My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 801

“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

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Chapter 802

That told me something, they were comfortable. Comfortable men became careless men. So, I waited. One guard stopped near the corner of the building and checked his phone.

The other kept walking. I remained still for the seconds. The first man moved again. I waited until the two separated by enough distance that they couldn’t help each other.

Then I moved, he first guard never saw me coming.

I closed the distance before he could turn. My arm locked around him, cutting off the sound before it could leave his throat. He fought hard for a few seconds, boots scraping against the wet ground, but I kept him pinned.

I drove the blade once in the artery. His body went rigid. I held him there until the fight left him completely, then lowered him carefully into the grass. I wiped the blade against his jacket and looked toward the second guard.

He was still walking.

He had no idea his partner was already dead. He stopped suddenly. His body went stiff. He felt that something was wrong. His head turned slightly toward the trees where I stood.

I stepped out from the dark, moving fast. His eyes went wide, and his hand reached down to pull the gun from his belt.

He never got the chance.

I closed the distance in a split second, grabbing his face with my bare hand before he could even open his mouth to make a sound. I slammed him backward against the trunk of a thick tree. My other hand pulled the long tactical knife from my chest.

Before he could push me away, I drove the long steel blade straight up through the bottom of his chin, pushing it up into his throat until the hilt hit his skin.

His eyes bulged in total shock. His hands clawed weakly at my arms, but he couldn't breathe, and he couldn't scream. Blood spilled out over my fingers, hot and wet in the cold night air.

I twisted the blade sharp and hard, severing everything inside his neck, then ripped it free in one fast pull.

He collapsed against me, his knees giving out instantly. I held his body tight against my chest, feeling his last fast twitches fade away, until he went completely limp.

I lowered his lifeless body quietly to the muddy ground. I straightened and looked toward the compound.

Two fewer problems.

Eight left.

I checked the guard's radio and disabled it before moving on. My eyes returned to the building. There were three possible entrances.

The main entrance was useless.

The service entrance had a camera directly above it.

The third was an access door near the side of the building. There was an older lock, less traffic and no visible camera covering the entire approach.

That was my door.

I moved toward it, the tracker showed Gianna was somewhere below the main structure.

Basement level.

I studied the building again. The service corridors connected directly to the lower floor. If the plans were accurate, I could reach the basement without crossing the main hall.

That was the route.

I reached the door and paused. My hand rested against the frame and I listened. I checked the security feed. The camera facing the corridor showed an empty hallway.

I opened the door, no alarm went off, and I slipped inside. The door closed behind me and the darkness swallowed me. I removed the night-vision goggles for a moment and let my eyes adjust to the faint emergency lighting.

The hallway smelled like disinfectant. Hospitals had that smell. So did places where people wanted blood to disappear.

I looked down the corridor and started walking. My boots barely made a sound against the floor.

The tracker pulsed on my screen. Gianna was still below me..I stopped at the stairwell. My hand tightened around the weapon, then I looked down..A faint light glowed beneath the door at the bottom.

I stepped back into the darkness and waited. Two men came through the lower doorway. They were talking quietly, neither noticed me. They passed.

I waited until their footsteps disappeared, then I descended. Every part of the building seemed designed to hide what happened inside it..That made me angrier than the guards ever could.

But anger could wait.

Gianna couldn’t.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and looked at the tracker, the signal was stronger now, very close.

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Chapter 803

I followed it down the corridor. The farther I went, the colder the building became. The lights above me flickered. A metal door stood at the end of the hall, beyond it was the basement.

I took another step and the lights went out. I stopped. For half a second, the whole building became completely black.

Then, red lights flashed along the ceiling. A siren tore through the silence.

I looked up, “Fuck.”

A woman’s mechanical voice came through the speakers, “Security breach detected.”

I turned toward the corridor.

“Unauthorized person detected in restricted area.”

The alarm grew louder.

“All security personnel report to the lower level.”

My jaw tightened.

They had found me. Someone had probably found the bodies I left outside. I moved immediately. I stepped back into the shadow beside the stairwell as heavy footsteps thundered somewhere beyond the metal door. 1

The metal door at the end of the corridor slammed open. Four men came through, armed. They stopped when they saw the empty corridor.

One of them lifted his weapon, “Check the stairs.”

Another started toward me. I waited until the red light swept away from my position, then I moved. I crossed the small gap and disappeared behind a concrete support before the nearest guard could see me.

A burst of gunfire tore through the corridor. Concrete exploded beside my shoulder. I dropped lower.

“He’s here!”

The walls shook. I pulled my handgun free and looked toward the four men.

Four.

The corridor was too narrow.

The alarm was too loud.

The element of surprise was gone.

Fine.

I had planned for the possibility of being discovered. I hadn’t come this far carrying half an arsenal because I expected everything to go smoothly.

I reached for the communication unit, “Ciro.”

His voice came through immediately, “I’m here.”

“Status?”

“Still outside.”

“Good.”

I looked toward the corridor, “Keep the helicopter ready.”

“What’s happening?”

“Their security finally woke up.”

Another burst of gunfire cracked through the hall. I ducked behind the concrete support.

“Boss-”

“I’ve got it.”

I ended the call, and the four guards spread through the corridor. They were trying to surround me.

Bad idea.

I looked at the building plans in my head, the basement was behind them. Gianna’s signal was below.

And I wasn’t going anywhere without her.

I reached into my equipment bag and pulled out a flash grenade I had modified for tight spaces. I set it down on the hard floor, and the loud metal clatter echoed down the hall.

“He’s there!” a guard barked.

They rushed down the corridor toward me, guns raised. I stepped back into the dark corner and hit the remote switch. A blinding burst of white light and a boom exploded through the narrow space.

The four guards stumbled, clutching their ears and eyes, and I moved in fast.

I reached the first guard before he could regain his sight. I grabbed the sides of his heavy helmet and twisted his head hard to the side. A sharp crack echoed through the hall as his neck snapped, and he dropped dead to the floor.

The second man tried to blink through the white haze, but I drove my boot straight into the side of his knee, shattering the joint. He screamed and fell to his knees, I drew my

silenced pistol and pressed the barrel directly under his chin, pulling the trigger once. The quiet pop put him down instantly.

The third guard frantically raised his rifle, but I slapped his barrel aside. The gun went off, blowing a hole in the ceiling and showering us with dry white dust. I grabbed his throat with one hand, shoving him violently backward into the concrete wall, and used my other hand to jam my long blade straight through his eye socket. He went limp immediately, pinned to the wall for a second before I yanked the blade free and let him hit the floor.

The fourth guard finally recovered from the flash grenade, yelling as he charged. He tackled me hard, crashing us both into the wall. His rifle dropped to the tiles, and he swung a wild fist at my face.

I caught his wrist in mid-air, crushing the bones in his hand until he yelled in pain.

Just for a second, we stared at each other, his eyes wild with fear, mine completely empty.

I smashed my forehead straight into his nose, shattering his face. As he stumbled back, spitting blood, I grabbed his vest, spun him around, and slammed his head back-first into the sharp corner of the concrete wall until his skull cracked open. He slumped into the pool of blood spreading across the white floor.

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Chapter 804

I wiped my bloody boots on his uniform, racked the slide of my weapon, and stepped over their bodies without slowing down.

But the alarm remained screaming behind me.

“Security breach.”

“Security breach.”

IST

Gianna

Everything around me vanished.

My mind went unnaturally quiet, so quiet it scared me. I blinked once, slowly, and even that simple movement felt foreign, like my body was moving without me telling it to. My limbs felt heavy. Time seemed to drag.

The corridor faded first.

Then the glass cages disappeared.

For a moment, there was nothing left but him.

Only his face.

Older.

Harder.

But still his.

And suddenly I was a teenager again, strapped to a chair. My wrists too small for the restraints, but he had tightened them anyway.

“Hold still, Gianna!”

I remembered the slap, the sharp crack of his palm against my cheek. My head snapping sideways, the sting spreading across my face.

Worthless.

Another memory flashed before my eyes.

A metal tray with long needles lined up in perfect rows. His gloves, the cold touch of alcohol against my skin, then the needles.

Into my neck.

Into my back.

Under my feet.

Until my skin burned and my tears soaked the paper beneath me.

I remembered the machines, the wires pressed against my temples. The first electric shock. My whole body jerking against the straps while he watched from behind the glass.

He had written something down. That was what I remembered most, not the pain but his pen. Moving across a sheet of paper while I screamed.

Another memory hit.

Water, cold water closing over my face. My lungs burning. My hands pulling uselessly against the restraints. I remembered trying not to breathe because I knew he wanted me to panic.

I remembered coming up coughing. I remembered him telling someone to start again.

And then Gio Jr.

His face flashed through my mind. My little brother, his face, his legs, his wheelchair.

We had believed there was a reason, that was the part that hurt the most. We had believed all of it meant something. That if we endured enough pain, if we survived enough sessions, if we became better subjects, eventually there would be an answer.

A cure.

A reason.

Something.

Anything.

My eyes burned, but now I knew. There had been nothing, no miracle, no cure, no great discovery waiting at the end of all those years.

Just a man with a God complex and countless children he could hurt because nobody stopped him instead my father had encouraged him.

My breathing became uneven.

Vance watched me, and then the smallest smile touched his mouth. There was no guilt in it but there was recognition.

He remembered what my fear looked like.

He knew the signs, the way my breathing changed, the way my body went still, the way my eyes searched for somewhere to escape. He knew exactly what was happening inside me.

And he enjoyed it.

Something dark settled behind his eyes as he watched the fear return to me. My pain pleased him. The damage he had left behind pleased him even more.

It was as if every scar he had carved into my body and every wound he had left inside my mind was proof that he had once owned me.

And seeing me afraid again made him feel powerful.

My hands began to shake, “You knew.”

His smile faded slightly.

“You knew.”

He said nothing.

My voice cracked, “You knew it wasn’t working.”

My chest tightened until every breath hurt. I stared at him through the tears burning my eyes.

“You fucking knew.”

Vance slowly lifted his chin, almost as if the accusation pleased him. Something in his expression made my stomach turn.

“You knew!” I screamed.

My voice tore through the corridor and bounced off the walls. Behind the glass, the children shifted at the sound Some flinched. One little face turned toward us, frightened and weak.

Vance took one step backward and that was all it took. I ran. I didn’t think. I didn’t plan. I just ran at him. He barely had time to react before I slammed into him.

We crashed against the wall. His shoulder struck the concrete with a hard thud. I swung and he caught my wrist.

I drove my free hand toward his face. He turned away and my fist struck his shoulder instead. He shoved me back and I stumbled, then I went at him again.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 805

Years of fear came out in one breath.

Every scream, every tear, every night I had woken up remembering his machines, every time I'd wondered what I had done to deserve it.

I swung again, drove my knee forward. He stumbled backward. The metal collar around his neck caught the light.

For the first time, I noticed the chain attached to it. It was secured to a restraint point in the wall. He couldn't move far.

My eyes locked onto it, he saw me looking.

His expression changed, "Gianna."

"You told me I was worthless," my eyes filled again, "You hurt me because you said you were trying to fix me and you knew. You knew there was nothing to fix," my stomach turned, "You fucking knew!"

I lunged again. This time he caught both my arms. We struggled. His grip was stronger than I expected, and he twisted my wrist hard enough to make the letter opener slip in my hand.

It hit the floor, and I kicked at his shin. He cursed and loosened his grip. I ripped one arm free and shoved him backward. His head struck the wall, and I grabbed the letter opener again.

He went still for half a second, then he looked at me and I saw the old Vance.

The man from my childhood.

The man who had watched me suffer without blinking.

His face hardened, "You always were the most difficult, you fucking spoiled cunt."

My blood ran cold and before I knew it, I grabbed the front of his shirt and shoved him against the wall, Vance's hand came up at the same time, he struck me.

My head snapped sideways, the old pain returned instantly but something was different this time.

I didn't freeze.

I turned my face back toward him slowly. I stared at him, he stared back and then I smiled. There was nothing funny about any of this. Maybe that was why I smiled.

The old me would've been crying.

The old me would've been begging.

The old me would've been looking for the nearest door, praying someone would come through it.

She wasn't here anymore.

Whatever had been left of that little girl had been buried under years of pain, fear, rage, grief and things I didn't even know how to name. My heart was pounding, but I didn't feel afraid. I felt something else, something darker, something that had been waiting inside me for years.

"I went through every fucking thing you did to me. Every session. Every needle. Every time you hurt me and called it treatment."

A broken laugh slipped through my tears.

"And for what?" I shook my head slowly, "Nothing. You tortured me for nothing. You hurt those children for nothing. You watched us suffer for years, knowing exactly what you were doing."

My laugh carne again, louder this time, almost unsteady.

"But maybe I was wrong."

Vance's eyes narrowed.

"Maybe it wasn't for nothing after all. It didn't cure me but it did do something else."

I took a slow breath, my chest rising and falling too fast as I pulled him harder against the wall.

"Whatever was wrong with me before you put me in that chair..." I looked straight into his eyes. "You fed it. You pushed it. You buried it under years of pain until there was almost nothing left except rage. So congratulations, Doctor."

I tilted my head, tears still slipping down my face.

"You didn't fix me. You helped make me fucking crazy. And you shouldn't have done that. Because now you finally get to meet the part of me you helped create."

My hand moved before he could react. I drove the letter opener into his abdomen.

Vance's breath caught.

His eyes widened.

For the first time since I’d known him, I saw something I had spent years wanting to see.

Fear.

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Author

Whew..... Do you guys think this is going to backfire on Raph and Ginny? Because things might get a little messy.

”

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Chapter 806

Gianna

For the first time since I’d known him, I saw something I had spent years wanting to see.

Fear.

It wasn’t anything like the fake concern he used to wear when he called himself my doctor. And definitely not like the calm little smile he gave me before another session.

It was real, pure fear for his life

And God, it felt fucking good.

I yanked the letter opener free. Vance gasped. I drove it into him again before he could even get his balance.

His body jerked.

Then his hand caught my shoulder and he shoved me with everything he had. I went down hard, my palms hit the floor. Pain shot through my wrists.

Vance staggered backward, he stared down at himself. The white of his coat was changing. Red spread across it, soaking through the clean fabric I’d seen him wear a thousand times.

He looked at the letter opener, then at me. His face went blank. For once, he looked like he had no fucking idea what to do.

I started laughing, “You should see your face.”

His eyes snapped toward mine. Something ugly twisted across his expression. He didn’t pull the weapon out. He didn’t call for help.

He just came for me, “You fucking-”

He charged. I scrambled backward, my hands slipping against the cold floor. I didn’t care, I wasn’t thinking, I wasn’t planning, I just wanted him dead. I reached for anything I could grab, but Vance was already on top of me– then his body jerked violently.

His feet left the floor. A sharp electrical crack ripped through the hallway. Vance’s entire body arched in the air. His mouth opened, but whatever sound came out was swallowed by the violent buzz of electricity.

Then something yanked him backward hard. His body slammed into the wall with a thud. He dropped to the floor like someone had cut his strings.

I froze, my chest heaved. I stared at him, then at the wall and then down the corridor, “What the fuck?”

Footsteps came closer and Vance groaned on the floor. A shadow moved behind him. Dad stepped into view first and Leone was beside him. Neither looked surprised.

Leone walked straight past my father and stopped over Vance. He crouched. His hand closed around the back of Vance’s hair and yanked his head up.

Vance groaned.

Leone looked at the blood spreading across his coat, then he looked at me.

His eyebrow lifted, “Who said you could touch her, you piece of shit?”

Vance tried to speak.

Leone tightened his grip, “What? Didn’t hear you.”

Vance coughed.

Leone shoved his head back against the wall with a bang, “That’s what I thought.”

I was still sitting on the floor. My fingers were shaking. Dad walked toward me. His eyes dropped to Vance, then to the letter opener buried in him, then back to me.

He sighed. Actually fucking sighed like I’d broken an expensive vase, “Are you stupid?”

I stared at him.

He crouched beside Vance and grabbed the handle of the letter opener.

“Gianna, I told you we need him.”

?

He pulled it free and Vance sucked in a sharp breath. Blood immediately followed the blade. My father stood, holding the letter opener between two fingers.

I looked at him, then at Vance, then at the blood on the floor. Something inside me wanted to laugh again.

Instead, I whispered, “He deserved worse.”

My father looked at me for a long moment, “I know,” he stated, that answer surprised me. His eyes moved to Vance as he continued, “But dead isn’t useful.”

Leone glanced at him, “Neither is bleeding out on the floor.”

Dad’s jaw tightened, “Then keep him alive.”

Vance shifted beneath him. Leone’s grip tightened in his hair, forcing Vance’s head back, “You put your hands on her again, and I swear to God, I’ll forget how fucking useful you are.”

He released his hair with a sharp shove.

“Now get the fuck out of my sight and get yourself patched up before I decide you’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

I watched Dr. Vance walk away from Leone and Dad, his usual arrogance gone. His head was lowered, his steps quick as he held onto his bleeding side.

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Chapter 807

He was afraid of Dad, but he was more afraid of Leone. My eyes dropped to the metal collar locked around his neck. It was a shock collar.

For the first time, the man who had once made me tremble was the one walking away with fear in his eyes.

Dad turned back toward me. His expression was tired. Mine probably looked completely fucking unhinged.I lowered my eyes to my hands. Blood stained my fingers, some of it still fresh against my skin. Then I looked through the glass again.

The children were still there.

My gaze drifted toward the corridor where the man who had once called himself my doctor was limping away.

A strange calm settled over me but it was mixed with a certain fear and I wasn't sure which part of that scared me more.

The fact that I'd finally hurt him or how badly I wanted to do it again.

Leone's eyes found mine, "What the hell happened to stay in the office?"

I pushed myself off the floor. My knees shook, but I didn't care.

"I told you to stay there," he continued, voice tight with anger, "You couldn't listen for once?"

I stared at him, then my eyes moved past him, back to the glass, back to the children. I just couldn't stop looking at them. The little boy with the bandages around his face was still there.

My throat closed.

I pointed toward the cages, "What are they?"

Neither of them answered. They exchanged a brief look before turning their eyes back to me.

I pointed again, harder, "Who are those children?"

Dad stepped closer, "Gianna-"

"Don't you fucking Gianna me," I turned toward him, "You brought me here. You wanted me to see what this place is. So tell me what the fuck I'm looking at."

Dad's face tightened, "It's complicated."

"Complicated?"

Leone rolled his eyes, looking toward the ceiling as if my question was exhausting him, "You know exactly what they are. You read the files yourself. You even sent them to our enemies, remember?"

I looked back at the children.

A little girl had pressed herself into the corner of her cage. She couldn't have been more than seven.

I memorized her face, the shape of her nose, the tiny scar near her eyebrow and the beautiful dark curls stuck to her forehead.

I looked at the next child, then the next. I forced myself to remember every face, every single one. They needed to be seen, they needed to be heard.

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"Look at them," I turned back to my father, "Actually look at them. How... how can you even-"

Dad's eyes flicked toward the cages, his jaw tightened, "They're part of the operation."

My stomach turned, "The operation," I repeated the words slowly, "That's what we're calling children now?"

Dad sighed, "Gianna, this is our business."

"Our? You cut them open. You take pieces of them. You keep them locked behind glass."

My finger shook as I pointed at the little boy.

"And that little boy doesn't even have eyes," I choked out, pointing toward the cages. "And there are so many more like him. God, there are too many of them. Look at them. They're hurting. They're fucking hurting!"

Dad's expression hardened, "Lower your voice."

I stepped toward him, "You lower yours!"

He went still.

For a second, the anger disappeared from his face, replaced by shock.

It had been happening more and more since I came back. Every time I pushed back, every time I refused to obey, every time I looked him in the eye instead of looking down, that same disbelief flashed across his face like he was slowly realizing the daughter standing in front of him wasn't the girl he'd spent years controlling.

As if he couldn't understand how she had become someone he no longer recognized.

Leone folded his arms and let out a tired sigh, and somehow that small sound made me look at him.

I stared at him for a long moment. I couldn't believe this was the same boy I had once loved with everything in me. The same boy I had trusted. The same boy I had once thought would never hurt me.

What the hell had I ever seen in him?

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Chapter 808

Maybe I had needed something soft to hold on to. Back then, he had been the one gentle thing in my life, and I had clung to that with both hands because I needed to believe something good still existed but maybe I had only seen what I wanted to see.

Because there was nothing gentle about him. He was just like Dad, maybe worse and realizing that hurt more than I wanted it to.

"How do you sleep at night, Leone?"

He barely shrugged, "Pretty well."

Something hot tore through the ache in my chest, "You fucking coward."

One eyebrow lifted. He looked almost bored. I let out a bitter laugh and looked between him and Dad.

"Both of you," I shook my head, wiping angrily at the tears on my face, "You're so powerful, right? Big men. Big families. Guns. Money. Territory. And this is what you do with all of it?"

I pointed at the cages.

"You pick children who can't fight back."

Dad reached for my arm and 1 jerked away. My voice shook so badly that the words almost broke apart.

"Are you really this fucking weak?" My voice cracked as I pointed toward the cages. "You need sick children because you can't make money without cutting them apart?"

Dad's face went cold, "Enough."

“No,” I stepped closer, tears burning my eyes, “How could you do this, Dad? How could you? Wasn’t this supposed to be the one line you never crossed? Doesn’t your precious code say children are off-limits? Then why?” my chest heaved, “Why are you doing this?”

Dad stared at me for a long moment before slowly exhaling, “Because the world isn’t fair.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit.”

“It’s reality.”

“No. It’s cowardice.”

Leone’s expression barely changed.

I turned toward him, “And you?”

He lifted a brow. “What about me?”

I stared at him, almost unable to believe he had to ask, “You just stand there. Just like you stood there and watched Vance do all of that to me when you were supposed to be my husband. You were supposed to protect me. And now you’re standing here while he does worst to those children too.”

His face didn’t change but he looked away.

“You promised me you were going to kill Vance,” I said, my voice breaking, “You looked me in the eyes and promised me. What happened to that promise, Leone?”

“That promise ended the day you left me,” he snapped back.

I went still.

“You walked away,” he continued, “You left the engagement ring behind. You left me without a word, and then you disappeared for years. After that, Gianna, whatever promise I made to you stopped meaning anything.”

“Leone…”

my voice came out smaller this time, “They’re children. Leone, please, don’t be like my dad.”

His jaw tightened.

“Please, just think about what you’re doing,” My voice shook as I pointed toward the glass, “Look at them.”

He glanced over his shoulder, the little boy was still sitting there, the girl beside him hadn't moved.

"They're scared," I whispered, "They're hurt. They're alone," I swallowed hard, "This isn't you. This isn't the guy I loved. It can't be," A bitter smile pulled at my mouth, even as tears slipped down my cheeks, "You used to be better than this. You used to care."

Leone's expression hardened, "That changed when you left."

"Leone." I stepped closer, "You don't have to do this. Whatever Dad told you, whatever he promised you, whatever money or power he gave you, none of it is worth this."

He looked away again, he couldn't look into my eyes.

I caught that tiny movement, "You know I'm right. Please. Just stop for one second and think. They're children, Leone. They don't know what your family is. They don't know what mine is. They don't know about territory or money or the Council. They just want to go home. Please don't become him."

His eyes hardened, "It's already too late for that."

My heart sank, "No," I whispered. "It isn't. You can still choose not to be a monster to the innocent."

Then he said something that made every word I'd just spoken feel completely pointless, "We usually take the expendable ones anyway."

My stomach dropped, "The what?"

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 809

"The ones nobody is going to look for," his voice was flat, "Kids from poor families. Runaways. Orphans. Illegal immigrants. Some don't have papers. Some don't even have families," he glanced toward the cages, "Most of them don't make it onto a missing-person list because no one gives a shit about them."

I stared at him.

He continued as if he were explaining inventory, "They don't matter."

For a second, I couldn't breathe, then something inside me broke.

"They don't-" my voice disappeared.

I looked at the little girl again. Her tiny fingers were wrapped around the edge of her blanket.

She mattered.

The boy behind her mattered.

Every single one of them mattered.

I turned back to Leone, “You don’t get to say that. They’re children.”

“Gianna-”

“No!” I screamed so loudly my throat hurt, “They’re fucking children! You found the people nobody would notice and decided that made them disposable?”

Leone’s expression stayed cold. “Yes, principessa. Get your head out of your ass. That’s how the world works. And I’m beginning to think that your father is wrong about you, Gianna. You’re not built for this.”

“You’re right.” I shook my head, a bitter laugh catching in my throat, “I’m not built for this because I refuse to become you. Because you’re too fucking weak and stupid to find another way to make money, so you choose people who can’t fight back.”

Leone’s jaw tightened. Dad’s eyes narrowed into slits.

I pointed toward the cages, “It’s not the children fault that you’re both so fucking incapable of doing anything on your own that you need helpless children to keep your whole rotten empire standing.”

Leone took a step toward me to intimidate me but I lifted my chin, refusing to give him an inch.

My voice cracked, but I forced the words out, “Do you know what that makes you?” I threw the next words at them like stones, “Worthless. Idiots. Damaged. Good for nothing.”

The same words they had thrown at me since I was a little girl.

Dad stepped between us. “Gianna!”

I barely looked at him.

“You hide behind people who can’t even fight back,” I said, my eyes locked on Leone. “That’s beyond pathetic. Honestly, I’m starting to think the word pathetic isn’t even strong enough for what you two are.”

Leone smiled, but there was nothing warm in it, “You really think you’re better than us?”

“I know I am.”

He let out a low, humorless scoff, “Running off to your bitch of a mother really did fill your head with a lot of fucking nonsense, didn’t it?”

He stepped closer, his eyes dragging over me with open contempt.

“You came back thinking you’re some fucking queen, standing there and barking orders like anybody here gives a damn what you think. I used to know exactly how to shut that mouth of yours. You were easier to handle when your stayed where I put you instead of pretending you had a spine.”

His smile faded.

“Don’t mistake the fact that I haven’t put you in your place yet for weakness, Gianna. And if you keep pushing me, you’re going to find out exactly how little patience I have left.”

That did it.

I swung.

My fist caught his jaw, and pain exploded through my knuckles.

Leone’s head snapped sideways.

“Gianna!” Dad grabbed me from behind before I could hit him again.

I fought him immediately, “Let me go!”

His arms locked around my waist, “Stop!”

“Get off me!”

I kicked backward. Leone wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked at the blood on his fingers. His eyes slowly lifted to mine.

I screamed at him, “You fucking deserve hell! And I swear to God, Leone, I’m going to drag you straight there with me, you piece of shit!”

Dad tightened his hold, “Gianna, you’re not thinking!”

I fought until my shoulders burned, “Let me go!”

Dad turned me around, forcing me to face him, “Look at me.”

I refused.

“Gianna!”

“Fuck you!”

“Look at me!”

I finally did, his face had changed, “You need to understand what you’ve done.”

I laughed, “What I’ve done?”

“You walked out of that room. You attacked Vance. You attacked Leone. You’re putting yourself in danger.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 810

“I don’t care.”

I looked past his shoulder again, at the cages, at the children. My tears started falling harder.

Dad noticed, “We’re your family. We’re on the same side.”

I stared at him.

He continued carefully.

“This operation. This facility. Everything inside it. One day, it will be yours.”

My stomach twisted, “No.”

“You need to stop thinking of it as something separate from you.”

“Never.”

“Gianna-”

“Never.”

He held my arms tighter when I tried to pull away, “Everything here is part of the empire you’re supposed to inherit.”

I stared at him, then I smiled although my chin trembled, “Then you made one hell of a mistake.”

He frowned.

I looked at every child again, “I’ll shut it down, every room, every machine, every account, every shipment, every name. I will make sure the Philadelphia Syndicate ends with me.”

Dad shook his head, “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying,” I looked straight into his eyes, “I’m getting them out. And when I do,” I glanced toward Leone, “…I’m going to make both of you stand here and watch this place come down.”

Leone gave a humorless laugh, “You’re going to save everyone?”

“Yes.”

“From here?”

“Yes.”

“By yourself?”

I held his stare, my breathing still rough, my fists clenched at my sides, “No, you forgot something, Leone. I haven’t been alone for a very long time,” a slow, bitter smile touched my lips, “You forgot who my real family is.”

I looked back through the glass. I memorized another face, then another.

Dad’s arms loosened slightly as he realized what I had just said.

I stepped away from him, “You keep calling it business, Dad, but business doesn’t cry. Business doesn’t scream from pain. Business doesn’t have a mother waiting for it to come home,” my eyes met my father’s, “People do.”

Then Leone’s patience snapped, “That’s it. I’ve had enough of your ass.”

He lunged forward and caught me before I could step away. His hands closed around my arms, wrenching them behind my back.

Then, a siren ripped through the corridor. Every light above us flickered. Red emergency lights flashed across the white walls, turning the glass cages crimson.

Leone froze.

Dad’s head snapped toward the ceiling.

A woman’s calm, mechanical voice came through the speakers.

“Security breach detected.”

My heart slammed against my ribs.

The announcement repeated.

“Unauthorized person detected in restricted area.”

Leone slowly released my arms, and now, he wasn’t looking at me. He was listening. Footsteps thundered somewhere above us.

Two guards came running around the corner a moment later, both breathing hard. One nearly slipped on the polished floor before catching himself against the wall.

“Boss.”

Léone turned sharply, “Talk.”

The first guard swallowed, “We found the two of our men dead from the outer path.”

Leone’s face changed.

Dad’s eyes narrowed. “Both of them?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Near the tree line. They were supposed to be watching the eastern side.”

Leone stepped closer, “What happened?”

“We don’t know.”

The second guard shook his head. “No shots. No alarm from the outer gate. Nothing. We only found them after the motion system picked up movement near the rear entrance.”

Leone’s eyes hardened, “The rear entrance?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Less than two minutes ago.”

Leone looked toward the ceiling, then toward the corridor leading deeper into the facility.

“Did anyone see him?”

The guard shook his head, “No.”

Leone’s jaw flexed, “You’re telling me someone killed two armed men, crossed the island, reached the fucking facility, and walked through a restricted entrance without a single person seeing his face?”

The guard opened his mouth and Leone slapped him. The crack echoed through the corridor. The guard stumbled sideways, one hand flying to his cheek.

“How the fuck did he even get here?” Leone snarled, “There is no public road. No civilian boats. No fucking ferry. How did he get onto this island?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

Leone grabbed the front of his shirt and shoved him against the wall.

“What the fuck were you doing while someone was coming onto my island?”

The guard’s face went pale, “We don’t have many men here.”

Leone stared at him, “What?”

“We weren’t expecting an attack. The island usually has only a small security team. A few men at the dock, some inside the facility, that’s it. And that’s on your orders, boss.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 811

Leone released his shirt with a violent shove and went still.

I felt something warm move through my chest.

Leone turned toward the second guard, “Call the mainland. Tell them to send everyone.”

The guard immediately reached for his radio, “Everyone?”

“Every fucking man we have,” his voice cut through the siren, “I want boats in the water now. I want every armed man on this island. Lock down every entrance. Nobody leaves this building. Nobody gets near the docks without clearance.”

The guard nodded quickly.

“And wake the men at the marina. I want them moving before whoever came here gets any farther.”

“Yes, boss.”

The guard turned and hurried away. Leone stood motionless for a second. Then he looked toward Dad, “They’re here.”

Dad’s face had gone hard, “Who?”

Leone’s eyes narrowed, “You know who.”

My heart stopped. I looked at the corridor behind them, at the red lights, at the guards rushing past. At the panic spreading through a building that had been so quiet only minutes ago.

Someone had come.

Someone had crossed the water.

Someone had gotten past the men outside.

Someone had reached the facility.

My fingers curled slowly into my palms. A smile pulled at the corner of my mouth before I could stop it. I lowered my head so they wouldn’t see.

My heart was beating so hard it hurt.

It’s him.

My lips barely moved, “He’s here.”

Raphael.

He had found me.

He was here.

Leone's eyes stayed on the corridor where the guard had disappeared, then they shifted to me. The look on his face made the little spark of hope inside me flicker.

He turned toward Dad, "This started because of her."

Dad didn't answer.

Leone's jaw tightened, "She brought this to our door. She exposed the operation. She dragged the Capones into it. And now someone is here because of her," he took a slow breath and glanced at me, "So she's going to end it."

Dad's eyes narrowed, "Leone."

He reached inside his jacket and my body went rigid. His fingers closed around something hidden beneath the fabric, and when he pulled it out, a small black device rested in his hand.

My stomach dropped, I knew what it was, "No."

Leone started walking toward me.

I stepped back, "Leone, don't."

He kept coming.

I looked at Dad, "Dad."

Dad's face twisted with anger, "Leone, don't touch my daughter."

Leone didn't stop, "I'm not going to hurt her."

He kept walking. I backed up until the glass behind me stopped me. My fingers pressed against the cold surface. The children stared through the glass. I could see their faces in the flashing red light.

He raised the device.

"Leone!" Dad's voice cracked through the corridor, Leone pressed the trigger and pain exploded through me.

Every muscle in my body locked at once, a scream ripped out of my throat.

My back slammed against the glass as my hands curled into fists I couldn't control. My legs gave out beneath me, but the current held my body rigid for another second.

My vision flashed white. I couldn’t breathe. I heard someone shouting my name, but the voice sounded far away.

Dad.

Maybe.

I tried to lift my hand. It wouldn’t move. The children behind the glass blurred into red and white shapes.

I thought of the little boy without eyes.

The girl with the scar.

The faces I’d promised to save.

Raphael.

The thought came weakly. He was here. He was coming. I couldn’t pass out. I couldn’t. My knees hit the floor, the pain stopped.

My body collapsed forward, for a moment, I could only hear the blood rushing inside my ears.

Leone stood above me. The device hung loosely from his hand. I tried to look up at him. My vision wouldn’t focus.

“Now we’re going to do things my way,” he said.

I wanted to spit in his face. I wanted to tell him to go to hell.

Instead, my lips barely moved, “He’ll... find me.”

Leone’s expression tightened, the room tilted, his face changed, then everything went black.

Enjoy!

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 812

Raphael

15 B¢nux

The alarm kept screaming.

I stood in the middle of the corridor, surrounded by four bodies and the red pulse of the emergency lights.

Six guards down.

Four left.

I checked the magazine in my handgun and it was enough. I didn't need to reload yet.

I looked at the corridor. The building had changed. Doors that had been closed were opening. Security lights were coming alive. Somewhere above me, boots hammered across the floors.

Beside the door was a recessed security terminal, built into the concrete wall. It had a black glass display surrounded by a steel frame, with a small fingerprint reader and several status lights beneath it. The display had switched from green to red.

INTRUDER – LOWER LEVEL

I stepped closer and touched the glass. The terminal refreshed, pulling up the facility's current security status.

Three separate security zones appeared.

Whoever designed this place had made one mistake.

They had connected them.

I didn't need to control the entire building. I only needed to make each section believe the other sections were already secure.

My fingers moved across the panel, the alarm continued screaming, then the camera feeds changed.

One by one, the screens showed empty corridors.

I watched the guards move through them.

They were looking for me. My phone vibrated. A notification of Gianna's tracker popped up. I looked down.

My jaw tightened, “Where the fuck are you?”

The signal didn’t move. I looked at the floor plan again. The basement wasn’t one room. It was a maze of medical rooms, storage, cold rooms, a surgical wing, an old service tunnel and one section that wasn’t labeled at all.

That caught my attention. I zoomed in. The unlabeled section sat behind the medical wing.

I moved, passing the first door and opened it. It was empty, so was the second, but as I opened the third, I stopped.

Cold air rolled across my face. I pushed the door open. The room was enormous, where steel shelves covered the walls, freezers stood in long rows.

These were industrial units.

My eyes moved over the labels, they were arranged according to dates, numbers, initials.

+158chus

Then I saw a printed inventory sheet of human tissue, organ codes. Whatever Giovanni had built here wasn’t a rumor. It was an industry.

A fucking factory.

I walked deeper into the room as a gunshot cracked behind me. The bullet struck the metal door.

I turned.

I moved behind the nearest freezer as another round punched through the wall.

“Come out!”

A man’s voice echoed through the corridor.

“Capone!”

“Your little princess isn’t here!”

My eyes narrowed, they were trying to make me angry. That told me they were afraid.

A third shot hit the freezer.

I checked the reflection in the polished metal. There were two men. One at the end of the hall. One near the doorway. They were waiting for me to step out.

I looked at the room, it had three exits, one entrance and ventilation above. Emergency power panel near the rear wall.

I moved deeper into the freezer room.

“Running already?”

I reached the emergency panel and pulled the cover open, the lights died, the alarm died with them.

My night vision came down over my eyes, the room changed, two green shapes stood outside the doorway. 1 moved toward the rear exit.

One guard stepped inside, “Where the fuck did he go?”

His partner entered behind him. I slipped through the second door. They didn’t see me. I closed it behind me. The moment it clicked shut, I heard them rush toward the exit I’d just used.

I waited until both men entered the narrow opening. Two shots broke the silence. Both men dropped before either could turn around or call for help.

I caught the first body by the vest and lowered him before he hit the floor. The second collapsed beside him, his weapon sliding across the tiles.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 813

I stepped through the doorway and looked down at them.

Four guards were left.

Now there were two.

The corridor ahead split into four paths. I checked the tracker. Gianna’s signal pulsed beneath the eastern wing.

I turned right and a door opened ahead. I stopped. A guard walked through. He didn’t see me. I stepped backward into the shadow.

He passed, I waited, then I followed him. He stopped at an intersection and spoke into his radio, “Lower level is clear.”

I almost laughed.

It wasn't.

The facility's security network had told him it was clear because I had told the network to tell him that. I had not disabled the system. That would have been too obvious. I had changed what selected parts of it reported while leaving everything else looking normal.

That was the difference between security and a security system.

People trusted the second one too much.

I walked past the guard while he studied the small security terminal mounted beside the door. The recessed black display showed a green status bar and a list of zones.

By the time he turned around, I was already at the next corridor. I reached a steel access door. A small electronic panel sat beside it, its green indicator blinking steadily. I pressed my fingers against the reader and fed the panel the access credentials I had already pulled from their network.

The light changed, the lock clicked and I stepped inside. A surgical table stood beneath a bright examination lamp. Leather restraints hung from either side. Metal trays were lined up against the wall, each one holding instruments that had been cleaned so many times the steel looked almost new.

I stopped.

My eyes moved to the restraints. I didn't need anyone to explain what they were for. I had seen enough. Photographs covered the wall beside the table.

I stepped closer to see the dates written beneath several photographs, different years, different children, same facility and same system.

The observation window beside me exploded..I dropped behind the surgical table as another round struck the metal frame, "Capone! Come out, you son of a bitch!"

Another bullet punched through the wall. My hand tightened around my weapon. I looked at the tracker. The green marker pulsed closer.

I reached up and pulled the lamp loose from its position..The beam swung across the room. The guard fired at the movement. I moved in the opposite direction. His shots struck the table. I crossed the room before he could correct his aim and went through the second door.

The guard rushed inside after me, and he found an empty room, took one step. I came out behind him and shot at

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the back of his head. His weapon hit the floor. I caught him before his body could crash against the wall and lowered him quietly.

I took his radio.

The radio immediately came alive, “East wing!”

“Check the medical rooms!”

“Don’t let him reach the lower section!”

“He’s cutting through the facility!”

I stepped back into the corridor. A camera turned toward me. I looked directly into the lens. The small red indicator blinked. I touched the control unit on my wrist and the feed went black.

The first room was a storage area.

The second was a laboratory.

The third was a recovery room.

A male nurse stood beside a bed, sorting medication into a tray. He looked up. For one second, neither of us moved. His eyes dropped to the weapon in my hand, then he reached for the emergency button. I crossed the room before his fingers touched it.

He swung at me.

I caught his wrist, turned his arm away from the panel, and drove him back against the wall.

“Where is she?”

He stared at me, “Who?”

Wrong answer.

I slammed him against the wall again, “Gianna.”

“I don’t know.”

I searched his badge, medical staff, lower-level clearance and took his access card, “Then you’re not useful.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 814

I shot him twice in both eyes and let him fall to the floor. I stepped over him and kept moving.

The radio crackled, “He’s in the storage wing.”

“Which room?”

“Doesn’t matter. Lock the entire section.”

I looked up and there was the camera. I smiled into it. I pulled the access card from the nurse and held it against the next reader. The door opened and I stepped through.

Gunfire erupted from the other side. Rounds punched into the steel. I moved through a maintenance corridor running parallel to the main hall. The floor plan had shown me this route before I entered the building. A small service door led into another section.

I opened it, and two staff members were standing at a workstation. They looked up. One reached for the alarm. I crossed the distance and broke his wrist, making him scream out hysterically.

The second man grabbed a metal tray and swung it. I ducked beneath it, drove my shoulder into his chest, and sent him into the workstation.

The first man tried to run. I caught him by the back of his coat. He hit the floor.

I stood over them, my weapon already raised, “How do I get to the basement from here?”

I glanced at the security terminal. Their clearance levels were displayed on the screen. One had access to the lower wing.

I took his badge, “Thank you.”

And then I shot them both between the eyes.

Doors slammed open and shut somewhere above me. Boots thundered through the corridors from every direction. Voices overlapped through the radios, as more men poured into the lower levels. The small security team I’d counted earlier was no longer the whole problem; they’d called in reinforcements, and now the building felt packed with bodies.

A burst of gunfire followed me, the rounds struck the wall behind my shoulder.

“Come out, Capone!”

“Come out!”

I stopped, “Fuck!”

Then I heard more voices.

“Spread out.”

“Check every room.”

I stepped backward until my hand found the maintenance panel I’d noticed earlier. It was low on the wall, almost hidden behind a row of pipes. I pulled it open and found a narrow service duct behind it.

I dropped into the passage and pulled the panel back into place. The space was tight, but the ductwork ran deep through the building. I moved forward on my elbows, keeping my weapon close to my chest while the sounds of boots filled the corridor below.

They rushed past the panel, “He has to be nearby!”

“Check the rooms!”

“He can’t have disappeared!”

I kept crawling.

The building’s plans unfolded in my head as I moved. Ventilation routes connected the medical wing to the storage rooms, then crossed above the eastern corridor. They had built the ducts to carry air through the facility.

They had also built me a second road.

I reached a larger junction and stopped. A metal ventilation grate sat below me. Voices came from beneath it,

“He went this way.”

“No, the camera picked him up near the storage wing.”

“The cameras are fucked.”

I looked through the narrow gaps in the grate. Three guards stood below. One had his rifle pointed down the corridor. Another was staring at the security terminal. The third was speaking into his radio.

“Lock the lower section.”

I watched them for a moment, then I moved the grate aside just enough to create an opening.

The first man looked up, his eyes met mine. I fired once and he dropped. The other two spun toward the sound, but they had no idea where it had come from.

“Where?”

“What the fuck was that?”

One of them fired toward the ceiling.

The bullets struck the metal duct above them and ricocheted through the corridor. Another guard fired after him, sending more rounds into the ceiling.

Idiots.

The vibration shook the old ductwork. A section of ceiling tile cracked and collapsed onto the floor, dust filled the hallway. I pulled myself farther into the vent while they stared upward.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 815

“He’s in the ceiling!”

“Shoot the fucking vents!”

They opened fire, rounds ripped through the metal around me. I flattened myself against the duct floor as bullets. tore through the grille behind me. The sound was deafening inside the narrow passage.

Then the old metal gave way.

Part of the ceiling collapsed behind me with a violent crash.

The guards stopped firing.

“He got out!”

“Where?”

I crawled deeper into the duct, keeping my breathing slow while their boots scattered beneath me. Their voices followed the length of the corridor, confused and angry, each man looking in a different direction.

“He can’t be in there!”

“Then where the hell is he?”

I stopped at the next grille, seven men stood below. I watched them through the narrow gaps. They were looking at the collapsed ceiling behind me, not at the vent. I lowered myself until the muzzle of my handgun rested against the grille.

The first man turned, I fired and he dropped. The second reacted to the sound and looked up, another shot, then another, then another and another.

The corridor erupted into chaos.

They finally understood the direction of the gunfire, but understanding it wasn’t enough. I kept my aim steady and fired through the gaps in the metal, placing each shot before they could raise their weapons.

Six shots.

Six bodies.

The last guard stumbled backward, staring at the ceiling as if he couldn’t understand how the hell I’d managed it.

I fired once more, he dropped beside the others. Silence returned in pieces. Smoke curled through the grille. I pulled the weapon back and I kept moving.

The duct narrowed ahead, forcing me onto my stomach. I didn’t slow down. My elbows scraped against the metal as I pushed forward, following the map in my head.

A second ventilation grille appeared beneath me. I stopped. Two guards were running through the corridor. One looked toward the collapsed section, the other raised his radio.

“Nothing here.”

I pushed the grille open. It dropped silently onto the floor, both men looked up and I fired twice. They fell before either could understand where the shots had come from.

The alarm continued screaming.

The radios continued shouting.

But the men searching for me had stopped knowing where to look.

I kept moving. The metal passage narrowed around my shoulders, forcing me to crawl slowly, but I barely noticed. the discomfort anymore. The tracker on my wrist pulsed with each movement, the green signal growing stronger until it was almost constant. I followed it through the ductwork, past another junction and another locked section, of the facility, until the map in my head stopped matching the walls around me.

I stopped when I was right above the green dot on the screen, she was here, right below me. I reached the next opening and looked down.

My entire body went still. There were glass cages below me. I moved closer, pressing my face near the grille.

Then I saw her.

Gianna.

She was lying inside one of the glass enclosures, completely still. My hand tightened around the edge of the vent.

For one second, I couldn’t breathe.

She was on a narrow bed, her hair spread across the pillow, her body unnaturally quiet beneath the thin blanket. I couldn’t see her face clearly from that angle, but I knew her.

I would have known her in a crowd.

I would have known her from a mile away.

The tracker on my wrist pulsed again.

A silence settled inside my head so complete that I couldn’t hear the alarms anymore.

They had put her in a fucking cage.

I stared through the grate at her motionless body. My fingers tightened until the metal bent slightly beneath my grip.

“Gianna.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 816

Gianna

1&1

I came back to myself slowly, first came the sound. A low electrical hum, then the alarm. Then voices/distant and. angry, crashing into one another somewhere beyond the glass.

My eyes opened.

White light stabbed straight into them. I tried to move and immediately regretted it. Every muscle in my body jerked.

A sharp aftershock ran from my shoulders down through my arms and into my fingers. My chest tightened, and sucked in a breath that came out as a weak, broken gasp.

My eyes burned. I stared at the ceiling, trying to pull the pieces of memory back into place.

Leone.

His hand.

The taser.

My jaw clenched. The anger came so fast it almost pushed the weakness out of my body.

My fingers twitched against the mattress. They felt heavy, almost disconnected from me. My arms shook when I tried to push myself up, so I stopped and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

For a few seconds, I didn't know where I was, then I saw the glass and my stomach dropped. I turned my head around.

The cage.

I was inside one of their fucking cages.

And then I looked past it.

Glass stretched across the room in every direction, dividing the space into rows of clear cells. White lights burned above each one, making it impossible to hide anything inside them.

Closest to me was a girl with stitches running across her abdomen. The skin around them was swollen and bruised. She was awake, but she didn't make a sound, she just watched me curiously.

My voice barely worked, “No,” I swallowed and tried again, “No...”

The room blurred for a second. I blinked hard and then I saw him. Vance was sitting on the other side of the glass like nothing had happened.

He had changed his coat. The blood was gone from his hands. A fresh bandage disappeared beneath the sleeve near his abdomen, but otherwise he looked almost perfectly composed.

He sat beside a metal table. His surgical tools were arranged in neat rows in front of him. He picked up one, wiped it, held it beneath the light and placed it down. Then he picked up another, wiped that one too.

My breathing became uneven, “You...”

His hand stopped and slowly, he looked at me. That nauseating smile appeared.

The one I remembered from childhood.

The one that always came before something terrible.

“Ah,” he said quietly, “You’re awake.”

I pushed myself higher against the mattress.

My arms trembled, “You’re fucking insane.”

He tilted his head, “I’d say you’re the insane one between the two of us,” he picked up another instrument, “You tried to kill me.”

I stared at him with disbelief as he calmly wiped the metal.

“You stabbed me twice, Gianna.”

My eyes dropped to the bandage, then back to his face. His smile grew slightly and a shout exploded somewhere outside the room.

“You know what I find interesting?” His smile sharpened. “You spent years sitting in my chair, shaking whenever I walked toward you. You couldn’t look me in the eye,” he leaned slightly closer, “And now you stab me and expect me to be offended?”

His eyes gleamed.

“I almost admire the improvement. You’re still weak,” he added softly, “But now you have teeth,” he chuckled, ” All those years, all those sessions, all that screaming and somehow, you’re still capable of surprising me.”

His eyes flicked over my face.

“I’m beginning to think I underestimated what I created.”

“SEARCH THE EAST WING!”

A man’s shout tore through the facility, cutting straight through the quiet between us.

Vance paused.

So did I.

The voice echoed through the speakers, followed by the heavy thunder of boots somewhere beyond the glass.

“We’re already searching it!”

“Then search harder!”

Boots thundered past the glass. I turned toward the sound. There were so many.

Too many.

The corridor outside was filled with men running in different directions. Some carried rifles. Others had radios pressed to their ears. More guards kept appearing from adjoining hallways.

I stared through the glass, my heart pounding harder with every distant gunshot. Raphael couldn’t be here alone. Could he?

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No. He couldn’t be stupid enough to take on all these men by himself but a cold thought settled in my chest.

What if he was?

A man’s voice suddenly roared from somewhere outside.

“FIND THAT BASTARD!”

Leone.

Another guard shouted, “We’ve checked three floors!”

“Then check a fourth!” Leone’s voice came again, louder this time, “There are hundreds of you in this fucking building! How the hell is one Capone making you look this useless?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 817

Despite the weakness crawling through my body, something cold flickered in my chest.

One Capone?

So he really was alone?

No.

Absolutely fucking not.

I refused to believe Raphael had walked onto this island by himself, knowing exactly what waited for him.

He wouldn’t be that reckless.

He’d have a plan.

He’d be prepared.

He always was.

I swallowed hard and looked toward the corridor as another burst of gunfire echoed through the facility.

“He’ll be fine,” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

He had to be.

Because Raphael Capone didn’t walk into hell without a way back out.

Vance noticed. His eyes moved to my trembling hands, then slowly returned to my face. But there was something different in his expression now-Interest.

“I’ve heard quite a bit about him,” he murmured.

His gaze drifted toward the glass, as if he could somehow see through the walls and find Raphael himself.

“Raphael Capone.”

He said the name slowly, almost tasting it.

Then his eyes came back to me.

“You love him?”

There was a strange fascination in his voice.

“I’ve heard he’s unusually intelligent,” Vance continued, almost to himself, “I’d like to know how that brain works,” his eyes narrowed slightly, “What makes someone like him think the way he does? How does he process fear? Risk? Violence?” A dark small smile touched his mouth, “I wonder what I’d find if I could open that skull and take a proper look.”

I said nothing.

My mouth felt dry, but it wasn’t fear that had stolen my voice. It was the way he was looking at Raphael’s name, like Raphael wasn’t a person to him. He was a puzzle. A rare thing Vance had already decided belonged beneath a microscope.

Vance seemed to notice my silence.

He leaned back in his chair and picked up another surgical instrument. The metal caught the white light as he turned it between his fingers.

“You’re very quiet.”

I kept staring at him.

He smiled faintly, “I suppose that’s because you’re imagining it.”

My stomach twisted.

He tapped the instrument lightly against his palm.

“His skull opened. The brain exposed.” His eyes grew distant, almost thoughtful, “I’d want to see what makes him different. Where his judgment sits. How quickly he processes information. What happens inside his head when everything around him becomes chaos.”

I didn’t blink, or move. I refused to give him that part of me but inside my chest, something was screaming.

Vance looked almost pleased with himself, “Perhaps I’d find nothing special at all. Wouldn’t that be disappointing?”

I stared at the instrument in his hand, then at his face. I gave him nothing.

Because if he wanted to know what was inside my head, he could wonder.

And if he wanted Raphael, he could keep wondering about him too.

I wasn't going to give this man a single piece of either of us.

The shouting continued.

"Seal the lower wing!"

"The cameras are still fucking down!"

"He got into the security system!"

"He's locked us out of half the access panels. The power controls are screwed too!"

"Get the west corridor covered!"

"Where the fuck is he?"

"Check every room!"

"Then check them again! He's somewhere in this building!"

Leone's voice cut through them again, "Someone tell me where the fuck he is!"

Another voice answered, "We don't know!"

I heard something slam, "Then start knowing!"

I almost laughed.

"You're happy," he said and my head snapped back to him. He was watching me carefully, studying me.

Then I heard my father's voice, "Leone!"

The shouting moved closer.

"What the hell do you know about Raphael?"

There was a brief silence before Leone answered, his voice flat, "Not much. The bastard likes to play games with the people he tortures."

My father's voice hardened, "That's not good enough."

"I told you. I don't know much about him. The only thing I know for sure is that he's fucking Gianna."

My cheeks burned.

Even Vance's eyebrow lifted.

Dad went silent.

Leone continued, "So why the fuck do you think he's here?"

My heart slammed against my ribs. I stared toward the glass door.

Leone's voice carried through the corridor, "She called me."

My father asked, "When?"

"Before all this started. She told me she'd found someone. Then he stood in front of the Council for her."

My eyebrows furrowed... He did?

For what?

Leone's voice grew sharper, "And after that, Gianna told you that bastard built those reading apps for her. She put him on her call list first," Leone said, "First. He was the last person she texted. And he was the one she sent all of our business to."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 818

Leone laughed once, but there was no humor in it.

"He even fucking texted her that he loved her."

I stared at the floor, and a tear slipped down my cheek. He had come here alone. He had walked onto this island knowing exactly what kind of place it was, knowing what Giovanni was capable of, knowing what Vance was, knowing how many men stood between him and me.

And he had still come.

Leone's voice came again, "So stop asking why he's here. He's here because of Gianna and he'll die because of her."

Something inside me went still. I lifted my head and that made Vance look at me again. My hands were still / shaking. My body was still weak. The aftershocks still crawled through my muscles.

But my mind was suddenly clear.

Vance leaned back in his chair, "That's the problem with... love," he said softly, "It makes intelligent people do very stupid things."

I looked through the glass at him. Then toward the corridor where Raphael was somewhere inside this nightmare, "You don't know anything about him."

Vance smiled, "I know he's walking into a building filled with men who want him dead... for you."

I slowly pushed myself upright, my legs barely held when I tried to stand. I caught myself against the glass.

Vance watched me struggle to stay upright, a faint smile pulling at the corner of his mouth, "You can't even stand," he said, "Just like your brother. Must be those pathetic Toricelli genes."

I glared at him through the glass and pressed my palm against the cold surface. My legs shook beneath me, but 1 refused to let myself fall.

His smile widened, he seemed to enjoy every little sign that my body was failing me. Then his attention shifted toward the voices outside.

"Giovanni."

Dad appeared beyond the glass, Leone beside him. Both looked toward Vance.

Vance smiled, "That man is intelligent."

Leone scoffed, "You're giving him too much credit."

"No," Vance's eyes returned to me, "I'm giving him exactly the amount he deserves."

He leaned back in his chair.

"You can't beat someone like that by being smarter than him. If he's already inside your security system, then he's probably watching us right now. He knows our movements. He knows our doors. He knows our blind spots."

Dad’s expression hardened, “Then what do you suggest?”

Vance’s smile returned, “We beat him where we’re better.”

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Dad’s eyes narrowed, “And what exactly is that?”

Vance looked at me, “Pain.”

The word landed softly and my stomach turned. Vance picked up one of his instruments and examined it beneath the light.

“We’re not going to kill her,” he said, “That would be wasteful. Your daughter is supposed to inherit this family, isn’t she?”

My father’s jaw tightened, “So?”

“So we only take what she doesn’t need.”

My blood ran cold. Vance continued as if he were discussing a medical procedure.

“Something small. Something he can find. Something that tells him we’re still in control.”

Leone stared at him, “You’re suggesting we leave him pieces of her?”

“Not pieces,” Vance corrected calmly, “A trail.”

He glanced toward the ceiling camera.

“If he’s watching us, he’ll hear everything. If he’s already moving through the building, he’ll know exactly where she is,” his smile widened, “So let him come.”

I couldn’t breathe.

Vance’s eyes settled on mine again.

“Give him something to follow. Something harmless enough that she survives, but frightening enough that he understands what will happen if he doesn’t listen.”

Dad said nothing.

Vance leaned forward, “An ear. A finger. A toe. Nothing that has to be fatal. Nothing that prevents her from becoming Donna. Nothing that damages anything she would need to lead this family.”

My hand curled against the glass. He was smiling at me.

“Then perhaps he’ll understand the message,” his eyes gleamed, “He may be very good at finding people, Giovanni. But every man has a breaking point.”

He glanced toward the corridor.

“And if Raphael Capone really loves her as much as Leone seems to think... then we won’t have to find him.”

He looked directly at the camera.

“He’ll find us.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 819

Raphael

The voices reached me through the vent before I saw them.

Giovanni.

Leone.

And Elias fucking Crowe.

I stopped moving, the entire facility seemed to disappear.

There was only the sound of my own breathing and the image that had been burned into my mind since I first saw her signal inside this place.

Gianna was already surrounded by people who had already hurt her and those fucker weren’t above doing it all over again if it suited them.

My grip tightened around the gun until my knuckles ached.

They had already done enough.

They had already put their hands on her. They had already made her afraid of doctors. They had taken years from her and then had the fucking nerve to sit there and discuss what else they could take.

A finger.

An ear.

Anything.

The thought alone made my vision narrow. I moved through the vent, slowly and silently. The grille ahead gave me a clear view of the room.

Gianna was behind the glass, my eyes found her first, they always would, then I saw Vance. He was holding a surgical instrument.

My jaw locked. Caruso stood beside Giovanni while Vance was still fucking talking, still fucking challenging me.

I lowered my gun and reached behind my back, pulling the rifle free. I brought it up slowly, settled the stock against my shoulder, and adjusted my grip until the barrel lined up exactly where I wanted it.

The barrel passed through the grille and before anyone could even say another word about hurting her, I fired.

The shot cracked through the room and Gianna immediately sprang forward in her cage. Vance screamed and dropped the instrument. His hand flew to his upper arm as blood spread across his sleeve, he stumbled backward.

Leone barely had time to reach for his weapon before I fired again. The bullet tore into his shoulder, throwing him backward into the wall. I kept the rifle trained on him for another second.

I didn't want either of them dead.

Not yet.

They needed to stay alive long enough to understand exactly what happened when they put their hands on her again.

Caruso dropped behind a table, "Fuck!"

Giovanni didn't move. He simply stood there, staring toward the vent as if he knew exactly where I was, He didn't reach for a weapon. He didn't duck. He didn't even flinch when the rifle stayed trained on him.

Then I saw it.

The smallest hint of a smile touched his mouth.

It stopped me, not because I trusted him. I didn't. Not because I suddenly forgot everything he'd done to Gianna. I hadn't.

It was because he looked almost relieved.

As if he didn't care whether that barrel was pointed at him. As if seeing me standing between Gianna and the men who were about to hurt her was somehow enough.

Vance scrambled across the floor, clutching his arm.

Leone dragged himself behind cover, "WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?" he roared.

I shifted the rifle, another shot punched through the edge of the table.

Leone ducked, "Come out, you cowardly motherfucker!"

His voice shook with rage, and I smiled. He wanted me to come out. If I were a hot-headed idiot with an ego too big for his head, I would have walked straight into that room and tried to fight my way through hundreds of men. That wasn't courage. That was stupidity.

I didn't have their numbers.

I didn't need them.

They had more men, more guns, and the advantage of knowing the building. I had something they clearly didn't- time to think.

So I wasn't going to fight them on their terms. I'd use my head. And if they wanted a war inside this building, I'd make them fight an enemy they couldn't see.

I moved backward through the vent as Leone shot at it six times. Boots thundered outside the room, more men were coming.

I could hear them shouting.

"Find him!"

"Check the vents!"

I looked through the grille again. Gianna was staring directly toward me. She couldn't see me but somehow, she looked like she knew.

Vance suddenly disappeared behind another piece of cover, then he reached inside his coat.

My rifle came up involuntarily.

His injured hand shook as he reached into his coat. When it came back out, a small black remote was clenched in his bloodied fingers.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 820

He raised it above his head, “Don’t.”

The amusement was gone from his voice. There was only fear now. Blood ran down his sleeve from the wound in his other arm, dripping onto the floor as he held the remote tighter, his thumb hovering over the button.

“If you fire again, she dies.”

Everything inside me stopped.

Vance looked toward Gianna’s cage, “Five minutes.”

My finger remained against the trigger and he smiled maliciously.

“I can seal her cage.”

Leone looked at him, “What the fuck are you doing? Killing her isn’t the plan!”

“I’m saving us!” Vance snapped as he lifted the remote slightly.

“The cage has its own emergency system. Air can be cut off and the chamber can be flooded with a fictionalized lethal compound called KX-9.”

Giovanni’s face changed.

Vance kept talking, “Five minutes is all it takes.”

My eyes stayed on him.

“You shoot me, she dies. You shoot Leone, she dies.”

My gaze moved to the remote, as I moved the barrel of the rifle towards it.

“You shoot Giovanni, she dies.”

Vance’s breathing was becoming uneven. He knew exactly what he was doing. He had finally found something that could make me hesitate.

He looked at Gianna through the glass, “By the time you manage to open that cage, there won’t be enough time, because these cages aren’t ordinary.”

I lowered the rifle by an inch, Vance noticed. His shoulders loosened and that was his mistake because I wasn’t lowering it because he had won. I was changing my angle.

I studied the room. Everything became positions and distances. Vance was watching my rifle. Leone was watching the vent. Giovanni was watching Gianna.

Nobody was watching the control panel beside the cage.

Nobody except me.

I looked at it, then at the remote, then back at Vance and then I fired. The bullet struck the control panel beside Gianna’s cage. Sparks exploded across the wall, the lights flickered.

Vance screamed, “NO!”

The room dropped into darkness. Emergency lights flashed red. Gianna’s silhouette disappeared behind the glass.

Leone rose from behind the table and fired toward the vent again, rounds tore through the grille. I rolled deeper into the shaft as bullets ripped through the metal behind me.

“GET HIM!” Leone’s voice echoed through the room.

I looked through the busted up grille and saw Vance stumbled toward the cage, “She’s still locked in!”

Giovanni grabbed his arm, “What did you do? Get her the fuck out of this!”

I shot at Vance again but he moved and the bullet struck the wall beside Vance. He dropped flat.

Leone shouted toward the ceiling, “CAPONE!”

I crawled through the darkness, the rifle stayed tight against my chest. My eyes remained on the faint tracker glowing on my wrist.

Behind me, Leone screamed orders. Vance screamed for someone to restore the system. Giovanni shouted Gianna’s name.

The facility had become chaos. Chaos was easier to use than order. I reached the next grille and looked down.

Three armed men rushed into the room, they looked toward the damaged control panel, they didn't look up. I pushed the barrel through the grille and fired three shots and their bodies dropped to the floor.

I pulled the rifle back, then I heard Gianna's voice, through the glass, "Raphael?"

I froze. My hand tightened around the weapon. I couldn't see her clearly through the smoke and flashing red lights but I could hear her.

Alive.

I moved toward her and behind me, Vance whispered something I couldn't hear, then came the click of the remote.

I stopped, my eyes went to the cage.

The red light above it changed.

LOCKDOWN ACTIVE.

"You know what, Capone?" he shouted, "I'm tired of playing games."

He looked at me through the flashing red light, then down at the remote in his hand.

Vance smiled from behind cover, "Now," he whispered, "let's see what you do."

His thumb moved. A heavy mechanical sound came from Gianna's cage.

My head snapped toward her in the flashing red lights. The ventilation system above the glass sealed with a sharp hiss.

Gianna looked up, her eyes widened, "Raph?"

There was so much fear in her voice that it tightened something deep inside my chest.

I moved toward the grille as Vance laughed. A thin white mist began spilling from the vents inside the cage.

Gianna stumbled backward, "Daddy?"

Giovanni's face went pale, "Vance, fucking stop before I kill you."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 821

Vance kept his eyes on me.

“You wanted to make him surrender?” Leone asked, breathing hard through his clenched teeth.

Vance lifted the remote, “Five minutes, Capone.”

I stared at the cage, at the mist thickened around Gianna’s legs. She coughed twice, her eyes going wide.

“Come out. Put your weapon down. Let them take you,” he pointed toward Gianna, “Or she dies.”

Gianna slammed both palms against the glass. “Raphael, don’t! Don’t you dare do it. He’s bluffing. They need me. Daddy needs me. They wouldn’t-”

Her voice cracked.

Leone stepped out from behind the table, one hand clamped over his wounded shoulder. His face was pale from the blood loss, but his eyes were cold.

“No, Gianna. That’s where you’re wrong.”

She stared at him.

He gave her a humorless smile, “You think you’re still necessary because your father keeps telling you that you’re going to inherit everything? You’re not.”

Her face went still.

He continued, almost casually, “Gio Jr. is still alive. He’s a Toricelli. He’s a son. Once he’s strong enough to walk again, your father doesn’t need you to carry the family. You were always replaceable,” Leone said. “Your father just hasn’t been ready to admit it yet.”

His eyes shifted toward Giovanni.

“Besides, he’s got a male heir waiting in the wings. Why would he risk an entire operation for you?”

Giovanni’s expression hardened, “Leone.”

But Leone didn’t stop, “You’re not the only Toricelli anymore, principessa. And you’re certainly not the only option. So go ahead. Keep telling your boyfriend we won’t hurt you. Let’s see how long that confidence lasts when you can barely breathe anymore.”

Vance glanced at the clock on the wall. A digital timer appeared on the security monitor.

Then it began counting down.

Gianna coughed again, my eyes returned to her. She was trying to stay upright. Her palm slid down the glass. I could see the fear in her eyes.

“Raph, leave!” she screamed, both hands pressed against the glass, “Please, just leave! I’ll be fine. Don’t surrender yourself for me. Don’t you fucking dare!”

Her voice cracked on the last word, and that sound hit harder than any bullet. Something inside my chest twisted so hard it hurt.

Vance watched her with that same sick curiosity in his eyes before turning his attention toward me, “The only person in this building who knows exactly how to keep her alive is me, Capone. Come and get her. That’s why you came all this way, isn’t it?”

I slowly raised my rifle. I aimed at the remote and Vance immediately pressed it against his chest, “Shoot me and the system triggers automatically.”

I stopped.

He had thought of that.

The timer continued.

Gianna shook her head behind the glass, “Don’t.”

Her voice was getting weaker by the second. I stared at her, then at the timer, then at Vance. He had finally found the one thing that could make me obey.

I lowered my rifle.

Leone’s expression changed, “That’s right,” he said, “For once, use your fucking brain.”

My mind ran through every possible route. The cage was reinforced. The control system was damaged. The emergency release wasn’t responding. The ventilation system had been separated from the rest of the building.

I could reach her but not fast enough. Vance knew it and that was why he was smiling.

Gianna pressed both hands against the glass. Her chest rose sharply as she tried to breathe, “Raph, please, leave…”

Giovanni suddenly moved. He crossed the room and grabbed Vance by the wrist, “Give me that.”

Vance’s eyes widened.

Giovanni twisted his arm, trying to take the remote, “Open her cage!”

“Gio!” Leone caught Giovanni from behind and dragged him backward.

“Let go of me!”

“Listen to me.”

“LET GO!”

Giovanni fought him hard.

Leone wrapped both arms around him, holding him back while Giovanni reached desperately toward Vance, “My daughter is in there! This wasn’t the fucking plan! Get her the fuck out!”

Leone’s face tightened, “We can’t.”

Giovanni stared at him like he’d forgotten who Caruso was, then he shoved him, “That’s my daughter.”

Leone looked at Gianna and swallowed, “Gio, we don’t have a choice, he will surrender for her, he won’t let her die. He didn’t come all the way here to just let her die.”

And then I realized something I had never felt before.

Helplessness.

It was not the kind I had watched in other people and it was definitely not the kind I had inflicted on enemies who begged for mercy.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 822

This was different.

For the first time in my life, I was the one standing on the other side of the weapon. The one forced to wait. The one whose choices had been taken away because someone else held the person I couldn’t afford to lose.

They had her.

And that meant, for the first time, my life was in someone else's hands.

Leone's voice stayed low.

"If we fight this now, they won't just come for her. They'll come for everyone tied to us. Family. Soldiers. Businesses. Everyone," Leone glanced toward the cage, his voice dropping. "We need to survive this."

Giovanni's face tightened, "Then we survive without sacrificing her."

Leone looked away for a moment before meeting his eyes again, "I wish it were that simple. But we need Raphael Capone and Gianna alive. They're our bargaining chips now."

His jaw clenched.

"We make a deal with the Council. We hand them over alive, but only after they agree to our terms. That's the only way we get everyone out of this alive."

Giovanni lunged again, "Let her go!"

Leone caught him, "Gio!"

"LET MY DAUGHTER GO!"

Vance stepped around them, he looked almost annoyed by the noise, "Enough."

Giovanni barely had time to react when a needle pressed against his neck.

He jerked away, "What-"

Vance pushed the plunger and Giovanni froze.

Leone caught him as his knees weakened, "What did you give him?"

"Something mild."

Giovanni tried to push himself upright. His eyes struggled to focus, "You son of a-"

His body sagged and Leone held him against his chest, "What the fuck, Vance. You don't fucking touch him! You piece of shit!"

Vance stepped back, his eyes moving back to me, "It'll wear off."

Giovanni's eyes remained fixed on Gianna, "Don't..."

His head dropped against Leone's shoulder. Leone looked down at him, then at the timer.

Gianna dropped to one knee, the mist continued spreading around her.

She coughed again, "Raph..."

I closed my eyes for half a second, then I opened my phone and tapped on one name.

Vincenzo.

Me: I'm going to surrender myself. They'll kill Gianna if I don't.

My thumb hovered over the screen for a second before I typed again.

Me: Make a deal for her. Get her out of here. In return, we leave the Toricellis alone. The Council leaves them alone too. It's what they want.

I stared at the words.

Me: Accept their terms. Whatever it takes. Just get her out of here and bring her home.

I sent the message, slipped the phone back into my pocket and looked through the grille. I looked at the timer.

I looked at the vent opening beneath me, then at Gianna, then at the door. There was no clean way out.

There was only a choice.

I reached down and grabbed the edge of the grille. The metal bent under my hand.

Vance and Leone looked up as I pulled. The grille tore free and it hit the floor below with a sharp clang. Every weapon in the room came up.

Leone turned as Giovanni remained unconscious against him.

Gianna lifted her head weakly, her eyes found mine, and she shook her head, "No... please, no!"

I dropped from the vent and my boots hit the floor. I landed hard, rolled once, came up on one knee and raised my gun.

Every man in the room froze. The barrel of my gun stayed trained on Vance. I looked at him first, then at Gianna. She was barely moving now. Her head had fallen against the glass, her breathing shallow and uneven, but her eyes were still open.

Still on me.

I lowered the weapon by an inch, “Open the cage.”

Vance’s smile trembled, “That’s not how this works,” he lifted the remote slightly, making sure I could see it,” The clock is running, Capone. You want her alive? Then you follow instructions.”

His eyes moved over me, measuring every weapon I carried.

”

“Drop everything. Your gun. Your knife. All of it. Then put your hands behind your head and get down on the floor. Face down,” he glanced toward Gianna, “She doesn’t have much time left.”

My eyes went to the timer.

Vance’s voice softened, “And judging by the way she’s breathing, she’s losing strength faster than I expected.”

I didn’t hesitate. The rifle came off my shoulder first. I let it hit the floor, then the handgun from my waistband, then the second handgun hidden beneath my jacket.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 823

A knife followed, then another.

I pulled the spare magazine from my belt and dropped it beside the weapons. One by one, everything I had carried onto this island landed on the floor between us.

I raised both hands, “I’m here,” my eyes never left Gianna, “Now shut the gas off.”

Vance watched me carefully.

“Fresh air,” I said. My voice came out low and rough. “She’s done enough. I’ve done everything you asked.”

I reached behind my back and pulled out the last blade. I dropped it, “Every weapon. Now give her air.”

Gianna's eyes barely moved toward me. I could see her struggling to breathe. That was enough to make every other thought disappear.

Leone didn't, "Vance, get him in there."

Vance glanced at him, "First, we need-"

"Get his ass in the fucking cage!" Leone barked, pointing toward the empty chamber beside Gianna's. "Put the bastard right next to her. Now, you useless fucking coward. Do what I said before I fry your ass where you stand. And don't forget, you put your hands on your own fucking Don. So don't stand there expecting mercy from me, you stupid son of a bitch."

Vance visibly paled as he walked toward the control panel. I followed him with my eyes.

Leone stepped closer to the cage, "Open it."

Vance pressed something, the lock clicked. The door to the empty glass chamber slid open.

Leone pointed his gun at me, "Inside."

My eyes went to Gianna, her body had gone frighteningly still. I wanted to tear every man in this room apart. I wanted Leone's throat in my hand. I wanted Vance's head against the floor.

But none of that mattered if Gianna stopped breathing.

So I stepped forward.

Vance's grip tightened around the remote, his knuckles whitening around the plastic, "Keep walking. Don't try anything clever, Capone. One wrong move, one stupid fucking twitch, and I press this button. One click, and she burns to death right before you."

I stopped at the entrance, "How do I know you'll do what you promised?"

Vance gave me a thin smile, "You don't."

Leone stepped between us, one hand hovering near his weapon, "Raphael, you're supposed to be a smart fucking man, so use that brain for once. I need both of you alive if I'm going to make this trade. Now get your fucking ass in that cage before you force me to put a bullet in her myself."

His jaw clenched.

"I don't want her dead, you stupid bastard. But keep pushing me, keep testing me, and I'll pull that trigger just to prove I fucking will."

I looked at the timer.

Then at Gianna. Her breathing was still shallow. She barely had the strength to keep her head up.

Leone was right.

I hated that he was right.

If he wanted to save the Toricelli syndicate, his own life, and every soldier tied to it, he needed both Gianna and me alive. Two bargaining pieces. Two names valuable enough to force the Council to listen.

I stepped inside, the glass door remained open behind me. I kept my eyes on Gianna. She was only a few feet away, close enough that I could see every shallow breath, close enough to reach for her, yet I couldn't touch her.

I couldn't pull her into my arms.

Couldn't even close the distance between us.

"Raphael..." Her voice was barely more than a breath.

"I know, baby," I whispered, taking another careful step toward the center of the cage, "I know."

The door slammed shut behind me, clicked, and locked. I turned. Vance stood outside, his smile was back. Leone walked toward Giovanni, who was still barely conscious. He dragged a chair across the floor and lowered Giovanni into it.

"Stay there."

Giovanni's head lifted weakly.

Leone turned back toward Vance, "Give me the remote."

Vance hesitated.

"Now."

Vance slowly handed it over. Leone snatched it from his hand. He looked through the glass at Gianna, then pressed the button.

The hiss stopped, the red warning light above her cage changed. Fresh air rushed through the vents.

Gianna coughed hard.

I moved toward the glass separating us, “Breathe.”

She dragged in another breath, then another. Her shoulders shook. I pressed my palm against the glass.

I looked through the glass at Vance. My expression didn’t change but my voice dropped, “You’re going to regret every second you kept her in here.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 824

Vance smiled, “I thought you surrendered.”

“I did,” I kept my hand against the glass, “I just didn’t promise you would live long enough to enjoy it.”

Vance smiled, “I thought you surrendered.”

“I did,” I stated, “I never said I was going to make it easy for you to survive the consequences.”

Leone stepped closer, a stupid fucking smile pulling at his mouth, “You killed my men. You put a bullet in me You made a fucking joke out of my security system. Now I don’t have to kill you,” his eyes hardened, “But I can still make damn sure you remember exactly whose territory you fucked with.”

I slowly turned my head toward him. My eyebrows lifted, “And whose territory did I supposedly fuck with?” I let my gaze travel over him, “Yours? Don’t flatter yourself, Caruso. It’s my girl’s territory. You’re just a loud little bastard standing between me and the woman I came here for.”

Leone’s smile vanished, “Vance,” he snapped. “Knock him out. I don’t trust that bastard. I want every weapon off him. I want him searched, stripped of anything he can use, and tied down before he gets another chance to play hero.”

I smiled. “Then come in here and do it yourself. Man to man. I already surrendered, so what the fuck are you waiting for? Let’s see which one of us ends up tying the other down.”

Leone’s face hardened, “You’re testing me while you’re standing under my mercy. And you might find out just how little mercy I have left.”

I kept my eyes on him through the glass, “You know what I find funny, Leone?”

“What?”

“Now I finally understand why she fell out of love with you so fast.”

His face hardened.

And there it was.

I hit the nerve.

“You had her,” I continued, “You had years with her. You had her trust. You had every advantage a man could ask for, and somehow you still managed to lose her within just a few months... to me.”

I tilted my head.

“That takes talent.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Leone’s nostrils flared, as he walked to their equipment table, snatched the remote and stared at me through the glass.

I watched his thumb settle over one of the controls, “You really think you’re better than me?” he asked.

“I don’t think it,” I looked him straight in the eye as I tilted my head towards Gianna, “She does.”

His expression twisted, then he pressed the button. A sharp hiss came from the ceiling. I looked up. White vapor began spilling into the cage.

I knew that smell.

An inhaled anesthetic. The kind of drug that could force consciousness away if enough of it reached the lungs.

Sevoflurane.

I looked at Gianna, who was barely conscious herself. The white fog spread across the floor first, curling around my boots before rising toward my knees.

Leone only watched, “Still feeling confident?”

I ignored him, my eyes stayed on Gianna. My lungs burned as the fog climbed higher. I held my breath, but I knew it wouldn't be enough. My vision had already started to soften around the edges.

I forced myself to stay standing.

Leone's voice came through the glass, "Sleep, Capone."

My knees weakened. I caught myself against the wall and pushed away from it. My body felt heavier with every second. My thoughts began dragging, each one taking longer to form.

Gianna.

Her face was pale behind the glass. I forced my eyes to stay open, slammed my fist against the glass, "Gianna."

Her eyes moved slightly, filled with tears. I could tell she heard me. My legs finally gave. I dropped to one knee, the white fog reached my chest.

I dragged in a breath before I could stop myself. My head spun as Gianna's face blurred beyond the glass. I wanted to reach through it.

My forehead touched the cold floor, the last thing I saw was her face through the glass before the darkness finally took me.

Guys, guys! Raphael infiltrated the facility while the Council meeting was happening at the same time, so they might need a little time to get there.

The timelines are happening simultaneously! Don't panic yet. ••...

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 825

Gianna

Raphael was lying on the floor of the glass cage beside mine.

His face was turned slightly toward me, one arm bent beneath his chest and the other lying loose beside him. His dark hair had fallen across his forehead.

He wasn't moving.

I pressed both palms against the glass separating us, “Raph…”

He gave me nothing.

I swallowed and tried again, quieter this time, “Raph, please.”

Still nothing.

I leaned closer until my forehead touched the cold glass, “Wake up.”

My fingers spread against the surface as if I could somehow reach through it.

“Please, just wake up.”

The silence was worse than the shouting, worse than the gunshots, worse than the alarms because I knew what Raphael looked like when he was ready to kill someone. I knew what he looked like when he was angry. I knew what he looked like when he was hurt.

This wasn’t any of those things.

This was nothing.

My eyes burned, “Please, Raph, if something happened to you because of me…” I took a shaky breath, “I’ll never forgive myself.”

His chest rose and I stared at it.

One breath.

Then he took another.

My own lungs finally remembered how to work.

“He’s breathing,” I whispered, I pressed my hand harder against the glass, “Okay. You’re breathing.”

My voice shook as if saying it enough times could make it true.

“You’re okay.”

Across the room, metal scraped against metal. I looked away from Raphael. Vance stood behind Leone with a pair of forceps in his hand. Leone was sitting on a steel chair, his injured arm resting across his lap. Blood had soaked through the fabric around his shoulder.

Vance had already cut the sleeve open. The bullet hole was ugly beneath the emergency lights. Leone didn't make a sound while Vance worked. 15 Bonus

His jaw stayed locked as Vance pressed gauze against the wound. The forceps disappeared into the injury. Leone's fingers curled around the edge of the chair.

I watched his face. He wasn't looking at Vance. He was looking at Raphael and there was nothing but hatred in his eyes.

Pure, ugly hatred.

"He really fucked you up," Vance murmured, studying the blood-soaked bandage.

Leone's gaze stayed fixed on Raphael through the glass. His jaw tightened, "He's going to pay for every fucking drop."

Vance pulled the bullet free. A small piece of metal dropped into a stainless-steel tray. The sound made my stomach twist. Vance cleaned the wound and began wrapping Leone's shoulder.

I barely paid attention.

My eyes kept returning to Raphael, specifically to his chest.

One rise.

One fall.

One rise.

One fall.

Please.

Please keep breathing.

I couldn't lose him, not because of me.

He had come here.

Alone.

For me.

And now he was lying unconscious because he had chosen me over himself.

A tear slipped down my cheek. I wiped it away quickly. I didn't want Leone to see. I didn't want anyone to see but Leone was already watching me. His eyes moved from my face to Raphael, then back to me, and his expression twisted.

He hated what he was seeing.

The fact that even now, when Raphael was unconscious and completely helpless, my eyes still belonged to him.

Leone slowly stood as Vance tied the final knot around his shoulder, "There," he stepped back, "You'll need to keep pressure on it."

Leone looked down at the bandage, then he slapped Vance on the chest, pushing him away like he was trash, " Don't fucking touch me."

Vance barely reacted like he was used to it. Leone turned sharply. His hand grabbed the front of Vance's coat and yanked him closer. Vance's back hit the table.

"I'll deal with you later," Leone's fist tightened in his coat, "But first..." his gaze moved toward Raphael, ".. you're going to help me search that bastard."

My heart stopped, "No."

The word left me before I could stop it.

Leone looked at me and I stepped closer to the glass, "You're not touching him."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 826

Leone smiled and it made my stomach turn, "You're in no position to give orders."

"Stay away from him!" I yelled, my voice shook, but I didn't lower it.

Leone released Vance and walked toward Raphael's cage.

Every step made my pulse jump, "No."

He stopped at the side and looked down at him. Raphael didn't move, my heart jumped into my throat with fear

Leone's mouth curled, "All that confidence. Look at him now."

My hand slammed against the glass, “Don’t touch him!”

Leone looked at me, then down at Raphael again, “He shot me,” his fingers brushed the bandage around his shoulder, “He killed my men and then he crawled through my walls like some fucking animal.”

I pushed myself upright. My legs shook so badly I had to use the glass for support, “He already surrendered, he dropped everything.”

“I’m aware.”

“He said he did.”

Leone’s mouth curled, “Men lie.”

“Not him,” my voice came out sharper than I expected, “He doesn’t lie.”

Leone stopped.

I shook my head, “He told you he dropped his weapons, and he did.”

Leone reached for the cage door.

Panic shot through me, “Don’t. He gave you everything. His guns. His knives. His ammunition. Everything.”

Leone’s eyes hardened, “You expect me to believe that?”

“Yes,” my voice trembled, but I didn’t look away, “Because unlike you, Raphael keeps his word.”

Leone’s jaw flexed. I could see the anger building in his face. I wanted him to know exactly what I thought of him.

“He doesn’t lie,” I whispered, “He doesn’t make promises he doesn’t intend to keep. He said he surrendered. So he surrendered.”

Leone took another step.

I pressed myself into the glass, “He isn’t a lying, selfish piece of shit who throws people under the bus the moment it benefits him.”

Vance watched me with that strange little smile and Leone’s nostrils flared as he stomped toward the cage’s door.

My heart began hammering, “No,” I struck the glass with my palm, “Don’t fucking touch him.”

Leone opened the outer lock. The heavy glass door released with a mechanical click. I literally stopped breathing for a whole minute as it happened. Leone stepped inside and Vance followed. They moved toward Raphael and I watched every step like I could stop them somehow.

My hands shook against the glass, “Raph...”

Leone tilted his head towards Raph and Vance crouched beside him. His hand moved toward Raphael’s jacket.

I hit the glass again and again, “Don’t touch him!”

Vance ignored me. Leone stood over Raphael, staring down at him. For a second, he said nothing, then he bent slightly. His face twisted with hatred, “You caused me a lot of trouble, Capone.”

Raphael didn’t move as Leone’s hand reached toward his chest, and panic ripped through me so hard I could barely breathe.

I screamed, “He has nothing!”

Leone stopped.

I was crying now, but I didn’t care, “He gave you everything! He doesn’t lie! Leave him alone!”

Leone raised an eyebrow at me mockingly.

I pressed my forehead against the glass, “Please...”

The word came out smaller this time....

It was not meant for Leone, it was meant for Raphael, “Please don’t let them hurt you.”

His chest still rose and fell. That tiny movement was the only thing keeping me together as Vance crouched beside him. He reached for Raphael’s shoulder and rolled him onto his back.

Raphael’s head lolled to the side. His eyes stayed shut.

He was dressed almost entirely in black. A compressed black shirt clung to his chest. Loose tactical pants hung from his waist, covered in pockets and straps. Heavy combat boots were still laced tight around his feet.

Vance started with the shirt.

He ran his hands along Raphael's sides, checking beneath his arms and across his chest. He pressed along the seams, searching for anything concealed beneath the fabric.

He moved lower. His hands went over Raphael's waist, then across the front and sides of his tactical pants. He checked every pocket. He reached around Raphael's back and checked the waistband.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 827

"He dropped everything," I whispered.

None of them paid attention to me, Vance checked the pockets again anyway, then the ankle area. He ran his hands down Raphael's legs, checking beneath the loose fabric around his boots.

He crouched lower and grabbed one of Raphael's heavy combat boots. He searched the outside, then the heel, then the space around the tongue and laces.

He moved to the other boot and repeated the search. He pulled the boots free from Raphael's feet.

He turned them over and inspected the soles before checking inside each one. He ran his fingers along the lining, pushed beneath the insole, and felt around the heel.

He dropped the boots beside Raphael with a heavy thud, "Nothing."

Leone frowned, "Check again."

"I did."

"Check him properly."

Vance's jaw tightened. He reached for Raphael again. He checked beneath the collar of the compressed shirt. Ran his fingers along the seams. Checked behind his neck. His hands moved over Raphael's arms.

He checked beneath both sleeves.

Vance finally pulled back, "There's nothing on him."

I smiled, because I knew. I knew Raphael. When he said he had dropped his weapons, he had dropped them. He didn't need to lie about something like that.

Vance stood, "He's clean."

Leone's eyes remained fixed on Raphael, then they moved toward me.

I met his stare through the glass, "I told you. He doesn't lie."

His jaw tightened.

I looked back at Raphael. I pressed my palm against the glass, and whispered against it, "You promised you'd always protect me, so wake up. You still have to take me home."

Leone listened to my words and something in his face changed. The anger had been there before, now it became something uglier.

He turned back toward Raphael, who was still unconscious, his breathing slow and even, completely unaware of what was happening around him.

Leone stood over him, "You think he's better than me?"

I sobbed pressing myself into the glass, "Don't touch him."

He looked down at Raphael again before turning his eyes back to me. A cruel smile slowly spread across his face. Then he grabbed Raphael by the front of his jacket and hauled him halfway off the floor. Raphael's head rolled limply to the side, his body offering no resistance.

My heart jumped into my throat, "Stop!"

Leone drove his fist into Raphael's face, then shoved him back onto the floor. Raphael's head rolled with the impact, but his eyes never opened. He didn't even stir.

Leone stared down at him, breathing hard, then kicked the floor beside Raphael with enough force to make the metal beneath us rattle.

The cage shook around me.

I struck the glass with both palms, "LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

Leone glanced at me, a cruel, mocking look settling in his eyes. Blood had already begun seeping through the fresh bandage around his wounded shoulder, "You love him so badly, don't you? Then watch."

He grabbed Raphael again, I barely had time to understand what he said before his fist came down. It struck/ Raphael across the side of his face. His head snapped to the side.

He carelessly threw another punch. Raphael's body shifted across the floor, but he remained completely still. Leone grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him halfway up. Raphael's head hung forward and Leone punched him again.

His head snapped back from the impact, a thin streak of blood spilling from the corner of his mouth before he shoved Raphael hard against the floor.

"STOP!"

Leone didn't even look at me as he started kicking Raphael in the ribs. The sound made my stomach twist.

Raphael curled slightly from the force, but there was no conscious reaction. No raised arm, no attempt to protect himself. He was still trapped somewhere deep inside the drug.

"Get away from him!"

Leone kicked him again.

"Leone!"

I hit the glass harder.

"You asshole!"

That finally made him glance at me. His face was twisted with rage. His boot drove into Raphael's side again.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 828

I couldn't breathe, "Please! He can't even fight you!"

Leone grabbed Raphael by the collar and pulled him upright once more. Raphael's head rolled slightly against his shoulder. His eyes stayed closed. His lips parted as he dragged in a slow breath.

And then Leone started to hit him again like a mad man. Raphael's body moved with every blow, but he never woke.

He struck him across the jaw, “Come on! You were so fucking brave before. Where did all that courage go?”

I slammed both fists against the glass, my voice tearing through the room, “You kill him, and you won’t have an island left to hide on. The Capones won’t just come for you, they’ll tear your entire operation apart piece by piece. They’ll come for every man who stood beside you, every safe house, every business, every person who helped you. STOP IT!”

Leone deliberately slammed Raphael back onto the floor. The impact echoed through the room.

Vance stood nearby, watching with that same detached interest, as if he were observing an experiment instead of a man being beaten.

Leone bent down, grabbed Raphael by the front of his jacket, and hauled him upright again. Raphael’s head dropped forward, completely limp.

“You walked into my home,” Leone growled.

A punch.

“You killed my men.”

Another.

“You shot me.”

His fist came down again and again.

Raphael’s head dropped. My vision blurred with tears, “Raph, please wake up. Please.”

Leone lifted his foot again.

I screamed, “DON’T!”

He stopped. I looked through the glass at Raphael. He wasn’t moving, I don’t know if he was breathing anymore. His face was turned toward me. Even unconscious, he looked like he was trying to find me.

Something inside my chest cracked so hard it felt like the pain spread through my entire body.

I pressed my palm against the glass, reaching toward Raphael. His hand lay stretched in my direction, only inches beyond my reach.

“I’m here,” I whispered, my voice shaking. “Raph, I’m right here.”

Leone's boot came down on Raphael's hand.

I screamed.

"Let's see how tough you really are when you wake up."

"Raph..." I whispered through a sob.

I couldn't stop staring at him as Leone wiped his knuckles against his shirt and looked at me through the glass.

"That's what happens when you push a man too far."

It's my fault...

It's all my fault.

I lifted my eyes to Leone with every bit of hatred I had left burning in my chest.

"You didn't beat him," I whispered. My eyes dropped to Raphael's unconscious body before returning to Leone, " You waited until he couldn't even defend himself. You needed a cage. You needed Vance. You needed him unconscious just to put your hands on him. You're not a man for doing this. So don't stand there and call yourself one."

Leone's jaw tightened as I gave him a cold, bitter smile.

"And thank you," I whispered, "You just made me realize that I never loved you. I was only stupid enough to mistake what I felt for something worth calling love."

Leone stared at me for several seconds. His face had gone completely still, "You'll regret saying that."

I didn't look away, "I already regret wasting the time."

Before he could answer, the doors at the far end of the room burst open. Two soldiers came running inside, Boss!"

Leone turned sharply, "What?"

The first man was breathing hard, his radio bouncing against his chest, "We have a situation."

"What kind?"

"You need to come now."

Leone's expression hardened, "Fucking talk."

The soldier swallowed, "We counted them twice. There are at least eighty boats."

Leone stared at him, "Eighty?"

"Yes, boss."

"Heading where?"

The soldier looked toward the others, "Here."

"

Leone cursed under his breath, his eyes immediately went to Raphael. For a second, he simply stared at him. Then he stepped forward and drove his boot into Raphael's ribs.

"Son of a bitch!"

I screamed, "STOP IT!"

Raphael's body shifted across the floor.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 829

Leone looked down at him with pure fury, "He was inside this facility for too long. Armed. Moving through our systems. Killing guards. Cutting cameras."

Then his gaze landed on the phone lying near the weapons Raphael had surrendered.

"And carrying a fucking phone."

Leone walked towards his stuff, bent and snatched it up. His thumb moved across the screen, then he violently threw the phone onto the table until it broke into pieces.

Then he turned toward Vance, "You."

Vance looked up.

Leone crossed the room and grabbed the metal collar around his neck, yanking him forward, "You're staying here."

Vance's hand closed around Leone's wrist, "I have work to do."

"You've done enough."

Leone shoved him toward the cage controls, "Lock him up. I want you to keep him alive. That's your job now," then his gaze shifted toward me, "And you keep her alive too."

Leone stepped closer until they were almost face to face.

"If either of them dies while I'm gone, you'll wish you had been on the other side of that bullet."

He released Vance, then his attention moved across the room. Dad was still slumped in the chair. He walked over to him, "Gio."

Leone crouched in front of him. He placed two fingers against Dad's neck and checked his pulse.

Then he touched his cheek, "Come on."

Dad's eyelids fluttered but didn't open.

Leone glared at Vance, "You said it was mild."

"It is."

"How long?"

"Less than an hour."

Leone's eyes hardened, "He better wake up."

He stood and straightened Dad's jacket almost absently, the way someone might fix a father's collar without thinking, then he looked back at Vance.

"If he isn't awake within twenty minutes... I will make you regret every second you've spent breathing in this building."

Vance said nothing.

Leone pointed toward Raphael, "Keep him alive," then toward me, "Keep her alive," and then his eyes settled on Dad, "And keep him alive."

\

He turned toward the soldiers.

“Move.”

The men rushed after him the doors slammed open. Leone stopped once more at the threshold and looked back at the room. His eyes held mine for one long second before he left and the doors shut behind him.

I looked at Raphael again, my breath catching at the sight of him.

The damage was worse than I’d realized.

A cut split the skin along his cheek, a thin line of blood trailing toward his jaw. Blood stained the corner of his mouth, and another dark streak had dried beneath his nose.

His face was already swelling.

Purple bruises were spreading across his cheekbone and along his jaw, some darker than others. His lip was spli and his skin looked pale beneath all that blood.

But he was still breathing.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to look away. I needed to get out. I looked around the cage. There had to be something.

Anything.

A weak body didn’t mean a useless body. I pushed myself away from the glass and nearly fell.

My knees buckled.

I caught myself against the mattress and waited until the room stopped spinning.

Come on, Gianna.

Think.

My eyes moved over the walls, the mattress, the narrow metal frame beneath it, the drain near the corner. Then I noticed the examination tray mounted into the wall. A thin metal bracket held it in place.

I dragged myself toward it.

My fingers slipped underneath the edge and I pulled, nothing happened so, I pulled harder.

Pain shot through my shoulders, “Come on...”

The bracket creaked. I stopped and looked toward Vance. He was sitting a few feet away. He had wrapped a cloth around his wounded arm and was cutting away the blood-soaked sleeve with a pair of scissors.

He wasn't helping me, he wasn't stopping me either. He was watching and smiling. That smile made something inside me burn.

I grabbed the tray again, this time I used my whole weight. The metal screamed against the wall. The bracket finally gave, the tray dropped into my hands.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 830

I almost fell backward with it.

I stared at what I had. It wasn't much, just a thin steel tray with a sharp corner but it was something. I turned toward the glass.

I staggered toward the nearest panel of glass. Raphael was on the other side of it. I lifted the tray and slammed the corner against the glass.

Vance's smile widened as I hit it again and again. Pain ripped through my wrist. The glass barely moved. I raised the tray again, "Gianna."

I ignored him and swung. The sound echoed through the room. I swung again. My arms shook. My vision blurred.

"You're going to hurt yourself long before you break it." Vance said calmly, continuing to clean the wound in his arm.

I glared at him, "Shut up," I lifted the tray and struck the glass harder, screaming now, "Wake the fuck up!"

The tray slipped from my fingers. It clattered onto the floor. I pressed both palms against the glass and stared at him.

His eyes stayed closed, "Please, Raph."

Behind me, Vance gave a quiet laugh. I turned slowly. He was tightening the fresh bandage around his arm, completely calm despite the blood on his clothes. His eyes dropped to the broken tray, then back to me.

"Raph..." I whispered as I grabbed the broken tray again and slammed it against the glass.

Vance finished wrapping his arm, “You’ll hurt yourself long before you hurt that.”

He lifted one finger and tapped the glass.

The sound made my teeth clench.

“This isn’t ordinary glass. It’s built in layers. Transparent ceramic. Reinforced polycarbonate. Several armor layers bonded together.”

He tapped it again.

He smiled, “You could hit it with a hammer. A pipe. You could even put a bullet through the outside layer,” his finger slid across the surface, “And it would still hold. The force doesn’t travel through one piece,” he continued. ” It spreads through the layers. Each layer takes part of the impact. That’s why you don’t get one clean break,” he tilted his head, “So keep hitting it. Go ahead.”

I raised the tray, “Maybe I’ll get lucky.”

“You won’t.”

I slammed it against the glass again. The pain shot through my wrist.

Vance didn’t even blink, “See?”

I swung again.

And he laughed under his breath, “You’re wasting energy you don’t have.”

I stopped.

He stepped closer, “And don’t start thinking about the edges. The frame is reinforced too.”

My eyes moved toward the frame. He walked along the outside of the cage, dragging one finger across the metal frame.

“No weak corner. No hinge you can reach. No screws sitting there waiting for you to turn them. It was built like a box. A containment box.”

He pointed at the door.

“That isn’t a normal lock either. There’s no keyhole.”

He tapped the small black panel beside it.

“The door is controlled by the facility’s security network. The system decides whether it opens. And right now, it doesn’t recognize you as someone who is allowed to leave. So hit it as much as you want, sweetheart. You’re not getting out by force.”

I stared at him.

He enjoyed saying it.

Every word.

Every second of watching me realize how trapped I was.

“As I said, the only thing in this entire building that can open that cage,” he said, “is the system itself,” he tapped the panel, “And you don’t have access to it.”

I looked past him.

At Raphael.

At his beautiful bloodied face.

At his chest rising and falling.

My fingers tightened around the tray again, “Then I’ll find another way.”

I didn’t need to know how yet.

I only needed to remember who I had at my side.

And if Vance thought this cage was the end of the road, he was about to learn how badly he had underestimated us.

I know some of you might say things are dragging, but I promise there’s a reason for it. I can’t give you a satisfying climax if everything gets wrapped up in a chapter or two. I need to let the characters sit in the mess for a while so that when the resolution finally comes, it feels earned.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 831

Gianna

I pressed my forehead against the glass. The cold seeped into my skin, but I barely noticed it.

My eyes stayed on Raphael.

Blood had dried along his cheek, but a fresh line had started beneath his nose and disappeared toward his mouth. Another dark stain spread across the collar of his black shirt.

I kept staring at his chest.

Up

Down.

Up.

Down.

I counted every breath because it was the only thing I could do.

“Please,” I whispered, my fingers flattened against the glass, “Come on, Raph, wake up.”

My voice broke.

I swallowed and tried again, “Please wake up.

A tear slid down my cheek, then another. I didn’t wipe them away this time. I just kept staring. His breathing had become so quiet that every few seconds panic crawled up my spine and made me wonder if I had imagined the movement.

I let out a shaking breath. My lips almost touched the glass. My voice was barely there, “You don’t get to leave me here after coming all this way.”

A small sob escaped before I could stop it.

I lowered my head, “Please, Raph.”

I hated the sound of my own voice.

His face was still turned away from me, “Just open your eyes, please.”

I watched another breath leave him while I silently cried, hot tears streaming down my face while I kept my forehead pressed against the glass.

Behind me, something moved.

I heard metal scrape. I didn't turn. I didn't care what was happening around me, not until I knew he was fine I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Then came a sharp electrical crack and Vance screamed. I spun around involuntarily and watched as his body jerked violently.

The metal collar around his neck flashed with blue white sparks. His hands flew toward it, but his fingers couldn't find a grip before another burst of electricity ripped through him.

His back slammed against the wall, as another jolt cut him off.

My eyes went to the other person in the room, Dad was standing there now. His chair had been pushed several feet behind him. One hand gripped the edge of the table for support while the other held a small black control device.

His hair was messy. His jacket was crooked. His face was pale from the drug but his eyes were awake and furious. He looked at Vance like he had just discovered an insect crawling across his floor.

"You."

Vance's knees buckled. Dad pressed the button again. The collar sparked while Vance screamed.

Dad's expression didn't change, "How dare you?"

Vance dropped to one knee, coughing.

Dad took one slow step toward him, "You drugged me."

Vance tried to straighten himself, "I had to-"

Dad pressed the button. The electricity snapped through the collar again. Vance's words died in his throat.

I stared at my father. I had seen him angry before, but this was different. I had never actually seen him hurt someone with his own hands. He had always kept that side of himself away from me, letting other men handle the violence while he stayed behind closed doors.

But this time, he was the one holding the remote.

The one making Vance suffer.

"You put something into my body," Dad said quietly, "Without my permission. Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Vance's breathing became rough, "I was trying to keep you calm."

Dad gave a humorless smile, "Calm?" he stopped in front of him, "You forget your place."

Vance looked up.

Dad leaned down slightly, "You work for me. You exist because I allowed you to. And now you think you can put your hands on me?"

He pressed the button, the collar sparked again. Vance's body jerked. I watched him fall against the wall.

Dad stared down at him, "The only reason you're still breathing is because I have spent years paying for your little experiments."

Vance coughed.

Dad stepped closer, "I funded your labs, I covered your failures. I paid for equipment, staff, buildings, security, and transport. And you still managed to turn all of it into this fucking disaster."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 832

Vance looked toward me. Dad noticed, and his gaze followed. Then he looked at Raphael and a certain darkness passed over his face

Then his eves returned to Vance. "You've cost me more money than I care to count And it's the only fucking reason why I haven't killed you yet!" Dad crouched in front of him, "Because you're going to repay every fucking penny

His voice was calm.

You're going to recover every loss your research caused me. Every facility expense. Every failed project Every shipment. Every dollar wasted because you couldn't control your own work," he grabbed the metal collar and pulled Vance's face closer, "And when I decide I've gotten everything I can from you... I'm going to kill you."

Vance's face went still as Dad released the collar. Vance dropped back against the wall, one hand gripping his throat.

Dad stood over him, "Consider yourself fucking lucky I've got bigger problems to deal with right now. Otherwise, I'd make you regret giving me one more reason to put you in the ground."

I stared at my father through the glass, then my eyes moved back to Raphael. He was still unconscious, still bleeding, still breathing.

Dad came closer to the glass, his eyes settled on the blood covering Raphael's face, then on the bruises, then on the hand lying motionless beside him.

Dad's jaw tightened, "Who did that?"

I looked at him, neither of us needed to say the name.

Leone.

Dad's fingers tightened around the remote and I turned back to Raphael before Dad could say anything else.

My forehead touched the glass again, "Dad, please," my voice came out small, "Let us go."

Dad's answer was cold, "It's too late for that, Gianna. You brought him into this yourself. You dragged the Capones into a situation they had no business being in, and now we're standing in a mess."

I shook my head, "You're looking at this the wrong way."

His eyebrows pulled together

I kept my eyes on Raphael, "He can fix this."

Dad went quiet, "What?"

I swallowed, peeking at Vance to see if he was listening in on us but he was too disoriented from the shock collar, "If money is the reason you kept Vance around, then you don't need him anymore"

Dad stared at me

I turned toward him, "Raphael can make you money."

His expression changed slightly

I pulled my knees to my chest, "You've spent years pouring money into Vance's work. You paid for his labs His people. His equipment. His research. These fucking cages. You kept feeding that operation because you believed the return would eventually make it worth what you lost but it was all a lie, Dad."

Dad sucked in a sharp breath, "You don't know what you're talking about."

I pointed toward Raphael, “He can make more money than Vance ever could.”

“Gianna-”

“No, listen to me,” my voice shook, but I didn’t stop, “You have no idea what he can do.”

I looked back at Raphael, my chest tightening as I silently prayed that everything would unfold exactly the way I needed it to.

“He handles money for people who can’t afford mistakes. Chicago’s laundering networks don’t run on luck. Vincenzo doesn’t hand that kind of work to just anyone. Raphael built systems around money that would have buried lesser men.”

Dad’s expression remained hard.

I pressed my palm against the glass.

“He knows where money goes before it moves. He knows how to make it disappear, how to move it, how to protect it, how to make it come back clean,” I looked directly at Dad, “And you think Vance is more valuable than that?”

Dad said nothing.

I lowered my voice, “Give him a chance.”

His eyes narrowed, “A chance?”

“Yes,” I glanced toward the equipment table, “Test him, right now. Give him a laptop.”

Dad stared at me as if I had lost my mind, “A laptop?”

“Any laptop connected to your system.”

I pointed toward the computers outside the cage.

“Put one in front of him. Give him access to whatever you think is worth protecting. Accounts. Transfers. Records. Whatever you want.”

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Chapter 833

Dad’s jaw tightened, “And then?”

I looked back at Raphael. My heart hurt at the sight of him, “He doesn’t need a month He doesn’t need a year, I met Dad’s eyes again, “Give him one hour. If he’s as valuable as I claim, he’ll prove it and if he doesn’t then you lose nothing you haven’t already lost.”

Dad’s eyes remained on me.

“But if I’m right… you get everything you wanted without needing Vance to hurt another child.”

I could feel Dad watching me, but I didn’t care anymore. I wasn’t trying to save myself. I didn’t care what happened to me. I cared about the man lying on the other side of that glass.

His body was beaten and bruised and I needed him awake. I needed him thinking. Because I knew Raphael, give him a computer, give him a connection, give him one opening.

He would find the rest.

And if I could get a laptop into his hands, even for a few minutes, he might find a way through this place.

A way through the locks.

The security system.

The walls.

A way out.

I didn’t need to tell Dad that part. I just needed him to believe he was getting a business opportunity.

I looked at him again, “He’ll make you more money in an hour than Vance could ever manage.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed, “And you swear to that?”

I nodded, “I don’t swear lightly,” my voice softened as I glanced at Raphael, “I swear on him.”

Dad followed my gaze.

“You have no idea what he is,” I whispered, “You keep looking at him like he’s just another Capone. He isn’t. He’s worth more than every person in this room put together.”

Dad’s expression shifted slightly.

“Imagine what someone like him could do for you,” I continued. “Not just with money. With everything,” I touched my fingertips to the glass, “You’ve spent years forcing yourself to work around the things that are difficult for you. Making people repeat things. Asking them to read things for you. Memorizing what you can and finding other ways around what you can’t.”

Dad’s jaw tightened.

“Raphael wouldn’t make you keep doing that He would build around you He’d change the way the information reaches you He’d make the systems fit you instead of making you fight the systems”

I swallowed

“He can do that,” I said quietly, “And he’d probably do it without making you feel like there was anything wrong with you in the first place.”

The doors suddenly burst open. Leone came through them at a run. His breathing was hard, his wounded shoulder already bleeding through the bandage again. Two soldiers followed him, but Leone waved them off before they could say anything.

Then he saw Dad standing and he stopped dead. For half a second, his face went blank, then he laughed,

“Gio.”

Dad slowly turned toward him, looking like he was still deep in his thoughts.

Leone dragged a hand through his hair, letting out another breathless laugh, “Fuck. You’re awake,” he looked relieved, “I was losing my fucking mind out there,” Leone pointed toward the security monitors,

It’s the Capones and I think I saw Costello boats too.”

Dad’s expression shifted. His eyes returned to mine, and I gave him a small nod.

Leone walked farther into the room, talking faster now, “They’re coming from the south and east. We’ve counted around eighty boats, maybe more. They’re moving in groups, and they know exactly where we are. The Council is going to fuck us hard for missing that meeting.”

His eyes darted toward the monitors.

“So what do I do? Do I start blowing them out of the water?” he pointed toward the weapons controls,” We can take thirty, maybe forty before they even reach the island. We

have the guns. We have the range. We can hit them while they're still out there. Tell me what you want."

Dad didn't answer immediately. He walked toward the monitors. I watched him straighten his jacket as he studied the screens. One showed the shoreline, another displayed a rough map of the waters around the island. The red markers kept multiplying.

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Chapter 834

Dad's eyes moved across them slowly, "How did they find us?"

Leone's mouth tightened as his gaze drifted toward Raphael Dad followed his line of sight, and I immediately straightened, my body moving on instinct as if I could shield Raph from them. The glass was the only thing between us, and I hated that I couldn't put myself between Raphael and anyone who wanted to hurt him.

Leone pointed toward Raphael, his finger shaking with anger, "That bastard was inside our facility for too long. He had a phone, got through our security, and moved around this place before half our men even knew there was an intruder. He had access to systems he should never have been able to touch. Who the fuck else could've given them our location?"

He gave a bitter laugh.

"Fifteen seconds. That's all it took him to tear through our security with nothing but a phone. Fucking freak."

Dad looked at Raphael for several seconds, and swallowed then he looked back at the screens, "How many men?"

"We don't know."

"Ships?"

"Eighty confirmed. Could be more behind them."

"Aircraft?"

"Nothing on the radar yet. But we found a Capone-owned helicopter on the far side of the island. It's probably how he got here. We searched it. There was no sign anyone else came with him. No extra gear, no second set of supplies, nothing," he glanced toward Raphael, "He came alone. Flew straight here by himself."

“Artillery?”

“Nothing we’ve detected.”

Dad’s eyes narrowed, “Then we don’t know enough to start a full blown war.”

Leone stared at him, “Gio, they’re coming here as we speak.”

“I can see that.”

“We could destroy half their fleet before they reach the shore.”

“And then?”

Leone frowned.

Dad pointed toward the screen, “You destroy thirty boats Forty, if you’re lucky. What do you think. happens when the remaining boats reach the island? They won’t come ashore looking for a negotiation They will come ashore looking for blood”

Leone glanced at the monitor again.

Dad continued, “Eighty boats means we have no idea how many men are behind those hulls Two hundred? Five hundred? More? We would be fighting blind.”

Leone’s jaw tightened, “They’re the Capones.”

Yes.”

“They’ve come for him.”

“I know.”

Leone pointed toward Raphael, “So we hand him the fuck over and make them bend to our terms. We don’t need him.”

Dad looked at him, “No.”

Leone blinked, “No?”

“Not yet.”

Leone stared at him, his brow deeply furrowed, and for the first time in what felt like hours, a small spark of hope flickered inside my chest.

Dad turned fully toward him, “Trading one Capone for our lives isn’t enough.”

Leone's expression hardened, "Then what the fuck are we supposed to do?"

"Make them need the deal."

Leone went quiet. Dad walked toward the table and picked up one of the scattered papers.

"The Capones didn't send boats because they just wanted their brother. They sent them because they want to make sure nobody here survives," his finger rested on the island, "And if Costello is with them, this is no longer just a Capone problem."

Leone let out a sharp breath and dragged a hand over his face, "Yeah, I know. We've pissed off the fucking Council. You should've never brought them into this. I could've taken Gianna right out from under their noses, but you wouldn't let me."

"Because I'm not stupid, Leone." Dad gave him a steady look, "The Costellos helped build the Toricelli power base here in Philadelphia. Their backing is worth more than you seem to understand."

Leone cursed under his breath.

Dad's voice became colder, "And if Costello backs away from us, we lose our protection."

Leone rubbed his jaw, "So we can't fight."

"No."

"We can't surrender."

"Not blindly."

Leone glared at Raphael, "Then what?"

Dad finally gave him the answer, "First, we don't shoot."

Leone looked at him, "Even if they start firing?"

"Then we defend ourselves," Dad's eyes hardened, "But we don't fire first. The first man to fire gives the other side a reason to stop negotiating. Right now, they know we have their brother and they're right," his gaze moved to me and I glared at him, "They also know we have his weakness."

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Chapter 835

My stomach twisted

Did he just ?

Dad continued, “That gives us leverage.”

Leone stepped closer, “Raphael for safe passage?”

“Too simple.”

“Then what?”

“Raphael and Gianna.”

Leone’s expression shifted, and he immediately shook his head. My heart lurched, and my eyes widened before I could stop them.

Dad nodded toward the fleet outside, “But not as prisoners. We offer them a controlled exchange.”

Leone frowned, “How?”

Dad’s eyes stayed on the approaching boats, “The Capones will desperately want their brother back, they will sign a formal agreement guaranteeing that the Toricelli organization, our families, our businesses, and our men remain untouched after the exchange for his life.”

Leone’s expression tightened, “And if they refuse?”

“Then we have a problem, but I don’t think they’ll refuse. He is... valuable,” Dad said, his voice dropping, and I smiled, “But we don’t hand Raphael over without protection. The second we release him, they could turn around and come for every man, every family member, and every piece of our operation.”

He stopped, his eyes moving briefly to Raph before settling on me. Then he turned back to Leone.

“So the agreement comes first. Raphael is exchanged only after the Capones accept the terms and the Council witnesses the deal. We make sure the peace is official before we put him in their hands.”

Leone nodded slowly, “And after that?”

Dad’s gaze shifted toward me, “They’ll want Gianna. And that’s where we make the second deal.”

My stomach dropped. I blinked, trying to make sense of his words. My mouth went dry as I stared at him.

What the hell did he mean?

Leone stared at him. “You’re actually going to give her back?”

Dad’s expression turned cold, “Do you see another way out of this mess?”

Leone’s jaw tightened. He looked toward the approaching fleet before shaking his head, “No.”

Dad gave him a single nod, “Then listen carefully The Council is already furious with us We missed their meeting We ignored their summons. And we’ve kept Vance’s work hidden from them for years”

Leone’s expression darkened, “It’s clear, that they won’t fucking help us Your point?”

Dad looked at him like the answer should have been obvious, “We aren’t going to ask them to help us, you idiot We’re going to give them something. The Council doesn’t care about our excuses. They care about power, money, and control. So that’s exactly what we’re going to put on the table.”

I looked toward Raphael, wondering if any of Dad’s words had reached him but he hadn’t moved. He was still lying exactly where I’d left him, unconscious and silent.

Leone crossed his arms, “What exactly are we giving them?”

Dad let out a slow breath, “First, we admit we broke their order. We don’t make excuses. We accept a penalty.”

Leone’s eyebrows lifted, “How much?”

“Enough to hurt. Twenty percent of the Toricelli operation’s liquid assets.”

Leone’s face hardened, “Twenty percent?”

“Yes.”

“That’s fucking insane!”

“No,” Dad said quietly, “What’s insane is risking the entire organization because we’re too stubborn to pay a price. The Council wants to see that ignoring them has consequences. We give them those consequences,” he paused, “Then we give them Vance.”

My eyes immediately went to him. Vance's face changed. Dad didn't even look slightly bothered by his reaction.

"The entire operation," he said, "The research. The accounts. The facilities. The records. Every name connected to it. Everything we've funded and everything he's built under our protection."

Vance shook his head. "You can't-"

Dad slowly turned the remote in his hand, his expression completely calm. "I can."

Vance's mouth snapped shut. The color drained from his face as he finally understood that Dad wasn't making a threat. He was reminding him who was in control.

Dad looked back at Leone, "The Council gets access to everything Vance built with our money. They get control of the operation. We hand them something valuable enough to make them forget how badly we pissed them off."

Leone's eyes narrowed, "And Gianna?"

Dad's gaze shifted to me. From me, it moved to Raphael before returning to my face, "I'm not going to throw my daughter away, Leone." 15 Bor

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Chapter 836

My breath caught

We use what she means to Raphael We ask the Capones for an alliance"

I sucked in a silent breath, while Leone's expression changed completely, "You mean-"

"Yes," Dad's voice stayed confident, "You will marry congressman Daniel Whitmore's daughter The marriage gives us a connection outside the syndicates, someone with access, influence, and a reason to keep the Toricellis protected."

Leone fell silent. His eyes shifted away, his jaw tightening as if he'd already figured out the rest of Dad's plan and didn't want to hear it said aloud.

Dad's gaze returned to me, "And Gianna will marry Raphael Capone." 1

My heart stopped.

Dad didn't look away from me, "We don't need Vance anymore. Raphael Capone can do more. He has the technology. He has the connections. He has the Capone name behind him. He can build something faster, cleaner, and more profitable than Vance ever could," his voice hardened, "And he'll do it for her."

Dad looked toward Raphael's unconscious body.

Leone slowly nodded, "So we give the Council Vance and his entire operation. We give the Capones Raphael's freedom, then Gianna becomes the bond between the two families."

Dad gave him a single nod, "Exactly. The Council gets money and Vance's operation," then toward Leone, "You get your political marriage," then toward Raphael, "And we get a connection to the Capones that benefits both families."

Finally, his eyes settled on me.

"And Gianna becomes the reason Raphael Capone has every reason in the world to keep the Toricellis profitable instead of destroying us."

Leone stared at Dad for a moment before a slow, uncertain smile touched his mouth, "If this works." He let out a quiet breath, "And that's one fucking huge if..."

Dad stepped closer to Leone and cupped the side of his face, almost like he was looking at his own son.

"It will work. They don't want federal attention on their doorstep. A bloodbath this size won't stay buried. Bodies, missing men, hundreds of children present right now in this facility, destroyed boats... sooner or later, someone in the government starts asking questions. All the families will want this contained before the death toll gets high enough to bring the feds down on all of us. And that's how we turn this disaster into something bigger."

Leone shook his head, "And if the Capones refuse... to everything?"

Dad's expression went cold. "Then there is no negotiation left. We go to war, and the first thing we do is we toss Raphael's decapitated head onto the dock. We put it at their feet and let the Capones understand exactly what their refusal cost them."

Every bit of warmth left my body. I shot to my feet and stumbled toward the corner of the cage, as close to Dad as the glass would let me get, "No!"

Dad's eyes shifted toward me.

I tried to grab the glass with both hands, my fingers curling, "No, you don't. You fucking touch him and I'll kill you," I slammed my palm against the glass, "If you touch Raphael, I will fucking kill you."

Dad stared at me for a long moment, then his eyes moved to Leone, “Come.”

Leone raised an eyebrow, “What?”

Dad reached out, caught Leone by the arm, and pulled him toward the door, “Now.”

Leone resisted for half a second, “Gio, wait-”

“I said now.”

Dad’s grip tightened. Leone glanced back at me before allowing himself to be dragged toward the exit.

I stayed pressed against the glass, “Dad!”

The door opened. Leone disappeared through it with Dad, and the heavy metal door slammed shut behind them..

I stood there, breathing hard. My hands were still shaking. Across from me, Raphael hadn’t moved. His body was lying exactly where Leone had left him. One arm stretched toward my side of the cage. His fingers were slightly curled.

“Raph...”

I stumbled toward the glass. My knees gave out before I reached it, and I slid down until I was sitting on the floor. The glass was cold against my shoulder. I turned my head.

He was only inches away but the glass might as well have been a mile thick.

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Chapter 837

I pressed my palm against it, “Wake up. Come on,” I wiped my face with the back of my hand, but another tear followed the first, “Don’t do this to me. Please”

Behind me, Vance moved. I looked over my shoulder. He was standing near the control panel. His breathing was heavy now.

His injured arm was pressed against his chest, and sweat had gathered along his forehead His shoulders were tense, his eyes moving between me and Raphael.

I turned back to Raphael.

“Raph,” a sob slipped out of me, I slapped both hands against the glass, “You don’t get to leave me here. Wake the fuck up!”

My palm slammed against the glass again and again and Vance flinched behind me.

“Wake up, Raphael!” I hit the glass again, my tears fell freely now, “I don’t need you to fight anyone. I don’t need you to save me right now. I just need you to open your eyes,” I stared at his face, “Just once.”

I pressed my cheek against the glass.

“Please, Raph,” my body shook with another sob, “Please wake up. They’re going to hurt you.”

The lights went out, every light in the facility died. I lifted my head. For a few seconds, there was nothing but darkness and the low hum of machinery winding down somewhere beyond the walls.

Then, metal slammed over one of the windows. Heavy steel plates dropped into place over every window I could see, sealing the outside world away. The narrow strips of glass disappeared behind thick metal.

My heart started pounding, “What the hell…”

I pushed myself upright and looked around, the monitors were dead, the control panels had gone black.

Even the small red light above the cage door disappeared. A second later, emergency lights flickered on. Dim red lights washed everything in a dark glow.

Vance stood near the control station, his injured arm pressed against his chest. His face was tight as he stared at the dead screens.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The lockdown.”

Footsteps suddenly thundered down the hallway. Vance turned toward the door. The handle jerked and the door burst open.

A soldier rushed inside with his rifle raised, his breathing hard, “Boss!”

He looked around.

His eyes swept across the room, “Don Gio?” the soldier lowered his rifle slightly, confusion flashing across his face. “Where the hell is Don Toricelli?”

The soldier cursed under his breath and glanced toward the sealed windows.

“They’re here!” a voice echoed from behind the soldier.

My heart stopped, the words barely left his mouth before hope and terror hit me at the same time

They’re here.

The Capones.

The soldier turned toward the door. He started back into the hallway, then stopped, he looked over his shoulder at Vance, “If you see the boss, tell him they’re already inside the outer perimeter.”

Then he disappeared, the door slammed shut behind him. I stood completely still.

They’re here.

The Capones were here.

That should have made me feel safe.

Instead, cold fear spread through my stomach.

Because if they were close enough to reach this island, then Dad and Leone knew exactly what that meant.

My gaze dropped to Raphael, “Please… Please don’t let them use you against them.”

And then, the silence broke with a rough cough. For one second, I couldn’t move, then his fingers twitched.

“Raph?”

His chest convulsed with another harsh cough, and a small spray of blood escaped his mouth. His face twisted with pain, a strained sound slipping from his throat as he struggled to breathe. He tried to pull in a deeper breath, but the movement made his ribs seize, and he flinched sharply.

I dropped to my knees beside the glass, “Raph.”

His eyelids fluttered, then opened halfway.

His eyes were unfocused. He stared at the ceiling as if he couldn’t remember where he was. His breathing came unevenly, each breath followed by a small pause and then he said, “Fuck...”

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Chapter 838

Raphael

The first thing I felt was pain.

And it was everywhere.

My ribs burned every time I breathed. My jaw throbbed. Something warm had dried along my mouth, and when? tried to swallow, my throat felt scraped raw.

I stayed still for a few seconds, then the memory came back in pieces.

The gas.

Gianna.

Fuck, Gianna...

I tried to move my fingers, they answered. Then slowly, my eyes opened. The room swam in and out of focus. I blinked slowly, waiting for the walls to stop moving. My head felt heavy, like someone had filled it with wet sand.

Sevoflurane.

That explained the fog.

The bastard had knocked me out with anesthesia.

I tested my breathing. I drew in another breath and immediately regretted it, “Fuck.”

The word came out rough. I heard movement. Someone was crying. I turned my head. Pain shot from my neck into my shoulder.

I stopped.

Across the glass, Gianna sat with both hands pressed against it. Her face was wet, her eyes were red. She looked like she'd been crying for hours. She whispered something but I couldn't hear it.

I stared at her for a moment, trying to make my eyes focus, "Gianna?"

Her whole face changed, her voice fell on my ears, "Yes."

I studied her for another second, letting my eyes move over her from head to toe. I checked her face, her arms, her neck, the way she was sitting, looking for any bruise, blood, or mark that hadn't been there before.

She was shaken and exhausted, but there was no sign that anyone had put their hands on her.

No one had touched her.

At least, not physically.

That was enough.

I tried to sit up and my body immediately disagreed. A deep ache tore through my ribs, and my arm shook beneath me. I stopped halfway and breathed through it.

Right.

Someone had been busy while I was unconscious.

Nooked down at myself, my black shirt was stained with blood. My hands felt stiff. My ribs screamed every time I shifted. I touched my lower lip and blood clung to my fingers.

I looked at Gianna again, "What happened?"

She stared at me as if she couldn't believe I was asking, "You passed out."

I nodded once, "I remember that part."

She swallowed, "Leone."

My eyes narrowed, "What did he do?"

Her fingers tightened against the glass, "He beat you after you were unconscious. He punched you. He kicked you. He kept hitting you when you couldn't even wake up."

I stared at the floor for a few seconds before a laugh escaped me at the sheer absurdity of what she'd just told me. It started low, rough, deep in my chest, then dragged painfully across my ribs. I winced and pressed a hand against my side, "Fuck."

Gianna stared at me like I'd finally lost whatever was left of my mind, "What?"

I looked up at her, and a grin slowly spread across my split lip, "He waited until I was unconscious?"

Another laugh broke out, this one was louder, I couldn't stop it. I pictured Leone standing over me, all that rage packed into his stupid face, finally getting his chance to play the big bad fucking Don because I couldn't open my eyes. I laughed harder but my ribs punished me for it, "Jesus Christ."

Ibent forward, holding my side.

Gianna's expression darkened, "Raph."

I tried to catch my breath, "He really did that?"

"Yes."

I looked at her, "While I was unconscious?"

"Yes!"

That sent me off again, a harsh, breathless laugh tore out of me, "Fuck me," I dragged a hand over my face, "That is pathetic."

"You're laughing."

"Yeah."

"You were beaten bloody."

"I can see that."

"You could have internal injuries."

"Probably."

Her mouth fell open.

agrive

I looked down at myself, then back at her, “He had me unconscious, locked in a cage, surrounded by his men, and apparently decided that was the perfect time to discover his inner warrior,” I snorted, “He probably looked fucking magnificent.”

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Chapter 839

Ganna’s eyes narrowed, “Stop.”

“I can picture it,” I leaned my head against the glass, laughing again, “Big tough Leone. Standing over an unconscious man. Throwing punches like he’s fighting the devil himself,” I wiped at the corner of my mouth,” He probably got tired.”

“Raph.”

I grinned, “I’m sorry, but that’s fucking hilarious.”

“It wasn’t.”

I glanced at her and she wasn’t smiling, not even a little. Her fingers were now curled into fists, still pressed against the glass, but her knuckles had gone pale.

I tilted my head, fighting another laugh despite the sharp pain in my ribs, “Come on, ballerina.”

Her eyes narrowed at me.

“Admit it.”

“Admit what?”

A crooked smile pulled at my mouth, “That had to be funny to watch.”

Her expression hardened, “Funny?”

I gave another short laugh, “Leone beating the shit out of an unconscious Capone because that was the only version of me he had the balls to fight? That’s comedy.”

Gianna’s stare didn’t soften, “You think it was funny for me?”

My smile faded slightly when I saw the look in her eyes.

She glared at me through the glass like she wanted to hit me hard, “I was standing right there. I watched him hit you. I watched your head move every time his fist hit you. I watched him kick you while you didn’t even know where you were. I didn’t know if you were breathing. I didn’t know if he’d broken your neck. I didn’t know if he’d crushed your ribs. I didn’t know if the next hit would be the one that killed you,” her palm flattened against the glass again, “And I couldn’t reach you.”

The grin disappeared from my face completely.

She tilted her head to the side, “So no, Raph. It wasn’t funny,” I opened my mouth but she didn’t let me speak, Maybe one day I’ll find it funny. Maybe someone will beat me unconscious while you’re trapped behind another cage, and you’ll have to stand there and watch without being able to do anything.”

I went completely still.

“Maybe you’ll be screaming my name while someone kicks me across the floor. And maybe when you can’t tell whether I’m alive or dead, you’ll laugh because it looks funny!”

The room seemed to shrink around us. My smile was gone completely. Gianna stared at me through the glass, breathing hard. I looked at her hands, then her face, then back at her eyes.

“No,” the word came out low and immediate. I slowly moved closer to her, my eyes locked on hers, “I would never let it get that far,” her eyes blinked, “So don’t ever put that thought in my head again.”

Then we both shifted toward the glass at almost the same time, ending up directly opposite each other.

Her forehead rested against one side, mine rested against the other. The glass was cold between us

She looked at me for a long moment, then her hand moved against the glass. I placed mine over it, our palms lined

Her fingers trembled beneath mitte, “I was scared,” she whispered.

I nodded at her, “I’m sorry.”

“I thought I’d lost you.”

My throat tightened. I didn’t know what to do with that feeling, so I stayed there, close to her.

My forehead remained against the glass, “You didn’t. I’m right here.”

She closed her eyes in relief.

I watched her for a few seconds before adding quietly, “And for the record...”

Her eyes opened and I gave her the faintest hint of a smile.

“Leone is still a fucking coward.”

A tiny breath escaped her nose, it was almost a laugh.

I smiled. My thumb moved slowly against the glass, following the shape of her hand on the other side.

I pushed myself upright again, this time I made it, my back hit the wall.

Gianna immediately shook her head, “Don’t move too much.”

“I need to get closer to you.”

“You can barely sit up.”

I ignored her and dragged myself toward the glass anyway. There wasn’t much distance left between us, but even that small movement sent a sharp line of pain through my side.

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topped and sucked in a breath through my teeth, “Fucking hell.”

My hand went to my ribs.

The pain came in waves now, deep and hot beneath the skin. I pressed my fingers carefully against the area, testing it.

“Three, maybe four,” I muttered.

Gianna’s eyes widened, “What?”

“At least three ribs,” I said calmly, “Possibly more. The pain is concentrated along the lower right side, and it gets/ worse when I twist or take a deep breath.”

Gianna stared at me with disbelief.

I looked down at my ribs, thinking through the damage, “No obvious breathing restriction. So they’re probably fractured, not badly displaced.”

Her face tightened, “You’re diagnosing yourself right now?”

“Someone has to,” I shifted my shoulder against the glass and settled into a position that put less pressure on my side, “Until I can get an X-ray, three is the minimum estimate.”

Gianna’s face crumpled again, “We’re getting out,” she whispered quickly, almost as if she needed to convince herself before she could convince me, “Then we’ll find a doctor. A good one. Someone we can trust. Someone who won’t lie to us or hurt you. We’ll get you checked properly, Raph. We’ll make sure you’re okay.”

I watched her wipe the tears from her cheeks, and every instinct in me screamed to reach through the glass and do it for her. It took everything I had not to press my hand against the glass and pretend it was her skin beneath my fingers.

“Dad wants to negotiate because he doesn’t have another choice. I heard him talking to Leone. They’re already here,” her eyes moved toward the sealed doors, “Vincenzo will get us out, right?”

I watched her talk, the words coming faster than she could control, breaking apart between shaky breaths. Tears kept sliding down her face, and she wiped them away only for more to replace them.

She was scared.

I wanted to pull her into my arms badly but instead, I stayed where I was and watched her through the barrier, forcing every violent instinct in me back under control.

Whoever had put that fear in her had made a mistake.

And I loved her enough to make that mistake very expensive./

“I already sent him a message before they took me. I told him to accept their terms, so we can get you out of here.” She stared at me for several seconds, then she shook her head, “Raph... Dad and Leone were talking about the boats. They said there are eighty of them. What if Vincenzo doesn’t agree and they hurt you for it?”

“Vincenzo knows what he’s doing, Gianna. We’ve been in worse situations than this. This isn’t our first rodeo with this kind of shit.” I gave her a small smile, hoping it would settle some of the fear in her eyes.

It didn’t.

“I heard what they’re planning...”

en she told me everything.

Not every detail but most of it was already clear from what I'd heard before she was taken. But she filled in the pieces I hadn't known: first, they wanted to use me as the trade for peace with the Capones. Then they planned to hand Vance, his research, and the entire operation over to the Council as payment for their protection. And finally- came the part that made my jaw tighten, the alliance Giovanni had built around Gianna and me.

A marriage.

He wanted to turn his daughter into the bridge between the Toricellis and the Capones, with me on the other side of it.

It was a clean political move and exactly the kind of plan a man made when he had run out of better choices.

Gianna kept talking, explaining what she'd overheard between her father and Leone, but my attention had already moved to the pieces beneath the plan.

Giovanni wasn't trying to save his organization.

He was trying to make sure that when this was over, the Toricellis came out of it stronger than they had gone in.

And he had just made one very important mistake. He still thought Gianna was something he owned. Something he could put on the table, attach a price to, and trade when it suited him.

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was wrong.

She was never his to bargain with and she certainly wasn't his to hand over.

If Gianna and I took the next step together, it would happen because we chose it, not because her father needed a way out, not because the Council wanted a deal.

And definitely not because some desperate man had decided her future was another asset on his balance sheet.

I looked toward the floor for a moment, then back at her, "That's his plan?"

“Yes,” she wiped at her cheek, but another tear slipped down before she could catch it, “And maybe I made it worse. I told him he didn’t need Vance. I told him you could make him more money in a month than Vance could make in years. I was trying to make him see that you’re worth more alive than dead. But he still said if the deal fails, he’ll kill you first.”

She swallowed hard, her face turning red.

“I thought if I made him understand what you can do, he’d leave you alone. I thought I could make you too valuable for him to hurt but I couldn’t,” she shook her head, “And now he knows exactly how much you’re worth. I was trying to save you, and I only gave him another way to use you. I ruin everything. It’s my fault.”

Her breathing hitched.

Slowly, she lifted her face and met my eyes. They were red and swollen from crying, but she still looked at me as if she were waiting for me to blame her.

“It’s all my fault, Raph,” she whispered.

She suddenly pushed herself to her feet and backed away from the glass, as if even standing close to me was something she no longer deserved.

“All of it.”

I watched the tears gather along her lashes. Slowly, I forced myself upright, standing tall, “Hey, Mess…” I shook my head, “Come on. No. None of this is your fault. You didn’t do this to me. I came here because I chose to. I knew exactly what I was walking into. You never asked me to come here. You never forced me. I made that choice myself. So don’t you dare carry something that belongs to me.”

A violent boom shook the facility, the floor jumped beneath me.

Gianna flinched so hard her shoulders snapped upward. Her eyes flew toward the sealed doors as another distant blast rolled through the building.

“No. No, no…” she stumbled backward, “Vincenzo isn’t going to listen. He’s going to refuse. Dad will hurt you. He’ll kill you.”

Another explosion sounded somewhere outside.

She covered her ears, “Leone will kill you right in front of me. He’ll do it just to hurt me, and it’ll be my fault.”

“Gianna.”

She didn’t hear me, her breathing turned fast and shallow, “It’ll be because of me. Everything will be because of me.”

“Gianna,” I pressed my palm harder against the glass, “Look at me.”

Her eyes stayed on the doors.

“Don’t look there.”

A burst of gunfire cracked somewhere beyond the walls and she jumped again.

“Look at me.”

Slowly, her eyes came back to mine.

“Only me.”

Her breathing was still shaking but at least she was looking at me.

“Forget the gunshots. Forget the explosions. Don’t listen to any of it,” I kept my eyes locked on hers, “Look at me. You’re here. I’m here. That’s all you need to think about right now. None of this is your fault.”

Her eyes filled again, “It is.”

“No.”

“It is!” her voice broke through the room, “I wanted to come back here! I was the one who begged you to let me go to Philadelphia. I was the one who kept asking until the council got involved. I shouldn’t have come back, but I did anyway! You’re here because of me!”

“Gianna-”

“You’re trapped in a cage because of me!” her voice rose with every word, “You’re beaten and bleeding because of me! I should have listened. I should have listened to everyone. I should have left you alone! I should have stayed away from you!”

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y brow tightened.

Where the fuck did that come from?

She kept going before I could make sense of it, “I was so fucking stupid. I just didn’t want to let you go. I thought I could fix myself for you. I was selfish!”

My entire body went still. I didn’t say a word. I’d never heard her say anything like that before.

She stared at me through the glass, “I thought if I changed enough, if I became better, maybe I could be worthy of you.”

I said nothing because I forgot about the pain in my ribs. I forgot about the blood drying on my face. I forgot about the sounds outside.

Worthy?

The word lodged in my mind, completely foreign. She had never said anything like that to me. I hadn’t even known she thought that way about herself.

“I thought maybe I could become someone who deserved you.”

My fingers slowly curled into fists by my sides.

She shook her head, “But instead I ruined your life.”

I stared at her. I couldn’t find an answer fast enough, not because I didn’t have one, but because I was trying to understand how she had managed to carry a thought like that.

Fix herself for me?

Be worthy of me?

Deserve me?

And then there was the part that bothered me even more.

Everyone.

She had said everyone.

My eyes narrowed slightly.

Who had told her that?

Who had made her believe she needed to become someone else before she could stand beside me?

I shook my head, “You’re looking at this the wrong way. Your mother had just died. You lost Denise. You lost three of your closest friends. You got hit in the head and spent weeks trying to figure out what was real and what wasn’t,” I kept my voice low, “You were hurt, Gianna. You were grieving. You were confused. You wanted something familiar.”

I held her gaze, but her frown deepened.

“Your family was familiar. Your father was there. Your home was there. You knew those people before everything went to hell,” I paused, “There is nothing wrong with wanting that when your entire life has fallen apart.”

Her head moved slowly from side to side, “But it wasn’t about that.”

rowned, “What?”

“It wasn’t about being with my family,” her voice was quieter now, but there was something firm beneath it, “I was already with my family. You were iny family. Jules was my family. The Capones were my family. They were all right there. I didn’t need to go back to Dad because I missed them.”

I watched her, “Then why?”

“Because I ruin everything,” she swallowed, “Because I’m not enough and I thought I could fix it.

My brow pulled together, “Fix what exactly? I don’t even understand-”

“Me.”

The word landed harder than it should have.

I blinked at her, confused, “What?”

She looked away for a second, then back at me, “I wanted to fix myself for you.”

I went still, another explosion thundered outside. The walls trembled. Gianna flinched violently, but this time she didn’t turn away from me.

“I came here because I thought Dad had finally found something that could fix me. I thought maybe, if I could fix everything that was wrong with me, I could come back to you and finally become the woman you needed me to be. I thought maybe then I’d be enough for you.”

I couldn’t speak. My mind went back through every moment I had ever spent with her.

Every argument.

Every time I had pushed her away.

Every cold answer.

Had I done this?

Had I made her believe she was something that needed to be fixed.

“Perfect,” she whispered. “I thought I needed to be perfect for you.”

Perfect.

For me?

The thought made no sense. None at all.

She was already everything I wanted. We fit together in ways I had never bothered trying to explain. I had never looked at her and made a list of things she needed to change before she could stand beside me.

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And yet somehow, she had been carrying the exact opposite belief. She thought she had to earn her place beside me. I didn’t even know where to begin with that.

I blinked once, “Go back.”

She frowned, “What?”

I moved closer to the glass, “Go back to what you just said.”

Her breathing shook, “I—”

“What the fuck did you just say?”

She stared at me, tilting her chin up, “You heard me.”

“No,” my voice came out harder than I intended, “I heard the words. I’m asking if you actually believe them.”

She looked down, “Don’t act so surprised. Everyone knows.”

My frown deepened even more if that was possible, “Knows what?!”

Her eyes lifted to mine, “That you’re settling.”

The words made no fucking sense. Where was the logic in any of this? My jaw clenched, heat crawling up my neck as I stared at her through the glass.

“You’re with me because you like me,” she continued, “but that’s all it is. You’re settling, Raph.

Another distant blast rolled across the island, rattling faintly through the walls. Her hand flew to her chest, fingers curling over her shirt as she sucked in a sharp breath but her eyes never left mine.

“You deserve someone better than me,” she added.

She said it as if it were a fact. As if there had never been another possibility. As if I had chosen her because I couldn’t find anyone better.

“So that’s what you think this is?” my voice came out quieter than I expected, “You think everything I feel for you -” I stopped and looked at her, “Trust me, Gianna. There is a lot I feel for you and you think all of it is just me settling?”

She didn’t hesitate, “Yes.”

The word landed cleanly.

She looked exhausted. Her eyes were red, her cheeks wet, but she didn’t look away or take back what she said.

A bitter breath left my nose, “You actually think that little of me?”

Her expression tightened, pain flashing across her face before she looked straight into my eyes, “You used to think that little of me too. Don’t fucking deny it.”

I blinked. The accusation caught me completely off guard.

“I saw you,” she stepped closer to the glass, “I saw the way you looked at Viviane. I saw you watching her.”

The name meant nothing compared to the look on Gianna’s face.

“I heard you talking about her. You said you would’ve done almost anything to get someone like her on your team. saw how much you respected her. How much you admired what she could do,” she gave a small, broken laugh, And I wasn’t any of those things.”

I kept staring at her, unable to make sense of the woman in front of me. After everything we'd been through, after everything I'd done to prove what she meant to me, she still believed I thought so little of her?

"I remember thinking that if I could become someone like her, someone smarter, calmer, stronger... if I stopped being so fucking broken..." her voice cracked, "Maybe then I'd be good enough for you."

I stared at her through the glass and she shook her head, smiling through the tears.

"Everyone knows it, Raph," the words were almost a whisper, "Everyone sees it. Everyone knows it," she looked straight into my eyes, "You're Raphael Capone and I'm just an idiot you decided to settle for."

I couldn't speak.

Because suddenly, the woman standing in front of me wasn't talking about some vague fear. She was talking about something she had been carrying for a long time.

Something I had never seen.

Something she had built an entire decision around.

And the most horrible fucking part was that she believed every word she said.

The long-awaited conversation that could've prevented ALL of this from happening... but where's the fun in that?

FOR THE PLOT. FOR THE CHAOS. FOR THE DRAMA!...

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Chapter 844

Raphael

I stared at her, for several seconds, I genuinely had nothing. My mind had gone completely blank.

Viviane?

That was what she had built all of this around?

My jaw tightened, "What the fuck does Viviane have to do with this?"

Gianna blinked.

I forced myself a little straighter, ignoring the sharp pain ripping through my ribs as I moved closer to the glass. On the other side, Gianna instinctively took a step back.

“I said I wanted someone like her on my team, Gianna. My team. My work. My fucking company,” I gave a short, disbelieving laugh, “Not my fucking life.”

She swallowed and dropped her gaze, trying to hide the tears gathering in her eyes. I stared at her, completely fucking stunned.

How could we have been living through the same moments and come away with two completely different truths?

I had thought we understood each other.

I had thought we were on the same fucking page.

“I wanted you in my life,” the words came out harder this time, “Do you understand the difference?”

I watched her face.

“My entire life has been full of women like Viviane. College. Business meetings. Orion Vector’s basement. Every room I’ve worked in has had someone smart, sharp, capable, ambitious. If I wanted one of them beside me, I could have chosen one,” my eyes locked onto hers, “I didn’t. I wanted you. I kept choosing you.”

I dragged a hand over my face, frustrated enough that I almost laughed again.

“Fuck, Gianna.”

I looked at her like she had just handed me the most ridiculous problem I’d ever had to solve.

“You heard me praise one woman for her skills and somehow turned that into proof that I wanted her?” I shook my head, “That isn’t how I work.”

I leaned closer to the glass.

“I wanted someone like Viviane on my team because she was good at what she did. That’s it. But you?” My voice caught for half a second before I forced it steady, “I wanted you everywhere.”

Her eyes lifted.

“I wanted you breathing beside me. I wanted you barging into my office just to annoy the hell out of me. I wanted you wiping those greasy fingers on my shirt after eating whatever trash you called food. I wanted you sitting beside me in my car, taking up my space like you owned it. I wanted you in my bed. I wanted to wake up next to hapter 184 you and spend half the morning arguing over the stupidest fucking things, exactly the way you always do.”

Abitter smile touched my mouth as I stared straight into her eyes.

“I told you I wanted you. I told you I wanted to be with you. I told you what you meant to me,” I paused”...And/I told you I fucking love you.”

Her lips parted, her eyes glossed over once more.

I shook my head slowly, “And somehow you heard all of that and decided the one thing that mattered was me saying I wanted Viviane on my team? You conveniently kept that part.”

I leaned my head back against the glass behind me and closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them again, I glared at her, not angry enough to hate her, too fucking in love with her for that but angry enough that I needed her to understand.

“Gianna, I don’t want a perfect woman. I don’t want Viviane,” I held her gaze, “I don’t want someone easier. I wanted you, not because you were perfect but because you were you.”

And that was the part I couldn’t understand.

How the hell had the woman I would tear apart the world for convinced herself she was the one person I had settled for?

“You were what was missing from my life, not someone like you, not a better version of you, not some woman with the same face, the same skills, or the same fucking personality, and definitely not the “fixed” version of you.”

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Chapter 845

Nooked straight at her.

“You. Only you... just the way you are.”

She blinked, her lips trembling into the smallest, saddest smile, “But... what if the way I am isn’t enough?” she looked down again, almost embarrassed by the question, “What if you just haven’t realized that yet?”

I raised an eyebrow, “I’m a grown fucking man who thinks before he makes a decision. I’m not some child who needs someone holding his hand and warning him about the consequences. I know exactly what I’m choosing.

I shifted against the wall, ignoring the ache in my ribs.

“Before you, my life was predictable. Work. Money. Meetings. Men wanting something from me. Women wanting something from me. Hunts. Bike races. Parties. The same rooms, the same faces, the same conversations. Every fucking day felt like the one before it,” I shook my head, “I didn’t even realize how bored I was.”

My mouth twisted.

“I thought that was just adulthood. I thought that was what my life was supposed to feel like,” then I looked at her again, “And then you showed up. Suddenly, nothing was quiet anymore.”

Gianna’s lips parted, and she gave a tiny, uncertain smile, “I’m sorry?”

“You should be.”

Her eyebrows pulled together, “I ruined your peaceful life?”.

“You fucking destroyed it.”

Her smile disappeared.

I shook my head, “And somehow, I don’t want it back. I stopped hunting,” her eyes widened slightly, “I stopped going to the races. I stopped wasting whole nights riding around because I had nothing better to do. Half the stupid things I used to do just... stopped mattering, not because you told me to stop. I just stopped caring.”

I leaned closer to the glass, planting one hand against it and letting my weight settle into my arm. I held her gaze, my body angled toward hers, making the few inches of glass feel like the only thing in the world keeping me from closing the distance.

“Because suddenly I had something I actually wanted to come home to,” I gave her a hard look, “And don’t get too fucking proud of yourself. You also became the reason I stopped sleeping properly. You made my life harder but better, too.”

I watched her silently.

“So explain something to me,” my brow furrowed, “What the fuck do you mean when you say I settled?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, searching for another excuse and coming up empty. For once, she had nothing to say.

“Do you think I’m some helpless idiot who woke up one morning and looked around my life and went, Well, I suppose Gianna will do? Are you fucking crazy?”

I shook my head.

“I’m a powerful man. I know that. I have money, influence, and options. I can walk into almost any room in this

+15 Brus country and find a woman willing to spend the night with me,” my voice hardened, “If I wanted someone else, I Could have had someone else by now.”

I looked directly at her.

“I didn’t.”

“But you could have,” she whispered, “That’s what I don’t understand.”

“Because settling isn’t what you think it is, Gianna. Settling is choosing what’s easy because you’re too lazy, too afraid, or too comfortable to reach for what you actually want,” my jaw tightened, “Do you know what would’ve been easy for me?”

I gave her a cold smile.

“Walking away from my stepsister. I could have listened to everyone too. I could have chosen a woman nobody would question. Instead, I chose the woman I was never supposed to want. The woman who complicated everything. The woman who made me go against people I had spent my whole life protecting.”

My eyes narrowed.

I didn’t have a name for what was happening inside me. I wasn’t good at that. I usually needed time to sort through what I felt, to find the cause and decide what to do with it.

Not this time.

Whatever it was, it came fast and hard.

Chapter 846

Anger.

Pure, fucking anger.

I didn't have to think about it. I didn't have to understand it. I could feel it.

My voice became almost painfully quiet, "So don't fucking stand there and tell me I settled. Settling/would've been choosing the easy woman. You were never the easy choice."

A faint, bitter smile touched my mouth.

"And you're an idiot for thinking otherwise."

Her brows pulled together.

"You called yourself an idiot. I'm just agreeing with you for once," I added.

Outside, the gunfire had gone quiet for several moments. I had no idea what was happening beyond those walls, and under normal circumstances, I would've cared.

Right now, I couldn't give a fuck.

Not while Gianna was standing in front of me, telling me she had spent all this time believing she needed to be fixed before she could be worthy of me.

Gianna looked down again, wiping the corners of her eyes, "I heard Vincenzo."

My eyes narrowed, "What did he say?"

She swallowed, "He said you'd always have to slow down for me. He said that you'd always have to stop and make sure I could keep up with you."

My jaw tightened. I needed to explain why Vincenzo had said it.

He hadn't said it because he thought less of Gianna. He'd said it because he'd seen how many times I'd made her cry when we first met at the office. He knew I had zero tolerance for incompetence, and he wanted to make damn sure Gianna would never become a target for that side of me again.

But she kept going before I could interrupt.

"And I know he didn't mean it to hurt me but I heard it," er eyes lifted to mine, "And I couldn't stop thinking about it."

Something in my chest went tight.

She wiped beneath one eye.

“My whole life, Dad made me believe my dyslexia was a disease. Something wrong with me. Something that needed to be fixed,” her mouth trembled, “So when I heard him say you’d have to slow down for me…” she took a shaky breath, “I thought maybe this was my chance to finally fix it.”

I didn’t move.

I just went completely still, staring at her as I tried to process how fucking absurd that sounded.

“I thought if I could cure it…” she looked at me with that same terrible uncertainty, “You could just… be with me.

I looked at her as if she had just told me the world was flat, “You really thought that?”

My voice came out quieter than I expected. I looked around the room as saw nothing but a line of glass cage with children either sleeping or drugged and I squeezed my eyes shut.

“When you broke our arrangement, I thought my whole fucking world had ended.”

The memory still sat somewhere in me, sharp and unpleasant.

“I didn’t understand what happened. One day you were there, and then you weren’t. You wouldn’t talk to me. You wouldn’t let me near you. You wouldn’t even give me a reason that made sense,” I swallowed, “And I lost my fucking mind.”

I looked away for a second, remembering the weeks afterward.

“I thought something was wrong with me.

That admission tasted bitter. Gianna gasped, her brows pulling together as if the idea coming from my mouth was completely fucking absurd.

Good.

Maybe now she understood exactly how absurd it sounded to me when it came from hers.

“I thought maybe you’d finally seen whatever everyone else had been too polite to tell me about,” my eyes returned to hers, “So you know what I did?”

She didn’t answer.

“I went to therapy.”

Her face changed, her eyes widened. I almost smiled at the shock on it.

“Yeah.”

“You... went to a therapist?”

“Yes, Gianna,” I let out a slow breath, “Because that’s what you do when you realize something inside you isn’t working. I spent my entire childhood hearing that I was brilliant, perfect. The boy who never needed help. The one who could solve anything.”

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Chapter 847

My mouth tightened.

“Turns out nobody bothered to teach me what to do with people.”

She pursed her lips, her brows drawing together, “That can’t-” she stopped herself, searching my face, “That can’t be true.”

“I could read a balance sheet faster than most people could read a sentence. I could break down a business problem in minutes. But emotions?” I shook my head, “Give me a fucking manual.” ·

Her expression softened.

“My therapist told me something I didn’t want to hear. He told me I wasn’t as perfect as everyone had made me believe and he was right.”

I had spent months learning things that should have been obvious.

How to recognize frustration before it became anger.

How to tell fear from irritation.

How to sit with something I couldn’t solve.

How to say what I needed instead of expecting people to somehow know.

“I still don’t always know what I’m feeling the second it happens but now I can usually figure it out,” I lifted my eyes to hers, “I learned to read myself.”

Her lips parted, “You went to a therapist,” she repeated, like she still couldn’t make the words fit together.

“Yes.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

I let the answer sit there.

“Because you thought you weren’t good enough for me?”

I lifted my shoulder, “Yes. I knew there had to be something wrong with me. I just didn’t know what it was. So I went to someone who could help me find out, not a fucking doctor who locks people in cages.”

Her face changed.

“Not some psychopath who’drugs people, burns them, drowns them, shocks them, and calls it research,” I leaned forward slightly, “What the fuck were you thinking?”

She went completely still.

The color drained from her face so quickly that for a second, she looked almost ghostly. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Her eyes widened as she stared at me, disbelief fighting with something darker behind them.

Fear.

She looked as if she had just realized I knew far more than she had ever wanted me to know, “How do you know about that? I never told you. I never told you anything about Dr. Vance or Dad…”

My chest tightened, “Hazel told me.”

anna’s head moved slowly from side to side, “Mom?”

“Yes.”

“When?” I watched confusion spread across her face, “How?”

“She left me a letter.”

Gianna’s lips parted.

“She knew about us, Gianna,” I added, “Before we even understood what the hell was happening between us,

Her eyes widened, and I watched the color drain from her lips as the realization settled over her.

I reached into the memory of that night, the letter, the broken chip, the information I had spent too long trying to understand.

“She trusted me with something you couldn’t,” my voice lowered, “And she left me proof of it.”

Gianna looked like she had stopped breathing.

“A broken chip.”

I watched her absorb it.

“Your sessions were on it. And it was enough for me to understand what that man had been doing to you. She knew.”

The anger inside me has changed shape now. It wasn’t aimed at Gianna anymore. It was aimed at the people who did all this to her.

“And do you know why she left the letter and that proof with me instead of Dad or Vincenzo? Because she knew exactly what you’d do. She knew you’d run straight back to the people who spent your whole life convincing you that you weren’t enough. She knew you’d believe you needed fixing.”

I looked away for a moment and then back at her.

“And she knew I’d come after you.”

Gianna’s eyes filled again, her lower lips trembled.

“She left that letter because she knew exactly what I would do if I found out. She saw it before I did. She understood what you meant to me before I even had a fucking name for it.”

I paused, watchinge think of her mother.

Suppor

Chapter 848

She knew I'd do anything for you. And unlike you, she never once believed you had to become someone else before I would choose you."

Gianna started crying, not the quiet tears she'd been fighting a few minutes ago. Her whole face crumpled, and the sob that escaped her sounded like it had been trapped inside her for years.

I hated the glass.

I hated it more than I could put into words.

Every instinct in me wanted to reach through it, pull her against my chest, and make the fucking tears stop. Instead, I was left with one hand against the barrier between us.

"Look at me."

She wiped at her face, but the tears kept coming, her sobs echoed around us.

"Gianna."

Her eyes finally found mine, "She knew?" her voice broke mid sentence, "She really knew all of this?"

"Yes," I nodded, "She knew."

Gianna covered her mouth as another sob shook her.

"She knew I loved you exactly as you are," I paused, "Because she loved you that way too."

Her eyes closed, as she cried harder.

"The only person who doesn't seem capable of loving you as you are..." my voice lowered, "...is you."

She turned away from the glass, then she started walking, one step, then another. She moved across the small space, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand, shaking her head as if she was trying to fit years of pain into a few minutes.

Then she stopped.

A strange little smile appeared through her tears, "She gave us her blessing?"

I nodded, "She gave us every blessing she had."

Gianna let out a shaky breath, “She knew.”

“She did.”

“She saw us.”

“Yes.”

Her smile grew for half a second before breaking again, “She really wanted us to be together.”

“She did.”

Gianna came back to the glass and slowly leaned her back against it. Her head rested against the barrier, closer to me now.

“My mother saw your love and blessed us,” she whispered, as I watched her beautiful green eyes, shinning, “But

+15 Bus your father saw everything wrong with me.”

body went still.

“And he told me to leave you.” 1

For a moment, I didn’t understand the sentence.

My father?

Dad?

Salvatore?

My mind tried to reject them before they even reached the part that mattered, “What?”

Gianna’s eyes dropped, “He told me I wasn’t good enough for you.”

Something cold moved through me, my mind rejected it, then accepted it, then went completely quiet.

She continued, “He told me that right before my mother died. He took me into another room.”

My breathing slowed, my jaw locked so hard it hurt. My fingers slowly curled against my palm.

She sniffled, “He told me that once my mom was gone, I needed to move out of his house. He said I needed to stay away from his perfect son.”

I didn’t move.

Perfect son.

The phrase hit me harder than it should have. I didn’t understand what I was feeling yet. I only knew that something inside me had gone frighteningly still, while another part of me wanted to tear apart the first thing standing in my way.

Then came the part that made something inside me go completely numb.

“He called me a whore,” she whispered, and my eyes stayed on her, my mind taking in her words, “For sleeping with you.”

The words hung between us.

After that, she said something else, but I barely heard it. A harsh static had filled my ears, drowning out everything around me. The room seemed to pull farther away.

I couldn’t hear the machinery.

I couldn’t hear the movement outside.

I couldn’t even hear my own breathing.

All I could hear was that one word.

Whore.

My father had looked at her while she was losing her mother and told her she wasn’t worthy of me.

He had called her that.

Shopter 348

He had asked her to leave me.

anna’s voice trembled, “He begged me to leave you,” she swallowed, “I wanted to tell him no. I wanted to scream at him. But I was scared, and my mother was dying, and I didn’t know what to do.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 849

For fingers curled against her arms.

“I couldn’t leave you. I didn’t want to leave you,” she looked at me through swollen eyes, “I loved you too much. That was the moment I knew, I had to become better for you,” she gave a broken little laugh, “So I tried.”

Her eyes closed.

“I tried so fucking hard.”

And suddenly every piece of this nightmare fell into place.

She hadn’t come back because she thought she wasn’t loved.

She had come back because someone had convinced her she wasn’t worthy of the love she already had.

I swallowed, “He said that?”

The question came out low. I rolled my neck slowly, trying to ease the tension that had climbed into my shoulders and locked along the side of my neck.

Gianna gave a bitter little laugh, “He said a lot more than that,” she rubbed at her cheeks, but the tears kept coming, “I just didn’t want to fix myself for you. I wanted to fix myself for us, for our future. He made me think about what would happen if we had children.”

My stomach twisted. I pushed myself into a slow pace, shaking my head as I tried to clear it. My vision had begun to blur at the edges, the room slipping in and out of focus.

“He said I’d give you defective children because I’d give them everything that’s wrong with me. He said I’d damage his bloodline. That I’d ruin what your family had built.”

I felt something tighten behind my ribs that had nothing to do with Leone.

My father.

My own fucking father.

Salvatore fucking Capone.

Gianna looked away, “He made it sound like having children with me would be some kind of punishment for you,” her fingers twisted together, “What was I supposed to do, Raph? What was I supposed to think when your own father looked me in the face and told me I would ruin your life?”

I said nothing.

She shook her head, tears spilling freely now.

“I was already scared. I already believed there was something wrong with me. Then he gave me a hundred more reasons to believe it,” she pressed a hand against her chest, “So what was I supposed to do?”

Her voice broke.

“What was I supposed to do when the man who raised you told me that I wasn’t good enough for you?”

Something inside me shifted again. I breathed out slowly, coldly.

I understood her fear.

I understood why she’d believed it.

But understanding it didn’t make it acceptable.

I looked down for a moment, my fingers flexed. The pain in my ribs was suddenly nothing compared to the pressure building in my chest.

My father had taken every doubt she already carried and fed it until it became a fucking monster.

He had watched her lose her mother.

He had known exactly how vulnerable she was.

And he’d used it.

I lifted my eyes again.

Gianna was still talking, still trying to explain herself, still searching for some answer that would make what she’d done make sense.

But one sentence cut through everything else.

“Tell me, Raph, what was I supposed to do when your own father told me to–”

“YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO COME TO ME!” 1

The shout ripped out of me so violently that Gianna froze. Her whole body jerked, and she flinched backward from the glass.

I barely recognized my own voice.

I had never yelled at her.

I didn’t yell, not at her, not at my men, not at anyone.

But whatever had been building inside me had finally broken loose, and there was nothing controlled about it anymore.

Janedoewritings

Author

Everyone else: PANICKING. CHAOS. COMPLETE DISASTER.

Meanwhile, Raphael and Gianna: just vibing in their own little world like absolutely nothing is happening.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 850

Gianna

The sound of his voice hit me so hard that flinched, more in shock than fear. My back struck the opposite wall, and I stood there frozen, staring at him through the glass.

Raph had never shouted at me.

I had seen him angry before. He was always cold, irritated, dangerous in that quiet way that made everyone around him shut up and move.

But this was different.

His eyes were bloodshot. A vein stood out along the side of his neck, pulsing hard beneath his skin. His jaw was clenched so tightly that I could see the muscle jumping.

For the first time, I was seeing anger take over him completely, “Raph...”

He didn’t hear me or maybe he did and simply couldn’t stop. He turned away from me and drove his fist into the glass wall, the sound shook through the room.

“Raph, stop!”

He struck the glass again, the impact splitting the skin across his knuckles and leaving a thin smear of blood behind. He barely reacted. His injured hand dropped for a second, fingers flexing as pain shot through them, then he raised it again and drove his fist into the glass.

“Raph, you’re going to hurt yourself!”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

He kicked the lower part of the cage and I pressed myself farther into the corner, “Raph, please.

He grabbed something, and yanked with everything he had. His shoulders strained beneath his shirt. His breathing came hard and uneven, and every movement clearly tore at his ribs, but he kept trying, like if he could just break through the glass, he could undo everything that had happened.

“Raph, listen to me!”

He slammed his palm against the glass, “I am listening!”

I rushed to explain before the anger swallowed him again, “Salvatore tried to make me understand. He told me Dad wasn’t right. He told me I was looking at everything the wrong way. He tried to stop me from coming here.”

I wiped my cheeks with shaking fingers.

“He asked me not to leave. More than once. He kept telling me not to go back to Philadelphia. I know it doesn’t change anything, but he tried.”

His eyes finally found mine.

There was so much anger in them that my stomach twisted.

“I wanted to listen,” my voice broke, “I swear I did but by then it was already too late.”

I took a shaky breath.

“The Council had already been called. Everything was already moving. Dad had already made his decision.”

Raphy looked away. His breathing grew heavier and then he drove his shoulder against the glass, the cage finally rattled.

I jumped, “Raph!”

He stepped back, breathing hard, then he kicked the glass again and again. Each impact echoed through the room. He wasn't even thinking about his injuries anymore. He wasn't thinking about the blood on his face or the way his ribs were barely letting him breathe.

He was trying to get out, trying to get to me and somehow that hurt worse than his shouting.

"Please," I whispered.

"I don't care!" he snapped, "I'm so fucking mad at you, Gianna," he struck the glass again, "I'm so fucking mad at you.

I swallowed hard.

He pressed both hands against the barrier, breathing heavily, then shoved away from it and kicked the lower panel from inside, the impact made the whole cage tremble again.

"That's why Hazel told you to take your fucking pills!" His voice thundered through the room. "That's why I asked if you needed a therapist! It doesn't mean you're fucking crazy! It means you're supposed to get help before you make decisions that put you in situations like this!"

I hugged my arms around myself, "You don't understand."

"I understand plenty."

"No," my voice shook, "You don't," I looked around the cage, "I had a doctor. I trusted him. I trusted someone who was supposed to help me, but he drugged me. He hurt me. He kept doing it until I stopped knowing what was real."

Raph went still for half a second.

I shook my head, "So forgive me if I don't hear the word doctor and immediately feel safe."

His jaw tightened.

I wiped my cheeks, "My whole life was put in the hands of someone who was supposed to help me and he destroyed me until there was almost nothing left."

Shure