without an answer. I wasn't able to form logical thoughts at this point. I was unstable, and it was her. Fucking. Fault.

Nevertheless, I closed my eyes, praying for any thoughts that didn't end with her wearing my hand for a necklace. I had dabbled in different kinks but had never really found my specific one per say. Like I said, irrationality was the only constant I had going for me right now.

"Fucking little monster," I forced out of my dry throat.

"I'm sorry?" a woman's voice raised with clear irritation questioned me, and my eyes shot open immediately.

"For fucks sake, not you," I clarified, shaking my head without looking at her.

"He's referring to me, Trin," my pretty little monster's voice called from just inside the door. My jaw tensed, and I told myself to stay calm. My fingers curled into balls, and I shoved them into my front pockets to keep them busy. Coming here with this much rage inside was a bigger mistake than I had realized it would be.

"Devil." The woman, whom I learned was named Fiona, tipped her imaginary hat.

"Monster? Devil? What in the smutty romance novel is going on here, Fi?" The Trin woman prodded for answers, and I sure as shit wouldn't be the one to supply them, even though she hadn't asked me.

"I would like to know the same thing," I said, my eyes locking with Fiona's.

"Trinity." Her attention flickered to her friend.

"You aren't coming to dinner, are you?"

"I'm afraid she won't be," I answered for Fiona, hooking my arm through hers and resting my hand on the small of her back to test the waters a little. Not a single muscle twitched in her body with fear. I had to hand it to her, she was

"You'll have to excuse his lack of eloquence. He's a manly man, Trin. You know how cranky they can be when someone isn't around to stroke their ego." She laid the bullshit on thicker than her accent, and my fingertips tapped against her back with impatience.

“I’ll tell you this once. I don’t like the way you look at her one bit.” Fiona opened her mouth, and Trinity raised her hand as she shook her head. “*But*, she has made it clear she wants to handle whatever is going on between you all on her own. She’s nineteen. That’s what, almost half your age? It doesn’t really matter, does it?” She sighed. “Just remember, Skip Turner, where we come from, everything learns how to be a predator so as not to become the prey. I know how to lose a body in the bayou and will gladly do it for her.”

“Noted,” I simply answered, processing everything she had said in her statement. It was undeniable that Fiona was young, but nineteen wasn’t a number I would have guessed. I figured she was in her twenties at the very least. The fact that Trinity hadn’t mentioned the guitar to me either meant she was clueless her friend had stolen from me, or she was one hell of a liar. There wasn’t an ounce of guilt clinging to any of the words she spoke, so I doubted it was the latter, but hell, I didn’t know her.

Trinity formed a V with her first two fingers and pointed them to her eyes and then at me before skulking off. I had to admit, seeing such a small woman vehemently threaten me over her friend almost made me chuckle, and it would have if I hadn’t been so pissed.

“Would you like to show me to your room?” I spat out through gritted teeth, unclenching my jaw, only to press them back together.

“I wouldn’t.”

“Let me rephrase that. We’re going to your room. Lead the way.” I applied pressure where my hand was on her back. Not enough to cause horrific pain, but enough to let her know I wasn’t playing any games with her. Hopefully she would understand my unspoken instructions, or I might do the one thing I didn’t think I would. Call the cops.

“Fine.” She plastered a fake grin on her gorgeous face. “But, I would much rather go to your place.”

“You were already there, *remember?*” I growled, not finding any amount of enjoyment in our dodgy conversation.

“Cut the bullshit. Where is my guitar?” I said in a hushed tone as soon as we were out of passersby’s earshot.

“Which one? You have a lot of them, or at least, I think you do in your shop. And you can’t prove I was there.” She planted her feet and batted her long eyelashes in my direction.

“Your room. Now.” I pushed my fingertips harder to make her walk again. “I have you on camera, and I have no problem handing the evidence and you over to the police.”

“What’s the matter? Not used to someone being as big of an asshole as you?” she asked in a sour tone, her eyebrows knitting together.

“Does it really matter if I answer?”

“Not really.”

“Good, because like I said. I’m done with the bullshit. Now, be a good little monster and unlock the door.”

She squeezed her legs together and nodded slowly, biting her bottom lip. *Fuck*. Was this turning her on? Was it turning me on? The answer to my question was clear as my cock jerked to half-mast at the sheer possibility of her wanting me. Nothing made a damned bit of sense, and I couldn’t trust myself when I was this close to her. I didn’t know what it was about her that drove me fucking crazy, but if both of us made it out alive, it would be a miracle.

It was a fucking horrible idea to touch her, but how was I to know that she was my direct line to crazy? I hadn’t even touched her skin, only her fucking back through a shirt, and here I was thinking with the wrong head. I had to get a hold of myself. I jerked my hand off her body like it was the most repulsive thing I had ever touched. I wasn’t here to fuck her.

“Nope.” She took a step forward, nodding her head to a couple as they walked between us.

“No?” I spat out in disbelief, faking a smile, not bothering to look at anyone but her. I closed the distance between us, resting my cheek against hers. “I think you’ve mistaken me for a nice man, and maybe that’s my fault. Let me be clear.” I lowered my tone, flattening my palm on the wall beside her

head. “You call yourself an asshole, but as far as I’m concerned, you’re nothing but a fucking spineless thief.”

She blinked, and her lips clamped together silently, and then her eyes darted toward down the hall. I smacked my right hand on the other side of her, caging her in place with my arms. She wasn’t running away this time. “Don’t even think about it. Neither of us are going anywhere until I get my guitar. Simple as that. I will be out of your fucking life, and you won’t go to jail. Do you know what they do to pretty little monsters like you in prison?”

“Not that I care. But why is it so important to you?”

“It belongs to me.”

“Wrong. Possession is nine tenths of the law, so technically...”

“Fuck this. I don’t do games.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Thinking this could be dealt with in a civil manner was one of the worst ideas I’d come up with to date. I’ll let the sherriff handle your ass. I have enough to deal with over the next two weeks. I *tried* being nice,” I warned her, clicking Alexander’s name in my contacts.

“I’ll give the guitar back,” she said in a small voice, but I ignored her, listening to the phone ringing in my ear. “Surely, we can work something out. I could help you with whatever you have to do these next two weeks. An extra set of hands around couldn’t hurt, right?” She rambled with such speed, her words were running into one another.

“It’s not something you can physically...” I stopped midsentence, the line going to a busy signal, and tucked my phone back into my pants. She didn’t know what she was offering in her desperation, but that didn’t make it any less tempting to accept. She needed to pay for what she’d done, and I sure as shit didn’t want to deal with being someone’s secret valentine. If I could fake a relationship with this gorgeous pain in the ass and not have to deal with anyone else, it would be a two bird, one stone situation. “I’m going to move my arms, and you’re going to open the door. Got that?”

She nodded, plucking her key from her cleavage. My eyes widened, and I cocked my head to the side, silently questioning her. She shrugged. “I stuffed them in there when I saw you outside.”

I still didn't trust her not to run. As far as I was concerned, she was a flight risk, and until she returned my guitar, under no circumstance was I letting her out of my sight. “I'll do the honors.” I pulled her key from her fingers, unlocking the door, and held it open for her. Her eyes flickered up to my face, and the confusion swimming within her body was unmistakable. She wasn't entirely alone, because although I wasn't as lost as she was, I didn't know . Whether or not she would be arrested was up to her. It didn't really matter to me. Either way, I would get back what belonged to me.

“Guitar first,” I instructed, walking into the room and sat on the edge of the bed, scanning the room for possible places she could have hidden it. She cleared her throat and then halfheartedly smiled, motioning behind me. I didn't understand, so I stared at her for a moment, waiting for clearer instructions. Of course, none came. Either she was scared shitless, or plotting my death. The latter was more believable, though.

She rigidly pointed behind me, and I glared at her. “It's not on the bed.”

“The fuck it isn't. Stand up.” She was in no position to bark orders at me. It should be the other way around. The fact that she thought this was acceptable pissed me off beyond belief. When I opened my mouth to tell her such, she huffed, “Get over yourself, Skip, and stand up.”

Out of pure curiosity, I did as she instructed, watching her closely in case she was scheming against me. She grabbed the top corner of the bedspread and pulled it back. She wasn't lying. Angel's guitar. *My irreplaceable guitar* was definitely not where it should be.

I took her hand in mine. “Skip Turner, your fake boyfriend for the next two weeks.”

Her mouth flew open as she gasped and ripped her hand away. “Listen, this isn’t *Pretty Woman*. I might be young and maybe even a little naïve, I’ll give you that, but I’m not a whore. If you think I’m going to be your sex slave for the next two weeks, then you’re all looks and brawn without zero fucking brains.”

Even though she didn’t deserve the truth, she was honest with me, so I decided to return the favor a little. “As much pleasure as it would give me to make those gorgeous lips beg to come, this isn’t about sex. Things are crazy in this town leading up to Valentine’s Day, and I’m not a happy participant,” I admitted, walking around her and lifting the guitar off the bed, inspecting it for damage.

“Shocker.”

I glared at her over the neck of the guitar before double-checking that it was still straight and she hadn’t ruined the action. Every part of it checked out, so, for now, I was satisfied. “I don’t do love or relationships.”

“Again...shocker.”

I tried to ignore her, but it was impossible as she lowered her eyes to the side of the guitar, her gaze following my every movement.

“You know what? I don’t have to explain myself to you. You either agree or I call the sheriff. Those are the only options you have.” I blew out a frustrated breath, hating how easily she got under my skin.

“Fiona Dupree, the devil’s pretty little monster,” she said in a deflated voice, dropping onto the mattress. “I can’t afford this room for the next two weeks.”

“Luckily for you, no girlfriend of mine would pay for it,” I assured her, hating how much I enjoyed her claiming to be mine.

“Really? I stole from you, and now, you’re not only asking me to stay in town longer, but paying for me to do so? That doesn’t add up. What would stop me from leaving when you weren’t around?”

“Fiona, I’m going to level with you. When you have endless money, anyone can be found, and you’ll be slapped with the charges so fast that you’ll regret the day you ever made a deal with the devil and broke it,” I warned her, having no idea if I was lying or not. I had the means to make it happen, but not a clue how I would carry it out. Hopefully, I never had to figure it out because I was a man of my word. If she ran, I would find her, and she would regret crossing me.

“I’m not sucking your dick and don’t expect me to do a bunch of dumb shit.”

“You’re not exactly in the position to be bargaining, but I’ll agree to some ground rules.”

“Then I might as well.”

“One: starting tomorrow we will be in a real relationship as far as anyone else is concerned. You will tell no one otherwise, or I’ll send your ass to jail. I’m not kidding, this is not up for debate. Two: you will be doing a lot of dumb shit, but I’ll be doing it with you. Neither of us will enjoy it, but we have to do it anyway to make this believable. If you don’t—”

“Let me guess, you’ll call the cops?”

“Correct.”

“I’m seeing the pattern,” she said, her southern drawl making the sentence sound much longer than it should have been.

“Three: no one will fall in love.”

“Not a problem, considering I don’t believe in it.”

“I suggest you tell your friends you’ve fallen madly for a sexy songwriter and can’t bear the thought of leaving. Honestly, I don’t care what you tell them as long as they believe it.” I stood, scooping the neck of the guitar into my palm and opened the door to leave.

“Oh, and my pretty little monster?” I called over my shoulder. “Starting tomorrow, you are mine.” I laid my claim to her. It was supposed to be fake, but it felt very real.



fiona

I DIDN'T DO what Skip Turner told me to do at all. That self-righteous asshole didn't deserve any of my respect. If he would have asked me, I would have told him so, but I didn't because jail time wasn't in my five-year plan. Not that I had one, but if I was the type of person who did, jail wouldn't have made the cut.

"Why aren't you packing?" Trinity asked suspiciously after walking into my room. "Are you sure that Skip guy didn't hurt you?" She walked toward me, no doubt trying to look my skin over for bruises. This wasn't the first time she'd questioned his motives of yesterday.

"Because, uh, I'm not going."

"You're not what?" Her feet plated immediately.

"Skip asked me to stay, and I kind of want to," I made myself spout the half-truth into the room, hating that I had lied to her again. What I said was true, he had asked, and I did want to, but only to keep myself out of jail. I was one hundred percent against staying in Cupid's Cove, especially to be someone's fake girlfriend. But when it came down to not wanting to do something or self-preservation, self-preservation won every time. Skip might have forced my hand in the matter, however, I intended to teach him a lesson. I was grateful I wasn't sitting in jail right now, yet part of me wondered if he was bluffing about calling the police. That part wasn't big enough to test him at the time, but it didn't mean I wouldn't make his life a living hell every chance I got.

“You’re not staying here. He could be an ax murder, Fi, like the real kind, not the Eli kind.”

“Eli isn’t an ax murderer, and I promise if I can handle Bonnie Jane, I can protect myself from anyone. You go ahead and go home. I know you have to work the day after tomorrow and can’t miss any more days.” I pushed the lie up my throat and out of my lips with ease. She didn’t need to stick by my side through this one. I didn’t know how things would end, but if I was going down, I wasn’t taking her with me. If she got into any serious trouble, her nursing license would be revoked.

“You can’t seriously like this guy, Fiona. You said he was an asshole, and I agree.”

“I can’t help what I’m attracted to.” I blew out a frustrated puff of air, the truth of my statement really hitting home with me. Skip Turner was the sexiest man I had ever been around, but he was also one of the rudest, too. I never thought the alpha male, pushy attitude was something I was attracted to, and it wasn’t until I met him. Maybe all the years of trauma were finally resurfacing and I was on the edge of a mental breakdown. Who knew? All of these thoughts were things I refused to share with another person now or ever.

“Ain’t that the truth.” Trinity momentarily closed her eyes with a sigh. “You know, I hope you don’t regret this. I can’t stand in your way because I understand being attracted to someone you shouldn’t be all too well.” She glanced down at her engagement ring. For as long as I’d known her, I had never questioned her relationship with Eli. The two of them just made sense to me. They were perfect together in my opinion. That was just an outsider’s view, though. I didn’t know where they began or what roads they’d traveled as a couple before I met them. I only where they were now.

“But?”

“I meant what I said about hiding his body in the bayou. They would never find it. I guess what I’m saying is, don’t stay here if that asshole doesn’t deserve you,” she said, with a nod of satisfaction.

“Thank you for always being you, Trin. You’re the best.” I smiled, pulling her against me in a tight hug.

“I know. I really am, aren’t I?” She giggled.

**fiona**

“MS. DUPREE?” a kind female voice called, following a knock on my door.

“Just a minute.” I flipped the covers off me and opened the door to see what the stranger needed.

“My understanding is that you’re new in town, but you, my dear, are someone’s secret valentine.” The woman, who was well into her sixties, beamed, shoving large sparkly red box into my arms with an oversized silver bow.

“Uh, thanks?” I eyed her as she lifted on her tiptoes, her eyes fixated on the box.

“Aren’t you going to open it and see if there are any clues as to who it is?”

“No,” I answered her pointblank.

“You don’t want to know who your admirer is? Seems a little strange, don’t you think?” The gift had caught me off guard, and her question brought me back to reality. As far as anyone else was concerned, I was in a relationship with the Skip Turner. I didn’t know if she was actually privy to this information or if she was simply a courier.

“Oh, I do. I just haven’t gotten the chance to wake up fully. Plus, I’d rather do it by myself, if you don’t mind?”

“Well,” she paused for much longer than necessary, “of course, I don’t mind,” She said with a smile. “Welcome to Cupid’s Cove, Ms. Dupree. My name is Maryland, and I’m sure we’ll be seeing plenty of each other.” She winked,

wrapping her hand around the doorknob, and closed it behind her.

“Stupid devil,” I grouched, tossing the box on the bed and sat beside it. I accepted the gift to keep up appearances, but that didn’t mean I had to open it. My cell rang moments later, and I picked it up to read the number. I didn’t recognize it and knew I hadn’t given my number to many, so it was probably a telemarketer. As soon as the ringing stopped, there was a loud knock on my door, followed by another.

“Fiona, open the door,” Skip called from the other side.

“Go away,” I said in a sour tone, instantly irritated.

“I’m giving you the chance to open the door before I open it myself.”

“I’m naked,” I lied.

“Even better. Let. Me. In,” he ordered, in a voice similar to mine. Good. I wanted him to be upset. I had agreed to be here, not to be nice to him.

The doorknob turned, the door opened, and I jumped to my feet, my arms covering my body out of instinct, and then I remembered I didn’t care what he thought. I dropped my hands, not giving a damn if I didn’t have on a bra. I wasn’t trying to impress him in the slightest.

“I was calling to make sure it fit.”

“What?” I looked around the room for something that wouldn’t fit. Everything in this room either belonged to the bed and breakfast or me, so their size shouldn’t be in question.

“Open the box.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

My hands scrubbed over my face and through my unruly hair. Fourteen days. How bad could it be? I was currently between jobs but had worked plenty of jobs I hated longer than two weeks. I needed to grit my teeth and push through this.

Years down the road, I hoped this would be an unimportant distant memory.

“A dress? I don’t do red.” I shook my head, refusing to admit I liked it. It’s simplicity only added to its beauty, but I wouldn’t tell him that.

“You do now.” His jaw tensed as he watched me with such intensity. “Try it on.”

“I’m not trying this on in front of you.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know you.”

“You’re mine for two weeks, monster, or did you forget?” He lifted the dress, hooking his finger through a sleeve, and pushed it toward me.

“I told you I wasn’t your sex slave.”

“I’m not asking you to be.”

“Then why would I change in front of you?”

“For fucks sake, I want to make sure it’s the right size. If you are worried about me seeing your flawless tits, you should have kept them under your arms. That shirt doesn’t leave much to the imagination. Don’t get me wrong, I could stare at them for the rest of eternity and die a happy man, but coupled with who they’re attached to, they lose their appeal.”

Ouch! I didn’t expect his words to hurt me, and definitely did not think they would hurt as much as they had. I still didn’t care about his opinion, but what he said stung.

“Fine,” I said, gripping the bottom of my shirt, lifting it over my head, and tossing it onto the bed.

“What are you doing?” he abruptly said, his attention immediately focusing on the ceiling. So, the devil was a liar, too. I did affect him.

“I’m trying on the damned dress,” I said, reminding myself not to smile. Two could play his games. I dropped my shorts to the ground next and throw them in his direction. They sailed past his face, and he groaned as his eyes locked with mine.

“Checkmate, monster,” he said in a hoarse voice, his tongue wetting his lips, and he stalked toward me.

“What are you doing, Skip?” I asked, backing away from him, fear creeping into my veins.

“Making sure the dress fits.”

“I can do that by myself, I...I...I don’t need your help,” I stuttered, not sure if I was actually afraid of him or his closeness. His cologne was intoxicating and made my mouth water. My feet shuffled back some more until I felt the bed against my ass. The closer he got, the closer I wanted him. My core ached with excitement, anticipating his touch.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” His finger turned upside down and the dress dropped to the floor.

I refused to give him the satisfaction of answering him, but if I didn’t get his hands on me, I might die.

“Hmm?”

Not a word left my stubborn mouth.

“Last chance, Fiona.” He bent down to retrieve the dress, unzipping the side and held it out for me.

My pride wouldn’t let me speak, but the building desire in my body needed an outlet. I lifted my arms above my head and took a step toward him.

“Fuck this was a bad idea.” He stopped for a second, his eyes roaming my almost naked body before covering it with the dress.

“What our fake relationship?” I remembered I had the ability to talk again.

“No, buying you clothes. In fact, I changed my mind. Sex slave it is.” Wickedness flashed in his eyes as his hand slowly crept down to my side where the opening was.

“I won’t be your slave.” My fingers crept on top of his.

“I wouldn’t force you to. I have morals, despite what you think.”

I might hate myself for doing this, but I couldn't take it anymore. It felt like I was going to explode. My hand guided his under the skirt and between my legs, showing him what I wanted.

"Fuck me," he groaned.

"Yes, please," I panted, grinding my hips against our hands.

I hated Skip Turner, but I hated myself more. He didn't make me fuck him; I begged him to. He was still the villain of the story, only now, he was the villain for a different reason entirely. All of the thoughts swimming in my head made me dizzy. This was supposed to be a fake relationship, but the way he kissed me wasn't fake. His need to pleasure me was very real. My experience in the sex department didn't amount to much, so I didn't have a lot to compare our experience to, but I wanted it to happen again.



I WAS A STUPID, stupid man to ever think faking a relationship with Fiona was a good idea, and an even dumber one for fucking her. My thought was if I banged her and got the urge out of my system, I would be able to think clearly, maybe I wouldn't be as easily triggered by her. Wrong. Every day I spent with her, I wanted more from her, and each day I slipped a little more into hell with my pretty little monster.

"There's a dance tonight," I said testing the waters, certain it was something I didn't want to do, but she might. Despite it all, I wanted her to say yes. I wanted to show her off to the town and to the world. Those thoughts scared the ever-loving fuck out of me, but I wouldn't let her know. This charade was my idea, and I'd made the rule neither of us would fall. Did I love her? No, but I knew I didn't want her to leave either. That in itself spoke volumes.

"Are we going?" she asked, while she mindlessly ran her finger along the display case in front of her before going back to organizing the albums.

"I don't know. Do you want to?" I asked, not sure if I wanted to hear her answer.

Silence was the only reply I got, so I backpedaled. "Never mind. It was just to make this more believable anyway," I lied to her but needed to hear it myself.

"If I have a choice, no, I don't want to go to some Valentine's Day bullshit dance. Not now, not ever." She looked up from the case.

“That’s fine.”

“*But*, I would go with you,” she sheepishly admitted, her eyes flickering to mine, and her cheeks flushed a gorgeous pink color.

“Good. Wear the red dress,” I instructed her. When I gave it to her a week ago, I had the Founder’s Day dance in mind in case we had to attend. After I fucked her in it and on it, I didn’t give a damn if she wore it ever again. It served its purpose.

“I can do that,” she said with a small smile. “What will you wear?”

“A suit with a matching red tie.”

“You planned that far ahead?”

“Fiona, everything I do has a reason, including being a dick to you when we met. You pissed me off with your lack of respect and how fucking beautiful you were while doing it.”

“You were mad at me for being pretty?” Her hands stilled and her back straightened.

“Not exactly. I was madder at myself for wanting someone I had no business wanting.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” she admitted, nodding her head.

“If we’re being honest with each other, tell me why you stole Feather’s guitar?”

She breathed out heavily. “This is the only time I’ll be vulnerable around you, got it? After this, I’m going back to my normal cutthroat attitude.”

“Deal,” I agreed.

“The reason we came to Cupid’s Cove was for Feather’s guitar.”

“I gathered that much, but why not ask to buy it?” Not that I would have sold it to her, but I was curious to hear her reason.

“I recently found out my birth mother had died without me ever getting the chance to know her. I felt like a shit daughter for letting my adoptive mother keep me from finding my bio mom. I’d always assumed I was given up for adoption because my mom was a crack fiend or something. Imagine my surprise when I found out my mom was a love child of Feather’s. I didn’t know her history, but I did find enough out to know that wasn’t the case—her being a drug addict that is.”

“Shit. That would make you Feather’s biological granddaughter?”

“In the flesh,” she said with a sigh. “Not that it does me any good to have the information now, though. They’re both dead.”

“So that’s why you took it? You felt like you had a right to it?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. I guess partly, but really, I wanted a piece of my mom, and why would you miss one guitar when you had plenty?”

“Because, my broken beauty, the words inside don’t belong to Feather as most of the world’s population believe they do.”

“They don’t?”

“Well, it depends on legality. Yes, he sang them and made them famous, but I wrote them.”

“He stole your lyrics?” she questioned in an uneven tone. “Is this some kind of trick to make me feel sorry for you?”

“Fiona, I am being transparent with you right now. You opened up to me, so I’m doing the same. I’ll always extend that to you as long as you do the same for me.” I swallowed, realizing how serious our conversation had gotten. “No, Feather was a good man. I wrote a lot of the songs you hear on the radio today, only my voice didn’t bring them fame. I was paid well for all of them, so it was well worth it, but that’s the reason I wanted the guitar. Angel was the only one in his family who cared about the guitar.”

“I always assumed those lyrics were written from a dad to his daughter.”

“Not at all. I wrote them about my grandmother named Angel. It was pure coincidence that Feather’s nickname for his daughter was the same.”

“That’s insane. So, all of this, why are you here when you could be in a cushy mansion writing songs and drinking expensive wine?”

“I prefer whiskey, and I haven’t written anything in over a decade.”

“Why?”

“Haven’t found the inspiration I was searching for,” I admitted, knowing as soon as the words left my mouth that was no longer true. Fiona was the muse I’d needed all along.

“Do you plan to live here for the rest of your life, avoiding the theme that reeks from this town? Love. What will you do when I go back to Louisiana? Find someone else to replace me and have fake a relationship with her?”

“Fiona, I haven’t gone on a single date in that time period either. My life was stagnant, and I was fed up with everything in it, myself included. But I don’t know if I’ll live here next year, much less the rest of my life. However, I can assure you of one thing.”

“What’s that?”

I walked around the counter and cupped her face. “No one could ever replace you, my pretty little monster.”

Her mouth crashed into mine, and I caught the moan as it drifted from her lips, scared shitless for the first time that our relationship that was never supposed to be real felt realer than anything I’d ever experienced. It wouldn’t be fair to ask her for more. She no doubt had plans to return to Louisiana, or she wouldn’t have mentioned her home state. I didn’t want to let her go, I wanted to see where we would end up with unlimited time, but that wasn’t a possibility. We had an expiration date, even if I didn’t want it anymore. I was the one who made the dammed rules. The first two weren’t binding and had wiggle

room, but the last, I was finding it very hard to abide by. I had never been one to believe in love at first sight. Hell, I was sure it didn't exist for me. Now, with my hands in her hair and her tongue caressing mine, I never wished to be more wrong in my life.



fiona

TODAY WAS IT. The end of our contract. I thought I would be happy for this day to come, but I wasn't. In fact, I was the closest to depression as I thought I had ever been in my life. I didn't want to leave, but I wasn't telling Skip that. He was the world's best imposter in the worst way. I was the universe's biggest hypocrite. I lied to love, and love lied to me. I swore on my very life that love wasn't real, and if it was, it wasn't for me. I couldn't have been further from the truth. Love was so exceedingly real that it was palpable. It made you do stupid things without you realizing it and was the motivation for your actions. Love was the untraceable drug that people unknowingly welcomed into their bodies, falling deeply under its spell without detecting its presence until it was too late. I had been drugged by Skip Turner, and now, I was his addict. After tomorrow, when our relationship was over, I would be another pitiful junkie who spent years without him, trying to get clean.

Maybe if I had been raised by different people and the world was a tiny bit kinder, Skip and I could have found each other. The world wasn't a kind place, though, and fate was an asshole. I hated everything today, myself included. I couldn't face Skip because seeing him meant this was ending, and my stupid lying heart couldn't bear the thought of living without him for even a second.

"Ms. Dupree?" Maryland's voice called, opening the door as she entered my room. She didn't even bother knocking anymore. I didn't mind. I actually liked being around her. She reminded me of the loving yet sassy grandma I never had.

“Morning, Maryland.” I faked a smile for her benefit, curling the covers around my face.

“Honey, it’s Valentine’s Day. Aren’t you excited to find out who your admirer is?”

I squinted at her. “We’re both aware who he is.” I stared at her, remembering her coming into the shop last week while I was on my knees behind the counter.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. Love is in the air, and tonight is the Sweetheart’s Dance. So, you’re getting up, putting on this dress I’m sure cost more money than my house, and meeting that man for your final gift. We won’t do this poor pitiful me routine, not while I’m around.”

“Wow, you don’t cut anyone any slack, do you?”

“Not when there’s no reason to. I know what love is, dear.”

I sniffed back the tears that were climbing up my throat because I refused to lose it in front of her. I didn’t dare admit I knew what it was all too well, but the problem was, I wasn’t supposed to. I had assured Skip it wasn’t an issue for me to not fall for him, but I still fell for him without giving my consent.

“Now, get your ass out of bed and in the shower. No one wants a stinky valentine.”

I smiled with a nod. I owed Skip the last day of our bargain, and I was a woman of my word, so I would see this through to its end, even if it ripped my heart to shreds.



fiona

“**RUNNING BEHIND**, meet me at my shop, and I’ll sweep you off your feet. ;)” Skip texted. I swallowed the uncontrollable sadness. I wouldn’t cry. After this, I would never give my heart to anyone else. Instead, I would drown it in cement and lock it away. Maybe then, it wouldn’t have the power to do this to me ever again. I would die a lonely, bitter woman, and as long as I didn’t have to feel this unrelenting pain, I was okay with it.

“On my way.” I shot a quick reply back to him and headed out the door.

The main lights were off when I reached his shop, much like the night this whole mess started. Only now, I knew to flip the main lights on so I could see.

“Leave them off, please,” Skip asked, and my muscles jerked. “Take a seat,” he instructed.

“Okay,” I said in a defeated voice, finding the chair he had set out for me just inside the door. This was it. He was done. I didn’t even get tonight to let my addict heart down easy. Hot tears rimmed my lower eyelids, and I cleared my throat. I wouldn’t break in front of him; it wouldn’t do me any favors by doing so. It would only make things worse for me.

The first strum of the guitar took me by surprise as Skip mindlessly plucked the tune I’d come to love. I didn’t know what it was, but he played it often. When he cleared his throat, my fingertips wrapped around the edge of the chair, bracing myself for what he was going to say.

He strummed a few more cords, and I lost it. The tears broke free and rushed down my face.

“This is your last gift, and then I’ll be out of your life for good.” He walked to where I was sitting and place the guitar on my lap. “Here, so you’ll always remember me. It all works out, though. I already have people lined up to buy this song and its lyrics. So, as for my future, I guess I’ll move to that mansion you asked me why I didn’t own. I’ll be leaving this town and never looking back, and for that, I thank you.”

“Wait. You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t feel right anymore, everything is so...”

“Depressing?” I finished his sentence.

“You have that fucking right. But it’s yours to take back to Louisiana. You don’t even have to go to the dance with me if you don’t want to.”

I cleared my throat, gripping the guitar to my body. I thought it would bring me closer to my birth mom, not be the reason I wanted to die.

“I keep my word, Skip, and I said I’d go, so I will.”

“Good, then let’s go.”

As soon as we arrived at the dance, all eyes were on us. It was probably the frown that seemed to be a permanent fixture on my face.

“Dance with me?” Skip held his hand out, leading me to the empty dance floor.

“Why not?” I took his hand, and he brought our bodies together, his other hand resting on the small of my back. I breathed in his cologne and memorized how his body felt against me. Forcing myself to move along with him and not awkwardly stand still and ball my eyes out.

“My pretty little monster,” he mused, running his nose along my jawline, and I held my breath in fear that if I didn’t, I would hyperventilate. I couldn’t keep my word. Not this time.

Not when he held me so sweetly only to send me on my way after tonight. I yanked my hand from his and turned to run, but he wrapped his arms around my waist.

“Stay for just a few minutes?” he pleaded with sadness behind his irises. He was taking pity on me by being here with me. I knew I should say no, at least then I would be able to leave with my dignity, but I couldn’t bring myself to say the words. I loved him and would do anything to make this moment last for an eternity.

The familiar tune played over the loudspeaker, and he hummed it into my ear as he sang:

*My pretty little monster
From heaven she fell
To rescue the devil
And pull him from hell
I don't want your kisses
We don't have a life
But if that's the truth then tell all lies
Whisper to you want me
Look in my eyes
Promise this isn't over
You won't say goodbye
My pretty little monster
From heaven she fell
To capture the devil and condemn him to hell
I want your kisses
You are my life
So, deceive me
Abuse me
And tell me your love lies*

*Tell me you'll stay
I'll do whatever it takes
To make you want me
I'll make no mistakes
My pretty little monster
Condemned me to hell
I promised not to, but I fell
So, deceive me
Abuse me and tell me your love lies
Tell me you'll stay
Whisper I'm yours that's all it will take.*

Tears streamed down my face, and I pulled him closer to me. I had never been so happy to be wrong. “Does this mean you don’t want me to leave?”

“Never, but I couldn’t ask you to stay either.”

“Then why are you?”

“Because I’m a selfish devil and nothing without you.”

I didn’t know what kind of future we had together, but I wanted it. There was no denying that truth. There were a lot of things to work out before we found any semblance of normalcy, but I was willing to put in the work if it meant being with Skip. Like many, I’d made a deal with the devil, but my outcome wasn’t to dwell in purgatory for the rest of my life. Skip had saved me from myself, and I would spend everyday from here on out thanking him.

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#AreYouALunatic #CrazyAsChelle

#AcaciaMalone

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To the participating authors of The Rogue Enforcers

Thank you for welcoming me into the family, can't wait to read all of the individual books!

about the author

Thank you for reading!

Acacia Malone is the paranormal pen name of Chelle C. Craze. She is a native of West Virginia.

She has authored numerous books in the romance genre with sub-genres varying from MC romance, romantic suspense, & dark romance to contemporary romance.

Their biggest inspirations and blessings will always be her children.

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