



Beautiful Lie

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: I thought our love was perfect. . . Then I learned the truth. I woke up lost and confused, with no name, no parents, nothing. But a boy with kind eyes had decided to help me. Eight years later and I couldn't imagine my life without him. I could spend hours watching him, stroking him, riding him. Birch was my first everything; my first friend, my first orga*m, my first love. There was no place on my body his tongue hadn't licked and his fingers hadn't gripped. I thought we were soul mates. . . Until I learned his family's secret and the lie that had been fed to me for years. He said he did it to protect me, he claimed it was all done for love. Birch promised me forever, but all I felt was betrayal. He wants me to remember what we have, that the love we feel for each other is real. I can't deny my feelings for him are still there. But how can I trust him now? How could I ever believe another word out of his mouth after what he kept from me? Even if it was a beautiful lie.

Total Pages (Source): 77

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Prologue

August 15, 2010

My eyes opened wide, catching blurred images of faces dangling over my head. Voices swam through my ears, drawing me out of my sleepy haze. I wasn't sure how many, but whoever was around me was speaking so softly I couldn't hear what they were saying.

Where am I? Who is that?

Blinking rapidly, I lifted my fists to my eyes and rubbed them into focus, pulling the doubled image back into one.

A face lowered, hanging just above my nose, as a set of deep blue eyes began to emerge, turning from fuzzy orbs into crystal clear pools. His face was serious and concerned as he slipped his hands under my shoulders and sat me upright. "Honey, are you alright?" the older man asked, worry highlighting the sound of his voice.

"I . . . I don't know. I think so." Forcing my vision to steady, I looked around, trying to figure out where I was. I didn't have a clue, nothing really looked familiar.

There were tall trees swaying above me, their long arms waving and bouncing against the bright skyline. A cool breeze bristled my skin, forcing a shiver to run from head to toe. Rubbing my hands up and down my arms, I shook my head, trying to understand what was happening.

“Why. . . Who. . .” I spoke the words quietly, barely a whisper against my tongue. I was so confused, trapped in a world that was spinning on its axis. My head began to throb as the tree tops and clouds all swirled together making me feel dizzy. Scrunching my brows, I tried to drudge up one single memory that led me to this place.

But there were no words or thoughts, nothing that jumped out to give me answers. The urge to stand roared in my head, and that was the only thing I wanted to do. I had to get up. I needed to stand.

Shifting, I pushed my hands into the cold ground, using all the effort I had to rise to my feet. Damp grass squished between my fingers, and water logged dirt soiled my palms. Clutching the mud, I dug my nails in, begging for the earth to show me why I was there.

I'm outside? Why am I outside?

How did I get here?

Bending my legs, I grunted, attempting to climb to my feet. But a nauseous rumble turned my stomach, forcing me to keel over and grab my belly.

“I think I'm going to throw up.” Gagging, I fell back, muscles shaking as if I had forgotten how to use them. I felt weak and shaky, like I had suffered a battle with an illness that devoured me from the inside out while I slept.

What happened? Why am I here?

A million questions filled my brain, but I was left empty and answer-less. There were no memories flooding in, no pictures of past movements that led me to where I was. Nothing.

“Easy now, easy, don't move to fast.” The man gripped my shoulders, holding me steady. Drifting his gaze around my body, he scanned up and down. “Are you hurt? Do you feel any pain anywhere?”

Rocking my wrists, I moved my arms and hands in slow circles. Wriggling my feet, I bent my knees up and down. “I don't think so. I just feel like I'm going to be sick.”

“That's alright, if you need to puke, puke. As long as you're not hurt, that's all I care about right now. Are you sure you're not injured?” Shaking my head yes, he lifted the back of his hand to my face and touched my cheek, slowly moving up to my forehead. “You don't feel like you have a fever. Can you tell me what happened? How did you get here?”

Racking my brain, I tried to round up my memories. I was drawing a blank. Closing my eyes, I pinched my nose, dipping my head into my chest. “Uh, I'm not sure. I can't remember what happened. Where am I exactly?”

“You're in the woods behind my house.” The man watched me cautiously, moving his hand to my shoulder. “I'm Nick, can you tell me your name?”

“My name. . . Uh, my name's. . .”

What's my name?

I can't remember my name. . . Why can't I remember my name?!

Lifting my eyes to his, I watched his expression harden as concern and worry drenched his face. Thick lines creased his forehead, and bushy brows crawled up towards his hairline like caterpillars. I could tell by the way he stared at me that my lack of memory wasn't a good thing.

That worried me. What could have happened to cause everything in my brain to disappear?

I should know the answer to his question without having to think about it at all. But all I could hear in my head was wind and dust blowing tumble weeds through an empty cavern.

Clearing his face of any distress, he spoke soft and slow. “Do you know your name, Sweetheart?”

Shaking my head no, tears started to fill my eyes. “I . . . I can't remember.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Nick's hand flattened on my back as he rubbed it tenderly, his touch caring and fatherly. "That's alright, we'll figure this out. Don't cry little one, I'll help you. Do you remember where you live or how old you are? What about your family, can you remember them?"

Plucking at my lip, I peered blankly at the ground. I couldn't find the words, I couldn't see any faces or hear any voices from a mother or a father, siblings, friends—Nothing.

This is crazy! I can't remember anything about who I am!

"No, I don't remember anything at all." Hanging my head, I wiped my face, as my chest began to ache with every breath, and tears drenched my cheeks.

Yesterday didn't exist, who I was and where I came from was gone. It was as if I had just been reborn, taking in my first breath, my first view of the world, my first smell of the air. Because before that moment, there was nothing but vast darkness.

"What happened to me?" Picking at my fingers, I tugged at the nail beds, keeping my eyes in my lap. I felt exhausted and drained, every inch of my body screamed with pain.

But it wasn't a pain from an injury or falling down. I didn't have any open wounds or large scrapes. There were no bruises or bumps that indicated I had been in some sort of fight.

Everything I felt, it was emotional torment. It was all the hurt of not knowing.

My head was pounding with the worst headache I had ever experienced, my stomach cramped and knotted with tight spasms I couldn't control. I wanted to throw up, I wanted to scream, I wanted to jump up and run until everything came back, crashing into my head like a grenade went off.

But I couldn't move, I was frozen in place, unable to connect my thoughts to my muscles and make them work.

It was all too much for my young brain to process. My mind was a tornado of questions, unable to stay trained on one single thought.

Where is my family? Do I even have a family?

Who am I? Where did I come from?

How in the world did I get here?

My breathing became erratic and labored as the air seemed to thicken, attempting to drown me where I sat. Heaping mouthfuls of oxygen tore up my insides, burning my lungs like hot coals.

“I can't breathe, I can't breathe—” Holding my chest, I dropped forward, trying to slow everything down. But I couldn't. My mouth was open wide, but my throat had closed. My lungs clenched tight, jerking with painful leaps to taste the air.

Cocking my head up, my eyes met the man's, and they begged him for help. I didn't blink, openly gawking with nothing but hurt and confusion on my face. I didn't know what to do or how to stop my body from reacting the way it was.

Pulling me into his chest, Nick hugged me. “It's alright, calm down. I don't know what happened, but everything will be fine. I promise, everything will be alright.” His

arms wrapped around me like a blanket, holding me tight.

I could smell his cologne and there was something about it that made my breathing slow down and my muscles stop shaking. It was soothing, musky with a hint of mint, the scent calmed my nerves, giving me a sliver of peace in the chaos that had gobbled me up.

Tears continued to fall effortlessly as I let my body snuggle into his, allowing him to hold me like a father would hold his daughter.

“Dad, is she alright?” A young boy's voice crept in from behind us, his tone wary and unsure.

“Yeah, she's okay. Come on over here.” With a firm arm around my shoulder, Nick held out his hand to the foreign voice, and waved him in. “This is my son Birch, he's the one who found you.”

“Hey,” he said, stealing a quick glance at my face then looking to the ground. “Are you sure she's alright?”

“She will be, Birch, she's going to be just fine. Come on, let's get you in the house and get you some water.” Helping me to my feet, Nick guided me through the trees while his son trailed a little behind us.

I could feel Birch watching me as I stumbled over fallen branches and staggered across the uneven ground. His eyes were like weights, pulling on every piece of my body they touched.

When they hit my shoulders my spine pressed down. When they sunk into my neck, the hair stood up and prickled my skin.

But when I looked at him, his eyes flicked away. I didn't understand why he wouldn't look me in the eyes. There was a hint of fear in his gaze, a sheen of fright that coated his pupils. It didn't make sense. Why would he be afraid of me?

Caught in a daze, his father pulled me back, his voice cutting through the sounds of breaking branches. “Our house is right through here, only a little bit further. How you doing? You alright?”

“Yeah, I'm okay.” I could see the shape of a house forming as the forest thinned, and we stepped out into the clearing of a backyard.

A huge house created the backdrop, with brick siding and a stone patio. A kidney-shaped, in-ground pool sparkled like crystal to my left, while full flower beds colored the lower half of the house in pops of purple and red.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Arching my neck, giant windows peered back at me, causing my reflection to morph and twist as the sunset teased my doppelganger. It was a bizarre feeling to see my face, to know that the person staring back was actually me, and have no memory of what I looked like.

Stopping short, I took in my reflection, learning my features all over again. My hair was made of big brown curls, tousled and knotted, with broken flakes of leaves and debris tangled in the locks. My eyes were dark brown, I assumed, but it was hard to tell against the glass.

All my limbs looked thin and brittle under the skin, like I hadn't eaten in ages and my body had started to find its food from within. I had on a dirty blue t-shirt with a unicorn in the center, spouting the phrase, 'You're awesome,' and nothing else but a pair of shorts, and filthy white socks.

I was shocked and captivated all in the same breath. Reaching for my cheeks, I stroked the cold skin, feeling myself to make sure this was true, that what I was seeing was actually real.

It was.

This wasn't a dream, I wasn't waking up, cuddling a thick comforter and tear-soaked pillow. I was a ghost to myself, a mirage of a young girl that once had a life, a past, an entire world that didn't exist anymore.

Strong fingers squeezed the outside of my arms, and Nick leaned over to whisper in my ear. "It's all right, we'll get you cleaned up, don't worry about what you see."

Ushering me along, he started forward again.

Hesitantly, I allowed his hands to manipulate me through the yard and to the door. “This is your house?” I asked, my voice still not registering inside my head as my own.

“Yeah, it's Birch, myself, and his mother, my wife Valentina.” Nodding his head at his son, he eyed the door.

Birch jogged ahead a few steps, folding down the handle to let us through. Leading me to a long wood table, Birch pulled out a chair and Nick sat me down.

Combing his thick fingers through my hair, he smiled. “I don't want you to worry, no matter what, I'll take care of you. I'm going to make a few calls and see if we can figure this out. Relax here, Birch will get you some water and keep you company until I get back. Sound good?”

“Okay.” Forcing a smile, I slouched in the seat, resting my hands in my lap. “Thank you.”

Running flat palms down my head and over my shoulders, his smile widened. “Don't thank me, you don't need to. I'll be back in a bit.” Nudging my chin with his fist, he turned and walked out of the room, disappearing around the corner.

For the first time since I opened my eyes, I felt some hope. Nick was going to find the answers, he was going to find out who I was and where I belonged. That thought dried my tears, it gave me something to cling to instead of feeling like everything was spiraling out of control.

Taking in a deep breath, I tugged my shirt down further so it covered my knees, and looked around the room. Their house was gorgeous. Everything sparkled and

twinkled like it had been waxed and shined.

Silver and gold trinkets rested on a shelf above the sink. The fridge was made of stainless steel, completely barren of any pictures or magnets. A giant wicker bowl of fruit was set in the center of the table, cradled by two tall candles in crystal holders.

Staring at my hands, dirt had embedded itself under my nails, covering my skin and arms. Wiping my palms on my shirt, I tried to clean them off. I was too dirty to be sitting in that house.

It felt like I didn't belong there, as if I was a peasant given clearance to sit in a castle. My filth was a disease, my dirt a calling card to the status I held in that room.

Frantically I rubbed and rubbed the skin until it started to turn red and raw. I wanted it gone, I wanted any reminder of where I had crawled out of erased.

Come on, get off.

Brushing my fingers through my hair, I pulled and plucked at the bits of leaves and tiny sticks. The small debris floated into my lap, dressing my shirt like soiled snowflakes.

“Don't worry about that, just sit and relax like my dad said.” The faucet gushed on, and the sound of water spilled into a cup. Soft feet tapped to my side, and Birch rested the glass of water down in front of me. “Here, try not to drink it too fast.”

Birch slipped into the chair across from me, and I glanced up with a light smile. “Thanks.” Curling my fingers around the cup, I lifted it to my lips and took small sips.

Birch sat staring at me. He had that same look I had seen outside. Fear, discomfort,

uncertainty, it was all there, lashing my skin like whips from a belt. He didn't know what to make of the girl who ended up in his woods.

He doesn't know what to think. . . How the hell does he think I feel?

With jet black hair and a jaw that was still young but forming, I guessed he was about fourteen. He was too young to have knowledge earned by experience, but he looked like he had lived a million years of suffering.

It was hard to make sense of what I was seeing, of the eyes looking at me, reading me, wondering about me.

Nervously, his fingers tapped against the table, and his leg jerked up and down against the floor. “So, you really can't remember anything?”

Swallowing the cold water, it quenched my dry throat and made me feel a little bit more normal, and not as shaky. “No, nothing at all.”

“Are you sure? You really can't remember anything before this?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

“No, I can't.”

Why is he asking me it like that?

Does he not believe me?

Why would I make that up?

Crooking his jaw, his eyes bounced around my face. “And you're sure of that? Nothing? Not one thing?” His questions came out more like an accusation, like he thought I was holding back, and my claims weren't real.

That wasn't true. I was trying like hell to force it out, but there was nothing there for me to grab.

“Yes, I'm sure. Do you think I'm lying?” Angling my head, I traced the rim of the glass with the tip of my finger. I was angry that he was asking me that way, that his tone insinuated he didn't trust what I was saying, and I was full of shit.

“No, I don't think you're lying, it's just. . .” Pausing, he pulled his eyes away, staring at anything that wasn't my face. “It's just strange, that's all.”

He looked like he wanted to say more, like he had so many more words to give me. But he didn't, he stopped there, hanging his head and braiding his fingers together.

“How old are you?” I asked, taking another drink from the cup.

“Fifteen.”

I was close.

We both sat quietly for a few seconds, but that silence was uncomfortable. I wanted to talk and learn, with the hopes that conversation was the key to my memories coming back. I could feel it, I could feel that my past was there, but it felt like it was on mute.

“How old do you think I am?”

Shrugging his shoulder, he lifted his head. “I don't know, about my age.”

“Hm, maybe.”

He could be right, it felt like that was the right answer, but I didn't know for sure.

“I've never seen you around here before, so I don't think you live here.” Popping his eyes open wide, his mouth dropped into his chest. “I've got an idea, we could look through my yearbook, maybe you're a little older than me.”

That's perfect!

“Yeah, let's do that. Can you go get it?”

Birch jumped from the seat and ran out of the room. He wasn't gone long, only a minute or two before he returned with a big book under his arm. “We can go through tenth grade. I'm in ninth, so I know you're not in my grade.”

“Ninth?”

“Yeah, my parents kept me back in kindergarten. My dad said he didn't think I was ready to move up. It is what it is, I didn't have a say in it. Like everything else around here, it's not up to me.” His eyes flickered, pupils dancing in the sockets as he looked at me.

I was tempted to ask him what he meant, why he had said it with such disdain for his father. Wasn't that how it worked? Weren't your parents the ones who made all the decisions?

Angling my head, I parted my lips, ready to question him. But I stopped myself. It didn't really matter what his relationship was like with his parents. I needed to find out who I was, I needed to go home, to my parents.

“Do you think I'm in there?” I asked, pushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

“I don't know, let's find out.” Pulling out the seat next to me, he flipped through the pages until he found the section he was looking for. Folding the yearbook open on the table, we both started scanning the pictures.

Throwing out my finger, I pointed at a young girl. “That kind of looks like me.” She had the same hair, same small round nose. The resemblance was so close, my heart started to beat faster as I leaned in closer. Thinning my lips with disappointment, I shook my head. “No, no it's not. Keep going.”

We went through every single picture, and nothing. I wasn't in there. I came from another place, a different school or city all together. It was deflating to not find my image in that book. I was really hoping that it would have been that easy.

I was praying that I had just been out for a walk and hit my head, and that my parents were only a few blocks away. Or that I had gotten lost and disoriented, and in a panic my brain had shut down completely, erasing everything I had once known.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Nothing was that simple. It would never be that simple.

After about an hour, Nick came back into the room, but he had no answers. He said he had called the police to see if there were any reports of missing children, and that he had tried the hospital too to see if any parents had called looking for their child.

It was a dead end, no one had yet.

No one is looking for me. . .

My eyes began to well up, the water bubbling over the surface and teetering on the thin edge of my lids. Dipping my head into my chest, I tried not to cry. I didn't want to let myself get worked up again just because the answers hadn't jumped out right away.

But I couldn't ignore the feelings that came over me. I felt lost and abandoned, unloved, unwanted and not missed.

What type of parents did I have?

Why weren't they looking for me?

You don't know anything yet. Maybe I haven't been missing for that long? Maybe I'm supposed to be somewhere else and they haven't noticed I'm gone yet.

But I don't look like I just vanished, it looks like I've been out here for a while.

Maybe I ran away. . .

“Don't let this get you down,” Nick said, tipping my head up so he could look me in the eyes. “This doesn't end here, we'll keep looking. For now, you're welcome to stay with us for as long as you need to.”

“I can't thank you enough for this. I don't know where I'd go or what I'd do if you hadn't found me.”

“Our home is your home, you don't have to worry about having nothing.” Smiling, he nudged my chin with his fist. “I'm going to make sure that no matter what, you're taken care of.”

Nick made me feel welcomed, he made me feel safe in their home. There was an extra bedroom I could use, and Birch gave me some clean clothes to wear.

And even though I was scared, sad, angry—painfully aware of the fact that no one was out there looking for me yet; having this family beside me felt good.

Tomorrow was a new day. The police would help me, they would get it out there that a young girl was desperately seeking the family she had lost. My memories would eventually come back, and all of this would be behind me. . .

Luck was a funny thing. It either rained on you day after day or left you out to dry and turn to dust.

But my luck, it was backwards. My luck had delivered me to a family, it had dropped me into the lives of people who cared about me even though they didn't know me.

It had erased what I knew and gave me something special.

Maybe what's behind me isn't worth finding at all.

Nick arched a brow, rubbing his chin in thought. “We need to call you something until we find out who you are. What do you want us to call you?”

“I . . . I don't know.”

“Well, you need a name, little one. How about Julie?” Scrunching my face, I furrowed my brows. That name didn't fit, it just didn't feel like me. “Okay, that's a no.” Taking a step back, he crossed his arms over his chest. “Bella? That's a nice name.”

“What about Cyprus?” Birch chimed in, pushing the yearbook across the table and turning in his seat. “You were under a Cyprus tree when I found you, it's a pretty name.”

Cyprus. . . I like it.

One year later

“Hey, I've got something to show you.” Birch poked my shoulder and smirked. “Come on, follow me.”

Placing the magazine on my thighs, I pushed my sunglasses up. “Follow you where?”

“It's a surprise.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

“A surprise? What kind of surprise?”

Shoving my leg with his foot, he playfully snapped. “Just get up, enough with all the questions.”

“This better be good.” Swinging my legs off the lounge chair, I grabbed my sun dress and slipped it over my head. “Do I need shoes for this?”

“Yeah, and bring your towel.” Birch jogged to the patio doors and yelled inside. “Mom, Cyprus and I will be back in a bit!”

Valentina stepped to the screen door, wiping flour-covered hands on a dish towel. “Where are you two going?”

His mother was amazing. She came from Italy, and nothing she ever made came from a box. The woman would spend hours kneading dough for pasta, breads, and everything in between. For the past year she had even been home schooling me.

Since Nick still didn't have any new answers about who I was, I couldn't enroll in Birch's school. We were all guessing that I was the same age as Birch, but we didn't know for sure, and we didn't know why or how I ended up out in the woods. Nick and Valentina had decided it was best for me to just stay there where it was safe.

It still hurt to not know who I was exactly, but I was happy living there. They treated me like I was their daughter, not once did I ever feel like I didn't belong.

Each day the pain I felt became lighter, and less of a burden to my emotions. It never

went away, but it wasn't always in the front of my mind. I was beginning to feel at home, like this was the family I was meant to have all along.

Drawing her hand over Birch's forehead, she pushed his hair back out of his face. "I don't want you two out causing trouble, Birch." Her long brown hair fell around her face, the thick braid swinging down over her shoulder and swaying back and forth. Eyeing us both curiously, she arched a brow in wonder.

Swatting her hand away, he ruffled his hair back into place. "No, Mom, I want to show her. . ." Whispering, he leaned in closer and covered his mouth so I couldn't hear what he was saying.

His mom smiled and nodded her head. "Just be careful." Birch turned and started back towards me, but stopped short as his mother spoke. "Dinner is at six, don't be late, your father is having guests tonight."

"Got it, six o'clock, no problem." Grinning, he walked quickly, snatching my wrist as he passed by and headed towards the woods. "Come on, you're going to love this."

We hiked for a bit through the trees and thick foliage. Birch kept glancing at me with excited eyes and a big toothy smile. But he refused to tell me where he was taking me.

"It's just a little bit further."

Wiping sweat off my forehead, I groaned. "That's what you said twenty minutes ago."

"I swear, it really is." Stopping at a ridge, he turned to face me. "Okay, close your eyes."

“What? Why?”

“Just close your eyes, Cyprus. Trust me, it will be worth it.”

Stuffing my arms into my ribs, I kicked my hip out. “Alright, but if you're messing with me, and I open my eyes to a dead animal or something—”

Holding out his hand, he cut me off. “It's not a dead animal, I promise. Just shut your eyes.”

Pursing my lips, I did what he asked, and closed them tight. I felt his hands curl gently around my wrists, and butterflies began to swarm in my belly. His touch had started to affect me differently lately than it used to.

Most of the time he would give me a playful punch or he would tug my hair and laugh. Birch liked to mess with me, teasing me with stupid pranks and things only an immature boy would find funny.

Normally I would yell at him, hitting him back and storming off annoyed. Then something changed, he stopped his games and his touch became tender and delicate. He would look at me with more in his eyes than just a kid who got his jollies out of being a pain in the ass.

What I don't think he realized was that I had started to enjoy his touch, to crave that tiny bit of intimacy. I found myself brushing my shoulder against his if we passed in the hall just to get that warm and fuzzy feeling in my gut. I would wait for him to be in the kitchen and would purposely go and get something out of a cupboard he was near just so I could smell his cologne or graze his body in some way.

It was stupid, I knew that. All the little ways I manipulated my position just to feel his skin on mine. I couldn't help it, it was like I was falling into this rabbit hole of desire I

couldn't explain and didn't understand.

But his touch today was so different. He initiated this contact, he brought his fingers to my skin and I sensed a change. Right then, when he gripped my wrists and held my arms, everything inside my body screamed with delight.

Birch's fingertips were careful and soft as the pads of his fingers pressed against my pulse. There was no strength or force behind it, no joking tickle or blindsided wet finger in my ear.

His skin sizzled against mine, forcing a tingle to run up my arm and curl around my ribs. My heart slammed around inside my chest, thudding so loudly I thought he might be able to hear it where he stood.

Guiding me forward, he pulled me along. "Don't open them, keep them closed."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

“I will, don't worry. I won't peek.” His thumbs softly swirled over the nubs on my wrists, and my skin ignited in goosebumps, sending sharp hairs up my arms.

Swallowing hard, I kept my eyes sealed shut and took in a few deep breaths to try and calm my nerves.

Stopping, he released my arms, and the ground crunched as he stepped up to my side. “Okay, you can look now.”

Peeling my eyes open, I looked out onto a glistening pond. A giant rock protruded from in the middle, and the water was so clear I could see right to the bottom.

I didn't speak, I couldn't. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

“Pretty sweet, huh?”

“It's amazing, Birch.” Leaning over the edge, I looked down. “How high up are we?”

“It's only fifteen feet, maybe a little more.” Peeling off his shirt, he dropped it to the ground.

The sun hit his chest and I noticed how muscular he had become. It was as if over these past few months his body had gone from boy into full blown man.

His pecs were firm with defined lines. A thin bushel of hair decorated the center of his chest, disappearing and picking up at his naval. I tried not stare, but it was useless.

These feelings I was having for him were growing out of control. My body would get all tingly and hot, my heart would pick up and start to beat faster and faster until I thought it was going to shoot out of my chest.

I fought it, I tried to wrangle the emotions he brought out. But every day it seemed harder and harder to keep my hormones in check.

“You ready?” he asked, giving me a wink.

“Ready for what?”

Birch's lips rolled towards his ears, cheeks puffing with a grin. Taking one long step back, he turned his head out towards the water and jumped. “Wooo!” he yelled, his voice echoing off the tamed glass surface.

I heard him splash into the water before I could get to the edge. Looking down, he was smiling up at me with one closed eye. “Come on! Your turn!”

“I'm not sure about this!” I called down, shaking my head. “Are you sure it's deep enough?”

“Trust me, Cyprus.”

“But what if I land on a rock or something?”

“Stop being a pussy and just jump already! You got this, trust me!” The way he said it made me believe him. Birch was always so confident, so sure of himself and his ideas.

Taking a deep breath, I stood up, shaking my hands by my sides. Stepping back a few feet, I closed my eyes.

I didn't think about how far down the water was, or the rocks I could see just under the surface. I trusted him, I trusted him with everything I had.

And I jumped.

The water was cold, splashing up my nose and making it burn. Kicking my feet, I swam back to the top, taking in a huge gulp of air.

Waving my arms back and forth through the water, I spun in a circle, looking for Birch. But he was gone.

“Birch! Birch!” Twisting my head back and forth, I started to worry that I had landed on him when I jumped in and knocked him out.

Oh God, where is he? Where the hell is he?

“Ahh!” I screamed as he lurched out from under the water, right next me.

“Nice jump, great form.” Laughing, he tipped his head back, dipping his hair into the water to get it out of his eyes.

Splashing water into his face, I snapped. “You just scared the shit out of me!”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Our eyes connected, his smile fading as he paddled in so we were almost touching chest to chest. Every sound around us went silent. It felt like it was just the two of us, there were no birds chirping or trees rustling in the wind.

His lids hovered half open, as droplets of water balanced on the tips of his lashes, reminding me of crystal raindrops. Birch blinked, and I watched the tiny drops break free, cascading down his cheeks and disappearing into the wet hair on his chest.

The water shifted us together, causing our legs and feet to tangle. We didn't speak, we just stared into each others eyes.

My stomach went wild, turning and flipping. Tingles and electric pops hit my veins, making my blood bubble like lava.

We had never been that close before. Not like that, not half clothed, with no one around to stop us from doing something stupid.

Birch leaned in, bringing his lips to my ear. "Can I tell you something?"

I couldn't answer him. My tongue wouldn't work and my brain forgot how to speak as his words washed over my skin like silk. All I could do was nod.

"I like you, and I think you like me. But if I'm reading it all wrong, you have permission to slap me."

Slap him? Why would I slap him?

Tipping my head a hair, I was about to ask him what he meant. I didn't have the chance.

His lips pressed against mine with a hard kiss. That was the first time I had been kissed by a boy—that I could remember.

His eyes were closed as his smooth lips massaged mine. Flapping my arms up and down to stay above water, my body went up in flames. I felt things I had never experienced before.

My stomach knotted, my ribs hurt, and my most sensitive spot had started to pulse. It was surreal, an out of body experience that I wasn't sure what to do with.

I knew what sex was, and I was well aware of the fact that neither one of us was prepared for that right now. But I didn't want him to stop, his lips felt so good against mine.

The small devil on my shoulder barked in my ear to keep going, to allow him to touch me in ways I had only dreamed about. The angel stepped in, reminding me that bad things can happen if we don't take precautions and things get out of control. I was at a loss, whose side was I supposed to take?

Do I pull away? Do I keep kissing him?

What are we doing here?!

I felt his tongue push past my lips, so I opened wider and accepted. The muscle was warm and wet, smooth and a little rougher than I expected. Swirling his tongue around mine, I copied his movement.

I wasn't too sure if I was doing it right, but he didn't stop me to give me a lesson or

laugh at how awkward I was.

Birch kissed me.

And it felt right, it felt perfect, it felt like it was meant to be.

Pulling away, I hovered in the water, feeling like I was floating in the clouds.

Birch smiled, his mouth tinted red from where my lips had just been. “You didn't slap me. . .” Pausing, he bit his bottom lip with a grin. “Does that mean you liked it?”

Splashing him with water, I giggled. “Are you serious? Did you really think I would slap you?”

Raising his brows, he lifted his shoulders to his ears. “I don't really know what I expected.” Throwing his arms out, he tugged me into his waist, and lifted my legs around his hips. “But I liked it.” Kissing my cheek, he pressed his hands into my shoulder blades as he spoke. “Come on, we should probably head back.”

I didn't want to go to back. I wanted to stay there, wrapped in his arms, feeling his heart beat against mine.

Reluctantly I agreed, unfurling my body from his and swimming beside him to the small ledge at the bottom of the cliff.

The entire hike back to the house we held hands, and I knew right then, I loved him. I didn't tell him that, because I wasn't sure if he felt the same. But I knew what I was feeling.

He was the boy who had saved me. He was the reason I was alive. If he hadn't found me, who knows what would have happened.

And because of that, I loved him.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Even if he didn't love me back, it wouldn't change how I felt. But that kiss meant something. I felt it all the way in my chest, in my muscles, in my bones.

True love was a thing, it wasn't just something made up in fairytales. Sometimes fate placed you in the right place at the right time. And for me, that's exactly what I believed happened.

Maybe I was naive, maybe I was just a stupid girl drunk on the first boy she had ever kissed. But that was far from what I felt.

I felt like love had pushed us together. I felt like love had been the guiding force that placed me in those woods to begin with.

Hitting the end of the trees, Birch untangled our fingers and smiled. "Let's keep this between us for now. I don't want my parents to freak out or anything."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I'd hate for them to kick me out or something."

"Exactly." Leading the way through the yard, he glanced in the window. "Shit, I forgot about dinner." Biting his lip he gave me a crooked look. "Let me do all the talking, I know how to handle my father."

"Why? Is he really going to be that pissed?"

Shrugging his shoulder, his lips drew taut. "I guess that depends on who's here for dinner, and how it's going." Gripping the handle, he pulled the door open as quietly as he could.

What the hell does that mean?

“You're late.” Nick gave us both an angry glare, flaring his nostrils. “And we have guests.”

There were two men at the table with his father. Both of the men were dressed to the nines in black suits, with a blue handkerchief puffing out from the breast pocket. Their hair was slicked back tight against their scalps, an angry scowl rested on both their faces.

“I'm sorry, we lost track of time.”

“You're sorry? You lost track of time? That's the best you could come up with?”

“Dad—”

“Don't.” Jerking an open palm into the air, he tilted his head. “Go upstairs, both of you. I don't want to see either of you the rest of the night.”

One of the men smirked, cupping his mouth with his hand. Whispering to Nick and the other man, he said, “Kids. . . I'd trade mine for yours any day. Ricki is doing five in the pen, something to be proud of right? Little shit has no idea how to keep a low profile, him and his big mouth.” All of them busted out with laughter, raising their glasses and clinking them together in some parental toast.

I had no idea what that man was talking about or why they all found it so funny. Following Birch to the stairs, I glanced over my shoulder one last time, pausing to look at the unknown men. There was a feeling in the air that made me uneasy, like it was a secret meeting and not a dinner for old friends.

Trying not to linger for too long, I watched them for a moment. The need to make

sense of who they were and why they were here dressed like it was a fancy board meeting rattled my brain.

What are they talking about?

Quietly, the two of us made our way upstairs. Standing at my door, Birch rubbed a heavy hand over the back of his neck. “That wasn't too bad, things must be going well.”

“Who are those men?”

“Don't worry about them, they're just associates of my dad.”

Associates? Associates of what?

Maybe they're private detectives.

The thought made my heart skip with excitement. Nick had said the police had hit a dead end with my case, but he insisted that he would still work hard on it, and wouldn't give up. A fresh set of eyes could be just the thing we needed to find my family.

“Are they detectives? Do you think they're here to help find my family?”

Sighing, Birch's head drooped down, chin touching his chest. “I take it my dad hasn't told you yet.” Running a finger across the bottom of my chin, his eyes softened. “My dad told me the other day that he can't find your family, no one can. Not the police, not any of the detectives or organizations for missing children. I'm sorry, Cyprus, I know that's not what you want to hear. But he's going to let you live with us, he says you're a part of our family now anyway, you belong here.”

My heart tore open, spilling every piece of hope I had onto the floor. I watched my past seep into the carpet, disappearing as if it had never existed.

“Why didn't he tell me that? He said he wasn't giving up, why is he giving up?” Taking in heavy breaths, I held back the tears that tried to consume me.

“He doesn't want to give up, but there's nothing else he can do. He was suppose to tell you, I guess he was just waiting for the right time.” Reaching out, Birch held my hand. His eyes dimmed, burying the spark I had seen at the pond. He looked sorry for me, he looked like he wished he didn't have to tell me the bad news.

But there was never going to be a right time to tell me that. I wasn't going to have a future where my past became my present, not anymore. All my hopes and dreams, all my wishes on the countless falling stars I plucked from the sky would never be gifted.

My memories were gone. Whatever life I had lived wasn't returning. I didn't know my real name, I'd never know where I was born or how old I truly was. I couldn't remember the family that had forgotten me or what it was like to live under their roof.

Whoever I was before was gone.

My name was Cyprus now.

And my future was with this family.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Chapter One

Cyprus

Present Day

“Cyprus, do you have everything we need for tonight?” Nick folded his newspaper and rested it on the bar. “I need to make sure that we have everything, I can't risk that rat bastard trying to fuck me over. I don't trust him, never have. The only reason I agreed to this thing was because of his father. But if he tries something, anything at all—”

Cutting in, I did my best to ease his worry. “It's all set, Nick. I have everything we need for tonight. Don't worry about it too much, it'll be fine.” Stacking the clean shot glasses, I finished setting up the station for tomorrow.

When I turned eighteen—or what we estimated my age to be, Nick gave me a job. I helped run the family bar, but that wasn't my main job. Cooking the books, that was my trade. I fixed the sheets and made it look legal to the outside world.

And I hated to admit it, but I was fucking good at it.

Smiling, Nick tapped the bar top, knocking on it with his knuckles. “God you remind me of Valentina, a spitting image. That woman rubbed off on you, it shows.” His eyes twinkled, casting a warm glow. “And you're sure you're alright with sitting in? I can have Birch do it if you don't want to.”

“No it's fine, I've sat in before, I can handle it. Besides, Birch will be up here if things go south, we can ring him if we need to.”

Smiling, he leaned across the bar and fisted my chin with a gentle bump. “Good girl, that's why I put you in charge of that stuff and not my boy. He has a hard time remembering his head from his asshole sometimes.” Chuckling, he pressed his palms against the edge of the wood and rocked back. “It would be my luck he'd shoot the guy point blank for a sneeze. Him and that feather trigger of his.”

“You really think I have that much of a short fuse?” Birch walked in from behind his father and gripped his shoulder.

“I don't think it, I know it.” Angling his head over his shoulder to look at his son, he playfully snapped. “You act like I haven't had the pleasure of seeing it before.”

Shaking him a little, Birch grinned. “Maybe I have you wrapped around my finger, old man. I hate that shit, sitting at a table and playing stupid fucking mind games with a couple of assholes.” Winking at me, he tossed a big smirk in my direction. “You know I love you, Cyprus, but setting up a buffet for a group of dicks and playing with numbers and the fine details is not my thing.”

“Yeah, acting like a giant muscle head is far better than looking smart.” Biting my lip, I veered my stare. “What will you do when I take that job too?”

Nick let out a deep throaty laugh, pointing his finger in my direction. “She sounds like your mother used to, Birch. Watch out for this one, she'll slit your throat in your sleep.” Reaching for his shot glass, he held it to his lips. “Just like I showed her how.”

He wasn't lying when he said that. Nick had spent a lot of time making sure I knew how to protect myself. The family business wasn't exactly built off honesty and law

abiding rules.

It took me some time to figure out what he was involved in. I was too young to understand when I first met him, and I hadn't put two and two together when I saw those men at that table that night back when I was a kid.

Once I got older, it became more than obvious. Nicholi Rottera, the kind man who took me in, the loving father to his wife and child, he had a dark side. Ruthless and cutthroat, his business dealings were not for the faint of heart.

When he started to teach me how to use a gun and the proper way to handle a knife, I knew there was a reason. It wasn't exactly common practice for a person to share that with a kid. But he was right, I needed to learn how.

Nick had his hands in shit that others would run from. He considered himself a man who should be feared, but that didn't mean there weren't people out there waiting to take his life. The mafia was built off power and control, and Nick liked to have both.

As time went on, the loyalty between his family and myself grew. Nick had deemed me trustworthy enough to know the truth, and he decided to let me in on the family business.

At first, when he finally confirmed my suspicions, I wasn't sure what to think. A part of me was angry, like it was wrong to even be under the same roof as that family. It was dangerous, the risks were far too high that something could happen to any one of us.

But then I thought about the side of Nick I had seen, the caring father and loving husband who was there to protect his family.

That was the man I knew. Not the gangster gunslinger, who would hold cold steel to

your temple and pull the trigger before you had time to blink. He never showed me that person, not once had I ever felt threatened by him.

I decided to accept him for who he was, to accept the family that had shown me unconditional kindness and love.

I wouldn't lie and say it didn't scare me when I knew Birch was going out to collect a debt or ruff someone up to make a point. It didn't matter if he had other guys with him; the fear was there, the painful twinge of anxiety would eat me alive until he came home.

But he always came home.

People came and went, and I turned a blind eye to the reality of what was going on. I never asked about what happened to someone if I didn't see them again. That part was none of my business, and completely out of my control anyway.

There were rules, a code that we lived by. And I respected it. I had to, there wasn't a choice for me.

I never completely felt like this was who I was. I had never fully accepted that this way of life was one I was agreeing to. But I did it. I did it because these people weren't just strangers anymore.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

They were family, they had given me the same opportunities and respect that they had given their own blood born son. I would never forget that, I would never take for granted what they had done, and I would stand by their side till the very end.

Because that's what you did for family.

You stood by their side, good or bad. Nothing would cut the thread that tied us together. Despite the pit in my gut at times and the tiny voice inside my head telling me it was wrong; I was here, and I wasn't going anywhere.

My appreciation for what Nick and Birch had done, how they had saved me from dying alone in the woods, that was all I needed.

They had my back and I had theirs.

Birch came around behind the bar, arms open wide. "Babe, you know I love you." Wrapping me in a big hug, he pressed my head into his chest. "And without you, I'd be lost."

"You bet your ass you would be." Curling my arms around his back, I ran my fingers up and down his spine. "You couldn't function without me."

Slamming the glass down, Nick sucked in air through thin lips. "She's right, Birch. Your mother used to tell me that all the time, and I never actually believed it until she was gone." His eyes went cloudy, staring off behind us as he thought of his wife.

Valentina had passed last year, it was rough on all of us. It was hard on Birch to

watch his mother suffer the way she had. He would help his father care for her, both of them did their best to make sure she was comfortable and happy in the end.

I watched him shed tears that I didn't think he had. I held him at his worst when her illness had finally won and there was nothing more that the doctors could do. Birch had lost something the day she died, a small piece of himself was suddenly gone.

But nothing could compare to the pain that Nicholi was going through. For all the horrible things he had done in his life, for how dark and harsh his hands could be to others. . . He loved and cherished that woman.

It was hard as hell to watch that man lose his best friend, the love of his life. Twenty-four years of marriage, and it ended before either one was ready for it. But you can't foresee the future, you never knew when God would slip his hand down from the clouds and call back one of his children.

I wasn't sure if Nick believed in heaven or hell, or if he thought that one day he would see his wife again. There was too much pain in his eyes and hurt in his voice for him to think beyond the moment, beyond the past, and beyond the future he had lost.

Frowning, I laid my hand over his. There were no words I could say that would ease his pain. This was something he was going to have to deal with on his own.

It was going to take time for that hurt to go away, for it not to be there day after day as a constant reminder of what was gone.

I hadn't lost the love of my life, but I had lost a family. I dealt with their absence as if they had died. Because to me, they were as good as dead.

They never came looking for me, they hadn't plastered my face on missing person fliers or televised it on the news. It didn't matter that Nick had searched for month

after month, no one was out there on the other end ready to retrieve his gift.

Time had helped to heal the wounds, but it was still there. It would never go away completely, the pain only dulled into this paper cut that was more annoying now than anything else.

Slapping the bar, Nick sucked in a big breath of air. “Well, I’m going to go down. When they get here, just bring them in.” Forcing a smile, it faded immediately, turning his face back to stone.

Birch and I watched him drag his feet into the back and heard him start down the stairs. Thud after thud, he clopped down the steps until he hit the cement floor, and a door closed in the distance.

Turning to look at me, Birch kissed my forehead. “I hate seeing him that way.”

“I know, me too.” Resting my head on his chest, he rubbed his hands up and down my back. “I’d be devastated if I lost you.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that, because I’m made of steel baby.” Slipping his hands down over my ass, he gave me a hard squeeze. “I’m indestructible, like this ass of yours.” Grunting, he shifted his waist so his cock rubbed against my belly.

Pushing back, I peered up at him. “Are you serious right now? You know I have a ton of shit to do before Antoine and Collin get here. The big man is already worried enough about this deal, I don’t want to screw it up.”

“You won’t screw it up, we both know that. We have plenty of time, Cyprus, I can do you right here. We’re not open, no one is coming in, and my dad will be downstairs. Antoine and Collin won’t be here for another hour.” Licking his lips, he stepped in closer, forcing my back against the bar. “You know you can’t resist this cock, Baby,

you never could.”

Holding a palm to his chest, I smirked. “Full of yourself much?”

Curling his fingers around my wrist, he guided it down over his abs and onto the firm muscle under his pants. “You feel that? You do that to me, you've always made me so fucking hard. Even when we were younger, I'd rub one out just thinking about you.”

“Is that suppose to turn me on?”

“Is it working?” Using my hand, he stroked his cock. “Because if it's not, I have other ways to make you wet.”

Flicking his brows high, he dug his free hand into the small of my back. Arching my spine, my lids hooded as my nipples went stiff, tingling in my bra. He had this power over me, he always did. A look, a touch, a smile, it didn't matter. Birch made me feel things I couldn't explain.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

“Fuck, Birch, how do you do this? How the hell do you still make me feel this way after so many years?”

Lowering his lips to my cheek, he whispered. “I think people call that love.” Licking the shell of my ear, he nibbled the lobe.

All of the air in my lungs rolled out as my head fell towards my shoulder to make room for his mouth. Light kisses hit my throat, as he worked his way down, turning my muscles into limp spaghetti.

Grazing the sharp edges of his teeth around my neck, my skin exploded in goosebumps. “There it is, that's what I was looking for.” His words buzzed over my flesh, making my body hot. “Now I know your pussy is wet, and if I'm right—” Biting my collarbone, he blew cool air across my throat. “Your pussy is fucking dripping, wishing for me to take it.”

Moaning quietly, my eyes closed on reflex, body melting into his hands. Birch had spent years learning all the places that gave me goosebumps if he kissed them or caressed them just right.

His eyes never stopped watching me, they never left my body, not once. Taking notes on how I moved or whimpered, he paid careful attention to how my body reacted to his lips and hands.

I felt like an instrument he had been playing for years. He knew my chords, he knew which string to pluck and strum so I sang for him. It was perfect, always perfect.

Releasing his hand from my wrist, I kept stroking the hard member as Birch slipped his fingers under my shirt.

Hard pads caressed my breasts, plucking at the pebbled beads. “You want this, don't you?” Another moan spilled from my mouth, louder and less controlled. “Sing for me my sweet little siren.” Sharp teeth clamped down on my shoulder, biting into the flesh.

There was no escaping him now. My mind had turned off, refusing to let thoughts that weren't about his cock come through.

Moaning, my eyes closed tight as I pushed my chest up and forced my tits into his hands.

Growling, he twirled my perked flesh hard, grinding his cock into my hand. Birch knew exactly what he was doing, and he was loving every second of it.

His eyes flirted with a primal smile, teeth nibbling his bottom lip as he grunted. In one quick spin, strong hands flipped me onto my stomach, and bent me over the bar.

With painful slowness, he slid a hand down my spine, curling his fingers into my hips. Working my pants, he popped the button and slipped his hand into my panties, searching for my sex.

“Fuck, Cyprus, you're so damn wet right now.” A single finger dipped between my folds, massaging the juice against my clit.

“Mm,” cooing, my head snapped forward, fingers clutching the firm wood edge. Brushing the counter with my belly, the cold surface iced my skin, forcing me to suck in a quick gulp of air.

“Tell me what you want, Babe. Tell me what you want me to do.” Rolling his hips, he massaged the dimples above my ass with his thumbs. “Let me hear you say it.” Gliding a hand back into my panties, he cupped my mound, putting pressure on my swelling nub.

“Fuck me, Birch.” The tip of his finger flicked my clit, causing my legs to tremble. “Fuck me.” The words came out built on nothing but air as my hips rocked, forcing his finger against my needy button harder.

“That's what you want, hm? You want me to fuck you?”

All I could do was nod. I had lost my voice as his finger massaged and swirled my hot center, forcing all the words from my mind. An air-filled moan escaped my lips as he pushed his finger into my pussy, then pulled it free to find my clit again.

Running his free hand up my back, he tangled his fingers into my hair and tugged the locks with a quick snap. “Tell me, say it so I can hear you.”

“Fuck me.”

“Again.”

“Fuck me.” Groaning, my ass rolled and bucked, pushing into his belly.

Tearing at my pants, he worked them down over my thighs, leaving them to trap my knees. Wrapping my hair around his fist, he gripped my roots and shoved my head down against the bar. “Again, say it again. I love hearing you beg for me.”

“Fuck me, Birch.”

I heard the metal teeth on his jeans as he tore open the zipper. Harsh fingers dug into

my ass cheek and pulled the plump flesh apart. A throaty growl rolled off his tongue, as the tip of his cock pressed my entrance.

My body was on fire, begging for him to take me. I needed his cock, I needed to feel him deep inside me. There was nothing I could do once I hit that level of greed. I had to have him, right there, right then.

If he even tried to stop and walk away, I would have jumped him like a starving cougar, and devoured him whole.

In one quick thrust, Birch's length was buried inside my pussy, pulsing and throbbing as he stilled. He didn't move, allowing my walls to stretch around the muscle and lubricate his cock.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

The coarse hair at the base of his dick tickled my ass, my pussy clenched around him tight and firm, waiting anxiously for him to move.

Shifting his hips, he pulled back slowly, only to drive in deeper. His crown hit my lower belly, forcing a rush of air to skip out of my lungs. Thrust after thrust, he fucked me. Raw and needy, the love of my life turned from man into beast.

And I begged for every second of it.

“Harder, fuck me harder.” Gnawing on the inside of my cheek, I did my best not to scream. The last thing I wanted was to be interrupted by a curious old man, searching for the sound. That would be a recipe for disaster, killing any and all arousal that had claimed us.

Each piston of his hips was followed by a deep grunt. With clenched teeth, grinding into each other, he slammed in and out hard and fast.

My brain went fuzzy and numb, forgetting where we were. When I was with Birch, it always felt like there was no one else in the world. He was all-consuming, engulfing every inch of my body and mind.

The orgasm bubbled, tingling in my stomach and spreading down my legs. My tits scraped the bar top, making my nipples tender and firm beneath the fabric of my shirt.

“Mm, Birch, fuck, I'm so close.” Biting my lower lip, I looked back at him over my shoulder. “Don't stop, harder, harder. Fuck me, fuck me harder.”

His hips drove in with malice, threatening to force me to my knees. Pressing the tips of my toes into the floor, I found my balance and readied my body for pure ecstasy. I was right there, teetering on the edge of sexual insanity, ready to jump.

With white knuckles I held on tight, as fireworks shot through my muscles turning them weak. The orgasm hit hard, making my thighs quiver and my lungs struggle for air.

I couldn't breathe, but I didn't need to. He fed me everything my body needed to survive. He was my food, my water, my oxygen. I could give up everything, and as long I still had my man, I would be happy.

Birch picked up his pace, gripping my hips in both hands and pulling me back to meet his rhythm. With one final thrust, he groaned, stilling above me and clinging to my waist with the tips of his fingers.

Dropping his chest onto my back, we laid there like that for a few seconds. Our chests rose and fell together, our breathing loud and ragged as we both slowly came down from the high coursing through our veins.

“Okay,” he finally said, pulling his cock free and grabbing a few cocktail napkins from the holder to clean off. “Back to work.” Slapping my ass, the sound rang out, echoing in the empty bar.

Giggling, I grabbed a few napkins for myself, and turned to look at him. “You're lucky I love you.”

Smiling, he clasped my jaw with his thumb and finger. “I know I am.” Giving me a kiss, he snapped his back straight. “I've always known how lucky I was to have you.”

My heart pitter pattered, watching his eyes glisten with that same look he has given

me since we were kids and confessed our love to each other.

Tucking his cock back into his pants, he buttoned them up and glanced at the clock. “And we still have twenty minutes to spare. Want to go again?”

“You're a fucking animal.” Shaking my head, I threw the napkins into the garbage. “And no, we'll have to go for round two later.” Wriggling my hips, I shimmed my jeans back into place.

“You're no fun.” Pouting his lips, he batted his eyes like a sad puppy dog. “Come on, I can be quick.”

Smirking, I nodded in agreement. “I know.”

“Hey,” he barked, doing his best not to laugh. “That was one time.”

“That's all it takes for me to know it can happen.” Grabbing the stack of papers from under the register, I rested them in my arm, and started for the office downstairs.

“I love you!” he yelled as my foot hit the top step.

“I know you do.” Smiling to myself, I pressed the papers to my chest and walked into the dimly lit basement.

For years I often wondered what my life would have been like if this tragedy hadn't happened. I wondered who I would be and what I would be doing if I hadn't ended up in those woods.

Would I be in college, working towards a degree in accounting?

Would I be slaving day after day as a waitress in a shitty restaurant, barely getting

by?

And then one day those thoughts just stopped.

Because there was no place I could picture that would make me as happy as I was with Birch.

There was a silver lining to my story; finding the love of my life in the middle of a nightmare.

Chapter Two

Cyprus

“This isn't what we agreed, Nicholi.” Antoine tapped his thumb against his jaw and stared down the rectangle shaped table. “We agreed to fifty thousand for the run. That was what you said, that was the number you told me.” Holding out his finger, he glared through one eye at his target sitting beside me.

Nicholi sat deadpan, not willing to play Antoine's games. Glancing at me, he flicked his eyes to the pile of papers on the table. I knew what he was getting at without him having to ask.

Flipping through the contract I had drawn up a few weeks prior, the same one Antoine had signed, I slid it in his direction. “That's your signature—right?”

Scoffing, Antoine rolled his eyes and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket. “Am I doing business with you, Nicholi? Or your little pet?”

Nick didn't give him the pleasure of a reaction. But I knew it bothered him when someone would toss out shitty words about any of his children. And even though I wasn't his by blood, he still considered me his daughter.

I saw his finger twitch, it was subtle, but it was there. I was fairly certain that if the deal was done and the money was in our hands, Antoine would have had a bullet in his brain right then for what he said.

“She asked you a question.” His face was cold, no emotion or concern about the tension that was starting to build between them.

I always found Nicholi's level of cool one to be desired. He could stay still as water on a cold winter day, no expression, no arched brow or curled lip. It didn't matter how much someone pressed him, he was a statue.

But that was also his secret weapon. He gave you nothing to go on, nothing to show you that he was getting pissed and angry. He would make you think that all was fine, that whatever shit you had pulled didn't bother him as much as a pimple on his ass. And then he would strike, one click and you'd be laying in a pool of blood.

It was a masked brutality, a game he took pride in. And one I had been lucky to avoid. I wasn't sure I could handle that side of this shit. And so far, I've only heard stories, I haven't had to see it first hand.

I wasn't stupid, I knew what Nick and Birch were capable of. I also knew that death came with the job. It didn't change how I looked at them, not once had I ever questioned their loyalty to me. I didn't have to fear these men, but others weren't so lucky.

Glancing down at the paper, he nodded. “It is, but you must have doctored it. Seventy grand is not what we agreed on.” Lighting the end of his cigarette, he took in a long, slow pull. Wispy tendrils snaked out over his lips, filling the air with a sweet scent.

Clove cigarettes. . . Huh, I wouldn't have expected that.

Most of these jerks smoke cigars.

Crossing my leg, I cleared my throat. “I didn't mess with the deal, that's what you signed, that sheet right there.” Leaning back in my chair, I clasped my hands on the

table, speaking clear and firm. "I'm only going to warn you once, don't accuse me of fucking with this shit."

I took my job seriously, there was no way in hell I would fuck with something so sensitive. Numbers were mine and mine alone. I created the contracts, I sat with Nick and discussed reasonable prices for their services. And I would never ever go back and change them once hands had shaken on it and pen hit paper.

Chuckling, Antoine looked over at his brother Collin, his lips curling high with amusement. "Your little pet there is feisty," he said, ticking his head back in our direction. "Maybe we can adjust our deal a bit, make it more worth my while."

"The deal is set," Nick snapped, jerking his body straight. "I agreed to give you two boats and help you get your merchandise into the country. Seventy grand, that's what I said, that's what you got. There's no room for negotiation now."

Holding out his hands, Antoine's mouth turned razor thin. "I think there's always room for tweaking shit, we can add in a little disclosure that would make this deal much sweeter."

Nick veered his stare, his voice harsh and fierce. "I filled my end of this, you have a debt to pay. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

The two men glared at each other, each one trying to assert their own level of power. The first time I had sat in on one of his meetings, I was fucking nervous as hell.

But not now, not anymore.

Time had thickened my skin. I wasn't intimidated by these assholes and their comments or threats. My confidence had grown, my comfort with what I was capable of when it came to protecting myself, Nicholi, or any one else I loved was strong.

Standing up from the chair, I walked closer to Antoine, pressing the tips of my fingers into the table. “We're done here, you have until tomorrow to pay us what you owe. Understand?”

Antoine's eyes slowly clicked my way, the air tearing like a thick sheet of cardboard as he broke the staring match with Nick. Licking his lips, he smiled up at me, letting out a devious laugh. “We can take this firecracker off your hands for a bit, Nicholi, show her a real good time.”

My skin turned hot, blood percolating under the skin like coffee as he grinned at me. Holding my breath, I flared my nostrils, doing my best not to smack him across the face. My knuckles turned ghost white as I balled them tight and dropped my face to his. “Tomorrow, or I'll make you regret ever stepping foot in here.”

“Sweetheart, why don't you sit back down and let the big boys talk.” Flipping his fingers, he waved me back towards my seat. “You look much prettier when your mouth isn't moving.” His eyes turned to pinpricks as his teeth blared white behind parted lips. “I think you need a muzzle for your pet, Nick, she doesn't know her place.”

Wrong answer asshole.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

In one quick swoop, I kicked him in the chest, forcing his chair to drop backwards and land him on his back. Collin jumped from his seat, but he wasn't quick enough. My gun was out, level with his head.

Jerking his arms out to the side, Collin stepped backwards, palms facing me like a big white flag. Keeping him in my peripheral vision, I pressed my heel into Antoine's throat, cutting off his air supply.

“How do I look now?” Cocking my head, I applied more pressure, watching his eyes pop from the sockets as he choked for air. “Tomorrow we expect payment. And if you don't make good on it, it won't be my pretty little face you'll be seeing.”

Nick started to laugh, raising up from his seat. “I don't think your idea of a muzzle went over too well.” Rounding the table, he nodded at me to relax. Removing my foot, I allowed Antoine to breathe again. “I think we're clear, right?”

Antoine held his neck and shook his head.

“Good, now get the fuck out.”

Scrambling back on his hands, his brother grabbed him from under his arms and lifted him to his feet. The two men were gone before I even had time to blink.

Patting my shoulder, Nick leaned in and kissed my forehead. “See, and you didn't want to take the gun. I told you it's better to be prepared and not have to use it, than need it and not have it.”

My body started to shake as the adrenaline wore off and what I had done sunk into my head. I hadn't thought about it, I reacted. It was like instinct, a natural reaction that happened before I had time to really decipher my movements.

What did I just do?

That could have ended really badly! I could have just put us in danger even more!

“I . . I'm sorry, he just—”

“No, no, don't apologize. I liked seeing that, maybe a little too much.” Nick patted my shoulder and brushed my hair like he used to when I was younger. “It makes me happy to know you can handle yourself. You did great, Cyprus.”

“But what if he—”

“He won't.” Nick's words were short and direct. “People fear us, we don't fear them. That's how this works. You did exactly what you should have.”

I can't believe I just did that.

Smiling, I swallowed hard, forcing my racing heart back into my chest. I felt weird, like in that moment I hadn't been myself. I had lost control, I had allowed his stupid fucking comment to drive me into a blind rage.

That jerk needed to be put in his place.

He had insulted me, he had tried to make it seem like my only place there was being eye candy. I didn't like it. He needed to learn respect for women. . .for me.

I'm a Rottera. This is what we do.

Birch jogged down the stairs with a curious look on his face. “What the hell just happened? I don't think I've ever seen those two move that fast in my life.”

Squeezing my shoulder, Nick smiled. “Your girl here just put them in their place. You would have been proud.”

“Wait, what?” Shifting his eyes between us, he looked dumbfounded. “Why didn't you ring me? You were supposed to ring me if there was a problem.”

“Cyprus handled it just fine.” Lowering his head, Nick walked past his son and up the stairs. “I'll see you two at home. Great job, Cyprus. I think tomorrow will go nice and smooth.”

I watched him disappear into the bar above us, and heard him move through the room. The door jingled, signaling Nick was gone. And I couldn't help but feel slightly torn between the good and bad world I was living in.

Protection was Birch's job, not mine. I was the numbers, I was the tax-altering paper criminal. Not an assassin. Nick might have complimented my reaction, but I felt horrible for being a loose canon.

I really am one of them. . .

Walking to my side, Birch ran his hand through his hair. “I'm confused, what the hell just happened?”

Folding my arms, I plucked at my lips and shrugged. Was I supposed to tell him the truth? That I had drawn my gun on the men and almost crushed Antoine's larynx to prove a point?

I'm not a frail princess. I'm a warrior, I'm a bold woman who isn't afraid to stand up

for herself.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

Why should I be ashamed of that? Why should I feel bad for letting that dick know I wouldn't sit back and take his shit?

Maybe Nick was right. I was a part of this business, and sometimes that meant getting dirty. I wasn't afraid to get a little dirty.

“I made sure they knew we were serious.”

“And?”

“And now he knows that he needs to watch what he says to people he doesn't know.”

“What did he say to you? Did he try to do something to you?” Birch's muscles puffed up as he started to breathe heavily. “I'll kill that motherfucker if—”

Placing my hand on his cheek, I rubbed my thumb up and down. “I'm fine, Babe, he didn't try to hurt me.”

Hurt, that was a word I knew all too well.

But I hadn't felt it in a really long time.

Little did I know, my future was about to be filled with a lot more hurt than I could handle.

Chapter Three

Cyprus

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, looking at Birch through the mirror. Pulling my hair back, I tied it in a ponytail and adjusted my shirt. “I don't usually do this type of thing. This is all you and your dad.”

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he kissed my neck and stared at my reflection. “You're a part of this too, you should be there.”

Pursing my lips, I thought about what he was asking of me. Nick and Birch wanted me there for the exchange. That wasn't how things typically went. In the past, I always stayed back, keeping watch over the bar or the house.

I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

“I don't know.” Dropping my arms to my sides, I asked, “What about Frankie or Vincent? Why don't you have them go along?”

Scrunching his face, he shook his head. “Not today, we don't want them, we want you.”

Turning, I leaned back against the sink and gripped the granite. “What if I screw it up somehow?”

“From what Dad told me about what you did yesterday, I'm pretty sure you can

handle yourself.” Smirking, his thumb traced my throat, eyes glistening in the bright lights set above our heads.

“He told you everything?”

Nodding, Birch kissed my forehead. “I think you're ready for this. I wasn't sure before, but after that, I'm not worried anymore. You're strong, Cyprus, you're one of us. There's no doubt in my mind about that. You were made for this life, it's like it's built into your DNA.”

It did come a little too easily. I can't argue with him on that.

But does that mean I'm really ready? Do I want to see how dark this world can be?

I had been able to evade the black hate that coated this world like a satin sheath. Burying my head in the sand, I was able to ignore all the blood that spilled because of what we did.

I knew it existed, I knew that it was a means to an end for those that went against Nick and the family, but I never really allowed those thoughts to take shape until now.

It was one thing to be aware of it all, to hear stories and know what someone was capable of; but to witness it, that was a totally different thing.

You either did what you said you would, or that was it, you didn't get to see tomorrow. It was black and white, there was no middle ground.

But the middle ground was where I sat. Blindly I fixed documents and altered numbers, adjusting everything so Nick came out the other end clean. And on either side of where I stood was a violent presence just waiting for me to join in.

For years I thought I wanted to be one of them, I wanted to be who they were because they had done so much for me. I wanted to make Nick proud, show him that he had done a great job of creating the person I was.

But I had never seen them kill anyone. I heard about it several times, the details painted by Birch so vividly that I never felt the need to see it. I chose to not let the gravity of what he was saying scare me away.

Now, I wasn't so sure that this was what I wanted with my life at all. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't see the innocent girl I once had. All I could see was the cold shadows working their way down my shoulders, pulling me under.

I'm here, I'm one of them.

Not seeing doesn't change my position in this. If we got arrested tomorrow, I'd be just as guilty as if I had pulled the trigger myself.

Doubting myself was the worst thing I could do. This family needed me as much as I needed them.

“Alright, I'll go.” Birch attempted to kiss my lips, but I held up my hand to block him. “But if I don't like how it's going, I'm out.”

“Of course, Babe, I won't make you do something you don't want to.” Running his fingers through my ponytail, he let the strands slip freely over his skin. “But I think it's good for you to see it. One day it's going to be us running this shit, and it's hard to trust other people. I trust you, I trust you with everything I have.”

Smiling, my cheeks blushed. “You really are good at sweet talking me, you know that?” Hugging his ribs, I rested my head on his firm chest. “When do we leave?”

I could hear his heart beating, and that sound, it did things to me. Birch had always told me that his heart beat for me, that I was the blood flowing through his veins and the air filling his lungs.

Listening to him live, hearing that life as it played music against his ribs, it made everything else vanish. My muscles relaxed, the tension a faded cramp that would soon be gone.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:37 pm

“The drop is suppose to be at four, so about twenty minutes.” Placing his chin on the top of my head, Birch held me tight. “I don't want you to worry, I'll make sure nothing happens to you. I would never let you get hurt, Cyprus, not ever.”

That's not what I'm concerned about.

I'm not worried about physical pain.

Tilting my head, I forced our eyes to connect. “I know, I'm not worried about getting hurt, Birch. I'm more worried about how I'll come out after.” Swirling a single finger around his chest, I furrowed my brows. “I don't know if I can handle seeing this side of it. If things go bad, and I see someone die, if I see you die—”

“Cyprus,” he said, his voice low and thick. “Everyday I play Russian roulette, you can't control that—not with what we do. Nothing that happens would be your fault. You're stronger than you give yourself credit for. Trust me, you'll be fine. This is how shit goes, this is just how it is.”

Is it? Is this all there is for us?

“Does it have to be this way? Wouldn't it be nice to not have to worry every time you step foot out that door?”

“What are you talking about?”

Teasing a crinkle in his shirt, I pressed it flat, running my fingertips over his stomach. “What if we did something else? We could do that, couldn't we? Start over, start

fresh, none of this weighing us down. . .” Pausing, I searched his face for understanding.

Just hear me, just listen to me.

I wanted him to understand why I felt this way. The thought of losing him, of losing another family to something we could control, I wasn't sure that was what I wanted. It was a thought that had popped into my head after what happened with Antoine, and I couldn't stop thinking about it.

When Valentina passed, we all knew it was coming. There was months between her finding out about the cancer that was eating her soul and her actual death. It wasn't an easy thing, and I'm not trying to make it sound like it was.

But there was a difference. There was a mental preparation for the end that was coming. Any death of a loved one was a horrible thing to go through, but a sudden death, one that came in a blink of an eye, without warning. . . There was something different about it.

I had already lost one family in a flash, I couldn't bear the thought of losing another.

Giving me a confused look, his brows scrunched into the bridge of his nose. “Why would we want to do that?”

Shrugging my shoulder, I kept my eyes on his chest. “What if we have kids one day? Is this the life you want them to have?”

Taking in a deep breath, Birch pinched my chin and lifted my eyes to his. “This is what I know, Cyprus, this is all I know. And I'm damn good at it—” Holding my face, his gaze stayed firmly planted on mine. “You're damn good at it. Leaving isn't an option, running away is out of the question.” Drawing his lips paper thin, his lids

lowered. "Do you realize what you're asking me?"

Yes. . . No. . . I don't know.

I was afraid of what I was becoming. I thought and felt nothing when I had my gun on Collin and was strangling Antoine. It scared me. I wasn't sure this was who I was supposed to be.

Did I want to be a crazed maniac, trigger happy and heartless?

Did I want the Grim Reaper to be following everyone I loved, waiting for the gavel to drop?

Death was literally waiting for you on the other side of that door in this world. I was still young, and one day I wanted to have a family of my own. Was this the life I wanted to give them? Would it be fair for them to not know if their parents would come home alive or dead?

That entire incident had gotten me thinking about the loss I dealt with everyday, and how much it hurt to not have my real family.

Yes, I had Birch and the family his father had allowed me to be a part of, and I was grateful for that. But it wasn't the same, even though I wanted it to be.

Was I a born killer? Was it really that easy for me to just take someone out because they said something I didn't like? Is that the example I wanted to set for my future children?

They've been there for me. Despite this life, we are a family.

So what makes this life any worse than the rest?

Nothing.

I had to stop living with all this hurt. I had to stop dwelling on what wasn't there and accept what was. This was my family, that was all that mattered. Family didn't have to be blood tied, it came from love and nurturing. It was built off endless trust and knowing who had your back when you were down.

That's what I had here.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“No, no, I don't want to leave. I just. . .” Forcing a smile, I traced his ribs. “It's just that yesterday got me thinking. It was so easy to do what I did, and I guess it scared me.”

Cupping my face, Birched smiled. “Babe, there is nothing wrong with having a conscience. I hate some of the shit I've done, but it doesn't change who I am. I'm a Rottera, I'll always be a Rottera, and that will follow me for life.” His thumbs strummed my jawline, tender and caring. “But it doesn't make us bad people. We do things because we're pushed to, because we have to, not simply because we want to. And we don't kill innocent people just for fun, you know that.”

Nodding, I let my face snuggle into his hands. “You're right, you're absolutely right.”

Holding my cheeks, he kissed me. “You ready? It's time to go.”

“Yeah, let's do this.” Grabbing my gun off the sink, I tucked it into the back of my jeans. “Better safe than sorry,” I said, as the cold steel burned my skin like hot coals.

I was torn inside. I wanted to think that what I did had a purpose. And if someone got hurt or killed because they forced our hand, then that wasn't on me.

That didn't make me evil and stone cold. Right?

Or was I just fooling myself? Was I living in some altered perception of what good really was?

People were killed by the Rottera hands, families lost loved ones because of bad deals

and poor decisions.

Some people say that the root of all evil is money. . . But is it really?

Or is it the people holding out their hands, waiting for the basket to deliver that gold?
Who decided what made evil and what defined it?

My heart wanted to be pure, but my soul was tainted. I was in too deep to get out now. This was what I wanted, I wanted to be a part of this family and their life.

I held my hands out and took from their basket.

Why stop to ponder it now?

Chapter Four

Cyprus

Rubbing my palms up and down my thighs, I sat in the car as Nick and Birch stood outside. Taking in deep breaths, I felt the hard metal of the gun against the small of my back, and I was tempted to stuff it under the seat just so it wasn't there to taunt me.

What am I doing here?

Why did I agree to this?

My nostrils flared open wide as hot oxygen seeped into my nose. I could feel it as it trickled down the back of my throat like molasses and filled my lungs. I didn't want to be a part of this at all.

I said I'd do this. I can't turn my back on them.

Where would I be if they had done that to me?

Birch tapped my window and I flicked my head to look at him. Waving his hand, he nodded his head for me to come out. My hands felt like dead weight as I gripped the handle and popped the door open.

My nerves were on high alert, tempered by just my stubbornness to stay calm. This wasn't me, no matter how much I tried to convince myself that I was one of them;

deep down, I knew I wasn't.

I was forcing something that wasn't there. On the outside I was a Rottera, but on the inside I was still that lost little girl, struggling to find her place in the world.

That place found you, you have to accept it.

“Let's do this.” Holding out his hand to me, I rested my fingers against his and let him help out. “You're worrying, stop worrying. Everything is going to go fine.” Kissing the back of my palm, he tangled our fingers together and squeezed. “Nothing is going to happen.”

Fuck, he can read me like a damn book.

Thinning my lips, I smiled and shook my head. “Yeah, I know, I'm trying.”

Nick was standing at the back of the car, his gaze set out on the ocean. “You know the last time I watched the sunset was with your mother right after we found out she was sick.” His voice was soft and pained, full of all the loss still crippling him inside. “I haven't wanted to watch it since.”

Birch and I didn't respond, we walked up beside him and stared at the crashing waves and the giant orange globe in the sky. Nick's mouth was taut, his eyes glossed over as he battled with a memory I knew he would rather forget.

“It's not as pretty anymore,” he said, folding his hands in front of his waist. Taking in a heavy breath, Nick sighed. “Well, you two ready? Let's go get what's ours.”

He didn't look at either of us, he just started walking. His steps were strong, legs moving swiftly, determined to take him away from the sunset he despised.

Trailing a little behind him, I watched the sun as it set beneath the ocean, casting red and yellow shadows across the water. It was sad that something so beautiful could cause someone else so much pain.

A simple sunset was a reminder of death to him, it brought out feelings and emotions he couldn't bear to have, memories that I knew he wished weren't there.

To have to suffer that day after day, to know that with every sunset came loss, that broke my heart for him. In a way I was lucky that I didn't remember my family. I couldn't imagine having those images burned into my brain and having to relive them over and over again.

“Antoine should be here in a few minutes, I want you two set up over there,” Nick said, pointing to a small sand dune covered in tall grass. “Birch, you know the drill. Stay alert, have your gun out, and be ready for anything.”

Birch nodded and listened, waiting for him to run through each and every step. I tried to listen, but my head wasn't in it. I kept thinking of Valentina and wondering if she truly agreed with the life Nick had given them.

She never spoke ill of what her husband did, she never disapproved of her son's role and the dangers he might face. It was as if she put all her trust in her husband without a second thought.

I wished I could do the same, that I could stand there beside Birch and trust that everything would be fine.

“Cyprus?” Nick's voice cut through my thoughts, drawing me back to the present.

“Hm?” I asked, realizing that I hadn't heard a word he had said.

“Your gun, did you bring your gun?”

“Yeah, I brought it.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Good, take it out, and pay attention. If your head isn't on tight, shit can go wrong.” Stopping, Nick fixed his suit and adjusted his tie. “When Antoine gets here, don't say shit to him. I'll do all the talking, I don't want either of you chirping in like fucking canaries in the background. Understood?”

Agreeing, Birch and I walked only a few yards and took our position on the dune. Leaning over, Birch whispered in my ear. “He's a little more tense than usual today. I don't know if that's because of Antoine or mom. I hate not knowing, I never know what to say.”

Stroking his arm, I kept scanning around us. “I'm sure it's because of your mom. You saw how he looked at the sun right? He fucking hates it.”

“Stay focused.” Nick snapped his head in our direction, glaring at us like we were kids again. “Don't make me ask you a third time, there's no room for error here. Antoine isn't someone I trust, he's a sneaky little fucker. And sneaky little fuckers are as trustworthy as a starving fucking rat.”

“If you don't trust him, why did you agree to do business with him?” Birch kicked the sand, watching the parking lot, and the road in the distance.

Tossing Birch a crooked eye, his father snarled. “Why the fuck do you think? It all comes down to money, it always does. Money is the only thing that matters, even if it can make a man go mad.”

His eyes glistened with black stars, as his lips shifted into a hard frown. There was something about the way he said it that made my heart pause for a brief second. He

was looking at Birch, but it felt like he was talking to me.

I couldn't explain why, I couldn't rationalize the fear that struck a nerve and made my knees tremble as I stood sinking into cold sand. All I could do was feel it as it crept up my calves and coiled around my gut like barbed wire.

Crushed shells crackled in the distance, and the sound of an engine bled into the ocean breeze, perking my ears. Reaching behind my back, I pulled my gun out and held it at my side. It was strange, I should have felt safe with my gun, but I didn't.

Having it felt like the threat was more real, like the chance I might have to use it was heightened by a thousand. Nicholi had started demanding that I carry it. It seemed to go from a form of protection to a constant piece of flare I was expected to wear.

Most of the time I would just throw it in my purse and pretend it wasn't there. I didn't like having the heavy steel with me every second of every day. I got it, I completely understood the reason for needing it. But that didn't mean I agreed with it.

When I took it out yesterday it was on impulse, a knee-jerk reaction that I didn't have time to think about. I wanted to embrace that, to see myself as a fearless woman, a warrior to the trade and soldier to the game.

It didn't matter how much I tried to convince myself, I would never be the soldier Nick expected me to be.

Who the fuck am I? Why is this so hard? Why does it feel so wrong?

Holding it today was eerily un-welcomed. This was happening, and there was nowhere for me to go. All my time in the office, during formal agreements and conditions, was a mere crack on the surface. Today I was standing in the belly of the beast, its heart pounding in my ears, feeding the anxiety running through my body.

Maybe I hadn't taken all of this as seriously as I should have.

Maybe my denial of the danger left me weak. . .

Knowing and seeing were two different things completely. Stories explained the truth I was living in, but being a part of the movie wasn't going down as easily.

Swallowing hard, I glanced at Birch with a nervous frown. His skin was illuminated under orange rays, bronzing his skin like a Greek god. His eyes twinkled under the fading sunlight, and for a split second, I forgot about what we were there to do.

He had done it again, pulling me into his presence and making the rest of the world drift away. The beach had gone silent, the danger no longer crashing on the rocks and making my insides shake. I was grounded, standing firmly on my own two feet.

Our eyes connected and he reached for my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. With a single nod, he placed his attention back on the men that were making their way to the meeting spot.

Voices echoed across the beach, filling the starchy air and prickling my skin. Squinting my eyes, I could see three figures bobbling and moving through the sand.

“Nicholi, my friend, long time no see.” An older man walked up, holding out his arms. “How the years have built a wall between us. How are you?”

The man was much older than Nick, possibly his mid sixties. His head was bald on top, with a think layer of gray hair wrapping the bottom of his skull. Small beady eyes matched Antoine's, and his large, bulbous nose was a replica of Collin's, who was standing on his right.

Is that their father? It has to be.

“Georgio, good to see.” The two men shook hands, both of them wearing fake smiles. “I didn't expect to have you joining us today. Antoine didn't mention this when we spoke.”

“Yes, well, I wasn't going to come, but my son made it sound worth my while.”

“Did he?” Nick asked, tilting his head and looking past Georgio to Antoine. “And how is that exactly? Because our deal is still the same, nothing has changed.”

Stroking his jaw, Georgio kept his eyes firmly on Nicholi. “Are you sure about that?” Glancing over his shoulder, he looked at Birch and myself with a sick smile. “Because I heard things very differently.”

Curling his arms behind his back, Nick teetered on his heels. “So he told you how disrespectful he was during our meeting? How he antagonized my daughter,” he said, giving me a quick look and pointing at me. “And how she had to knock him down off his high horse?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

The man ticked his head back and forth against his shoulders, crinkling his eyes with disbelief. “You could be right, and you could be wrong. There's two sides to every story, and they never match up. But the one thing we both know. . .” Taking in a slow breath, Georgio's mouth curved into a condescending grin. “You don't have a daughter.”

“We're not here to discuss my family, Georgio.”

I could hear Nick's teeth as they ground down with each word. He wasn't as calm as he normally was. I wasn't sure if Georgio and his sons could pick up on his subtle cues, but to me, he was practically screaming in the man's face.

“Originally no, that's not what this meeting was for. But it is now.” His smirk spread high up on his face, eyes shining under a shadow of death. “I thought we could toss some numbers around, see if we could come to an agreement. I know how much you love numbers, Nick, and I'm willing to spend.”

What the fuck is this guy doing?

Is he trying to buy me?

Sucking in a huge gulp of air, my lips parted, ready to scream at the guy to go fuck himself. But Birch grabbed my wrist and stopped me, shaking his head no.

Staring into his eyes, I pleaded with him to stop this whole thing, to make that man eat his own tongue and get me the hell out of there.

Softening his gaze, he spoke to me with just his eyes. He was telling me to relax, that his father would never sell me to some sick fuck. He didn't want me to worry, and no one was going to touch me.

I could see what he was thinking, I could feel what he was saying in his touch and the look on the face. I wasn't going anywhere.

Swallowing hard, I jerked my head back to the men, pure hate filling my muscles and turning them into trembling sinew ready to strike. My finger fluttered over the trigger, eager and willing to put a bullet in all of their heads if anyone even tried to come and take me away.

“Georgio, our deal is done. If your son wants a piece of ass to have his way with, he can't buy it here. She's not for sale, I don't sell family. And even if I did, I wouldn't sell her to the likes of you.”

Antoine jumped up to his father's side, his fists balled by his hips. “I want her! I deserve to have her for what she did to me! How dare you—”

Slicing a hand through the air, Nick stepped up, chest to chest with Antoine. “How dare I?” Baring his teeth, his words came out sharp. “You come into my home and insult us the way you did and she shrinks your dick for being an asshole, so you think you can buy her from me?”

“That's not what happened! You screwed with me, you teased me with that bitch and I want what I deserve for it.”

“Georgio, you better get control of him or he won't be standing on two legs.”

Placing a hand over Antoine's chest, Georgio guided him back. “I was under a different impression, Nicholi, of what happened.” Veering his stare at his son, he

snarled. "He painted a very different picture. I was under the assumption she had a number, obviously you need more convincing." Stuffing his hand into his pocket, Georgio pulled out a thick white envelope and held it out. "Your money is here, and I've included an extra forty grand for her."

Snatching the money, Nick opened the envelope and began to thumb through the bills. My heart began to sink as I watched him. It looked like he was actually debating if that was enough to buy me.

"What?! No! Fuck you! I'm not going anywhere with you!" Taking a step forward, Nick held up his hand and shot me a look.

Stopping, my jaw hung open, unable to comprehend what the hell was happening. Is he selling me? Is he really fucking do this?

"So you mean to tell me that the only reason you're here is to buy my daughter? That's what you came for?"

Georgio smiled, nodding in agreement. "I came because my son said you had something that we could use. And I think he's right, she'd look gorgeous with the others."

Flashing confused eyes at Birch, I could see his lip twitch and the muscles in his arms tense up. He was staring straight ahead, not even registering the panic on my face.

"What don't you understand when I say I don't sell family?" Nick angled his head, a curious expression sitting on his face.

"She's not family, Nicholi, she never was. We both know things would be easier for you if someone took her off your hands. You won't miss her, we'd get so much more from having her than you ever will." Drawing a wrinkled thumb over his bottom lip,

Georgio looked up at Nick with devious eyes. “Let me put it to you this way; we do this here and now, or maybe you'll be getting a call tomorrow from someone I think you'd rather not have sniffing around your shit.”

What the hell does that mean? Who the fuck is this guy?

Sucking in a hard breath, Nick exhaled as he tisked the man. “You should have answered differently, this was a mistake, Georgio. And Mistakes need to be fixed.”

A small smile teased my lips as I watched Nick deny the men their play toy. I had questioned who this family was and what kind of people they were. I had doubts about my place here and if I could truly be one of them.

But in that moment I knew. . . This was where I belonged.

I was as much a part of them as they were a part of me.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Turning to look at Birch, I heard a loud pop. Covering my ears, I ducked my head and threw myself into the sand. I didn't have to see it to know what it was. Someone had just fired a shot.

With my face in the sand, a second shot rang out, echoing across the water and forcing a herd of seagulls to lurch into the air, cawing and scrambling away.

Peeking out over the crook of my arm, Birch was standing beside Nick with Antoine on his knees in the cold wet sand. The tide had started to come in, splashing over Antoine's thighs as he glared up at the sky.

His face was empty, cold and emotionless. He wasn't crying, he wasn't begging or pleading for his life. Two sets of feet laid on either side of him, their heels sinking into the dirt.

Lifting his gun, Birch placed the barrel against Antoine's forehead, directly in the center. “You never did know when to stop your dick from talking.” Clicking the hammer back, he cocked his head into his shoulder as the corner of his lip twitched. “Fuck, who am I kidding. You've never been anything but a dick. You wanted to buy my girl. . . you're father had the balls to threaten my family—that was a line no one should have crossed.”

I heard the gun go off, and it all seemed to happen in slow motion. Blood exploded out the back of Antoine's head, painting the beach in red. His eyes stayed open, glossing over as he swayed for the longest second of my life. Toppling back, his body folded unnaturally, arms tucked under his waist, feet bent and twisted in the ground.

I was in shock. Unable to look away and unable to close my eyes, I laid there and watched Nick and Birch as they rolled the men into the water and let the waves steal them away.

A high pitched ringing cut through my skull so I cupped my palms over my ears, trying to make it stop. My heart was racing inside my chest, unsure if what I had just seen was real.

“Cyprus, are you okay?” Birch jogged through the sand, crouching down and petting the top of my head. “It's alright, Love, he won't be able to threaten you again.”

“You killed him—” Blinking wildly, I clutched my hair with my hands and rolled onto my back. “You didn't have to kill him.”

“Yes we did.”

“No!” yelling, I threw my hands into the ground and pushed myself up. “You didn't have to kill all of them! They hadn't actually done anything!”

“Yes, Cyprus, he would have. It wouldn't have stopped here. They not only threatened you, but they threatened our very existence. We can't have that, we won't tolerate that shit.”

“They're people, Birch! You can't just go killing people because they make a threat!” Yanking my gun out of my waist, I dropped it to the ground. “I don't want this, I don't ever want this again.” Taking a long step back, I held my hands up.

Birch lunged forward, trapping me in his arms and forcing me against his chest. “Cyprus, those men traffic women. They take women and they sell them, they would have done that to you. They would have come back for you, we had to stop them.”

“What?” arching my neck, my brows tangled in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He's right, Sweetheart. They weren't going to give up just like that, he would have tried to get you another way. I've known that family for a long time, and usually I just turn my head to what they do. But Georgio fucked up this time. He did the one thing he shouldn't have, he fucked with my family.”

Shaking my head, I broke free from Birch's arms. “You don't know that.”

Nick stood at my side and slid his hand down over my head, smoothing my hair against my back. “Honey, this wasn't unjustified. You mean the world to me, you mean the world to my son. I won't risk an asshole like that laying in wait to take you away.”

My eyes zeroed in on the stained beach, watching the waves clean away what was left of Antoine and his family. “You're sure of that? You really think they would have done that?”

“Cyprus, have I ever lied to you before? Have I ever given you reason to think I was some cold-hearted killer?” Nodding no, Nick smiled in that same comforting way he had done years ago when he found me. “That's because I'm not. I do what's necessary, and those men should have died a long long time ago. They got a free pass, until they threatened you. I don't have tolerance for that shit.”

Pinching my elbow, Birch drew my attention back on him. “He's telling you the truth, those men were awful. The world's a better place without them anyway. We probably just saved hundreds of lives by erasing them.”

Holding out his arm, he motioned for me to come closer. Birch wrapped his big strong arms around my ribs, pressing firm hands into the center of my back. “I love you, and I'm here to protect you. You're all I care about. I'll do anything to keep you

safe.” Kissing the top of my head, he laid his cheek against my gritty hair. “I’d die if something ever happened to you.”

A deep seeded need to be loved and accepted, cared for and protected, made being in his arms a comfort. I loved and trusted Birch. I loved and trusted Nick like a father.

These men had been my saviors, and they had always stood by their word.

I had to believe that they were right. I had to give in to the horror and see it as a gift.

They had saved me again, they had solidified my existence on this earth for a second time.

How could I question that?

How could I doubt the nature of their intentions?

I knew these men and what they stood for. . .

At least I thought I did.

Chapter Five

Cyprus

“Cyprus, wake up.” Birchshook my shoulder, forcing me to roll onto my back.
“Come on, Babe, it's time to get up.”

“What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty,” he said, smiling down on me, his big blue eyes glittering with excitement.

“It's so early, Birch, why in the love of God are you waking me up? What are you up to?” Pushing up on my elbows, I rubbed my eyes, clearing them of the sleepy haze.
“There better be a damn good reason you're waking me up before noon.”

I had trouble getting to sleep over the past few weeks. Every time I closed my eyes I kept seeing Antoine's face. It plagued me like a horror movie, making me toss and turn until my body finally gave up.

The way he looked, the calmness in his eyes and smoothness of his lips as he kept a smile on his face right up to the end, it was unsettling. I wanted that image to make it better, I felt like his acceptance should set me at ease because even he knew he deserved what was coming.

But I still had nightmares about it. I saw the pop of the gun over and over in my head. What scared me the most was I wasn't afraid, I didn't feel horrified and nervous

around Birch or his father. I felt numb about the devastation they had caused, but fearful of myself.

Because deep down it wasn't that Antoine had been killed or the men I trusted had pulled the trigger several times over. . . It was because when I really looked back on it, I honestly didn't care that he had died.

What the hell is wrong with me?

What kind of monster am I becoming?

Pushing away the thought, I cursed myself for even debating if I could label myself as a monster. I wasn't a beast, I wasn't some disfigured creature that fed off life. I was just a girl who was being protected. I was just a woman walking a tightrope with the family that kept her balanced.

Tilting his head to the side, Birch kissed my forehead, and whispered. "You have no clue what today is, do you?"

His lips warmed my skin, sending tickling hairs down my arms. I loved when he kissed me like that. I could feel it in my bones, in every pore and muscle. That man was my world. With one kiss my mind was clear, and my thoughts were relinquished to nothing more than a single second in time that didn't matter anymore.

Because I was here; I was with the one person that helped me to believe in myself and forget everything behind us.

Neither of us are evil. We were just dealt a hand we had to play.

Nothing was simple. Death and living were both equally hard. It didn't matter which end you were standing at.

I had forced myself to forgive Birch for his actions on the beach. He said he had killed for me, that he had done it to make sure that no one would hurt me. But what he did had helped to save other women—I loved this vigilante of circumstance.

Smiling up at him, I shook my head no.

Drawing his fingers down my chin, his lips thinned. “It's your birthday.”

“My birthday?” Giving him a funny eye, I pursed my lips. “No it's not, it's August fifteenth, my birthday is in May, you know that.”

May, it was my favorite month. The flowers were blooming, the air was clean and crisp, I loved it. And since I didn't have an actual birthday to celebrate, I got to pick my own.

There were some benefits to not knowing who you were. You got to choose all the things that most had no control over. My age was a guess, my name was picked, and my birthday was a date I got to set.

Birch laughed, snuggling up against my side, and wrapping his arm around my belly. “No, not that one, your birthday with us. Today is the day my parents took you in eight years ago.”

“Oh, that birthday. Sorry, I'm still half awake.” Giggling, I nuzzled my head under his chin and placed my hand on his chest. “I can't believe it's been that long already.”

Squeezing me into his ribs, he tickled the tips of his fingers up and down my arm. “I'm just happy we found you. I can't imagine my life without you, and I never want to.”

Kissing his neck, I lifted my hand to his cheek. “Well I'm here, so you never have to

worry about that. I'm not going anywhere.” Shifting on the bed, Birch lowered his body, gripping my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I love you, I've loved you for a long time.” His eyes burned into mine, forcing my heart into my throat.

“I love you too.”

“I know you do.” His thumb swept back and forth, softly stroking my lower lip. “And I hope that never changes.” Pushing his mouth against mine, he kissed me like I was the air he needed to survive.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Birch was my first love, he was the only man I had ever loved. And I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. Our lives were woven together like a thick quilt. He was my past, my present and my future.

Pushing my back up, he climbed behind me on the bed, straddling my hips. His breath scaled down the back of my neck as his teeth grazed my skin. The air was hot, saturated with need. It didn't matter what he did or how gentle or rough he touched me, I melted in his hands. He knew me better than anyone else. He knew what I liked, he knew how to draw out moans and elongate the pleasure my body experienced.

Raking his fingers down my spine, I let my eyes close tight as he massaged my shoulder blades, digging his thumbs into the tense muscles.

There was nothing innocent about this man. His hands were lethal to others, but magic in my eyes. His toes dangled in the darkness, and he never downplayed the dangers that surrounded him.

To most he was Birch Rottera, son of Nicholi Rottera. His name brought fear, it brought hurt and pain if justified in the moment.

But to me, he was just Birch. He was the boy who taught me how to throw a football, the man who helped me learn to drive. We had breakfast together every morning and went to sleep side by side every night.

He was normal in every way through my eyes. When it was just the two of us; that was the real man, that was the man I had fallen in love with.

Everything else was forgotten the second he kissed me and held me tight. The moment his hands worked my flesh and I looked into his eyes, I only saw the boy I knew and loved, the young man I had grown up beside.

I was a mere girl when we first met, abandoned and alone. He was the curious entertainer and I was the serious visionary. He'd come up with some crazy idea, and I'd be the voice of reason.

And I've known that I loved him since the moment we first met.

I think it took him a bit longer to see what I could see. We had been together for two years before he finally told me he loved me. Either he wasn't sure about the way he felt or he was too shy to say it out loud. But I waited. I waited every day for him to finally tell me what I already knew.

The first time he told me he loved me, he gave me a look, and when he said it, I knew he meant it. I could still remember it as if it happened yesterday.

Birch tilted his head, allowing his charcoal colored hair to sweep across his forehead. The bright blue in his eyes contrasted the blackness of his hair and toned skin, making them pop like fireworks as he smiled. His shoulder brushed mine as we washed the dinner dishes together.

There was nothing significant about that moment, there were no flowers or candy, no cards or handwritten confessions of love.

It was just his eyes and the words. His tone simple and sincere, his voice strong and confident. He spoke those three words under his breath as I scrubbed lasagna bits off the dinnerware.

The silver cutlery splashed into the water, kicking up bubbles into the air. Birch

laughed, elbowing me in the ribs as I openly stared at him like there was a ghost hanging over his head.

That was the best day of my life, the moment I knew we would always be together.

“Do you promise to always love me, Birch?”

A tight kiss hit the base of my neck, forcing my skin to ripple with goosebumps. Resting his chin in the dip of my collarbone, he quietly spoke into my ear. “You know I always will.” Running a hand through my hair, he curled his fingers in deep, clutching at the roots. “I can't help but to love you, Babe.”

Love wasn't a word I could remember even using before him. I didn't remember my parents, I couldn't remember if I had siblings or family or friends. My first real memory was of him.

I woke up lost and confused. I had felt like my world before his family was nonexistent. It couldn't have been anything great if my brain had refused to hold on to one fucking image.

Dragging flat palms down my arms, he scooped them around my chest, dancing the pads of his fingers over my nipples. Stealing them away, he slipped them down the curve of my sides, sliding lower and lower.

My sex grew hot and wet, eagerly waiting for his touch. But he stopped just before my mound, cautiously flirting with the seam between my legs.

Fucking tease.

I didn't want him to stop, I wanted him to keep going, I wanted him to slip his finger through my folds, flick my clit, and give my body exactly what it was begging for.

Tugging hard on my hair, he yanked my head back. "I'm yours and you're mine, Cyprus. Always. Never forget that." His hard fingers clutched my skull, twisting my face so he could look into my eyes. Biting my lower lip, he plucked it gently between his teeth. "We were meant to be."

Smiling, my teeth glinted behind crimson red lips. "I know, I feel it too."

Growling under his breath, he tucked his hands under my arms and turned me around to sit me on his lap. I wasn't ashamed to say I liked it rough, I liked bringing it to the line and seeing how far I could take it.

And Birch. . .

He loved to give it.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I would never say no, I would never deny him of one craving, one thrust, one bite or pull or slap. He could take me however he wanted and I'd scream for more.

A tight white shirt hugged my chest, framing my naked tits behind almost sheer fabric. Birch stared down at my nipples, eyes zeroing in on the dark targets, beading up hard. Licking his lips, he pressed his palms against my back and pulled me closer.

His nose traced the pebbled flesh as a throaty moan escaped through his breath. "Babe, I'll make sure you always have everything you need." Shifting his hips, I felt his cock against the heat between my thighs. "And you need this, don't you?"

"I don't know, I might need breakfast first." Winking, I rolled my waist, gyrating and rocking against his thick member. My tits perked higher as I arched my back, anxiously waiting for attention.

"Fuck breakfast, I've got your breakfast right here." Licking his lips, he coiled a hand into my hair and snapped my head back. Goosebumps jumped off my skin as he kissed my throat with rough pecks.

"Mm," I moaned, sucking my bottom lip in. Rubbing my mound up and down the length of his shaft, I felt it jerk and throb beneath the thin fabric of his briefs.

"Fuck, I love that. I love seeing what I do to you."

He enjoyed teasing me. Watching me squirm, seeing my expression as the desire seeped into my belly and took over, leaving me lost in delirious arousal. That fed his adrenaline, it gave him a rush to know he had this power over me.

Birch wouldn't make me wait too long, he wasn't that cruel. It was just enough to drench my panties and make my body shudder as he entered my pussy and pushed in deep.

“Just take me, stop fucking around and take me.” Pressing my pussy down harder, I ground against the firm muscle. “I need you in me, I need to feel you deep inside.”

Gliding his fingers up my inner thigh, he gently massaged small circles against my needy button. The center of my panties were soaked in silky wetness, the sweet juice seeping through the thin material, and coating his fingers in liquid passion.

“Fuck me, Birch, I need you to fuck me.” My thighs quivered, choking around his waist. “Don't make me wait any longer.”

Pulling my head back harder, he tore his fingertips from my pussy, slinking a hand up my belly and under my shirt. Pinching one nipple, he rolled it firmly against the two pads.

“Did you think you were in charge when I put you on my lap?” Plucking my nipple with a hard pop, he moved to the other one, repeating the same motion. “Because you're wrong.”

Cooing, my eyes closed tight as my back bowed. I didn't have any words left to speak, not a single fucking one.

And that's exactly what he wanted to see.

Releasing my hair, Birch skimmed one hand down my spine, curling it around my ass. Bucking my hips, I forced the tender spot to rub hard and fast against his cock. I needed him to finish this. I had to come before the anticipation killed me.

“Fuck, Birch, I can't take it.” Digging my fingers into the tops of his shoulders, I squared my back, leaning into his chest. “Please fuck me. If you don't fuck me soon, I'm going to come all over your lap.”

An animalistic growl flowed out from the back of his throat. Crushing his lips against mine, he kissed me. He kissed me with all the emotions he bottled up inside. He kissed with all the hopes and dreams that we had an entire lifetime ahead of us to share.

My lips parted easily to let him in as our tongues collided and twined together. Everything around me faded away, I only saw him, I only needed him; nothing else mattered.

I wasn't alive before meeting Birch. And I'd die without him.

His cock was rock hard, eagerly trying to break free of its restraint. Working my fingers over the elastic band, I tugged his dick free. Gripping the throbbing muscle firmly in my palm, I stroked him from base to tip.

I knew just how he liked it. He liked it when I squeezed the crown and swirled my thumb over the tip. He would moan when my fingers stroked his shaft, massaging the beating veins under the surface.

Licking my lips, my lids hovered half open as I danced a single finger over the ridge, spreading the slick drop of come that rested on the edge. “I love you.” I whispered, biting my bottom lip and flashing a tight smirk. “Now fuck me.”

Raising my hips, I shuffled my panties down my thighs, and kicked them off. Pressing up on my knees, I held his dick and guided it inside. His crown disappeared into my warmth as I lowered slowly, butterflying my thighs wide open. A shiver spread up through my chest as my clit rubbed his lower belly.

This man had me, he had me in every way possible. There was nothing I wouldn't do for him. And I wasn't ever going to let anything come between us.

His blood ran black, his heart never beat, his veins thick as tar. But not with me, not with his Princess.

Slamming my ass down over and over, I drove him deeper. My soaked pussy milked his length as greedy walls clutched him tight to keep him inside.

This, this is where I belong.

BANG!

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

The bedroom door sprung open, wood splintering and shattering around us like falling snowflakes. Screaming, I threw my body to the side, ducking behind his back.

“Get on the ground!” A swarm of blue uniforms and black guns charged into the room, corralling around us in one quick swoop. “I said get on the motherfucking ground!”

A heavy hand gripped the base of Birch's neck, tossing him to the floor in a split second. Three over-sized men mounted him, smothering his face into the carpet.

I didn't say a word, not one fucking word. All I could do was stare into the eyes of my protector. His skin had turned ash gray, lids open wide as saucers as his pupils dilated in sheer shock.

“Birch! Birch!” Reaching my hand out, my fingers met air as I was jerked to my feet and dragged out of the room. “No! What are you doing!? Stop!”

Fuck! They know!

They found out what he did. . . What we did.

I tried to fight them, I did. My arms flew out wild and untamed. My lungs screeched like an owl as I tried like hell to get back to Birch.

But I couldn't move forward.

An officer stood in front of me, blocking me from darting back into the room. He

kept lifting his arms, shoving me backwards, making me teeter on my heels

Birch kept his gaze frozen on mine. It looked like he was hoping I could read the words inside his head. His eyes softened, brows crinkling up against his hairline.

He's apologizing. He's sorry that I'm seeing this.

“What are you doing to him?! Let him go!”

“You have the right to remain silent, you have the right. . .” The words faded into a jumbled mess of tones as I shut down and crawled inside my own head.

This isn't happening. It can't be happening.

No! No! No!

Raking hard fingers through my hair, I felt the firm grip of hands around my wrist.

“Let's go, you're coming too. You have the right to remain. . .”

I knew my rights, I didn't need some fucking asshole cop telling me them.

Clenching my jaw, I bit my tongue, trying to remove all the feelings that were burrowing into my chest, attempting to hijack my heart.

I knew who Birch was, he never pretended to be someone he wasn't. But I tried so hard to keep those two worlds apart. I refused to think that they could ever bleed together and destroy us.

I was wrong.

And as my eyes glossed over and the tears began to fall, I knew. . .

I had lost him forever.

Chapter Six

Cyprus

“You're really going to sit there and act like you don't know anything?”

“I don't. I don't know why they disappeared. I don't even know who you're talking about.”

“I'm here to help you.” The officer leaned back in his chair, flipping a pen around between his fingers. “Tell me your name.”

“I told you already, my name is Cyprus Rottera.” Rubbing my temples, I closed my eyes. “Why are you doing this? I told you I don't even know the people you're talking about, there's nothing else I can say.”

“Miss, I know you think you're protecting them, but you're only hurting yourself. I need to know who you really are.”

“I don't know what else you expect me to say, I'm Cyprus—”

Cutting me off, he dropped the pen onto his notebook and rolled his chair closer. “Rottera, yeah you said that. But I know that's not true. You don't exist, there's no record of you anywhere that I could find. I'm going to be honest with you, I've had enough with this bull-shit. Just tell me, who are you really?”

Veering my stare, I felt my hands begin to shake. “My name is Cyprus, that's the

truth. If you can't find me in your system, maybe that's because I don't have a record. I've never been arrested before this.”

Smiling, the detective hung his head, tipping it up a hair to look me in the eyes. “You're right, we don't have you in our system. But the funny thing is, I can't find any record of you having ever been born.” Clapping his hands together, he pushed his palms into his knees and sat up straight. “So is the joke on us? Are you a ghost?”

Fuck you.

You people couldn't help me when I needed you, why would I trust you now?

Shrugging my shoulder, I folded my arms over my chest. “Seems that way I guess.”

“Why are you protecting him—them?I mean. . .” Pausing, he ran his hands down his face and shook his head. “They're bad people, they do bad things. I know you know that, so why would you risk yourself trying to protect them?”

He thought he could talk me into a corner. . . Screw him, he was wrong. I knew better than that. I knew exactly what he was trying to do.

“Is that what you think? You think they're bad people?”

Detective Jones crooked his jaw, as if I was speaking a different language. “Tell me why they're good?” Holding out his arms, he relaxed in his chair, loosening his muscles. “I've got all day, tell me what they've done for you. Maybe you can change my mind.”

You don't deserve to know! Where were you when I needed you?

Where were you when I was lost and alone?!

The cops had done shit to find out the truth, they left me to deal with it on my own. They abandoned Nick and wiped their hands clean of the long lost little girl. Now he suddenly gave a shit about me?

No, that's not how this worked.

The officer could say whatever the hell he wanted to. Yes, they had hurt people. Yes, they had done things that didn't follow the straight line of the law. But did the officer really give two shits about the dirty ass men they snuffed out?

Was he even aware of what the men they killed had wanted to do to me or what they had done to others?

There were far worse people out in the world than the Rotteras. I knew that first hand. . . Because I had looked them in the eyes.

“I don't have to tell you anything. I don't need to prove to you what I already know.”

“Are you willing to go down for them? I don't know who you are, but I know them, I know what they're capable of. Do you think they're willing to do the same for you?”

Of course they are. What kind of stupid question is that?

Grinding my jaw, my eyes turned to slits. “What do you expect me to say, huh?” Tapping my nails on the table, I flipped my hand up in the air. “Do you really think you can bring me in here and expect me to just throw them under the bus? Because I won't. They're family, they didn't do anything wrong.”

“Family, huh?” The cop eyed me, drifting his gaze around my face. “You look nervous. Why do you look so nervous?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“I’m nervous because I’ve never been arrested before.” Fiddling with my fingers, I stared right at him, doing my best to remove the emotions that were running rampant. “So yeah, this is making me a little uncomfortable. It doesn’t help that you assholes didn’t let me get dressed and gave me this shitty jumpsuit to wear instead.” Plucking my shoulder, I let the fabric drop back onto my skin as I arched a distasteful brow. “And maybe it would help if you told me why you’re so interested in that family you brought up. They’re all adults, don’t adults have the right to be missing if they want to?”

I had been afraid that they found out what happened with Antoine and his family. But the detective didn’t say anything about this being a murder investigation, and I figured he definitely would have if that was the case. He kept referring to it as a disappearance. He hadn’t spoken of finding water logged bodies or gun casings in the sand.

Luckily, I wasn’t naive or a rambler. I was going to wait for him to give up the reason, not feed him information he might not know.

But this was something else, something different. He was far too relaxed for this to be about murder. Maybe it was about the truck they stole last year or the money that Nick had me launder through the bar.

Either way, he didn’t have enough to charge anyone, let alone me. Because if he did, we’d all be behind bars right now and he wouldn’t be sitting here fishing for information on me.

“Look, you’re not under arrest. We read you your rights because we have to, and we

put cuffs on you for our own safety. You were a bit wild back there, we had to be cautious.”

“If I'm not under arrest, then I want to leave. You can't hold me here if I don't want to stay.”

“Okay, alright, I get it.” Letting out an audible exhale, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I just want to know who you are. There's no record of a Cyprus Rottera anywhere. You obviously came from somewhere. I'm just trying to sort this all out.”

“And I'm trying to figure out why you thought you had the right to come storming into our home the way you did.”

“Well,” he said, sucking air in through thin lips. “If what we think is true, Nicholi and Birch are going to be put away for a long time. People talk and secrets don't stay buried forever. So if you want to help them, you can start by telling me where you came from. The sooner you tell me, the sooner you can get out of here. I'm just trying to help, that's it.”

Bullshit. Trying to help? He's trying to get me to talk.

“What kind of shit? You need to give me more than that.”

“Well for starters, we've been keeping a close eye on Nick for years. Never really had much until recently. It turns out he was pretty close to the men we're looking for.” Resting his head on his hand, he smiled smugly. “Now it's your turn. Who are you?”

I sat in silence. How could I even give him an answer when I didn't know myself. If they had done their job to begin with, we wouldn't be sitting here wondering what name I was born with.

The two of us glared at each other, neither one ready to break the silence. My loyalty wasn't with the police, it was with my family. I would do anything to protect them and they would do the same for me.

That's how this worked, that was the binding holding it all together.

“Do you really know the people you're living with?” he asked, tilting his head a hair.

“Do you have any idea?”

“I do. And I know that what you think of them is wrong. You see bad people doing bad things, I see the family that has taken care of me and provided for me. Bad people don't do that.”

“Cared for you?” His eyes flirted with mine, leaving me to wonder what the hell he was thinking. “I hate to burst the little bubble you're living in, but bad people do a lot of shit, even when it seems good. There's always a layer of selfishness built inside. I can guarantee it's no different right now.”

A knock at the door cut through the air, forcing the banter between us to stop.

An older woman with gray hair poked her head in, her face sullen and concerned.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, Sir, but Detective French needs you for a minute.”

Nodding, Jones grabbed his notebook and pen, and stood up. “I'll be back. Take this time to think about what you want. Do you want to spend time behind bars for these assholes? Or do you want to be free to live your life? It's up to you.”

Holding the door in his hand, he gave me one last look over his shoulder and stepped outside the room.

Why should I have to chose?

Dropping my head to the table, I wasn't sure what the hell I should do. A piece of me wanted to tell him the truth, to tell him that he was asking me a question I didn't have an answer for.

I wanted to tell him how this family had found me and taken care of me for all these years. I wanted him to know that I owed them my life and that without them, I'd probably be dead.

But why should I? Why did he deserve the pleasure of listening to me spill the deep dark secret I was holding inside?

Shouldn't he know this already? Shouldn't there be a record of me in their system from all those years ago?

The thought made me pause, it chipped away at my brain, making me question why he wasn't already aware that I was the girl Nick had found.

Fuck them, they never gave a shit anyway.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

They had their chance to help me and they failed. The police had deserted that young girl looking for answers herself. I was Cyprus now, that's who I was. I was part of the Rottera family, nothing would change that.

He could threaten me with time behind bars, he could take my signature off all the paperwork and use it to lock me up for fraud and tax evasion. It didn't matter, I still wouldn't speak ill of Nick and Birch.

Since I stepped foot in that house, the one thing that Nick had drilled into my head was that being part of their family meant standing on your own two feet if you had to. You take a bullet for those you love, this was my bullet.

Closing my eyes, I folded my arms under my head and laid there on the table. I didn't really care how long they kept me, I wasn't going to say shit.

I heard the door creak open and the sound of footsteps approach me from above. But I didn't get up, I just laid quietly, waiting for something. For what? Who the hell knows.

Maybe he would tell me I could go home now, maybe he would apologize for being a prick and send me on my way.

“Miss, I need you to sit up.”

“Why? I'm good right here.”

“No, I think you should sit up.” His voice was different, it was softer and less

intimidating than before. “Come on, sit up.”

Is this part of his game? A Good cop, bad cop routine that he altered between.

Rolling up slowly, I peered at the detective with as little emotion as I could. I didn't want him to think he was getting to me, or that he was building some relationship with me he could use against my family.

“Better?”

Detective Jones sat down, running a hand through his thick blonde hair. His green eyes were dull, lost in thought. He stared at me, not saying a word, just looking at me like he had a million things running through his head and he didn't know where to begin.

“What is it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Do you recognize this?” Placing a small purple book on the table, he rested his hand on top. “Have you ever seen it before?”

Tilting my head, I looked at the notebook. “No, I've never seen it before. What is it?”

“Are you sure?” Using the tips of his fingers, he turned it. “Just take a minute and think about it. Have you ever seen it before?”

There were small flowers lining the top and bottom trim, a thick leather strap held the front and back cover together. Doodles of stars and hearts were drawn in pen down the binding, and the name Fiona was scribbled in the bottom right corner.

“I've never seen this before. Where did you get it?”

“Well, Cyprus,” he said, stroking his jaw. “I think it's yours.” Pushing it forward, he nodded his head. “Go on, take a look.” Folding back the cover, he opened it. “Maybe you'll remember if you read it.”

Gripping the trim on either side, I pulled it in. I stared at the detective for a moment, trying to figure out what type of game this was. This book wasn't mine, it had nothing to do with me.

Why the hell does he want me to read it?

Touching the corner, I fiddled with the thin seam and dropped my eyes to the paper. Inside I felt horrible, like I was violating some little girl's deepest thoughts. This was her book, it was her feelings and wishes, her anger and sadness.

We had no right reading what was in there. My eyes kept popping around the page, afraid to truly see what this girl had put down.

“Read it, read what she wrote.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Snapping my eyes up, I glared at Jones, doing my best to tear him apart. “We don't have any right reading this.”

“I think we do, I think it's more important than you realize.”

“Where did you get it?”

“I don't think you'd believe me if I told you. Read it first, then we'll talk.”

Huffing under my breath, I flicked my eyes down and started reading. My heart began to break, it folded up and split in half, refusing to beat one more time.

There was a little girl begging for help. There was a child aching with pain and no one was listening but the pages of her private book.

Where is she now?

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Chapter Seven

Dear Diary

March 7, 2010

Dear Diary,

It's me. I know, it's been a little while, but you're all I have left, just you. Nothing else exists anymore. Not my home, not my family, not my life. . .

Everything is gone.

I don't know what to do. Where do I go, how will I live, how will I survive?

I'm not sure I can do it. I don't want to.

So why am I writing you now? I can't really give you that answer.

Maybe it's just because you were there and I found you in the bag on the floor that had a few of my things in it; or maybe it's so I don't forget what I used to have.

With you I can climb back inside my memories and remember for a moment—a split second in time, that things used to be different. I had a family and a life before this. I had it all, and now I have nothing.

This isn't home. I'll never be home. I'll never get back what I lost and I know that.

A man came into my house and did something awful, something horrible, and I don't think I can even write it on paper. I don't want to. I want to wake up from this nightmare, but I can't.

He said I was lucky, he said that things could be so much different. He told me that none of this was in the plan, and that he didn't have to keep me. But I'm here, so how does that make any sense?

The tears keep coming, I can't stop them. It hurts so much to think about what he did. The things I saw, they haunt me whenever I close my eyes. I can't. . . I can't do this.

I'm alone. I'm scared. I'm afraid. And I have no one to turn to.

For the first time ever, it's just me.

So I'm writing to you, and I'm desperately searching for answers I know you can't give. I wish you could write back, I wish you could tell me everything will be fine and things will go back to the way they were.

But you won't—they won't. Nothing will ever be the same.

I hope at some point my dreams will take me back. A girl can wish, right?

I hate this.

How could he do this to me? Why did he take them from me?!

The moment that door opened, and that man came rushing in, I knew something really bad was happening. I wish I was stronger, I wish I had stood my ground.

Maybe if I had then none of this would have happened.

Maybe if I had yelled and screamed he would have stopped what he was doing. But I didn't. I ran, I hid under the bed and prayed he hadn't seen me.

But he found me.

An evil man pulled me out from beneath my bed. A man with cold eyes and no emotion, he stole me from my home. He packaged me in a trunk and drove me away in the darkness.

I tried to fight, but he yanked me from my hiding place like I was a wild cat. The way his fingers pinched the back of my neck, it was as if he didn't see me as human. I screamed and kicked, I bit anything I could get my mouth on. He didn't care. Nothing phased him, nothing hurt him. He just took me like I belonged to him.

He thinks I'll forget what he did, but I won't. It doesn't matter how hard he tries to make me forget, I know who I am. And I'll never let him talk me out of it. The first chance I get, I'm gone.

— F

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

March 13, 2010

Dear Diary,

Today wasn't a good day, none of them have been. He hasn't let me out of this room at all. The man keeps telling me he will, but he doesn't.

These walls are a prison.

He keeps trying to tell me that he won't hurt me if I just listen, but I don't believe him. So I scream at him every time he comes in. I don't stop, I won't.

Today he told me his name, but I refuse to say it. He doesn't deserve it. I won't give him my voice in words, I won't let him forget what he stole from me. All he gets are my constant screams.

He tried to hold me so he could talk to me, but I don't want to hear what he's saying. He took my family from me, he took everything from me. I wished he had killed me instead, because this isn't living.

I feel like a rat trapped in a box, and my life has become a maze I'll never finish. There's no more home, not for me.

What am I supposed to do?

Please just give me something to hold onto, anything at all!

Everything hurts. My eyes hurt, my chest aches, my lungs feel like they're always on fire. And I can't stop it.

Whenever that man comes in I can't breathe, it's like his eyes grab hold of my lungs and suck the air right out of them. I swear he's trying to kill me, because this is torture.

I can't sleep, no matter how much I try, my eyes won't stay closed. Sometimes I think I'm having a heart attack, but it goes away after a little while. Most of the time I only feel that way when that man comes in.

He scares me. I'm afraid he's going to hurt me like he hurt my parents. The more I don't listen to him the angrier he gets. He grabs my shoulders and holds me still, barking at me to stop screaming.

He tried to talk to me about my dad and it made me so angry. I won't do that! He tried to tell me that my parents had gotten in over their heads, that none of this was supposed to happen.

He said he wants to make this better, that he wants to help me. How can he say things like that? He made it seem like none of this was his fault, but it is. He's the reason they're gone, he did this!

I want to be strong, I try so hard to not let him see how much I'm really hurting. I did everything I could to hold in my tears, but they came anyway. I hate the idea that he watched me cry like that. But even through my tears, the anger I felt intensified.

I hate him! I hate what he did! I hate him!

He made me so mad I lost it. I lashed out, I scratched his face and clawed at his eyes. I think I hurt him, because he hasn't come back again yet. Which is fine with me, I

don't want him here, not if he's going to try and make me believe things that aren't true.

But I did meet someone different, a boy came in, he said his name was Birch. He's young, not old like the other guy. I think he's my age, it's hard to tell.

There's something about his eyes, the way he looks at me, it's like he feels bad for me. His eyes are different, they aren't dead and cold. It's like he wants to help me, but he doesn't know how.

At least he doesn't scare me. I don't know why he doesn't, I feel like I should be afraid of him. I should want to scream at him too, but for some reason, I don't. I actually want him to stay here with me, to keep me company, and talk to me even if I'm not talking back.

It doesn't matter what I think or how nice he is, he's one of them. I can't forget that, I won't forget that.

He's helping them to keep me here, so he can't be good.

He tried to give me some food, but I refuse to eat. I don't want anything from them. I'll die before I take one thing from these people.

He told me that if I calm down things will get better. All I have to do is follow their rules, do what I'm told and I won't have to stay locked in this room.

I want to believe him, but I don't trust him. He's in too deep to be my friend, he's probably not even here by choice either. Maybe he used to be like me? Maybe he was in the same position and that's how he knows all this?

A part of me really wants to think he's speaking the truth, I do.

I just don't know what to believe. All I know is that I don't want to stay in here forever.

What do you think? Should I trust him?

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Can I trust him?

— F.

March 15, 2010

Dear Diary,

I want to go home! I don't like it here!

I told the man to go to hell today and then I called him an asshole. I've never called someone an asshole before, but I won't lie, it felt good.

I know I'm making him angry, and I don't give a shit. He keeps saying that I'm here and I need to get used to it. He told me to stop being a bitch and just listen for once. But what does he expect?

Does he really think that I'll just shut my mouth and do what he wants? He's freaking stupid if he thinks that. He doesn't know me, he'll never know me.

I just want to get out of here. I miss my parents, I miss my life. I just want to go, and I don't know how I'm going to do that.

The door is always locked, the window doesn't open, and there's nothing in here I can use to break it. Even if I could break it, I don't have anything to use to climb out.

WHY? Why is he doing this to me?

Why isn't anyone coming to help me? Why haven't the police come and rescued me from this place?

I don't understand. I'm going crazy Diary, I really am. I can't stay in here like this.

Tell me what to do!! Please, just tell me!

March 20, 2010

Dear Diary,

I think I broke my finger. Today the man came in with a chair, and he placed it in the center of the room and made me sit in it.

I tried to fight him, but he's too strong. He dragged me across the floor and wrapped a chain around my waist to hold me in a chair. It was disgusting, it was vile and cruel and this man needs to be locked away.

Where are the police? How come no one has come to save me?

He told me that he was done with my games, that it was time for me to finally just accept my reality. He wants me to forget who I am, he wants me to forget about my parents and my life.

He said I'll be able to have all the freedom I want if I can do that. You know what I said?

No damn way.

I screamed and I cried, plugging my ears and yelling at him that he killed my family. I called him a murderer and told him he was a sick asshole. He didn't like that very

much.

He got really close to my face, and all I could smell was his horrible breath. He stunk like booze and fish, it was gross. I thought he was going to hurt me, the look in his eyes was pure evil.

He put his fingers in my hair, and he grabbed it really tight. Then he pulled my head back so I had to look up at him. I think he was trying to scare me, but I'm not afraid of him. I'd rather die than live here with him.

So I punched him, I actually clocked him in the face. For a second I thought that was it. I braced myself, closing my eyes and waiting for him to kill me. Shit, a part of me was happily ready for all of this to be over.

I held my breath and prayed, wishing for it to be quick and simple.

He didn't, and I guess that makes me lucky. I don't know. My parents weren't lucky, so why should I be graced with any pity?

Instead of lashing out at me, he laughed. That sick crazy man laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world. Then he told me I was a spitfire like my mother, with the stubbornness of my father.

That made me more mad. How dare he act like he knew my parents! If he knew them, he would have known how great they were and he wouldn't have killed them.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

It wasn't until after he left me alone that I noticed my pinkie finger isn't bending right and it's starting to swell around the knuckle.

I'm trying not to move it at all, it's starting to hurt really bad. What happens if it's broken? Will it get better on its own? I don't know if these people are willing to help me fix it. Maybe I'll just keep this to myself and not tell them.

I don't know, I'll just see how it is tomorrow. Dad always said that pain was a part of life and you just had to suck it up and deal with it sometimes. Would that count for this? Is this the type of pain he was talking about?

I'm going to listen to him even though he's not here. I wish I knew where he was, I wish I knew if him and my mom were watching me right now.

But my gut is telling me that they're not. I don't think they'd let that man keep me here if they were. They'd find a way to tell the police that a murderer had their daughter, even if it was through a whisper in a dream.

I'm not sure I believe in guardian angels anymore. Not now, not after this.

How could they exist and allow something this horrible to happen?

Did I do something wrong?

Did I deserve this?

Is this my fault?

— F.

March 28, 2010

Dear Diary,

I saw Birch again today.

He seemed different, like he was trying to pretend he was happy. I'm still not ready to trust him, but he's nice to me. He talks to me like he knows me, like we're friends.

He let me play a game on his phone today. It was a dumb game, but it was the best game I had ever played. I can't remember the name, but I had to fit these blocks all together to make a row.

I thought about calling the police, but he never took his eyes off me. I didn't have a chance to do it. Even if I did, I had no idea where I was. I couldn't give them any clues or directions to find me.

It was a dumb idea, and maybe I should have done it anyway. I don't know. I guess it's too late for that now. Sometimes I feel so stupid. Even that night the man came, I should have called the police, but I didn't. Instead I hid like a damn coward and did nothing.

I'm such a fucking idiot. What's wrong with me?

Birch told me that the man is his father. He says he's really not a bad guy, and he knows I won't believe him, but that he really does mean well.

I don't know what the hell he meant by that. Did he know why I was there? Did he have any clue what he had done to my parents?

There's no way he could know, I don't think he'd be saying that stuff if he did. I asked him if his dad knew he came down here, but he wouldn't give me an answer. He shrugged and went to sit against the wall beside the door in the corner.

He always sits in the right corner, I don't know why. I asked him about it, but he wouldn't tell me. He just said that we all have favorites, and this corner was his.

I don't know how someone could have a favorite corner, I guess everyone is different though. I had a favorite spot on the couch at home, and a favorite cup I use to drink my milk out of. But a corner, that was just odd.

Birch said that when I get out of this room he'll show me a really cool place to go swimming. He talked about it like it was the most incredible place in the world. I want to see it now. The way he described it, the way his eyes lit up and he smiled when he spoke, it actually made me excited about it.

I made him promise to take me, I guess I'll have to see if he keeps his promises or not.

I like Birch more than the other man. I wish he was the only one I had to see.

— F

April 5, 2010

Dear Diary,

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I'm getting out. I'm not staying here anymore. The man, he told me it was time for me to stop acting like he was the devil. He told me I had to stop hurting him every time he came down.

Screw him.

I think I know how to open the door. The hinges are loose, they wiggle when it opens. I noticed it last night after Birch brought me some water. I'm going to use you to knock them out, then I can open the door. If it works, I won't be able to write you anymore. So I'm saying goodbye now. I'm going to go to the police, I'm going to tell them everything about what he did.

He won't get away with this. He deserves to be punished for taking my family from me. As soon as it's safe, I'm leaving. I can't forget who I am, I can't forget who my parents are.

I will not go through life pretending I'm someone else. I'm Fiona Deltorro, no one can take that from me.

Goodbye Diary.

And thank you.

— F

* * * *

That was it, there were no more entries after that. I sat in shock, my fingers trembling as I touched the last few shaky letters of inked pen on the paper. A single tear balanced gracefully on the edge of my lid, afraid to let go.

I wasn't sure what the hell I had just read or who it came from. That couldn't be me, there was no way that happened.

Did it happen?

Is that what happened to me?

“Do you remember writing any of that?” Shaking my head no, Detective Jones nodded gently. “Can I ask you to do something for me?”

“What?”

Holding out his pen, he pushed a blank piece of paper across the table. “Will you write something for me?”

“What? Why? This was written by a girl, I'm not a girl anymore.” Angling my head, I flipped the pages over my thumb, feeling the cool air blow across my palm.

“I know, but I want you to write for me.”

“I don't know what to write.” Running the tip of my finger around one of the flowers on the cover, I glanced back and forth between the detective and the diary.

This is ridiculous. This isn't mine, I didn't write this.

Taking my hand, he curled my fingers around the pen. “Just write anything, write me a paragraph about something you remember. It can be anything, from any point in

time.” Pushing the diary to the side, he slid a piece of paper in its place.

Pinching the tip of the pen, I rested it on the thin, blue line. I tried to think of something to jot down, but my brain was pounding and turning in every direction. I couldn't focus on one single thought, I was drawing a blank.

“I don't know what to write.”

“Alright, I'll talk and you write what I say.” Scratching his chin, he glanced up at the ceiling. “My name is Fiona, and today I went to the store. I bought some milk and bread, and then I grabbed a bag of chips.”

“Why—”

“Listen and write, that's all you need to focus on.” Repeating himself, I copied down the words naturally, allowing his voice to be the only thing inside my head. “Good,” he said, as I placed the pen down and sat back in my seat.

Pulling my hands into my lap, I looked at my fingers, stretching them out against my thighs. Bending my left pinkie finger, I noticed a bulge in the knuckle and how it curved slightly. Opening and closing my hand, my finger wouldn't go completely straight, it stayed arched.

No. . . No it can't be true. I didn't write that, that didn't happen.

It's dated eight years ago—

Could it be. . . No, it's not me.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Nervously, I bumbled my hands around each other, trying to force my finger back into place. I couldn't accept what I read, it was some sort of trick, some type of tactic he was trying to use to against me.

“You're wrong you know. I didn't write that, that didn't happen.”

“I would love it if you were right, but I can't ignore the truth, and you won't be able to ignore it either.” Taking the paper, he bundled it up with the diary and went to the door. Opening it enough to stick his head and shoulder out, he whispered to someone in the hall.

“What are you doing with that?”

“We're going to analyze the handwriting, see if it's a match.”

“I'm not that girl, there's no way I wrote that. That shit didn't happen, not to me.”

Crooking his jaw, his brows softened. “Does that mean you're willing to finally tell me your name now? Are you ready to tell me the truth?”

“No, that's not what I mean. I just. . . I just. . .” I had no idea where I was going with that.

How could he drop this shit on me like this?

I came in here expecting to be interrogated about a murder. I expected to be grilled about Birch and Nick and what they had done. I thought I had lost everything all over

again. My heart was breaking at the idea that Birch was going to prison.

But I got this instead. I was being tormented with diary entries from a poor little girl who had been through hell. Notes from a girl who had watched her parents die and the man who executed them had taken her away.

I didn't remember that. I remembered the family that had cared for me and given to me like I was their daughter. I felt the love and affection of a father and mother when mine were nowhere to be found.

I felt trapped, pinned against a wall without an exit. My legs trembled, eager to flee, my muscles shook, filling with hate for all the memories I couldn't recall.

“You just what? Go on, finish what you were going to say.”

Taking in a deep breath, I focused on his face. “I just don't remember writing that. And Nicholi has been nothing but good to me, I can't imagine him doing something like that.”

“Sometimes things aren't always what they seem, Cyprus.” Opening a green folder, he pulled out a small photo and kept it upside down. “Sometimes, what we see is only what they want us to see.” Placing the image on the table, he slid it in my direction.

“What's this?”

Rolling his hand in the air, he frowned. “It's reality.”

Thumbing the sharp edge, I picked it up off the table and flipped it over. I went numb, the world around me fading into black as my brain swelled and throbbed against the inside of my skull.

Oh my God. . .

Gaping with wide eyes, I couldn't believe what I was looking at.

It wasn't possible, not after all this time.

I had no past before the Rottera's, there were no memories or images of anything but Birch and Nick's faces the day I woke up.

But I couldn't deny what was peering back at me from behind a glossy, one dimensional window. . .

The girl was me, and I did have a family.

Chapter Eight

Cyprus

Dropping the picture, I dragged my hands through my hair. “Where did you get that? How did you get that?”

The picture was of a family, it was a mother and father with their child. I couldn't sit there and pretend, I couldn't ignore the faces of who I was looking at. That was my family, that was me with my parents.

Those are my parents.

That's definitely me. . . That's me.

I can't believe this, how did he get this?

The picture was taken when I was young, about twelve or so. I was standing between two adults, and I could see the resemblance of both of them in my face.

The sharp curves of my high cheekbones came from my mom, along with the puffy curls I had battled day after day. While my chin was slightly boxed and short like my dad, our eyes mirror images of each other. Deep hazel globes, with specks of gold and green, peered up at me. I was the perfect mix of both of them.

Tears started to fall seamlessly down my cheeks as my eyes kept glancing around the image. I couldn't look away, it was surreal.

It was everything I had wanted for years, to see their faces, to know the people that had left me behind. And it was nothing like I had imagined.

I often thought my parents were probably drug addicts, junkies that had finally had enough of me. That thought made the abandonment easier, it gave rise to an internal hatred and acceptance for people I didn't know.

But that wasn't who I was seeing. I wasn't looking into the scarred faces of addicts with frail bodies and track-lined skin.

What I saw was normal, it was what you would expect to see in a family photo album or a frame on the wall.

We were standing in front of a lake, the water glistening like diamonds in the background. There were sailboats gliding around in the back, and a long pier with men fishing off the side. I could see the clear blue sky and giant puffy clouds, as the sun's reflection sparkled off the ripples in the water.

The smiles on all our faces were serene. We looked happy, like we were on vacation and having the time of our lives.

But I didn't remember that moment, I couldn't find the memory in my brain anywhere. It just didn't exist.

“We've been looking for you for a long time, Fiona.”

No, this isn't real. It can't be real—

He's screwing with me, he's trying to turn me against Nick and Birch.

I'm not this girl! I'm Cyprus!

“Don't call me that!” I yelled, unable to place the emotions I was feeling in the right box. “No! No one looked for me! You're lying!” Slamming my palms on the table, I growled like an angry lioness, protecting herself from a poacher. “Those aren't my parents, that's not real! None of this is real!”

It felt like the detective was trying to kill me. He was trying to pit me against the family he sought out to destroy, and ruin everything I had. I couldn't let that happen, I couldn't let him wipe my world clean again.

There was no way I could just sit back and allow this man to erase everything I had. I had a family, I had a boyfriend who loved me and everything was exactly the way it was supposed to be.

But she looks just like me, how is that possible?

Everything was exploding all at once. All the hurt of not knowing who I was, all the sadness of feeling abandoned and not loved; the happiness of seeing the faces I had searched for and of knowing my real name; all of it came crashing in like a nuclear bomb, blowing apart my insides.

Sweat started to bead up on my forehead, running down my temples and cooling against my chest. My breathing became erratic and labored as I smiled and cried, frowned and screamed.

“Why?! Why now?!” Fisting my hair, I tugged at my scalp. “This isn't real, this isn't happening!” My voice fell into a whisper, lost and broken in truth. “That can't be me. Can it? Is that really me?”

The denial I felt was raging. I didn't want to accept the picture, I wasn't ready to receive what I longed to find.

They were dead to me. I had left them in a past that didn't exist anymore. I had a good life, with people who cared about me. Nick wouldn't do this. . . Would he?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

What was the reality in my story now? Where did the truth end and the lies begin?

Birch had found me in their woods, but who put me there? Was Nick the man in the journal? Was he the one who had done this to me?

There was no way for me to process all of that and pick apart the details. None of it made sense.

“Yes, that is you. And yes, we did look for you. We did everything we could to locate you. We spent years searching, but turned up nothing.”

“Why should I believe you?” Touching the picture, I traced the woman's face, desperately wishing for my past to find me. I wanted to remember, I wanted my mind to flood with painful memories so this happy family wouldn't be what I lost.

If my past was worth losing, then this man couldn't taunt me with these fake smiles. If I could recall a single ounce of pain from being in the hands of those people, then everything I had could be a blessing. I wanted desperately to stuff the picture down the detective's throat and make him eat his lies.

But that wasn't what I was seeing. Their arms were embracing me, their smiles glowing and broad, not sinister and cracked out.

I had brainwashed myself into believing that fate had delivered me into the hands of the family I was destined to have. That I had found love through a tragedy and something great had been born within the carnage.

What happened? Why did this happen?

“This doesn't make sense. Why did it take this long to find me? I've been here the entire time, is this department really that stupid or just that blind?”

“I know this is a lot to take in, but I have no reason to make this all up. What you should be asking is why he had you. What did he gain from stealing a child?”

Steal me? He didn't steal me! He found me, he saved me!

Biting my tongue, my eyes turned to slits. He was feeding me bull-shit and telling me it was prime rib. None of this was possible, not one fucking ounce of it.

Why would Birch lie to me all these years? It didn't make sense. He said he loved me. How could he look in my eyes and knowingly lie to me about this?

I wasn't ready to believe that everything he had spoon fed me was a giant sack of shit. It hurt too much to think that the man I loved could pretend for all these years.

A sharp knife sliced my chest, exposing delicate nerve endings and brittle veins. If this was true, then Birch was in on it the entire time. He had seen me, he had been there in that room, he had taken part in the lies and helped his father fill my head with them.

Every emotion I had was strung out, spread in so many different directions I expected them to break. A noose had been placed around my neck, and there was no ground for me to stand on.

“No, you're lying.” Waving my hand, I cupped my jaw and swallowed hard. “Nicholi said no one could find my parents, he said that no one was looking for me.” My voice wavered, tumbling out in broken cries and lost breaths. Shoving the picture back at

the detective, I looked into his eyes. “He said you gave up.”

The detective threw his hand out, capturing mine and squeezing it firmly. “We never gave up. We did everything we could to find you. Nicholi lied to you.”

“I don't believe this, it doesn't make sense.” Shaking my head, I sniffled, yanking my hand free. “I woke up in the woods, Birch found me there. Nick and Birch saved me, they helped me and gave me a place to live. Why would they lie about that?”

“I don't know the answer to that, but I promise you, we're going to figure it out. For now, you can't go back there. We need more answers, we need more information so we can take this asshole down. We need to protect you.”

Protect me? Did he really just say that?

Protect me from the only family I know?

Protect me from the people that have loved me?

“How do you know he did this? What proof do you have that he took me? I remember waking up to him picking me up off the ground. What if it was someone else that placed me in those woods?”

“Cyprus, I'm sure this hard for you to take in, but that diary was in his house. We found it during our search, that wasn't a coincidence. What you wrote in there, that tells the story.” Tapping the side of his head with a single finger, his brows arched high. “What you remember, that wasn't reality. I believe that little girl, I don't believe what he put into your head. But all we have is that book, we don't have anything else to go on just yet. You really don't remember anything?”

Taking deep breaths, I covered my face with my hands and wept. My shoulders shook

uncontrollably, my lungs begged for air they couldn't find. Nothing was what I thought it was.

Everything was a lie.

“We'll help you through this.” Detective Jones scooted closer, and rubbed a hand over my back. “But you can't go back there. We need to figure out what happened, we need to find out how deep in this Nicholi is. Tell me you understand that, Cyprus.”

Sniffling, I kept my face buried and nodded. “I understand you're trying to steal my world. I've already been through that once, I can't do it again.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“You deserve the truth. Don't you think you deserve better than this?”

My world was spinning out of control. Everything I thought I knew wasn't true.

How was I supposed to feel about the idea that my family might have done this to me?

The little girl in that book was so shattered, she had lost all hope and was left to mend her own broken pieces.

But that little girl wasn't just anyone. . .

That little girl was me.

“Where are they? Where are my parents? Are they really gone like the diary said?”

Nodding, Jones tapped the table with his knuckles, unable to look me in the eyes. “When you're ready to know the truth, I'll tell you. But let's take this one step at a time. I have a safe place all set up for you, you'll go there for now.”

Cocking my head, my brows knitted. “What? No, I can't do that. I need to go back, I need to hear it from them—”

“No,” he snapped, crushing my request with his harsh tone. “You can't go back there. Not tonight, not tomorrow, not ever. It's not safe for you.”

Not safe? How?

Does he hear himself?

I was tempted to laugh in his face. The guy was trying to protect me from the people who had been caring for me. He was worried for my safety. . . Seriously?

Did he really think that the love of my life was suddenly going to change after all these years and strangle me to death?

Was he really that caught up in the mob dynamic that he thought we were all disposable and held no value?

I never felt like I was in danger. Nick had done far too much for me to just wipe me off the face of the earth. And I had done the same for him, I had been there through it all. Through the death of his wife, through business deals and even a triple homicide. He wouldn't hurt me, he loved me.

Right?

He did love me like a daughter. . . Or is that a lie too?

No, he loves me. And so does Birch. But I need answers, I deserve answers.

“Detective Jones, I appreciate the offer, but I'm not going to just run away from them. I deserve answers, and if you don't have any to give. . .” Pausing, I crooked my jaw and hardened my stare. “I'll get them myself.”

Bouncing his hands in the air, his lids opened wide as his lips frowned. I could tell he was annoyed and frustrated that I was going against his idealistic plan for my safety. “Let me do my job, I know these people, I know this family—”

Cutting him off, I snapped. “Are you screwing with me? You know this family? I'm

not trying to fuck with your manhood, but I know this family. You know what you want to see, I know them for who they really are.”

He wanted to peg them as the enemy. But it wasn't until right then that all of that was exposed. I had to decide for myself what was real and what was fake. I deserved an explanation, I deserved to know the truth.

Their truth, not the detective's.

I wasn't going to just run away from it. I couldn't. I wanted to hear it from Birch's own mouth. I had to know exactly what happened and why. Those were answers I didn't want to get from some report or testimony on the stand. I wanted to hear it from his lips. I wanted Birch to look me in the eyes and tell me himself.

That was what I deserved.

I was going back to them. Maybe it was a stupid decision to run into the arms of the criminal that had been the spark to the fire that burned my world down.

But I couldn't forget what they had done for me. I couldn't just erase the life they had given me. They had given me birthdays and Christmases, we had Sunday dinners and beach days in the summer. We camped in the backyard and swam in the lake, we laughed at jokes and played stupid board games.

We were normal on some level, with love and kindness. That was what the detective didn't see, that was what he didn't know. He was already blinded by their dark side, he was never going to be able to see what I had.

“Are you going to fight me tooth and nail on this?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“I'm going to do the right thing, I'm going home. You have questions, I have questions, but we can't get answers if I'm sent someplace else.”

“Fio—” Pointing my finger, I stopped him from saying that name. Clearing his throat, he corrected himself. “Cyprus, please, let us do our job.”

“I'm not stopping you from doing your job, I'm stopping you from fucking up my life even more than it already is. The diary was enough, I have some shit to think about, some shit to run through my head.” Standing up, I pressed my palms down and loomed over the detective. “So if I'm not under arrest, I'd like to just go home. If you have some court ordered authority to lock me up, then do it. Otherwise, I'm done for today.”

He could try and talk me out of it all he wanted to, but I wasn't going to be swayed.

It took them eight years to finally find me, I wasn't going to let it take eight more before I got answers.

“I want my diary.”

“That's evidence.”

“That's mine. I want it back, I deserve that much from you.”

Pursing his lips, he rocked his jaw. “Give me a few minutes, let me see what I can do.” Leaving the room, he returned about fifteen minutes later. Holding out the diary, I gripped the trim, but he didn't release it right away. “Maybe this will help you get

your memory back, I really hope it does. The sooner you see those men for who they really are, the sooner you can start healing.”

“Yeah, healing, that's what I need to focus on.” Drawing my brows up, I plucked the diary free and stood up. “Where were you all those years ago? Where were you when it actually counted?”

“Cyprus—”

“I'm all grown up now, Detective, that little girl is gone.”

Turning my back, I walked out the door.

My skin was thick, my soul was full.

The girl in the diary hadn't existed in years. The only thing I cared about was finding out what really happened to her.

I owed her that much.

Chapter Nine

Birch

How much longer are they going to keep her?

Pacing in front of my car, I couldn't stop glancing up at the police station. I watched the blue suits come and go, all of them wearing some sort of smug grin that I wanted to knock off their fucking jaws.

I hated this place. I hated everything about this fucking place. I had been dragged in here one too many times, only to be treated like an asshole that refused to open for a dick. They would threaten me with time behind bars, they would dangle my freedom over my head in return for information on my father and a clean pass out the other end.

As much as I didn't agree with my dad all the time, he was still my father. I wouldn't throw him to the wolves. That wasn't how I was raised.

“Birch, stop worrying, she's fine.”

“Fine? Fine? They let us go over an hour ago, but they still have her. Why?”

My father shrugged his shoulder, as if this entire thing was nothing and we were just waiting for our takeout order to be ready. “Trust me, she'll be out soon. They don't have shit, they can't keep her. Fuck, I hope they didn't ruin the house too much. I really hate cleaning up after a raid. We still have that cleaning lady's number right?”

Helen was it?”

How can he act so casual about this? Doesn't he see the danger here?

Even if he did, he wouldn't say it. That wasn't who he was. He was the man who always kept a level head. He didn't overreact, he never lost his temper unless he was pushed. And I had only seen him truly lose it a handful of times.

“I don't like this, I don't like this at all.” Clenching my hands into fists, I couldn't sit still. I had to move, I had to do something. Every second that Cyprus was still in that building, the more and more unhinged I felt. “I'm about to go in there and get her myself.”

Groaning, my father shifted in his seat and leaned his head out the window. “Get in and shut up. You aren't doing anything, especially going in there to make a scene. Let's go, in.” Jerking his head towards the driver's seat, I could feel the annoyance in his voice.

Ignoring his demand, I growled under my breath, unable to take my eyes off the building. “What if they're—”

“They're not. Get the fuck in the car, Birch.” His voice was sharp and stern, balancing between the father he was and the boss he needed to be.

Stepping to the driver's side, I looked up at the entrance before tugging the handle. Dropping into the front seat, I slammed the door shut frustrated and worried.

This was not what I wanted and it was the last thing my father or I needed. Cyprus shouldn't be there, she shouldn't be anywhere near this fucking place. I knew that and so did my father.

In the past we always had a heads up before a raid, and my father would send Cyprus out for a bit so she wasn't anywhere around for them to see her. I didn't know what went wrong this time. Our inside snitch, Miguel, he never called us to let us know they were coming.

I'm going to have to talk to him later, find out what the hell happened.

“Better? Does this help?”

“Yes, and you don't have to be a little prick about it.” Flipping his sunglasses down his forehead, he twisted his neck in my direction. “We both know how this goes, Birch.”

“Did they ask you about the Mangoletti's?”

“Yeah, the fuckers said they had reason to believe we're behind their disappearance.” Chuckling, my dad shook his head side to side. “I guess someone said they knew we had a meeting set up, and that we were the last ones to be with them. But the cop wouldn't tell me who ran their mouth. Not that it matters, I'll find out who it was.” His jaw clicked as he clenched his teeth and his mind wandered to all the different ways he could punish the rat.

They had said the same thing to me, trying to intimidate me into telling them everything. I refused, asking for my lawyer and sealing my lips shut. They didn't have anything to hold us on. There was no evidence in our house or the bar to prove we had ever been face to face with that family.

We weren't fucking stupid, that shit had been long destroyed. Lit on fire and turned to ash, it was like it never happened. No bodies had been recovered, no DNA or fingerprints would surface saying that we were linked to the missing father and sons.

The police had suspicions, but as evidence goes, they had shit. Hearsay was enough to give them probable cause to raid our home and arrest us, but without anything other than a snitch and his statement, we were freed.

So why do they still have Cyprus?

“You can't tell me that you're not even a little bit worried about this?” I couldn't hold back the strain in my voice or the fear I felt inside about Cyprus being in the hands of the police. “Why didn't Miguel call us? Why would they have her longer than us? She's not supposed to be here.”

This had been my fear, the only fear I had ever really had. I was afraid that if they found her, they'd take her, and I'd never get to see her again. I couldn't stand the thought of that. The mere idea that she could be stripped from my grasp hurt, it smashed my ice cold heart into tiny bits.

“Obviously he didn't know, Birch. Maybe their onto him, I don't know.” Rolling his eyes, he dropped his gaze into his lap. “But she's a smart girl, she'll probably do better in there than the both of us.” Taking out his wallet, my father flipped through the photos he had in the center slots. “At least this time they didn't take my pictures. I never did get back the one of you and Cyprus at the beach. You remember that day? When you guys were making that sandcastle and it collapsed right when your mother took the picture?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Yeah, I remember.” Smiling as I thought about that moment, my lids hovered in the memory, picturing Cyprus's smile and sun-kissed skin. God she had always been so damn beautiful. I could remember the way her hair smelled like salt and how her skin felt gritty like sandpaper. “Shit, I was what. . . fifteen, sixteen?” Arching a brow, I watched him from the corner of my eye. “How do you know they took it?”

“They took it, who knows why they did it, but they did.” Tipping his head up, he hummed as he thought. “It was back when they tried to slam me for the whole illegal container bit at the freight yard. Remember that?” Rolling his hand as he spoke, I recalled the incident he was referring to and nodded. “I've asked every time they dragged my ass back here and they pretend like they don't know what the hell I'm talking about.”

Why the hell would they take that picture? What could they possibly use it for?

What if. . . What if they. . .

My lids opened wide as I watched my father flip through his wallet. He couldn't see it, he was oblivious and too drunk on his own power to let himself see what could be happening.

“That doesn't make you think at all about what's going on?” Drifting my gaze back to the front doors, I painstakingly searched through the people going in and out. “Maybe they kept that picture for a reason.”

“Birch, this has to stop. You can't keep being so damn paranoid about it. It's been years, it's long forgotten. Trust me on that.”

I wanted to believe him, I've always wanted to believe him. But I could never shake the idea that one day our pedestal would crumble and everything would fall apart. Eventually shit would catch up to us. . .to him. We couldn't hide her forever.

But he didn't see it that way. There was no point in me trying to convince him otherwise. I didn't push it, I shifted the conversation to what really mattered right then. Where the hell was Cyprus?

“How long do we wait then? At what point are we going to do something about this?”

“If she doesn't come out, we go home.”

“What? Fuck that, I'm not just going home.”

“Birch, we'll go home, and we'll wait there. Either she'll call us when she's done, or she'll get dropped off. What's wrong with you?” Angling his head, he slid his glasses down the bridge of his nose, eyes scanning my face.

“You're really not worried? Not at all?”

His brows dipped angrily, as thick lines creased his forehead, and his mouth turned paper thin. “Birch, if I had a reason to worry, we'd already be long gone. Don't doubt her for a second, you can't. And don't doubt me, not with this.”

“I don't doubt her or you, but I don't trust them.”

“Fuck, when are you going to realize that they're not looking for her anymore? They haven't been looking for years now. No one gives a shit, they never did.” Tucking his wallet back into his pocket, he grabbed his bottle of water from the holder and took a long sip. “They're fishing, that's all this is. They want us, they want to lock us away. And they think they can use her to do it.”

“Fishing? They broke down our door, they ripped us out of the house, I think they're doing more than just fishing.” Running my palms up and down my thighs, I let out an audible breath. “Fuck, I hate this shit.”

“Look, look there.” Holding out his hand, a smug grin filled his face. “See, she's right there. What did I tell you?”

Following his finger, Cyprus was walking down the front steps. She was wearing a white jumpsuit, her eyes set on her feet as she made her way towards the parking lot. She looked so sad and upset, with her skin dull and chalky, her eyes swollen and dark.

Was she crying?

Did they make her cry?

Anger bubbled beneath the surface, my rage percolating in my veins with every thump of my heart. The cops were ruthless, they'd do and say anything to try and make you break. Cyprus looked broken, and I was ready to hunt down the bastard that hurt her and fucking kill him.

Jumping out of the car, I jogged across the parking lot. “Hey,” I said, slowing down once I reached her side. “What the hell happened? What's wrong? What did they say to you?”

Flicking her eyes up, she darted them away. “They really pressed me in there, the detective was a dick.” Shrugging her shoulder, she smiled. But it came across as forced, not genuine in any sense. “I didn't give him what he wanted, so don't worry.”

Cyprus tried to walk past me, but I stopped her. “Wait, what did they say to you? What did they ask?”

“I . . . I don't know. Nothing really. They asked a lot of questions, but I told them I didn't know what they were talking about.” Lifting her fingers to her mouth, she plucked at her bottom lip nervously.

She's lying. Why the hell is she lying to me?

“That's bullshit and you know it. What the hell happened in there?”

She couldn't pull this shit with me. I knew her way too well for her to try and act like everything was fine. Something was wrong.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

The whites of her eyes were bloodshot, small red scratches clawed their way over the glossy orbs like shattered glass. Her muscles were visibly shaking, fingers bouncing and jerking as she did her best to steady her hand.

Taking in a deep breath, she stuffed her hands into her armpits and snapped. “Nothing, Birch, just drop it. Can we go now? I just want to go home.”

Running my eyes around her face, she wouldn't look at me. Her big brown eyes went to the sky, to the ground, to the cars around us. But not to me.

What did they do to you?

Watching her, it was easy to see that she had been through hell in there. She was trying to put on a brave face and act like her backbone was made of steel. But it was her eyes that made me realize there was far more to it than just a few dickhead cops who gave her a hard time.

This can wait. I can't jump down her throat, not here, not like this.

“Okay, let's go home.” Wrapping my arm around her shoulder, we started towards the car. Cyprus picked up her pace, slowly pulling free of my grasp. Her shoulder dipped, forcing my arm to slip off.

What the fuck is going on?

This isn't her, this isn't the girl I fell in love with.

Something is different. . .

Eyeing her cautiously, I let my hand fall to my side. I didn't try to reach out and touch her again. Something was off and I wasn't sure what it was.

Her back was stiff and rigid, hands anxiously twisting and twining in front of her waist. She kept shifting her head side to side, but she never took her eyes off her feet.

I couldn't figure it out. I didn't know what the hell was going on inside her head.

My father climbed out of the car and held the door open so she could get in the passenger seat. Waving her hand, she brushed off his generosity. "No, that's okay, I'll sit in the back. I need a little time to clear my head."

Crooking his jaw, my father's lips turned down. "Sure, I understand." Opening the rear door, Cyprus slipped inside with a tight smile and a nod.

Closing the door, my dad got back in without another word. I wasn't sure if he could sense what I was. There was no denying what I felt and saw. The woman who came out of that place was not my Cyprus.

"How did you get the car?" she asked, tucking her hands in between her thighs.

"Jerry helped with that after we called him."

"Oh." Cyprus turned her head to the window, ending the weak conversation.

The drive home was quiet, none of us spoke. Cyprus had her chin resting on her palm, eyes glued out the window. Dad looked straight ahead, every so often fiddling with the radio or the cuff links on his suit.

And I stared out into the distance, allowing muscle memory to get us home. All I kept thinking about was what they did to my girl in there. I was afraid they had fucked her brain up, warping her mind and pushing her away from us.

It wouldn't be hard for a seasoned detective to manipulate his words and cross you over the bridge to his side. It didn't work on me, but I was trained for that type of pressure. Cyprus wasn't. We never planned on her being brought in for questioning. We failed her in that regard, never giving her the tools she'd need to stand up in a situation like that.

Cyprus was strong as hell, she had a great head on her shoulders. But we kept her at arms length from some of this shit for years. All she ever heard was stories. We filled her head with the knowledge of what we did, and how dangerous it was. But we never let her get close until now. The Mangoletti family was her first real experience like that.

I knew it was a risk when she came with us. And to be honest, I didn't think it was going to end the way it had. But they fucked with us, they wanted to barter with my woman.

They deserved what they got.

Parking the car, I heard both doors open and close before I even had time to pull the keys free.

What the fuck is going on here?

Running my fingertips up and down the length of the key, I watched my father and Cyprus as they entered the house. He rubbed her shoulder, speaking inaudible words into her ear. She smiled and nodded, her muscles tensed and tight as she pulled from his hand too.

It's like she doesn't want to be around us. What the fuck did they say to her?

Raking my fingers through my hair, I sat alone, confused by the person who came out of that building. That wasn't my girl, that wasn't the woman I fell in love with.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

My Cyprus would have given me a kiss when she came out of the station, she would have embraced me with a warm hug and bright smile. She would have told me every single word they used and how they said it.

That's not what she did. She had shut down, she refused to even indulge my questions about what happened.

Gripping the keys in my palm, I squeezed. The metal cut into my skin, but it didn't feel it. Warm blood trickled down my wrist, and all I could feel was the anger ravaging my insides. Someone had gotten into her head, someone had methodically placed information in her brain about us, about who we were.

That was the feeling I got from how she was acting. She was cold and removed, withdrawn from the people she had loved before the police got their hands on her.

Could they know? No, it's not that, it can't be that.

They probably filled her head with loads of shit, making her think we're evil. And that wasn't entirely wrong, but it was misplaced. We were bad, we did things that the law didn't agree with.

But we did it because that's how this shit worked. We all had a set of rules to follow, and those that went against the grain, they got what was coming to them. It's not like they didn't know the risk, it's not like the pricks we dealt with were oblivious to the end result of screwing us over.

I'm going to change her mind, I'm going to make her remember who we are—who

she is. I'm going to bring her back to me.

Storming into the house, my father was in the kitchen, pouring a glass of whiskey. His back was to me, head hanging down as he eyed his glass.

“What the hell was that all about?”

“What?” he asked, looking at me over his shoulder.

“Cyprus, what the hell is her problem?” Checking over my shoulder and around the stairs, I made sure she was out of earshot. “Can't you see it? Isn't she acting different?”

“Birch, she just went through her first interrogation, she's a bit worked up. Remember the first time they took you in? You weren't exactly king shit in there.”

“Dad, this isn't the same. Something isn't right—”

Cutting me off, he swirled his glass in the air. “Don't worry, she'll be fine. Come, have a drink with me, it'll calm your nerves.”

Stalking to his side, I whispered through clenched teeth. “How can you know that? What if it's something else, what if they—”

“They didn't. If they did, where the hell do you think we'd be? Do you think I'd be standing here pouring this shot? Do you think you'd be talking to me right now?” Slugging his drink, he exhaled a hard breath. “It's fine, just give her a little time to get her shit together.”

Scrubbing my jaw, I glared into his eyes. “Let's hope her getting her shit together doesn't mean her fucking mind opening up and giving her the answers.”

“Fuck, Birch, I’m not doing this right now.” Slamming the glass down on the counter, he snarled. “I’m not doing this shit anymore with you.” Stepping into my chest, he threw up a finger and poked me in the temple. “Get it in your goddamn head, no one is looking for her anymore. But if you keep talking about it, if you can’t keep your fucking mouth shut, that’s when the problems will come in.” Flaring his nostrils, his lids hooded, mouth taut.

We stood toe to toe, chest to chest. A father and his son, each demanding to hold the power. He was trying to get me to back down, to bow my head and agree like a good son should. But I couldn’t.

“The problem won’t be me. It never was me.” Stepping in a hair, I brought my lips to his ear and whispered. “The problem was you. It was always you. Everything that happened was because you lost control.”

Shaking my head, I watched his eyes glaze over. I waited. I waited for him to react, to fill my ear with threats of a bullet in the head if I didn’t keep my mouth shut. My father might be calm with the men he dealt with, but when it came to me, he had no problem letting it free.

In one quick motion, my father socked me in the jaw. I knew what I said would get to him, calling him out with the truth and not the fucking lies he had tried to mold into the reality we lived with for years.

All of this was because of him. Period.

“You ungrateful piece of shit.” The veins in his forehead throbbed, angrily pressing against the skin in an act of threat. “Fuck you.” Grinding his teeth together, his hands hung in tight fists by his side.

But he didn’t hit me again. Taking a long step around my body, he stalked out of the

kitchen.

I was tired of pretending. I was done playing his game. If the sky came crashing down on us, I wasn't going to be there to catch him.

There was a woman I loved, a woman I would do anything for.

I knew from the sound of her voice and the look in her eyes; she needed me.

And I was going to have to work to get her back.

Chapter Ten

Cyprus

Sliding down the bathroom wall, I dug the diary out from inside the jumpsuit and clutched it against my chest, on the verge of busting into tears. I had been trying since I left the station to recall a single memory from my past or a plausible explanation for the diary they had found. There was nothing.

The faces of my parents went no deeper than that single picture. They were a one dimensional figment of my imagination, a shiny piece of paper that gave me no answers.

Birch's name was written boldly in black ink on the pages inside, and there was no denying that he had been a part of something, but what it was. . . my head wouldn't go to that place, it refused to let me imagine that the love of my life would have kept this from me.

Maybe someone else wrote this. It's possible that this girl isn't me.

Birch wouldn't lie to me for all these years. . . would he?

I didn't want to believe it. That would mean my entire life had been a lie. Everything I thought I had, the great family fate had entrusted me to. . . it would all be fake.

It's you, this is your diary. Stop trying to force it to be something else.

I felt different than I thought I would. The second I saw Birch in the parking lot, my chest tightened and my heart sped up. Sweat beaded up on the back of my neck and my body began to tingle with nervous twitches. Inside I was torn up, split between running into his arms and darting in a different direction.

I wanted to scream and demand answers. I wanted to throw myself into his chest and let his embrace comfort me like it had so many times before. I wanted to slam the diary in his face and force him to tell me everything; where it came from, whose it was, and why it was in our home.

This treacherous mix of needing him to make me feel safe and confronting the dark truth dug into my brain with razor sharp talons.

What if I'm wrong? What if the police are wrong?

I couldn't imagine putting Birch through any false accusations or heartbreak from a lack of trust. Deep down I loved him, but if this all turned out to be true, then what?

What the fuck am I going to do?

Why the hell can't I fucking remember?!

Pushing the diary against my forehead, I wished it would feed me the answers I needed. Desperately I begged the pages to spill their secrets until every piece of my body surged in pain.

This isn't working. I have to look deeper.

Resting the book in my lap, I opened it and started reading it from the beginning. The first few entries were simple, they lacked any real depth or emotion.

Fiona went on and on about how she couldn't wait for summer camp and that she really hoped she would get the set of earrings she wanted for her birthday. She talked of a boy at school she thought was cute, his name was Dylan, and I guess he had really dreamy eyes.

She liked to draw, and I found that strange, because not once had I ever picked up a pencil and a piece of blank paper to doodle or sketch a damn thing. You would think that if this little girl was me, even without my memories, there would still be certain traits that we would have in common.

If that was my past, then the person I once was truly had been erased. That girl had been wiped off the face of the earth, along with anything that resembled her.

Page after page, I read her thoughts, trying to link that girl to myself. Fiona enjoyed watching ice skating, she hated tomatoes and onions. She loved animals and really wished for a dog one day, but had to settle for the time being with a ferret named Rocko.

She hated her bony knees, and how her pinkie toe curved in. She had a best friend named Emily, and both the girls wanted to marry the singer from some boy band when they got older. They even had a pact, that if the singer chose one over the other, then the girl left out would still marry the second hottest guy in the group.

Line after line, I watched this young girl's life transform. She documented when she got her period at twelve, and how she was afraid to tell her mom because they had never really talked about it before.

There was a fight she had with her parents about going to some movie, and how she couldn't wait till she was old enough to finally get her license to drive. But nothing in there gave me that 'aha' moment and open up Pandora's box inside my brain.

Her entries slowed down around the time she turned thirteen, writing on and off, then nothing before the entries that changed her life.

Knock! Knock!

Snapping my head up, I didn't answer the taps on the door. I sat quiet, listening and hoping that whoever it was would just leave me alone. I couldn't deal with this. I had thought I could, I had expected to walk outside and not feel any type of fear or uneasiness. In my mind, everything would be the same until I figured it out.

That didn't happen. Birch's hand on my shoulder made me quiver, forcing me to question everything he had ever told me. Nick's pep talk when we got home made me sick, my stomach churned and I felt the vomit as it sat in the back of my throat. All I could imagine was him storming into my home and killing my parents.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I wanted to have a family so badly, maybe I missed the reality at my feet. . .

Holding my breath, I stayed quiet, sitting on the floor with my knees to my chest. Staring at the door, tears swelled over my eyes, making the room blurry. Short quick bursts of air snapped through my lungs as I did my best to not break down and sob uncontrollably.

Wiping them away, I exhaled gently, doing my best to not lose it and stay sane. I had to keep a clear head, I had to be able to pick apart all the details of what I did know to see behind the surface.

Fuck! Get it together!

A few more knocks racked the door making me jump. Dragging my hands through my hair, I licked my dry lips and spoke as casually as I could. “Yeah?”

“Are you alright in there?”

It's Birch. . .

“Uh, yeah, I'm fine.” Forcing my voice to stay steady, I choked out a few words. “I'll be out in a minute.”

“You sure? You didn't seem okay at all after we left, and you've been locked in there since we got home.”

Taking in a deep breath, I closed my eyes. “I'm good, Birch, really. Just give me a

few minutes.”

“Sure, no problem, I'll be downstairs.” His feet vibrated the floor as he walked off, and I could hear the sound of his steps as he went down the stairs, leaving me alone.

Birch didn't believe me. I could tell by his voice he knew I was full of shit. I hated lying to him, I had never really done it before. It was stupid of me to think that he wouldn't notice something was up.

Why do I feel bad about not being honest, when he's been able to keep up this lie for years?

Maybe I don't know him as well as I thought.

Exhaling, I stretched my legs out across the floor, unable to filter the jumble of shit inside my head.

A part of me was excited to learn about who I was, while the rest was anxious and upset about what this all could mean in the end.

The man I loved with everything I had could be a fictitious character that never existed. Just the thought sucker punched me in the gut, leaving me keeled over in a pain I didn't know what to do with.

I thought that losing my family was the worst kind of hurt. . . I was wrong.

Pushing myself up, I stripped free from the jumpsuit and tossed on some clothes. Stepping to the sink, I turned on the water and splashed my face. The water felt good as it cleansed my skin, erasing the salty tears.

Leaning over the sink, I let the cold water run down off my chin. Every drop was a

mix of sadness and pain, disappearing into the drain forever. I didn't want that for my life, I wasn't ready to lose everything I had with Birch.

I couldn't just forget the feelings I had for him. I wasn't ready to walk away from the love I felt inside. Deep down, I still wanted the feelings between us to be real. I just had to find a way to build a bridge over the trench that had just opened up.

I'm going to figure this out. I have to.

I'm strong, I can do this.

All the answers were right there inside me, everything I needed to know the truth was in my brain. I just had to find it. Standing up straight, I dried my face and fixed my hair, ready to hit this thing head on. I deserved more than this, and so did my parents.

Opening the bathroom door, I stepped over everything the cops had discarded on the floor and stashed the diary under the mattress on my side of the bed.

For now I wasn't going to let Birch know I had it. I planned on taking my time, reading it again, allowing her messages to sink in with the hopes that it would ignite some flame in the back of my mind.

Making my way downstairs, I found Birch and his Dad in the kitchen, cleaning up the mess from the raid. "They really did a number in here, huh?" I asked, slipping into a chair at the table. "I don't remember it being this bad before."

Grunting, Nick flashed his eyes at me over his shoulder. "They really wanted to find something today." Turning back to the cupboard, he stacked the plates inside and closed the door. "Valentina would have shit herself if she saw it like this." Chuckling lightly, he shifted against the counter and leaned back. "Remember that time she went off on that cop? When she got in his face and reamed him a new asshole for dumping

her grandmother's silverware on the floor?"

Birch grinned and nodded his head. "I do. She did that thing with her eyes where they went all crazy, throwing her arms all around and shit." Flicking his eyes to me, he smiled. "The guy actually picked them all up one by one as she gave him orders on where they went."

"That's right, your mother knew how to throw her weight around." Nick's face lit up, his eyes getting that twinkle I always see when he talks about her. "The good thing is they didn't find shit. It's not like they ever have, I don't know why they would think this time would be any different."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, keeping my eyes on my fingers as I picked at my nails.

Nick scoffed, going back to straightening up the counter. “Of course I am. Like we'd really be that stupid to keep anything involving those assholes in here. The fucking cop even had the balls to tell me that he expected to find them in here.” Shaking his head, he meticulously set the coffee pot and toaster back in their respective places.

“I wouldn't be so sure.” Instantly I wanted to shove my foot into my mouth. I shouldn't have said that, but it came out on its own.

Birch walked towards me, taking the seat at my side. “What do you mean? Did they say they found something? What do they know, Cyprus?”

Shrugging my shoulder, I couldn't look him in the eyes. “No, it's just that after what happened at the beach, how can you be so sure that they didn't find anything? There was a contract with Antoine's signature on it, there could be witnesses that saw us driving there or leaving. You don't know for sure what they know.” Slowly, I let my eyes flutter up to meet Birch's. “Maybe they found something you thought they never would.”

His brows dipped in hard, head tilting in wonder. Birch stared at me, questioning what the hell I could mean. His gaze began to shift around my body, as if he was looking for something.

A wire. . . He thinks I'm wearing a wire.

“I'm not tapped if that's what you're thinking.” Holding out my arms, I leaned back in the chair. “Go on, check if you want to.”

“What the fuck are you doing? Why are you talking like this then?” Drawing his thumb over his lip, he flicked his eyes between his father and me. “It's like you're a different person.”

“Oh yeah? Who do you think I am then?”

I wasn't sure exactly what I was trying to do. It was like I wanted to entice him to tell me, but I couldn't spit out the words I really wanted to use. My tongue refused to speak what my brain was telling it to.

Fear. Fear was the binding holding me stagnant. Fear of the truth, fear of the unknown, fear of losing everyone I loved all over again.

I just want to be wrong. Let all of this be wrong.

I wanted to think that maybe they had both been trying to protect me. Maybe it wasn't what I expected it to be at all. Maybe they found me with that diary and were trying to help me heal without reopening the wound.

His name is in there, you can't ignore that.

Fuck! Why the hell did this have to happen?

Why couldn't things have just stayed the way they were?

“What the hell is going on with you, Cyprus? I don't understand—”

“Birch,” Nick snapped, whipping around to face us. “Give the girl time to relax. Of

course she isn't herself, she just went through hell with the cops. You got to let it settle. And they didn't find shit, we know better than to leave breadcrumbs for them to follow.”

Nibbling on my thumb, I looked between them. “Is that what you think? Do you think letting it settle is all I need?” Standing up quickly, I felt my eyes begin to tear. “Because right now I'm not sure what the hell I'm doing.” With heavy strides, I stomped to the sliding glass doors and tore them open.

I was a fucking mess and I knew it. I didn't want to be around either one of them right then. I couldn't be.

My mouth was about to go on a rampage of its own and I wasn't sure I'd be able to control it. I knew it wasn't fair for me to just jump down their throats. I wanted to take more time, read the diary over and over to see if my memory would return on its own.

I wanted my memories of the past and what happened. Even if they weren't good, even if they would change everything I had now, I wanted them.

No more lies, no more bull-shit painted with gold to lead me one way or another.

I didn't want to learn about who I was or what happened from someone else. I wanted to know it for myself, I wanted to see it for myself.

It was time.

Chapter Eleven

Birch

“Cyprus, wait!” Yelling, I jumped up from the table, ready to chase her out the door.

“Let her go, Birch,” my father barked, lunging forward to grab my arm. “Just let her go.”

Jerking my arm free, I glowered in anger. I felt my cheeks heat and my muscles tighten as we stared at each other.

I was angry with my father because all of this was his fault, and he couldn't fucking see it; either that or he was too stubborn to want to see it. He never listened to me when I told him he would regret everything we did. I wish he had.

Every single thing that was happening had been because of him and the choices he had made. I hadn't asked for any of this, this was the hand I was dealt. But he could have given her options, he could have done things so much differently. He didn't.

My father claimed it all came from someplace good, a place that was warm and full and didn't have any shadows like the world we lived in. He tried to tell me that he was giving her something better than what she already had, but who was he to judge?

I didn't need her to tell me what was bothering her, I already knew.

It was written all over her face, embedded into her body language and the distance

she put between us. When I looked her in eyes as she sat at the table all I could see was sadness. Her gaze was flat and cold, lost in thoughts I hoped she would never have to experience.

But here we were, the silent battle raging in unspoken words and soundless gestures.

She fucking knows. . .

“Don't you see what's happening? Can't you get it through your thick skull that this isn't what you think it is? This has nothing to do with the police questioning her, it goes so much deeper.” Shaking my head, I chewed up my words and spit them in his face. “This is all because of you. I'm going after her, I won't let you stop me. Someone has to fix what you broke.”

His eyes crinkled, mouth twitching at the corners. He didn't speak, he stood stone still, hands opening and closing by his side. I thought he was going to hit me again, but he stepped back, nostrils flaring wide as he nodded his head with a light flick.

With firm strides I started for the door, only to be stopped in my tracks. “I know you love her, and I know she loves you. Hopefully she can forgive me, I never meant to hurt her.”

Looking back over my shoulder, my father's eyes had softened. The black globes that were normally there had turned gray, his shoulders rolled forward and his body slumped. I knew he felt what he was saying. He might not ever speak the words out loud, but he knew that he fucked up all those years ago.

He tried to make up for it, he tried to give her as normal of a life as he could. He wanted her to start over, to escape and find solace with us. But that came at a cost, it came with thin emotions that were so brittle a single cough could snap them in half.

“Her forgiveness isn't up to me, Dad.”

I didn't wait for him to answer, and I didn't really care if she ever forgave him or not. All I wanted was for her to understand that despite what she knew now, I loved her, I've always loved her since the very beginning.

How I felt about her wasn't part of the scene we created. My feelings were real, I felt them in every inch of my being. I couldn't live without her.

The lie my father created had nothing to do with what we built together. I didn't pretend for all this time just to keep her close, I didn't fake these emotions to keep her thoughts from floating back into the past.

I loved her. It was that simple.

Searching the yard, she wasn't by the pool or my mom's flower garden. When we were growing up and Cyprus felt sad, she always gravitated to my mother's garden. I'd find her sitting in the flowers, staring up at the sky, her cheeks cloaked in the sadness my father created.

And I never said a fucking word to her. I'm such an asshole!

She had told me once that it made her feel like she was being hugged by her birth mother. She couldn't explain why, all she could say was that it felt like her mother's arms were the petals, soothing her skin.

Scanning the trees, the thought crossed my mind that she might have gone out to the pond. It was quiet there, a good place to collect your thoughts and ground yourself again when it felt like the world was spinning on its axis, trying to throw you off.

“Cyprus!” calling out, I followed the game trail through the thick trees, listening for

her.

Where the hell is she?

She couldn't have gotten that far. The woods around our home were thick and dense, you had to stay on the path or they'd gobble you up. Then it hit me, and I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it to begin with.

Shit, I know where she is.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

With tender feet, I crunched through the leaves and debris, doing my best to not be too loud. There was no doubt she knew I was coming and would find her eventually, but I didn't want to scare her off.

Rounding a few thick trees, I stopped and breathed a sigh of relief. Cyprus was sitting on the ground, running her hands over the earth around her thighs.

“Figured you'd find me here at some point,” she said with her back to me. “What do you want?”

“I'm surprised you stayed then.” Walking to her side, I sat down beside her, cupping my hands in my lap. “Why didn't you run when you heard me coming?”

Her face hung low, chin dipping into her chest. “I don't want to run, I want to learn.”

“What do you want, Cyprus? What do you want me to say?”

Her head twisted side to side, lips turning down. “I don't want you to say anything.”

Letting out a deep breath, I tipped my head back to look up at the sky. “Tell me what you know. What did they say to you?”

“Birch, don't.”

“Why? Why won't you tell me? If I knew then I could—”

“You can't do anything. I need to figure it out for myself.” Her eyes finally came up

to mine, and for the first time since we came home I finally felt like she was going to be honest with me. “I want to learn on my own, I want to see it on my own. I need my memories. That's the only thing that will help right now.”

I understood what she meant when she said it. For so many years she knew nothing, but she knew it was stored someplace inside her head. She had told me that she felt like her brain was on mute, and she wished there was a button to turn everything back on.

It hurt me to know that I had the answers she needed and couldn't give them to her. I almost had several times, when I found her crying alone, filled with so much pain. I just couldn't do it.

When I was younger I kept it in because my father told me I had to, but as we got older, I did it because I had lost the strength to expose him for what he had done. She was happy to have our family, for all the wrongs, my father had done what he set out to do. He gave her her life back.

It wasn't just her relationship with him that kept me from telling her. I didn't tell her because I was scared she'd run away, that she would leave if she knew the truth. The thought of her leaving, that cut me deep.

And then one day it all stopped. Cyprus stopped crying over the family she couldn't find, she stopped questioning her past. I thought that maybe she had finally given up, that the prison her memories were encased in had ultimately locked its doors for good.

I was wrong. I don't think it ever really went away, it went dormant, waiting idly by for the perfect moment to spring back.

My only worry now was what she felt about me. I didn't want her to doubt us or to

fall out of love with me. . . because we were real.

Besides keeping my father's secret, everything else we shared was the truth. My feelings, my fears, the laughs and arguments; all of it.

“You know I love you, right?” Picking up a small bushel of pine needles, I started plucking them free one by one. “I really do love you.”

“I don't know what to believe right now.” Blinking slowly, her brows folded as her eyes searched mine. “There's so much that's still missing, and so much that's been put in its place.”

“Why did you come here?” I asked, dropping the bushel and resting back on my palms.

Cyprus looked around, stopping at the tree we had told her I had found her under years ago. “Because this is where it started. This was where I met you for the first time, this was where my memories began and ended all in the same breath.”

My heart pounded with her words, taking me back to that day, that moment, the instant her eyes opened wide and her new life began. All I ever wanted to do was save her.

I wanted to save her then and I wanted to save her now.

“Do you think knowing the truth will really help you?”

“Yes. Why the hell wouldn't it? Wouldn't you want to know?”

Shrugging my shoulder, I shifted on the ground and scooted closer to her. “I don't know, maybe. I guess I just don't understand what you think you'll gain from

knowing. What if what you learn hurts you more? How will you feel then?"

"I'm already broken." Lowering her lids, Cyprus pursed her lips. "How much worse could it get, Birch?"

How the hell do I answer that?

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Do you want me to tell you the truth or what you want to hear?”

Glaring, her mouth snarled, cheeks flushing crimson. “Fuck you.” Grabbing a handful of dirt, she threw it in my face. “Fuck you!” Screaming at the top of her lungs, she started to stand.

Her hands dug into the ground, fingers stabbing the earth like spikes. She had made it to her knees, wobbling as she started to cry and gasp for air.

I knew she was trying to run, that she wanted nothing more than to be as far away from me as possible.

“I didn't say that to upset you, I swear.” Lunging forward, I snagged her forearm and held her steady so she didn't fall. “I would never hurt you purposely.”

Whipping her face in my direction, tears streamed down her cheeks, falling like heavy raindrops to the forest floor. “It's a little too late for that, don't you think?”

“No, it's never too late to fix mistakes. Not for us, not for what we have. What we have is real, Cyprus, we were meant to find each other.” Holding her tight, I kept her in place, refusing to let her go.

I wasn't going to lose the best thing to ever walk into my life because of something my father had done. Decisions were made, choices that could never be taken back. But we had found each other, that was all that mattered to me.

“Let me go, Birch.” Her small fist balled tight, arm tense and locked in place. “I just

want to go.”

“Do you love me? Do you still feel it like I do?” Searching her eyes, my heart stopped beating while I waited for her to answer.

Fuck she still looked so beautiful even in her rage and sadness. Her lips were puffed up as she took in ragged painful breaths. The small freckles across her nose began to disappear as her skin flushed bright red, and her nostrils flared.

“I love what we had, I loved the man I thought I knew. But now I'm stuck wondering where the lies end and the truth begins.”

“How can you say that? Can't you feel it? Don't you feel it?” My voice begged her to listen to her heart, to what we shared and felt.

I knew it was still there, it wasn't gone. There was no way that the love we experienced could just vanish in a day. It wasn't possible, what we had was too strong for that.

Right?

Even if she doubted what her past was made of, she had to know that our love came from someplace whole.

“I feel betrayed, I feel like my entire life has been a goddamn lie.” Thinning her lips, her teeth clenched as years of pent up anger fed her words. “I feel like the man I thought I trusted fed me bullshit as easily as he fed me dinner. What I feel hurts more than I think you could ever realize.”

Lifting my hand to her cheek, I brushed her skin, wiping away the tears she continued to cry. “I love you, that's not a lie, and it's never been a lie.”

Leaning in, I attempted to kiss her, but she turned her face so I couldn't. "Don't. I can't do this right now. I can't take the idea that you spent all these years lying to my face."

"Tell me what you know, just tell me so I can make this right." Holding her chin firmly in my hands, I forced her to look at me. "I want to make this right."

Just tell me what you know!

"Don't fucking give me that shit." Shoving my hand away, Cyprus pushed herself off the ground and rose to her feet. Her arms flailed in the air, waving erratically. "You knew! You knew and you chose to say nothing!"

Holding out my hands, I didn't get up. I wanted her to have this moment, to feel like she had some form of control. She needed that, she needed to stand on the pedestal and let the world hear her cries.

"How could you do this to me?" Water poured from her eyes, and she looked so fragile and young all over again, just like she had that day; when she woke to a world she couldn't remember and faces she had never seen. "How come you never told me?"

"I couldn't." My heart broke as I watched the woman I loved crumble and dissolve before me. It hurt, it hurt more than anything I could have imagined.

"You couldn't. . ." Pausing, her body went limp, arms hanging lifelessly by her sides. "Of course you couldn't, you're too much of a fucking coward to stand up to your father." Thinning her lips, her chin crooked hard. "I'm glad that what he told you when you were a child still means something today. That says a lot, Birch, really it does. You say you love me, but I'm not even sure you really know what that word means. If you loved me, you would have done the right thing long before now."

Wiping her cheeks, Cyprus took in deep long breaths through her nose. She didn't say anything else, she just stared at me, her eyes boring a hole into my heart.

She was right. I was a fucking coward.

I could have told her everything so many times, and I chose not to. Not because I didn't want her to know, but because fear kept me from speaking.

When we were kids, yes, my father was the voice of reason. He wanted a clean slate, he wanted her to never know about what happened so she would willingly stay with us. I hadn't agreed then, and I didn't agree now.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

But as time went on and the years slipped between our fingers, it became something I didn't want to share because of fear. I was afraid of how she would react. I was afraid she wouldn't look at me the same and I wasn't sure I could deal with that.

It didn't matter. Cyprus found out. What she knew exactly I still wasn't sure, but regardless, she knew more than I had ever spoken out loud to anyone other than my father.

The fear I felt began to spiral and transform. Panic was setting in and my mind began to race with all the things she could use against us. With just her testimony she could put my father and I away for life.

“Let me fix this, Cyprus. Let me tell you the truth, all of it.”

“No,” she barked, cutting the air with her hand. “I don't want anymore lies. I'll find the answers myself, I'll see it in my head and learn it on my own. I don't want to have anymore lies shoved down my throat. I'm done with this shit, Birch. I'm out, I'm not one of you, I never was.”

With quick steps, Cyprus stormed back towards the house, her arms stiff and rigid as they swung in tandem with her feet. She didn't look back at me, she never turned to give me one last glance. She just walked with purpose.

In that moment I knew everything just got a whole lot harder.

I was losing her. You fucking lost her.

I needed her back. Good luck, you might as well have killed her parents yourself.

I won't let her go. That's not your choice to make.

Chapter Twelve

Cyprus

Ihate him! I hatehim!

I hate. . .

Hate was a strong word. It wasn't a word that should be tossed around. People say it all the time, but I don't think anyone really stops to think about what it means.

Hate: Intense hostility and aversion usually deriving from fear, anger, or sense of injury. An extreme dislike or disgust.

Did I really hate Birch? No.

I hated how he lied to me. I hated that he had kept such a sensitive secret from me for all these years, knowing that it was all I ever wanted.

I wanted to know who I was.

He had been there through my tears, through my countless sobbing rambles as I went on and on about needing to know. He had rubbed my back and held me when I was at my worst. When I couldn't go to school because there was no history to give them, when I couldn't go to a regular doctor because my name and birthday were unknown.

He stood by me and hugged me, kissing my forehead and whispering sweet nothings

into my ear just so I felt special when I thought the world had forgotten about me. When I felt abandoned and unloved, Birch gave me what I craved.

And all that time he had the key to what I needed.

How could he do this?!

Slamming the bedroom door, I threw myself into a rage and started kicking things on the floor. I punched the wall, I stomped a picture of Birch and I on the floor, crunching my heel into the shattered glass.

My hands were in my hair and my heart was racing, I could barely function. All I wanted to do was break stuff. I wanted to get this all out, destroy everything I could get my hands on just to release the anger that was settling inside my chest.

I want it all gone! Everything!

Darting to the bed, I pulled the diary out and held it by the binding, ready to destroy the one thing that had brought all this back. My fingers clutched the worn leather, twisting it back and forth.

When something fell out from inside. A square piece of paper, folded in half, floated to the ground like a falling leaf. Next to it was a picture, face down, with a handwritten date penned on the back.

What the hell is this?

July, two thousand and eleven?

Bending down, I picked up the paper and photo. Flipping the image over, I stared at it unable to blink.

It was Birch and I, smiling with our arms around each other and a crumbled sandcastle between us. I remembered the picture, I remembered the day it was taken and how happy I felt at the time.

We had spent all day building that damn sandcastle, only for it to fall apart right when Valentina snapped the picture. Nick was sitting in the background under the umbrella, laughing his ass off. Birch and I were covered in sand, our cheeks rosy and bright red from staying in the sun all day.

And that night. . . That was the first night we made love.

Just thinking about it made my heart hammer inside my chest and my sex throb with shadowed memories of his cock entering me for the first time. His parents had gone out to dinner and movie, and we had the entire house to ourselves.

We hadn't planned on that being the night, but it turned out to be the greatest night of my life.

Dropping to the floor, I tucked the picture back in the diary and unfolded the paper. It looked old, like it had been written years before. The white was now tinted a faded yellow, the ink had sweat and bled out around the edges.

I could never have prepared myself for what was written. Words that had been sealed away and forgotten with my thoughts.

Dear F,

I can not give you the answers you are looking for. I can't even begin to understand what this might be like for you. But I want to help. I want to fix it. The man is not as bad as you might think, he's actually a pretty good guy.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I know you don't see it now, and I know it might be hard for you to ever see it. But I think things are going to work out. At least I hope they will work out, I guess we won't really know until the time comes.

You know you're right. Your dreams will take you back, you will always have that, even if you don't remember it when you wake up. I promise you that somewhere inside, when your eyes close and you fall asleep, you will see your parents again.

You were wondering if I was like you, if I was here because he made me. Well, I am like you in a way, I also wasn't given a choice. Except, I'm here because I have to be, not because he took me, but because I was born into this. I wish I could answer all your questions and give you what you want. I'm sorry I can't.

But I can tell you one thing. I don't know if it will help, but I sit in the right corner because that was where he used to make me sit when I was punished. I guess it's habit and nothing more than that. It's not really my favorite spot, I just go there because I'm used to it.

I hope one day you get the answers you're looking for. And I hope one day we can really be friends, I'd like that. I want you to trust me, I tried not to lie to you, but somethings aren't for me to say.

I know you'll probably never read this letter, not if what he wants to do works. All of this will probably just get burned up, turned into ashes so no one ever sees it. He's out there looking for you now. I'm supposed to go help him after I remove your stuff from this room, but I had to do this first.

If you do get to read this, I just want you to know that I'm sorry.

I'm sorry this happened.

I'm sorry you're scared and confused.

I'm sorry you lost your parents the way you did.

I know it's not really my fault, but I also know my father will never say these things to you. You didn't deserve this and none of this was your fault. So don't ever think that you did something wrong, because you didn't.

I'm also sorry that I read your diary.

I hope you find peace, F. I hope your life goes on and you get everything you wish for.

I hope that we meet on the other side and you don't remember us this way. Because there is so much I feel for you that I can't understand.

All I can do is hope that things will get better for all of us.

—B

Dropping the note, my heart slammed inside my chest. He's always loved me, just like I've always loved him. . .

Chapter Thirteen

Birch

I'm not a man.

Sitting by the pool, I let my feet dangle in the icy cold water. I had so many things I wanted to say to her, but I said none of them.

Cyprus locked herself away in our room after leaving the woods, refusing to even acknowledge that I was at the door. She wouldn't answer me when I called her name, she didn't yell at me to go away or tell me to go fuck myself.

I wish she had. That hurt more than any of the cuss words she could have thrown my way. Not hearing her voice, not having her scream at me that I was a dick or an asshole, that I could go fuck myself over and over; that silence was so much harder to take.

Fuck! Why the hell didn't I make her listen?

I let her down. . .

Hanging my head, I cupped my face in my palms and growled to myself. I was so frustrated that I had never once over the years told her the truth.

I fucking should have, she deserved to know.

“Did you tell her?” my father asked, forcing me to lift my head.

“No, she doesn't want to hear it from me or anyone else. She wants to learn it on her own. I just have no fucking clue what she knows already, she won't say shit.”

“Can you blame her?” Crouching down beside me, he swung his feet around and slipped them into the pool. “She obviously knows enough to know we took everything from her—”

“You took her everything from her, not me. I helped to save her.”

“Think of it however you want, but we're both at fault here. I might have done the shit that led us to all of this, but you. . .” Pointing his finger at me, he cocked his head. “You're the one she loves. She could give a shit about me and what I did, but you're the one she trusted the most, you're the one she gave her heart to.”

My eyes turned to slits, unable to believe that he had the nerve to put any of this on me. I was a damn child when everything happened. I had no say, I had no voice or control in what he decided to do.

I did as I was told. Period.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? I helped her, I helped remove the pain. I didn't cause that shit, you did.”

“It's like this, your mother and I didn't always agree on everything. But no matter what I did, as long as she heard it from me first, eventually she got over it. Cyprus is hurt because you never told her the truth, it doesn't matter what your intentions were; saving her, hurting her—right now, it all looks the same in her eyes.”

“You told me not to, you're the one who told me to keep my mouth shut. So I did.

Who was I supposed to give my loyalty to, you or her?"

"Birch," my father said, reaching out and gripping my shoulder. "When you're a child things are different. Yes, I expected you to keep your mouth shut, but you're a grown man now, it's time for you to decide what you tell her and what you don't." Patting my back, he climbed to his feet. Looking up at him, his eyes were full and tender, with more sincerity than I had ever seen before. "You know what you need to do, you don't need me to tell you anymore."

He started walking away, but I stopped him. "Wait," I said, holding out my hand. "You know you never really told me why before."

"Why what?" he asked, keeping his head forward.

"Why all of this happened, why you did what you did."

His eyes peeked at me over his shoulder, his back expanding as he took in a deep breath. There was a pause before he started speaking again, like he was thinking long and hard about how much he wanted me to know.

"I wanted power. At the time I told myself it was for you and your mother, but it wasn't. It was easier for me to lie to myself back then, but not now, not since your mom was ripped away from me. I was a selfish prick, and it took the death of your mother for me to see it." Dropping his face into his chest, his voice fell quiet. "I got lost along the way, forgetting who I was fighting for. I didn't know Frank had a daughter, if I did, things would have ended differently. After you were born, I promised your mother I wouldn't ever do that, that I'd never purposefully go out and hunt a man with a family. And I hadn't up until then. It was something I took pride in, the one thing I always weighed when I made decisions in this business. Children need their parents when they're young. But I was too greedy to fucking care in the moment. I didn't stop myself, and I could have. I used him, I used him to feel bigger, to feel

like I had all the control. I went looking for a fight, when I didn't really need to. I knew he needed the money more than me, but I didn't care, I wanted what was mine. .
.”

I didn't say a word, I just sat and listened to him talk to me in a way he never had before. My father had always been straight to the point. He was cutthroat, I had seen him kill without questions.

He never admitted guilt or sorrow, he never owned his mistakes. He always stood by his choices.

But this, this was him finally speaking the truth. For the first time in his life he was actually speaking from his heart and not from his fucking balls.

Exhaling, he reached up and scratched his head. “When I saw her crying under that bed, I didn't know what to do. I tried, I did my best to fix her. I fucked up, that's what I did instead. Your mother forgave me, and not because I took care of someone who could destroy us and tear our family apart if he went to the cops, but because I told her what I had done. I promised her I would make it right. . .” Grunting, he stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Just don't forget who you're fighting for, Birch, she's worth more than all the pride in the world.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I watched him stroll through the yard and into the house, closing the door behind him. I sat stunned, unraveling inside from what he had just said. That was first and only time I had ever heard him say he was wrong, that it was his greedy, power-fueled need that led us here.

He's right, the man is fucking right.

Pushing myself up, I crossed the patio and went into the house. My father wasn't one for heartfelt conversation, and I couldn't help but feel like it was my mother speaking through him right then.

It was like her hand had come down and touched his heart, helping him to guide me in the right direction. I was going to listen to him, I was ready to tell Cyprus everything that had happened from the first moment she entered our home that night.

If Cyprus chose not to listen, there was nothing I could do. But I could try and help her see, I could try and help her understand. And maybe she would get pissed and hit me and tell me she never wanted to see me or my father again.

But I had to do the right thing.

The truth had eaten away at me, it made me harbor this guilt that I had to get off my chest. I was tired of the wall between us, the one I had felt for years and she had just discovered.

Climbing the stairs, I took them two at a time. My muscles were tense, my heart thudded against my ribs as I tried to put together the words inside my head that I was

going to use.

I wanted to make sure that everything I said came out clear and easy to understand. I didn't want to risk her misunderstanding and twisting my words into something they weren't.

Taking in a deep breath, I knocked on the door. "Cyprus, let me in." She didn't respond, not that I expected her to. "I'm coming in, we need to talk."

Pressing my ear to the door, I tried to listen for any sounds. She was silent.

"If you're near the door then move, because I'm coming in, even if I have to break it down." Holding the handle in my hand, I pinned my shoulder to the wood, ready to force my way in.

Twisting the handle, to my surprise it turned. Pushing it open, I poked my head inside before opening it up all the way. Glancing around, I found Cyprus sitting against the wall with a book in her hands and tears running down her face.

"Cyprus, you need to hear me out." Stepping closer, I looked at the book and my heart sank in my chest. "Where did you get that?" I asked, moving slowly towards her. "Where did you find it?"

How the fuck did she get the diary?

"The detective gave it to me." Sniffling, she wiped her eyes. "He said they found it here in the house."

"You were never supposed to see that." Stopping a foot from her, I raked my fingers through my hair. "My father was supposed to get rid of it so you'd never have to know."

“But I do know, I know what happened that night.” Tears continued to fall as her shoulders rolled forward. “I remember, Birch.” Flicking her eyes up to mine, her lip trembled as she spoke. “I remember the night he killed my parents.”

She looked so broken, so lost and sad as her eyes swelled with pain I never wanted her to have.

“I wanted to tell you—”

“But you didn't!” screaming, she slammed her fist into the floor. “You knew what he did! You knew who I was! And you didn't tell me!” Gripping the carpet in her fingers, she clawed the fibers as her body began to shake.

Dropping to her side, I tried to hold her, but she pushed me away. “Let me explain, let me tell you the truth.”

“No!” Her screech came out loud and unhinged as she punched her fists into my chest. “No! No! I trusted you! I loved you! How could you do this to me?”

Snagging her hands, I yanked her into a bear hug, refusing to let her go. “I love you, Cyprus, I've always loved you. That was never a lie, I love you with everything I have.” Whispering into her ear, I kissed the side of her temple. “I love you so much, I never wanted to hurt you. None of this was supposed to happen, not like this.”

Her body shrank, folding up as she began to weep. Her entire life had just changed. What she lost, she had found, what she didn't know, now had the power to destroy us both. I never wanted that, I never wanted her to know the pain she had been through.

“Why did you lie to me for all these years? If you really love me, how could you lie to me?” Sharp nails dug into my chest as she held on tight. “How could you lie to me, Birch? Tell me.”

Burying her face in my shirt, I slipped my hand around the back of her head and held her tight. “I lied because I love you. I wanted you to always be happy, I wanted to make you happy. I was selfish, I was wrong.”

Tipping her head up, she nuzzled herself into the crook of my arm. “All those times you saw me crying about losing my family, that never bothered you? It didn't make you think?”

Running my thumb across her forehead, I traced her hairline and moved down her cheek. “It always bothered me, I hated seeing you like that. I wanted to tell you so bad, but I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” Her brows scrunched, eyes searching my face. “What were you scared of? Was it your father, did he threaten you?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

A part of me was.

I wanted to answer her, to open my mouth and spew every last drop until my soul was clean and there was nothing left filling the air between us. Her eyes made my heart bleed, sending a shiver up my spine as she stared at me.

She looked like she was genuinely concerned for me and my feelings. I couldn't understand why, not after what I had kept from her. Why would she care about me? Why should she even give two fucks about how I felt?

I was the son of the man who had killed her family. I was the boyfriend who had let her believe she was abandoned, who nourished and manipulated her mind into believing what my father wanted her to believe. I was the lover who never told her who she really was.

I was a liar.

“I was afraid of losing you. I was afraid that you'd hate me, and I couldn't ever live with that thought. I've loved you since the first moment I saw you. I was scared that if you knew the truth you'd leave me. I couldn't handle that, I could never imagine my life without you.”

“Did you really think that I would leave you just like that? That my love for you was that weak?”

Weak, no. Misguided, no.

I never thought that her love for me was weak, but hate had the power to drive people away.

“I was afraid you'd hate me.” Wrapping my fingers around her hand, I placed her open palm over my heart. “My heart beats for you, I live for you, Cyprus. If there is one thing in this world I never lied about, it's how I feel about you. That was always the truth.”

Darting her eyes between mine, her fingers nipped my skin as she curled them into my chest. She didn't use her voice, remaining silent as she gazed up at me.

Inside my head I was praying that she could feel the sincerity in my tone. She had to know that I meant every word.

Parting her lips, I didn't wait for her to speak. I kissed her. I kissed her so she could taste my love, I kissed her to remind her of what it felt like when we touched. I wanted her to remember the passion we shared and the feelings that came alive when we were together.

My muscles tensed as I anticipated a slap to the face or a punch in the gut. She didn't do either of those things. Cyprus kissed me back.

Her tongue slipped into my mouth, back arching as she lifted her hand to my nape. A hearty moan rolled from her mouth into mine as our tongues danced over ridges and tangoed together.

There were a million quiet words in my kiss. I love you, I need you, I can't live without you, you're my world, you're my life, without you I'm nothing. . .

Raw and greedy, I scooped her cheeks in my palms, forcing every last breath I had into that kiss. In the back of my mind I wasn't sure if that was going to be the last kiss

we ever shared.

This isn't it, this isn't ending here. Not like this.

Cyprus dug her nails into my hair, scraping my scalp and sending chills down my spine. We were nothing but heavy breaths and soft moans as we lost ourselves to a hunger that wouldn't be satiated until it felt complete.

Cradled in my lap, I held her firmly, unable to let her go. She was my earth, my air, my everything. If she wasn't in my arms I'd be empty, if she wasn't in my life, I'd be no one.

Looking in her eyes, I watched the tears dry as need swept in taking full control. I could see it written all over her, she needed me as much as I needed her.

Pulling back, I tickled my fingers across her forehead, twirling a thick curl of her hair around my finger. "I love you, I'll never stop loving you. I just want you to know that."

A soft smile spread on her lips as she touched my chin. "I know, Birch." Lowering her hands to the edge of her shirt, she tugged it off, dropping it into a puddle on the floor.

Her nipples poked through her light pink, satin bra, as her stomach clenched and goosebumps jumped down her skin. My cock jerked, thickening and throbbing as I ran my fingers over her stomach.

Moaning, Cyprus closed her eyes and tilted her head. She was so fucking beautiful. That woman was my strength and weakness all rolled up into one. She could hold me up and tear me down in a snap.

Arching her back, I plucked her nipples through the bra and watched her body shudder. Fuck, I loved that. The way she wriggled and tensed when my hands were on her, it was fucking magic.

Grunting, I placed her down on the floor and climbed on top of her. Brushing my fingers through her hair, I kissed her throat. "Tell me you love me, Cyprus. Tell me you still love me."

Her eyes glazed over, spearing my heart and making me sweat. I wasn't sure what she was thinking, or if she was about to cut me loose. I couldn't bear hearing the words if she didn't feel the same anymore.

"Birch," she said, stroking my cheek with a gentle smile. "I love you, I can't pretend that I don't. I love you, that's why this all hurts so much."

"I won't hurt you ever again, I promise. I'll tell you everything, I'll answer all your questions. Just promise me you won't give up on us."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Give up? It's not about giving up, it's about holding onto what I have.” Her thumb brushed the curve of my jaw, eyes soft and gentle as if she could see through my hardened shell. “But I'm holding on tight, Birch. I'm not ready to lose this, I can't just give up on what I feel. I won't give up on you, or on us.”

That was all I needed to hear. I had to hear her say she wasn't leaving me. I had to know that everything between us was worth the fight for her too. Because I was going to fight to keep her. Without both of us working to save it, we wouldn't stand a chance.

Love needed to be felt on both sides, otherwise it was a strong wind blowing away the world. I couldn't lose my world.

Pushing up her bra, I licked her nipples, suckling them hard. Cyprus moaned, pressing her tits harder into my face. Swirling my tongue around the hardened beads, I dug my fingers into her ribs.

I couldn't think straight anymore. The blood had poured from my brain and filled the aching muscle between my thighs.

All I could think about was proving my love to her and taking her body like she had taken my heart. I wanted to drive in deep, wash her soul in silky bliss, and make her forget everything she worried about.

Her past was a shattered piece of glass. But her future wasn't set in stone, it could be whole and full if she wanted it to be.

“Mm,” she cooed, her voice a whisper in my ear as I allowed myself to get lost in her.

Her hands found my neck, tearing my shirt over my head and digging into the flesh of my back. Her nails raked my spine as she rolled her head and rocked her hips beneath me.

Running my hand down between her breasts and to the hem of her pants, I popped the button, and slid the zipper down, slipping my hand inside. The diamond between her thighs was hot and wet, aching for my touch.

Flicking her panties to the side, I pressed her clit, forcing her to moan louder. It was fucking music to my ears. Every sound that spilled from her lips made my heart beat faster and cock throb harder.

I wasn't going to draw this out, I couldn't. I needed my woman.

Tearing her pants down on her legs, I ripped her panties off with a heavy growl. With nimble fingers, Cyprus tore at my jeans until they were free from my hips. Shuffling out of them, I kicked off my boxers and spread her legs open so I could climb between them.

Her eyes met mine and all I could see was the love she felt. She loved me for me, she loved me for everything we built together, and she loved me because we were meant to be.

Biting her bottom lip, she called me in with a single finger. Resting my forearms on either side of her head, she wrapped her hand around my dick and guided it into her hot center.

There was no resistance as I slipped inside her body with ease, her warm juice coating my skin and helping me along. Stilling above her, I pushed the stray curls

from her face and held her eyes with mine.

“I love you, I love you so much it hurts.” Kissing her throat, I kept whispering my feelings into her ear with each thrust.

“I need you.” My hips shifted, pressing deeper.

“You're my everything.” I pulled out and drove in harder.

“Without you I'm nothing.” Like a piston I pumped and pulled, each thrust a devastating blow to her hips.

Wrapping her legs around my waist, Cyprus ground into me, rubbing her clit against my stomach and groaning with pleasure. Her body trembled as beads of sweat coated her chest and her nails scraped my skin.

I could feel the claws as they dug in, cutting me with soft scratches and turning my flesh red. Her moans grew louder and louder, her hips rocking and rubbing hard and fast. She was so close to coming and I was determined to come with her.

I wanted to share that release with her, to feel our bodies as they shook and pulsed when the orgasm reached its peak. I wanted to ride that high alongside her, just like we had for years.

Faster and faster I jerked my body, throwing my cock in with determined thrusts. I felt my balls draw up tight, and my stomach begin to tense as tingles swept through my muscles making me weak.

With one final thrust, my body stalled, and hot come spewed from my dick, filling her to the point I could tell it was dripping out. The warm liquid trickled down my shaft, dropping to the carpet.

Staring into her eyes, Cyprus lifted her head and kissed my lips. "I love you, Birch, nothing will change that."

Smiling, I ran my fingers through her hair as I peered down on the only woman to ever make my heart skip a beat. "That's all I need. That's all I've ever needed."

Rolling onto my side, I grabbed my shirt and passed it to her so she could wipe herself off. Our breathing was heavy and ragged, and the air was hot and thick. I could feel my knees as the sensations subsided, they were sore and tender, rubbed raw from the rug.

Twisting, I rested my hand under my head and looked down on her. "So where do we go from here?" I asked, running a finger up and down her ribs.

A thin smile spread across her cheeks as she looked off in thought. "I'm not sure. To be honest, I don't really know what to think about all of this."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“It's not about what you think, it's about what you feel. What do you feel?”

Sucking in a breath, she let it out slowly. “I feel confused. I still feel hurt and betrayed. But I also know what this family has given me.” Rolling onto her side, she snuggled into my chest. “What do I do with that, Birch? How do I love and hate the only family I have ever known?”

“Will you tell me what you remember?”

“I can't.” Her face sunk into my arm as her eyes slammed shut. “I wish I didn't have this shit in my head. I wish I never remembered.”

“Was it the diary? Do you think that gave you your memories back?”

Shrugging her shoulder, her finger spun against my skin. “Maybe.” Tilting her head to look in my eyes, she asked, “How did the police never find it before? If it's been here, how did they miss it?”

I had to think about it before I answered her. That was a good question, one that didn't cross my mind until she asked it.

“My mother. . .” Pausing, I curled my arm under her neck and rolled onto my back to look at the ceiling. “My mom used to remove it from the house before a raid. We have a guy on the inside who would let us know when they were coming, and my mom would always make sure it was gone before they got here. That's why you were always sent off too.”

That's how they got it. . . That's how this shit happened.

That was the first raid we had since my mother passed away. The only reason they found it was because no one had warned us and no one was here to hide it. I felt sick to my stomach that something we had been through so many times before had been our downfall.

I still wasn't sure why my father never destroyed it. But then again, maybe it wasn't up to him. Maybe it was my mother who refused to let him, maybe she wanted a piece of Cyprus's past to still live on.

“Your dad went through a lot of trouble to hide me. And I'm still not sure I know why. He could have left me there, I didn't really know who he was.”

She's right. He could have left her there. . .

He said he was trying to fix it, and I believe him.

“Tell me what you remember, Cyprus. I need to know. All I know is what he told me, and that wasn't much. I want to hear what you saw, what you felt.”

My memory was one thing, but she had been there.

I trusted my father and what he said. But I only knew his side.

It was time for me to hear her truth, to learn about what it looked like through her eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

Fiona

Eight years earlier

“Dad!” I called again for the tenth time. “Where are you?” Walking through the kitchen, I could hear voices coming from the garage.

He was supposed to be helping me with my science project that was due in two days, but I couldn't find him anywhere. I felt like he was avoiding me, it was never that hard to find him, and he always came when I called for him.

Except for right now. Where the hell is he?

The house was eerily quiet, making every creak and groan from the floorboards sound like I was jamming a knife between the ribs of a lion. A lamp was on in the living room, the light in the kitchen was burning boldly, casting dark shadows across the cabinets and counters.

But no one was around.

Standing in the kitchen, I could hear voices behind the door that led to the garage. It sounded heated, like my father was arguing with whoever was out there.

What the hell is going on in there?

Walking to the door, I lifted my hand to the knob and started to turn it.

“Fiona, no!” My mom barked in a hushed voice, rushing to my side and stopping me. “Your father is busy right now, leave him alone.”

“But he said he would help me tonight, he promised.”

“I know what he said, but it's going to have to wait.” Gripping my shoulders, my mother turned me away from the door and led me into the living room. “It shouldn't be too long, but your dad is having an important meeting right now.”

“Meeting? But it's nine, isn't it a little late for that?” Arching a brow, I twisted my head to look at her. “He never meets with anyone past seven, that's his rule.”

“Don't, now is not the time for your mouth.” With stiff arms, my mother guided me around the coffee table. “This is important, I need you to just stay in here.”

My father was a business man, what he did exactly, I wasn't too sure. He always told me that when I got older he would sit me down and explain the details. I have yet to have that conversation with him, and I was already fourteen. I wasn't sure that discussion would ever happen.

Plopping me down on the couch, my mom grabbed the remote and clicked on the television. “Here, watch something for now. And I don't want you going back near the garage. Understood?”

“Fine.” Slouching into the cushion, I stared at the screen and zoned out.

I wasn't sure how much time had gone by exactly, when my mom suddenly rushed past the living room. She was running full speed with something in her hands. I couldn't tell what it was, but as she passed under the light it sparkled with a mirror

finish.

I heard the garage door open and close quickly, and I couldn't stop the curiosity as it swelled in my gut.

What is she doing?

Quietly, I rose to my feet and carefully walked back towards the kitchen. Her face worried me, she looked frantic and scared. I had no clue why or what the hell would make her look so upset.

Hitting the threshold for the kitchen, the voices had become significantly louder than before. Their tones were harsh and thick, as they spewed hate-filled words at each other.

“Fuck you! I didn't do this to screw you over, I needed it! But now you're going to force me to do something I really don't want to.”

Holding the wood beam, my heart started to race inside my chest as I listened to the argument turn from heated into plain rage. My dad was angry, the man with him was angry, and I stood unaware of the true danger lurking behind the door.

“Don't fucking threaten me, Frank!” the unknown man's voice barked, his scream booming through my ears and making my back snap straight. “Do you know who you're talking to?! You said you'd pay me back double what I gave you! You didn't! That's why I'm here, I'm here because you couldn't hold up your end!”

“I told you I needed more time!”

Why is Dad so upset? Who is he yelling at?

“Stop this, not here, not right now.” My mother cut in, sounding anxious and terrified. “You can't do this here.” Pleading for them to stop, I heard my mother's voice trembling as she spoke.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Shut up, Brandy, you're not helping.” Dad's tone was softer with her, but firm. I knew that tone, the one when he wanted you to listen, but he didn't want to upset you more.

“Frank, you didn't hold up your end of this shit.” The unknown man spoke clear, his voice low and more controlled. “You know what happens now. I gave you more than enough time, and instead of paying up, you chose to run. Did you think I wouldn't find you?”

“I left because I had to, I left because I didn't have a choice.” The sound of metal clanked, but I had no clue what it could be. “And if you don't get the fuck out now, the cops will be pulling your lifeless body out of Narragansett Bay.”

“Do you think that scares me? Do you really think that you're the first man to ever put a gun in my face?” The evil sound in his voice cut me deep, forcing me to squeeze the wall as I crept up to the garage door. “You better hope you kill me with your first shot, because if not. . .” There was a moment of silence, and my ears strained to listen. “You're a dead man.”

Who's dead? What the hell is going on?!

I need to look—

No! Don't look!

My brain was begging me to stop moving forward. It was screaming for me to listen and do what it said. But I couldn't. I had to see what was happening. I needed to know

what the hell was going on.

“Normally, this would end with just one, Frank, but it seems your wife wants to die beside you.” The man growled, and I heard him take in a deep breath. “You shouldn't even be here, this doesn't involve you.”

“You're in my house, so it involves me now.” My mother was standing her ground. “I want you to leave. Stop being a prick and just go.”

She never was one to sit back and let people walk all over her. My mom would hold her tongue for as long as she could, and she always told me that if you didn't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. But that phrase only went so far with her. Push her and eventually you'd unleash her inner bitch.

I once watched her make a grown man cry at the park. He yelled at me for taking the swing his daughter was going to use. I got up, telling him I was sorry. But he wouldn't let it go, he kept harassing me about it, calling me selfish and ungrateful.

My mom stepped in, attempting to remind him that I was just a child like his daughter and to calm down. She really did give it her best shot, but then he called me a spoiled bitch, and that was it.

By the time she was done, the man was in tears and his daughter was soothing him.

“This isn't on me, this is on your husband. All he had to do was pay me what he owed, and he didn't. He ran, he skipped town like the fucking pussy he is. He stole sixty grand from me.”

“I needed the money, I was going to pay you back. But shit got hot, the cops were starting to nose around and I had to leave before anything happened.”

“You were going to pay me? No, you used me and ran. You might as well have come into my home and stole from my family!”

“You didn't need the money, it's not like you were hurting for it. I needed everything I had, I didn't have it to give. I can get it for you in a few days, just give me that.”

“You shouldn't have shook my hand that day. That sealed your fate, Frank. Your word means shit, it'll never mean anything ever again.”

“You're really going to make me shoot you? Just go and we can both walk away from this.”

Shoot?! Why the hell would my father shoot anyone?!

Closing my eyes, I gripped the handle and turned it as quietly as I could. Peeling it open, I did my best to not make a sound. Cold air splashed against my cheeks as I poked my head inside.

My parents were standing with their backs to me, and a man I had never seen before was holding a gun up, aiming it at my father.

Oh my God. . . What the hell is going on?!

The man's eyes stayed on my father's, but my mother turned as I stuck my head inside.

“Go! Go!” Mom screamed at me instantly, and a loud pop rang out making my ears hurt. Her hands were on my shoulders before I had time to react or take in what had happened.

I heard the man yell in pain, and from the corner of my eye I saw him drop to the

floor.

“Get inside! Lock the door!” Shoving my mom from behind, my dad pushed us back into the kitchen.

“You fucking dick!” the man screamed out as the door slammed shut behind us.

“Go! Go!” my dad screeched, darting forward and snagging my hand to drag me away.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I could hear the door as it rumbled and shook from the man hitting it and kicking it. He was yelling and grumbling, screaming words I couldn't make out.

My father swiftly guided me to the stairs, shoving me up the first few steps. "Go hide, Fiona, and don't look back!"

I wanted to ask so many questions, but he didn't give me a chance. Turning his back to me, my father stood at the bottom of the stairs, eyes piercing the garage door.

The door flew open, wood splintering like sharp thorns across the kitchen floor. Glancing around my father, I could see the man, his eyes black as death with a vile grimace on his face.

His forehead was riddled in thick angry lines, a deep frown plagued his lips, and his arms were hanging by his side with precision. The gun he had been holding was now pointed at the floor as his other hand clenched into a fist.

The front of his left thigh was drenched in blood, his pants wet and dark as more and more blood seeped from a frayed hole in the upper muscle.

"Dad, what's going on?" I knew I was asking a question he probably wouldn't answer, but I was frozen. I wanted to run, but I didn't want to leave them.

"Go!" Giving me another shove, my mother rushed to my side and grabbed my hand.

"Fiona, Honey, do what your father says. Everything is going to be fine, but you need to listen. Go." Forcing a smile as she spoke, she nodded her head, trying to reassure

me.

“You fucking piece of shit.” The man took a shaky step forward, raising his gun in the air. “You stupid fucking piece of shit. This is on you, all of this is on you.”

I wasn't sure if he saw me or not, or if he just thought my parents were trying to run from him. But he looked pissed.

My heart raced inside my chest, my anxiety a whirlwind of fear and confusion as I took the steps by two. For some reason I stopped at the top of the stairs, I didn't run directly into my room. I should have kept running, I should have sealed my eyes shut and done as I was told.

Looking down, my dad had his hands up, and my mom was crying, begging the man for mercy. I didn't see any mercy on his face, not a drop of it.

A click lit the air on fire as I watch from my perch, and everything that followed seemed to happen in slow motion. I watched as my dad's head snapped back and his body folded onto the stairs. A thin trickle of blood started to run from a small hole in the middle of his forehead and my mother let out a scream like I had never heard before.

I stood there shocked, confused, frightened. I was staring down at my father's lifeless body and it wasn't until I tasted the metal in the air that I ran to my room and dove under the bed. There was nothing going through my head right then.

Instinct kicked in and my muscles took over, taking the load off my brain. Covering my ears with my arms, I buried my face in the carpet. A second shot rang out, and I knew instantly where that bullet went. Because the screaming stopped.

He shot my mom. . .

He's killed my parents.

My heart stopped in my chest, and all I could do was listen. I listened for my mother's voice or my father to call up to me that it was over and everything was alright.

Those voices never came.

Heavy footsteps started up the stairs, so I held my breath. I didn't want him to hear me, I didn't want him to find me and kill me too.

Shit, shit, shit. Does he know where I am?

Am I about to die?

The tips of his shoes twinkled under the light in my room, and he slowly walked closer to my bed. I was trying not to look, but no matter how much I tried to close my eyes, I couldn't.

Bending to his knees, the man's face loomed closer and I couldn't stop the tears from coming.

Sliding his hand under the bed, he yanked me out in one quick jerk. Kicking my legs, I threw my fists around trying to hit him.

“No! Let me go! Let me go!”

“Who the hell are you?” he asked, snagging the back of my neck in his strong hand and holding me still.

“I'm. . . I'm Fiona.”

“Why are you here?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“I live here.” Crying, I could barely utter the words as his eyes tried to understand what I was saying.

The man looked confused, even more confused than I was. He looked like he had found a ghost, like he was seeing someone who shouldn't exist.

“You live here?” Nodding yes, I squeaked as his grip tightened and the tips of his fingers dug into my neck. “Fuck. . . fuck, fuck, fuck.” Cursing under his breath, he stroked his chin, and dropped me to my feet. “Frank and Brandy—they're your parents.”

I didn't answer because it wasn't a question. He said it as a fact, like he was talking to himself to confirm what he had just learned.

Scrambling back, I trapped myself against the wall as the unknown man blocked my exit. Pacing back and forth, he was talking to himself quietly. I had no idea what it was he was saying, but he looked even more upset than he had before.

Looking behind him, I could see the open door and I wanted to run. But I wasn't sure I could make it by him.

You have to try, just try, Fiona.

His eyes were set on the floor, so I waited until he started his walk back in the other direction.

Go! Go! Go!

The words were so loud inside my head, that I lurched forward and started running in a panic. I didn't think about how I was going to get by him or where I'd go if I actually made it out. I just ran.

With one fast swoop, he trapped my hair in his fingers and yanked me back. “You're not going anywhere,” he said, his words curling around my lungs like daggers. “You're coming with me.”

“No! No!” I screamed as he started to drag me out of my room.

He can't take me! I won't let him take me!

Grabbing his arm, I bit down, but he just shook me off like a bug. It didn't phase him, nothing I did phased him. I hit him and punched him, I kicked and bit, and he just kept moving.

“Close your eyes,” he said, stopping at the top of the stairs.

“What?”

“Close your eyes.”

“Screw you.”

Huffing under his breath, he wriggled out of his jacket with one arm. Holding both my wrists in one hand, the man tossed his jacket over my head. Swooping me off my feet, he threw me onto his shoulder and I felt him start down the steps.

His strides were labored and wobbly, and I could tell the gunshot to his leg was bothering him as he grunted every time he had to put weight on his injured leg.

Everything around me was black, I couldn't see a thing. I tried my best to shift and throw the jacket off my head, but it was useless, it wouldn't budge.

And maybe that was a good thing. Maybe I should be thanking the man for not forcing me to see my dead parents again.

“This wasn't my plan, I wasn't going to kill him. But he shot me, your fucking father shot me. All I wanted was what he owed me, that was it. I only wanted to scare him, I just wanted to shake him up a bit.” He was speaking with this sorrow in his voice that confused me. And I almost believed he meant what he said—almost.

Until he tossed me into his trunk and closed the lid.

Remorseful people don't steal children.

They don't run away from the damage they caused, and pretend it never happened. They don't act like a death at their hands was justified because of a stupid debt.

But this man. . . he did all of those things.

He wasn't really remorseful for what he did, for taking my parents away from me. All he was upset about was that now he had to do something with me.

I just didn't know what that was.

And I don't think he did either.

Chapter Fifteen

Birch

“I don't remember anything else yet, all I have is what I wrote in my diary.” Swallowing hard, her words came out scratchy and soft. “Now it's your turn, what happened to me, how did I end up here like this?”

Her voice was a whisper as I stared at her hands. They were shaking, trembling with such force I half expected her fingers to break off. I had never seen them shaking like that before, and for some reason I couldn't take my eyes off them.

My head was a fucking mess. To imagine what it had been like for her to watch her parents get slaughtered, knowing that it was my father who had wielded the gun that destroyed her world. There would never be enough apologies I could ever give her that would validate his actions.

I could tell her I was sorry over and over again, I could grovel at her feet and promise her endless love and unbridled devotion, and that still wouldn't be enough. Nothing would ever be enough.

But I was willing to spend the rest of my life trying to make up for it. That's what I had to give her; my heart, my soul, my everything. She could have all of it if it would bring her a sliver of happiness.

“Birch?”

“What?” I asked, my attention totally drawn to the spastic muscles in her hands and rambling thoughts inside my head. I wasn't focused on her like I should have been.

“You said you'd give me answers, so answer me.”

How about I show you.

“Come on.” Standing up off the floor, I threw on my clothes as she watched me with questions in her gaze.

“What? Where are we going?”

“Get dressed.”

“Why aren't you answering me?” Pulling her shirt over her head, she slipped her long lean legs into her pants.

My eyes licked her calves and up her thighs. Her supple skin glistened in the soft light of the room, as her plump ass peeked out from beneath the curves of her hips. If we weren't knee deep in this horrible situation, I'd fuck her again.

All I wanted was to go back to us, to what we had before this rain of shit came toppling down. It was perfect, our life was great. I had a woman who would do anything for me, and I would do anything for her.

Now I felt like all of that was gone, and I feared we'd never get it back.

The truth. . . All she wants is the truth.

'She heard it from me. . .' my father's voice boomed in my ears as the weight of what he said clicked on the light.

It wasn't easy for me to explain it, to put it into words that would make sense. But if I showed her, if I took her back to that place, if I gave her more than just an explanation, maybe she'd get what she wanted all along; her own memories.

She had the first half, she was finally able to tear off a small sample and free it from its cage. There was more she needed, and finding it herself was all she ever really wanted. I wanted to help her with that, I wanted to give her back her past.

“Just come with me, I want to show you something.” Flapping my fingers, I tilted my head. “Please.”

Her eyes questioned me as they peered deep into my mind. She was trying to figure out what I was up to, just like she had so many other times over the years.

I felt like I was looking back into the eyes of that young girl, wary and unsure of what I was up to.

Hesitantly, she reached her fingers out, and I latched my hand around hers, helping her to her feet. “There's something you need to see.”

“What is it?”

“Something I owe you—something I should have shown you a long time ago.” Holding her hand in mine, it felt smaller than I remembered. Her fingers were thin and slender, twining like a vine around a branch.

Cyprus kept her head down, something she seemed to do a lot of lately. Before all of this, she walked tall, with her head held high. But now, now the black hole that circled her past was sucking her inside.

Her entire body showed the stress and strain of the lie she had finally discovered. And

I hated it. I wanted her back, I wanted the woman I had fallen in love with back by my side. I was missing her more and more by the minute.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

She was right there beside me and yet she felt so far away. Her touch was cold, her eyes lacked that signature twinkle I longed to see. Nothing was more important to me right then than getting her back, and I didn't care what I had to do to make that happen.

Leading her down the stairs, I stopped at the door that went into the basement. Turning to face her, I curled my arm around her back and brought her in to my chest. I searched her eyes before speaking, looking for signs that my Cyprus was still inside.

A shimmer, a spark, a small flicker of that light she used to carry, that was what I needed from her. I couldn't see it, I couldn't find her in the sadness that crusted her features.

Help her to heal. Make her believe in you.

“I meant what I said, I love you.” Running my thumb along her bottom lip, I traced the side of her cheek. “And if you decide that you hate me, if you think that you'll never be able to forgive me, I'll understand.”

“Birch—”

Pushing my finger to her lips, I silenced her. “No, right now, this is for you. After you know everything, once you see the whole picture, then you can tell me. But not until then.”

Releasing her waist, I clicked on the light and opened the door. It had been a long time since I went down those stairs, since I entered the room my father had ordered

sealed for the rest of his natural born life.

He had given me strict orders to never talk about that room, to never open the vault that could rekindle her mind and destroy us forever. I did as I was told; I always did as I was told.

Each step creaked under our weight as plumes of dust exploded out with force, coiling around our legs as our heels disrupted the dormant granules.

“Why are we going in the basement?”

Stopping at the bottom, I pointed at the back wall. “We're here for that.”

“For what? It's just a wall.”

Tracing the seam I could still see in the paneling, I shook my head. “No, it's more than a wall, that's what he always wanted you to think.” Running my hands over the paneling, I felt around until I found the small notch in the crease.

Pressing in hard, I heard it creek and crack as I pulled the hidden door open. More dust blew out, causing both of us cough.

Waving away the thick cloud, Cyprus took a step forward, her face contorting in wonder. “What the hell is this?”

“This is what you need to see.” Hitting the small switch on the wall, a dim light popped on, exposing the tired, worn room.

It was exactly the same as it had been eight years ago. And in that single instant it felt like we had stepped back in time. I felt a flood of emotions rush through my system, all the same feelings I had experienced back then.

When my father came home that night, I was supposed to be in bed. There was a commotion downstairs with him and my mother. She was pissed, screaming at him in a way I had never heard her do before. Her voice penetrated my ears with a shrill tone, her rage building high notes that matched the sound of a train whistle.

Quietly, I made my way to the middle of the stairs so I could listen and not be seen. My father was begging her for forgiveness, he was pleading with her to calm down and let him speak. She wouldn't hear it. She kept telling him he needed to fix it, that he had to figure out something or she was taking me and leaving.

I had no idea what he had done, but I knew it had to be really bad for her to threaten him with his own family. I just couldn't have ever expected that his mishap had involved such an innocent person.

“You wanted me to answer your questions, I'm showing you instead.”

Cyprus walked to the back wall, kicking the thin sleeping bag bundled up on the floor. Her eyes were watering, and I knew she was trying her hardest not to cry. Sucking in a long breath of air, she turned to face me.

“Is this what I think it is?”

Pointing to the left, I stepped into the corner. “This is the corner I would sit in when I came down to see you. I told you it was my favorite corner, I gave you an answer that was a lie. I lied to you before I really knew you. I didn't like lying to you then, and I don't like lying to you now. I never liked it, Cyprus, not once was I ever happy about the shit I said.”

“This is the room. . .” Twisting her foot into the floor, she looked back down at the sleeping bag. “This was where I slept.”

“Yeah. Most of the time you laid it out against that wall. You never really talked to me much back then, a little bit here and there. I figured you liked that spot because you could see the door easier.”

“And the chair? Is this—”

“Yes,” I said, “That's the one my dad used to try and get you to listen to him.”

“You knew about that?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“You were never really alone, regardless of what you thought. I was always close by, even if you didn't realize it, I was there. Outside the door or sitting by that window, with my ear to the glass. I always wanted to make sure I was here for you, and I hoped you could feel me even if you couldn't see me.”

Her mouth hung open as she digested everything around her. I could see her putting pin pricks in what her diary said and what she could visibly touch and see with her eyes. Her hands were shaking again, fingers buzzing as she softly ran them over the back of the chair.

“How did he do it? How did he erase my memories?”

Biting my lip, I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I want you to remember. That's what you want right? To see it on your own?”

“Yeah, I do, but I can't wait for that anymore. I need to know, Birch, tell me how he did it.”

Sharp goosebumps zipped over my back, making my spine tingle nervously. I was about to say it, I was about to give her the last bit of her past she needed to complete the puzzle.

“I didn't want him to do any of this shit, but he wouldn't listen to me.” I couldn't tell her. I wanted to, I really did, but it was harder to speak the truth than it was for me to think about it. Holding up my hands, I bounced them in the air, hoping it might help deflect her curiosity. “My dad wanted to do the right thing, he told me he wanted to give you what you deserved; a family, a good life.”

“A family?” Cocking her head, her lids turned to slits. “And he thought that killing mine and replacing it with his was giving me what I deserved?”

“No, that's not. . .that wasn't what he meant to do.”

“Then what did he mean, Birch? How was this doing the right thing?” Anger bristled her skin and turned her stoic expression into a wave of emotion. Every ripple through the muscles on her face, every twitch and grimace was boldly painted with disgust.

It wasn't done out of cruelty. He didn't go there with the intentions to change your life.

“He didn't know about you, Cyprus, he didn't know that you existed.” Raking my fingers through my hair, I paced in the dirty, dimly lit room. “He took you because he thought it was the right thing to do, he wanted to help you.”

Scoffing, Cyprus spun on her heels and kicked the sleeping bag. “Help me, he wanted to help me.” Rolling her eyes, she stuffed her hands into her ribs. “Tell me how he did it. How did he make me forget it all?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I felt my chest tighten as I tried to breathe. “Do you really want me to tell you?”

I asked her because she had been so determined to find out on her own, she didn't want me to tell her then, and I was hesitant to tell her now.

I had never talked about what we did, not to anyone. And now I was about to tell the one person that was never supposed to know. It hurt, it cut me deep and made my stomach turn into corded rope.

“Tell me.”

Do it, just get it out. She deserves to know.

Taking in a deep breath, I let it spill from my mouth like tainted water. “He drugged you.” The words stung my tongue, they burned my throat and made me hate myself for everything I hid from her.

“He what?” Cyprus dropped her arms to her sides, her back stiff and rigid. “He drugged me?”

Dragging my hands down my face, my lungs struggled to take in air. I couldn't catch my breath, every breath felt like I was inhaling hot ash. Dropping to my haunches, I braided my fingers together and hung my head. “We held you down, and then he injected you with something.”

Her eyes widened, arms hugging herself tighter. “What was it?”

Shrugging my shoulders, I shook my head. “I don't know, he wouldn't tell me.”

I watched as her body rolled and she absorbed the gravity of truth set at her feet. “How did I end up in the woods?”

“You got out.” Straightening my back, I stepped up to her, taking her hands in mine and squeezing them. “You wouldn't give up, you wouldn't back down. And you did that, you refused to sit back and listen to what he had to say, you refused to forget who you were no matter how many times he tried to scare you into it.” Shifting my eyes between hers, I kept talking. “You were able to get the door off the hinges, and somehow you got out without him or my mom seeing you. It took us four hours to find you and when we did, you were hiding in some overgrowth in the woods. Dad caught you, he dragged you out kicking and screaming. I didn't want to do that to you, I never wanted to hurt you, Cyprus. He made me help him, he forced me to do it even though I kept yelling at him that there had to be another way.”

My heart ached as the anger and sadness I felt that night crept back in, stealing me away. Clutching my chest, I forced myself to take slow even breaths. The pit in my stomach was still there, I could feel it as if all of this was still fresh and not years behind us.

“That's why I was out there, that's why I looked the way I did.”

The softness in her eyes surprised me. I expected her to be fuming, to hit me and slap me, and tell me she never wanted to speak to me again. Instead, her eyes were crystal clear, the clarity making them sparkle like a gem.

“It all makes sense now, all of it.” Pulling her hand free, she fumbled with her bottom lip. “The way you kept asking me if I remembered anything, you said it like you weren't sure you wanted to believe it. You had doubts, you—”

“I thought you might be trying to fool him and trick us. I wasn't sure it worked, and I knew if it didn't, you were smart enough to just pretend.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Her eyes zeroed in on mine, brows drawing in hard. “He hid me for all these years and no one did a fucking thing. Why didn't any of the other guys say anything? How come no one threw him to the wolves when they got busted?”

“Because of fear.”

Fear was the only power he had. With every death at my father's hands, his control grew. The more people he destroyed, the easier it was to keep the rest in line. No one wanted to be at the other end, waiting to receive his punishment.

His secret was safe.

Her father was his first true reflex kill. He hadn't planned it, he didn't go there with the intentions to take him from Cyprus. But he did.

And that one choice changed our lives. That moment gave him more power than he could have ever imagined.

He took two lives that night, but he changed six.

I hated him for what he did. And yet, in my sick mind I was also grateful at the same time.

I almost thanked him once for bringing this woman into my life. I didn't know what stopped me from doing that, but I never could utter those words to him.

Maybe it was because I knew what he had done was wrong. Maybe it was because we

lived a lie every single day, despite the love I felt for her.

All of it was out on the table now, and I felt like nothing like I thought I would if she found out our secret.

For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like cement coated my skin and my bones were made of lead.

I felt a release, I felt the weight lift and my heart break free.

For once, I had done the right thing.

Chapter Sixteen

Cyprus

“Where do we go from here?” Birch asked, angling his head to look at me. His face was tender and soft, full of the pain he felt from years of lies.

Lies he kept, lies he helped build. Lie on top of lie, on top of lie.

But that wasn't what his question was about. It wasn't about whether or not I wanted to still be Cyprus or go back to Fiona. It wasn't about how I wanted to handle the truth or what I would do with it.

His question was about us and where we stood.

“We're not going anywhere, Birch. You and I still exist, I still love you. That hasn't changed.” Cupping his cheek, I brushed my fingers up and down his jaw. “None of this was your fault, you were just a kid. You did what you were told, I can't blame you for what your father did.”

“But I should have told you—”

“You did, you did tell me. It doesn't matter if it was now or then, nothing you say can change the way I feel about you.” My arms curled around his neck, hands taking his face and holding it tight. “I love you, and I'll always love you.”

“How can you say that? How can you stand there and not feel sick to your stomach

being around me? How can you not hate me? I lied to you, I spent our entire life together pretending that I found you like it was some miracle.”

“No, Birch, that's not what you did. Your dad might want to think that he gave me what I deserved, but he didn't.” Tangling my fingers into his hair, I played with the ends. “It was you. You saved me, you gave me everything I ever needed, everything I ever wanted. You loved me, and that was enough.”

A thin smile spread over his face as he looked into my eyes. “Do you realize how much you saved me?” I felt his hands slip over my ass, pressing me in closer. “If I didn't have you, I don't know where I'd be. I fucking love you, Fiona Cyprus Rottera, and I'll always love you.”

Giggling, I tilted my head and squinted my eyes. “Fiona Cyprus?”

Shrugging his shoulders, his lips curled into a playful grin. “Who do you want to be?”

“I'm just me, Birch, that's it. But you can always call me Cyprus, it might not be my birth name, but it's still my name. Just because I know who I am now, doesn't mean I'm ready to forget the person I have been. There's still so much I need to learn about the person I used to be.”

Birch kissed my forehead, curling his fingers into my backside. “I'm here to learn with you, no matter what, I'll always be right here.”

Placing light kisses across my face, he reached my neck, causing my head to sway and roll to make room. His mouth was warm, it relaxed me, it made me forget about all the hurt I felt and focus on the only person I cared about.

I loved him. I was loved by him.

He was my everything.

There was no part of me that blamed him for anything that happened back then. It hurt that he had hid it from me, it broke my heart that he thought our love was too weak to stand up to something this big.

But what happened, no, that wasn't enough to tear me from his arms.

I felt his fingers run up my spine and down the outside of my arms. His lips traced the curve of my ear and he whispered. "I was so afraid I'd lose you." Firm hands clutched my skull, digging in with a fierce passion brewing inside. "I can't ever lose you."

Exhaling, I felt my eyes close as he kept kissing me along my collarbone. My hands caressed his head, working down his shoulders. All I wanted was to feel him, to touch him, to hold him.

Birch's breathing became heavy and gritty as our bodies rubbed and need took over. There were no more words between us, there was nothing else to say. He had me, he's always had me since day one.

Nothing would break us apart, nothing could ever crack and destroy what we had. Because our love was stronger than the pain of my past, our love was stronger than orders delivered in threat, our love was all we needed to keep going.

There was no doubt in my mind that our love was strong enough to rebuild a life outside this horrible truth.

The thick pads of his fingers scraped across my back, palms latching on to my shoulder blades and pulling me in. His cock was engorged, piercing my thigh as he grunted like an animal in heat.

Everything that had happened had formed this wall of tension and I wanted it gone. I wanted him to remind me of what we could be together, I needed him to show me that what I felt inside was right.

I love him.

The sharp edges of his teeth dug into my shoulder, gripping the skin and turning it red. Groaning, Birch rocked his hips up and down, rubbing his hard cock against my thigh.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

My fingers found their way to his pants, tearing them open to free the thick muscle. We were ravaging each other like it was our first time together, and the control had been lost to pent up desire and lust.

Curling my fingers around his dick, he moaned, pushing hot air across my neck. Stroking him up and down, I lowered to my knees, ready to taste his length.

His bear-sized palm rested on the top of my head, fingers tangling in my hair to brace himself. Looking up at him, our eyes connected, his glazing over as I swirled my tongue around his crown and licked down the muscle.

His cock was throbbing, pulsing in my hand as I throated all of it in one slow mouthful. Hollowing my cheeks, I sucked Birch's length, letting it hit the back of my throat.

He tasted salty and sweet, just like he always did. It was the flavor I wanted, the taste I craved and devoured like a starving animal.

“Fuck, Babe, that's good.” Closing his eyes, his head fell back as his hips shifted subtly to my pace. “Damn, I love the way you suck me off. Your mouth is fucking magic.” Grunting, his hand drove my head harder as he fucked my face.

My pussy was growing warm and wet, clenching the air, greedily looking for something to fill it. I was delirious, lost and engulfed in the moment, in my need and the desire taking over my body.

Birch jerked his waist hard, pulling free from my lips with a soft pop. “Why are you

stopping?" I asked, stroking his cock hard and fast.

"Because your mouth is nice, but your pussy is better." Picking me up off the floor, he slipped my pants down my legs. Stepping out of them, Birch threw his arms around my ass and swooped me off my feet. "I need you, Cyprus, I always need you."

Curling my legs around his waist, I lifted up and positioned my pussy over his swelling tip. Sliding down, Birch growled as I took the full length of his cock with my heat.

Bouncing up and down, his strong arms held me up, making it easy to ride him. My body ignited, hot ripples ran up my legs and through my belly, forcing a chill to scale my spine.

And as we found our bliss in the coffin that held my former life, I realized that nothing he could say or do would change my past, but what he gave me was worth so much more.

I close my eyes and it's him I see. I touch my heart and it's him I feel.

How do I still love him when our life was a lie?

Because love was going to build my future.

I still had that—we still had that.

We had a future we could build on truth now.

Chapter Seventeen

Birch

Heat from the sun warmed my face, forcing my eyes to crack open. A delicate moan filled my ears and I looked down to find Cyprus snuggled up in my arms.

Smiling to myself, I hugged her harder, forcing her as close to my heart as I could. That was where she belonged, she's always belonged right there beside me.

I wouldn't be the man I was without her.

“Good morning,” she mumbled, her eyes half open as she yawned with a smile.

“Morning,” I said, kissing the top of her head and smiling back. “How did you sleep?”

“Actually, I slept better than I ever remember.” Swirling her finger in the center of my chest, she arched her head up. “It's weird, you'd think all of this would make it harder, but I feel a sense of relief now. There's no more questions or wondering keeping me awake.”

“That's a good thing then, I'm really happy you have some closure.” Tipping my head back, I listened to the birds chirping outside the window and the sound of cars in the distance streaming down the highway.

I was hearing things that I'd normally ignore, sounds that had once seemed

unimportant. Was I different? Had I changed when the walls came down and there was nothing standing between us?

Maybe I'm better because of this.

Voices from downstairs drew my head up, my ears perked and curious about who was in our home. Glancing at the clock, it was only eight in the morning, there was no reason for anyone to be here.

“Do you hear that?” Looking down at Cyprus, she nodded, tilting her head towards the door.

“Who is your dad talking to?”

“The hell if I know.” Shifting my arm free, I pushed up in the bed and looked around for my shirt.

“Are you going to go see?”

“Yeah, I want to check it out, make sure nothing is wrong.” Tossing my legs out of bed, I grabbed my shirt off the floor and pulled it on.

There was absolutely no reason for anyone to be there. My father only invited the elite few he trusted, and even then, he wouldn't have them over that early in the morning.

Standing in the doorway, I listened to my father and another man talking. I couldn't make out what they were saying, and my father didn't seem to be upset or angry at whoever had shown up.

Leaving the room, I studied the voices and tones. No one was getting loud, and my

father was speaking the same way he always did. He sounded calm, not unnerved or unsure about the guest he had let in. But that didn't mean shit.

Could it be someone from Antoine's family? Did someone come here looking for them?

Word had spread like wildfire, and everyone who needed to know or cared to know, were aware that they hadn't been seen since our meeting. Most wouldn't dare to question our family about it, only the police had the generic balls needed to bring us in and tempt our freedom with shit they really had no evidence for.

But there was always the chance someone else had stepped up the ranks and would try to shake us down for answers. A new body, trying to make a name for themselves in our world.

Walking down the stairs, I called out, "Dad? Is everything alright?"

Hitting the bottom step, I turned my head to look in the living room and found my father sitting on the couch with two men in suits and a police officer over his shoulder.

My heart sank, chest constricting as I debated between running back upstairs to warn Cyprus or yelling at them to get the fuck out.

I didn't have time to choose as all the men turned my way, their faces still and expressionless.

"Birch, good, you're up. Come on in and sit for a minute." My father waved his hand, nodding his head to the over-sized chair next to the couch.

"What the hell is going on?" Cautiously, I stepped to the chair and placed my hands

on the back. I didn't want to sit down, there wasn't a bone in my body that felt relaxed enough to lounge in a chair like this was a family gathering.

“Birch, I'm Detective Jones, and this is Detective Gouff.”

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“I know who you fucking are, why are you in our house?” Clenching my teeth, my hands balled up, ready to grab him by the collar and kick his ass out.

He wasn't welcomed in my home, they were never welcomed here.

Why is my dad sitting and talking with them? Why isn't he telling them to go fuck themselves?

“Dad, do something here, tell them to leave.”

My father arched his brows and cleared his throat as his hands ran up and down his thighs. “Birch—”

Holding up his hand to stop my father from talking, the detective inserted his own words. “We're here because your father asked us to be. He's got a long story that he's ready to share, and we're eager to hear it.”

What the hell does that mean?

My father would never willingly talk to the police. It was something he tried to avoid like the plague. It didn't matter how much they pushed and pressed him for information about any of the shit they thought he was a part of; he never said a word.

He's lying. This motherfucker is full of shit.

“Why haven't you told this dick to go fuck himself?”

The officer dressed in full gear took a step forward, drifting his hand to hover over his gun. “Watch your mouth.”

“Watch my mouth? You're in my fucking house, and you don't belong here. You can't tell me how to talk in my own home.”

“Enough,” my dad snapped, cutting the air with his hand. “He's telling you the truth, Birch.” His eyes jerked to mine, the seriousness in his gaze stabbing me in the chest like a serrated blade.

Why? Why would he do this?

“What the fuck is going on? What the hell are you doing, Dad?” Curling my fingers into the plush fabric of the chair, I felt my knees start to buckle. “Why?”

“I'm getting old, Birch, it's time to finish this.” His eyes went cloudy as he forced a thin smile. “These guys were nice enough to wait here so I could tell you myself.”

“Tell me what? What the fuck is going on? What the hell are you doing?” The inside of my head began to spin with all the things we had been a part of together, and all the things he had done before I came along.

They're going to put us away for life!

Don't you get that? Don't you understand what you're doing?

I wanted to scream at him to just stop all of this. He didn't have to do anything, not now, not today. We should have talked about this first, we should have sat down as a family and decided what to do.

Because this didn't just affect him, it affected all of us.

But he didn't, and I shouldn't have been surprised by that.

Adjusting his suit, my father pressed his hands into his knees and stood up. His demeanor was different, he didn't look like himself. It was like he stood taller, his back rigid and firm as he held his chin up high.

“It's over, all of this over. I'm finally going to do what I should have done a long time ago. Maybe if I had, shit wouldn't have gotten so out of hand.” The hardness his eyes always had faded away. He looked so tired, like he wanted nothing more than to just lay his head down and sleep for eternity.

“I don't understand.”

What was he ending exactly?

What was over?

Deep down I knew what he was saying, but accepting it meant accepting what came with it. I wasn't ready to do that.

No. No you can't! Don't do that!

I stood staring at him with gaping eyes, trying to make him see that what he was doing was wrong. He didn't have to do it this way. There was always another way.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

I wished he had come to me first, we could have talked about this, we could have fixed it ourselves.

We could have left and started over if he really wanted things to change. Cyprus had given me that same out not long ago, she had asked about leaving and starting over. I hadn't taken the time to really listen to her because it was burned into my brain that this was my life, it was our life.

I never imagined that it was something we could change, the thought had never crossed my mind that it could ever be a plausible option for our family to just pick and leave.

And now that was all I could focus on.

Standing in front of me, my father rested his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Let me do this, it's what I need to do. For you, for Cyprus. . . for your mother. I don't want to be this anymore, I'm ready."

I felt like a boy again, small and weak beneath my father. My eyes started water, and I felt a single tear drop free. If he did this, I knew I'd never see him again. We'd never have another holiday together, he'd never be a grandfather to my children.

My head was shaking, telling him not to do it. All he had to do was allow himself to see the pain that this decision was going to cause.

Don't! Please don't do this!

But I could see it in his eyes; this wasn't up to me. This was his choice; his salvation from his demons, his healing for the suffering he had caused; he was saving us.

It was written all over his face. He was giving himself to set us free, my father was selflessly feeding himself to lions to clean our souls. My father was about to give up everything for the ones he loved.

I understand. . . I know what you're doing.

Nodding, I asked. "What do you need from me?"

"Nothing, just live your life, Birch. Do everything and anything you've ever wanted. When you were little I used to imagine that you'd grow up and be just like me, but it's not what I thought it would be at all. I want more for you and Cyprus, I want you two to live your own life, not mine." Smiling, he shifted on his feet to face the detectives. "Alright, let's go."

The detective rose up off the couch and wrapped his hand around my father's arm, guiding him towards the door. Glancing at me over his shoulder, he said, "Tell Cyprus to call me." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his card and handed it to me behind his back. "I know she's got questions, and I have a few answers I need to give her."

I didn't answer him, simply giving him an understanding nod. Following them to the front door, I stood there and watched them put my father in the back of the cruiser. My chest was a mix of hot and cold as I breathed in and cursed everything he was about to do.

Nothing will ever be the same.

I'm losing the my father just like I lost my mother. There will never be a future for us

again.

That thought shifted something deep in my gut, it forced me to finally understand the loss Cyprus had been dealing with for all these years. I thought I understood what she felt, I thought I could give her what she was missing.

I've been lying to myself.

My father was wrong for everything that he had done. He could never fix her, no matter how much he wanted to.

Because we were never truly hers to begin with. And nothing could ever replace the bond between a child and their parents.

Fingers startled me as Cyprus crept up behind me and curled herself into my back. "What's happening? Where are they taking him?"

"He's giving them what they want." My father's eyes stayed on mine as the car pulled away. "And I think he's actually relieved about finally ending all of this."

"I'm sorry, Birch. I'm sorry I caused this."

"No," I barked, twisting on my heels and cupping her small round face. "Don't you ever apologize for a damn thing. You didn't cause this, he chose it."

"I just feel like it's my fault, I kinda lost it."

Holding her face in my hands, my brows knitted. "You deserved the truth from the very beginning. We both lied to you, you have the right to feel the way you do."

"So what happens now?" Her fingers teased the hem of my shirt, eyes glassy and lost.

Pulling her head into my chest, I wrapped my arms around her back. “We just keep going.”

“What will we do?” I felt her voice as it ruffled my shirt and the warmth of her breath as it heated my skin.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

“Start over, just like you wanted to.” Running my fingers through her hair, I kissed the top of her head. “I love you, it's time for us to change.”

Cyprus had been right, we didn't have to do any of this.

But I was blind. Blinded by comfort of what's familiar. Blinded by family laws that had ruled my life. I was blinded by everything that didn't really matter.

We didn't need this life to be happy.

I already had the one thing that made me who I was. It wasn't my name, it wasn't my father, it wasn't the brutality of power we thrived on. . .

I had Cyprus, she was my happiness.

And it took me far too long to realize that.

Chapter Eighteen

Cyprus

“Well?” I asked, tapping the table and leaning back in the chair. “What is it you have for me?”

Detective Jones stood in the doorway, holding a cardboard box. “Good to see you too.” Smirking, he tilted his head towards Birch. “Good to see you too, Birch. How are you holding up?”

“I’m doing pretty well actually,” Birch said with an uncomfortable smile. “Things still feel weird, but we’re doing good.”

“That’s all that matters.” Resting the box on the table, Jones placed his hands on the edges. “I saw you sold the bar, I don’t blame you for not wanting it anymore.”

“Yeah, I had mixed feelings on doing that. It was hard to let it go, but Cyprus and I have bigger things to think about.” Slipping his hand over my belly, Birch grinned. “Once we’re done with everything here, I think we’ll finally be ready to really start fresh.”

In the two months since his father willingly admitted to everything he had done over the years, we also found out I was pregnant. It was a wonderful surprise in the whirlwind of shit that we had gone through.

Three months along, and it was nice to have something positive to focus on finally.

And Birch, I don't think I've ever seen him this excited about something. Last week I had found him huddled around the computer, searching baby names and what to expect during pregnancy.

Unfortunately none of this was over, not in the least. Nick's sentencing hearing wasn't for another three months, and we both decided it would be good for us to go for very separate reasons.

I wanted to be there to support Birch. He had lost his entire family, his mother and now his father, I knew exactly what he was feeling. And he wanted to be there for his dad, to show him that regardless of what was happening, he still loved him for the father he had been and that he was grateful for what he had done for us.

Nick had taken the fall for everything. The death of my parents, the deaths of Antoine and his brother and father. He came clean about a handful of other murders I had refused to acknowledge and others I had never heard about.

He agreed to tell them every detail, to give them all the information they needed to close a dozen cold cases and the warehouse where he kept stolen goods and cash we hadn't laundered through the bar yet.

We got lucky the police hadn't been able to seize the bar. The place had been in Valentina's name, and when she passed, it was left to Birch. With Birch in the clear, the bar was his to do what he wanted with.

The only thing Nick demanded for his cooperation was immunity for his son, that was it. Leave Birch alone and they'd get answers. I couldn't believe he was giving himself for his son. It was an act of selflessness I didn't think he had and was beyond grateful for.

The district attorney agreed after much consideration, finding his request to be small

in comparison to what he promised to give.

“Congratulations.” Leaning in, the detective held out his hand. Birch hesitated for a split second, then gave him a firm shake. “I’ve got two of my own, there’s nothing like having a child to make you see the world differently.”

“Okay, are we done with this small talk?” Glancing between the two men, I brought my eyes back to the box. “Why did you insist on me coming here again?”

“I have some stuff here that belongs to you. We don’t need it anymore, so it’s yours.”

“What is it?”

Pushing the box in my direction, Jones folded his arms over his chest and smirked. “Why don’t you look for yourself.”

Pulling back the flaps, I shuffled through some of the items on top. There was a pair of brown loafers, a thick leather belt, and a quilt. Beneath that I found some eyeglasses and a pair of earrings.

“Who—” Tugging out the glasses, I cocked my head, unable to finish my question.

“These were your parents, now they’re yours.” Holding up his finger, he wagged it in the air like he had just had an epiphany. “Oh, and this.” Reaching behind his back, he tugged out a folder and opened it up. Pulling out a small photo and a piece of paper, he handed both of them to me.

Pinching the picture, I smiled. It was the one he showed me before, and I was excited to finally have it.

Holding up the paper, I knew what it was immediately. The small seal in the bottom

right corner was faded and worn. The upper edges were frayed and torn, the ink barely legible and bleeding out from the sold print.

My birth certificate. . . This is my birth certificate.

Fiona McKayla Deltorro. Born: September seventeenth, Nineteen- ninety six.

Mother: Brandy Seline Delvechio

Father: Franklin Donald Deltorro

Page 74

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Each line gave me a piece of my soul back. I had a birthday and a middle name. My parents were there, my birth weight and the hospital I was born in. I was the age we had guessed all those years before, we had hit it on the nose.

I really am twenty-two.

Tears created blurry glass bubbles over my eyes. Blinking them away, I held onto that piece of paper like it was made of solid gold.

“This is me, I have a real birth certificate.” My fingers pinched the thin paper, afraid to squeeze it any harder for fear it would crumble to dust and blow away.

Licking his fingers, the detective flipped through the folder. “There's an account for you at Fritz International Bank, it's under your birth name. Your parents assets were liquidated, and everything was put into an account that would go to you when you turned eighteen.” Slipping out another paper, he laid it down on the table.

Two hundred thousand dollars. . .

“Are you serious?” Flicking my eyes up and down, my jaw dropped into my chest. “This is mine?”

Shaking his head yes with a smile, his eyes glinted with happiness. “There's one last thing I need to tell you. You have one surviving grandmother, she lives down in Maryland and is very eager to see you again.”

“I have a grandmother?”

“Mm hm, and she has some more of your parents personal belongings. Pictures, clothes, maybe even some stuff that was yours.”

“This is insane. I'm shocked right now, I don't know what to say.”

“You don't have to say anything. This is your family, and you're still a part of them, regardless of how much time has gone by.” Smiling, Detective Jones crossed his arms over his chest. “Just do me a favor, go see her as soon as you can. She's been waiting far too long for you to come home.”

Sniffling, Birch passed me a tissue, and I wiped my nose. “Thank you for this. Thank you for not giving up on me.”

I had forced myself to think the worst; abandoned, left for dead in the woods, alone and lost.

I had thought no one from my past had loved me.

I had spent so many years hating people I didn't even know.

And now, now all I felt was love.

Epilogue

Cyprus

Taking a deep breath, I felt Birch squeeze my hand. My fingers had been working the piece of paper in my hands for over an hour.

I folded and unfolded, I opened it wide and stared at what I had written down, and still it somehow felt unfinished. It shouldn't, it should have been done, it should have been filled with everything I wanted to say to that man.

And as I sat there, re-reading it over and over, it just didn't feel like my feelings were captured well enough in my letter.

“Are you ready?” The prosecutor asked, leaning down and softly speaking into my ear. “You don't have to do this if you don't want to, you can still turn it down.”

“No, I want to—I need to.”

Birch kissed my cheek, gently nuzzling his forehead against my temple. “Just tell him the truth.” His hand stroked up and down my back, confident and strong. “Don't worry about what you wrote, just tell him what you feel.”

It felt like this day took forever to get here. We sat back and listened to the prosecutor and defense attorney go back and forth over sentencing terms and what each deemed necessary for the crime. There was no debate Nick was going to be spending the rest of his life behind bars, it was the meager details that they fought over now.

Nick plead guilty, he wasn't fighting them and trying to ease his own suffering. He wanted this all to be over as much as we did. But lawyers still played the push and pull game.

The prosecutor wanted murder charges on everything he confessed to. The defense wanted to split hairs and try to have some of the chargers changed from murder to second degree murder and manslaughter.

No matter which way they wrote it, Nick was destined to die behind steel bars and four feet of cement. I didn't see the point in this game, but it wasn't up to me.

A small foot kicked my rib, jogging me awake. Our son tumbled and turned, doing acrobatics in my gut, making me wince as he shoved a limb into my kidney.

And that's when it all came together, right then, as I held my breath and waited for my child to snuggle into place.

I know what I need to say. . .

"I'm ready," I said, looking up at Loretta Scott, prosecutor for the state of Rhode Island.

Her thin face twisted in a tender smile, eyes thinning as years of stress created thick crows feet at the outer corners. "Alright." Nodding, she rested her hand on mine and patted the top. "Judge Carmichael, before you hand down your ruling, Fiona Deltorro would like to speak."

Nodding, the judge waved his hand. "Ms. Deltorro, the floor is yours."

Birch's fingers fell off my back as I stood, their presence fading as my skin cooled on the longest walk of my life. It was only ten feet maybe less to the podium, but it felt

like I walked a mile to get there.

Nick was sitting at the defense table, hands folded on top, eyes opened wide staring at me. He didn't look upset or angry, he didn't look nervous or uncomfortable that I was about to tell him everything that I felt about him.

He was calm, but eager, I could tell by the way his fingertips repeatedly tapped into each other. It was the only sign I had that he was actually listening. A motion I had grown up watching, a subtle mannerism that most would never spot.

But I could. Because I knew my parents killer, I knew him like a daughter would know her father.

Unfolding the paper, I smoothed it out on the glossy platform, doing my best to not let my emotions take over. I could feel the tears as they sat in the back of my sockets, waiting for the perfect moment to take over.

Taking in a deep breath, I looked down at my victim impact statement and sighed. This isn't it, this isn't what I want to say.

Clearing my throat, I swallowed hard. "I had a whole long letter that I wrote for today. I spent days trying to get it right, trying to find the perfect words to use so you would know exactly what you had done to me. . ." Thumbing the edge of the sheet, I fiddled with the corner. "But this—this isn't it."

Allowing my eyes to meet Nick's, he gave me that same fatherly smile I had seen that day in the woods. My nerves seemed to settle and that smile had somehow given me the strength to articulate everything inside.

"You did so many horrible things to me and to so many others. But you don't need me to stand here and tell you again what those things were. This isn't just about what

you did, it's about who you did it to. It's about how your actions affected others, and how it changed us in ways you refused to let yourself feel.”

Lifting my chin higher, I refused to break eye contact with him. “Because it did change us, it changed not only my life but your son's too. It changed the life of your wife and the life of the unborn grandchild you're never going to be able to see. My gift to you is the same gift your actions gave my parents. You won't have the chance to be there and see him take his first steps, listen to his first words, or feel what it's like to have a grandchild hug you and love you. For our child, your memory will be a lie, just like my life. We won't share these details with him, we won't ever let him feel the hurt and pain that his grandfather caused in our world. But that pain, that pain is on you. Because I will be there, Birch will be there, and we're going to teach our son what it means to truly be loved.”

Nick dropped his chin into his chest as he eyed my growing stomach, knowing full well that I was right. But his eyes, his eyes said something else. They spoke to me, telling me that he knew, that he was okay with all of this because him behind bars meant his son wouldn't be.

My heart tore open for him. I was staring into the eyes of the father I had grown up with. The man who did love his family despite his addiction to power. He put himself here for his son, he did it to save us from anymore hurt.

He saved me from being alone.

I hated and loved this man all at once. It was confusing, mangling my thoughts into something that could never make sense to someone on the outside. You would have had to live it to understand.

Nick was like Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde. He killed my parents, he stole my memories and let me believe that my parents had abandoned me. But he also gave me a childhood, he gave me a family, he provided for me, he gifted his son to me and accepted me as one of his own.

There was good and bad inside this man, so naturally inside me there was love and hate.

Angling my head, I clutched the side of the podium and kept speaking. "I came here today, thinking that this one piece of paper was enough to show you how I felt. It's not, it never could be. What you took from me can never be replaced, but what you gave me, that's going to be my life. I love your son, and there's no doubt in my mind that you love him with everything you have. I don't question that, I don't even question if you have any love for me, because I know you do."

His smile returned, giving me a subtle nod of appreciation.

"I guess, I guess what I really want you to know is that I forgive you."

An audible gasp filled the courtroom, the onlookers all turning between themselves and whispering to each other.

Turning to face the room, I spoke loud and clear. “You can't live with hate in your heart, you just can't. And I refuse to let this define me, I refuse to let this live inside my heart like a disfigured monster I can't get rid of. In order to heal, you need to be able to forgive.” Twisting back to Nicholi, I smiled. “I forgive you. That doesn't mean I'll forget it, and it doesn't mean that it still won't affect me for years to come. But I won't live everyday hating you, it's not fair to me or to Birch, or the child we're going to bring into this world. No matter what, you're still Birch's father and he's your son, regardless of what you have done. And I know he still loves you.”

Sighing, I let my head tip forward, as everything that weighed me down suddenly lifted. “Some place inside you is the father he had, the one he still remembers and will never forget. That's the man our son will hear stories about, that's the man I'll think about when your name comes up or your grandson asks a question about when we were young. I hope it brings you some comfort to know that the picture we'll paint for him will be kind and gentle. That's my gift to you.”

Folding up the paper, I straightened my back, placing my hands on my belly. “My forgiveness wasn't an easy decision to make, but it was something I had to do. You erased a young girl from this world, you destroyed one soul and molded it into another. My memories were gone, but you filled my head with something else—a beautiful lie.”

Stepping down, I found my place next to Birch and hugged him. The tears came, stealing away any of the faces that looked at me like I was stupid for forgiving him.

But they hadn't been there. None of those people had gone through what I had.

All I cared about was how I would live with myself when this chapter of my life was over.

I wanted to be completely free.

And now I was.

* * * *

The taxi rolled to a stop outside a huge forest green colonial house. There was a big tree in the center of the front yard, and two tall spiral bushes perched outside the front door. White stones created a path from the driveway to the door, with large flat stones scattered up the center like floating lily pads.

“Thank you,” I said to the driver as I bundled up my purse and jacket and climbed from the car.

Birch unplugged the car seat, peeking under the small awning protecting our sleeping child. “He's still out like a light.”

“Well he cried the entire the flight, so I'm sure he's exhausted.” Chuckling, I lifted my eyes to the big house and my heart began to thud inside my chest.

“Do you have the baby bag?” he asked, slipping the handle of the car seat up his forearm and holding the bottom.

“Yeah, I got it.” Reaching onto the floor of the taxi, I grabbed the bag and slung it over my shoulder. “I can't believe we're here.”

“Are you nervous?”

“A little.” My lips crinkled and my eyes widened. “Are you?”

“Nope, I'm excited.”

A small cry escaped our son, and Birch began to rock the seat in his arms. “Shh,” he

hushed softly. “Go back to sleep, Noor.”

Noor, it was a name we took time finding. It means light, and this little guy had given us just that. He had shed light in darkness, he had glowed when the world was dark. We had so much worth living for and all of it was inside that little boy.

The cab pulled away and Birch and I stood motionless in the driveway. I knew he was waiting for me, but taking the first step to that door was harder than I thought.

I was afraid that I wouldn't be who she expected. That my grandmother would open that door expecting to see the same girl she remembered from years ago.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:38 pm

Noor cooed and that sound made me rethink every thing I feared. I loved my son and my family, and I knew it wouldn't matter who or what they became.

Birch still loved his father, and a piece of me still loved him too. I didn't love the man that had caused me pain, but I did love the man that had given me happiness.

If I could do that, if I could find the good in someone so bad, then why would it be different for this woman?

Forcing my foot forward, I felt the rocks crunch under my sneakers as I kept my eyes on the door. My fingers tingled, eager to ring the bell and see the woman who had brought my mother into this world.

I wondered if I'd recognize my mother in her, if I'd be able to see all those small details that they shared.

Lifting my foot to the bottom step, the front door swung open and a tiny old lady grinned down at us from ear to ear. Her hands were cupped over her heart as tears spilled out from beneath the rim of her large round glasses.

Pushing the storm door open, the scent of chocolate chip cookies and flowers floated out, mingling with the crisp autumn air.

“Hello, my dear, I've been waiting for this day for a long time.” Stepping into the house, my grandmother twined her fingers into mine. “My God, you're beautiful, just like your mother.”

The warmth of her skin melted my heart and I cried with her. Pulling me in, she hugged me like we hadn't just spent almost a decade apart.

“I'm so happy to be here.” The words came out crumbled in tears and joy. “This is all I ever wanted.”

Pushing back, she turned to Birch and smiled. “Thank you,” she said, throwing her arms around his neck.

“I'd say you're welcome, but I don't know why you're thanking me.” Chuckling, he curled his free arm around her back.

Holding his shoulders, she pressed back and smiled. “Because you brought her back to me.” Kissing the side of his cheek, my grandmother took a step, and held both our hands. “Because now I have a piece of my daughter here with me again.”

To some a family is nothing more than a watering hole where you can get a hand out.

To some a family is nothing more than the people you'd rather never become.

But to me. . .

A family was a wish that finally came true; I would never take that for granted.

Because family are the only ones who will ever look past your faults and see the good inside. As long as you're willing to let them.