My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 751

“I think your worth isn’t determined by whether you read easily. It can be mana-*

Giovanni pushed himself off the examination table. His boots hit the floor with a heavy thud, “You don’t get it.”

“I understand this is upsetting.”

“Nah,” his voice hardened. He jabbed a finger into his own chest. “You don’t know a damn thing. My whole fuckin’ life, people looked at me and saw one thing.” His jaw clenched. “Stupido. Idiot. Worthless.”

The doctor’s face softened, “I’m sorry that happened.”

Giovanni dragged a hand over his face, “First it was the teachers. Then my parents. Then every bastard in the neighborhood,” his voice turned rough, “I crossed an ocean, Doc,” he gave a hollow laugh, “Thought maybe it’d be different here,” he looked away, “Turns out people laugh in every language.”

His breathing grew heavier. His chest rose and fell harder with every breath.

“You know what they do?” his laugh was short and ugly, “They shove a piece of paper in my face,” he looked away for a second, “Then they just stand there…” His jaw tightened. “…waiting for me to fuck it up.

The doctor didn’t move, “I’m sorry you’ve had to live with that.”

Giovanni’s eyes snapped back to him, “Don’t. Don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m not judging you, Giovanni.”

“You’re looking at me like I’m broken.”

“I’m not.”

Giovanni stepped closer to the desk, “Then stop talking and fix it.”

The doctor sighed, “There isn’t a medication for dyslexia.”

Giovanni frowned, “Bullshit.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“What about surgery?”

“No.”

“Some machine? Some treatment?”

“No.”

“A doctor smarter than you?”

“There are specialists who can teach you ways to make reading easier.”

Giovanni gave a sharp shake of his head, “I don’t want easier,” he planted both hands on the desk and leaned in, “I don’t want tricks. I don’t want shortcuts. I want this shit outta my head.”

The doctor held his stare for several long seconds before speaking quietly, “Giovanni, it can’t be taken out.”

Giovanni let out a slow breath through his nose, “So that’s it? You’re telling me this is it?”

“Yes.”

“This is how I stay?”

“Yes.”

The word hit him harder than a fist. It didn’t bruise his face. It bruised something much deeper. He lowered his eyes to the floor.

No cure.

His mind refused to accept it.

No cure.

He slowly shook his head, “Nah… you’re wrong.”

The doctor didn’t answer.

Giovanni looked back up, “There’s gotta be somethin’.”

“There isn’t.”

“What about some experimental treatment.”

“No.”

“Some doctor somewhere.”

“Giovanni…”

“There’s always somebody better.”

“Not for this.”

Giovanni’s jaw clenched so tightly a muscle jumped beneath his skin.. Then both of his palms crashed onto the doctor’s desk, pens rolled, and a coffee mug tipped over. A framed family photograph fell onto its face with a loud crack.

“So what?” he barked, “Guys like me just stay like this?”

The doctor never raised his voice, “People with dyslexia learn different ways to read. Many build successful lives.”

Giovanni gave a cold, disbelieving laugh, “Yeah? You know what kind of life this bought me? School threw me away. My old man beat the shit outta me for it. Every asshole I ever met thought I was too stupid to breathe. So don’t sit there tellin’ me people like me do just fine.”

The doctor met his stare without looking away, “I’ve treated people with dyslexia who became lawyers, engineers, business owners, even teachers themselves.”

“I ain’t met a single one.”

The doctor sighed, “That doesn’t mean they don’t exist.”

For a long moment, neither man spoke.

Finally, the doctor said quietly, “Giovanni. Dyslexia didn’t make those people cruel. It only showed you who they really were from the beginning. It wasn’t your fault, it was theirs.”

Giovanni ignored what the doctor had said and walked toward the door. His hand wrapped around the handle but then he stopped.

“If somebody figured it out… if somebody figured out how to fix this,” he tapped the side of his head,” They’d never have to hear they’re stupid again.”

The doctor smiled sadly, “I suppose they wouldn’t.”

Giovanni nodded once, “Then somebody’s gonna figure it out.”

The doctor looked at the young man standing in the doorway, “Giovanni…”

“You’ve mistaken ‘we don’t know how’ for ‘it can’t be done.’ Those aren’t the same thing,” Giovanni pulled the door open, “I’ve seen enough people tell me something couldn’t be done. They were wrong every time.”

The doctor sighed, “I hope one day you stop believing you’re broken.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 752

Giovanni’s mouth curved into the faintest smile, “I’m not broken,” he looked the doctor straight in the eye, “You just ain’t smart enough to fix me yet.”

The door shut behind him and the sounds of Brooklyn rushed over him, cars, sirens, people shouting across the street, none of it reached him. His mind had latched onto one thing.

No cure.

Bullshit.

Doctors had been wrong before.

They were wrong now.

Somewhere in the world, there had to be a man smart enough. And if there wasn’t…

Then one day, Giovanni Toricelli would become powerful enough to find one.

No matter what it cost.

ƸӜ

Age 22 | Manhattan, New York | Soldier (Made Man), rising earner

The banquet hall glowed beneath crystal chandeliers.

Long tables stretched from one end of the room to the other, covered in white linen and silver cutlery that cost more than most people earned in a month. Bottles of expensive

Italian wine stood between towering flower arrangements while waiters moved quietly through the room, never speaking unless spoken to.

Every chair was occupied with capos, soldiers. Associates who had earned the privilege of being invited, businessmen, politicians, judges who looked the other way often enough.

Giovanni walked through the room without slowing. By the age of twenty-two, he was already Made. Already earning more than men twice his age.

He had almost reached the bar when someone stepped into his path. The collision was light, barely enough to make him stop.

A woman's voice snapped before he even looked up, "Watch where you're going, idiot."

Giovanni froze.

Idiot.

The word hit him before her face did, a muscle in his jaw twitched. Then he looked at her.

Green eyes.

They were not light green, not dark green, but something in between. The kind that looked straight through people instead of at them.

She couldn't have been older than twenty.

Dark brown hair fell over one shoulder in loose waves. A deep emerald dress rested against her figure without looking flashy. She stood with her chin lifted, clearly expecting an apology.

Instead, Giovanni smiled.

The girl frowned, "Did you hear me?"

He nodded once, "I did."

"And?"

"You called me an idiot."

"I know what I called you," she folded her arms, "You walked into me."

"No, you walked into me," he answered.

Her eyebrows shot upward, “Now you’re blaming me?” she stared at him another second before shaking her head, and mumbling “Fucking idiot.”

Then she stepped around him and disappeared into the crowd without another glance. Giovanni watched her until she vanished between the tables.

Someone chuckled behind him, “Didn’t think I’d ever see that.”

Giovanni turned. Vito Costello leaned against one of the marble columns with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

The Cosa Nostra’s chief enforcer looked amused, “You smile like that often?”

Giovanni ignored the question, “Who is she?”

Vito followed his gaze toward the crowd, “Ah. So that’s what this is. Her name’s Hazel Morino.”

The name meant nothing to him.

Vito took a slow sip of whiskey, “Her old man is Andrea Morino.”

Giovanni looked at him, “The Chicago Outfit’s consigliere?”

Vito nodded, “The same one.”

Giovanni looked back toward the ballroom but Hazel had already disappeared.

“You done admiring her ass?”

Giovanni finally looked back at him, “What do you want?”

Vito took another slow draw from his cigar before lowering his voice, “I found somebody.”

Giovanni frowned, “What are you talking about?”

“The doctor.”

Everything in Giovanni’s face changed. The warmth that had appeared only seconds ago disappeared as if it had never existed.

“What doctor?”

“The one you’ve been asking every bastard about for the last four years.”

Giovanni set his untouched whiskey on a passing waiter’s tray, “I’m listening.”

Vito glanced around the room before jerking his head toward a quieter corner, “Walk.”

The two men moved away from the laughter and music until the conversations around them faded into the background.

Vito spoke first, “His name’s Elias Crowe.”

The name meant nothing to Giovanni, “Who is he?”

“A pediatrician.”

Giovanni’s expression tightened, “A children’s doctor?”

Vito nodded, “Bright son of a bitch, from everything I’ve heard.”

Giovanni folded his arms, “And?”

“And he’s sitting on death row.”

Giovanni stared at him, “For what?”

Vito shrugged once, “Depends who you ask. The papers call him a monster because they say he killed patients. I’ve got people saying Crowe spent years studying how the brain learns. Memory. Language. Development. The way children process information.”

Giovanni’s heartbeat picked up, “What else?”

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Chapter 753

“Word is…” Vito lowered his voice even further, “…he believed a lot of conditions people called permanent weren’t as permanent as everyone thought.”

Giovanni didn’t blink, “Did he prove it?”

“No.”

“Did he try?”

“They say he wasn’t afraid to and that’s what got him in jail. There were lines he wasn’t allowed to cross.”

Giovanni’s eyes narrowed, “What lines?”

“The kind that get doctors stripped of their license. The kind that get them locked up.”

Giovanni didn’t blink, “What did he do?”

Vito gave a small shrug, “As I said, enough to land himself on death row.”

Giovanni frowned, “And you think that’s supposed to make me trust him?”

“No,” Vito smiled faintly, “I think it tells you he stopped caring about rules a long time ago.”

Giovanni looked away for a moment. His mind drifted back to all the doctors he had been to in the last four years.

There isn’t a cure.

Vito watched him carefully, “He knows about dyslexia. He knows enough to think the brain can be changed.”

Giovanni’s breathing slowed, “He said that?”

“He said the brain is just another machine,” Vito added, “And every machine can be taken apart.”

The noise of the dinner faded into the background for Giovanni, “What does he want?”

Vito answered immediately, “His life. He’s waiting for execution.”

“How long?”

“A few months.”

Giovanni looked down for a moment, “If he walks out of that prison, you think he can help me.”

Vito nodded, “He already has ideas.”

“Ideas?”

“He’d need money.”

Giovanni nodded, “I’ve got money.”

“He’d need protection.”

“I can buy protection.”

“He’d need a new identity.”

Giovanni didn’t hesitate before saying, “I’ll give him one.”

Vito watched the young man for several long seconds, “What if he’s lying?”

Giovanni’s jaw clenched, “What if he isn’t? They all told me to live with it. They all told me I couldn’t be fixed. I’m done listening to people who tell me what can’t be done.”

Vito gave a slow nod, “I’ll set up the meeting, then we’ll get him off death row.”

Giovanni watched Vito disappear into the crowd. The laughter around him faded into meaningless noise. Men raised glasses. Cigars burned. Deals were made over expensive whiskey.

He heard none of it.

He had finally found someone who wasn’t looking at him with pity. Someone who hadn’t smiled and told him to “accept it.”

His whole fucking life people had given him the same answer.

Live with it.

Work around it.

It can’t be fixed.

He was sick of hearing what couldn’t be done.

Every time someone shoved a piece of paper in front of him, he became that scared little kid again. The one standing in front of a classroom while everyone laughed because the letters refused to stay still.

It didn’t matter how much money he earned now.

It didn’t matter that men carried guns for him.

It didn’t matter that people lowered their heads when he walked into a room.

The second somebody handed him something to read...

He was eight years old again.

Weak.

Ashamed.

Stupid.

His fingers curled into fists.

No.

He refused to spend the rest of his life hiding that part of himself.

There had to be a way.

People weren't God. They didn't know everything. They just hadn't found the right man yet and maybe that man was Elias Crowe.

And if he wasn't...

Giovanni would keep looking.

One doctor.

Then another.

Then another.

He didn't care if it took ten years.

Twenty.

His whole fucking life.

He'd keep searching until somebody gave him a different answer. Because accepting it... that was never an option.

His eyes hardened.

If Elias Crowe truly believed there was even the smallest chance, then Giovanni would drag that chance out of the grave with his bare hands.

If it cost him every dollar he earned...

Fine.

If it cost him every favor he'd ever collected...

Fine.

If it cost him blood....

Even better.

Because for the first time in his life...

Someone hadn't told him, "It can't be done."

Someone had said, "I have an idea."

And that was all Giovanni Toricelli needed.

Janedoewritings

Author

I'm saying this as respectfully as possible: if you don't enjoy the story I'm telling, you're welcome to stop reading. I'm not forcing anyone to stay, and I don't want anyone spending their hard, earned money on something they don't enjoy.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 754

Gianna

I followed Dad through the long halls of the estate a few minutes later.

He walked with the same measured pace he always had. Hands behind his back. Suit perfectly pressed. Every servant stepped aside before he reached them.

Nothing about him looked unusual but I couldn't stop hearing Gio's voice.

We weren't raised.

We were studied.

My stomach twisted.

Dad pushed open another set of double doors, "This is where financial meetings are held."

I forced myself to focus. The room was enormous. A long walnut table stretched almost the entire length of it. Maps covered one wall. Another held photographs of politicians, businessmen, judges and foreign officials.

Dad walked toward the head of the table, “When you become Donna, every person sitting in these chairs will expect certainty. They don’t follow kindness. They follow confidence.”

I gave a small nod.

He began explaining how every territory generated money, construction, shipping, luxury hotels, private security, imports, exports.

He spoke without looking at a single note. Numbers rolled off his tongue effortlessly, percentages, routes, profits, losses.

I tried listening. I really did but another voice kept pushing its way into my head.

Do you want to end up like your brother?

My eyes drifted toward Dad’s hands. Hands that had tucked me into bed when I was little. Hands that had held mine while teaching me how to use a fork properly.

Hands that had praised me...

Hands that had punished me.

The same hands.

“...Gianna.”

I blinked.

Dad was watching me, “What percentage of the eastern ports belong to us?”

I opened my mouth but suddenly everything blanked out, I knew he’d told me less than thirty seconds ago.

I couldn’t remember a single number.

“I’m sorry.”

His expression barely changed, “You weren’t listening.”

“No.”

“What were you thinking about?”

My heartbeat sped up, “Nothing.”

His eyes stayed on mine for another second before he continued speaking, “If your attention wanders this easily, people will notice.”

I nodded, “I’m sorry.”

Instead, he moved toward a map hanging on the wall, “If federal pressure increases here,” he tapped one location, “Where do we redirect shipments?”

I looked at the map, the words blurred together for half a second before settling again, not because of my dyslexia but because I couldn’t stop thinking.

Studied.

The word wouldn’t leave me alone.

Studied.

Like an experiment.

Like…

No.

That was ridiculous.

Dad had pushed me hard. He’d hurt me. He’d controlled every second of my childhood.

But…

Lab rats?

No.

Surely not.

“Gianna.”

I looked up again. He had stopped talking and looked pretty annoyed now, “Do you have something on your mind?

“I’m just… tired, didn’t sleep well,” I lied smoothly.

“No,” his voice stayed calm, “You’re distracted.”

I swallowed, “I’m fine.”

“You aren’t,” he stepped closer, “What did Giovanni tell you?”

Every muscle in my body locked. My face stayed still, “Nothing.”

His eyes searched mine. It felt less like a father looking at his daughter and more like someone checking whether a witness had started talking. The thought hit so suddenly it made my chest tighten.

Where had that come from?

Dad smiled. His thumb brushed an invisible piece of dust from my jacket, “You always touch your fingers together when you’re hiding something.”

Without thinking... I looked down. My fingers were twisting together. I immediately pulled them apart.

His smile widened just enough to unsettle me, “So, what did they say?”

I forced myself to smile back, “We talked about my mom. I just miss her.”

Now that wasn’t a complete lie. I did miss her all the time.

He watched me for another few seconds, long enough that I wondered if he knew, long enough that I wondered if he’d always known every lie I’d ever told him.

Then he stepped away, “We’ll continue.”

He returned to the map as though nothing had happened. He resumed explaining trade routes, supply chains, money laundering, political leverage.

I forced myself to look away from him.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 755

Whatever Gio had meant...

Whatever Perla had been trying to tell me....

It wasn’t going anywhere. If I wanted answers, I had to stop letting my mind run in circles.

Dad was still speaking, “Cash flow tells you the truth long before people do.”

He tapped a stack of folders resting on the conference table.

I took a slow breath, “Can I?”

He gave a single nod. I pulled out my phone and unlocked it, clicked on the app and the clean interface appeared almost instantly.

Every file I scanned was sorted automatically, there were transactions, wire transfers, construction companies, import businesses, payroll, shipping contracts, tax records.

The app highlighted patterns faster than I ever could.

Dad continued explaining territory percentages while I worked, “The docks generate less than they did ten years ago. Federal pressure changed the landscape. We adapted.”

I nodded absently, “Hm.”

I dragged another folder onto the screen, the graphs shifted, then shifted again.

A red line appeared.

I frowned. I enlarged the chart and checked the dates, six months ago. The operating accounts had almost bottomed out.

Cash reserves were almost gone. Credit lines were maxed out. There were loans everywhere, and dozens of them.

I stopped scrolling, “Dad.”

He didn’t look up from the map, “Yes?”

I checked the figures again, maybe I’d imported something incorrectly. I rescanned the files but it gave me the same answer. I opened another report and the numbers matched every single time.

I slowly looked up, “These accounts...”

He finally turned toward me, “What about them?”

I rotated the tablet so he could see, “The Syndicate almost ran out of money. You were declared bankrupt... six months ago?”

His eyes moved over the screen of my phone. He didn’t look surprised or bothered. The app highlighted another section. They were debt maturity schedules, interest payments, refinancing and emergency liquidity.

I felt my brows pull together, “We’re still carrying enormous debt.”

Dad walked over without the slightest hint of urgency. He looked at the screen, then calmly reached for his coffee, “Yes.”

I stared at him, “Yes?”

He took a slow sip, “Markets shift.”

1 looked back at the tablet, “This isn’t a market fluctuation. Our operating costs exploded,” I opened another report, “Revenue dropped. Several businesses stopped producing. We refinanced multiple loans.”

The app linked everything together, construction, shipping, real estate, casinos. Everything was connected. Every profitable branch was supporting another one that was bleeding money.

I looked back at him, “Daddy?”

He set the coffee down, “There were setbacks.”

The answer was so calm it almost annoyed me.

I stared, “Setbacks?”

He folded his hands behind his back, “The organization expanded aggressively, so aggressively we nearly buried ourselves. Growth carries risk.”

I looked back at the screen, the graphs weren’t lying. If a normal corporation had looked like this, banks would’ve started circling, investors would’ve panicked, some companies would’ve collapsed.

I zoomed farther in, interest payments alone were staggering. Whoever had negotiated the refinancing had bought time.

My pulse quickened, “We’re still exposed.”

Dad nodded once, “For now.”

I looked at him, “You’re not worried?”

“I already handled the difficult part.”

I frowned, “The difficult part?”

“We survived.”

He said it so simply.

As though surviving the edge of financial collapse deserved no more attention than discussing tomorrow's weather.

I searched his face.

But there was still nothing, no embarrassment, no panic, no shame, "We'll recover."

I looked down again, "The debt load is still enormous. The Costello's could buy us out in a second."

"But they won't..."

I shook my head, "Some of these repayment schedules stretch almost two years."

"They do."

"Our reserves are still thin," I slowly lowered the tablet, "And you're comfortable with that?"

He met my eyes, "No, but I'm confident."

He wasn't pretending everything was perfect. He knew exactly how dangerous their position still was. He'd simply decided they would survive it.

While he turned back toward the maps, I kept my eyes on the phone, pretending I was still reviewing the reports.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 756

One by one, I snapped photos of the financial statements, balance sheets, cash flow reports, debt schedules, and internal ledgers.

Highly confidential Syndicate records.

If he caught me doing this, I'd probably won't leave this room alive. I saved the encrypted files anyway. There was something buried in these numbers that I couldn't quite put together.

Maybe...

Raphael would see what I couldn't.

"If something goes wrong before these loans are paid..."

Dad finished the sentence for me, "It becomes much harder, I know."

I looked once more at the shrinking margins on my screen and then back to my Dad. He turned back toward the map as if the conversation had already ended.

I looked down at my phone one last time before locking the screen, "Dad," I leaned one hip against the conference table, "There's something you haven't told me."

He looked over his shoulder, one eyebrow lifting, "What?"

"You remember why I came back, right?"

A faint smile crossed his face, "You came home because this is your home.'

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second and then sighed, "I came back because you promised me something. You told me..." my voice softened, "You told me you could finish what we started. You promised me you'd fix me."

A knot formed in my stomach.

"But since I got here, you've kept me busy every hour of every day. Meetings. Financials. Territory reports. Leadership lessons," I spread my hands, "Every time I bring it up, you change the subject."

"I've had more urgent matters to deal with."

"More urgent than the reason I came here?"

His eyes settled on mine, "Yes."

I stared at him, "I came back because I needed to know whether everything I went through... whether any of it was leading somewhere."

Something flickered across his face.

"So stop putting me in conference rooms." I took a step toward him, "Stop giving me another balance sheet to read. I want to see Dr. Vance."

Dad's mouth parted as if he were finally about to answer but Leone stepped inside the room.

"Don."

Dad turned toward him.

Leone leaned in, lowering his voice until I couldn't make out the words. He murmured something into Dad's ear, quiet enough that only the two of them could hear.

Dad's gaze returned to me, "We'll talk about this later."

The rest of the day passed in meetings or at least.

Dad called them meetings.

To me, they felt more like lessons.

We walked through warehouses filled with imported marble and Italian furniture. He introduced me to accountants who handled offshore companies, lawyers who specialized in tax law, and managers who oversaw hotels, construction firms, and shipping contracts.

Leone barely left Dad's side. Every few minutes he'd lean in and whisper something only the two of them could hear. Watching them together made one thing painfully obvious, he'd always had the kind of closeness witlyDad that Gio and I never did.

And between every quiet moment, Gio's voice found its way back into my head.

By lunch, I'd already tried three times to get Dad alone. The first was while we were reviewing contracts, after Leone had been called away.

"Dad..."

"Hm?"

"I asked you something-"

He slid another folder toward me, "Read the last page. Tell me what clause protects us if the supplier defaults."

The conversation ended before it had even started. By the time I'd lowered my eyes to the document, Leone had returned. I nodded and did what Dad had asked.

The second time was during a tour of one of the Syndicate's private warehouses.

"Dad... what exactly did Dr. Vance-"

He looked over, "Notice the cameras," he pointed toward the ceiling, "Every blind spot becomes an opportunity for theft. Never assume loyalty is enough."

I stopped talking.

The third time happened in the car.

Rain tapped softly against the windows as the city rolled past outside. Dad was talking while Leone answered emails on his tablet.

I stared out the window for another minute before finally speaking, “You still haven’t answered my question.”

15 you

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 757

“What question?”

“You know which one,” I said and he didn’t even look up, “I asked you about Dr. Vance,” I snapped.

He stopped talking to Leone and finally looked at me, “Let’s talk about it when we’re alone, alright?”/

By evening, my patience had worn thin.

The three of us were alone in Dad’s study. A fire crackled quietly in the fireplace, filling the room with warmth Dad stood beside the bar, pouring himself a glass of whiskey, while Leone sat in one of the leather chairs with tomorrow’s schedule spread across his lap.

I couldn’t keep still.

While they talked business, I wandered around the office, letting my fingers trail over the shelves. I pulled out a book, flipped through a few pages without really reading them, then slid it back into place before reaching for another.

“If you’re going to lead this family one day,” Dad said, swirling the whiskey in his glass, “you’ll need to keep Leone close.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him, then at Leone. He’d been in a foul mood all day, and it showed.

“I’ll think about it,” I said, “I’d rather have Gio beside me. That’s how it should’ve always been.”

Leone looked up from the papers, “Giovanni doesn’t know this business the way I do.”

“He can learn,” I replied, pulling another book from the shelf. “I’m learning.”

I slid the book back into place.

Then, something caught my eye.

A signature.

My breath caught.

I knew that signature.

I’d seen it everywhere as a child. On his white coat. On the metal trays. On the clipboard he always carried. Even on the chair I’d been made to sit in.

Dr. Vance.

Dad and Leone kept talking behind me.

“The New Jersey shipments can wait until Thursday.”

“They’ll complain.”

“They always complain.”

Their voices blurred together as I pulled it and something clicked. A quiet metallic sound echoed inside the wall. I frowned, the bookshelf trembled beneath my hand.

For one impossible second, nothing happened. Then the entire section began sliding sideways.

My hand slipped away as I stumbled back. The opening grew wider. Behind the bookshelf was another room.

Cold white lights flickered to life overhead. Hundreds of thick files filled shelf after shelf. Computer monitors covered one side of the room, some dark, others glowing with screens full of words I couldn’t read from where ! stood.

Boxes stacked neatly from floor to ceiling.

And everywhere...

Files.

So many files.

My pulse hammered so hard I could hear it, “What...?”

The word barely left my mouth before Dad was beside me. His fingers closed firmly around my wrist, stopping me before I could take another step. With his other hand, he reached behind the edge of the bookshelf and pressed something I couldn’t see..A low mechanical hum filled the room.

The bookshelf slid back into place, inch by inch, until the opening disappeared completely.

Books.

Nothing but rows of books.

If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes...

I would’ve convinced myself it had never been there.

I stared at Dad, “What was that?”

His expression softened just enough to be unsettling, “Something for another time.”

I pointed at the bookshelf, “There’s a hidden room in your office. What were all those files?”

“I’ll explain it to you when the time is right.”

I took a step toward him, “Dad, tell me!”

I watched his face harden in the next second and the warmth disappearing from his eyes, “Go to your room.”

I stared at him, “I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s in there.”

His jaw tightened, “I said... go to your room, Gianna.”

I looked from Dad to the bookshelf, then back to him. Every instinct I had screamed the same thing.

Whatever was hidden behind that wall...

It was the answer I’d been searching for because it had Dr Vance signature.

Raphael

The door clicked shut behind me and a soft hiss drifted through the air. I glanced toward the enormous glass enclosure near the windows.

Share.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 758

“There you are.”

Medusa lifted her head the moment she heard my voice. Her tongue flicked once.

I opened the enclosure, holding out my arm. Her body flowed over my wrist, smooth scales sliding across my skin. as she slowly wound herself around my forearm.

“Miss me?”

She answered by tightening ever so slightly.

I smiled, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Closing the enclosure, I walked toward the couch and dropped into it.

Medusa continued climbing until half her body rested across my shoulders while the rest curled lazily around my lap.

She’d always liked warmth.

My fingers absentmindedly traced the patterns along her scales, only then did I reach into my pocket.

The third USB drive.

The one I kept for myself.

For a moment, I simply looked at it. It wasn’t evidence. It wasn’t leverage. It wasn’t information.

It was...

Her.

I leaned forward and pulled a thin black case from beneath the coffee table. Inside the case sat a custom-built phone dock no larger than a wallet. Matte black. No logos. Just a row of tiny ports hidden beneath a sliding cover.

I snapped the cover open, the USB slid into place with a quiet click. My phone vibrated the instant it connected.

A small window appeared, external storage detected. Another notification followed almost immediately.

It scanned, and then less than a second later, folders began arranging themselves automatically.

Dates.

Video formats.

Corrupted files.

Duplicates.

Everything sorted before I even touched the screen. I watched the progress bar finish. My thumb hovered over the first folder.

I opened it and saw hundreds of Gianna's videos. I selected the first random video. The screen shook for a second before steadying.

Hazel's laugh came first, "Oh, it's recording."

The camera turned and a younger Gianna immediately covered her face.

"Mom!"

"No, don't hide."

"I'm not dressed!"

"You look beautiful."

"I look horrible!"

I stared at the frozen frame for another second before opening another, this one lasted longer. A banner stretched across the wall.

Happy 18th Birthday.

The room was filled with balloons. Hazel was clearly the one holding the camera again. The camera found Gianna standing beside the cake. She looked embarrassed before she'd even blown out the candles.

“Mom...”

“What?”

“Stop recording.”

Jules suddenly appeared behind her, without warning, she shoved frosting onto the tip of Gianna’s nose.

Gianna froze, then grabbed an entire handful of frosting. Jules turned to run but the frosting splattered across the side of her face before she could.

I hadn’t realized I was smiling until my cheek began to ache. Medusa shifted against my shoulder, her cool body brushing my neck. I scratched beneath her head without taking my eyes off the screen.

Another video.

This one started outside. Jules stood beside a garden hose. Gianna was watering flowers. Jules slowly reached over, turned the water pressure all the way up, the hose jerked and the stream exploded forward. Gianna shrieked as water slammed into her shirt.

She spun around, “You did that on purpose!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You liar!”

Gianna charged at Jules and she dropped the hose and ran. Water sprayed wildly across the garden.

Hazel’s laughter echoed behind the camera, “Oh, this is definitely staying.”

“Mom!” both of them yelled together.

Hazel laughed even harder, “You’ll thank me one day.”

“We won’t!”

“You will.”

The camera shook as she tried to keep up with them. Jules slipped on the wet grass. Gianna tripped over him a second later. Both of them landed in the mud.

Then they looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Hazel zoomed in, “My beautiful children.”

One by one, I watched most of them, and then I sat there long after the screen went dark. My thumb rested against. the edge of the phone.

I tossed the phone onto the couch beside me and leaned back until my head rested against the cushion.

Medusa shifted with me, her body sliding across my chest before settling around my shoulders once more.

Chaptor 700

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 759

I closed my eyes.

It didn’t help.

All I saw was Gianna laughing.

Cake smeared across her face.

Mud on her clothes.

That smile.

And those eyes that fucked me for life.

I let out a slow breath through my nose and closed my eyes.

She belonged here.

With me.

With the Capones.

Instead, she was sleeping under another man’s roof. Walking his halls. Sitting at his table. Listening to his voice.

I didn’t give a fuck that he was her father.

All I cared about was that she was still within Caruso's reach.

One wrong moment.

One locked door.

One order.

My jaw clenched. Every instinct I had screamed at me to bring her home, I couldn't. Giovanni had made sure of that.

He couldn't stand against the Capones himself, so he'd taken the coward's way out.

He'd dragged the Council into it.

Now it wasn't a fight between two Families.

It was an order.

If I ignored it and took Gianna by force, the Council wouldn't come after me.

They'd come after the Capones.

Four Families against one.

Every alliance we'd built. Every business. Every soldier. Every shipment. Every man carrying our name would become a target overnight.

That wasn't a war, that was an execution dressed up as justice.

Giovanni knew exactly what he was doing. He knew he couldn't beat us. So, he made sure the Council would. The thought sat in my chest like broken glass.

My jaw tightened. One order. That's all it would take. One phone call. One convoy. One night. I could have her here before sunrise.

My eyes opened, the ceiling stared back at me.

I hated waiting. Waiting meant someone else still had control over the timing. I preferred removing that problem. A soft hiss brushed against my ear. Medusa nudged my jaw with the top of her head.

I scratched beneath her chin without thinking, "You don't like waiting either."

I leaned forward as the stack of unopened mail on the coffee table caught my attention.

It had all been sent to my office. The staff always brought my mail back to the estate and left it in my room. There was no official address for this place. If someone wanted to send us something directly, they'd have to leave it at our doorstep themselves.

Most of it ended up in the trash without being opened. I picked up the pile anyway. More to keep my hands busy than out of interest.

One envelope, straight into the trash. Another, where someone was asking for money.

The next envelope stopped me. It was plain, no company logo, no return address.

Nothing.

Only one word.

Raphael.

My name.

Just...

Raphael.

A small crease formed between my brows. I turned it over. The flap had been sealed by hand. I slipped a finger beneath the seal and pulled it open.

Something small slid free before I could look inside. It landed in my lap with a dull tap.

I looked down.

It was a memory card, the kind most people had stopped using years ago. One corner had snapped clean off, and a thin crack ran through the plastic. 2

I turned it over between my fingers.

Damaged.

But not beyond saving.

My eyes drifted back to the envelope, there was something else inside. A folded sheet of paper. I reached in and pulled it free.

The frown left my face. My eyes dropped to the first line. My grip tightened around the paper.

There hadn’t been a return address because it had never been mailed. It had come from inside the house.

It was a letter addressed to me.

Tanter 20

From Hazel.

Janedoewritings

Author

A very late update, but it’s finally here! I hope you guys enjoy it.

This chapter answers a few questions I’ve seen come across quite a bit-like how Giovanni managed to survive in this world. Despite his condition, he’s always been more than capable

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 760

Raphael

Raphael,

This is Hazel.

You are probably wondering why, out of everyone in this world, I chose to leave a letter for you.

Truthfully...

I’m wondering the same thing.

You are your father’s son, and I was only his wife for a short part of my life. I don’t have the right to ask anything of you. I haven’t earned that right, and I know it.

So what I’m about to ask may feel unfair.

It may even make you angry. If it does... I’m sorry. But I don’t know who else to trust.

Over the last few months, I've watched this family more closely than any of you realize. I saw things people don't notice when they've lived together their whole lives.

I saw six young men who would walk through fire without thinking twice if it meant protecting someone they loved. You stand between them and the world without asking whether it's worth the cost.

I saw loyalty that couldn't be bought.

And I saw a home that never stayed quiet for very long.

When we first arrived, I was frightened. Because I didn't know what kind of life we were walking into.

At first, some of those fears weren't completely wrong, none of us knew each other. Trust doesn't appear overnight. It grows slowly.

One day at a time.

Somewhere along the way, without any of us noticing, that changed. The walls between us disappeared. You boys stopped treating us like guests. You made room for us at your table.

You laughed with Gianna and Jules. You argued with them. You protected them without even realizing you were doing it.

And before I knew it...

You had made us part of your family.

It was the first place in a very long time where I could go to sleep without wondering what tomorrow would bring.

The first place where I believed, my daughters might finally be safe.

So, there are a few things I need to admit, something I noticed long before I think you did. I want you to know why I'm writing your name instead of anyone else's, and it's not because I believe you're the easiest person to ask.

Quite the opposite.

I've watched you long enough to know that your trust isn't given freely, neither is your loyalty both have to be earned

But I've also noticed the way your eyes always find Glanna, even when you think no one is paying attention

You rarely speak more than necessary, but you never stop watching Whenever she walks into a room, your attention follows her before the rest of you does,

When she laughs... your expression softens, even if only for a heartbeat. It's such a small change that most people would never notice it.

A mother does.

Mothers notice everything when it comes to the people who stand near their children.

I don't know what the future holds for the two of you. Maybe I'm seeing something that will never become/ anything

Maybe whatever is growing between you will disappear before either of you finds the courage to give it a name.

Life has a way of changing even the plans we are certain of

I'm not writing this letter because I expect you to love my daughter.

Love cannot be asked for.

It cannot be demanded.

And it certainly cannot be forced.

If your heart leads you somewhere else one day, then I hope that person treasures you the way you deserve to be treasured.

What I want...

What every mother wants....

Is simply for her child to be safe,

To be loved honestly, to be seen for who she is, nothing more, nothing less but I would be lying if I said I haven't noticed something

Gianna has never been very good at hiding her feelings. She likes to believe she is. She convinces herself that if she keeps her face straight enough, no one will notice what's happening inside her head.

She's wrong

She's as easy to read as clear water.

Every feeling reaches her eyes before she has the chance to hide it. Especially when she's looking at you. I've seen her cheeks grow warm for no reason at all.

I've watched her lose her train of thought halfway through a sentence because you walked into the room.

I've caught her looking for you without realizing she was doing it. Then pretending she wasn't, the moment she found you looking back.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 761

Those are small things, easy things to miss. A mother doesn't miss them.

Neither, I think...

Do you.

Maybe the two of you will become something beautiful, maybe you won't.

That choice belongs to both of you, not to me.

My reason for writing goes far beyond that.

There are things about Gianna that few people truly understand or know.

She smiles more now than she used to. She laughs more often. Some days she even looks peaceful. People see those moments and believe she's healed.

She isn't.

The storms inside her mind haven't disappeared. She's simply become better at hiding how loud they are.

The doctors wanted to help. They offered medicine to quiet the noise in her mind. She refused every single time because she's unbelievably stubborn.

Once Gianna decides something...

Moving her is like trying to move a mountain with your bare hands.

The harder you push, the deeper she digs her heels into the ground.

I argued with her.

I pleaded with her.

I cried.

Nothing changed her mind.

She would smile, kiss my forehead, tell me she was alright, then continue carrying more pain than anyone her age should ever have to carry.

I loved that girl with everything I had. I tried to give her every piece of the childhood she had been denied. I celebrated every small victory, every smile, every laugh, every day she chose to keep moving forward.

But love, no matter how deep it is, cannot erase years of damage all by itself. There are wounds that become part of the way a person sees the world.

Her father left those behind.

Even now, after everything, Gianna still searches for love where it never truly existed.

She still believes that somewhere beneath everything he did, there was a father who loved his little girl.

She holds onto that hope with both hands. It breaks my heart every time I see it because the man she keeps searching for was never there.

I don't believe he loved Gianna for who she is. I believe he loved what she represented.

A reflection of himself.

An extension of his own ambitions.

And somehow, despite everything she's endured. She still cannot bring herself to see the difference.

There is something else I need to admit. You may not understand my decision. Perhaps, if I were reading this letter instead of writing it, I wouldn't understand it either.

Salvatore is my husband. He has shown me kindness. He gave my daughters a home when we needed one more than anything.

For that, I will always be grateful.

But gratitude and trust are not the same thing. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying he is cruel to me. He isn't. He has never raised his hand against me. He has never made me fear for my own safety.

But I have lived long enough to know that a person can be good to one individual while being someone entirely different to the rest of the world.

Your father is proof of that.

Salvatore has darkness inside him. I see it. I've always seen it. I simply made peace with looking away from the parts of him I could never change. Sometimes that's the only way people survive.

You learn which questions not to ask. Which doors not to open. Which silences are safer left untouched. That doesn't make him evil but it doesn't make him the man I would choose to leave this burden with, either.

When it comes to Gianna...

My heart tells me to place it in your hands instead. Maybe that sounds foolish. Maybe it even sounds unfair but mothers learn to listen to instincts they cannot explain.

Mine has never been louder than it is now.

I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't know what life will make of you and Gianna. Perhaps you'll grow old together. Perhaps you'll walk separate paths before either of you realizes what almost happened.

That part isn't mine to decide.

What I do know...

What I believe with all my heart...

Is that no matter what happens between the two of you, you and your brothers will never stop seeing Gianna and Jules as family.

I've watched the six of you for too long to believe otherwise.

Love may change.

Life may change.

People may change.

But the bond between brothers...

That is not so easily broken.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 762

If Gianna ever needs somewhere to run. I believe your family will still open the door.

That belief is the reason this letter exists.

Inside this envelope, you'll find a damaged memory card. I've kept it hidden for longer than anyone knows.

There were moments I almost handed it to someone else. I never could. Something always stopped me.

It felt like the kind of thing a mother keeps tucked away for the day she has nothing left except hope.

I've been waiting for the right time. Praying I would never need it.

But Gianna's father never stopped believing Gianna belonged to him, not because of love, but because he canno accept losing what he believes is his.

People like him don't let go. I knew, deep down, that one day he would try to bring her back under his control. Maybe with promises, guilt or fear.

That's why I kept this. He tried to destroy it before it reached me. The crack running through that little card wasn't an accident, neither was the missing corner.

He believed he had ruined it beyond repair but I kept it anyway.

I never understood how to fix it but I believed someone else eventually would. If anyone in this world can bring life back to something everyone else would throw away...

It's you.

I don't know what you'll find once you manage to recover it. I've never watched what it contains, and I never wanted to.

All I know is that everything they did to Gianna because she was different.... everything that happened inside that room was recorded in this. Well, not everything, but parts of it anyway.

Before I finish this letter, there is one last thing I want to say. It's probably something I should keep to myself. Because mothers are always a little too hopeful when it comes to the people they love.

If that's true...

Then let me be hopeful one last time.

If, one day, you and Gianna decide that what exists between you is worth holding onto, you will have every blessing I have to give.

I've seen enough to know what the two of you bring into each other's lives. I've watched it happen without either of you noticing.

You steady her.

She softens you.

Neither of you takes anything away from the other. You simply make each other a little more whole.

That is a rare thing.

Please don't let anyone convince you otherwise, not the world, and certainly not the ghosts the two of you carry.

Whether your story lasts a lifetime or only a season, never let anyone tell you that what you felt wasn't real.

Some people spend their entire lives searching for the kind of peace the two of you unknowingly give each other.

If you choose one another...

I will be smiling.

If there is any place beyond this life, I like to think I'll still be watching over my children.

That includes you now.

Take care of yourself.

Take care of Gianna.

And don't forget to let someone take care of you once in a while, too.

With all the love a mother can leave behind,

Hazel 1 ren &

I didn’t realize how long I’d been staring until my eyes burned.

The letter lay open across my hand while the damaged memory card rested in my palm. My gaze shifted between them over and over again, as if reading the same words enough times would somehow change them.

Every sentence of that letter had been written by someone who already knew she wouldn’t be there to explain herself.

Every thought collided with the next. Damage assessment. Flash memory architecture. Broken contact points. Corrupted sectors. Possible recovery methods. Chemical repair. NAND extraction. Direct chip-off recovery. Every process I’d ever learned lined itself up before me with brutal precision.

Then another thought cut through all of it.

Everything they did to Gianna because she was different?

My jaw tightened so hard my teeth hurt. I looked down at the crack running through the card.

Doctors kept records. Researchers kept records. People who experimented on human beings documented everything.

Progress.

Failures.

Results.

Observations.

My stomach turned, not because of what might be on the card but because I already knew it wasn’t going to surprise me.

It was going to confirm every suspicion I’d been trying to keep under control.

Giovanni…

Dr. Elias Crowe.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 763

The council.

Hazel’s fear.

Pieces that hadn’t fit together before suddenly began locking into place with frightening speed.

A cold calm settled over me.

I folded the letter with far more care than I’d expected myself capable of. The paper disappeared back into the envelope before I slipped both it and the memory card into the inside pocket of my jacket.

Medusa shifted across my shoulders, her body tightening for a brief moment before relaxing again. I reached behind my neck and guided her back toward the glass enclosure. She moved without resistance, sliding from my arm onto one of the thick branches inside her habitat.

I closed the enclosure the second she was inside. The magnetic lock clicked shut. I turned around and walked toward the door.

The walk lasted exactly two steps, and then I broke into a run.

The estate blurred around me. Guards stepped aside before I reached them, recognizing the look on my face before I said a single word. Someone called after me, but I didn’t bother turning around. Whatever they wanted could wait.

This couldn’t.

The garage echoed with the sound of hurried footsteps. Rows of cars sat beneath bright white lights. I ignored every one of them.

I snatched the helmet off the handlebars, swung onto the bike, and fired the engine to life. The roar filled the garage, bouncing off the concrete walls before the security doors had even finished opening.

Cold air hit me the moment I shot out onto the road. The city became nothing but streaks of light.

The engine screamed beneath me as I cut through the streets. Red lights blurred past. Speed limits became meaningless numbers painted onto signs I had no intention of obeying

I honestly couldn't have told anyone how I got there. One moment I was leaving the estate. The next, the glass tower of Orion Vector Technologies stood above me, reflecting the city lights across its dark surface.

I pulled into the underground entrance, and the security barriers lifted before my motorcycle had fully stopped. Cameras tracked every movement. License plate recognition. Facial recognition. Thermal scans. Layer after layer of security verified my identity without slowing me down.

By the time the motorcycle rolled to a stop, I was already climbing off.

I ripped the helmet free and strode through the private entrance without breaking pace.

The overnight reception staff looked up immediately, "Good evening, Mr. Capone."

The private elevator waited at the end of the corridor, hidden behind a wall that most employees assumed was decorative. A camera scanned my face as I approached. Another verified my retina.

The doors opened before I reached them. I stepped inside. No one else had access to this elevator. No buttons listed the destination I wanted. I pressed my thumb against the concealed biometric reader, and the elevator began descending.

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The doors slid open and the basement stretched farther than most people would believe possible, an entire underground floor that never slept.

Hundreds of monitors lit the room in shades of blue and white. Massive server racks hummed behind reinforced glass. Analysts studied live financial markets while programmers wrote code faster than most people could read it. Engineers dismantled electronics on one side of the room while cybersecurity teams monitored networks spanning half the country on the other.

Large digital maps tracked shipments, communications, and financial movements in real time.

People noticed me immediately and chairs rolled back.

"Boss."

"Mr. Capone."

“Evening, sir.”

But nothing existed beyond the office waiting at the end of the corridor.

Because whatever was hidden inside that damaged piece of plastic was about to change everything.

The moment the office door sealed behind me, every other thought disappeared. I crossed the room and dropped the envelope onto my desk. The memory card stayed in my hand.

Only then did I look at it properly.

The crack started near one corner and stopped just short of the center. The plastic housing had taken most of the impact. I switched on the workbench built into the far wall.

The surface came to life beneath my fingertips. Overhead lights brightened automatically while a row of monitors woke from sleep. A robotic inspection arm folded down from above, followed by a digital microscope.

I laid the card beneath the lens, the image appeared across three monitors at once. Every scratch, every crack, every grain of dust, magnified until it looked like a canyon.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 764

I reached into a drawer and removed a small anti-static kit. A pair of precision tweezers. Magnification lenses. A bottle of electronics-grade cleaning solution. Conductive tape no wider than a thread.

The damaged shell came apart with almost no effort. Inside sat the actual flash memory package was intact.

I let out a slow breath. The corner that had broken away had missed the memory chip entirely. The damage had severed part of the connection between the contacts and the board, nothing more.

It was annoying but recoverable.

I cleaned the fractured contacts carefully before securing the board inside a specialized recovery adapter designed for damaged flash storage. The adapter held the broken circuit perfectly still, replacing the pressure the missing corner had once provided.

The adapter locked into place with a quiet click. I connected it to an isolated forensic workstation and the monitors flickered.

Nothing happened for atleast ten seconds.

Then...

Unknown removable media detected.

The corner of my mouth twitched, “Come on.”

The system tried reading the card, failed and tried again. This time using a slower protocol.

A warning appeared.

Read instability detected.

I disabled automatic repair immediately. The last thing I wanted was software trying to “fix” evidence. Instead, I instructed the workstation to perform a sector-by-sector image.

The progress bar crawled forward, three percent.

Nine percent...

Fourteen percent...

It slowed every time it reached the damaged portion of the card. I watched the error counter climb, then stop, and then climb again..

The only sounds in the room were cooling fans and the faint tapping of my fingers against the desk.

Fifteen minutes after I’d walked into the office, the progress bar reached one hundred percent. A message appeared in the center of the screen.

Disk image completed.

Data integrity: Partial.

Good enough.

I never touched the original card again. I removed it from the adapter and set it aside before opening the forensic copy, folders appeared, and then filenames.

None of them had names.

Only numbers.

My pulse slowed.

A directory caught my attention. I opened it and the screen refreshed.

Files started filling the screen. My eyes kept moving as a row of video files filled the monitor. Every one of them carried the same date format. Every one of them had been recorded days apart.

I stared at the list without moving, twenty-two recordings. My hand drifted toward the mouse. It stopped just above it.

For the first time that night...

I wasn't afraid of finding nothing.

I was afraid of pressing play.

I clicked the first file, for a second, the screen stayed black then static crawled across the monitor before the picture steadied.

The angle was wrong.

Too high.

Too far away.

Whoever had placed the camera hadn't wanted it seen. It looked down from the upper corner of a white room, catching only part of what was happening below.

A chair sat in the middle of the room, metal, bolted to the floor. A girl sat in it, weak and frail. Her feet didn't reach the ground, they were strapped to the legs of the chair, leather restraints circled both wrists and another held her waist against the backrest. A wider strap crossed her chest.

She couldn't have been older than fourteen.

My breathing stopped.

Gianna.

She stared straight ahead at something beyond the camera's view, the timestamp blinked in the corner of the screen.

Years ago.

A man walked into the view, carrying a clipboard, white coat, grey gloves. He never looked at the hidden camera. Instead, he walked toward another camera positioned somewhere in front of Gianna.

The one recording the official session.

He pressed a button, a small red light turned on. His posture changed immediately.

“Primary Research Subject,” he said into his own camera. “Session one hundred and twelve.”

He glanced briefly toward Gianna before returning his attention to his notes.

“Objective remains unchanged. Continued observation of accelerated cognitive intervention for developmental

+15 Bgnus reading impairment.”

Reading impairment.

My jaw clenched. He didn’t say her name. He didn’t say child. He didn’t even say patient.

Subject.

As if she wasn’t human.

He set the clipboard aside and picked up two small circular sensors connected by thin wires. Without asking permission, he brushed her hair back. She flinched but he didn’t react.

He pressed one transmitter against her right temple, then another against her left. Cold adhesive caught in strands of her hair.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 765

She squeezed her eyes shut, “Please... so cold...”

He ignored her and I squeezed my eyes shut. His fingers checked each connection before attaching another sensor behind her ear.

The monitor beside him came alive, lines began moving across the screen, numbers, waveforms and brain activity.

He spoke toward the front camera again, “Subject continues displaying significant neurological inefficiencies consistent with severe developmental dyslexia. Traditional educational intervention has failed to produce acceptable improvement. Current protocol aims to stimulate targeted neural adaptation through repeated synchronized exposure and electrical modulation.”

He said it the way someone else might explain changing a tire. Gianna rubbed one thumb against the restraint around her wrist over and over again until the leather turned her skin pink.

Dr. Crowe crouched in front of her, “What is your name?”

She swallowed, “Gianna.”

“Louder.”

“Gianna Toricelli.”

“Age?”

“Sixteen.”

He made a note without looking up, “Do you know why you’re here today?”

Her lips parted, she hesitated, and his eyes lifted from the clipboard, glaring at her.

“So…” she whispered, “…my brain can… get better.”

“Better?” he repeated.

She nodded quickly, “So I can read properly.”

“The subject continues demonstrating an awareness of her own neurological deficiencies,” he adjusted one of the wires connected to her temple, “The objective remains correction of abnormal neural function.”

Correction.

The word echoed inside my head. Gianna shifted against the restraints. The leather squeaked. Her breathing had become shallow.

“Will…” she asked quietly, “…will it hurt… today?”

He looked at her, “Discomfort is a normal part of treatment, you should know that by now, but you ask these questions every single fucking time.”

“I was... good yesterday.”

“You were.”

“I read all the pages.”

“You did,” he continued, “That’s why, today’s procedure will be longer.”

The little bit of hope disappeared from her face, “No...” her fingers pulled uselessly against the straps, “I don’t want the long one.”

Dr. Crowe checked another cable, “The protocol is not determined by patient preference.”

“I’m... scared, please, tell Daddy, I’ll do... better. I promise, I’ll be... good...”

He walked back toward the equipment.

She made a small sound, the kind a frightened child makes when they’re trying very hard not to cry because they think crying will only make things worse.

Dr. Crowe didn’t even turn around.

Instead, he faced his own camera once more, “Subject displays predictable anticipatory anxiety before electrical stimulation.”

He looked down at another page on his clipboard.

“The emotional response has no measurable impact on the effectiveness of the protocol and will not alter today’s procedure.”

He reached toward a control panel just outside the hidden camera’s frame.

My hand slammed onto the desk so hard the keyboard jumped. The video kept playing. I couldn’t look away. I couldn’t breathe. And for the first time in years...

I understood why Hazel had never been able to watch it.

I should have stopped the video, closed the file and walked away. Instead, my hands stayed frozen.

As her small body convulsed against the restraints, spit ran down her chin and her eyes rolled back beneath trembling lids.

I didn’t look away.

I forced myself to watch every second of it.

Because if I was going to bury every last one of the men responsible... I needed to know exactly what they had done to her.

I needed to see every detail. So when the time came... I'd know exactly how much suffering still wouldn't be enough to repay what they'd stolen from her.

The recording continued and the current finally stopped.

Dr. Crowe reached for the control panel and turned a dial down with the same casual ease someone might lower the volume on a radio.

Gianna's body went limp against the restraints.

Her chest rose and fell in quick, uneven breaths. Small tremors still ran through her arms and legs, refusing to stop even after the electricity had. Tears streamed silently down her face while she struggled to catch her breath, a quiet whimper escaping every few seconds.

I watched every second of it.

Every shake.

15 Bus

Every broken breath.

Every tiny movement her body made as it fought to recover.

Dr. Crowe stepped toward a steel stand positioned in front of Gianna. Until then, it had been hidden by the angle of the camera. A thin board was clipped to it, rows of printed words, large black letters.

Simple enough that any child her age should have been able to read them. He adjusted the stand until it sat directly in front of her eyes.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 766

"Look at the first line."

Gianna sniffled, her eyes were still wet, but she obeyed.

He waited, "So," he said evenly, "read it."

She stared at the page, her lips moved silently, trying and trying again.

“I…”

The word caught in her throat.

“I can’t…”

“You can.”

“I… the… letters…”

“They haven’t changed.”

He wrote something on the clipboard without looking at her.

“Attempt again.”

She swallowed hard and focused on the first word even though she could barely hold her head up, “I…”

Dr. Crowe reached toward the control panel beside him.

“I can’t read it,” she whispered, panic creeping into her voice. “Please…”

A sharp tone echoed through the room. Gianna’s whole body jerked violently against the chair. Her back arched. A cry tore out of her before she could stop it..The restraints snapped tight around her wrists as every muscle locked at once.

This time, I looked away, I stood up and turned my attention to the wall, breathing heavily.

Then it stopped, she sucked in a desperate breath and I looked back, tears spilled freely down her cheeks now.

Dr. Crowe looked at the monitor displaying her brain activity, “Read the first line.”

She shook her head rapidly, “I… I can’t…”

Another shock. Her small body convulsed against the restraints. A broken sob escaped her lips as the current released. She bent forward as much as the straps allowed, fighting to catch her breath.

“I’ll try,” she gasped. “I’ll try…”

“Then read.”

She forced herself to look at the page again, the tears blurred her vision. She blinked them away as fast as she could, “T...The...”

She stumbled over the next word, the letters seemed to trap her. She squeezed her eyes shut for a second, “I can’t...

The tone sounded again, this time the shock lasted longer. A scream ripped through the room.

My hand shot to the keyboard, slamming the space bar. The video froze, but the sound had already carved its way into my skull. I turned my head away from the monitor and clamped both hands over my ears.

It didn’t matter.

I could still hear her.

My breathing turned slow and heavy as I stared at the opposite wall, my jaw locked so tightly it burned. Severa long seconds passed before I looked back. The recording was still paused.

Gianna’s small body was arched against the restraints, every muscle pulled tight, her mouth frozen open in a silent scream.

I swallowed hard.

Then I forced my shaking hand back onto the mouse and pressed play.

When it ended, her head hung forward..She was crying openly now, just the helpless, exhausted sobs of a little girl whose body had reached its limit.

“I’ll do better,” she cried, “Please... I’ll do better...”

Dr. Crowe calmly adjusted one of the sensors on her temple, “The subject continues associating failure with corrective stimulation. Crying persists. Compliance remains acceptable as anticipated.”

He spoke as though she wasn’t even in the room. As though the child trembling in front of him was no different from numbers on a chart.

Gianna tried to wipe her face against her shoulder. She couldn’t reach. Her wrists were still strapped down.

“I don’t want to be broken anymore,” she whispered through her sobs. “I’m trying...”

I couldn’t watch another second.

I threw my head back and squeezed my eyes shut, “Fuck…” I muttered, “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” the word echoed through the office as my hand curled into a fist, “I’m going to bury every last one of them.”

The promise settled in my chest like stone but before Giovanni Torricelli paid…

The Council would.

The same men who had looked the other way. The same men who had handed an innocent little girl over to monsters and called it acceptable because she was his blood.

They would kneel before the Capones.

They would strip Torricelli of every protection they had ever given him.

Every alliance.

Every favor.

Every ounce of influence.

They would cast him out and leave him standing alone.

And once they did…

I’d make sure there was nothing left for him to stand on.

Janedoewritings

Author

Dun dun duuun… there it is!

I hope you guys enjoy this chapter.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 767

Gianna

—

It was late at night, and the only sounds were the distant ticking of a grandfather clock and the soft footsteps of guards changing shifts somewhere downstairs.

I stopped outside Gio's bedroom door.

For a long moment, I simply stood there. My hand hovered in the air before I finally knocked. Three quiet taps

Then his voice came through the door, "Come in."

I pushed the door open slowly. His room was dark except for the bedside lamp, which cast a warm pool of light across the bed. Giovanni was lying against the headboard with a book resting across his lap. He looked up the moment I walked in.

He closed the book without marking the page, "You couldn't sleep either?"

I tried to smile, "No."

He watched me for a second before patting the empty space beside him. I crossed the room and sat beside him, drawing one leg onto the mattress.

Neither of us spoke immediately, I simply stared at my hands. They wouldn't stay still. My fingers twisted together before I caught myself and forced them apart.

"The conversation at breakfast?" he asked quietly.

I nodded, "I can't get it out of my head. I keep telling myself you have to be wrong," I admitted. "Then I remember everything... and suddenly I don't know what to believe anymore."

"What's hard to believe?"

My throat tightened, "I just..." I looked at him, "I need the whole truth."

He didn't look surprised. He only asked one question, "What do you want to know?"

I swallowed, "Did Dad..." my voice almost disappeared, "...did Dad and Dr. Vance do the same things to you that they did to me?"

Giovanni didn't answer right away, his eyes drifted toward the window. Then he nodded, "Yes."

The word barely reached me, I felt the air leave my lungs, "No... It doesn't make any sense. Why? Why would they do that to you? You were his son. You were his heir. You weren't..."

I couldn't finish the sentence.

Giovanni did it for me, "I wasn't different?"

I nodded weakly.

A tired smile crossed his face, "But I am. I'm dyslexic too, Gianna. Always have been."

Everything inside me stopped.

I just looked at him.

He gave a small nod, "Dad always knew."

1 searched his face, waiting for him to laugh. To tell me he was joking. He never did.

"He figured it out before either of us was old enough to understand what it meant but he only needed one of us for the... sessions."

The words sounded hollow.

"As long as he had you..." he paused, "I was free to be what he wanted me to become. I was the heir," his eyes lifted to me, "You were the experiment."

My stomach turned.

"He believed if Dr. Vance could understand your brain," Giovanni's jaw tightened, "He could fix mine without ever putting me through it."

The room suddenly felt too small as I slowly realized why he was in a wheelchair.

"And then I left," I whispered.

"You did."

"And after I left, there was no one else."

He sighed, "He never stopped searching for you. He wanted you back but he couldn't find you. So..." a bitter laugh escaped him, "I became the only option he had left."

I couldn't breathe, "He put you through it?"

Giovanni nodded once, "It wasn't as long as yours. It was just four years. He'd already gathered years of information from you. Most of what they did to me was trying to repeat what they'd learned."

His fingers tightened around the edge of the blanket.

“Two years ago, something went wrong.”

He stopped speaking.

I waited.

After several seconds, he continued, “Dr. Vance lost control of the machine... And it didn’t stop when it was supposed to.”

My heartbeat thundered inside my ears.

“I remember trying to tell him I couldn’t feel my hands. He kept looking at the monitors. I told him again. He said it was a normal response.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 768

Giovanni looked away.

“The next thing I remember,” he swallowed, “...was waking up in a hospital.”

My hand covered my mouth.

“I couldn’t move.”

My eyes filled instantly, “What do you mean...’

“I couldn’t move, my legs, my arms, my back. My own body wouldn’t listen to me.”

The room blurred, “Oh my God...”

The words slipped out as little more than a breath. I reached for him without thinking. My hand wrapped around his.

“The doctors told Dad the electrical damage had injured my spinal cord. They called it...” he searched for the words, “...an incomplete spinal cord injury. They weren’t sure how much function would come back.”

I felt sick.

I looked at my brother.

If I had never left, he would've been himself, he wouldn't have been put through that.

A tear rolled down my cheek, "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault, Gianna. After that..." he let out a slow breath, "Dad shut everything down. He said he wasn't willing to lose both of his children. He'd already lost you. He almost lost me."

I closed my eyes.

"He changed."

I looked at him again.

"He stopped talking about the treatments. He stopped talking about Dr. Vance, but he also stopped looking at me the same way. One day he came into my room. I was still learning how to stand back on my own again. He stood at the end of my bed... and told me I wasn't as strong as you."

My heart broke.

"He said, 'If you were Gianna, you wouldn't still be lying in that bed. She would've fought harder. She would've gotten up instead of lying there like a coward.'"

I blinked, I couldn't find a single word to say. So I did the only thing I could. I moved closer, wrapped both arms around my brother.

And held him.

When I finally pulled back, I wiped at my face with the heel of my hand. My eyes drifted toward his legs before returning to him, "Can I ask you something?"

Giovanni gave a small nod, "You can ask me anything."

I hesitated.

$15 #104

I felt wrong somehow.

After everything he'd just told me, this wasn't the question I should've been thinking about but I couldn't stop thinking about it

"Do you..." I swallowed. "Do you think any of it ever worked? The treatments," I clarified quietly. "Everything Dad and Dr. Vance put us through..." I searched his face, "Do you think they ever actually accomplished anything?"

Giovanni let out a slow breath. His shoulders lifted in a small shrug before falling again, “I don’t know. I’ve asked myself that more times than I can count. Maybe they changed something. I’ll never know who I would’ve been if they’d just... left us alone. I don’t know whether I’m living with the damage they caused or with the person they were trying to create.”

A lump formed in my throat.

“I don’t have that answer. Neither of us knows what our brains would’ve looked like without all of it.”

I lowered my eyes for a moment, then I looked up, “I’m going to find out.”

Giovanni studied my face for a long moment, “How are you going to do that?”

I gave him a nod, “Leave that to me.”

I knew where every guard usually stood. I knew which corridors stayed empty the longest. Growing up here has taught me more than etiquette. It had taught me how to disappear.

Every step toward Dad’s study felt heavier than the last. I stopped outside the door, listening but heard nothing. I wrapped my fingers around the handle and eased it open.

The room greeted me exactly as it had a few hours earlier. The fireplace had burned down to glowing embers. His whiskey glass still rested on the bar. Tomorrow’s schedule was gone, Leone must have taken it.

I quietly shut the door behind me.

My eyes immediately found the bookshelf. For a few seconds, I simply stared at it then I walked over. My fingers moved across the shelves until they found the familiar spine.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 769

Dr. Vance’s signature.

I wrapped my hand around the book and pulled.

Click.

The same quiet metallic sound echoed through the wall. I took two quick steps back. The bookshelf trembled before slowly sliding aside. Cold white lights flickered on one by one.

The hidden room opened before me. It looked even larger now that I really looked at it. Shelves stretched from floor to ceiling, it had boxes, binders, computer stations, locked cabinets, and row after row of thick files.

The door behind me slid shut with a soft mechanical hum. I jumped. For one brief second, panic rushed through me then I forced myself to breathe.

“It’s automatic,” I whispered to myself.

I walked farther inside, every shelf carried neat labels, not names, numbers.

Hundreds of them.

No.

Thousands.

Each identical gray folder sat perfectly aligned. My stomach tightened. I reached for the very first folder.

Dust hadn’t even settled on it. Someone had handled it many times over the years. I opened it. Inside were hundreds of pages, dense paragraphs, charts, brain scans and handwritten observations.

I pulled out my phone, and the app opened automatically. I scanned the first page. Within seconds, the handwriting became clear text across my screen.

I read the first line.

Primary Research Subject 0001

I frowned, the next line appeared.

Name: Giovanni Toricelli.

My breath caught.

I blinked.

Then read it again.

Giovanni...

Toricelli.

It was not my brother.

It was Dad.

1 stared at the screen.

No.

That couldn't be right.

With trembling fingers, I scanned the next page.

Age at enrollment: Nineteen.

The room suddenly felt colder.

Dad.

Dad had been Dr. Vance's first subject. I turned to the next page, and saw the first medical evaluation.

"Developmental reading disorder consistent with dyslexia. Persistent deficits despite conventional educational intervention. Subject displays exceptional reasoning, pattern recognition, spatial processing, and executive function. Reading impairment remains resistant to treatment."

My chest tightened.

He...

He really was dyslexic?

Dad?

I kept reading, the following pages weren't normal medical notes, they read more like a manifesto. Every sentence became harder to stomach than the last.

"Current scientific understanding assumes dyslexia represents a fixed developmental difference. This assumption is intellectually lazy."

Another paragraph.

“The brain constantly rewires itself in response to repeated stimuli. Extreme physiological stress may accelerate adaptive restructuring beyond naturally occurring neuroplasticity.”

I frowned.

Adaptive...

Restructuring?

I continued.

“Pain produces widespread neurochemical release, heightened electrical activity, and survival-driven learning states. If delivered in controlled conditions while specific cognitive pathways are repeatedly activated, permanent neurological reorganization may become possible.”

Chahe

+158grus

I stopped breathing as I turned another page.

“Scarring is traditionally viewed as damage. I propose that selective neurological scarring may instead redirect inefficient pathways toward more functional networks, improving cognitive performance through forced biological adaptation.”

I lowered the phone. My stomach rolled as I looked around the room. One of the nearby desks held an older computer beside stacks of labeled discs.

The first disc matched the file in my hands.

Hands shaking, I slid it into the drive, the monitor hummed to life. One folder appeared called Research Sessions

I clicked, the screen filled with dates, hundreds of them. The earliest recording opened, the picture flickered before sharpening.

A young man sat in a heavy steel chair, his dark hair was shorter, his face smoother but there was no mistaking him.

Dad.

He was nineteen years old here. He sat perfectly still while wires were attached across his temples.

Dr. Vance stepped into view. He looked younger too, “Session one.”

My chest tightened.

Dad gave a single nod, “Ready.”

There was no fear in his voice as the recording continued, questions, reading exercises, memory tests, then the first electrical pulse.

Dad’s jaw tightened. His fingers curled around the arms of the chair but he didn’t make a sound.

Another pulse went through his system, and his breathing grew heavier. Sweat formed across his forehead. His entire body trembled, still he kept pushing through, he kept reading, kept answering, kept trying.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 770

I couldn’t stop watching.

Every new recording showed the same thing.

Days became weeks, weeks became months, months became years. His face slowly grew thinner, dark circles settled beneath his eyes. Sometimes he struggled to stand after a session just like I did. Sometimes two assistants helped him leave. Other recordings ended with him vomiting into a metal basin before forcing himself back to work.

The dates kept changing.

Year one.

Year two.

Year three.

Three years.

Three years of this.

My throat tightened painfully. I clicked the final recording. Dr. Vance stood facing his camera instead of the patient.

Behind him, Dad remained seated, exhausted, barely able to lift his head.

The doctor's voice stayed steady, "Primary Research Subject Zero-Zero-One has reached the practical limits of continued participation."

He glanced toward Dad before returning his attention to the lens.

"While cognitive measures demonstrate modest improvement in targeted tasks, the cumulative physical burden now interferes with executive function outside the laboratory."

Another page of notes appeared beside the video.

I opened it.

"The subject's responsibilities no longer permit the frequency or intensity required for continued investigation. Sustained treatment now threatens organizational stability."

My pulse quickened. Dad had become too important to experiment on. The treatments weren't just hurting him' anymore. They were getting in the way of him running the Syndicate.

The recording continued.

Dr. Vance folded his hands behind his back, "Future progress requires subjects with greater neurological flexibility. The developing brain possesses significantly higher adaptive potential than the mature adult brain. Early intervention should maximize structural reorganization while minimizing resistance from established neural pathways."

His expression never changed.

"Accordingly, subsequent phases of the research will transition toward pediatric subjects."

I slowly lowered myself into the chair beside the computer. My eyes remained fixed on the frozen image of my father.

My mind slowly translated his words into something I could actually understand. He believed children's brains changed more easily than an adult's.

He believed that if he started young enough. If he hurt a child while their brain was still growing. He could shape it into whatever he wanted.

My stomach twisted.

He hadn’t stopped because the treatment failed. He hadn’t stopped because it was cruel. He’d stopped because Dad had become too valuable to keep experimenting on.

So they found someone whose brain was still developing.

Someone easier to control.

Someone who couldn’t say no.

Me.

My fingers wouldn’t stop shaking. I should have walked away. Instead, I reached for the next file.

Then 0003.

Then 0004.

The room fell into complete silence except for the soft hum of the computers and the sound of pages turning beneath my hands.

One file became five. Five became twenty. Twenty became more than I could count. Every folder belonged to someone different, different names, different ages, different handwriting, different photographs.

Every page stripped away another piece of their humanity. I kept scanning. My phone translated Dr. Vance’s cramped handwriting into neat lines across the screen.

“Subject displays poor response.”

“Increase intensity.”

“Repeat protocol.”

“Behavior consistent with avoidance.”

“Continue treatment.”

Every sentence felt colder than the last. Some subjects disappeared after only a few months, there was no mention of where they went or if they were treated. Others remained for years.

Some files ended with a single sentence.

Research discontinued.

Nothing more, no explanation, no outcome. Just gone. I swallowed hard and kept going, the numbers climbed higher.

Year after year.

19 agus

Seven years of research.

Seven years spent chasing the same idea.

Seven years spent convincing himself that enough pain could rewrite a person’s mind.

Then, my hand stopped. A different folder. Its edges looked worn from being opened so many times. The number. across the front was larger than the others.

Beneath it, another label had been added later in darker ink.

PRIMARY RESEARCH SUBJECT

My pulse stumbled because I had heard that in my life one too many times.

Slowly, I opened it. The very first page slid into view. There was a photograph clipped to the corner.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 771

A little girl.

Me.

The date sat beneath the photograph.

It was shortly after my fifth birthday.

The room seemed to tilt beneath my feet. I lowered myself into the chair again before my knees gave out. The next page appeared on my phone.

Subject demonstrates confirmed developmental dyslexia.

I barely saw the words, my eyes kept drifting back to the photograph. I remembered that dress. Mom had spent days looking for it. She’d said I looked like a princess.

I forced myself to keep reading, the following pages were different from every file I'd opened before. They were much thicker, much longer.

Entire sections had been highlighted, sticky notes filled the margins. There were diagrams connecting names with arrows.

One name sat at the top.

Giovanni Toricelli.

Another sat beneath it.

Gianna Toricelli.

A line joined the two.

The notes surrounding it made my stomach knot.

"Direct biological relationship provides unique research opportunity."

I frowned.

"Successful intervention in the offspring may provide strong evidence that similar neurological pathways within the parent remain modifiable despite age-related decline."

I read it twice, then a third time. Slowly, the meaning settled over me. They believed that because I was Dad's daughter...

Because we shared his blood...

If something worked on me, it might work on him too. I wasn't chosen by chance. I wasn't simply another child.

I was...

Connected to him.

I turned another page, saw more notes, more arrows, more observations. My breathing grew shallow.

The project had changed after they found out I was dyslexic.

The earlier subjects had become comparisons, control groups, references.

Everything after that centered around me. Every protocol had been rewritten. Every schedule adjusted. Every observation became more detailed.

My file grew thicker with every year.

Another note appeared.

“Primary subject offers greatest long-term research value.”

I stared at the sentence.

Primary.

“Future treatment models should be developed using Primary Subject before consideration for application elsewhere.”

My throat tightened.

I understood.

Every change, every new machine, every different procedure, every adjustment, every success, every failure.

They tried it on me first.

If I survived...

If they believed it showed even the smallest improvement...

Only then would they consider using it on Dad.

My eyes drifted back toward the shelves. There were hundreds of files in this room but mine... Mine filled nearly an entire section by itself.

Years, page after page, test after test, observation after observation.

My childhood hadn’t been documented. It had been studied, measured, compared, rewritten.

I slowly reached out and rested my fingertips against the thick stack of papers.

All those birthdays.

All those doctor’s appointments.

All those afternoons Dad had smiled and told me to be brave.

I closed my eyes, none of it had ever been about helping me. I was never the one they were trying to save.

Dad was.

I had only been the bridge between the research and him. The child they believed they could break...

So one day, they could fix him.

– 38-

Raphael

The office door opened, and Vincenzo stepped inside first.

Adriano followed close behind him.

A second later, Claire and Maddie entered as well, both wearing matching looks of concern. None of them had expected to be called down to the underground office in the middle of the night.

The heavy door sealed shut behind them with a muted click.

Four pairs of eyes settled on me.

Vincenzo studied me for a moment before speaking, “You called us down here like the building was on fire.”

I looked at them before reaching into my jacket. The damaged memory card landed on the desk between us with a soft tap, “It might as well be.”

Adriano folded his arms across his chest. “What’s that?”

“The reason.”

Claire exchanged a brief glance with Maddie. Neither woman interrupted. They knew me well enough to understand that whatever had happened had stripped away what little patience I normally possessed.

I finally looked at Vincenzo,.”I owe you an apology.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 772

His brows pulled together, “You don’t owe me anything.”

“I do,” I held his eyes, “That day… Inside that fucking Council chamber. I sat there and watched them overrule you. I watched them tell you that Gianna belonged with Giovanni Torricelli. I watched them dismiss everything you said. And I let them.”.

“You couldn’t have stopped them,” Maddie said quietly.

I looked at her, “I could have done more. I should have done my job better,” I looked down at the memory card, But I have something now.”

All of them followed my gaze. I slowly pushed the card across the desk until it stopped in front of Vincenzo.

“They didn’t just make the wrong decision,” I leaned forward, “They handed her back to monsters. I swore/ something to myself when we walked out of that Council meeting,” my eyes never left Vincenzo, “I swore I’d make every man sitting around that table regret speaking over you. I finally know how.”

Vincenzo picked up the damaged card, “What is it?”

I walked around the desk and woke the workstation. The forensic image was already loaded. Twenty-two videos. Twenty-two pieces of hell.

I clicked the first one.

The hidden camera came to life, the white room appeared again, the chair, the restraints and then…

My little Gianna.

The only voice came from the speakers.

“…Primary Research Subject…”

Adriano frowned, “What the fuck…”

Dr. Crowe continued explaining his procedure with the same emotion someone would use while discussing weather.

Vincenzo stepped closer to the monitor. His face didn’t change but I noticed that his breathing had turned slower.

Then Gianna whispered, “I’m scared…”

Adriano whispered, “What the fuck?!”

The first shock came. Gianna's body jerked violently against the restraints. A scream filled the office.

Maddie physically flinched. Her hand reached blindly until Adriano caught it without taking his eyes off the screen. She held onto him so tightly.

Claire slowly covered her mouth, the color drained from her face.

Vincenzo didn't move, not a single inch but I heard his teeth grinding together. The muscles in his jaw jumped so hard I thought he'd crack a tooth.

Maddie's eyes filled with tears almost instantly, "No... No, no..."

Claire swallowed hard. A tear escaped despite her obvious effort to stop it, "What kind of doctor..."

She couldn't finish the sentence.

Gianna cried, another shock, another scream, another clinical observation like she wasn't even human.

I paused the video.

Nobody looked away from the frozen image.

Gianna's face was covered in tears. The restraints dug into her wrists.

Adriano's jaw flexed so hard I heard his teeth grind together, "What..." he finally found his voice, "...what the fuck did we just watch?"

Vincenzo's voice cut him off, "Play it again."

I looked at him, "You don't want that."

"I said," his eyes never left the screen, "...play it again."

So I did.

This time nobody spoke through the entire recording.

When it ended...

Adriano slammed both palms onto my desk so hard one of the monitors shook, "What kind of fucking animal does this to a child? What kind of sick bastard straps a little girl to a chair?"

I leaned back against the desk, “Elias Crowe.”

Claire looked at me, “Who?”

I looked back at the frozen frame, “He’s a serial killer with a medical license. He hid behind medicine. He called it research. He called her a subject.”

Claire gave her head a shake in disbelief, “Her father knew?”

“He bankrolled it, he approved every session.”

Maddie looked horrified, “He... let that happen to his own daughter?”

The words tasted filthy, “He wanted to fix her.”

“Fix her,” Vincenzo spoke, “So this,” he gestured toward the frozen screen, “He believed this would cure her?”

I swallowed, “Yes, according to what he said in those sessions, he let another man torture his own daughter because he believed pain could rebuild her brain.”

I walked closer to the monitor. My fingers rested lightly against the edge of the screen.

“They kept records, they measured her fear, they measured her pain. They even measured how long it took her to stop screaming,” I closed my eyes for one brief second, “But nobody measured what it did to her afterwards.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 773

Vincenzo looked at Adriano, “Prepare the jet.”

Adriano was already reaching for his phone before the sentence had fully left Vincenzo’s mouth.

“Tonight?” he asked.

“I want an emergency Council session called within the next twenty-four hours,” Vincenzo ordered. The heads of the Five Families only. No wives, no children, just the Dons.”

Adriano’s thumb was already moving across the screen, “I’ll contact their offices myself.”

“Don’t ask.”

“I won’t.”

“Tell them they have twenty-four hours.”

“And if they refuse?”

Vincenzo’s eyes hardened, “They won’t.”

I reached inside my jacket and pulled out a small matte-black device no larger than a cigarette lighter.

I placed it on the desk before Vincenzo. He looked down at it before lifting his eyes to mine.

“I’m not getting on that jet.”

Vincenzo didn’t touch the device, “What are you planning?”

“I’m leaving in an hour. She’s under the same roof as the man who did this to her. Every minute she’s there is another minute she’s alone with him,” I pushed the device across the desk until it stopped in front of him, “Take it.”

He finally picked it up, “What is it?”

“The receiver.”

He turned it over in his hand, “For what?”

“For Gianna,” I leaned back slightly, “The necklace I gave her wasn’t just mom’s jewelry. I also implanted one beneath my own skin.”

Maddie’s eyes widened, “You… what?”

“If something goes wrong,” I met Vincenzo’s eyes, “You’ll know where both of us are.”

Vincenzo stared at the tracker for several long seconds before closing his hand around it.

Then Vincenzo nodded once, “So you’re going in alone.”

“Right now, the only thing that matters is getting her out without drawing attention,” I said. “The Syndicate can keep breathing for a few more hours.” I looked up. “After that… I bury every last one of them.”

Adriano let out a slow breath through his nose, “I’ll have men ready on standby.”

“No.”

Chapter

Adriano frowned, “No?”

“No one follows me.”

“Raphael-”

“I said no. If this turns into an army marching onto Torricelli territory, the Council will call it an invasion before Vincenzo even gets them into the meeting,” I looked toward him, “Giovanni is probably already waiting for a reason to accuse us.”

Vincenzo nodded, “He’s right.”

“I go alone,” I looked between both of my brothers.

Claire quietly walked around the desk until she stood in front of me. She rested one hand against my arm, her home. We’ll take care of everything here.”

“Bring

Maddie stepped closer beside Adriano. She looked worried, but there wasn’t fear in her eyes, “You all should do what needs to be done.”

Claire’s eyes shifted toward Vincenzo before returning to me, “Your only job is making sure Gianna doesn’t have to face another day like that ever again.”

Vincenzo slipped the tracking device into the inside pocket of his jacket. When he looked back at me, every trace of that defeat had disappeared.

The Don of the Capone Family stood before me once again.

“I’ll bring the Council to its knees,” he said, meeting my eyes. A familiar darkness settled back into his expression, “You go bring our little sister home.”

I stared at him for a second before letting out a dry, humorless laugh, “Fuck you.”

The smirk on his face widened just enough to tell me he’d gotten exactly the reaction he’d wanted.

There wasn’t a single fucking brotherly thought in my head when it came to Gianna.

There never had been.

Never will be.

And now, if the world stood between me and Gianna... 1

The world was going to fucking move.

Hey, guys!

Just a heads-up: this chapter didn't go through my final editing pass, so there might be a few errors here and there. I was already running really late, so I decided to post it instead of mak~

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 774

Gianna

I don't know how long I sat there.

The room had gone completely silent around me. The files, the shelves, the glowing computer screens... they all. seemed farther away now.

I lowered my hand from my own file and forced myself to look at the shelf again.

My eyes moved across the labels. I already knew who I was looking for. It didn't take long to find him. The folder was thick, not as thick as mine but close. My stomach tightened as I pulled it free.

Giovanni Toricelli Jr.

For a moment, I just stared at the name and gathered the courage to look through it. Then I opened it, the first pages looked familiar like the other thousands of files in here.

I scanned page after page with my phone. The app translated everything neatly across the screen.

"Subject demonstrates inherited developmental dyslexia."

"Treatment protocol adapted from previous research findings."

"Expected response remains favorable."

My grip tightened around the phone.

Expected response.

As if my brother was a laboratory result waiting to happen. I kept reading.

Every year had been documented just like Dr Vance always did. Every session, every test, every failure, and every adjustment.

The deeper I went, the worse it became.

Because unlike me...

Giovanni hadn't started as a child.

He'd started older, old enough to understand what was happening, old enough to be afraid, old enough to remember every second of it.

I swallowed hard and kept turning pages, then I noticed something strange. The reports suddenly became shorter. The observations became rushed. Entire sections were missing.

My eyes narrowed.

Something had changed. I scanned another page, then another. The dates grew closer together. The handwriting became less organized. Dr. Vance's notes lost their usual confidence. For the first time in hundreds of pages, uncertainty began appearing.

Then I reached the final section.

The very last file.

The last session.

My pulse quickened, the report was incomplete. Half-finished sentences filled the page. Observations ended abruptly. The final paragraph simply stopped in the middle of a word.

I frowned.

My eyes drifted toward the stack of discs beside the computer. One sat on top. The matching number stared back at

My stomach dropped as I reached for it. The disc slid into the drive. The computer hummed, a folder opened.

One video.

Only one.

I clicked it.

For several seconds, the screen remained black, then the image appeared.

Giovanni sat strapped into the chair. He looked younger, around fourteen, that was probably his last session. My brother sat quietly while wires ran from his temples to a machine beside him.

He looked exhausted.

Dr. Vance stood nearby with a clipboard in hand. The sight of him made my stomach twist, the recording continued with questions, reading exercises, memory tests.

The same routine I'd watched in dozens of other recordings. Then something changed, a warning flashed across one of the monitors.

Dr. Vance smiled.

Giovanni shifted in the chair, "What was that?" he asked.

Dr. Vance glanced toward the screen, "Nothing."

Another warning appeared, this time accompanied by a sharp electronic tone. Giovanni looked uncomfortable. His fingers tightened against the restraints, "I don't think that's supposed to

The machine activated and his entire body jerked. The words died in his throat, and my heart stopped. The shock didn't stop. It kept going and going and going. The chair rattled violently against the floor. Every muscle in Giovanni's body locked. His back arched so hard I thought something might snap.

My hand flew over my mouth, "No..."

The machine continued, the monitor alarms grew louder, red warning lights flashed. Giovanni convulsed against the restraints.

My eyes shot toward Dr. Vance, waiting for him to stop it, to do something.

He didn't, he just stood there, watching. His eyes fixed on the monitors. His pen moved across the clipboard.

Writing.

Taking notes.

My stomach rolled violently, "What are you doing?" I whispered at the screen.

The alarms continued screaming. Still, he did nothing. Tears burned behind my eyes.

“Stop it.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 775

Another violent convulsion tore through Giovanni’s body. The restraints dug into his skin. His head snapped backward. Blood appeared where one of the sensors had torn free.

“Stop it!”

My voice echoed through the hidden room. On the screen, Dr. Vance finally moved but still not toward Giovanni, toward the monitor, toward the data.

As if the machine mattered more than the person trapped inside it.

Then the door burst open.

Dad.

He stormed into the room so fast the camera struggled to keep up. I had never seen him move like that before. His face looked wrong.

He was terrified.

Absolutely terrified.

For a split second, Dr. Vance turned toward him.

Dad looked at Giovanni, then at the machine, then back at Giovanni and something in his expression changed. The next few seconds happened so fast I almost missed them.

Leone came through the doorway behind him. Dad shouted something. I couldn’t hear it over the alarms. Then Leone hit Dr. Vance hard. The clipboard flew across the room. The camera shook violently.

Dr. Vance crashed into a table.

Dad was already at the machine, his hands slammed against the controls, trying to stop it, trying to shut it down.

The alarms continued.

Giovanni's body continued convulsing. Dad hit the controls again. The camera tipped sideways. Someone had knocked into it. The image spun and crashed to the floor. The rest of the recording showed only fragments.

Feet.

Furniture.

Shouting.

A glimpse of Leone dragging Dr. Vance across the room.

Then the recording ended.

I sat frozen in the chair, the screen faded to black. My chest hurt. My brother had almost died. He had almost died in that room because of them.

Because of Dad.

Because he had allowed this to happen in the first place.

A few hours ago, part of me had still been searching for excuses, looking for reasons, trying to understand.

Trying to find the father I remembered. The man who carried me on his shoulders. The man who kissed my forehead and called me his little girl.

That part of me felt very small now.

Very far away.

Because no matter how frightened Dad looked in that video. No matter how hard he fought to save Giovanni once everything went wrong. He was still the man who put him in that chair. He was still the man who brought us into that room.

He was still the man who kept choosing Dr. Vance over and over again.

I wiped my face with the back of my hand and forced myself to breathe. My eyes burned as I pushed his file aside. I couldn't look at it anymore. If I stared at those pages one second longer, I was going to scream.

I stood up and looked around the room, there had to be something else. Something that explained why Dad had kept all of this.

Why he had never stopped.

Why he had destroyed so many lives.

My gaze drifted farther down the shelves, near the end of one cabinet sat a thinner section of folders. Unlike the others, they carried small colored tabs clipped to the side.

Green.

Every other file in this room had been plain gray.

These weren't.

I walked over and pulled out the first one, the folder was surprisingly light..Inside were only a few reports..I scanned the first page with my phone.

SUBJECT STATUS: SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME

I frowned.

Successful?

I hurried to the next page, the doctor's handwriting appeared across my screen.

"Subject demonstrates normal reading fluency following completion of treatment protocol."

"Symptoms of developmental dyslexia no longer detectable."

I stared at the words.

No longer...

Detectable?

My heartbeat picked up..I grabbed another folder. The same green tab.

"Subject achieved age-appropriate reading performance."

"Long-term follow-up confirms complete resolution of dyslexia."

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"Treatment outcome considered successful."

1 opened another file. There weren't many compared to the thousands of gray folders surrounding me, there were only a handful but they existed.

I looked down at the reports spread across the desk.

My pulse quickened.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 776

It...

It worked?

I picked up another report, almost afraid to breathe. Every conclusion sounded almost identical.

“Reading deficits resolved.”

“Cognitive function restored.”

“Patient discharged with no remaining evidence of dyslexia.”

Hope burst inside my chest so suddenly it almost hurt, just one broken breath escaped me before I covered my mouth, “Oh my God...”

It worked.

It actually worked.

Dad hadn’t been completely insane.

Dr. Vance had done it.

He had actually helped people.

I looked around the room.

Then...

Why?

If these people had recovered. If the treatment really cured dyslexia. Why hadn’t he done the same for himself? Why hadn’t he done it for Gio?

Why keep experimenting?

Why keep changing machines?

Why keep pushing farther?

None of it made sense.

I gathered the green folders together again. There had to be another answer. There had to be something I was missing.

I looked around the room once more. Every shelf was arranged with patient files, treatment logs, financial records, equipment manuals.

I forced myself to slow down.

Think.

I walked toward the main desk in the center of the room. Unlike the others, this one looked used. It had Dad's reading glasses, fresh notebooks and his laptop.

I pulled open the top drawer but there were just empty folders and stationery. The second drawer held old research journals. The third was locked.

I looked around until my eyes landed on the small key rack hanging beside the computer monitor.

Five keys.

I tried the first, then the second and the drawer slid open. Inside wasn't another patient file. It was a thick black binder.

Research Review

The cover looked newer than everything else in the room. I carried it to the desk and opened it. The first pages were filled with printed emails but none of them came from Dr. Vance.

They were from different universities, different hospitals, different researchers. Every one discussing the same thing.

Dyslexia.

I scanned the first page.

"Independent replication unsuccessful."

"No measurable neurological restructuring observed."

“Results inconsistent with published conclusions.”

A cold feeling settled into my stomach. I turned another page. Dad had written notes in the margin.

The next section held newer documents. The dates caught my eye.

Two years ago.

1 froze.

Exactly...

Two years ago.

The same year Gio’s treatment had ended. My hands started shaking again. I read faster. A private laboratory had reviewed decades of patient records inexhange for millions of dollars. Another team had examined brain scans, again bribed with millions of dollars. A third had repeated every statistical calculation from Dr. Vance’s original work.

Every conclusion sounded worse than the last.

“Unable to reproduce reported outcomes.”

“No evidence supporting therapeutic claims.”

“Recorded improvements cannot be scientifically verified.”

I stared at the page. Every report said the same thing. He had approached different experts from different countries who use different methods.

The conclusion never changed.

Finally I reached the last section. It was addressed directly to my father. I recognized the signature at the bottom.

A medical investigator.

Dad had hired someone himself. Someone with no connection to Dr. Vance. Someone he trusted to check everything.

I scanned the letter.

The translation appeared on my phone.

“Mr. Toricelli,”

“After reviewing the complete archive of research, patient records, laboratory data, and follow-up documentation, my conclusion is unavoidable.”

My throat tightened.

“There is no reliable evidence supporting Dr. Arthur Vance’s claims.”

I stopped breathing. I blinked until I could read it again.

“The reported successes cannot be verified through independent examination.”

“Several documented ‘recoveries’ are inconsistent with the original diagnostic criteria.”

“The available evidence strongly suggests that Dr. Vance manipulated research findings over many years.”

One final paragraph had been circled in Dad’s handwriting.

“Based on all available evidence, I believe you were deliberately deceived. Dr. Arthur Vance’s research does not meet even the minimum standards required to support his conclusions. Twenty-five years of work appear to have been built upon false data, fabricated outcomes, and unsupported claims.”

My phone nearly slipped from my hand.

Twenty-five years.

Twenty-five years...

I slowly lowered myself into the chair.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 777

Dad knew. He had known for two years. He knew Dr. Vance had lied. He knew the research had never proved anything. He knew the foundation of everything they had built together had fallen apart.

My chest hurt.

I looked around the room, the shelves, the files, the recordings, the photographs. The childhoods that had been stolen. The pain, screaming, broken bodies and all those broken families.

All of it...

It was built on a lie.

Dr. Arthur Vance hadn't simply been wrong. He had fooled my father for twenty-five years.

And by the time Dad learned the truth, the damage had already been done to me, to my brother and to hundreds of other children just like me.

The report slipped from my fingers. It landed on the desk with a soft slap. I didn't pick it up.

I sat there, staring at nothing.

My ears rang, because I finally got my answers.

Twenty-five years.

Twenty-five years of lies.

Twenty-five years of pain.

For, nothing.

A laugh escaped me. It sounded wrong. It echoed through the hidden room until it slowly turned into something else.

A sob, "No... no," I shook my head harder, "No," my hands grabbed handfuls of my own hair, "No!"

My breathing became uneven.

It wasn't true.

It couldn't be true.

There had to be another report, another explanation, another page hidden somewhere that said the investigator had made a mistake.

There wasn't.

My eyes drifted across the shelves, thousands of files, thousands. It was not research. It was evidence.

Evidence of ruined lives.

A burning pressure built inside my chest. It spread through my ribs into my throat into my head until I couldn't breathe around it anymore.

I slammed both hands onto the desk, "For nothing..."

The words barely came out. My fingers curled against the edge until my knuckles turned white.

"For nothing..."

The room blurred. A little girl appeared in my mind. Five years old, holding her father's hand, looking up at him with complete trust.

"Be brave, sweetheart."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

I had been.

God...

I had tried so hard to be brave, every time, every single time.

The machines, the wires, the waterboarding, the straps around my wrists, the cold tables, the cuts on my body to make me bleed, the smell of rubbing alcohol.

Every time I wanted to run...

I stayed.

Because Dad told me brave girls stayed. Because Dad promised he was helping me. Because Dad promised I would get better.

A sob tore out of me, "I believed you..."

My voice echoed back at me. I remembered trying not to cry because crying disappointed him. I remembered biting the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood just so he would smile afterward.

I remembered reading the same sentence over...

And over...

And over...

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Until the words danced across the page and I couldn't tell one letter from another.

Then the electricity would come, again, again and again until I begged my own brain to work, not because I wanted to read but because I wanted Dad to hug me. Because I wanted him to say...

Good job, Gianna.

I never realized how hungry I'd been for those words. My knees gave out. I hit the floor hard. The pain barely registered. I wrapped my arms around myself.

Tears poured down my face, "I wasn't asking for much..."

Just one book, one page. One day where reading didn't make me feel stupid. One day where Dad looked proud.

One day.

One.

Instead, I got another appointment.

My breathing turned ragged.

Mom.

My thoughts crashed into me. All those fights. All those nights I screamed that she didn't understand. All the times she stood between me and Dad. I thought she was trying to stop me from getting better. I thought she didn't understand how badly I wanted him to love me.

"Oh God..."

I covered my mouth.

My chest hurt so badly I thought something inside me might actually break.

I had fought Raphael too. I wanted to come here to get better because I couldn't let go. Because somewhere inside me, I still believed Dad loved me. I defended him.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 778

I defended the man who had tied me to a chair, the man who watched while I screamed, the man who kept bringing me back.

“Why!” the word ripped out of me, “Why!”

I hit the floor again, hard enough that pain exploded through my hand.

“I did everything! I listened! I tried! I was good!”

Everything...

Everything I had carried for years, every nightmare, every panic attack, every time electricity flashed in a dream and I woke up shaking, every time I looked at a book and heard Dr. Vance’s voice telling me to try harder. Every time I looked in the mirror and wondered why my own brain wasn’t good enough.

Every time I thought, maybe if I was smarter, maybe if I tried harder, maybe if I wasn’t broken... none of it had ever been because of me.

I had spent years hating myself for someone else’s lie. I believed I wasn’t good enough for Raphael’s love for someone else’s lie.

A slow, shaking breath filled my lungs.

I remembered the way he always watched me. The way he never made me feel stupid for being dyslexic. The way he waited. The way he always made space for me without saying a single word.

Something inside me cracked completely.

Because for the first time, I understood why being with the Capones always felt so different.

Most of them had never asked me to become someone else.

They had argued with me, protected me, annoyed me, made me laugh, made me angry but above all, they loved

I buried my face in my hands. The tears stopped, not because I felt better but because something hotter had taken their place.

I slowly lifted my head. The grief was still there but it was changing, hardening, every file surrounding me suddenly looked different.

Evidence.

My hands slowly curled into fists again. This time, I wasn't shaking. I looked toward the shelves, toward my father's life's work, toward twenty-five years of obsession.

"You stole my childhood. You stole my mother. You stole my brother. You made me spend years believing I was the one who needed to earn your love."

I stood. My father had built this place like a monument. A monument to his obsession, to his lies, to every child whose pain he had called progress.

My jaw tightened until it hurt, "No."

And for the first time since walking back into Philadelphia, I wasn't looking for answers anymore.

I had them all.

Then my eyes caught another divider in the drawer, bright red. The tab simply read...

REACTIVATION

My heartbeat slowed. I flipped it open immediately. There were fresh signatures, fresh dates.

Six months ago.

I frowned harder.

"Previous conclusions require reassessment."

"Project resumed under revised operational security."

"Current laboratory location classified."

My stomach dropped.

"Dr. Arthur Vance assumes direct supervision."

I froze.

Dr. Vance was still working. Dad had started everything again.

Six months ago.

After shutting it down for two years. He had opened it again.

Why?

My eyes dropped lower. One sentence had been written by hand.

“Financial collapse leaves no remaining alternatives.”

I blinked.

Financial...

Collapse?

I whispered, “He actually...”

My words died. He had nearly lost Gio. He had learned the research was built on lies. He had discovered Dr. Vance had fooled him for twenty-five years.

And somehow, he had still gone back. My hands began moving before I even thought about it.

I opened up the camera and started taking pictures. Every report, every meeting, every medical review, every photograph. The sound echoed through the room over and over again.

I moved from shelf to shelf, opening folders, photographing everything, brain scans, treatment schedules, lists of names, equipment diagrams.

Dr. Vance’s handwritten notes. Dad’s comments written in the margins. If this room burned tomorrow, the truth wouldn’t burn with it.

By the time I stopped, my phone felt warm in my hand. I opened my messages. My thumb hovered over one name.

Raphael.

For just a second, I smiled, then I attached every single photograph. The loading circle kept spinning. There were hundreds of them.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 779

1 stared at the empty message box. My fingers began typing.

Me: Do whatever you have to with this. If exposing every secret tears the Philadelphia Syndicate apart, then let it. Just, please, get Gio and Perla out of here. They've suffered enough.

My thumb stopped. It took me three tries before I could finish writing it.

Me: I'm going to finish something that should've been finished a long time ago. I don't know if I'll make it out alive. If I don't, I need you to hear this.

My vision blurred again.

Me: I love you. I always will. Thank you for showing me what love was supposed to feel like. If I don't come back.. destroy all of it, Raph. Leave nothing standing.

Then, I pressed send. The progress bar appeared.

The photographs began uploading. My heart pounded. Almost... almost there, the final notification appeared.

Delivered.

A breath escaped me.

Thank God.

Before I could even turn, a hand closed around my wrist hard. The phone was ripped from my fingers so fast it barely registered,

"No-!" I spun around.

Leone stood in front of me, my phone already in his hand. He looked down at the locked screen then slowly raised his eyes to mine.

Behind him, Dad stood silently near the entrance, watching me.

Leone looked from the phone and then back to me.

Dad's eyes never left mine as he said, "So, I suppose you've finally seen everything."

I stared straight past Leone, locking my eyes onto my father's face. The face I used to look up to. The face I used to beg for a smile from.

A cold, dark fire ignited in my chest, burning away every last trace of fear I had ever held for him.

“Everything I ever went through...” my voice cracked, shaking with a rage so heavy it threatened to snap my ribs, It was all for nothing?”

My father didn’t answer. He just stood there in the doorway, his eyes cold, empty, and completely unbothered.

“I went through all of that... for nothing?!” I screamed, the sound tearing out of my throat so hard it hurt, “It was all a fucking lie?!”

Leone tried to grab my arm to pull me back, but I shoved him off with every ounce of strength in my body. I turned back to my father, my chest heaving, tears of absolute fury spilling over my burning eyes.

“You ruined my life!” I shrieked, stepping right into my father’s face, “You ruined Gio’s life! You ruined

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+15 8chus thousands of innocent children’s lives for nothing! It was all for nothing!”

My vision went completely red. The pain, the years of crying in the dark, the straps around my wrists, the cold water, the burning wires, it all rushed back to me at once, exploding out of my mouth.

I turned around and grabbed a metal desk lamp, ripping it from the wall with a loud snap of wires, and slammed it against the wooden desk. The glass bulb shattered into a million tiny pieces, flying everywhere across the room.

I grabbed a stack of gray folders and throwing them straight at his head. The loose papers exploded into the air, raining down like white snow, “You took everything from me!”

I grabbed a glass tray from the table and hurled it against the wall next to Leone, watching it smash to dust.

“Look at me!” I yelled, as I slapped my own chest with both hands, “Look at what you did to me! Look at what you did to your own son! You put us in that chair! You watched that man fry our brains, and for what? For a lie! For a fake fucking cure!”

My father took a slow step forward, his jaw setting hard, “Gianna, calm down, I never wanted you to find out about that-”

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down!” I screeched, picking up a heavy binder and throwing it right at his chest, I spent years believing I was broken. I hated myself because of you! I hated my own brain because of you! I thought I wasn’t worthy of anyone’s love because of you!”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 780

It hit him hard, bouncing off his suit, but he barely blinked.

“You aren’t a father! You’re a disgusting, heartless thief! You stole my childhood! You stole my mind! You made me hate myself for years because I thought I was broken!”

I kicked a wooden chair with all my strength, sending it crashing into a shelf of files.

“I bled for you!” I sobbed. “I trusted you! I loved you!”

I pointed at the reports scattered around the room.

“And you knew. You knew the truth. You knew he’d lied to you. You knew none of it worked. You knew everything we’d suffered was for nothing,” I stared into his eyes, “...And you still started it all over again.”

My hands curled into fists.

“You are a monster,” I shook my head slowly, “No, monsters don’t hide behind children. You hid behind your own children. You’re the broken one, Giovanni...”

Every word dripped with disgust.

“You’re the coward. You’re the disease,” the tears kept falling, but I didn’t wipe them away, “I don’t hate my brain anymore,” I looked him straight in the eyes, “I hate you. I hate you with every piece of me.”

My phone rang in Leone’s hand. All three of us looked toward it at the same time.

The screen lit up.

Raphael.

Messages began appearing one after another across the locked screen. Leone’s eyes narrowed.

“No,” I lunged for the phone.

He caught me before I reached it.

“Give it back!” I clawed at his wrist, trying to pry his fingers open, “Leone!”

He shoved me back with one arm hard. I stumbled, caught myself against the desk, and threw myself at him again.

“Give me my phone!”

His free hand shot out, large fingers wrapped around my jaw, squeezing hard enough to force my head still.

Pain shot through my cheeks, “Hold still.”

“I said let me go!”

I fought him with everything I had. I kicked, twisted, scratched at his wrist. He was far stronger. He held me at arm’s length like I weighed nothing. My feet barely found the floor.

“Stop fighting.”

“Go to hell!”

The phone vibrated again. Leone glanced down at it, then back at me.

His eyes hardened, “I’m sorry, Principessa.”

Before I understood what he was doing, he pulled the phone in front of my face.

“No!” I jerked my head away.

His grip tightened. His thumb pressed against the side of my face, forcing me to look straight ahead. The screen flashed.

Face ID successful.

“No!”

The lock disappeared, my stomach dropped. Leone released my face. I immediately reached for the phone. He simply lifted it higher, far above my reach.

Another message arrived and then the phone’s accessibility feature activated. Raphael’s message filled the room in a calm electronic voice.

Raphael: I’m already coming for you. 1

Raphael: Don’t you dare move. Don’t you dare try to be brave. You stay exactly where you are. I’m the one coming.

Raphael: If you so much as throw your life away before I get there, I'll drag your stubborn ass back from hell myself just so I can kill you for it.

Raphael: Touch one hair on your own head, and I'll lose what's left of my fucking mind.

I stopped struggling, my heart pounded against my ribs. Leone wasn't looking at me anymore. His eyes had dropped to the screen. His thumb moved once, then again.

The photographs appeared, every single one of them. The color slowly drained from his face. He kept scrolling.

His jaw tightened as he looked up at me, "What..." his voice came out low, and almost disbelieving. He looked back at the phone, then at me again, "What the fuck did you do, Gianna?"

Well...

Gianna is trapped with Leone and her father... and Raphael is already on his way.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 781

Gianna

I lunged for my phone again, "Give it to me!" Leone moved it out of reach. I grabbed his sleeve with both hands and pulled, "Leone, give me my fucking phone!"

He didn't answer, his eyes were still on the screen, on Raphael's messages, on the hundreds of photographs I had sent.

My evidence.

I reached for it again. Leone caught my wrist. I twisted hard, trying to break free.

"Let go!"

"Gianna."

"Give it back!"

I clawed at his hand, kicked at his shin, tried to wrench my arm free but nothing worked. He caught my other wrist too while I fought like an animal trapped in a cage.

His face tightened, “I’m trying to keep you from making this worse.”

I glared at him, “You both already made it worse!”

I yanked myself forward, the phone slipped slightly in his hand. My fingers brushed the edge, I grabbed it and for one second, I had it. Then Leone pulled back, the phone tore from my fingers.

“NO!”

I threw myself at him. He caught my shoulders and shoved me backward. I hit the desk. Pain shot through my spine but I barely felt it.

I pushed myself upright and went for him again, “Give it back!”

He raised the phone above his head. I jumped, my fingers missed it again. He caught my wrist and held me away from him.

“You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“I don’t give a fuck!” I kicked toward him again, desperation burning through every inch of me, “Give me my phone!”

Leone’s face hardened as he looked toward Dad, “They know too much already. She sent him everything.”

Dad looked like he didn’t even care. His eyes stayed on me as if I was a mere inconvenience, “The Capones can’t do anything with what she sent,” he said calmly, “They can’t move against us without putting themselves in the Council’s crosshairs. The moment they make a move, the Council will tear them apart. We have the numbers. We have the power. We have the support of the other four families. They won’t risk their entire family for this.”

Something changed in Leone’s face as more messages flashed on the screen, one after another. And I knew where this was going, he looked at the phone and closed his fist around it.

My stomach dropped, “Leone…”

A crack split the room. I froze. He squeezed harder. The screen fractured beneath his hand.

“No. No!”

I lunged for it, but Leone jerked his hand out of reach. The phone twisted in his grip...The screen flickered once before going completely black.

My stomach dropped.

That phone had been my only way out. My only way to reach Raphael. My only way to warn the Capones before they came for me.

“You...” my voice disappeared halfway.

Leone released the broken phone. It hit the floor. The sound was small but it felt like someone had ripped my heart out.

I dropped beside it, “No...”

My fingers hovered over the shattered screen. I touched it. I pressed the button but nothing happened.

“No, no, no...”

I picked it up with shaking hands, the screen was spiderwebbed from one corner to the other. I pressed the button again.

My only link to Raphael was gone.

My eyes burned as I slowly lifted my head. The rage inside me had swallowed everything else. I looked at Dad, and whatever love I had once carried for him was gone beneath the hatred burning in my chest.

He was still standing there, still watching. He hadn’t moved, he hadn’t stopped Leone, he hadn’t even tried. He had simply stood there and watched.

Something inside me broke again, “Why? Why would you do that?”

He said nothing.

A sob shook my chest, “Why would you do this to your own family? Why?”

I held the broken phone against my chest.

“We’re your children,” my face twisted, “Gio is your son. I’m your daughter. How could you stand there and watch him do that to us?”

Dad smiled faintly, “I did what I believed was necessary.”

I laughed through my tears, “Necessary? You destroyed our sanity.”

He scoffed lightly, “I gave you opportunities. Opportunities I never had.”

I stared at him incredulously, “What?”

“I grew up with very little. I knew what it meant to have doors closed before you were even allowed to reach them,” he stepped farther into the room, “I promised myself my children would never live that way.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 782

My throat tightened, “So this was your care?” I gestured around the room, “This?”

“I wanted you to have every advantage.”

“Are you serious?” I looked at the broken phone in my hand, “You call this an advantage?”

“I wanted you to be better prepared than I was.”

I stared at him in disbelief, “You put me through torture.”

“I wanted you to overcome what held you back.”

“You made me believe I was defective.”

“You were defective,” he said, his voice hardening. “You are defective. And despite that, I still wanted you succeed.”

Something inside me snapped.

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The rage I’d been holding back for years surged through me, hot and violent, “You made me hate myself!”

His expression barely changed. He sighed, almost as though my anger was nothing more than an exhausting inconvenience, “I wanted you to become strong. I still don’t see the problem. You don’t become worthy of having an entire network under your command by being soft. You need a thick skin if you’re going to have the world at your feet.”

A bitter laugh slipped out of me. I shook my head, tears still clinging to my lashes, “You didn’t make me strong. I survived you. Mom made me strong.”

Dad studied me for a long moment before speaking, “I won’t apologize for trying to make sure my children never suffered the way I did. And I won’t apologize for trying to make both of you stronger, better people.”

I laughed again, “Don’t stand there and pretend you did all of this for us. This... all of this.... was never about me or Gio.”

His brow furrowed, “Of course it was. I have plans for you, Gianna. You can still choose to stay with me. Everything can still fall into place. You’ll learn what you need to learn. You’ll take your position. You’ll inherit what belongs to you. And you will lead.”

I stared at him, hardly believing the words coming out of his mouth, “You still think I want any of this?”

“You were born for it.”

“No,” I shook my head, stepping back from him, “You never saw me as your daughter. I was a subject. A number in one of those fucking files. A lab rat you could strap down whenever you needed another result. That’s what I was. And that’s what Gio was.”

Dad’s jaw tightened, “Don’t reduce what we were doing to that.”

“What else am I supposed to call it? You weren’t trying to save me. You weren’t trying to make my life better. You were testing me.”

His eyes narrowed, “We were trying to understand your condition.”

“Stop saying that,” my voice rose, “You were using me. You needed someone whose brain you could experiment on. Someone close enough to you that the results mattered to you.”

He said nothing.

I swallowed the knot in my throat.

“You needed me because you thought whatever happened to my brain could eventually help you.”

His face hardened, “You were part of something larger.”

“That’s your excuse?” I shook my head slowly, “No, Dad. I wasn’t part of something larger. I was the thing you were willing to destroy to get what you wanted.”

My voice dropped to a whisper.

“I was your experiment.”

“Gianna-”

“You needed me to prove your theory.” I stepped closer, my eyes burning. “You needed to watch me suffer so you could convince yourself that one day you could fix yourself. You wanted to be healed.”

His jaw clenched.

“I wanted all of us to be healed,” he said, “You, me, and Gio. If the research had worked, all three of us could have benefited.”

I stared at him.

All three of us.

As if that made it better.

As if putting three names together could erase everything that had happened.

My eyes moved across the room.

Hundreds of faces stared back at me from pieces of paper. Children whose names I would probably never know. Children who had been brought into this room, strapped into those same chairs, placed beneath those same machines.

Their pain had been measured.

Their fear had been recorded.

Their screams had been turned into numbers and observations.

And men like my father and Dr. Vance had looked at all of it and called it research.

“It didn’t work. It never worked,” my voice cracked, “You ruined us for something that wasn’t even real.”

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Chapter 783

Dad’s shoulders sank slightly. He closed his eyes for a moment, then let out a slow breath, “Yes,” he said quietly.” Unfortunately... it was all a lie.”

There was remorse in his eyes, but it wasn't for the lives he'd destroyed. It was for the fact that his precious research had failed.

The anger came rushing back, "If you knew that..." I snapped, "If you knew the research was fake, if you knew Vance had been lying to you for twenty-five years, then why? Why restart it?"

The words burst out of me.

"Why six months ago? Why bring him back? Why find another location? Why pour money into it again?"

I pointed toward the files scattered across the floor.

"You knew it was bullshit! You knew what he did to me never worked. You knew what happened to Gio. You knew the entire fucking thing was built on lies, and you still went back to him. Why?"

Dad said nothing.

My chest rose and fell sharply.

"Why go through the fucking Council to get me back? Why fight to bring your so-called primary subject home if the research was worthless?"

Leone shifted beside him. His expression had changed. The patience he'd been pretending to have was gone. He looked at me with open irritation, "Because you don't understand what this is anymore, Gianna."

I turned toward him,."Then explain it."

His jaw tightened, "It's not a fucking treatment program anymore."

My anger faltered for half a second, "What?"

Leone looked at my father for permission but Dad said nothing, so he nodded to himself and looked back at me, It's an organ trafficking operation, Gianna."

My stomach turned, "You're lying."

Leone shrugged, "No, I'm not. After Vance left, we didn't just shut the whole thing down and forget about it. We spent two years trying to find out whether any part of his research had ever meant anything."

He gestured toward the files.

“We brought in specialists. Neurologists. Surgeons. Researchers from different countries. Independent teams. We paid for scans, tests, reviews, everything.”

His laugh was bitter.

“Millions,” he stepped farther into the room, “Millions of dollars went into trying to prove that bastard wasn’t completely full of shit.”

My throat tightened, “And?”

“And nothing. Nothing we could verify. Nothing that could justify what he’d done,” Leone pointed toward the shelves, “Those ‘successful’ cases? Most of them fell apart when independent doctors looked at them. Those

+15 Bchus people never had dyslexia to begin with. All of the records had been changed. Some of the results couldn’t be reproduced. We had spent years and millions chasing an answer that didn’t exist.”

He looked toward Dad again, disappointed and pissed off.

Hus eyes met mine, “And all of it nearly destroyed us.”

I swallowed, suddenly it all fell into place, “You went bankrupt.”

“More than once,” he snapped. “We burned through fortunes trying to prove Vance’s work was real. Money went out faster than we could replace it.”

My eyes slowly shifted toward Dad, “So that’s why you brought him back. You brought Dr. Vance back to make money?”

Leone’s face hardened, “Yes. Dr. Vance was the only man who knew how to keep the subjects alive.”

I froze.

Leone continued, “Vance had spent years learning how much the human body could take. He knew how to keep a subject alive through procedures that should have killed them. How to push the body, damage it, operate on it, and keep it functioning.”

My blood went cold, “You mean…”

“Yes.”

My stomach twisted so violently I nearly stepped back.

His voice stayed devoid of any emotion, “We didn’t need Vance to cure anyone anymore. We needed him to keep merchandise alive long enough to harvest what we needed.”

“Harvest?”

He nodded, “Every viable organ.”

The words echoed through my skull. I looked at my father. He didn’t deny it.

Leone’s voice now came from somewhere far away, “Does that answer all your fucking questions, Gianna?”

I felt sick.

“Then why bring me back? What was the point?”

His expression changed slightly, “You were never supposed to be treated like the others anymore.”

I looked at him sharply, “Then what was I supposed to be?”

Dad finally spoke, “My successor. How many times do I have to say it for you to believe it?”

“Your successor?” I asked, my voice filled with disbelief.

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Chapter 784

“You were always going to inherit everything,” he said, “You and Gio Jr. Fifty-fifty. The Syndicate. The businesses. The territory. Every alliance and every piece of power I’ve built. And the organ trade.”

“You wanted me to run this.”

“Yes.”

I stared at him as if I were seeing a stranger, “After everything you did to me...”

Dad’s eyes hardened, “I wanted you prepared.”

“For what?”

“For the world I built.”

I shook my head, “You built a fucking nightmare.”

Leone rubbed a hand over his face, “Gianna, shut the fuck up. This world isn’t built on pretty lies and fucking fairy tales. It’s ugly. It’s cruel. And people like us survive because we understand that.”

He gave a bitter scoff.

“You know what? I liked you better when you couldn’t read half the shit in front of you. At least back then, your little brain wasn’t giving you enough confidence to run your fucking mouth.”

My hand moved before my mind could catch up. I grabbed the empty whiskey glass from the table and swung it with everything I had. The glass connected with the side of Leone’s head. The sound was sharp enough to cut through the room.

Leone staggered sideways..The empty glass slipped from my fingers and shattered across the floor.

Leone looked at me and his hand slowly went to the side of his head, “You fucking-”

I lunged for him again. He caught me before I could reach him. His arms locked around me, and he twisted us away from the broken glass. I fought like a wild animal, kicking, twisting, trying to tear myself out of his grip.

“Let me go!”

“Gianna, stop!”

“Get the fuck off me!”

He tightened his hold just enough to keep me from hurting myself on the glass.

“Calm down!”

I shoved against his arms, “You’re telling me to calm down after everything you’ve done?”

“You’re going to cut yourself.”

“I don’t fucking care!”

Leone forced me down onto the clear part of the floor, keeping my wrists pinned without crushing them.

“Gianna!”

I struggled until I couldn’t anymore, then I stared up at him, breathing hard and a smile spread across my face. A

+15 8chus cold, furious smile, “He is going to kill you. And if you think your precious little Council can stop them? They can’t. They’re going to come for you. And when they do, they’re going to tear this whole fucking place apart.”

Leone’s grip tightened for a second, “You stupid-”

“They’ll kill you all,” the words came out with a strange calmness now, “And when they do, I won’t be standing beside you. I will never be part of this. I would rather die than inherit this disgusting excuse for an empire.”

Leone stared at me for several seconds, then he let out a harsh laugh, “Oh, that’s what this is about? The Capones, huh? They can’t touch a single fucking hair on our heads. Wake the fuck up, Gianna!”

His voice dropped.

“The Capones don’t spend their days feeding poor children and saving kittens. The Capones are more powerful than us, richer than us. You understand what that means?”

I glared at him, refusing to answer.

“It means they have more enemies. More territory. More people trying to take what belongs to them. And people don’t build that kind of power by being nice. They’ve done fucked-up things too. Probably far more than we ever did. You don’t know them-”

“I know what they are,” I cut him off, “I know exactly what they are. I know they aren’t innocent. I know what the Capones do. I’ve seen enough to know better than that but there is a difference.”

Leone smiled, “Oh, a difference?”

“You hurt people who can’t fight back. Children. People who have no power. People who can’t walk into this room and put a gun to your head and tell you no. The Capones aren’t saints but they don’t need to choose children as their enemies. They choose people who can fight back. They go after enemies who know exactly what kind of world they’re stepping into.”

I shook my head.

“That doesn’t make them good but compared to this?” I looked at the shelves behind him, “That alone makes them more honorable than you will ever be.”

Leone was still sitting on top of me when Dad finally moved. He stepped forward without saying a word.

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Chapter 785

Leone glanced at him.

Dad turned his phone's screen toward Leone, "Tell me it doesn't mean what I..."

Leone's eyes moved over the message and the color drained from his face. I watched the change happen. His eyes. moved across the screen again.

His mouth tightened, "The Council. They've called another emergency meeting. The heads of the families have been ordered to appear in person and you need to be there in less than twenty-four hours."

A laugh slipped from me, "Oh. Oh, it has already started."

Leone's eyes narrowed.

I laughed again, "That's Raphael."1

My chest tightened at his name, but this time the feeling wasn't fear.

It was certainty.

"He doesn't waste time."

I could almost picture him reading the files. Going silent. Making that cold calculation in his head then moving immediately.

"He's efficient like that," I looked straight at Leone, "So you should probably enjoy your last few hours," my smile widened, "Because I think you're about to fucking die."

For a moment, Leone simply stared at me, then something strange happened. He smiled too, "Maybe."

He reached for my broken phone, still lying on the floor nearby, and glanced at the broken screen.

Then he looked back at me, "But I'm not as worried as you think I should be."

My smile faded slightly.

Leone got closer, “You made one mistake. You thought sending those messages made you safe. It didn’t. It made you valuable.”

A chill moved down my spine.

Leone’s smile widened now, “I heard what he sent you. The way he spoke to you, and I read a message where he told you that... he loved you,” he gave a quiet laugh, “That wasn’t the Raphael Capone everyone is afraid of. That was a man who was scared. He was trying to keep you alive and he was desperate because you’re under our control.

I swallowed.

Leone again looked at the broken phone, “That desperation is useful.”

My blood went cold. I tried to pull myself upright but Leone caught my shoulder, “Get the fuck off me.”

“No,” his tone was darkly amused, “As long as I have you, Gianna, I don’t think I’m losing. And I’m certainly not above using the one thing Raphael Capone clearly can’t afford to lose.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, “You can’t touch hi-”

“He’s already coming,” he raised his eyebrows, still wickedly amused, “I don’t need to do anything, Gianna.”

Before I could move, he grabbed me and turned me onto my stomach. I fought immediately, “Get off me!”

I kicked backward, but he shifted out of the way and caught my wrists before I could reach the broken glass.

“Leone!”

“Hold still.”

“Fuck you!”

I twisted hard, trying to wrench one hand free.

He kept his grip firm without striking me, “Stop fighting.”

“No!”

I heard the quick scrape of something being pulled free, then my wrists were drawn behind my back.

I fought harder, “Let me go!”

Leone secured my hands together, checking the restraint once before releasing his grip. I immediately tried to pull free. My breathing came fast as I pushed myself onto my knees.

Leone stood above me.

I glared up at him, “You think this is going to stop him or me?”

He looked down at me, “No. I think it’s going to bring him exactly where I want him.”

Dad finally cut in, “What are we going to do about the Council?”

Leone didn’t even look at him, “Fuck the Council.”

The answer came so quickly that even I went still. Leone walked toward the desk and picked up Dad’s phone, reading the message again.

“They can sit in that room and demand answers until their fucking throats hurt. We don’t have to give them anything.”

Dad watched him carefully, his expression tightening, “You think it’s that simple? They’re going to come at us from every direction. The Council, the Capones. They’re going to fucking bury us if we give them even one opening.”

Leone’s eyes shifted toward me, “Then we don’t give them an opening. First, we move Gianna somewhere the Capones can’t reach.”

He said it like he had already made the whole plan.

“We take her there tonight. No phones. No trackers. No outside contact. We disappear before the Council meeting even begins. The Capones won’t even find us there.”

I scoffed, “You can’t stay hidden forever.”

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Chapter 786

“No,” he looked directly at me, a mocking expression on his face, “But I don’t need forever. I need enough time.”

“For what?”

“For Raphael.”

My stomach dropped to my feet.

Leone smiled, “The moment his feet touch Philadelphia soil, we take him.”

“No,” the word came out before I could stop it, “You won’t get near him.”

“We’ll see,” he crouched in front of me, “This Raphael... is going to come here because of you. As he said, he is already on his way. He’ll come looking for you.”

“And he’ll destroy you.”

“Maybe,” Leone shrugged, “But if we have you, he’ll walk straight into whatever trap I build.”

I shook my head with a smile, “You don’t know him.”

“I know enough,” he glanced at my restrained hands, and stood, “And once we have him, the Council gets a very different story.”

Dad’s brow furrowed, “What story?”

Leone looked toward him, “That the Capones fabricated everything and Gianna will help us. She will testify.”

I laughed bitterly, “You really think I’m going to stand in front of the Council and help you?”

Leone’s expression hardened, “You will.”

“I won’t.”

His eyes narrowed, as he ignored my answer and continued, “You’ll tell them the Capones manipulated you. That they fed you false information. That they made you believe your father was responsible for everything.”

“No,” I stated.

“You’ll tell them you want nothing to do with them.”

My voice grew louder, “I’d rather die.”

Then he gave a slow nod, “That’s what you’re saying now,” he crouched again until we were eye to eye, “But you’re forgetting something. I can hurt the people you love. What happens when the pain isn’t yours?”

I didn’t answer, I just stared at him with all the hatred in the world as he leaned closer.

“What happens when I put Raphael in front of you and make you watch what happens to him because you refused to cooperate? What happens when I cut off his tongue and feed it to you.”

I hated the satisfaction in his voice.

“If you refuse to speak, I’ll find another way to make you speak,” he paused, “And if I have to hurt him badly enough to make you understand what obedience means, I will.”

Dad finally spoke, “Enough.”

Leone turned toward him. Dad’s eyes moved to me, “Gio cannot run this family, Leone, not after what happened to him, not after what Vance did. We need her, I need her.”

Leone nodded slowly, “You’re right.”

I stared between them.

Leone stepped between us, “And we need her functional. Alive. Clear-headed. Useful,” he glanced down at me She doesn’t need to love us. She just needs to do what we tell her.”

My eyes burned, “You really think you can control me again?”

Leone’s answer came without hesitation, “Not tonight but eventually? Yes…”

Rage twisted inside of me, “I’m going to kill you if you even think about touching him.”

I yanked hard against the restraints, fighting until the material bit into my wrists.

Leone simply watched me, “Keep fighting. We’ll see how long that lasts,” he turned toward the door, “I’ll get the cars ready and have the island secured, make sure everything is waiting for us. And when the Capones come looking for you, we’ll make damn sure they find exactly what we want them to find, Gianna.”

His hand closed around the door handle, as he looked back at me. A cold smile touched his mouth.

“Let’s see how this ends when we have you. And one of theirs.”

He walked out, but Dad stayed. For a moment, neither of us spoke as I continued to glare at him. Then he slowly crouched in front of me until we were at eye level.

“This isn’t what I wanted for you,” he said quietly, “But you kept asking about Dr. Vance. You kept pushing. You kept digging into things that were never meant to concern you.”

He studied my face for a moment.

“So, congratulations, Gianna.”

My stomach dropped.

His voice softened, “You’re finally going to meet him.”

Janedoewritings

Author

I wrote this chapter at one of my lowest points. I’m so tired and ridiculously busy right now that I barely have a second to breathe.

I hope you guys enjoy it. And if it doesn’t quite hit the way you hoped, forgive me, I wasn’t r

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Chapter 787

Raphael

The helicopter cut through the night without a single unnecessary light.

Philadelphia was still ahead of us.

I could already see its glow through the dark glass.

I sat alone in the rear cabin, one hand resting on my phone while the other moved through the equipment laid out beside me.

Everything had its place.

Everything had a purpose.

Nothing came with me because I might need it. It came because I had already calculated the situations in which I would need it.

My hands moved automatically, sliding the slick slide of my customized 9mm handgun backward. Click. The spring was taut, perfectly greased. I inspected the chamber, released the slide, and slotted the weapon back into the tactical holster strapped tight across my chest.

Next was the suppressed rifle resting across my lap. I popped out the magazine, checked the spring tension of the thirty brass rounds packed inside, and clicked it back into place.

Everything had to be flawless. I didn't rely on luck. I relied on calculation, precision, and fucking force.

I had mapped out every single entry point into the Toricelli estate six moves ago. I knew where their guards rotated, I knew which security cameras had a three-second blind spot, and I knew exactly how many seconds it would take for their backup teams to respond once the first alarm tripped.

Then, the silent submachine guns, fitted with custom-built suppressors I had machined myself to eliminate even the smallest flash of light.

I loaded armor-piercing rounds into every single clip, bullets designed to punch straight through the heavy Kevlar vests of the Philadelphia Syndicate's elite guards.

They thought they had drawn a line in the sand with their Council rules. They thought hiding behind syndicate borders would keep them safe from me. My mind ran through the possibilities again.

I checked the screen on my phone. The tracker was still inside the Toricelli Estate. A small green marker pulsed against the map.

I stared at it.

There.

My thumb stopped above the screen.

She had sent me hundreds of photographs, files, names, research notes, reports, everything she had managed to capture. I hadn't read through a single one, not yet. I forwarded the entire package to Vincenzo and Adriano without opening the files myself.

They needed the evidence more than I did right now. I sent the files in one encrypted bundle, then another copy

+15 Benus through a separate channel.

First I sent them to Vincenzo.

Me: Everything Gianna sent me. Have Silvio go through every page.

Then I sent the same package to Adriano.

Me: Find anything that can strengthen our case before the Council. Financial records. Names. Dates. Anything connecting Toricelli, Vance, and the operation. I want it all.

I watched the delivery confirmations appear one after another. I didn't need to know what was inside yet.

I trusted Gianna.

If she had risked everything to get those files to me, then they mattered. My thumb hovered over her last message.

I love you.

I had read it three times.

My jaw tightened. She had written as if she had already accepted that she might die.

That wasn't happening, not tonight, not tomorrow, not ever. I leaned back and closed my eyes for half a second.

Think.

Emotion was noise.

Noise got people killed.

If I let anger take the wheel now, I could lose my focus. One wrong decision. One second of hesitation and Gianna could pay for it. I couldn't afford that.

I opened my eyes again, the map was still moving.

Good.

I had a location.

That was enough.

For now.

Across from me, the secured cases remained closed. I had brought enough equipment to handle problems I expected and a few I didn't. Medical supplies. Communication gear. Protective equipment. Tools for getting through locked doors if I needed them.

And weapons.

More than enough. I didn't plan to use most of them. That was the point. A man who needed every weapon he carried had already lost control of the situation. I checked each case once more, then closed the last one..

My phone vibrated, the marker moved again. Where the fuck was she?

My eyes snapped to the screen, "How much longer?"

Ciro's voice came through the cabin speaker, "Twenty minutes.'

"Make it fifteen."

"That's pushing it."

"I know."

He said nothing else. Ciro knew better than to argue when my voice sounded like that. I looked back at the tracker.. Every second Gianna remained in their hands was another second they had to hurt her after everything she had seen.

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Chapter 788

Another second they had to move her.

Another second for someone to make a decision I couldn't undo.

My fingers tightened around the phone. I had spent years making decisions without knowing why certain things. mattered to me.

I understood now.

Gianna mattered.

And it was not because she was useful to the Outfit, not because she was connected to the Toricelli empire, not because she was a bargaining chip, not because she belonged to some fucking war between families.

She mattered because she was Gianna.

That was enough.

My phone vibrated, I looked down. The marker for her phone had stopped.

Fuck.

My mind immediately began running through every possibility. Why had it stopped? Had someone taken the phone? Broken it? Thrown it somewhere to make me lose the signal?

That meant they had gotten to her?

I checked the last known position against the previous movements.

My pulse stayed steady but my thoughts didn't. I stared at the screen, running through every possibility before keeping all of my attention now on the tracker hidden in her necklace.

It moved, slowly at first, then faster. My eyes narrowed. She was moving, not walking, not running. The signal was traveling along a road.

She was in a vehicle.

My grip tightened around the phone, "She's been moved."

Ciro glanced back, "Where?"

I turned the screen toward him, "Somewhere."

He looked at the tracker, then back at me. I watched the marker continue across the map. One thing was certain. They weren't keeping her in the estate anymore.

They were moving her.

That meant they had realized they couldn't keep her where she was. My eyes stayed fixed on the tracker as the signal continued across the map. And if her phone had stopped because they had destroyed it...

Then they knew.

They knew I was coming. They were trying to cut the one line I had to her. My jaw tightened.

They could break the fucking phone. They could move her across the city. They could bury her behind walls, guards, and miles of concrete but they didn't know one thing. As long as that necklace stayed around her neck, I

15 Benus still had a path to her and I would follow it straight to her.

My jaw tightened, "Keep going. Faster!"

Ciro nodded. I looked back at the screen. The little marker continued moving through the darkness.

"Just stay alive, Gianna," my eyes remained fixed on the signal, "Stay alive until I get there, don't do anything stupid."

They moved her toward the coast.

The island, the fucking island. A location isolated from the city with limited routes, easy to control, difficult to reach without being seen.

Smart, but not smart enough.

I opened another screen and started building the possibilities in my head. If they took her there, they would expect us to come through the obvious route.

They would expect the Capones to make noise. They would expect retaliation. They would expect me to act like an angry man who had lost his mind over the woman he loved.

They were right about one thing.

I had lost my patience.

They were wrong about the rest.

I wasn't going to give them the man they expected. I was going to give them the man who had already spent the entire flight thinking ten moves ahead.

My phone showed the tracker again. I stared at the screen. Alexithymia had never made me incapable of feeling. It had only made some feelings difficult to name.

Gianna had solved that problem for me.

I knew exactly what this was.

Fear.

Rage.

Love.

Possession.

And something far more dangerous than all four.

A promise.

I would get her back. I didn't care how many doors stood between us. I didn't care how many men thought they could stop me. I didn't care what the Council decided. I didn't care what Giovanni Toricelli called his empire.

Philadelphia could belong to him.

The Council could belong to itself.

None of it changed the one fact that mattered.

Gianna was mine to protect, and I was coming for her.

The helicopter tilted slightly.

Ciro's voice came through again, "Philadelphia ahead."

I looked through the glass, the city appeared beneath us, bright and unaware. I slipped my phone into my hand and watched the tracker.

One green dot.

One woman.

One destination.

My entire world had narrowed to that point on the screen, "Take us in."

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Chapter 789

Ciro answered immediately, "On it."

The helicopter descended into the darkness and I smiled.

There was nothing happy about what came next. I smiled because the men who had taken Gianna still believed they had time.

They didn't.

Vincenzo sat at the head of the table, his jacket still buttoned, one hand resting beside his phone. Across from him, Adriano sat with his elbows on the table, his expression hard.

The private jet carried them toward New York for the emergency Council meeting.

On Vincenzo's request, the meeting had been called in NYC instead of Sicily. The shorter flight meant less time wasted in the air and, more importantly, less time before they could put everything Gianna had uncovered in front of the Council.

Silvio had been silent for nearly twenty minutes. He had barely looked up since opening the files Gianna had sent. At first, he had sorted them quickly, then he stopped sorting.

Now he was reading every page.

His face had lost its color.

Vincenzo noticed, "What?"

Silvio didn't answer, as he turned another page.

Adriano leaned forward, "Silvio?"

Silvio finally looked up, "These aren't just research files."

"Then what are they?" Vincenzo asked.

Silvio placed several photographs on the table. There were medical records, treatment logs, dates, everything that Gianna had sent.

Vincenzo's eyes moved across them, "How many?" he asked.

"I don't know yet, there could be thousands," Silvio swallowed and opened another file, "Gianna found records going back decades. Children were brought into this program under the excuse of treating neurological disorders. Some of them were barely old enough to understand what was happening."

Adriano's fingers slowly curled into a fist, "Treatment? So, it wasn't just Gianna?"

Silvio gave him a look, "No, and they only called it treatment but it wasn't, clearly."

He pushed another photograph across the table.

“These records describe electrical procedures, cutting into their skin, repeated waterboarding, physical restraints, constant monitoring.” Silvio’s voice grew colder with every word. “And look at how they refer to them. Not patients. Subjects. Numbers on a page.”

Adriano stared at the photographs for several seconds before dragging a hand over his face.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered. “And I thought we’d done some fucked-up things,” His eyes hardened as he looked back at the files, “This isn’t another level of fucked up. This is a whole different fucking world.”

Vincenzo remained still, “What did Gianna find about herself?”

Silvio hesitated, “Her file is one of the largest.”

That was enough.

Adriano looked away for a moment.

Silvio continued, “She was used as something called the primary subject. Her father believed the research could somehow change his own condition. Vance built an entire theory around it.”

“And the results?”

Silvio gave a bitter laugh, “Fake.”

Vincenzo’s eyes lifted, “Completely?”

“Apparently.”

Silvio tapped a report, “Gianna found independent reviews commissioned after Vance disappeared. Different specialists. Different countries. Different teams. They examined the records, the scans, the claims, the supposed successful cases,” he shook his head, “They couldn’t reproduce the results. Some of the people Vance claimed to have cured didn’t even meet the original diagnostic requirements.”

Adriano leaned back slowly, “So twenty-five years…”

“Built on manipulated data.”

Vincenzo looked at the files again, “And Toricelli knew?”

“According to this, he only realized it, two years ago,” Silvio’s voice hardened, “I think that was when he finally accepted that this research was fraudulent, instead of knowing what he already knew deep down.”

Adriano stared at him, “And he shut it down.”

Silvio slid the next report across the table, “That’s where this gets worse. We have hit the Gold mine, brothers.”

He pointed toward the financial records.

“After Vance left, Philadelphia spent a fortune trying to prove the research had value and they got nothing. They nearly destroyed themselves financially trying to prove Vance wasn’t lying but then the operation changed,” he placed another photograph on the table, “According to these records, the facility became part of an organ- trafficking operation.”

Adriano’s face went completely still.

Silvio nodded once, “Children were kept alive long enough to become viable sources for organs.”

Vincenzo’s hand slowly closed around the edge of the table.

For all the blood their families had spilled over the years, there were lines even men like them did not cross.

Their world had rules.

Chorder 80

They were not pretty rules.

They were not legal ones.

But rules.

Women were not targets.

Children were never targets.

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Chapter 790

Civilians who had nothing to do with their wars were left alone.

A man could choose this life and accept the consequences.

A child couldn't.

Neither could an innocent person who had never asked to become part of it.

Those rules were older than any of them. Break them, and you weren't simply breaking an oath. You were destroying the boundary that kept monsters from becoming something worse.

The mob world could be brutal, but it was still built around family. A man didn't rise alone. He rose because people stood behind him, because blood meant something, because the next generation mattered.

They could fight men who chose this life. They could destroy rivals who came for their territory. They could spill blood when blood was the price of protecting their own but innocent civilian children were never supposed to pay that price.

Giovanni Toricelli had crossed every line they lived by.

He hadn't simply broken an oath.

He had taken the very thing their world was built to protect-family-and turned it into a weapon.

Vincenzo slowly leaned back. For the first time since they had boarded the jet, something almost calm entered his expression.

He picked up one of the photographs from the table and studied it for several seconds. His thumb rested against the edge of the paper, careful not to cover the child's face.

His eyes hardened, "He's going to answer for every one of them."

Adriano looked at him.

Vincenzo placed the photograph back on the table. He looked at the rows of files spread across the table.

"These children didn't choose our world. They didn't choose a war. They were helpless, and that bastard used their helplessness to make himself richer."

Adriano's expression darkened, "So what do we do with him?"

Vincenzo finally looked up, “First, we take away his Council protection. His alliances. His reputation. His money. Every piece of power that keeps men like him untouchable.”

Silvio nodded slowly, “And if the Council refuses?”

Vincenzo’s eyes gleamed with darkness, “Then they can explain to every family sitting in that room why they chose to protect a man who turned children into merchandise.”

Adriano nodded, “Nikolai is Philadelphia’s biggest ally. That puts him under the most scrutiny,” he shook his head, “I doubt he has any idea what his neighbor has actually been doing behind those walls. I can only imagine the look on that proud bastard’s face when he realizes who he’s been standing beside.”

Vincenzo’s mouth curved into a humorless smile, “I want that Council to understand one thing. This is what happens when you make an enemy out of a man who protects his family.”

His gaze dropped to the photographs again.

“And this time, I’m not asking them to take my word for it,” he tapped the files, “I’m giving them a reason they can’t ignore.”

The doors of the council chamber opened. Every conversation stopped. Vincenzo Capone entered, he did not hurry. He simply walked in at his own pace, as if the entire room could wait for him.

His black suit was perfectly fitted, his tie straight, his cuffs fastened, every detail of his appearance controlled. Adriano walked beside him. Silvio followed with a black case in one hand and a thick folder beneath his arm.

The room was already full.

Leonardo Visconti sat with his arms folded, his expression openly irritated.

Valentino Falcone looked even less pleased.

Luciano Deverecci had several papers spread in front of him and the bored expression of a man who believed the meeting had already lasted too long.

At the head of the table sat Nikolai Costello.

Capo dei Capi.

The man who had called the previous ruling.

The man who had looked Vincenzo in the eye and told him to surrender Gianna.

The man who had believed Giovanni.

Vincenzo's gaze moved across them slowly, then he stopped. Four empty chairs waited on the opposite side.

The chairs reserved for Philadelphia.

Leonardo scoffed, "We were told this was an emergency."

"It is."

"We have all had enough of this war."

Vincenzo placed his gloves on the table, "Then you should have chosen your ally more carefully."

Valentino's expression hardened, "Watch yourself, Capone."

Vincenzo looked at him, not angry, not even annoyed, just disappointed, "That is the problem with men who are accustomed to being feared, Falcone. Eventually, they confuse fear with authority."

Valentino's jaw tightened.

Vincenzo turned away from him.

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Leonardo shifted in his chair, "You called us here again after the Council already ruled."

"I did."

"You lost, just fucking accept it and move the fuck on."

A faint, almost amused smile touched Vincenzo's mouth, "Yes," he said calmly. "I lost."

His eyes moved slowly from Nikolai to Leonardo, Valentino, and Luciano, lingering on each man long enough to make the silence uncomfortable.

"Giovanni walked into this room carrying paperwork. I walked in carrying the truth," his smile sharpened, "And somehow, gentlemen, you decided the paperwork mattered more."

He leaned back in his chair, perfectly composed.

Nikolai's expression hardened, "Watch it, Vincenzo. Keep pushing, and this Council may decide the Capone family has reached the end of its road."

Vincenzo raised an eyebrow, and let out a dry laugh, "I meant no disrespect, I was just confused how some paperwork was enough to make four intelligent men forget how to recognize a monster."

Luciano folded his hands, "You are again making a serious accusation with backing it up."
1

"No," Vincenzo cut him off immediately, "I'm bringing you a serious accusation," he looked toward Silvio, "Open it."

Silvio placed the black case on the table, the locks clicked and the lid opened. Inside sat a laptop, several drives, printed reports, photographs and sealed evidence bags.

Leonardo frowned, "What is all that?"

Vincenzo looked at him, "Your conscience."

Leonardo's face hardened.

Vincenzo's smile barely appeared, "You may want to examine it. It seems to have been missing during the last hearing."

Adriano looked away, hiding the faintest smirk. Silvio connected the laptop to the large screen at the front of the chamber.

The first image appeared.

A child with medical sensors attached to his head. His wrists were strapped down. A machine stood beside him.

Valentino leaned forward, "What am I looking at?"

Silvio answered, "One of the Toricelli treatment subjects."

Leonardo stared at the screen, "Subject?"

Silvio clicked, another photograph appeared, another child, another room, another chair, another set of restraints.

Another photograph, a little girl with bare feet in a hospital gown. A thick cable running toward the machine beside her.

Luciano's expression slowly changed, "Where did these come from?"

"Inside the Toricelli program," Vincenzo rested his hands together, "The same program I tried to save my stepsister from."

Nikolai's eyes narrowed, clearly intrigued, "Continue."

Silvio did, the photographs changed, orphanage records, school records, names, dates. Some names had been crossed out, others had been marked with numbers.

Leonardo stared at one page, "Most of these children came from orphanages."

"Some," Silvio clicked again, "Some were taken from special-needs schools. Some were reported as runaways. Some disappeared without any formal missing-person report. And some were taken from their perfectly happy families. Innocent families with innocent children."

Valentino slowly sat back, "How many?"

"We don't know yet," Vincenzo answered this time, "But there are enough records to make the number irrelevant

Valentino looked at him, "How can you say that?"

Vincenzo's eyes hardened, "Because one child would have been enough. One. That is the difference between us and them."

His gaze settled on Leonardo.

"You spent the last hearing worrying about bloodlines."

Then Valentino.

"You worried about precedent."

Then Luciano.

"You worried about paperwork."

Finally Nikolai.

"And you worried about order."

Vincenzo leaned forward.

"Meanwhile, Giovanni Toricelli was putting children into chairs."

The sarcasm in his voice was impossible to miss. Vincenzo Capone hadn't come merely to defend his family. He had come to tear apart the Council, and make every man in that room understand exactly what their decision had cost them.

He had lost the hearing.

But he had no intention of letting them walk away believing they had won.

"The Cosa Nostra guards the honor of La Famiglia like it's sacred, yet somehow you failed to notice children being tortured right under your fucking noses. Makes me wonder, Nikolai, if you had been the one who wanted something badly enough, would you have been willing to torture children to get it?"

Nikolai's jaw clenched, "Have you lost your fucking mind, Capone?"

"No," Vincenzo's eyes met his, "Not yet. You wanted proof."

Silvio opened another file, "Here it is."

The video appeared, static filled the room, then the image cleared.

Gianna.

Far too young, strapped into a chair. Vincenzo's expression didn't change but Adriano saw his hand close slowly.

into a fist.

The room watched.

Wires were attached to Gianna's head. Dr. Arthur Vance stood beside her. The machine hummed.

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Chapter 792

Gianna looked toward him, "Is it going to hurt today?"

Vance looked toward the monitor, he said nothing. The warning alarm sounded. Gianna shifted. The machine activated and her body jerked.

The Council went silent.

Another violent movement, the restraints pulled tight, the alarms grew louder.

Vance stood there, watching as young Gianna writhe in pain.

Leonardo's face drained of color, "What the fuck..."

Silvio didn't stop the video.

Gianna's voice broke through the speakers, "Please..."

Valentino shoved his chair back and rose to his feet, "Turn that fucking thing off. I didn't come here to sit here and watch children being tortured."

Silvio kept playing until the video ended. The silence afterward was worse than the recording.

Nikolai stared at the blank screen, "That was Gianna Toricelli?"

Vincenzo answered, "Yes."

Leonardo swallowed, "His daughter? The one he called an idiot?"

Vincenzo's eyes moved toward him, "Yes."

Nikolai shook his head, "Why?"

"For treatment..."

He continued staring at the screen, "Treatment for what?"

"Dyslexia, according to Giovanni Toricelli."

Valentino rubbed a hand over his mouth.

Vincenzo breathed out a laugh under his breath, "You men sat in this room and questioned whether a traumatized girl could understand her own life," his eyes moved from one man to another, "You questioned her memory, you questioned her judgment, you questioned her intelligence, you questioned whether she could even understand what had happened to her."

His expression hardened.

"And you believed the man who caused it."

That one landed, all the men looked uncomfortable.

Vincenzo smiled without warmth, “Congratulations. You managed to stain every oath you claim to live by in a single afternoon.”

Nikolai glared at him.

Vincenzo continued without caring, “You speak about family. She is my family. You speak about protecting

+15 Benus children. They were children. You speak about honor,” His eyes moved across the room, “Where was yours?”

Vincenzo’s eyes became almost black.

He turned toward Luciano, “You asked whether her words came from her or somebody else’s influence. Perhaps you should ask yourself the same question.”

Luciano frowned.

His voice became colder, “Because when Giovanni stood here and told you what to think, you accepted it. You were influenced too.”

Luciano looked down.

Vincenzo finally turned toward Nikolai, “And you.”

The room went completely still as Nikolai held his stare.

“You were the one who spoke about order. You stood there and told me the Council existed to keep monsters from tearing this world apart,” he pointed toward the screen, “Then you protected one.”

Nikolai’s face hardened, “I made a ruling based on the information presented.”

“Exactly,” Vincenzo nodded, “And that is why every man in this room should be ashamed.”

Nikolai’s eyes narrowed.

Vincenzo lifted a shoulder, “Not because you were fooled but because you were so certain you couldn’t be.”

Silvio opened another document, “There’s more.”

Nikolai looked at him, completely off guard.

Silvio brought up the research review, “Twenty-five years of Dr. Vance’s research were independently examined. None of the major findings could be reproduced. Patient

outcomes could not be verified. Diagnostic standards were inconsistent. Several reported recoveries were impossible to confirm."

Leonardo stared, "So the treatment..."

"Was based on false claims," Vincenzo finished his sentence.

Valentino's face tightened, "And Giovanni knew?"

Vincenzo gave a slow nod, "He took a man named Elias Crowe off death row-a child killer-and handed him children to experiment on. His own children included, along with countless other innocent lives. And he's still doing it. Right now."

He glanced toward the empty Philadelphia seats.

"That's why Giovanni Toricelli isn't sitting in this room."

Silvio opened the organ records, the screen filled with coded lists, "These are organ records."

"From the children?"

Silvio nodded, "From the subjects."

Vincenzo corrected him, "Children. Call them what they were."

Silvio nodded, "Children."

He looked around the table, "They weren't patients. They weren't business assets. They weren't merchandise. They were children."

Finally, he looked toward the empty chairs.

"And the man who did this to them, didn't have the courage to come here tonight. He was very brave when my family was on trial. Very brave when he had four families standing behind him. But now that the evidence is sitting on the screen..." his voice became almost amused, "He's suddenly busy."

Adriano stepped forward, "The Council ordered Philadelphia to attend."

Nikolai looked toward the empty chairs, "They did."

"They ignored the order."

"Yes."

Adriano’s expression hardened, “That alone should be enough to suspend their standing.”

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Leonardo slowly nodded, “That’s a direct violation.”

Vincenzo turned toward him, “Now you remember.”

Leonardo looked up.

Vincenzo smiled, “I was beginning to worry the rules had become selective.”

Leonardo’s jaw tightened, “I made a mistake.”

Vincenzo raised an eyebrow, “One?”

Leonardo said nothing.

Vincenzo looked around the room, “Let us be honest with one another. You didn’t make one mistake. You made several. You believed a man because he had a clean suit. You believed paperwork because it had official stamps. You believed medical records because they looked impressive. You believed a father because he called himself a father.”

His voice became colder with every sentence.

“And you looked at the girl covered in scars and decided she was the unreliable one.”

Nobody could answer him.

Vincenzo’s gaze hardened, “You don’t get to hide behind the word ‘mistake.’ You were wrong and your mistake had a victim,” his eyes went to Gianna’s photograph, “Her,” then the other children, “And them. So don’t insult me by telling me you made a simple error.”

Nikolai’s expression darkened, “You brought all of this before the Council because you want the previous ruling overturned.”

Vincenzo smiled faintly, “No, I don’t need your ruling overturned before I make my next move.” He slowly looked around the table, meeting each man’s eyes without the slightest hesitation. “That decision was made the moment I walked out of this room the first time.”

He straightened his cuffs, almost casually.

“You can come after my family with every man, every weapon, every alliance this Council can put behind you. I’ll deal with it but understand something before you make that mistake. I don’t handle losing well. Especially when the loss was never supposed to happen.”

He looked at the others one by one.

“So remember this moment. Remember the evidence I placed in front of you. Remember the faces of those children. And remember that I warned every one of you. Next time I tell you something, listen. It might save you the humiliation of discovering, far too late, that you were wrong.”.

Nikolai’s eyes moved to the empty Philadelphia seats, “First, Giovanni Toricelli will answer for ignoring a direct Council order. Second, the previous ruling regarding Gianna Toricelli is suspended.”

Leonardo nodded, “Agreed.”

Valentino followed, “Agreed.”

Luciano’s answer came last, “Agreed.”

Nikolai looked at Vincenzo, “And third, if even half of this is true, Giovanni Toricelli hasn’t simply broken Council law. He has made an enemy of every father sitting at this table.”

For several seconds, Vincenzo said nothing. Then he stood, and buttoned his jacket, “I’m going to tear the Philadelphia Syndicate apart. I’m going to take their money, their territory, their men, their businesses, their allies, and every fucking thing they’ve built.”

Nikolai leaned forward, “Don’t mistake the Council’s ruling for permission to start a war in my territory.”

Vincenzo’s eyes locked onto his, “I’m not asking for permission. So stay the fuck out of my way. Because if you don’t, you’re going to find out what happens when the man you’ve spent days trying to restrain finally stops giving a shit about being polite.”

His jaw tightened.

“I’ll come for anyone who puts themselves between me and my family. I don’t care who the fuck you are.” /

Nikolai held his stare for a long moment before giving a slow nod, “I’m with you, Capone.”

Vincenzo paused at the doorway and glanced back, “What?”

Nikolai shoved his chair back and stood, reaching for his coat, “After what we just watched?” A bitter laugh left him. “You think I’m going to sit on my ass while that bastard Toricelli keeps torturing children and calls it business?” he slipped into his coat, “Fuck that.”

His expression hardened.

“I’d rather stand beside you and put that son of a bitch in the ground than go home and explain to my own family why I sat at a table, watched children get butchered, and didn’t have the balls to do something about it. So go handle your war, Capone,” a dark smile crossed his face, “And if that coward in Philadelphia thinks he’s tough enough to stand against us, let the bastard find out exactly how badly he fucked up.”

Vincenzo’s mouth curved into a cold smile, “Now that’s something I can agree with.”

Enjoy!

And if you’ve been waiting for some action... well, let’s just say you won’t have to wait much longer....

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Chapter 794

Gianna

The car hadn’t even come to a full stop before the door beside me opened. Cold air rushed into the back seat. I barely had time to lift my head before Leone reached inside and grabbed my arm.

“Move.”

I planted my feet against the floor, “No.”

His fingers tightened around my upper arm,

“I said no.”

He pulled.

“Gianna.”

My body jerked forward, my knees hitting the edge of the seat as I tried to use the car door to hold myself inside. My hands were still tied tightly behind my back. The restraints

had rubbed my wrists raw during the drive, and every movement sent a sharp sting through the skin.

Leone swore under his breath, “Don’t make me drag you.”

“Then don’t fucking take me.”

He gave another hard pull. I lost my balance and stumbled out of the car. My shoes hit wet concrete. The air smelled like salt, fuel, and cold metal.

Mooked up.

For one second, I forgot to fight.

We were at a private marina.

Rows of boats sat in their slips, their hulls rocking gently against the dark water. Tall lamps threw pale circles of light across the dock. Beyond them, the water stretched into the night, black and almost impossible to see where it ended.

A larger motor yacht waited at the end of one of the private docks.

Not some giant luxury ship.

A fast, low vessel with enough room for several people and a covered cabin. Its engines were already running, the low vibration traveling through the dock beneath my shoes.

My stomach sank.

The island.

Of course.

There would be no road leading there, no car, no easy way to run. Leone pulled me toward the dock.

I twisted away, “Where are you taking me?”

He didn’t answer.

I dug my heels into the concrete, “Say it, Leone!”

He turned around sharply, “The island.”

The word hit me harder than his grip. My head snapped toward my father as he stepped out of the car behind us.

“Dad!” I stared at him, “What island? Is this the undisclosed location I saw in those files?”

He stopped and that answered my question.

I stared at him, “You are actually doing this.”

His face looked tired, “You don’t understand the situation.”

A bitter laugh tore out of me, “No, I understand it perfectly.”

Leone started pulling me toward the boat again.

I fought him every step, “You think taking me to Vance is going to fix anything?”

“Stop fighting.”

“That man ruined my life!”

My voice carried across the marina. A couple of men farther down the dock glanced toward us before quickly looking away.

“You hear me?” I shouted, “Dr. Vance destroyed my life for nothing!”

Leone’s jaw tightened.

I turned my head toward my father, “And you let him!”

Dad followed us onto the dock, “Gianna, lower your voice.”

“No!”

I stumbled when Leone pulled me forward. He caught my arm before I could fall.

I shoved against him with my shoulder, “Don’t touch me!”

“You’ll fall.”

“I’d rather fall into the fucking ocean!”

Leone gave me a look, “Keep talking like that and I’ll throw you overboard myself.”

My head snapped toward him, “Try it.”

For a second, neither of us moved, then my father stepped closer, “Enough, both of you.”

I looked at him, “Enough? You drag me out of my home with my hands tied behind my back. You take me to a fucking boat in the middle of the night. You’re sending me back to the man who tortured me, and you want me to be quiet?”

Dad’s expression tightened, “It’s not the same and it’s only temporary.”

I laughed, “Temporary?”

Dad sighed, “I am not going to keep you hostage in your own home.”

I stared at him, “You already did that in the past. You kept me there because you wanted me under your control, because I wasn’t good enough for you. You put cameras around me. You watched me. You decided who I could see. You decided what I could know. You decided what happened to my body.”

My voice rose again.

“And now you’re taking me back to the man who ruined me.”

Dad’s jaw tightened. “Vance isn’t the same situation anymore,” he paused, his eyes narrowing, “And I thought this was what you wanted, Gianna. You kept asking about Vance. You kept digging until you found out where he was. Isn’t this why you came here in the first place? To find him?”

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“How fucking convenient,” I spat, “Blame all of this on me again, just like you always do.”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, like I was the one making his life difficult.

“I’m not blaming you.” He lowered his hand. “I just need time. I need to buy enough time to get control of this Council mess and get those fucking Capones off our backs for good.”

A dry laugh slipped from me, “Yeah. Good luck with that. Buy all the time you want. It doesn’t change what he is. He’s a fucking monster,” I swallowed hard, “And so are you.”

“I know.”

The answer stopped me for half a second.

He continued, “I know exactly what he is and what I am,” Dad looked toward the yacht, “But we need him.”

“You need him?” I stepped toward him, even with Leone holding me, “You took everything from me because you believed some lie about fixing us. Then you found out the lie was worthless and instead of stopping, you found another way to use the people you already destroyed.”

Dad’s expression hardened, “We have enemies. We have people waiting for us to weaken.”

“Good,” I smiled through the tears burning my eyes, “Maybe they’ll finish what you started.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why? Does it hurt?”

He looked away for a moment.

I pushed harder, “You want me to understand the business? Fine. I understand it now. You need Vance because Vance keeps your little machine running. He keeps people alive long enough for you to take them apart. He makes you money.”

Dad’s silence told me everything.

“So if I kill him,” I said quietly, “your entire operation falls apart. The whole syndicate falls apart.”

Dad tilted his head to the side, “You really think you’re going to kill him?”

“I don’t think,” I pulled against the restraints until the rope bit deeper into my skin, “I know. Don’t underestimate me.”

Leone grabbed my arm again, “Walk.”

I resisted, so he pulled harder. I stumbled forward. The yacht rocked slightly as I reached the boarding ramp.

My stomach turned.

The gap between the dock and boat wasn’t large, but with my hands tied behind me, even stepping across it felt dangerous.

Leone stepped onto the boat first, then he turned and held out a hand.

I stared at it, “Fuck you.”

His hand dropped, and he grabbed my arm instead. I stepped onto the deck. The boat shifted beneath my weight. I

+15 Benus caught myself against the railing.

Leone immediately grabbed my shoulder, “Careful.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“You do when your hands are tied.”

“I’d rather drown.”

“You’re becoming repetitive.”

“You’re becoming fucking annoying.”

He dragged me toward the covered cabin. I turned my head. Dad was still on the dock. He hadn’t boarded yet.

“You’re coming too?”

“Yes.”

I nodded, “You really want to watch this?” I turned toward him fully, “You take me to that island, you put me in the same room as Vance, and that’s going to be his funeral.”

Dad’s eyes hardened, “Gianna.”

My voice shook, but I didn’t lower it, “That man ruined my life for nothing. And you let him do it,” I swallowed hard, fighting the tremor in my throat, “After Mom died, I came here because I thought I had one choice left. Either you fixed what was wrong with me, or I was going to keep hurting people until someone finally died by my hands.”

Léone’s head snapped toward me.

“That was the deal I made with myself. Fix me, or someone dies. And I’m not walking away from Vance until I make him answer for what he did to me.”

My eyes burned as I looked at my father.

“So thank you,” a bitter smile pulled at my mouth, “Thank you for bringing me straight to the man who deserves to pay for every fucking thing he did.”

“Gianna, calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to fucking calm down.”

Dad stepped onto the yacht and shut the distance between us. For a moment, his expression softened, almost gentle, “I’ll deal with you later,” he said quietly. “Right now, we need to survive this. We need to recover before we all end up dead.”

“Survive? You mean survive on the money you made selling children’s organs?” My laugh came out hollow, “Real fucking brave of you, Dad.”

His jaw tightened, “Money keeps people alive in this world. Vance is the reason we’re still standing. You kill Vance, and you don’t just remove one man. You destroy our supply. You destroy our income.”

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Chapter 796

“And I would gladly do that.”

He stepped closer, “We have other families waiting for us to fall. Other gangs. Other men who have been waiting years for an opening.”

He pointed toward the darkness beyond the marina.

“We lose this operation, we lose the money that keeps our territory protected. We lose our leverage. Then the people who hate us start carving us apart. You think they’ll show mercy? They won’t. They’ll come for everything. Our businesses. Our territory. Our people. They’ll pick our bones clean.”

I wanted to tell him it didn’t matter anymore. Raphael was coming, and sooner or later, everything they’d done was going to come crashing down around them.

But I kept my mouth shut.

For Raphael’s sake.

“And you expect me to care?”

“You’re my daughter.”

“No,” I shook my head, “You stopped being my father a long time ago.”

Something flickered across his face but it was gone almost instantly.

I looked away, the yacht’s engine grew louder. Leone moved toward the controls and spoke to one of the men waiting near the cabin.

“Cast off.”

The ropes were pulled free, the boat began sliding away from the dock. I watched the marina slowly move behind us, the lights became smaller, the city disappeared into the darkness. Ahead of us was nothing but black water and somewhere beyond it was the island.

Somewhere on that island was Dr. Vance.

The man who had strapped me down, the man who had treated my brain like a puzzle, the man who had watched me suffer and written down the results.

I pulled at the restraints around my wrists. I didn’t need to fight them right now. I needed to be patient.

All I had to do was wait for the right moment, get myself free, and find something I could use as a weapon.

Leone sat across from me. Dad was beside him. The engine roared beneath our feet, drowning out almost everything except the slap of the water against the hull.

I kept my eyes on the black water outside, the farther we went, the darker it became. My heart beat faster. I shifted against the seat and tested the restraints again.

I looked at Leone, “How long?”

He didn’t answer.

I raised my voice, “How fucking long?”

“About forty minutes.”

1 looked through the window again.

Forty minutes.

I looked outside for a long time. At first, I saw nothing, then a dark shape appeared beyond the mist.

An island.

It was larger than I expected.

A rocky shoreline emerged from the darkness, covered in thick trees. A narrow strip of lights ran farther inland almost hidden behind the trees.

The boat slowed, the engine dropped to a low growl. I watched the dock approach. Two men were waiting there, armed.

Leone stood, “Get ready.”

I looked at him, “For what?”

He gave me a cold smile, “You’re about to meet Dr. Vance.”

My stomach twisted, the boat bumped against the dock. One of the men caught the railing and secured the line.

Leone moved toward me.

I immediately pulled away, “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“You’re coming.”

“I can walk.”

“Then walk.”

He grabbed my arm anyway.

I fought him, “Get away from me!”

He dragged me toward the exit while I dug my heels into the floor. Dad followed behind us. The moment the cabin door opened, cold night air hit my face.

I looked toward the island and something inside me went very still.

Somewhere beyond those trees was the man who had spent years taking pieces of my life and calling it science.

Dr. Arthur Vance.

I had spent years trying to forget his face, now I was going back to him. It didn’t seem real for a second. Leone pulled me onto the dock. My shoes hit the wet wood. I stumbled but caught myself.

Two guards moved closer. I looked at them, then at the dark path leading inland.

My fear was still there, but beneath it, something else was growing, something hotter, something darker.

The moment we reached the end of the dock, Dad stopped.

His eyes moved from me to Leone, “Did you search her?”

Leone frowned, “Of course I-”

“Not her pockets.” Dad’s voice sharpened, “Did you check for a tracker?”

Leone went still, then the color drained from his face, “No.”

My heart gave one hard kick.

Dad’s expression darkened. “You didn’t?”

“I broke her phone and left it behind.”

GET

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 797

“That’s not what I asked.”

Leone swore under his breath, then he turned toward me.

I stepped back immediately, “What?”

“Hold still.”

“Why?”

“Because if the Capones put a tracker on you-”

“Then you should’ve thought about that before dragging me onto a fucking island.”

He grabbed my shoulder.

I jerked away, “Don’t touch me.”

“Gianna, stop fighting me for one fucking second.”

He ran his hands quickly over the outside of my t-shirt, then my sleeves, my waist, my sides. He checked my shoes, the seams of my clothes, even the back of my collar.

The necklace was there, not around my neck, not where anyone could see it, not where Leone would think to look.

I'd made that choice long before tonight.

Raphael had given me the necklace because he wanted me safe and now it was the only thing standing between me and complete isolation.

I had known someone would search my clothes eventually if I got caught. He'd take my phone. I'd also known he would never think to search that tiny hidden pocket in my underwear, not while Dad was standing there, not unless he was willing to cross a line even he knew existed.

Leone crouched and checked my shoes. He stood and looked at me. His eyes traveled over me, thinking, then they stopped right between my legs.

He reached toward my waist.

I stepped back, "Don't."

His expression changed, "Where is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're wearing something."

"Everyone is wearing something, genius."

Leone's jaw clenched. He grabbed my arm and looked down at my clothes again, then his eyes dropped lower.

My blood ran cold.

"Leone," Dad warned.

"I need to check."

I shook my head, "No."

"If there's a tracker-"

"You can search my clothes."

"I need to know."

He moved closer.

I backed away until the edge of the dock caught against my heel, “What? You seriously think my stepbrothers, the Capones, shoved a tracker up my fucking vagina?”

His eyes dropped toward my legs. He lowered into a crouch and reached toward my thigh.

A cold smile pulled at his mouth, “Judging by those messages,” he said, “it sounds like you’ve let the Capones put a hell of a lot more between your legs than a tracker.”

And that pissed me off. I reacted before he could get any farther. I drove my knee straight into his face.

His head snapped back, “Fuck!”

He stumbled, clutching his nose.

I stood there breathing hard, “Don’t you fucking dare.”

Blood appeared beneath his nose. Leone stared at me in disbelief.

Dad’s expression hardened, “Leone.”

Leone wiped the blood from his mouth and glared at me, “You think this is funny?”

“No.”

His face twisted and I smiled because I knew exactly what had just happened. He had searched everything he could search. He had found nothing. And he wasn’t going to put his hands inside my underwear in front of my father.

The necklace remained exactly where I’d hidden it, against my skin and somewhere beyond this island, Raphael still had a path to me.

Leone pressed a hand beneath his nose and stared at me like he was deciding whether strangling me was worth the trouble, “Get her inside.”

One of the guards stepped forward.

I immediately straightened, “Don’t touch me, how many times do I have to say that?!”

He stopped.

Leone pointed toward the path leading inland, “Just move.”

I looked at Dad but he didn’t meet my eyes, so, I walked. The path cut through the trees, the wet ground shining beneath the lights fixed along the edges. No signs of normal life. Just concrete walls rising through the trees as we moved farther inland.

Then I saw the building and this place looked too clean to be in the middle of an ocean. The building was wide and low, built from pale concrete and glass. Bright fluorescent lights burned behind narrow windows. There were no signs outside. No name. No logo. Nothing that told the world what happened inside.

Leone pushed open the main door, the cold air came first and then the smell came next, it was antiseptic, bleach and something metallic beneath it.

The inside looked like a hospital with white walls, white floors and white doors. Every surface was spotless. There wasn't a single picture on the walls. No flowers. No waiting room chairs. No signs telling people where to go.

Just long corridors beneath harsh fluorescent lights.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 798

A hospital without patients.

A hospital without humanity.

I looked around slowly, "What the fuck is this?"

One of the guards walked ahead and opened a door, "Inside."

It was a small office with a desk, two chairs, a filing cabinet, a computer and a single fluorescent light buzzing above my head.

Leone pointed inside, "Stay here."

I looked at him, "For how long?"

"Until someone comes for you."

"Who?"

His expression hardened, "You do realize we wouldn't even be in this fucking situation if it weren't for you?" he snapped, "And now we've got a bunch of pissed-off Dons breathing down our necks because of it."

He stepped back toward the door, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Don't try anything."

“Go to hell!”

The door closed, a lock clicked and I waited. Footsteps moved down the corridor and I listened until they faded. Then I slowly turned toward the desk and looked for something sharp.

A letter opener sat beside a stack of papers. My heart began beating harder. I moved toward it. The restraints were still tight behind my back. I reached blindly across the desk, my fingers searching until they found the metal handle.

I gripped it.

For several seconds, I simply stood there, then I turned my wrists and brought the edge against the restraint. I worked the blade back and forth, the material resisted. I stopped whenever footsteps passed outside, then continued.

My wrists burned, my shoulders ached but I kept going and then finally, it snapped. My hands separated, and I nearly gasped. I caught the broken restraint before it hit the floor. I rubbed my wrists, staring at the red marks around them.

I looked at the letter opener, then I slipped it into my pocket. I didn’t know what was waiting outside that room but I knew I wasn’t going to wait for Vance to come find me.

I opened the door a fraction, the hallway was empty. I stepped outside, closed the door behind me without making a sound. 1

The corridor stretched in both directions, I chose the left, every few steps, another door appeared, some had small windows, some didn’t.

I passed one and stopped, there was a sound coming from inside. A low mechanical hum, I looked through the glass and saw a chair in the center of the room.

Exactly like the one I used to sit in when I was little, straps were fixed across it, around the chair were machines, wires, screens, metal trays.

I backed away.

One by one, I checked all the rooms, there were more strange equipment, a bed surrounded by restraints, table beneath a bright surgical lamp.

My stomach twisted but I kept walking. The deeper I went, the quieter the building became, then I found a stairwell.

A red emergency light glowed above the door.

I looked behind me, and found nothing, so I opened it and saw stairs disappeared downward.

I started walking, one small step at a time. The smell of disinfectant grew weaker and something else replaced it A stale, heavy smell that made my stomach turn.

I reached the bottom, the door opened into another corridor, but this one wasn't white. The walls were gray, the lights were dimmer.

And there were... cages?

I stopped breathing.

Glass cages?

Thick glass panels lined both sides of the corridor, behind them were beds, small beds.

My feet stopped moving, "No."

The word barely left my mouth. I stepped closer. A child was lying inside the first cage. He looked so small beneath the blanket. His eyes were closed, there were medical marks across his skin.

I moved to the next. One little girl sat curled against the wall, staring at nothing. Another child had bandages covering part of his face.

I covered my mouth as my eyes filled, "No..."

In the next glass cage, a small boy sat curled in a corner, his face covered in thick white bandages, and dark, hollow circles soaking through where his eyes used to be.

My lips parted, but no sound came out. Fear crawled through me as I stared at what was in front of me.

I couldn't move.

I couldn't think.

I couldn't even tell if what I was seeing was real or if my mind had turned it into another fucking nightmare.

In the cage beside him, another young girl lay on her side, a long, angry red surgical scar stretching all the way across her small abdomen, marking where an organ had been surgically cut out of her body.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 799

Others sat staring blankly at the floor, their small bodies bruised, thin, and drained of all life. They were being harvested. Kept alive in glass boxes like spare parts for my father's sick, profitable machine.

A broken, breathless sob tore from my chest. My hands slapped against the cold glass of the nearest cage, my tears blurring the sight of a little boy looking up at me with pale, empty eyes.

He looked terrified.

I felt something inside my chest collapse, "I'm sorry."

My voice broke but the boy didn't move. I wiped my cheek with the back of my hand.

"I'll get you out."

I didn't know how.

I didn't know how many guards were upstairs.

I didn't know where Vance was.

I didn't know how many people were trapped down here but I couldn't walk away, not after seeing them.

I moved farther down the corridor and saw more glass, more children, more evidence of what my father had built.

I couldn't take pictures of it, I couldn't do anything and I hated myself for it.

I pressed my palm against my mouth to hold back a sob. They weren't numbers, they were children.

Someone's children.

Someone's little brother.

Someone's little sister.

Someone's entire world.

And my father had put them behind glass. I looked at the scars on the next child's body and tears spilled freely down my face.

For years, I'd thought my own suffering was the worst thing my father had done.

I had been wrong.

Mine had only been one story, there were dozens behind these walls, thousands. I stepped away from the glass, shaking.

I wiped my tears, but more came before I could stop them. My fingers closed around the letter opener inside my pocket. The metal was cold against my palm because everything around me felt like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

I looked through the glass again, the little boy was still watching me. I pressed my lips together, trying not to cry again, "I'm getting you out," my voice shook, "I swear."

I didn't know how. I didn't have a gun. I didn't have my phone. I didn't have Raphael. I didn't even know where the fucking exit was but I couldn't leave them here. 2

My father's voice echoed in my head.

It's only business, we need the money. Vance keeps us alive. I wanted to scream, they weren't money, they weren't business, they were children.

I looked down the corridor again. The steel door at the end waited beneath the red light. Maybe there were more rooms behind it. Maybe there were more children. Maybe there was a way out.

I moved toward it.

My shoes made almost no sound against the floor. My heart hammered against my ribs. I reached the door and wrapped my fingers around the handle.

I looked over my shoulder one last time, the children were still behind the glass. I pulled and the door opened.

A narrow corridor stretched beyond it, I stepped through, then I heard a voice behind me.

"Is that little Gianna I remember?"

My entire body froze, every muscle locked. My fingers tightened around the letter opener. 1

Slowly, I turned around.

He stood at the end of the corridor. Older than I remembered. His hair had more gray in it, his face had changed but that smile hadn't.

That fucking smile.

The one I'd seen before every procedure, before every machine, before every room where I had begged him to stop.

Dr. Vance.

He stood there with his hands resting loosely at his sides, looking at me as if he'd found something he'd misplaced years ago.

His eyes moved over my face, then down to the letter opener hidden in my fist. His smile widened.

"Well," he murmured, "Look how much you've grown."

My grip tightened around the metal.

And for the first time in years, Dr. Vance stood in front of me and I wasn't strapped to a chair. I wasn't trapped beneath his machines. I wasn't the one being restrained.

This time, he was the one wearing the metal collar.

Enjoy!

And the next chapter is in Raphael's POV...

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 800

"I don't need long."

That was the difference. I didn't need to own their system. I only needed to understand it. I pulled up the satellite image. The island appeared as a dark shape against darker water.

There was one proper dock, one main road, and one building. A secondary structure farther inland. No visible lights around the perimeter, no patrol vehicles, no boats moving nearby.

I studied it for another minute, "Put us down here."

Ciro looked at the coordinates, “That’s not the island.”

“I know.”

“It’s open water.”

“I know.”

He looked at me through the mirror, “You want to land there?”

“Not land,” I pointed toward a darker stretch of coastline several miles from the island,.”We go low and stay off their approach.”

Ciro stared at the map, then he understood. We didn’t need to fly directly over the property. We didn’t need to announce ourselves. We didn’t even need to land near the dock.

The helicopter could get close enough to the island without becoming part of the island’s normal pattern.

The rest could be handled on foot. I opened the equipment case. Everything was still there. I checked each one without hurry. I secured the equipment and looked at the tracker.

The green dot had stopped, “She’s there.”

Ciro nodded.

I looked at the island again. For the first time since leaving Chicago, something inside me became completely still, it was not calm. Calm suggested peace.

This was different.

It was the absence of uncertainty.

I knew where she was.

That was all I needed.

“Kill the cabin lights.”

The helicopter went dark, the city disappeared behind us. Below, the ocean became one endless sheet of black.

Ciro reduced our altitude.

The aircraft moved toward the coast without the usual glow that announced its presence from miles away.

I watched the instruments, then the map, then the island, the property remained dark. I brought up the security feed one last time.

Ten guards.

My mouth curved slightly, “Giovanni, you really should have hired more men.”

The island grew larger ahead. I closed the laptop. The screens went black. Everything I needed was already in my head.

Ciro looked back, “How close?”

“Close enough.”

He lowered us farther. The helicopter moved through the darkness, staying away from the island’s direct approach.

There was no spotlight, but just the low vibration beneath my feet and the black ocean beneath us. The island remained unaware and that mattered because once they knew I was coming, their choices would change. /

I wanted them making the wrong choices.

I looked down at the tracker, the green dot sat inside the main building. My fingers tightened once around the edge of the seat, then relaxed.

Emotion was useful only when it told me something.

Right now, it told me one thing.

She was close.

I opened my eyes fully, “Take us in.”

Ciro adjusted the controls, the helicopter slipped toward the island. I watched the shoreline through the night- vision display.

Black became gray. Trees became pale shapes. The water looked almost white beneath the moon. Every movement stood out against the stillness.

I studied the island for several seconds, “Set us down on the west side.”

Ciro glanced at the coordinates, “There?”

“Yes.”

“There’s no landing area.”

“There’s enough ground.”

He gave me a look.

I ignored it.

The helicopter descended behind a line of trees, far enough from the main building that the sound would be swallowed by the wind and the surf.

The skids touched down. I didn’t move immediately. I listened but there was only the faint rush of water against the rocks.

I opened the equipment case and took out the night-vision goggles. I secured them, checked my communication channel, then looked at the tracker again.

Gianna’s signal remained inside the main building. I closed my hand around the rifle.

“Stay here,” I told Ciro.

He frowned, “You’re going alone?”

“I’m going ahead.”

“Boss-”

“If something changes, you move only when I tell you.”

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. I stepped out, the cold air hit my face. The helicopter disappeared behind the trees as I moved away from it.

I kept low, using the terrain rather than fighting it. The island was quiet enough that every careless movement would stand out.

I watched the building, then the guards, two men were moving along the outer path, they weren’t looking toward