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Chapter 851

Raph stepped toward the glass again, slowly tilting his head as he looked at me. Whatever warmth had been in his eyes was gone, replaced by something cold, “And after everything he did to you, you decided the best place to go was back to him?”

There was no softness left in his voice, only disbelief wrapped in that cold, superior edge I knew too well, the same mocking tone he’d used on me back when I worked under him in the office.

I looked down, “I understand now. I know it was a mistake,” I forced myself to look at him, “My mistake. That’s why I’ve been telling you it’s my fault. This whole thing happened because of me.

I pointed toward the room around us.

“You’re here because of me and you’re hurt because of me,” my eyes filled again, “You’re paying for what I did. It’s my fault, Raph.” I pressed my back harder into the corner, “All of it.”

His hands slowly curled into fists again and I knew, before he said anything, that he wasn’t going to accept that and then I watched him slam his fist into the glass again.

The impact made my whole body jump, “Raph, stop it!”

He didn’t. His breathing was rough, and every movement made the bruises across his face pull tighter. He drew his arm back again.

“You’re going to hurt yourself.”

He struck the glass.

“Raph!”

I moved closer to his side of the cage, pressing my palms against the wall.

“You’re not going to break it.”

He ignored me.

“This glass doesn’t break, Vance told me.”

That finally made him pause. His fist remained against the surface as his eyes shifted toward me.

I glanced at Vance.

He was sitting in the corner of the room with his head buried in his hands, shoulders slumped. He looked completely defeated, as if whatever fight had been left in him had finally drained away.

I lowered my voice, “This isn’t normal glass. It’s built in layers.”

Raphael’s eyes narrowed as I pointed toward the wall.

“He said it has transparent ceramic Reinforced polycarbonate. Several armor layers bonded together.”

Raphael slowly lowered his hand, thinking.

“He said, even a bullet can’t damage the outer layer because the impact doesn’t move through one piece. It spreads across the layers. Each layer takes part of the force, so there isn’t one weak point where everything cracks at once, so stop hurting yourself. We need our energies…”

His expression became distant. I watched him study the glass. His eyes moved over the seams, the corners, the frame and the floor.

His breathing slowly settled, for a moment, he looked like himself again because he was calculating, thinking.

Chapter BEA

Theu his eyes returned to mine, “Don’t fucking talk to me.”

I blinked, “Raph-

“I said don’t.”

I took a careful breath, “I’m sorry, but you can’t lose your mind right now. We need to work together if we’re getting out of here.”

His jaw flexed, he lifted one hand and pointed at me, “I don’t need to work with you. I’ll get myself out,” his finger lowered toward the floor between us, “And I’ll get you out too then I’ll deal with you but right now, don’t talk to me.”

I stared at him for a moment, then I shook my head, “Too bad, I’m going to keep talking. You can’t stop me from doing that,” I folded my arms, “You can ignore me if you want.”

I glanced toward the reinforced walls.

“But we’re trapped in here together, so you’re going to have to listen to me eventually.”

I waited until his breathing slowed before I tried again.

“Raph.”

He didn’t answer.

His eyes were still on the cage door, moving over every part of it as if he could force the mechanism to reveal its weakness just by staring at it long enough.

I knew that look.

His mind was already somewhere else, probably three steps ahead of me.

“Come closer...” I whispered.

His eyes shifted toward mine, “No.”

The answer came immediately.

I frowned, “Raph.”

“No,” he snapped, and he didn’t even look apologetic about it. He was injured, furious with me, trapped inside a reinforced cage, and somehow still had enough energy left to be difficult.

“Don’t be stubborn.”

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His eyebrows lifted, and he scoffed, “I am not being stubborn.”

“You are absolutely being stubborn.”

“I am standing exactly where I need to stand.”

“You’re standing six feet away from me.”

“Four.”

I blinked in confusion.

He glanced at the floor, “Four feet.”

Despite everything, I almost laughed, “Would you just please listen to me?”

His expression stayed hard, “I have ears, Gianna. I’m listening.”

“You’re not.”

“I am.”

“You’re thinking about how to break the cage,” I moved closer to the glass, “Come here.”

He didn’t move, he didn’t even move his head, he went completely still

I let out a frustrated breath, “Please.”

That finally changed something. His eyes stayed on mine for a few seconds, then he pushed himself away from the wall. The movement was slow. I watched every step. The sight of him walking toward me should have made me feel better.

Instead, it made my chest hurt.

His face was still bruised, blood had dried beside his mouth. One side of his jaw was a little swollen, and every now and then his expression tightened when his ribs shifted and he was still coming toward me because I had asked him to.

When he finally stopped, there was barely any space between us, the glass was the only thing separating our bodies.

I lifted my hand and placed my palm against it. For a moment, he looked at my hand, then his eyes met mine.

I pointed toward the door. His attention moved immediately to the panel beside the door, and he studied it, “Vance explained how it works to me. He was bragging about the whole system.”

Raphael’s eye twitched, “I can see how your father went bankrupt,” his gaze swept over the cage and the equipment around us, “He poured millions into building all this and got nothing back from it. And the upkeep alone must have cost him another fortune.”

I nodded, “Yeah, Vance said the doors are connected directly to the facility’s security network.”

Raphael’s eyes narrowed, “I know…”

His gaze moved slowly across the door. I could almost see the calculations forming behind his eyes. He wasn't looking at the cage anymore. He was looking at a problem.

A system.

Something he could understand.

That was the first thing that gave me a little hope.

"Vauce said we could even destroy the outside panel." } glanced at his bruised, bloodied hand. "And we'd still be trapped. The lock is controlled by the security system. The only way to release it is to gain access to that system."

Raphael's gaze shifted, first to the cameras, then the ceiling, then the corners and finally, the vents. His expression changed and he went quiet for several seconds, thinking.

He was mapping the building in his head.

I knew he was.

I had seen him do it before.

Give Raphael enough information and his mind would turn it into a map, then a pattern, then a weakness.

That was exactly what I needed.

"We can't do much while the facility is in lockdown."

I gave my head a shake, "What do you mean? why?"

"Lockdown doesn't just seal the doors." His eyes stayed on the vents, "It isolates the internal systems. Security, access controls, ventilation. Anything the facility considers a possible entry or exit point gets restricted," he looked at me, "Before I surrendered, I told Ciro to get inside through the ventilation system."

My heart beat stuttered..

"He was supposed to stay hidden until the guards stopped checking the network. Once they assumed I'd been secured, he was meant to bring my laptop and the rest of my equipment," his eyes returned to the vent above us, "But the lockdown changes that."

"How?"

"If the system sealed the vents when the lockdown started, Ciro could be trapped inside the duct network."

His jaw tightened slightly.

“The ventilation system should have emergency airflow, but I don’t know how Vance designed this place. If he tied the vents nto the lockdown protocol, airflow could have been reduced or redirected,” he stared upward, “And if Ciro was already inside when that happened,” he paused, “He could be running out of air.”

I took a breath, “That’s why I’m working on getting you a laptop in here.’

His eyes returned to mine and I saw a tiny change in his expression, “How?”

get at

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Chapter 853

I hesitated, “I’m trying to get one from Dad, I’m making him think you’re useful”

His mouth twitched, “You’re making him think?”

“I told him you could make more money for him than Vance ever did,” I whispered.

He stared at me with narrowed eyes, “You’ve been selling me.”

I pursed my lips, “Not exactly.”

“Sounds exactly like it.”

“I am trying to keep you alive,” I looked down, “I told Dad he could test you. I told him that if he gave you a laptop, you could prove what you were capable of,” I swallowed, “I don’t know if he’ll actually do it but I’m going to keep pushing until he does.”

“And you think he’ll believe that?”

“I don’t know,” I looked back at him, “Maybe. Maybe he’ll see you as another source of money instead of a prisoner.”

Raphael was quiet.

“And once I get the laptop in here,” I continued, “you can access the security system. If you get into it, maybe you can make the system recognize you as an authorized user.”

“Maybe,” he murmured, completely unimpressed.

“Maybe you can unlock the cages.”

“Maybe.”

The word came with the faintest twitch of his mouth, like he was humoring me rather than admitting he could probably do exactly that.

I nodded, “That’s enough for me.”

He studied me. I could feel how badly he wanted to ask more, but his anger was still there. I could see it sitting underneath everything else.

So I continued before he could shut me out again, “Because the people outside can’t just come in. They could probably take this place apart if they didn’t have a reason to hold back. Dad and Leone know exactly what they’re doing.”

I looked toward the sealed doors.

“They know if Vincenzo attacks too hard, they can threaten to kill us. They can put a gun to your head and force him to stop.”

Raphael didn’t answer but his jaw flexed. I moved my hand slightly, until my fingers lined up with his face through the glass. His eyes dropped to my hand.

“We have to get ourselves out,” I took a slow breath, “And you’re the only person I know who might be able to make the cage open from the inside. So I’m going to get you that laptop and you’re going to get us out,” I leaned a little closer to the glass, “ Even if you’re still furious with me.”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“Because I am not letting Dad use our lives to bargain with Vincenzo,” my voice shook, but I kept going, “And I’m not letting you stay in that cage, not after everything I have already done to you.”

For a few seconds, Raphael said nothing. His attention shifted past me toward Vance.

Vance was still sitting in the corner, his head lowered, one hand covering his mouth as he talked to himself while the other rested against his knee. He looked lost in his own thoughts.

Raphael watched him for several seconds before lowering his voice, “From everything you’ve told me, there’s another way.”

I blinked, “What way?”

“Every cage in this place should have an emergency maintenance release.”

I glanced around my enclosure, “Where?”

“Don’t be so obvious!” he scolded in a low tone, and I turned back to him immediately, “But that’s what we need to find.”

I looked toward the walls, the ceiling, the door, “Raph, Vance said the security system controls the cages.”

“It does.”

“Then how would a maintenance release work?”

He gave me a look that made me feel like I’d missed something obvious, “Because systems fail and engineers know that.”

He shifted slightly, his eyes moving toward the cameras before returning to me.

“Think about it logically. If the central security network crashes, the facility loses power, or the access controller stops responding, engineers still need a way to service the cage.”

I nodded slowly, “So there has to be another way in.”

“Not necessarily an ordinary way in,” his eyes moved toward the door mechanism, “An emergency maintenance switch. It wouldn’t be connected to the normal access controls. It would exist specifically for technicians.”

I looked around again, discreetly this time, “But wouldn’t Leone have removed it?”

“He couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because removing every physical override creates a serious safety problem,” his expression was calm now, focused instead of enraged, “If the security network malfunctions while someone is inside, technicians need a way to release them without depending on the network they’re trying to repair.”

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Chapter 854

He paused.

“And before you ask, no, it probably won’t be sitting in the middle of the wall with a giant red button.”

I almost smiled, “Then where?”

“That depends on how the engineer they hired designed the maintenance system,” His gaze moved slowly over every part of my cage, “It could be behind a secured panel. Under the control housing. Inside the door frame. Somewhere a normal prisoner wouldn’t know to look.”

I looked at the walls again.

Raphael leaned closer, “And before you ask me again how I know any of this, remember what I do. I design systems like these- government security, private networks, high-security facilities, surveillance architecture, access control systems. I know how they’re built. I know where they’re vulnerable.”

His gaze returned to the cage.

“Which means I also know where the people who built them have to leave a way in.”

A chill moved through me, “So you think there’s one in both cages?”

“I think there has to be.” His gaze shifted toward Vance again, “They built this system to keep children inside, Gianna. Children, not adults like us. So the maintenance access wouldn’t be somewhere a child could reach. It would be hidden, placed higher, behind another panel, or somewhere they wouldn’t think to look.”

Vance shifted in the corner, both of us went quiet. Raphael’s eyes followed him as we waited. Vance didn’t look up as he grabbed a scalpel from the tray and nicked his finger to check how sharp it was.

Only then did Raphael continue, “Don’t look at him when we talk about this.”

I lowered my gaze, “Why?”

“Because if he realizes we’re searching for a physical override, he’ll either move it, disable it, or tell the guards.”

My stomach tightened, “So we pretend we’re talking normally.”

“We don’t pretend. We talk about us. He didn’t seem interested when we were arguing, so we give him the same thing to listen to. Keep your eyes on me. Ask normal questions. Anything that sounds like

His gaze flicked toward Vance.

“Don’t mention my father. If you bring him up, I’m going to lose my fucking mind,” he looked back at me, “And if you find anything that looks like a maintenance panel, don’t touch it. You tell me first.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t know what it does yet,” he nodded toward the door, “Some systems use a maintenance switch that only unlocks the door temporarily. Others trigger an alarm. Some require a second control somewhere else.”

I glanced toward the lower part of the cage, “So what am I looking for?”

“Different screws. A panel with a seam. A section that doesn’t match the rest of the surface. A small access cover. Anything that looks like it can be removed.”

His attention shifted toward the opposite side of his cage.

“Don’t search randomly. Start with the areas closest to the door controls. Maintenance access is usually placed near the equipment it services.”

Chuprengt

I nodded, “And if I find something?”

“Don’t open it,” his voice hardened, “Tell me First.

I looked at him, “And if you find yours?”

“Same rule.”

A faint smile touched my lips, then I remembered where we were. My eyes flicked toward Vance then I turned back toward my cage.

The door slammed open so hard that I jumped. Leone stormed in first and Dad followed close behind him, already reaching for his arm.

“They’re not fucking listening!”

Leone kicked the door shut behind him. His face was red, his hair disordered, and his breathing came fast through his nose. He grabbed a metal chair and sent it crashing across the room.

Dad caught his shoulder, “Leone. Enough.”

“They won’t stop, Gio. They don’t respect you. They’re still moving. They’re still trying to get inside. They think they can walk into my fucking facility and take them!”

He swept a hand across the room, a glass container went flying. It shattered against the wall.

Raphael didn't move. Instead, a slow, knowing smile pulled at his mouth. He knew his brothers were making things difficult for Leone outside, and somehow, knowing that seemed to piss Leone off even more.

"You think this is funny?"

Raphael's mouth twitched, "I think you're losing your mind."

Leone's expression twisted, "You want to see me lose it?"

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a knife.

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Chapter 855

My stomach dropped and Dad immediately stepped toward him, "Put that away, Leone."

"No," Leone walked toward Raphael's cage, "I need to remind those Capone bitches that I'm serious," he stopped in front of the glass and lifted the knife, letting the blade catch the light, "When I put this against their brother's throat, maybe they'll finally understand."

Raphael's eyes dropped briefly to the knife, then back to Leone, his expression barely changed, "Try it."

Leone's eyebrows lifted.

Raphael leaned closer to the glass, a cruel smile pulling at his bruised mouth, "Go ahead. Do it, your pathetic little bitch. Maybe then you'll finally feel like a man for five fucking seconds."

Leone's jaw clenched, the insult landed exactly where Raphael intended it to.

His fingers closed harder around the knife, "You think you're so funny?"

Raphael's smile widened, "No," his eyes moved lazily over Leone's face, "I think you're predictable."

Leone took another step toward the cage.

Giovanni caught his arm, “Leone, you’re giving him exactly what he wants.”

Leone ripped his arm free.

Raphael gave a quiet laugh, “My father in law is is right.”

Leone’s head snapped toward him and Raphael leaned his shoulder against the glass, careful of his ribs.

My face heated before I could stop it.

Father-in-law.

In the middle of this fucking nightmare, with Leone standing there ready to tear the room apart, Raphael had somehow managed to call my father his father-in-law like it was already a fact. I quickly looked away, hoping neither of them noticed the heat creeping up on my face.

“You’re doing exactly what I expected,” Raph added.

“Shut your mouth.”

“Make me.”

Leone’s breathing turned heavier.

Raphael looked at the knife again, “You walked in here waving a piece of metal because you couldn’t handle what was happening outside. Now you’re standing in front of a cage, hoping I’ll be scared of you, but that also isn’t working out for you,” he gave him a slow once-over, “That’s embarrassing.”

Leone’s jaw flexed, “You won’t be laughing when I put that blade against your throat.”

Raphael’s smile widened, “Then stop talking about it and do something.”

Dad stepped between them, “Enough!”

Neither listened.

Leone pointed the knife toward Raphael, “You’ve been sitting in there acting like you’re untouchable since you got here.”

Raphael glanced at the blade, “That’s because I know something you don’t.”

Leone laughed bitterly, “And what’s that?”

“You’re scared of me,” he let out a laugh, “Even with me locked behind reinforced glass, you’re the one who’s scared.”

Leone stared at him.

Raphael’s smile disappeared, “You’re scared because you know if those doors open, you won’t have enough men to save you.”

Leone’s face hardened, “You don’t know shit.”

Raphael’s eyes dropped to the blade again, “That tells me enough.”

Leone stepped forward, “I could cut her.”

Raphael’s entire expression changed. His eyes went cold.

Leone smiled “There it is,” he raised the knife slightly, “That’s what I wanted.

Giovanni grabbed his wrist, “Leone, control yourself.”

“He needs to understand—”

“I said control yourself!” Dad’s voice echoed across the room.

Leone froze, then he slowly lowered the knife. His breathing eased, the tension in his shoulders loosened.

He looked at Dad and then at Raphael, then a strange smile spread across his face, “Fine,” he slipped the knife back into his jacket, “Fine. You know what?” he rubbed a hand over his mouth, “I think I’ve been wasting my time.”

He turned toward Vance. Vance looked up from where he had been sitting, I saw him slip the scalpel into his pocket.

Leone’s smile deepened, “Open Gianna’s door. It’s time you understand exactly how helpless you are in this situation, Raphael. I’m going to make you watch, and if you so much as blink wrong, I’ll make sure she pays for it.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Gianna got approximately three seconds of emotional clarity, and then Leone walked in like, “Wonderful. Time to make everything worse.

I hope you guys enjoyed it!...

whapt

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 856

Gianna

My body reacted before my mind could catch up. The second Leone said he was going to open my cage, my hands curled into fists.

He wanted to use me to hurt Raphael.

Fine.

He could try.

I wasn't going down easily.

I shifted my weight, already measuring the distance between us, the position of the door, the knife under his jacket. My pulse hammered against my throat.

If he came inside, I was going to make sure he regretted it.

I didn't care about the consequences anymore.

I didn't care if I got hurt.

I would get my hands around his throat and keep squeezing until somebody pulled me off him.

Raphael moved before Leone could take another step. Whatever humor had been left in his face vanished.

His shoulders squared, his eyes went flat and cold, and the small smile he'd been wearing disappeared completely, "If you're going to hurt someone, come at me."

Leone stopped, and raised an eyebrow at him.

Raph scoffed, "You've spent all this time running your mouth about how dangerous you are. Now you're hiding behind a woman because you don't have the spine to deal with the man standing in front of you."

Leone's jaw tightened. I could see the anger return to his face, "You really think this is about courage? Then you've got the wrong idea about me. I'm not afraid of you."

Raphael's expression hardened even more, "Then prove it."

"No," Leone shook his head, "Because I'm not stupid. Going man against man with you right now would be fucking pointless."

Raphael's eyes narrowed, "Because you know I could kill you."

Leone's mouth twisted, "You could. But there's a damn good chance I'd kill you first. Maybe you win. Maybe I do, Maybe one of us walks away bleeding and the other doesn't walk away at all," he shrugged, "Either way, that's a shit trade for me."

His eyes moved toward the doors, toward the noise coming from somewhere beyond them then he looked back at Raphael.

"Look around yourself. I don't want to die tonight. And I don't want to walk out of here with broken ribs, a bullet in me, or half my face rearranged just because I wanted to prove something to you."

Raphael's mouth pulled into a humorless smile, "So you admit it."

"I admit nothing."

"You just explained why you're too scared to fight me."

Leone's eyes flashed, "No. I explained why I'm not emotional enough to make a stupid decision. We are surrounded by all sides.

You're the only leverage we have left."

His eyes flicked toward me, and I pursed may lips, narrowing my eyes back at him

"If using her to get inside your head gives me an advantage, then I'm going to fucking use it."

My stomach twisted and Raphael went completely still.

Leone continued, "That's not cowardice, Capone. That's strategy," he tapped the side of his head, "You should understand that better than anyone."

I saw Raphael's jaw tighten, "All I see is you threatening her because you can't beat me."

Leone's smile returned, "I'm threatening what you care about because that's where you're vulnerable. There's nothing wrong with using someone's weakness against them. That's how you win."

Before Raphael could answer, Dad grabbed Leone's arm, "No."

Leone looked down at his father's hand.

Dad's grip tightened, "This isn't what we agreed on."

Leone's expression soured, "Let go, Gio."

"You're not opening that cage."

Leone slowly turned his head toward him, "She was supposed to be mine. She was mine before any of this. You said, she will be mine once she comes back!"

Dad's face hardened, "We talked about this."

"No, you talked," Leone pulled his arm free, "You made decisions," his eyes flicked toward me, "Gio, since we were kids, everyone knew where she was supposed to end up. You took her away from me, and now you're standing here telling me I can't even touch her?"

"Because you can't," Dad stepped closer, "You and Gianna have to work together after this."

Leone gave a short laugh, "Work together?"

"Yes."

"That was the plan?"

"That is what we agreed."

Leone's face twisted with disbelief, "You expect me to stand there and work beside her after everything?"

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Dad gave his head a disappointed shake, "You don't have to like it."

"I don't want to fucking work beside her."

“You don’t get to decide that. I do,” Dad told him.

Leone’s eyes moved toward me again and for a moment, I saw something ugly in them. His possession, his resentment and something that made my skin crawl.

Dad noticed it too, “You can’t touch her,” he said again, “Not because I’m asking you to be kind, but because it would destroy the arrangement.”

Leone laughed under his breath, “You’re asking me to hand her over to a Capone after spending my entire life being told she was supposed to be mine. And now you want me to stand here and watch her choose him? While you go ahead with that fucking marriage you’ve arranged for me to a woman I don’t even give a shit about?”

“I expect you to act like an adult.”

A short laugh escaped Leone, “And you think this is how you make that happen, Gio?”

Dad’s expression hardened, “You don’t get to throw away an alliance just because you’re angry. That’s not what I taught you, Leone. This is politics. You observe, you think, and you consider every move before you make it.”

Leone finally stepped away from my cage, only then did I realize I had been holding my breath. It slipped out of ine in a shaky exhale as the distance between us grew.

Leone’s attention shifted back to Raphael, “Vance. Knock him out.”

My stomach dropped. I turned toward Vance, but he didn’t move. Vance simply stood there, one hand resting near his pocket, his eyes fixed on Raphael.

“Did you fucking hear me?” Leone snapped.

Vance’s jaw tightened, “I can’t.”

Leone’s face twisted, “What the fuck do you mean, you can’t?”

“I don’t have anything to use.”

Leone stared at him, waiting for him to explain.

Vance let out a slow breath, “You’ve forgotten about the medical supplies.”

“What about them?”

“They haven’t come.”

Leone’s expression changed, “What?”

“The deliveries,” Vance’s voice stayed flat, but there was tension in it now, “Our pharmacist has been ignoring my calls for more than a week now. I sent messages. I called the warehouse, but no one answered.”

Leone looked toward Dad. Dad’s face had gone completely still.

Vance continued, “We’re out of Anesthetic.”

My eyes moved toward Raphael and he was already smiling.

Vance rubbed his forehead, “I used what I had during the surgeries this week. The last of it was used when you put Capone under earlier.”

Leone stared at him, “Whert was the delivery supposed to arrive?”

“Four days ago.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I told you but you didn’t listen.’

“Four days?”

Vance’s voice hardened, “I’ve been trying to get another shipment but that hadn’t worked either.”

Leone looked murderous, “So you’re telling me you can’t knock him out because you ran out of fucking medicine?”

“I’m telling you we can’t knock him from outside the cage without the proper anesthetic.”

Raphael suddenly laughed. It started as a quiet breath through his nose, then it grew. He leaned back against the glass, hands sliding in his pockets.

“Yeah,” he shook his head, “Not so strategic now, are you, Leone?” his smile widened, “But wait, I think I know the guy,” he made a show of considering it, “I don’t remember asking for his name before I cut him into a hundred tiny pieces.”

My eyes widened.

Raphael’s smile became almost cheerful, “But just so you don’t waste another week waiting for him to answer your calls. He didn’t ghost you. I killed him.”

Every pair of eyes turned toward him. My heart slammed against my ribs. For once, I didn’t care about the argument or the insult or how smug Raphael was being.

I just wanted him to shut the hell up.

Because I knew Leone and I knew Raphael was pushing him toward the edge. And I was terrified that this time, Leone wouldn't stop at words.

"I found out where your medical supplies were being stored. Your people weren't exactly careful about keeping that information away from the wrong network," he shrugged, "I didn't need to break into anything complicated. I followed the supply chain, found the warehouse your people were using, and made sure the problem couldn't simply be solved by sending another driver."

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Chapter 858

He tilted his head as Leone's breathing grew heavier, each breath coming harder through his nose. This time, even Dad looked genuinely furious, his face tightening as the last bit of patience seemed to leave him

"I didn't bother taking the medicine," a slow smile spread across Raphael's face, "But I made sure your next deliveries weren't coming."

Vance looked toward Leone.

Raphael continued before either of them could speak, "Your pharmacist is dead. Your supply route is compromised. Whatever stock you had left is already gone and you just told me you used the last of the anesthetic on me. So, congratulations," he spread his hands slightly, "You're fucked."

Leone's face darkened.

Raphael's voice dropped, "And now you're stuck with me awake."

I had seen Raphael angry before. I had seen him irritated, frustrated, cold. I had even seen him furious.

This was different.

I couldn't tell what had changed, but I could see the difference. He wasn't stopping to think before he spoke. He wasn't calm. He wasn't weighing every possible outcome ten steps ahead like he usually did.

He was just pushing.

Provoking.

Trying to get under Leone's skin, and Dad's too, like he didn't care anymore what happened after he finally pushed them too far.

That was what scared me.

The control he always kept around himself was gone. The part of him that usually stopped him before he said too much, before he acted on an impulse, before anger could become something worse, it wasn't there anymore.

His eyes were fixed on Leone and there was nothing human enough to make me believe he was going to let this go.

I swallowed, "Raph..."

Leone turned away from Raphael and looked at Dad. For the first time since he had walked into the room, there was no anger on his face.

"Please," he said quietly, "Tell me I can handle the next part the way I want to. Because if I can't, we're all going to lose everything."

Dad studied him for several seconds. I wanted him to say no. I wanted him to stop this before it went any further.

Instead, he gave one slow nod, "Make sure it goes the way we need it to, Leone."

Leone's shoulders relaxed, "It will. Have I ever disappointed you?"

Dad's face remained hard, but his answer came without hesitation, "No, I trust you. Do what you need to do."

My stomach dropped to my feet, and Leone turned toward Vance, "Give me the remote."

Vance hesitated.

Leone held out his hand, "The remote."

Vance looked toward Dad first and Dad gave him a small nod only then Vance handed it over. Leone looked down at the device, pressing one of the controls.

My heart started racing as the lock on my cage clicked. I backed away instinctively. The door slid open and Leone stepped inside. I didn't think, I swing my fist at him

He caught my wrist before it connected, "Still fighting?"

I twisted hard, trying to pull free He grabbed a fistful of my hair arid a pain shot across my scalp, "Let go!"

He yanked me toward him. I stumbled, and before I could regain my balance, he drove me forward. My face struck the glass wall beside Raphael's cage. Pain burst through my chest and Raphael moved instantly.

His palm slammed against the glass, "Get your fucking hands off her."

Leone stared at Raph through the glass while holding me against it, his grip tightened in my hair, "There, look at her."

Raphael's eyes had gone completely black.

"Look at her, you bastard," Leone forced my head toward him, "You made me do this. I wouldn't have touched her if you had listened. This is on you."

I shook my head quickly, "Don't listen to him, Raph. He stood there and watched while they tortured me. I wouldn't put anything past him," I swallowed against the fear tightening my throat, "This isn't your fault."

Raphael's eyes stayed fixed on Leone's hand in my hair. The fingers twisted into my hair, his jaw tightened once, then he looked at Leone.

There was something frighteningly empty in his expression, "Take your hand off her."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 859

Leone smiled.

Raphael didn't react to it, "I'm not asking again."

Leone gave my hair another small tug. Raphael's gaze followed the movement.

"Raph," I whispered.

His eyes flicked to mine, then his attention returned to Leone.

Leone pulled me back by my hair, "Vincenzo won't listen to me but he'll listen to her."

He reached for my other wrist. I fought him again, twisting my body and trying to drive my heel into his leg. He caught my arm and forced both wrists behind my back.

I struggled harder, "Get off me!"

He pulled something from his pocket, and I felt a ziptie tightened around my wrists.

I winced.

Raphael struck the glass again, “LEONE!”

Leone glanced at him, “Keep shouting,” he gave the restraint one final pull to make sure it held, “I’m sure your brothers can hear you.”

Then he caught my arm and dragged me toward the open doorway. My shoes scraped against the floor as I tried to resist.

I looked back, “Raph…”

Leone pulled me through the doorway. Raphael’s eyes stayed on mine while I got dragged farther away from the cage. The door began sliding shut behind us.

Raphael stepped toward it, “Gianna.”

I looked back.

“Don’t fight him.”

Then the door closed between us. Leone dragged me through the hallways before I could get my balance. My wrists were bound behind me, and every time I stumbled, his hand caught my arm and shoved me forward again.

“Walk.”

I glared at him over my shoulder, but he only answered with a cold little smile.

He stopped at a massive door that looked like the facility’s main entrance. The entire area around it was crawling with armed soldiers, and he shoved me toward the nearest one.

“Take her.”

The guard stepped forward and grabbed my arm. While Leone turned toward another man, who was carrying a heavy black vest.

“Put it on.”

The guard opened it. It wasn’t a normal bulletproof vest. It covered almost his entire torso, with thick plates across his chest and sides. Another guard handed him a second layer, then another piece that covered his shoulders. Leone slipped each one into place without rushing. I watched him load himself with protection.

A pistol went into one holster. Another weapon disappeared beneath his jacket and then another.

When he was done, he looked at the guard holding me, “Give her back.”

The guard released my arm. Leone stepped behind me and caught me around the waist. I felt the cold metal of a gun touch my temple and my entire body went rigid.

His arm tightened around me, “Keep still.”

He pushed me toward the exit, the bright daylight hit my eyes the moment we stepped outside. For several seconds, I couldn’t see properly, then the shapes in front of me became clear.

And my heart stopped.

They were all there.

Vincenzo stood at the front, with Adriano beside him. Luca, Dante, and Silvio were spread out around them, each surrounded by their own men. There were so many soldiers that I couldn’t even begin to count them.

And between them stood men from the Cosa Nostra, armed and ready, their presence making the whole line feel like an army waiting for someone to make the first move.

Guns were visible everywhere but nobody moved, nobody crossed the line. I looked down and saw a thin red marking ran across the ground between the facility and the men, then I noticed the small black devices placed at intervals around it.

Bombs.

My breath caught.

The syndicate had built a boundary, a line nobody could cross without paying for it. Vincenzo’s eyes found mine first, then they moved to the gun against my head. His face didn’t change.

Leone stepped farther into the doorway, keeping me directly in front of him. He used my body as cover without even trying to hide it.

“Don’t get any ideas,” he called out, his voice carried easily across the open ground, “Your men take one shot at me, they hit her first.”

Several guns shifted.

Vincenzo’s eyes hardened, “Move the gun away from her.”

Leone laughed, “That’s not how negotiations work.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 860

“Neither is hiding behind a woman.

Leone’s smile didn’t move, “Your brought an army to my front door.”

“You kidnapped my family.”

“Your family walked into my territory.”

Vincenzo’s expression remained calm, “She was taken.”

“And now she’s here,” Leone adjusted his grip around me, I felt the barrel press harder against my temple and my breath caught, “See?” Leone said. “We can both play this game.”

Vincenzo looked over the facility, then at the line, then at the men surrounding it, then he said, “You don’t want a war.”

Leone gave a small smile, “No. I want a conversation.”

“You had a chance for one. You missed it.”

Leone tilted his head, “The council meeting?”

“Yes,” Vincenzo’s voice stayed even, “You were summoned. You were given an opportunity to present your position in front of the council. You didn’t show.”

Leone shrugged, “Circumstances changed.”

Vincenzo took one slow step forward. Leone immediately tightened his arm around me.

Vincenzo stopped, “The time for meetings is over.”

Leone’s smile faded slightly, “You’re saying that while standing outside my facility with half your organization.”

“I’m saying it because you already made your choice.”

Leone looked around at the armed men, “That’s why I asked for a negotiation.”

Vincenzo's eyes narrowed "You don't negotiate with a gun against someone's head."

"You do when the person holding the gun has something you want.

"That means you're not negotiating from strength," Vincenzo voiced, resting his machine gun over his shoulder.

Leone gave a low laugh, "Or it means I'm smart enough to understand that killing each other gets nobody what they want."

"Then tell me what you want."

Leone's grip tightened around me, "Simple. I want everyone to stop pretending this can only end one way. I want a peaceful sit- down. Give us the chance to talk before anyone makes another move."

Vincenzo looked toward the facility, then back at Leone, "You want me to walk into a building you've surrounded with explosives?"

Leone smiled, "No, I want you to give us a chance to negotiate before we decide what happens to Raphael."

Vincenzo's eyes hardened, "You already decided."

Leone's lifted his chin, "No, Vincenzo, I'm giving you the chance to change my mind."

Then Vincenzo spoke, "You should have thought about that before the council meeting. You didn't come when you were called. You ignored the council. You took hostages. You attacked my family. You lost your chance for a peaceful resolution when you

Chapter See decided you were above all the families who came to settle this."

Leone's thumb shifted against the gun, "And now?"

"Now, I'm not wasting another minute on meetings," his eyes stayed locked on Leone, "Give me my family back, and maybe I'll decide you're worth showing mercy to."

Leone smiled faintly, "That's a/shame because I was hoping we'd both be reasonable."

Vincenzo's gaze never left him, "We are. You're the one standing on a line surrounded by explosives, hiding behind a woman, asking me for terms," he took a deep breath and continued, "And I'm still giving you one."

"And what's that, Vincenzo?"

"Let her go."

Leone gave a quiet laugh. “And Raphael?”

Vincenzo’s expression hardened, “We’ll deal with Raphael after Gianna is safe.”

Leone slowly shook his head. “I don’t think you’re taking me seriously, Vincenzo. You’re still acting like you have the upper hand but you don’t.”

His voice stayed calm, almost conversational, because he knew exactly why Vincenzo was keeping his men in place. He knew Raphael mattered to him, more than this standoff, more than the hundreds of men behind him, maybe even more than winning this fight.

“You’re going to negotiate with me because you don’t have another choice. And don’t fool yourself into thinking I’m bluffing. I’m perfectly willing to kill Raphael. I’m perfectly willing to kill her.”

He paused, letting the threat echo in the air around us.

“You can kill me afterward. Hell, you can kill every man standing behind me,” his eyes swept across Vincenzo’s men, “But you’ll still lose because I’ll take the people you came here for with me. And when this is over, you’ll be standing over a pile of bodies with nothing to show for all those men you brought here.”

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Chapter 861

His mouth curved into a cold smile.

“You came for your family,” he pressed the gun harder against my temple, “So start acting like their lives are worth negotiating for because if you force this into a fight, the people you came here to save won’t be walking out alive.”

Nikolai stepped forward, “You can threaten Vincenzo with his family,” he said coldly. “But you have nothing on me or my men. You can’t hold us hostage. We can still storm this facility and tear the whole place apart.”

Leone’s expression barely changed, “You really want to find out how serious I am?”

Before I could react, the gun slammed against my temple. Pain exploded through my skull. I cried out, stumbling against him as something warm began running down the side of my face.

“Glanna!” Vincenzo’s voice echoed across the field.

Leone caught me before I could fall and dragged me upright, pressing the gun back against the spot he'd struck.

He looked at Vincenzo, "There, now you understand. Back your men up."

"No."

Leone smiled, "Wrong answer."

He grabbed my bound hands and twisted my wrist behind my back. I gasped, trying to pull away, but there was nowhere to go. He forced my fingers backward until pain shot through my arm and I screamed.

"I can break them," he said, looking directly at Vincenzo, "One by one. Or I can cut one off."

My breathing turned ragged, Vincenzo went completely still. Leone lifted the gun from my temple for only a second before striking me again with the side of it.

My knees buckled.

Luca immediately shoved Nikolai backward, "Get your fucking men back!"

Nikolai fought against him, "Don't fucking touch me."

Luca shoved him back again, "That is my fucking sister, Costello. You cross that line, you put her life at risk. So get your men the fuck back and stay there."

Leone pulled me against his chest, keeping the gun pressed beneath my temple as my head lolled, "You wanted to know if I was bluffing? This is me answering you."

Vincenzo's face had gone white with rage, "Let her go."

Leone laughed quietly, "Now you're negotiating. So let's try this again. Get your men away from my facility, agree to a peaceful negotiation, agree to our terms," he pressed the gun harder against my bleeding temple, "Or the next time I hurt her, I won't stop at a bruise."

Vincenzo's jaw clenched so hard I could see the muscle jump. For several seconds, he said nothing. His eyes stayed on the blood running down the side of my face.

Then he slowly lifted one hand, and every man behind him went still, "Fine."

Leone's brows rose.

"One meeting. One sit-down. And when we sit down, I speak to Don Giovanni and no one else. Man to man. No intermediaries. No games," Vincenzo's voice stayed even, "That's the

only concession you're getting. We sit, we settle our terms, and my family walks out of this place unharmed. No more touching her. That's my condition."

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Leone studied him, “And if you don’t like our terms, what then?”

“Then we go back to where we were… Now take that gun away from her.”

Leone simply lowered the gun from my temple and grabbed my arm, “Move.”

My legs barely listened.

Everything felt wrong. My head throbbed where the gun had struck me, and warm blood had slipped down the side of my face and into my shirt. My wrists burned behind my back. Each step made the room tilt beneath me.

“Leone…”

He pulled harder, “Don’t make me drag you.”

I stumbled after him.

The facility door closed, and the last thing I saw outside was Vincenzo standing behind the line, his face hard and furious, then the door slammed shut.

Enjoy!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 862

Gianna

My head still rang from the two blows against my temple. Every few steps, the hallway seemed to shift beneath me. Warm blood had reached my cheek, and I could feel it slipping slowly toward my jaw..

My wrists burned where the restraints cut into them. I swallowed and then I looked over my shoulder at Leone, “I can’t believe you did that to me.”

My voice barely sounded like mine but he stopped. For a moment, he didn’t say anything. His chest rose sharply as he breathed through his nose. His face was still hard, but something flickered behind his eyes when he looked at the blood on my temple.

“I had no choice.”

A broken little laugh escaped me, “No choice?” my chin trembled, “All these years...” the words caught in fry throat but I forced them out anyway, “All these years, Leone, I missed you more than I missed almost anyone here.”

He looked away.

“If you had come back into my life before she married Salvatore...” my voice shook, “I would’ve gone with you. I would’ve run straight back into your arms without a second thought.”

His eyes came back to mine and regret moved across his face, just for a second then it disappeared beneath the anger again.

“But this?” I whispered, “This is what I get?”

“Gianna-”

I shook my head, and the motion sent another sharp pulse through my temple. “I don’t want to hear a single fucking word you have to say to me.”

His jaw tightened, “You were never supposed to be the one I hurt. Raphael was. But getting to him meant getting him out of that cage, and I needed him weak enough to control. Now I can’t risk letting him out and losing the only leverage we have. I don’t trust him to stay manageable once he’s free.”

He rubbed a hand over his face.

“You think I wanted to put my hands on you?” he looked at the blood again, “I didn’t.”

I watched him carefully, “You still did.”

His expression tightened, “I know.”

The admission came so quietly that it almost disappeared.

I let my shoulders sag, my voice quieter than I intended. With my hands bound between us, my fingers brushed against something hard. I kept my expression unchanged as I looked at him. “I don’t even know who you are anymore. The Leone knew could be stupid and reckless, but he was never cruel. He would’ve never laid a hand on me.”

That one landed. His eyes closed briefly and he breathed out a sigh.

“I really did miss you when I first texted you,” I whispered.

His eyes snapped open and he looked at me once more.

“I meant it,” I moved closer, the back of my head nearly touched his chest, “But now…” I let my voice break, “Now I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

His arms hung at his sides, he didn’t push me away as I pressed myself closer, hiding my hands from his view as I leaned against him.

“I thought you wanted me back because you still cared about me.”

“I do.”

“Then why does caring about me look like this?”

He went silent. I could hear his breathing. I kept my face tilted up at him but my attention wasn’t on his face. It was on everything around me and the weight of something hard against his clothing near my hand.

I didn’t move suddenly, instead, I stayed close, letting my breathing shake as if I were struggling not to cry again.

Leone’s voice finally softened, “I never wanted you caught in this.”

I swallowed, “Then don’t leave me alone in it.”

His arms slowly came around my waist.

I closed my eyes, “Please.”

“It’s not that simple, Gianna,” Leone’s voice had lost some of its edge, but there was still something hard underneath it, “You made a mistake sending him information about us. You should’ve left them behind. You should’ve stopped answering their calls. You should’ve stayed away from the Capones.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 863

He started walking again, Torcing me to follow.

“And now your father wants you married to that fucking Capone.”

My stomach tightened at the words. He pushed open another door, an office. Dark shelves covered otle wall. A large desk sat near the windows, and several screens glowed across the opposite side of the room

Leone guided me toward the desk, “Sit.”

I hesitated as he caught my arm and helped me onto the edge of it. My legs felt weak

He looked at the blood on my face, “Don’t move.”

He crossed the room and opened a cabinet. I lowered my eyes, shifted carefully, using the moverment of my body to hide what my fingers were doing.

Something hard had been pressing against Leone’s clothing when he’d pulled me through the hallway.

I had noticed it.

I had taken it.

Now I needed somewhere to keep it where nobody would see. I moved slowly, keeping my body between Leone and my hands. Then I tucked it away beneath the back of my clothes, making sure it disappeared from sight.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. I forced myself to breathe normally.

Leone returned with a first–aid kit, he placed it beside me and opened it, “You’re bleeding more than I thought.”

I watched him pull out gauze. He stepped between my knees and lifted my chin. I didn't pull away as he wiped the blood from my temple. The same man who had caused the wound was now trying to clean it.

The irony almost made me laugh.

His touch slowed when he reached the cut. I looked up at him and softened my eyes, and let my lower lip tremble, "You hurt me, Leone."

His hand stopped.

I swallowed, "You hurt me before and you hurt me now."

He looked away, focusing on the cut instead.

I kept my voice quiet, "How am I supposed to believe you ever loved me?"

His jaw tightened, "I did. I still do."

His fingers moved toward my face again. This time, his thumb brushed lightly across my lower lip.

I turned my face away, "No, don't do that."

He froze, "Gianna-'

"You can't," I looked down at my tied hands, "Love isn't supposed to make you afraid of the person saying they love you. It's supposed to make you feel safe."

Leone lowered his hand and he looked like he didn't know what to say. He finished wrapping the bandage around my temple, his fingers surprisingly careful against my skin.

He secured the edge and leaned back to examine his work. Then he touched the bandage lightly and watched me intensely

"I still love you, Gianna."

I didn't answer, because those words stopped meaning anything to me. He seemed to take my silence as permission to keep talking.

"We can still fix this. I don't care about anyone else. I never did. You were my partner before everything went wrong. You were my first love. My best friend," he reached for my hand, then seemed to remember it was still tied behind me, "I'll end the engagement."

My eyes lifted.

“I mean it. I’ll break it off. We’ll get married. You can stand beside me as the head of the Toricelli Syndicate. I’ll be there through all of it.”

He sounded almost certain that he could simply speak the future into existence.

“I’ll teach you everything you need to know. I’ll help you with the business. With the people. With your father. With your dyslexia. Whatever you need,” his thumb brushed my cheek, “I don’t need some other woman.”

I let my expression soften. I leaned forward until my forehead rested against his chest. His breathing changed, his arms came around me again.

I closed my eyes, not because I trusted him but because I needed him to believe I did. I needed him calm. I needed him close.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 864

And most of all, I needed him to keep talking.

For a few seconds, it worked, then his hand moved over my hair, “All you have to do...

He stopped.

I waited, barely breathing.

His fingers rested against the back of my head, “...is fuck me where Raphael can see.”

My entire body went rigid. I pulled away so quickly that it made my head spin, “What?”

Leone looked at me as if he’d suggested something completely reasonable. His eyes shifted toward the door, “Let Raphael see.”

Something inside me went cold. I couldn’t understand what I was looking at anymore, this really wasn’t the Leone I remembered. The boy who had once been my closest friend felt like a stranger wearing his face.

“Leone...”

“I want you,” his voice was blunt now, “I want you, and I want him to watch.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

He parted my thighs even more and stepped closer, “If you do that, I’ll let him go. I’ll make sure we can somehow settle this. I’ll do everything I can to stop this from becoming a war.”

He said it like he was offering me a fair deal like my body was a bargaining chip he had every right to place on the table.

I felt sick.

I had spent years remembering Leone as someone I had loved. Someone I had missed. Someone I had once believed would protect me. And now he was standing in front of me, asking me to humiliate myself to hurt the man I love.

I couldn’t believe he had fallen this far.

I swallowed hard, “You’re asking me to do that?”

His expression didn’t change, “Yes.”

The word settled heavily between us. I looked around, trying to think my way out of this but I couldn’t. Before I could answer, someone knocked on the door.

Leone turned, “Yeah?”

A guard’s voice came from the other side, “Boss Leone?”

Leone frowned, “What?”

“Don Giovanni is looking for you. He wants to talk. Now.”

Leone’s face tightened as he pulled me off the desk.

My feet barely touched the floor before his hands settled on either side of my body, moving slowly over my sides as though he were trying to remind me that he still believed I belonged to him.

I stiffened.

“I’ll give you time to think about it,” he murmured.

I said nothing.

“I’ll deal with your father. I’ll keep him busy with the meeting, or find something else to occupy him while we…” his eyes held mine, “You know what I want.”

My stomach turned.

“If you really want me,” he continued, “all you have to do is give in. Let me have you, and let Raphael understand that you were never supposed to belong to anyone but me.”

I looked away. He caught my arm and started dragging me toward the door. The corridor seemed longer on the way back. Every step made my head throb.

When we reached the main room, Dad was already there. His eyes landed on me, then on the brood beneath the bandage.

His face changed, “What happened to her?”

Leone shrugged, “She tripped.”

My head snapped towards him as Dad’s gaze sharpened, “Tripped?”

“Caught her foot and went down against a rock outside,” he gave a small shake of his head, “She’s fine. I cleaned the wound.”

Dad didn’t look convinced. His eyes moved over me again, “That’s more than a small cut.”

“Gio, she’s fine.”

Leone opened the cage, the door released with a mechanical click. My heart tightened and my eyes immediately went back to him. Raphael hadn’t moved from where I’d last seen him.

He was hunched forward, elbows resting against his knees, his head lowered. His breathing was slow.

I stepped inside, and the door shut behind me. Raphael didn’t look up. I couldn’t see his eyes. Only the tension in his shoulders and the way his hands rested between his knees. He looked like he was holding himself together by force.

CAR

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 865

I took a careful step closer to the glass separating us, “Raph?”

He gave me nothing, but his breathing deepened. His fingers curled slowly. I couldn’t tell whether he had heard me but I knew one thing.

He knew.

And whatever was happening inside his head was frightening me more than his shouting had.

Outside the cage, Dad turned toward Leone, “What happened out there?”

Leone closed his jacket and straightened, “Vincenzo agreed to talk.”

Dad’s attention snapped toward him, “He did?”

“He’ll listen to our terms,” Leone walked toward the table, “But there’s a condition.”

“What condition?”

“He wants to speak directly with you, and alone.”

Dad frowned, “Only me?”

Leone nodded, “He said he’ll discuss the terms with Don Giovanni and nobody else. And Nikolai will probably present the decision of the council.”

Behind the glass, Raphael finally lifted his head. I caught only a glimpse of his eyes. It was cold, dark and completely empty

Then his gaze dropped again because he refused to look at me.

Leone leaned against the edge of the table, his attention shifting between Dad and the screens covering the far wall, “We can still control how this ends,” he said.

Dad’s eyes narrowed, “How? I don’t think there’s a way out of this anymore, Leone. They are going to bleed us dry.”

Leone’s expression stayed calm, “Vance.”

The name changed the room. Vance pulled at the collar around his neck, swallowing. I felt Raphael’s attention sharpen froin inside the cage.

Leone noticed it too, but he didn’t care, “We put everything on him.”

Dad didn’t say a word as Leone walked toward one of the screens.

“Think about what the council already know. They know children were brought here. They know there were experiments. They know people disappeared,” he tapped the screen, “They don’t need to know who approved what. They need a person they can point at.” 1

Dad folded his arms, “And you think Vance is enough?”

“He’s perfect.” Leone gave a slow nod, “I’m not saying we walk away without heat. We won’t. We’ve been funding this place for years, and there’s no hiding that. But you and I never killed a child. Every murder tied to this operation was Vance’s doing. He ran the medical side. He made those decisions.”

He glanced toward Vance..

“And the people we’re dealing with aren’t cops or judges. They’re criminals themselves. They understand how trafficking networks are built, how people get moved, and how one person can run an operation while everyone above him claims they knew nothing.”

His gaze returned to Dad.

“We give them Vance, the records, the facilities, and a story that fits what they already know. They’ll have someone to blame, and we’ll have a way to survive the fallout.”

He turned back to the screens.

“If anyone asks who designed the program, Vance did. If they ask who selected the children, Vance did. If they ask who handled the medical side of the operation, Vance did.”

Dad’s expression hardened, “And the money?”

“We make it look like he built his own network without our knowledge,” Leone began pacing slowly, “Shell companies. Private accounts. Fake medical suppliers. Payments routed through people who never existed. We don’t need to prove every detail. We only need to give the council enough evidence to believe they’ve found the center of the operation,” he stopped beside the desk, “And Vance has already given us half the story.

I looked toward the doctor. Vance sat several feet away, silent. For once, he didn’t look amused, he looked murderous.

Dad’s eyes narrowed, “They’ll want more than a name.

“I know.” Leone’s smile barely moved. “That’s why we give them a story. We don’t need to erase every trace. We just need to separate ourselves from what happened here.”

He continued before Dad could interrupt.

“Every document with Vance’s name becomes evidence against him. Every payment can be tied to his operation. Every victim becomes another piece of proof that he was running this without our direct involvement.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 866

“And what happens to us?”

Leone’s expression turned serious, “We give Raphael back to the Capones in exchange for a peace agreement. Then you can offer Gianna’s marriage as part of that agreement. Two lives for two lives,” Leone said. “Giarma and Raphael for you and me.”

He took a slow breath.

“Maybe we lose the facility. Maybe we lose the money we’ve put into it.aybe we lose the entire network and the syndicate. Maybe we walk away with nothing,” his eyes hardened, “But we’re still alive, Gio. We can rebuild.”

He gave a small shrug.

“I know enough people who owe us favors. Enough people who would work with us again. We won’t have what we have now, but we can build something new. We walk away, ask for a clean start, and rebuild from whatever we have left.”

Inside the cage, Raphael finally spoke, “You’re an idiot.”

Leone’s head snapped toward him, “What the fuck did you just say?”

Raphael slowly lifted his eyes, “I said you’re a fucking idiot who’s about to die and is desperately grasping at whatever straw he can find,” he let out a quiet breath that almost sounded like a laugh, “You actually believe they’re going to accept that?”

Leone’s face hardened.

Raphael’s smile deepened, “You’re looking at this like the Capones are going to walk in here, see Vance sitting in a room full of evidence, and suddenly decide, Well, I guess Leone and Giovanni had nothing to do with it,” he shook his head, “That isn’t how this works and I shouldn’t have to teach you that, Underboss Leone.”

Leone’s eyes narrowed.

Raphael leaned back against the wall of the cage, his gaze moved briefly toward the screens, “You’re also forgetting the biggest problem.”

He raised an eyebrow, “Which is?”

“You’re trying to negotiate with people who already know you’re holding their family,” he gave him a humorless smile, “You think giving me back earns you a clean slate? It gives them their brother back. And once Vincenzo has me standing beside him, he doesn’t need to negotiate with you anymore.”

Leone’s expression barely changed, “Because there’d be nothing left to negotiate.”

Raphael saw it, “Exactly, this isn’t a negotiation. You’re offering them the one thing they want most and expecting them to reward you for it.”

Leone took a step toward the cage, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No?” Raphael looked at him, “Then answer one question. If you give me back, what stops Vincenzo from taking you apart afterward?”

Leone said nothing, but looked at Dad who seemed deep in his thoughts.

“Nothing,” Raphael added as his smile returned, “You don’t have leverage after I’m gone. Gianna won’t be leverage either once I’m out of here.”

His eyes flicked toward me for a second.

“And your whole plan depends on everyone believing you’ll keep your word after you’ve spent the last several hours threatening to kill people. You’re panicking.”

Leone’s nostrils flared as he stubbornly shook his head.

Raphael didn’t stop talking, “You’re trying to convince yourself that losing everything is the same thing as getting a second chance but you don’t have a clean start waiting for you.”

He nodded toward the facility.

“You have a building full of evidence, a doctor who knows exactly what you’ve been funding, a council that already wants answers, and an entire Capone family standing outside,” then his eyes settled on Leone, “And you have me because you know the second I’m free, your plan dies.”

Leone’s smile slowly widened, “Or I make one phone call to the FBI. This facility is full of evidence. Your people are outside carrying enough illegal weapons to bury every one of you under federal charges. And if the FBI walks through those doors, nobody gets to walk away pretending this was just a family dispute.”

His eyes moved toward the others.

“You think your connections will save you? Maybe they helped you before. Maybe you’ve got people inside the system who owe you favors but there are limits to how many strings you can pull when an entire operation like this lands in front of federal investigators.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 867

His gaze returned to Raphael

“And Nikolai?” he gave a small shake of his head, “This would be his second strike. You don’t survive a second war with the FBI by pretending you have enough friends in the right places.”

He leaned slightly closer to the/cage.

“So maybe you should stop telling me my plan is dead,” his voice dropped, “Because if i go down, I don’t go down alone.”

My attention was still on Raphael and Leone when I saw him move. Vance had been sitting quietly near the wall, his head lowered, his shoulders slack but then suddenly ran and his hand disappeared beneath his coat.

“Dad!” my scream tore through the room, “Move!”

Dad turned at the sound of my voice and Leone turned too but Vance was already there. He crossed the distance in seconds and drove the blade into the side of Dad’s neck.

Dad’s eyes went wide as a broken sound escaped him.

“Gio!” Leone’s voice echoed in my head.

Dad staggered backward, one hand flying to his throat as blood immediately soaked between his fingers. He tried to breathe, but the words that came out were nothing more than a wet, choking gasp.

I couldn’t move, I couldn’t blink, I couldn’t even breathe, it all happened so fast. Vance stood behind him, still holding the scalpel.

Leone lunged forward, “No.”

His voice sounded strange, small, almost like he hadn’t understood what he was seeing.

Then panic exploded across his face, “No, no, no–Gio!”

Dad grabbed the blade with a shaking hand and pulled it free, the moment he did, blood rushed from the wound.

His knees buckled.

Leone caught him before he hit the floor, dropping down with him, “Stay with me!”

Dad tried to answer, nothing came out, only another strained breath. Leone pressed both hands against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding.

“Gio, look at me,” his voice broke, “Look at me!”

Dad’s head rolled against his arm. Vance had already stepped back. I stared at him. The same man who had spent all this time sitting quietly had just changed everything in a matter of seconds.

“Gio?”

“Gio!”

The room erupted into chaos. Guards rushed in from every side, someone screamed for medical help, and weapons were drawn in a rush of shouting and movement. Two men tackled Vance to the floor, and one of them immediately started driving his fists into Vance’s face.

And behind the glass, Raphael had risen to his feet. He wasn’t looking at Vance. He was looking at Leone, he was looking at me.

Because everyone in the room had just realized the same thing.

The only man who could control the negotiation–the only man Vincenzo Capone and Nikolai Costello would even consider sitting across from–was suddenly on the floor, and Leone was holding my father’s life together with his bare hands.

And there was one more thing nobody could ignore anymore.

Dad had already named me as his heir. He had done it in front of the council. In front of his people. In front of everyone who mattered.

Which meant that if Giovanni Toricelli died now, the power he had been holding would not pass to Leone.

It would pass to me.

Janedoewritings

Author

Do you guys think Leone would actually let Gianna take the reins after everything that just happened?.....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 868

Gianna

Leone didn’t seem to hear anything around his

He was still on the floor beside Dad, one hand pressed against the wound, the other gripping his shoulder, “Gio,” he shook him gently, “Come on. Wake up.”

Leone swallowed hard.

“No. No, you don’t get to do this,” his breathing became uneven, “You don’t get to leave me here.”

He looked down at Dad’s face as though waiting for him to open his eyes and tell him what to do.

“You always know what to do,” his voice broke, “So tell me what the fuck I’m supposed to do now.”

I couldn’t look away.

Leone pressed his fingers against Dad’s neck, searching for something that wasn’t there, “Come on, Gio,” his shoulders started shaking, “I don’t know what to do without you.”

The words were so quiet that they almost disappeared beneath the noise around us.

Then one of the guards stepped closer, “Boss?”

Leone didn’t answer. The guard glanced toward Vance, who was still being held on the floor, “What do you want us to do with him?”

Leone slowly lifted his head and something in his face had changed. He looked at Dad once more, then he released him.

Dad’s body fell back against the floor and I flinched. Leone stood, crossed the room so quickly that the guards barely had time to react. He slammed into Vance and drove him back onto the floor.”

“You,” Leone’s fist crashed into Vance’s face, “You’re not dying. Do you hear me?”

Another punch landed before Vance could recover.

“I won’t give you an easy death.”

Vance raised an arm to shield himself, but Leone seized his wrist and ripped it away, leaving his face exposed.

“You ruined us. Do you have any idea what you just did! You ruined my fucking family. You took him from me.”

I couldn’t move, the sound seemed to come from very far away. My eyes drifted back to Dad. He was lying exactly where Leone had left him.

He was too still.

That couldn’t be my father.

He had never been still.

Giovanni Toricelli had filled rooms without raising his voice. Men twice his size watched him before making a decision. People waited for his approval. Entire families changed plans because he had spoken a sentence.

And now he was lying on the floor like anyone else, no guards moving for him, no orders coming from him, no sharp voice telling everyone what to do.

Just a body.

My mind refused to accept it.

How could someone who had seemed larger than life become so small in a matter of seconds? 1

How could a man who had controlled so many people suddenly be unable to control his own breathing?

And suddenly, my mind went quiet, the same way it had when Mom died. Everything inside me seemed to switch off. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t feel. I couldn’t even understand how was supposed to react to the fact that my father was dead.

So I looked at Raphael and forced myself back into the present.

My throat tightened, “Leone...”

He didn’t hear me.

I swallowed and tried again, “Leone.”

His fist stopped in the air and he slowly turned his head.

I looked at Dad again, then back at him, “What does this mean?” my voice shook, “What does this mean for us?”

His expression hardened and a strange, bitter smile pulled at his mouth, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I frowned, blinking through the shock still clouding my mind, “What are you talking about?”

He pushed himself away from Vance and rose slowly. His breathing was still heavy as his anger directed towards me. His face was streaked with blood that wasn’t his.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?”

My stomach dropped, “What?”

“This,” he pointed toward Dad’s body, “This is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“No.”

The word came out before I could stop it.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 869

Leone’s lips curled in disgust You and junior hever loved him.

My brows pulled together, “What are you–”

“You never gave him what he needed,” his voice rose, “You weren’t there for him the way I was.”

“Leone, that’s not-”

“I was,” he pointed at himself, “I stayed. When everyone else had something they wanted from him, I stayed because I was loyal to him,” his eyes flicked toward Dad, “He was like a father to me.”

I felt something inside me crack, “Leone…”

“No, Gianna! You don’t understand what he was to me,” his voice shook with anger, “I didn’t stay because I wanted his money. I didn’t stay because I wanted his name. I stayed because he gave me a place beside him. And you know what I did for him?”

I couldn’t answer, I couldn’t understand where it was all coming from.

“I gave him everything I had,” his jaw tightened, “I protected him the way junior was supposed to. I worked for him like you were supposed to do. I stood beside him when nobody else wanted to,” he pointed toward the floor, “And now he’s dead.”

My eyes burned, “I didn’t kill him.”

Leone’s face twisted, “But you made the choices that brought us here. You came back and now he’s gone.”

My breath caught.

Leone’s voice dropped into something cold, “You got everything you wanted, Gianna. Didn’t you? You came back, and now you think you can just step into his place, take his throne, and expect me to bow my head and listen to you?”

I shook my head, “No.”

His expression hardened, “You killed him. You brought these people into our life and you killed him. He loved you so much, more than he loved junior and you killed him.”

“No!” the word ripped out of me. I gripped the glass between us, my breath coming too fast, “No, you don’t get to put that on me! Dad brought Vance into our lives, not me. He chose him. He chose what happened here.”

My voice shook, but I couldn’t stop.

“He abused me for years, Leone. Years. I ran because I couldn’t take it anymore. He did the same thing to Junior until Junior could barely walk. Don’t stand there and tell me he loved us when he spent our whole childhood destroying us.”

Leone’s face went still, his eyes narrowed at me.

“He made those choices. He brought Vance here. He built this place. He hurt us. He hurt hundreds and thousands of other children. Whatever happened to him now came from the life he chose,” I swallowed hard, “I’m not responsible for that, neither is Junior.”

Leone looked at me as though I had become someone he didn’t know, “I don’t even recognize you anymore. You’re fucking cold You’re not my Gianna. My Gianna would never say something like this.”

My stomach dropped, but anger rose faster, “There is no your Gianna!” I snapped.

He took a step back, his eyes traveling over me before shifting toward Raphael, “You’re right. You’re not my Gianna anymore. I cared about the girl I knew. The girl who was mine. Not whoever the hell is standing in front of me now. So now I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done. You want to know what it feels like to lose someone you love?”

His eyes flicked toward Raphael, then back to me.

“you really want to know?” he stepped even closer, “Because I can show you.”

My skin went cold. I didn Tauswer. His eyes moved toward Raphael and I turned too. Raphael was standing near the glass, his face completely blank.

Then his eyes met mine and he gave the smallest shake of his head, his voice was barely a whisper, “Don’t provoke him, Gianna. He’s not in control of himself anymore, and if you push him, he’ll hurt you. So don’t say another fucking word.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 870

I wanted to listen.

God, I wanted to.

But the thought of Leone turning that rage toward Raphael made my chest tighten.

I looked back at Leone, “Don’t you dare touch him.”

Something almost amused crossed his face, “Oh, no. Not him.”

Then he turned away and my confusion lasted only a second as he walked toward the far end of the facility.

There were more cages beyond the section where Raphael and I were held. From where we stood, the glass walls and steel supports blocked most of that area from view.

I couldn’t see where he was going.

Raphael moved closer to his side of the glass, “Gianna, listen to me. We need to be careful now. Your father was the only thing keeping him from losing control. He’s not going to listen to you anymore.”

Then we heard it, a loud high pitched scream. My blood went cold as another followed, “No...”

I couldn’t see anything. I heard footsteps instead, and something scraped across the floor.

Leone appeared from behind the row of cages but he wasn’t alone. His hand was tangled in the hair of two women being dragged behind him.

I felt every bit of color leave my face.

Raphael stepped toward the glass, “Gianna, don’t do anything stupid.”

There was something in his voice that made the entire room seem quieter. Leone dragged both women toward us.

Leone stopped directly in front of our cages, he released their hair and they collapsed against the floor, gasping.

Leone looked through the glass at me, “You wanted to know what losing someone feels like, now you’re going to learn.”

I couldn’t breathe, I didn’t understand what I was looking at, then my eyes adjusted.

Jasmine and Tasha were barely recognizable.

Their clothes were torn and stained, and both of them had fresh surgical wounds across their bodies. Their faces were swollen, their skin pale, their bodies trembling uncontrollably against the cold floor.

But it was their faces that broke something inside me.

Their eyes had been removed.

I pressed a hand over my mouth, “No.”

Jasmine turned her head at the sound of my voice, “G...?”

“Tasha...” my knees nearly gave out, as I glared at Leone, “What did you do to them? What did you do to them?” I screamed.

He spread his hands as if I had accused him of something unfair, “I helped them. Isn’t that what you wanted? You wanted us to help them,” he glanced down at the two women, “So we did.”

“Please…” Jasmine’s voice broke, “No more…”

Tasha made a small sound beside her and reached blindly across the floor until her fingers found Jasmine’s hand.

They held onto each other.

And a sob slipped through my lips, “Leave them alone!”

Leone laughed under his breath, “No,” he crouched beside them, “Do you remember your other friends?”

My heart stopped, “What?”

He tilted his head, “The other three whores. Brianna. Morgan. And…” He snapped his fingers. “Whatever the hell the third girl’s name was.”

I stared at him in disbelief, “Leone…”

He gave a small nod, “They gave us plenty that night. Names, places, details about you. Enough information for us to build a case and take it to the council.”

My stomach twisted.

“They told us where you were. They told us where to find the Capone mansion. They gave us everything we needed to get close to you. They were useful. Very fucking useful.”

A bitter smile pulled at his mouth.

“And the funny part?” he glanced toward the women beside him, “They didn’t even need much convincing. They hated you. They really fucking hated you, Gianna.”

My chest tightened, “No.”

He looked almost pleased with himself, “Your friends turned on you the moment they were scared enough.”

“That isn’t true.”

“It is.”

His eyes hardened. “And your father knew what they’d done. He didn’t want people like that anywhere near you. He loved you too much to let them stay in your life, so he had them killed.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 871

I blinked. My mind went back to that time-the moment I’d first believed the Capones were responsible.

I remembered the fear.

The confusion.

The way I’d looked at them and wondered why they would do something so cruel.

I’d believed it.

The room seemed to tilt, “No...”

“He defended you right until the end,” Leone’s voice grew colder, “He punished them for betraying you. Then he sent these two to you,” he gestured toward Jasmine and Tasha, “And you did exactly what everyone expected and now look where that got them.”

Raphael’s voice came from behind the glass, “Leone.”

Leone smiled, “There he is. I was starting to wonder where that sharp tongue went now that your father-in-law is out of the picture.”

Raphael’s hands curled at his sides, “Leave the women out of this.”

“Why?” Leone looked back at me, “Because you can’t stand watching someone you love suffer?”

My tears kept falling, “Please, Leone, please don’t.”

He stared at me for several seconds, then he looked down at Jasmine and Tasha, “This is what I lost,” he stepped closer to them, “Gio was my only family left.”

I shook my head desperately, “Don’t do this.”

Raphael moved against the glass, “Gianna, don’t look.”

But I couldn't look away. Leone reached down. Jasmine began crying harder. Tasha held onto her hand.

Their voices were small, terrified. Leone's face hardened and then the room filled with a sound I knew I would never forget.

Leone broke both of their necks so quickly that I barely had time to understand what I was seeing. One second they were struggling beneath his grip, and the next, their bodies went completely still.

I screamed, "NO!"

Raphael slammed both hands against the glass, "GIANNA!"

I couldn't hear anything else. I couldn't see anything except the two women on the floor and Leone standing over them.

My legs gave out. I sank against the glass, sobbing so hard my chest hurt. Raphael stood on the other side, breathing like he was fighting for control.

I sobbed until my chest hurt. I couldn't make sense of anything anymore. Jasmine and Tasha lay motionless on the floor, and every part of me wanted to believe there was some way to undo what had happened.

Leone looked down at them, then, without a word, he kicked their bodies aside.

I recoiled, "Leone..."

He ignored me.

His attention shifted to Dad.

Heciossed the room and crouched beside him. For a moment, the anger disappeared from his face. He carefully lifted Dad from the floor, carrying him toward a stretcher positioned near the wall. He lowered him onto it, then he pulled a white sheet over Dad's body. The sheet stopped just below his face.

Leone stood there for several seconds, then he turned toward his men. His face was empty again, "Get every child out. Every single one."

The men exchanged looks.

"Bring them from every cage. Every room. Every section ofhis building," his voice grew colder with every word, "I want them moved to the exits. Put them along the walls, near every entrance, every corridor. Hidden entrances too. Service passages. Anywhere someone could try to come through."

He looked toward the doors and then at Raphael with a smile.

“If the Capones want a war, they’ll have one but they’re going to have to decide exactly what they’re willing to destroy to get to us.”

I shook my head, “You can’t do this, Leone, they’re children, they already suffered enough, please, stop this madness!”

He didn’t even look at me as he ordered his guards, “Move fast!”

The guards obeyed and the doors opened throughout the facility. One after another, children were brought out, some cried, some could barely walk. Some leaned against the guards because their bodies were too weak to carry their own weight. Others kept their heads down, terrified of everyone around them.

I pressed both hands against the glass, “Please...”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 872

Nobody listened, the children were moved toward the outer sections of the building. I saw small faces looking around in fear. Some were crying loudly, while the others didn’t make a sound at all.

That silence was worse.

Raphael had gone completely still inside his cage. His eyes followed every child who passed. Something dark settled across his face.

Leone turned toward Vance, who had been dragged away from the wall and was now surrounded by guards.

Leone grabbed the chain attached to the collar around Vance’s neck and pulled hard. Vance stumbled forward.

“Walk.”

Vance could barely breathe through the swelling and blood covering his face. Leone seized the chain around his collar and hauled him toward the opposite side of the room.

I watched them disappear down the corridor, the doors closed behind them, one after another until there was only silence.

No Leone.

No Vance.

No guards.

No voices.

Just Raphael and me, trapped in separate glass cages. I looked across the space at him and he lifted his eyes to mine. For the first time since this nightmare began, neither of us had anyone standing between us.

Raphael's face was still hard, but something in his eyes had changed, "I failed to protect you."

My chest tightened and I shook my head, "No, you didn't fail me, I failed you," I looked down at Jasmine and Tasha, "I failed my mother. I failed Jules. Denise. All of my friends. I made choices that hurt people. I can't change that," I raised my eyes to him again, "But I promise you, I won't fail the Capones waiting outside."

My heart was pounding so hard I could hear it, then I shifted closer to the back of my cage.

My hands went behind me, I slipped my fingers beneath the back of my waistband.

Raphael's eyes narrowed, "What are you doing?"

My fingertips found the hard rectangle hidden there and I pulled it free. Raphael went completely still as I held it up.

"Raph," I whispered, "I stole Leone's phone."

For a second, he simply stared at it, then his gaze snapped back to me.

"I took it when he was distracted..."

Raphael stepped closer to the glass. His jaw tightened, but his eyes stayed fixed on the phone.

"Check it," he said.

His eyes flicked toward the cameras, then toward the dark monitors. No one was actively watching the feeds anymore. I turned the phone over in my hand and pressed my thumb against the screen.

It lit up instantly and I froze. There was no passcode, no fingerprint prompt, nothing. The home screen appeared as if the phone had never been locked at all.

My eyes widened, “Raph...”

“What?”

I swallowed, “There’s no code.”

He stared at me. I tapped the screen again, almost expecting it to suddenly lock itself. It didn’t.

“There’s no lock at all.”

Raphael’s expression changed. He moved closer to the glass, studying the phone from where he stood. His eyes moved around the room before returning to the phone.

“If that thing is connected to anything inside this facility, this could be the access point we’ve been looking for.”

My pulse jumped, “You think you can use it?”

He stepped closer to the glass, his eyes narrowing on the phone, “No, Mess, we’re going to use it together. Turn the screen toward me.”

I raised the phone so he could see it through the glass.

“Don’t open anything yet,” he said, “From what we heard, Leone doesn’t have direct control of these cages from his phone. He ordered Vance to release them through the remote system. If Leone had full access, he wouldn’t have needed Vance in the first place.”

“So what are we looking for?”

“Anything that connects his phone to the facility.”

I opened the first few folders, “Not that one.”

I moved back.

“Open the settings,” he told me.

I tapped the screen, “Now?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 873

“Scroll slowly.”

My finger moved down the screen, Jooking everywhere, “We need to hurry before Leone gets back.”

“Stop.”

I stopped.

“Go back one.”

I did.

Raphael watched every movement through the glass, his eyes tracking the screen with sharp focus, “Look for anything that says security, facility, access, control. Anything that sounds like it connects to this place.”

I nervously bit my lower lip, “There are so many apps.”

“It’s fine,” his voice dropped, “Take your time, Gianna. Breathe. Stay calm and keep your head clear. You’re doing good,” his gaze held mine through the glass, “You got the phone. You kept it hidden. You got us this far. Now stay focused and we’ll finish it.”

I nodded, and kept scrolling.

Then his expression changed, “Wait.”

I looked up, “What?”

“Go back.”

I moved back through the screen.

“There,” his eyes sharpened, “That app.

I tapped it and a security panel opened, “Raph…”

“Don’t touch anything yet,” he leaned closer.

“Read me what you see,” I whispered.

He looked at the screen, “Facility status. Internal security. Exterior security…, Lockdown.”

Raphael’s mouth curved into a small smile.

“You want me to open it?”

He gave me a nod, “Yes.”

I tapped the option, a map appeared. For a few seconds, he didn’t say a word, just studied what was on the screen. The facility was shown from above, with different sections marked across the screen.

Raphael stared at it, “That’s not just the lockdown.”

“What is it?”

“Everything,” his eyes moved across the map, “Exterior gates. Perimeter sensors. Emergency doors. The vents. Security barriers.”

He told me to scroll through the controls, his eyes following every line on the screen until he suddenly told me to stop.

His gaze fixed on the lower part of the display, “Those... perimeter charges.”

My blood turned cold and I trodded slowly, “They’re bombs. They’re planted all around the facility. That’s what’s keeping everyone outside. ‘They’re connected to movement sensors. If anyone crosses the perimeter, they’ll trigger.”

He studied the layout, “They’ve tied the perimeter system into the sarne control network.”

I looked toward the facility walls and swallowed, “So this phone controls all of it?”

“Yes, this just gave us access to the system,” he whispered, “Once the vents are open, I’ll handle the rest.”

I looked at the screen, “What do I press?”

“Go back to the lockdown controls.”

I did.

“Find the master lockdown.”

My finger hovered over the screen, “I see it.”

“Open it.”

I tapped and a warning appeared.

Raph read it aloud, “Disabling lockdown will restore normal facility access,” his smile widened, “Do it.”

I pressed the button, for one second, nothing happened. Then, a deep mechanical sound rolled through the facility. The metal blinds covering the windows began to rise.

One after another, they folded upward with heavy clicks. The doors unlocked, somewhere down the hall, locks released in quick succession, then came another sound.

Air rushed through the vents.

I looked up, and the vent above Raphael’s cage shifted open, and a familiar face appeared behind the metal grille.

A man looked down at us.

His hair was a mess, his face covered in dust, and he looked like he’d spent hours crawling through the walls.

For half a second, I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Then a familiar voice came from the darkness, “Boss.”

Raphael’s entire expression changed. For the first time in what felt like hours, the tension in his face broke.

Ciro grinned down at him through the open vent, “Fucking finally.”

Raphael let out a short laugh, almost like he couldn’t believe Ciro was actually there, “Ciro.”

“Yeah,” Ciro called back, wiping sweat from his forehead. “About fucking time. I was starting to think you left me up there to die.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 874

Raphael 38

Ciro’s face appeared through the open vent, still wearing that irritating grin. 1

Dust clung to his hair and the side of his face, and there was a faint sheen of sweat across his forehead. He looked completely out of place above us, half-hidden behind the metal grille.

For once, I was glad to see him.

“Ciro.”

“Boss.”

My eyes moved over him quickly, checking that he was intact before returning to the opening above us, “Did you bring what I left for you in the vents?”

He nodded, “You mean the little black box?”

“Yes.”

He reached behind himself and brought it into view.

The device was small enough to fit in one hand, its dark casing catching the light from the room below. He held it carefully between his fingers as he leaned closer to the grille.

I looked at the narrow opening.

The distance wasn’t great, but the angle mattered. If he dropped it carelessly, it could break.

My eyes stayed on the grille, “Drop it.”

Ciro held it up, checking the opening beneath him, “Through here?”

“Yes.”

He turned it sideways and tried to guide it through the opening. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, my heart jumping at the thought of the little thing slipping from his hand and disappearing elsewhere. I quickly glanced over my shoulder, checking the room to make sure Leone still hadn’t returned, then looked back at Ciro.

I had no idea why I trusted this idiot as much as I did.

“It won’t fit,” he said, frustration clear on his face.

I looked at the device again. It wasn’t large, but the vent grille was narrow, and the metal bars left very little room to work with. The way he was holding it made the shape seem much bigger than it actually was.

“Turn it diagonally.”

“I already tried.”

“Not that way.

He frowned at me, wearing that same stupidly confused expression on his face.

I sighed and pointed toward the opening, trying to make him understand the angle without wasting another second.

“Rotate it ninety degrees. Hold the thin edge toward the opening, then lower the bottom corner first.”

Ciro adjusted his grip and tried again. This time, he turned the device at the right angle and carefully lowered one corner toward the gap.

For a second, it caught against the metal, then he shifted it slightly. The device slipped through one of the wider gaps in the grille.

His eyes widened as he looked down at me, “Huh.”

“Drop it.”

His fingers opened, the little black device fell through the vent and dropped toward me.

I caught it against my palm, closing my fingers around it immediately before it could slip from my grasp.

Ciro leaned farther through the opening, his shoulders pressing against the metal frame as he looked down at me, “You know how to use that thing?”

I raised an eyebrow at him, glancing briefly at the small black device resting in my palm, “I built it.”

He paused, then nodded slowly, “Right.”

I looked toward the corridor.

The facility had gone strangely quiet again. I tightened my fingers around the device and looked back up at him.

“Stay there.”

His eyebrows pulled together, “What?”

“Stay in the vents.”

His expression turned serious almost at once. The irritating grin disappeared, “Why? I need to be down there with you, not sitting in a fucking vent while you handle this alone.”

I glanced toward the corridor again, “Because Leone is going to come back.

I looked toward Gianna.

She was still clutching the phone in both hands, holding it close to her chest. Her eyes stayed fixed on me, and there was something fragile in them that I wasn’t used to seeing.

Then I noticed the bandage on her temple.

My eyes moved over the edge of it, following the faint stain that had spread through the material. Below it, dried and fresh blood marked her skin. More of it had soaked into her shirt, darkening the fabric across her body.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 875

I stared at it, for half a second, I forgot about the room, forgot about the cages, forgot about the security system and the men outside.

All I could see was the blood.

My gaze lingered on the dark red patch longer than it should have.

Leone had done that.

The thought came quietly, almost without emotion, but the anger that followed it was anything but quiet inside my head.

I wanted my hands around his throat. I wanted him to understand exactly what he’d done to her, exactly how much damage he’d caused. I wanted to make him feel the same pain he’d forced onto her.

I wanted to peel the skin from his face one layer at a time.

The thought was clear.

Precise.

And completely useless.

None of it would help Gianna right now, none of it would get her out of this cage, none of it would get us out of this facility.

I forced the thought away and looked at her again. She was still watching me, believing in me completely with her entire being.

So I pushed every violent thought back into the part of my mind where I kept things I couldn't afford to act on.

My breathing slowed, my hands relaxed. The anger remained, buried beneath everything else, but I locked it away for later.

Right now, there was only one thing that mattered.

"Prepare the equipment I left up there."

Ciro nodded, his expression turning focused, "The weapons?"

I gave him a nod, "Check every weapon before you bring them out. Load the magazines, check the chambers, and keep the safeties off. I want everything ready before you move."

His eyes sharpened, "Got it."

"Keep the spare magazines together. Don't leave anything loose in the vent. Put the smaller weapons where we can reach them quickly and keep the heavier ones secured in the bags."

Ciro gave a short nod, "Understood."

"Don't make a sound when you bring any of it down and don't come down until I signal you.

Ciro disappeared deeper into the vent. I looked down at the device in my hand. I hadn't expected to use it tonight. I'd brought it as a precaution, something that might come in handy if I ever had to get past a complicated security system or bypass a locked door.

It was a small interface tool I'd designed for controlled security testing. Nothing about it was magical. It couldn't simply make a locked system obey me.

It gave me another way to communicate with the cage's internal control hardware.

That was enough.

I moved closer to the glass and examined the access point built into the lower section of the cage.

The facility had been designed to keep children contained.

That meant its designers had assumed the person trapped inside wouldn't understand the system.

They had made one mistake, they had never planned for me.

I looked at Gianna, "Once I connect this, I need a few minutes."

"How many?"

"Five should be enough to map the system."

"And then?"

"If the cage controller is built the way I expect, I should be able to find the release command. But it may take another two or three minutes to get through it."

She nodded, her fingers tightened around Leone's phone. I was about to tell her to keep it ready when footsteps thundered down the corridor.

I froze.

Gianna froze too.

A second later, Leone came running into the room. He went straight to the security monitors. His eyes moved across the screens, at the open doors, the raised shutters, the vents.

His face drained of color, "How the fuck did the lockdown get lifted?"

He looked from one monitor to another.

"No," he shouted as his hand went to his pockets, he searched one, then the other, "Where the fuck is my phone?"

Gianna looked at me and I looked at her, one second, that was all we had. She moved immediately. Her hand disappeared beneath her shirt, hiding the phone against her body.

Chapter 876

Then she looked at me and gave the smallest nod. I lowered my hand and slipped my own device behind my back.

Leone turned away from the monitors and his eyes swept across the room, “Where is it?”

When nobody answered, he checked his pockets again, his breathing became heavier. His eyes moved toward the cages, first mine, then Gianna’s, then back to me. I kept my face empty, and so did Gianna.

Leone stared at me for several seconds, then his eyes narrowed, “You.”

I said nothing.

He stepped toward my cage, “What did you do?”

I leaned casually against the glass, crossing my arms over my chest, “Nothing.”

His jaw clenched, “Don’t lie to me.”

A faint smile touched my mouth, “I don’t need to lie to you. I’m locked inside a cage. What the fuck do you think I could’ve done?”

His eyes flicked toward the monitors again, the facility was changing around him, doors that had been sealed were opening, the ventilation system was running.

His controlled building was no longer obeying him and he still didn’t know why.

He walked toward Gianna’s cage, “Where is my phone?”

Gianna took a step back, “I don’t know.”

Leone stared at her and I watched his hands, his shoulders, his breathing, every small movement. He was angry, but beneath the anger was something else.

Fear.

He knew he’d lost control of something, he just didn’t know how much.

“Search the room,” he snapped.

No one answered, Leone turned but there were no guards left in the room.

His face hardened, “Where the fuck did everyone go?”

Five minutes.

Five minutes without Leone standing over me. Five minutes for the device in my hand to do what I'd brought it here to do.

Then Gianna's voice reached me, barely a breath, "Raph, I'm going to buy you some time.'

My blood ran cold as I turned toward her, "What do you mean?"

She didn't look at me. Her attention stayed fixed on Leone, her face giving away almost nothing.

That alone told me enough.

Gianna was thinking.

Planning.

And whatever was forming in that stubborn head of hers, I already knew I wasn't going to like it.

"Gianna," my voice dropped into a warning, "Don't do anything stupid. I'll handle it."

She turned back to me and I could see the pain in her face. The blood at her temple. The bandage. The fear she was trying to hide.

"Do you understand me?" I whispered, my voice shaking despite how hard I tried to keep it steady, "Don't you dare put yourself in his hands again. I swear to God, Gianna, I'll make you regret it when we get out of here."

Tears clung to her lashes, but somehow, a tiny smile tugged at her lips, "Don't threaten me with a good time."

My stomach dropped so hard it made me sick. I hated the unfamiliar feeling spreading through me, hated how quickly it stripped away every bit of control I had, "No."

But she was already moving. Her hand disappeared beneath her shirt before I could stop her. The faint rustle of fabric caught Leone's attention, making his head snap toward her.

Gianna pulled his phone into view, "Looking for this? I took it! I took your fucking phone!"

Leone stopped dead, rage flashing across his face the moment he saw what she was holding. Gianna leaned toward the glass, meeting his stare without backing down, almost as if she were daring him to make the next move.

“I pulled it right off you while you were too busy begging for a chance to touch me just to use it against Raphael,” her grip visibly tightened around the phone, “I took it, and I lifted the lockdown. So tell me, what the fuck are you going to do about it now, you coward?”

A darkness fell over him as he walked back to the central desk, grabbed his master keycard, and slapped it against the console to reactivate the facility lockdown. The heavy metal shutters slammed down over the vents and doors with a deafening, metallic crash, sealing us off completely again.

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Chapter 877

Then, Leone turned around and started walking slowly toward Gianna’s cage. As he moved closer, step by slow step, his hands went down to his waist, slowly unbuckling the heavy leather belt around his pants. The metal buckle clinked loudly.

The sound of the buckle opening made something inside me go completely still.

“Leone,” I said.

He ignored me as his eyes stayed on her, “We should have never brought you back into our life. You think you can play games with me now? You are nothing without your father, and you are nothing without this family. If I’m going down today, if I’m going to die, I’m going to make sure I ruin you first. I’m going to make sure you suffer every single second before you bleed out on this floor.”

Gianna’s chin lifted, and my fingers curled around the device, “Stay away from her.”

Leone smiled at me mockingly. And that smile was worse than his panic, because he thought he still had the upper hand. He grabbed the remote and the lock on Gianna’s cage clicked.

My heart fucking slammed against my ribs as if it would burst out of me, “Be a fucking man for once in your pathetic life and leave her out of this.”

The door opened, “Let me show you how much of a man I really am, Capone,” Leone sneered, his eyes dragged up and down Gianna’s body, “You’re going to stand right there, completely helpless, and watch me take what’s yours before I kill you both.” 1

Gianna backed away finally, when he stepped inside. Leone turned toward me through the glass. His expression was almost pleased.

Gianna's eyes found mine over his shoulder. She gave me the smallest, almost imperceptible nod, silently telling me to focus on opening my cage, even if it meant she had to endure him touching her to give me those precious few minutes.

Leone noticed where I was looking. He turned, putting his back between us, then stepped closer to her.

I couldn't look away from Gianna, my palms slammed against the glass, "Stay the fuck away from her!"

Leone stopped.

"You touch her, I'll make you wish you had died when you still had the chance.'

Her eyes stayed on mine and I tightened my grip around the device.

Five minutes had become irrelevant.

I didn't need five minutes anymore.

I needed seconds.

I backed away slowly, until the hard back wall of the glass box stopped me.

I kept my chin up and my eyes fixed directly on Raphael over Leone's shoulder. I knew I couldn't beat him with pure physical power, but I had to give Raphael every single second he needed to use that device.

Behind Leone's back, Raphael's hands were moving with blinding speed, plugging the tiny green board straight into the maintenance port on his wall.

Leone took two steps toward me, his face twisted into a sick sneer.

Before I could dodge to the side, his hand shot out and clamped tight around my throat. His thick fingers squeezed my neck, cutting off my air in a fraction of a second. He slammed my back hard into the clear glass wall, the heavy impact knocking the remaining wind right out of my lungs.

"You're so fucking stupid to do this, Gianna?" Leone sneered into my face, his breath hot against my skin.

I didn't just stand there. I fought back with everything my body had. I raised both hands and slammed my fingernails straight into his face, tearing dark red scratches down his cheek.

Leone grunted in anger, but his grip on my neck didn’t loosen an inch. He used his weight to pin me flat against the glass, his heavy chest crushing my ribs so tightly I couldn’t even expand my lungs to scream.

I drove my shoe straight down onto his foot, stomping with all my strength. He grunted, using his free arm to grab both of my wrists, pinning them hard above my head against the wall with just one of his hands.

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Chapter 878

My vision began to spot with bright white light as he squeezed my throat tighter, forcing my head back.

He used his knee to force my legs apart, his frame completely trapping me against the wall. He reached down with his free hand, ripping at the front of my shirt, his fingers clawing at my skin as he tried to tear my shirt off me. The fabric shredded with a loud tear, leaving me shivering in nothing but my black bra.

I thrashed violently, twisting my hips and slamming my knee up into his thigh as hard as I could. I bit down hard on his shoulder, sinking my teeth straight through his shirt into his flesh until I tasted hot blood on my tongue.

Leone let out a low, dark laugh that vibrated against my teeth, a sick grin twisting his face, “Yeah, bite harder, baby,” he rasped into my ear.

He didn’t care that I was hurting him, he liked it. His hand came down, squeezing me roughly through the thin lace of my bra as his crushing weight trapped me completely under him, but I kept twisting, keeping his attention fully on me.

Across the room, Raphael worked like a man possessed. His eyes were cold, and focused as he bypassed code after code on the glowing maintenance port. But for the first time in his life, his hands were shaking, those perfect hands were trembling violently as he fought to break the lock before it was too late.

Just a little more, Raph... I thought through the haze of pain and lack of oxygen, holding Leone off with every last scrap of strength my body possessed.

Leone pressed his hard body onto my stomach so hard I couldn’t expand my lungs. He shoved his rough hand down between my legs, forcing his fingers over my pants and cupping me hard through the fabric.

I twisted my hips, screaming against his mouth as he tried to kiss me, but he slammed his lips onto my neck instead, sucking hard at my skin until it felt like it was burning.

When I tried to sink my teeth into his cheek again, Leone pulled back and slapped my face with his open palm.

My head crashed sideways against the wall. Bright white stars exploded in front of my eyes, and the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth once more.

“Gianna,” Leone rasped into my ear, his hand squeezing between my legs even harder, making me sob, “You’re so fucking sexy when you fight me.”

Through my blurry, tear-filled eyes, I looked toward Raphael and sharp electronic beep filled the air. The red lights around Raphael’s cage suddenly turned green, then the lock released with a slight hiss.

My body sagged as a sudden wave of relief washed through me. For one brief second, my knees nearly gave out.

Leone didn’t notice.

He was too focused on me, his breathing rough against my neck, his attention completely elsewhere.

I turned my head as Raphael stepped out of his cage. The heavy glass door swung open behind him, and he walked into the room.

He didn’t rush toward us. He didn’t lose control and charge blindly at Leone. His eyes moved once over my cage, then settled on Leone.

Leone had locked my cage from the inside, and the remote was still in his pocket. The glass around me was reinforced, too. Raphael could smash his fists against it all he wanted, but it would only waste the few seconds we had.

Raphael then looked straight into my eyes.

In that single second, I saw something shift in him. The cold, unfeeling wall he’d built around himself—the one that had survived everything between us-was gone.

The same wall I’d watched crack the night we broke up, the night he kissed me as though letting himself feel for once had cost him everything.

Raphael moved at once, cutting across the room toward the central control desk beneath the main monitors.

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Chapter 879

His blood-stained fingers flew over the keyboard, each movement quick and precise. He ignored the warning screens and went straight through the master security controls, bypassing the override that kept my cage locked.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Leone grunted over me, he unzipped his pants with a jerk, using his heavy forearm to pin my throat to the wall, “Let me show you who you belong to.”

The monitor flashed.

CELL LOCK: OVERRIDE

His fingers moved again.

LOCKDOWN: DISABLED

A second later, the lights around my cage changed, and the lock released with a click.

Just a few more seconds.

I found whatever strength was still left in my body and used every last bit of it. My hand came up and my nails dragged across Leone’s already bleeding eye.

He recoiled with a sharp cry.

I kicked with both legs, catching him hard in the ribs, and that made him let go of my wrists above my head. The impact hurt my own body almost as much, but I didn’t stop. I twisted, shoved, and fought for every inch of space while he staggered.

“Fuck!”

His hand came up and I saw it coming. I couldn’t get away fast enough as he tried to slap me across the face but just then the overhead console gave one final, long beep.

The sound cut through the room and Leone froze with his hand still in the air, not because of the alarm, but because he felt someone right behind him. 1

I saw his face change before he even turned. His raised hand slowly lowered. My eyes moved past him and I smiled.

Raphael stood there.

He simply stood a few feet behind Leone, completely still.

Blood marked his knuckles. His clothes were stained from everything we’d been through, but none of that mattered.

It was his eyes that made me smile wider.

They were cold, empty of every emotion except the one thing.

Rage.

The room seemed to shrink around him that made Leone go completely silent and he visibly swallowed. Raphael tilted his head to the side just a little. His gaze moved from Leone's hand to me, then back to Leone's eyes. Leone slowly turned around face him.

His jaw tightened.

Without taking his eyes off Leone, Raphael reached for the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head in one quick motion. He held it out toward me, "Put this on, baby."

I grabbed it immediately.

My fingers shook as I pulled the shirt around myself, covering my bare shoulders and chest. I pulled the shirt over with trembling hands.

Only then did I realize how badly I was breathing.

My throat felt raw and swollen. Every breath scraped on the way down. I coughed hard, bending slightly as my lungs fought to catch up.

Raphael's eyes snapped toward me, for the first time, the coldness in his face cracked, "Easy."

I tried to breathe through it and another cough tore out of me. I pressed my palm against my throat, feeling every tender spot beneath my fingers. Raphael noticed. His eyes stayed on the marks for a moment longer than before.

Then they went back to Leone.

The calm was gone.

So was the patience.

Leone slowly raised both hands, "Raphael, listen. We can talk about this."

Raphael's fist came up.

I barely had time to breathe before he drove it straight into Leone's face.

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 880

Gianna

The punch landed with a loud crack.

Leone’s head snapped to the side, and his body stumbled with the force of it, then Raphael moved again.

He didn’t fight like a man who had lost control. He fought like a man who had made a decision.

His bare feet planted firmly against the floor as he drove another punch into Leone’s ribs. The sound of the impact carried through the room. Leone folded slightly, one arm dropping toward his side.

Raphael caught the front of his shirt before he could fall, then came another hit and another. Each one was placed with the same cold perfection.

There was nothing wild about him. There was no wasted movement, no swinging blindly. Every strike had a purpose, and every time Leone tried to protect himself or fight back, Raphael simply adjusted.

His shirt was on me, leaving his upper body completely bare. The muscles across his shoulders shifted with every movement, his back tightening whenever he pulled Leone toward him, his arms flexing as he drove another blow forward.

My brain chose that exact moment to become completely useless.

Because, apparently, watching the man I loved beat someone half to death wasn’t enough to stop me from noticing how fucking good he looked doing it.

His chest rose and fell, a thin sheen of sweat caught along his skin. There were bruises scattered across his ribs and shoulder, ugly marks left behind by the beating Leone had given him before.

That was what pulled me back.

The bruises.

Dark purple spread beneath his skin along one side of his ribs. Another mark disappeared beneath his shoulder blade. There was dried blood near his lips and a cut along his side that had already started to swell.

Leone had done that.

And Raphael was still standing, still fighting, still somehow looking at Leone like none of it mattered.

I watched him catch Leone by the collar and drag him upright. Leone tried to speak but Raphael hit him again.

The words died somewhere between his teeth.

“Touching her,” Raphael said quietly, almost conversationally, “was the only decision you made tonight that I needed.”

Leone’s knees buckled but Raphael didn’t let him fall. He pulled him back up just enough to make sure the next blow landed.

“You sealed your fate the moment you put your hands on her.”

Leone sagged against him and Raphael released him. He dropped hard onto the floor. And for a moment, there was only the sound of Leone’s rough breathing.

My eyes stayed on Raphael. He wiped the blood from his knuckles against his palm and finally turned toward me.

That was when my brain remembered something very important.

“I need to move,” I blurted out.

Raphael started toward me, raising an eyebrow.

I lifted a hand, “No. Listen.”

He stopped. I glanced toward the monitors. The lockdown was lifted but people outside didn’t know that. The doors were lined with children as human shields, but that wouldn’t last forever. And Leone’s guards would come looking for him eventually.

And when they did, they would find Raphael in here alone with Leone.

“He can’t leave this room yet,” I said, pointing toward him on the floor, “I’m going to lock you in here with him.”

Raphael attention shifted briefly to the console.

“I know it sounds insane,” I added quickly, “but if his guards get inside and see you standing here, they’ll shoot first and ask questions later.”

Raphael said nothing.

“I’ll lock the cage again from the outside. That’ll keep anyone from getting through to you. Leone has the remote in his pocket, take it from him.”

His eyes returned to me.

“I’ll go find Vincenzo. Tell him everything, once he knows the children are safe, he can come through without opening fire.”

The plan formed as I spoke.

Raphael studied me for a few seconds. I expected an argument. Instead, he gave one small nod, “Do it.”

Relief barely had time to reach me before his hand closed around my arm. He pulled me toward him and my breath caught.

His other hand came to the back of my neck, and his mouth crashed against mine.

There was nothing gentle about the kiss. It was hard, fierce, almost desperate.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 881

I grabbed his shoulder without thinking, my fingers pressing against warm skin and the bruising underneath it. He tasted faintly of blood, and for one strange second the whole room disappeared.

There was only Raphael.

His mouth moved against mine once more before he pulled back.

Our foreheads nearly touched, “Come back to me,” he said.

My fingers remained curled around his shoulder, “I will.”

His hand slid from my arm. I took one step away and a low groan came from the floor. Raphael’s attention shifted toward him immediately and mine followed.

Leone was still conscious, but barely in his senses. One hand moved against the floor as he tried to push himself

I stepped out of the cage and my legs nearly gave way beneath me. I had to catch myself against the frame of the door. My whole body hurt. My throat burned every time I breathed, and the side of my face still throbbed from where Leone had struck me with the gun.

There was no time to stop.

I turned back toward Raphael, “Stay here.”

He gave me a short nod and the door behind me slid shut, then I locked it. The heavy mechanism engaged with a deep metallic clunk.

Raphael was trapped inside with Leone, exactly where I needed him. He could handle Leone; of that, I had no doubt. What I didn’t trust was him trying to take on a hundred armed guards by himself, no matter how much his stupid, overconfident masculinity told him he could.

I turned and ran, only to find the corridor outside was empty.

My bare feet slapped against the cold floor as I hurried forward. I had no idea where Vincenzo was, and the corridors had begun to blur together.

Left or right?

Which way had Leone taken me when he brought me here?

I stopped for half a second, trying to force the memory into place.

Nothing.

Fuck you, dyslexia.

I didn’t even know which route led outside. I only knew I had to find him before the guards found Raphael or me.

I reached the next corner, and a guard stepped out from a side corridor. We both stopped, his eyes landed on me.

Then on the open section behind me, “Hey!”

I ran.

“Stop!”

His boots thundered after me. I didn't bother looking back. The corridor split ahead. I chose the left passage without knowing where it led and nearly slipped when my foot hit a patch of water on the floor.

The guard gained ground, "Get back here!"

I pushed harder. A red fire-extinguisher cabinet appeared on the wall ahead. I ripped the extinguisher free.

The guard rounded the corner just as I turned around. He reached for me and I pulled the pin. A thick white cloud exploded from the nozzle.

The guard stumbled backward, raising both arms to protect his face as the powder covered him. He coughed violently, trying to wipe his eyes.

I ducked around him, he swung blindly. His hand caught the back of my shirt and nearly pulled me down but I twisted free.

The extinguisher was still in my hand. I swung it with both hands, the metal cylinder struck the side of his head with a heavy crack.

His grip disappeared as he dropped onto the floor and didn't move.

I stood over him for half a second, gasping, "Sorry."

Then I ran, the extinguisher slipped from my hand and rolled across the floor behind me.

I had no idea where I was anymore.

The corridors looked almost identical. White walls, steel doors, cameras mounted high in the corners. Red emergency lights blinking above sealed exits.

I tried one door, but it was locked. I turned back as more footsteps approached.

Someone was coming.

I ran in the opposite direction. A second guard appeared at the far end of the hallway.

He saw me immediately, "There!"

I turned before he could reach me. A narrow doorway stood open beside me. I threw myself through it and found myself inside a storage room. Shelves covered the walls. Boxes were stacked from floor to ceiling.

The guard came through after me.

I grabbed the nearest box and shoved it off the shelf. It crashed between us and he stumbled over it.

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Chapter 882

I climbed over the fallen box, kicked open the door on the opposite side, and ran through before he could recover.

Then I saw the stairs. I didn't stop to think. I ran up, and the first flight nearly broke me. My lungs burned because of that poisonous gas, my legs felt weak, and my throat was still raw from Leone's hand.

Behind me came the guards, more than one this time, "She's going upstairs!"

"Don't let her get away!"

I reached the next landing, there was nowhere else to run. The staircase continued upward, but the guards were already coming around the turn below.

My eyes moved across the landing. A large metal maintenance toolbox sat against the wall. It was too heavy to carry far.

I grabbed the handle with both hands and dragged it toward the stairs, the first guard reached the landing and I shoved.

The toolbox tipped over the edge. It hit the first step with a violent clang, then another and then another. The heavy box gathered speed as it bounced down the staircase.

The guards tried to move aside but it was too late and they had nowhere else to go. The toolbox slammed into the first man and knocked his legs out from under him.

He crashed backward into the man behind him, the second guard lost his footing and a third collided with both of them.

For a few seconds, bodies and boots tumbled down the narrow staircase in a chaotic heap, metal banging against concrete with every impact.

I stood at the top, gripping the railing while they disappeared from view, one of them groaned below, another cursed but none of them were coming up yet. Boots scraped against the steps as they tried to untangle themselves.

Nobody came after me.

I turned and ran.

The next flight felt twice as long. My legs were already burning. Raphael's shirt hung around me, far too large, the hem brushing my thighs as I climbed.

Another door waited above and I shoved it open. Cold night air struck my face as I stumbled onto the roof.

For one beautiful second, I simply stood there, then I saw them. Men covered the ground below the facility, hundreds of them.

Armed men moved between them, rifles held ready, while others stood near the entrances and watched the building.

Vincenzo was there.

So were Adriano and several others.

I couldn't hear every word at first. The wind carried their voices away, mixing them with the distant hum of engines.

Then Adriano's voice rose above the rest, "Are we fucking negotiating or not?"

Another man answered from somewhere below, "I say we go in guns blazing. Don't give them time to make the next move."

Several men shifted toward the main entrance.

Then Vincenzo spoke, his voice wasn't loud but it echoed, "The walls are lined with children."

The men stopped.

"Little children," he continued, "You storm that place with guns blazing, and some of them will die. Maybe more. Once those bullets start flying, we don't control where they land. I won't risk that."

Another voice carried up toward the roof, "I won't either, that's too heavy a price for my soul."

My hands flew into the air, "Vincenzo!"

Nobody heard me.

I waved both arms harder, "Vincenzo!"

A few heads turned. I nearly lost my footing as I hurried toward the edge of the roof.

“Vincenzo!”

This time, the entire group looked up.

Adriano pointed, “There!”

Vincenzo’s head snapped toward me. I gripped the edge of the concrete barrier and leaned over it “Don’t shoot!” the words tore out of me, “You don’t need to shoot! We lifted the lockdown!”

Every man below went still.

“The bombs are deactivated!” I shouted, “The security system is open! The gates are open. You can get inside without opening fire!”

Vincenzo stepped forward, “Gianna?”

“Yes!” my voice broke from shouting, “Get inside! The children are still there. You can enter without hurting them!”

For half a second, nobody moved, then the entire formation changed, orders flew across the yard.

Men split away from the main group, moving toward different entrances instead of charging through one. Weapons came up as they ran, but nobody fired.

The men disappeared into the facility through several points at once, moving with the speed of people who had been waiting for exactly this chance.

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Chapter 883

Adriano was among the first through the nearest entrance, two men followed him, then five more.

Then another group broke toward the eastern side of the building. Within seconds, the courtyard that had been packed with armed men began emptying into the facility.

I stayed on the roof, watching them disappear one after another, no gunfire, no explosions.

For the first time since I had been in this facility, I let myself believe we might actually get everyone out.

Then I remembered Raphael. My hands tightened around the concrete ledge. He was still down there with Leone.

I turned toward the rooftop access door, then I ran back inside. The moment I reached the lower level, I knew everything had changed.

The corridor I had left minutes ago was gone beneath a storm of noise.

Gunfire cracked through the hall, sharp and deafening inside the concrete walls. Men shouted over one another. Boots pounded across the floor. Someone screamed for a medic. Another voice yelled for everyone to get down.

The Cosa Nostra and Outfit soldiers had finally breached the facility.

And Leone's men were fighting back.

Two of them were locked against the wall with one of Vincenzo's soldiers between them, trading brutal blows. Farther down, another guard fired toward the entrance before ducking behind a concrete pillar as bullets struck the wall beside him.

The soldiers coming through were trying not to fire blindly.

They had to.

There were children everywhere.

Three hundred of them, maybe more.

They lined the walls in rows, some sitting on the floor, some curled against one another, some too weak or frightened to move. Their small bodies were caught between armed men who were shooting at each other from opposite ends of the room.

My stomach twisted as I ran toward them.

A little girl sat beneath one of the tables with her hands pressed over her ears. Beside her, a boy stared blankly ahead. Bandages covered parts of their bodies. Some wore hospital gowns that hung loosely from their thin frames. Others had old scars and fresh dressings beneath their clothes.

Then I saw another child reaching blindly across the floor, her eyes were covered with thick medical bandages.

I dropped beside her, "Hey. Hey, I'm here."

She flinched at the sound of my voice. I slipped one arm around her shoulders and helped her up. She was frighteningly light.

or ter 383

“Can you walk?”

She nodded, but her knees nearly folded beneath her.

“Okay. I’ve got you.’

I pulled her against my side and started moving. A burst of gunfire erupted behind us. I ducked instinctively.

Bullets struck the metal railing above the children, sending fragments of paint and dust into the air.

“DOWN!” shouted the man with the scar cutting across his blue eye, his deep voice tearing through the chaos as he looked directly at me. 2

Every soldier nearby lowered their weapons for a second and that second was all I needed.

“Come on!”

I reached another child, then another.

A boy with a bandage around his abdomen clung to my wrist when I offered him my hand. His fingers were so thin they barely closed around mine.

“Don’t let go,” he whispered.

“I won’t.”

I didn’t know if I could keep that promise but I made it anyway. The room was too large and there were too many children. Everywhere I turned, there was another frightened face, another small body, another child who needed someone to move them out of the line of fire.

I grabbed two children by the hands and pulled them behind a concrete support wall. Then I returned for three more.

A man fired somewhere behind me and I dropped flat.

The children screamed.

“It’s okay!” I shouted, crawling toward them. “Stay down! Nobody is going to hurt you!”

I had no idea if that was true. I only knew I needed them to believe it.

Across the room, one of Vincenzo’s men tackled a Leone guard before he could raise his weapon toward the children. They crashed into the floor, the gun skidding beneath a row of chairs.

Another soldier kicked the weapon away, the fighting was spreading. I spotted a doorway on the far side of the hall.

A service room.

That was better than nothing. I pointed toward it, “Everyone who can walk, come with me!”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 884

Some children didn’t move and some simply couldn’t, so I went to them.

One boy had curled himself against the wall, trembling so badly his teeth clicked together. I crouched and lifted him.

He felt almost weightless, his head dropped against my shoulder, “I’m taking you somewhere safe.”

I carried him toward the door. Halfway there, a hand closed around my arm. I spun around.

Silvio.

His face was streaked with dust, his shirt marked with blood that I couldn’t tell was his or someone else’s. He pulled me behind a concrete pillar as another round of shots tore through the corridor.

“You need to get out of here.”

I shoved the boy higher against my chest, “No.”

Silvio stared at me, “Gianna-”

“These children first. They’ve suffered enough because of my family.”

“You’re standing in the middle of a firefight.”

“So are they.”

Another gunshot cracked. Silvio immediately turned toward the sound, placing himself between me and the open corridor, “Then move. Get all of them inside. I’ll cover you.”

I blinked at him as he gestured toward the doorway, “You’ll get yourself killed.”

A smile crossed his face, “That’s my problem.”

He stepped into the open just enough to draw the attention of two approaching guards. His weapon came up, two perfect shots to the head and both men dropped behind the cover of the wall.

Silvio immediately turned back toward me, “Go.”

I carried the boy through the doorway and placed him on the floor, “Stay here.”

His fingers caught mine, “Are you coming back?”

I crouched beside him, “Yes.”

Another child entered behind me, then three more. The room filled quickly.

When I ran back out, Silvio was still there.

He had positioned himself between the doorway and the fighting, using the wall as cover. Every time someone moved too close to me, he forced them back.

When he saw me returning, he shook his head, “You’re supposed to be inside.”

“There are more.”

I grabbed another child’s hand and together, we moved.

One trip became two.

Two became five.

The gunfire never stopped.

Neither did I.

Children were being passed from soldier to soldier now. Men who had entered the building to fight were kneeling down beside terrified children, lifting them carefully and carrying them away from the firing lines.

Somehow, everyone understood the same thing.

The children came first.

A gunman appeared at the end of the corridor. His weapon lifted, Silvio shoved me down. A burst of gunfire tore through the space above us.

Silvio fired back and the man disappeared behind the wall.

“Move!” Silvio shouted.

I grabbed the nearest child and ran. My hands were shaking from exhaustion but another child was waiting, then another.

I reached the last group near the far wall and found several children unable to stand.

For one second, I simply stared at them. There were too many. I couldn’t carry all of them. Then footsteps thundered behind me and Silvio appeared.

He looked at the children, then at me, “Which ones?”

I pointed. He didn’t ask anything else. He crouched and lifted one child while I took another. Two soldiers came running over and took the others.

“Keep moving!” Silvio ordered.

The four of us rushed toward the safe room as another explosion shook the building. The lights flickered and Dust fell from the ceiling.

For a moment, the entire corridor disappeared behind a gray cloud. I held the child against me and kept moving blindly through it.

A small hand tightened around my shirt and I tightened my arms around her, “Almost there.”

The door appeared through the dust. I shoved it open. Inside, dozens of children were already gathered together. I carried the child inside and lowered her carefully beside the others.

Then I turned around. Silvio was standing in the doorway. His weapon was raised. His body blocked most of the entrance as another bomb went off, this time inside the facility.

Another explosion ripped in the next second...

This one came from the exact room where I'd left Raphael with Leone.

Janedoewritings

Author

I know you guys are expecting a double update, and trust me, I would have given you that double update if I could, because that's what I usually do when the story demands it. But I simply can't this time. I'm completely swamped with work, and I'm so sorry....

Chapter Ras

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 885

Raphael

Leone was still conscious.

He lay on his side where I had left him, one knee bent beneath him, one hand dragging against the floor as he tried to find enough strength to move.

I watched him for a moment.

He was stupid even half-conscious.

That was the problem with men like Leone Caruso. Pain did not always make them surrender. Sometimes it only made them desperate enough to do something stupid.

The moment Giovanni died, Leone knew he'd lost control of the situation. Panic had taken over where judgment should have been, and one reckless decision had put him exactly where he was now.

I crouched beside him and pulled his arms behind his back. The first restraint went around his wrists and he jerked hard.

I tightened it, "Don't you fucking dare."

It wasn't a warning.

It was a statement of fact.

His breathing came out rough, then his fingers shifted a little too fast and a flash of metal appeared between us.

Knife.

I moved my body aside as the blade came toward my ribs. It missed by inches. Leone swung again and I caught his wrist.

He drove his shoulder into me, using what little strength he had left to knock me backward. The knife dropped, struck the floor, and skidded beneath the edge of the control desk.

I didn't follow it because I didn't need it. Leone came at me again. His fist caught the side of my face, and my head turned with the impact.

I returned the favor with a single strike and he stumbled. I landed another strike and he dropped against the side of the cage.

I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him upright before he could reach for anything else, "You had one chance to stay down."

He spat blood onto the floor. I hit him again..The fight lasted less than a minute. It didn't need to last longer.

Leone was stronger than most men, but he was exhausted, injured, angry, and fighting without a plan. I had none of those disadvantages.

He swung when he should have covered.

He lunged when he should have moved.

He kept trying to overpower me instead of thinking.

That was why he lost... again.

I forced him onto his stomach and secured his wrists behind him, then I checked every restraint.

I added a second tie around his wrists and secured his ankles separately, leaving enough room for circulation but not enough for him to get leverage.

I wasn't interested in killing him yet. 1

More importantly, I wasn't going to give him an easy way out. A man like Leone could turn his own death into a final act of control if given the opportunity.

I made sure he couldn’t.

He tested the restraints and nothing moved, “Comforting,” I said quietly. “Now you can remain exactly where I put you.”

Leone groaned as I stood. My shirt was gone. Blood had dried across my knuckles, and several bruises were beginning to darken across my ribs and shoulder, none of them concerned me.

Pain was information.

It told me what had happened. It didn’t decide what happened next.

My attention swept across the room just as Ciro came running back, his machine gun held tight against his chest.

“Boss, he’s in the storage room. You said you wanted him alive, right?”

Ciro fell into step beside me as we crossed the room, the storage door stood open.

Inside, Vance was still where Leone had probably left him, slumped against the wall with the chain running from his wrists to the metal frame behind him. His face was swollen, one eye nearly shut. Blood had dried along his cheek and collar.

I stopped in front of him, then I crouched. Vance lifted his head.

I smiled, “Dr. Elias Crowe.”

The color drained from his face. For years, he had carried himself like an untouchable man, protected by a name everyone believed belonged to a dead man. Now that confidence was gone.

I studied him for a moment, taking in the clothes, the blood on his cuffs, the man hiding beneath the fake name.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 886

“You spent years deciding how much suffering other people could survive.”

His breathing changed, I watched his throat moving as he swallowed hard.

“You like pain, don’t you? It’s what gets you off. You measured people by what their bodies could endure. You pushed them farther whenever they broke. Then you called it research,” I shook my head slowly, “But you have no idea what pain actually is.

Vance tried to pull himself backward, the chain stopped him with a hard metallic scrape.

I remained where I was, “That’s going to change.”

His lips parted in fear, the blood drained from his face when I leaned closer, keeping my voice almost conversational.

“You’ve spent your life studying pain from the safe side of it. Watching. Recording. Giving orders. Now you’re going to learn what it feels like when someone else decides where your limits are.”

I rose and looked down at him.

“And this time, Doctor, there won’t be a report waiting at the end.”

I released the lock and Vance tried to run immediately but his legs failed.

I caught the chain instead, “Walk.”

He didn’t, so I dragged him out. The chain scraped across the floor behind him, making a long metallic sound that carried through the room.

Leone heard it, his head lifted, and his eyes found Vance, and narrowed. I brought Vance beside him, then I wrapped the chain around both of them several times. Every connection was checked before I moved to the next.

I wasn’t improvising. Improvisation created gaps. Gaps created opportunities. I closed every one.

Leone pulled against the chain but it held, as he glared at me. Vance tried as well. I stood back and inspected my work.

Order.

That mattered.

I had never understood the fascination some men had with uncontrolled violence. They confused noise with power. They mistook rage for strength. They broke things because they didn’t know what else to do.

I didn’t.

Violence had a purpose.

It had limits.

It had sequence.

If I needed to break someone's arm, I broke it.

If I needed someone unconscious, I made them unconscious.

If someone needed to stay alive, I made sure they stayed alive.

There was no reason to turn any of it into chaos.

Leone had forced me to abandon that preference tonight.

He had touched Gianna.

That had changed the equation.

I looked down at him, "You made this unnecessarily difficult. You should have given up. You should have remained restrained. Instead, you reach for a knife, knowing all this isn't going to end your way. I dislike uncontrolled violence, Leone. I prefer order. A beginning. A purpose. An end."

I looked him over from head to toe, disgust reserved for the useless men I'd learned to despise on my hunts.

"This is what happens when you remove all three."

Leone shifted against the chain but they didn't move.

"Tonight, you made me spend more time on you than I intended. And you made the mistake of believing that because I was behind a cage, I am harmless. Those are not the same thing."

A burst of automatic gunfire cut through the room.

I moved before I thought.

Ciro dropped behind the nearest concrete support, dragging his weapon up with him as bullets tore through the storage-room doorway. Glass exploded from one of the remaining monitors, metal sparked. Pieces of the wall chipped away around us.

Ten or more men poured through the entrance. Leone laughed. He threw his head back and laughed like he'd just been handed his life back.

“Kill the bastards!” he roared, “Kill them!”

I dropped behind the heavy control desk, the bullets kept coming. One punched through the metal casing inches above my head. Another shattered the screen beside me.

My weapon was across the room. So was Ciro’s spare, neither of us had the luxury of staying where we were. I waited for the firing to shift toward Ciro,

It did.

For less than a second, the men turned their attention toward the opposite side of the room.

That was enough.

I moved, I came up from behind the desk, crossed the open space in three fast steps, and reached the table where my gun had been left.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 887

My fingers closed around it, the first guard saw me. He raised his weapon and I fired first. He dropped dead in a second.

Ciro rose from behind his cover and fired toward the second man. The guard stumbled backward into the doorway.

The room became a storm of gunfire.

I kept moving between pieces of cover, never staying in one place long enough for them to settle their aim. Ciro did the same from the opposite side.

One man tried to flank us. I caught the movement and stopped him before he reached the side corridor, another ducked behind the storage shelves.

Ciro forced him out, the gunfire came in short bursts now, then shorter and then nothing. The last guard collapsed near the entrance as smoke drifted through the room.

For several seconds, the only sound was the ringing aftermath of gunfire and the distant alarms.

Leone’s laughter had disappeared. He stared at the bodies scattered across the floor, then he looked at me.

His face had lost every trace of amusement, “You fucking-” he strained against the chain, “Capone!” the name came out like a curse, “You fucking animal!”

I checked the room instead of answering.

Ciro lowered his weapon slightly, “Ten,” he muttered.

I didn’t respond because something else caught my attention. A faint scrape came from near the doorway. Ciro heard it too.

We both turned, one of the guards was moving. His fingers dragged across the floor towards a gun.

Ciro raised his weapon as we stepped closer. The man’s face was turned toward the floor. His breathing was shallow. One arm was trapped beneath his body.

Then I saw his other hand. It was wrapped around something.

My attention went straight to it, “Back.”

Ciro understood immediately, the guard’s thumb moved. There was a small metallic click. I grabbed Ciro by the shoulder and shoved him down but the blast came before either of us could get clear.

The world disappeared into white noise, the floor struck my back. Something slammed into my shoulder and sent me rolling across the room.

For several seconds, I had no idea which way was up. My ears screamed. It was not a ringing sound but a wall of static.

I opened my eyes, nothing made sense.

The ceiling seemed to tilt beneath me. Dust hung in the air. Shapes moved through it, but none had a clear edge.

I tried to push myself up. My arm refused to cooperate. I tried again. My lungs pulled in a shallow breath.

Someone grabbed me.

I reacted on instinct, trying to pull away, but the arms tightened around my shoulders. A face appeared through the haze.

Green eyes.

Wet with tears.

Gianna.

Her mouth was moving. I couldn't hear her. She grabbed my face between both hands and turned my head toward her.

"Raph!"

Her voice was still gone. She pressed her palm against the back of my neck and brought her forehead against mine.

Her lips moved again and I watched them carefully.

Raph.

Raph.

She was saying my name. My hearing remained nothing but static. Gianna pulled back enough to see my face. Panic flashed across hers before she forced it down.

She put one hand against my chest, "Breathe."

I saw the word, she demonstrated it herself.

A slow breath in.

Then out.

Through the disorientation, I copied her.

The first attempt caught halfway and I coughed.

She immediately supported my shoulders, keeping me upright, "Again."

I drew another breath, this one went deeper. The static in my ears shifted. A faint sound broke through.

Gianna's voice.

It was distant, muffled, but at least, now it was there.

"Raph?"

I blinked.

She was crying now, "Raph, can you hear me?"

“Yes.”

The word came out rough. Her whole face changed. Relief crossed it so quickly that she didn’t even try to hide it.

She wrapped both arms around me again, “Thank God.”

I held onto her for a second, letting my senses catch up. The alarms returned first, then the crackle of damaged electronics, then Ciro coughing somewhere behind us.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 888

Then Gianna’s breathing against my neck.

She pulled away and touched my face, checking my eyes, my forehead, then my shoulders as if she needed proof that every part of me was still attached.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’ve been worse. Help me up.’

She stared at me, and I took a second to study her face, trying to work out exactly what she was thinking before I said something stupid and made an already bad situation worse.

I pushed one hand against the floor and started to rise and the room tilted.

Gianna caught my arm immediately, “Slowly.”

I steadied myself, across the room, Leone was still staring.

His laughter was gone.

So was his confidence.

He had watched his guards enter expecting ten armed men to end the fight. Now they were on the floor. Ciro was getting back to his feet. Gianna was holding onto me.

And Leone was still chained exactly where I had left him.

I looked at him, “Your men are running out,” I adjusted my grip on my weapon, “Try not to waste the ones you have left.”

Gianna still hadn't let go of me.

Her hands moved over my shoulders, my arms, the side of my face. She checked the back of my head, then my ribs, then came back to my face as if she had forgotten she had already checked it.

"Gianna."

Her fingers brushed over my temple, "Hold still."

"I am holding still."

"You're bleeding."

"So is everyone else in this room."

"I don't care about everyone else in the room."

She pushed my hair back, searching for another wound. Her fingertips were gentle despite the blood covering them. I caught her wrist and she stopped.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You don't know that."

"I know exactly where I'm hurt."

That earned me a look.

I released her wrist and let her finish her inspection. She checked my pupils, ran her fingers along my cheekbone, then pressed carefully against my shoulder.

I didn't even flinch, "See?"

Her shoulders finally loosened. I brushed the loose strands of hair away from her face. There was dust caught in them, a smear of blood near her temple and a tear still clinging to one cheek.

"I'm fine."

She searched my face one last time, "Promise?"

"Yes."

Only then did she seem willing to believe me.

My attention returned to the room. Bodies lay scattered across the floor. Spent casings glittered beneath the broken lights. Smoke hung low near the ceiling, and somewhere behind us, a damaged alarm kept giving a weak, uneven chirp.

The facility was still standing but it wasn't the same as it was an hour ago.

I looked toward the corridor, "Where's Vincenzo?"

Gianna followed my line of sight, "He told the rest of the Toricelli men to lower their weapons."

I turned toward her, "He did what?"

"He doesn't want this turning into an all-out war." She wiped at the blood beneath her nose with the back of her hand, "There are too many children here. He knows what happens if everyone starts firing without thinking."

That sounded like Vincenzo.

"He's coming?"

"He wanted the men outside to stand down first."

A burst of distant shouting carried through the corridor. Gianna looked toward the doorway and footsteps followed, several pairs.

Ciro immediately raised his weapon and I did the same. Three figures appeared through the smoke, weapons came up first, then I recognized them.

My brothers.

Silvio, Vincenzo and Luca.

They stopped the moment they saw me, lowered their weapons. Their eyes traveled over me, then to Gianna standing beside me, then across the wreckage behind us.

We exchanged a quick glance. A silent conversation passed between us, that said everyone was fine on our side.

Gianna suddenly moved closer. Her fingers closed around my arm, and she pressed herself against my side as though the few inches between us were still too much distance. Her other hand caught the back of my shoulder.

I felt her breath against me like if she let go, everything that had just happened might catch up with her.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 889

I covered her hand with mine.

“Where are the others?” I asked Vince.

“Moving through the lower levels,” one of them answered, “They’re securing the exits.”

“Children?”

“Being moved out wherever the corridors are clear.”

Another explosion rumbled somewhere far beneath us. Gianna’s fingers tightened around my arm.

I turned toward her, “Stay with me.”

She nodded, “I wasn’t planning on going anywhere now, trust me.”

The next set of footsteps came fast.

Adriano appeared through the doorway first, followed by Dante. Both had their weapons lowered now, but neither looked particularly bothered by the bodies, blood, broken equipment, or the smoke hanging in the air.

Adriano took two steps into the room, then stopped. His gaze traveled over the wreckage, the dead guards, the damaged control desk.

Leone and Vance chained together on the floor.

Ciro standing near the wall with his weapon, then me and then Gianna, still attached to my side.

A grin slowly spread across Adriano’s face. Dante came up beside him and gave the room the same inspection.

Then Adriano let out a low whistle, “Well.”

Dante glanced at him.

Adriano spread his arms slightly, looking around as though someone had just invited him to the finest party in the world, “That was fun.”

Dante's mouth twitched, "Very."

Adriano rubbed a hand over his face, almost thoughtful. "I haven't had this much fun since..." He paused, genuinely trying to remember. "Actually, I don't think I've had this much fun in years."

I opened my mouth.

Adriano immediately raised one finger, "No, whatever you're about to say, don't. My wife asked me to destroy this place."

He lowered his hand and gave me an almost innocent shrug.

"So unless you're about to tell me that my wife has suddenly developed poor judgment, I'm going to assume we're all in agreement."

Dante looked toward him, "You're leaving out the part where she specifically told you not to come home until this place was gone."

Adriano nodded, "That too."

I stared at both of them. Dante looked pleased with himself and Adriano looked even worse. They had the particular kind of humor that only came from men who had spent too much of their lives around violence and somehow decided laughing was healthier than discussing it.

Vincenzo rubbed the bridge of his nose, "I already regret letting you two inside."

"That's hurtful," Adriano said.

Dante gave a quiet laugh. The mood lasted exactly three seconds before Vincenzo turned serious again.

His attention went to Leone, then Vance and then the damaged facility around us, "Now that Giovanni is dead, his underboss is ours to deal with. So is this territory. According to the information Raphael and Gianna sent us, there are three hundred and eighty-seven children in this facility."

The humor disappeared from the room.

"Some are alive. Some are barely alive. And that's only the number we found tonight. Thousands more are already dead."

Gianna's fingers tightened around my arm. Vincenzo noticed that too but he continued anyway.

“I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do with this place,” his eyes moved toward the corridors beyond us, “I don’t deal in this business. I don’t want this territory. I don’t want the people who ran it. I don’t want the money attached to it. I don’t want the operation,” his voice became quieter, “I don’t want any part of it.”

That was the first time I’d heard Vincenzo sound genuinely uncertain about what came next.

He could handle a war.

He could handle betrayal.

He could handle blood.

This was different.

There was no clean way to take ownership of something built on the suffering of children.

Adriano raised his hand.

Everyone looked at him.

He smiled.

“What?” Vincenzo stared.

Adriano gestured around the room, “As I suggested once before. We could just blow the whole place up.

Dante nodded as though he’d just heard a perfectly sensible business proposal, “Problem solved.”

Adriano pointed toward him, “Exactly.”

“Adriano,” I said, he looked at me and I took a breath, “We cannot destroy this facility.”

His brows lifted, “Why not?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 890

“Because turning an entire facility into rubble would create a level of noise and destruction the government couldn’t ignore. And whatever’s stored in a place like this

could spread through the surrounding area. There are large amounts of toxic gases here. Set this place off, and we'd be poisoning the environment along with everything around it."

Adriano shrugged, "Fine. Government," he waved a hand dismissively, "But you lost me at the environment because who gives a fuck about the environment?"

Gianna, who had been standing against my side, suddenly lifted her head, "Maddie."

Adriano's smile disappeared and Dante slowly turned toward him.

Gianna furrowed her eyebrows, "Maddie cares about the environment. A lot."

Adriano's expression changed. Something much closer to the realization that he'd just made a terrible strategic error.

"She'll kill you," Gianna continued.

Adriano glanced at Dante for support.

Dante nodded, "She probably will."

Gianna clung to my side as I leaned on her for support, "And if I tell her you put all the marine life around here at risk because you thought blowing things up was fun, you won't even get the chance to explain yourself."

Adriano stared at her, then at the ceiling, then back at Dante, before nodding, "I suddenly support the environment." 1

Dante put a gun to his heart, "A touching development."

"I care deeply about fish."

Vincenzo raised an eyebrow, "Since when?" 1

"Since approximately ten seconds ago.'

Vincenzo gave him a look, "You're making this worse.

"That's usually how I contribute."

Dante looked around the wreckage, "For what it's worth, I think, even if we blow this place up, the fish are safe."

I glanced at him, "You don't know that."

“No,” he considered it, “But I have confidence.”

“That isn’t evidence.”

“It has gotten us this far.”

I shook my head. Vincenzo walked toward the damaged control desk, stepping around a fallen weapon,

Enough.”

Everyone quieted but Adriano couldn’t shut up for long, “I still think it would have been fun.”

“Don’t,” Vincenzo said.

“I said I think it would have been fun. I didn’t say I was doing it.”

“That distinction is the only reason you’re still allowed to speak.”

I looked between them, “Can we focus?”

Adriano pointed at me, “There. That’s exactly why you’re no fun.”

Vincenzo stepped forward, “We need to decide what happens next,” his gaze settled on Gianna, “This facility is not going to another family.”

Gianna’s fingers loosened slightly around my arm.

Vincenzo continued, “The territory outside these walls is another matter. The Philadelphia operation still has value. Routes, businesses, contacts, money, men who answer to the old structure,” his attention settled on Gianna, “That part can be taken apart, rebuilt, and put under new management.”

His head turned toward the corridors beyond the room, where hundreds of children were still waiting to be brought out.

“But this place?”

He let the question sit for a moment.

“There is nothing here I want. No business worth keeping. No operation worth inheriting. Just innocent blood, dead children, and enough filth to follow whoever puts their name on it.”

His eyes returned to Gianna.

“I want no part of this facility. But I won’t hand it to someone else, either. The Council will descend on this place like vultures picking at a corpse the moment they realize it’s up for grabs. This was Toricelli ground before Giovanni turned it into something else, and you were born into that family before any of us had a say in it.”

He gestured toward the building around us.

“This is yours by blood, Gianna. What happens to it is your decision. If you want it destroyed, we’ll help you destroy it. If you want to turn it into something that serves those children instead, we’ll protect it.”

Vincenzo paused.

“But no one else is taking it from you.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 891

Gianna

The city was still awake.

New York never seemed to care what happened inside its walls. Traffic moved beneath the windows. Horns sounded somewhere far below. A siren passed in the distance, fading between the buildings until the night swallowed it.

Inside the room, nobody spoke.

There were too many numbers sitting on the table.

Three hundred and eighty-seven children.

Three hundred and eighty-seven.

I had repeated it so many times that the words had stopped sounding real.

Some of those children had a chance, not a good one, but a chance.

Others had been cut apart so badly that even the Capone doctors weren’t willing to promise they would survive the week. Organs were missing. Bones had been broken and reset badly. Some had scars covering half their bodies. Some couldn’t see. Some couldn’t walk without help.

And every single one of them had a name.

That was the part nobody at the table seemed able to forget.

And it was my family's fault.

The council had already called for another meeting, not to decide whether the children deserved help.

That part had never been in question.

The problem was what came after.

Government agencies are going to notice sooner or later. If we don't bury this properly, every one of us in this room could end up behind bars.

Three hundred and eighty-seven children appearing out of nowhere from a hidden medical facility was not something anyone could explain away with a few forged documents and a bribe.

The facility belonged to the Philadelphia Toricelli Syndicate.

The money behind it had passed through several hands..The people running it had disappeared. The guards were dead, wounded, or taken captive. And now every powerful family involved wanted to know what happened to the territory.

That was why the council meeting had been called.

I sat at the end of the table with my brother, Giovanni Jr., beside me. Somehow, he and Perla had been brought here, and he hadn't stopped asking questions since they arrived. I couldn't answer any of them. I was still too numb, too shaken by everything that had happened tonight to put any of it into words.

Across from us sat Vincenzo.

Several of the men from the Cosa Nostra stood behind Nikolai Costello. The Visconti representatives occupied the other side of the room, quiet for once along with the other families.

Raphael stood near the window. He hadn't said much since we'd arrived, neither had I but I'd spent the entire drive thinking, not about revenge, not about money, not even about the Toricelli name.

The children had changed the equation.

Costello placed both hands on the table, “The Philadelphia territory is finished. The Toricelli leadership is dead or scattered. Their operation is exposed internally, their soldiers are broken, and their income streams are compromised.”

One of the Falcone men leaned forward, “Then the territory should be divided.”

I raised my eyes.

He continued, “Philadelphia is too valuable to leave without leadership. We can divide the docks, the transport routes, the gambling houses, and whatever remains of their legitimate businesses.”

“No,” the word came from me.

A few men exchanged glances.

I swallowed and looked around at the men’s faces, “The Philadelphia territory isn’t being divided.”

“And who exactly gets it?”

“Me and my brother.”

The room went quiet. Junior turned slightly toward me. I hadn’t told him anything yet, he was clueless but he probably now understood that our father was dead.

The Deverecci representative gave a short laugh, “You? You’re a little girl. You haven’t been in this business long enough to know how territory works,” he said. “You don’t simply walk into Philadelphia and claim it.

“Maybe,” I leaned back, looking at Vincenzo, knowing that he has my back, “But I’m going to take responsibility for it. That is exactly what I’m doing, taking responsibility for the actions of my family.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 892

Vincenzo watched me without interrupting. I knew he understood what I was really saying. Philadelphia wasn’t just territory anymore.

It was evidence.

It was three hundred and eighty-seven children.

It was a facility that could never be allowed to reopen and it was a problem nobody could afford to hand to another family.

One of the council members spoke, “You intend to keep the facility?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

I glanced at Vincenzo, then at Giovanni Jr., “I haven’t decided about that yet.”

A low murmur moved around the table.

I waited until it died, “The facility and the Philadelphia Syndicate stays under my control, just as my late father’s wishes stated. Nobody sells it, nobody leases it. Nobody moves another operation into it. And nobody sets foot inside that place or makes a decision about it without my permission.”

Nikolai Costello leaned back in his chair, studying me for a moment before speaking, “My wife and the women in my family run an organization that handles situations like this. This isn’t unfamiliar territory for them. They have the staff, the resources, and the facilities needed to care for these children properly.”

His gaze moved around the table.

“They’re already on their way here. They need to know the Council’s decision so they can take custody of the children and get them the medical care they need immediately,” he paused, settling his gaze on me, “We’re not leaving those children in that facility another night.”

I lifted my chin. “They’re my responsibility. The Capone medical team is already treating them, and I’m not handing them over to someone else simply because it’s easier for everyone else.”

My fingers curled against the edge of the table.

“I brought them out of that place. I’m the reason any of you know they exist in the first place. I saw what was done to them. I’m not walking away now and leaving someone else to carry the burden I chose to take on,” I met his eyes, “I won’t be able to live with myself if I do.”

“You’re talking about hundreds of children.”

“I know how many there are,” my voice stayed level, “I’ve seen them.”

That ended the argument for a moment.

Vincenzo finally spoke, “She’s right.”

Everyone turned toward him.

“The Toricelli operation was my war. I want that understood,” Vincenzo’s voice carried across the table, “Giovanni was the one who brought the Council into it. Not me. I would have handled Toricelli on my own, and I’ll handle what comes after this the same way,” his attention settled on Costello, “I allowed you into the operation because Toricelli used Cosa Nostra money to build that facility. Your money was stolen. You had every right to collect what was owed to you. But don’t mistake collecting a debt for owning what remains.”

Nobody interrupted as Vincenzo spoke. For some reason, no one seemed willing to challenge him.

“The Costellos don’t get Philadelphia,” One of the men shifted in his chair. Across the table, Nikolai watched Vincenzo with the faintest hint of a smirk, “The Outfit doesn’t get Philadelphia either. Neither does any other family sitting at this table,” he pointed toward me, “The facility belongs to Gianna. The Philadelphia operation belongs to her as well.”

That drew more reaction than anything else had.

Another member cleared his throat, “There is still the government problem.”

Raphael walked forward and stopped behind my chair, “The children leave through private Capone owned medical channels. Their identities are rebuilt where necessary. Medical records. are created from scratch.”

One of the men frowned, “And of the authorities found out?”

Raphael shrugged, “They receive what they need to receive.”

“Which is?”

“That a private rescue operation recovered children from an illegal medical site and transferred them to protected care. Those children will be protected from being treated as evidence. They don’t need to know every name connected to this operation.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 893

Vincenzo leaned back, “And the facility, Gianna?”

I looked at him, “Closed permanently.”

“Destroyed?”

“No.”

The answer caught his attention. His head tilted slightly. “Why?”

“Because destroying it would destroy evidence we may need. It would also erase what happened to the thousands of children who died there.”

I looked down at my hands for a moment before meeting his eyes again.

“I’m going to find their families. Every one we can identify. I want them to know what happened to their children. They deserve answers. They deserve to know that their children didn’t simply disappear,” I drew a slow breath, “It could take years to do this for every child. I know that. But I’m not giving up on any of them, not even the ones who are already dead.”

Vincenzo’s mouth pulled into the smallest proud smile.

“We keep it sealed,” I said, “We strip every record, every server, every piece of equipment that can expose the children. Then we lock the place down.”

“And the Toricelli name?”

I looked at Giovanni Jr. and he understood before I answered, “It survives through us.

Several men began speaking at once, their voices overlapping as they argued about the Toricelli name, the blood tied to its legacy, and everything Giovanni had left behind.

Vincenzo sighed, “It’s decided. The Toricelli Syndicate will remain a territory under new leadership,” his gaze moved around the table, stopping on each man in turn, “Those who agree with the decision can stand with me. Those who came here hoping to strip the Toricellis of what belongs to them should understand one thing,” he paused, “I’ve never been afraid of a war, and I won’t be afraid of the next one.”

Nobody challenged Junior or me after Vincenzo had made his position clear.

The meeting eventually came to an end, and the other families began filing out of the room. The Costellos remained behind, as they were hosting the meeting and had no reason to leave with the others.

Once the doors closed and the last of the families disappeared down the hall, Nikolai turned his attention to Vincenzo, “You’re not leaving tonight.”

Vincenzo glanced at him, “I wasn’t aware I needed permission.”

Nikolai gave a quiet laugh. “You don’t. Consider it an invitation from Allegra’s family.”

“I’ve got men waiting in Chicago.”

“They can wait until morning. You’ve been through enough today,” Nikolai eased in his chair, rolling an unlit cigar between his fingers, “Stay the night. Eat something, get some rest, and leave for Chicago in the morning.”

Vincenzo studied him for a moment. “You always this hospitable?”

“Only when I don’t want a guest dropping dead on the road and making my house look bad,” Nikolai’s mouth twitched with amusement, “Besides, Allegra would have my underboss’ head if we treated your family like anything less than our own.”

He turned the cigar slowly between his fingers.

“You’ve always kept your word when our women or our family visit Chicago. You’ve made sure they’re protected, respected, and treated properly while they’re on your territory,” his gaze settled on Vincenzo with hesitant respect, “For once, I’m giving you the same courtesy. Consider it repayment for all the times you’ve looked after my family.”

A faint smile touched Vincenzo’s mouth, “Fine. One night.”

“Good,” Nikolai nodded toward the door, “I’ll have rooms prepared.”

Vincenzo stood, rolling one shoulder carefully. “Tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Nikolai agreed.

The bathroom door clicked shut behind me. For once, there was no shouting, no gunfire, no alarms, no men running through corridors with weapons in their hands.

Just the sound of water running into the tub.

I stood there for a moment with the towel hanging from my hand, staring at the steam gathering slowly against the mirror.

My reflection looked like someone I barely knew.

Dust covered my skin. There was dried blood along my arms and beneath my fingernails. My hair was a mess, tangled from running through those corridors, and the side of my head

Cropter a throbbed where Leone had struck me with the gun.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 894

I reached up carefully, my fingertips found the tender skin near my temple.

I winced, “Fuck.”

The word came out quietly.

I dropped the towel onto the counter and started pulling off the clothes I’d been wearing.

My pants were stiff with dirt and blood. When I peeled them away, the fabric dragged against my skin, taking some of the dried blood with it. Raphael’s shirt came next. I pressed the shirt against my chest for one second before forcing myself to let it go.

It landed in a heap beside my ruined clothes.

My undergarments followed as I stepped into the tub. The heat reached my feet first, then my ankles, my legs, and finally the rest of me as I lowered myself into the water.

A quiet breath escaped me. For several seconds, I did nothing and simply sat there. The water moved around my body, slowly turning cloudy as the dirt and blood washed away. I watched a thin red stream disappear down the drain.

Once all the blood and dirt was gone, I refilled the tub and stared at nothing. I couldn’t stop thinking about the children. Their faces kept coming back, not all of them. I couldn’t remember all of them yet and that was somehow worse.

There were too many.

I closed my eyes.

Brianna.

Emma.

Morgan.

Tasha.

Jasmine.

Mama D.

I pictured them one after another.

People who knew me before all of this. People who had laughed with me, annoyed me, hugged me, fought with me, loved me.

People who belonged to a life that suddenly felt very far away, then my parents came to mind.

Dad was gone.

So was my mother...

How was I supposed to live with this?

How did people carry thousands of dead children and then wake up the next morning and eat breakfast?

How did you learn to sleep again?

How did you laugh without feeling guilty?

How did you look at your own life and not think about the lives that had been taken from someone else?

I lowered my chin until my mouth touched the water. My eyes burned.

This was the part nobody warned you about, saving people didn't mean you walked away clean.

Some things followed you.

Some things settled somewhere deep inside you and stayed there.

A soft click came from behind me. I lifted my head, the bathroom door opened and Raphael stepped inside.

He had changed out of the clothes he'd worn during the fight, but bruises still covered him. Dark marks ran along his ribs and shoulder. There was a cut near his eyebrow and another across his knuckles.

But when his eyes found mine, he smiled. It was small, nothing like the smile he gave the rest of the world.

Just mine.

I didn’t say anything. I shifted forward in the tub instead. There wasn’t much room between me and the other end. I lifted my eyes to him and then glanced at the water, then back at him.

He understood.

Raphael reached for the hem of his shirt. I watched him undress without saying a word, my attention catching on every bruise I’d noticed earlier.

The ones Leone had given him.

The ones I hadn’t been there to stop.

He stepped into the bath behind me and lowered himself carefully.

The water rose around us, then his arms came around my waist. I leaned back immediately. My head found his chest while I tried my best to keep my distance from his ribs. His skin was warm against my back, his heartbeat slow beneath my ear.

I closed my eyes and neither of us spoke. Raphael didn’t ask what I was thinking. He didn’t tell me everything was going to be okay.

He knew better.

Instead, one of his hands moved slowly over my arm, his thumb brushing away a streak of dirt I had missed.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 895

I took his hand, and our fingers slipped together beneath the water.

“Does your head hurt?” he asked quietly.

“A little.”

His arm tightened around me and I continued staring at our joined hands.

“I keep seeing them.”

Raphael didn’t ask who.

“The children.”

His fingers closed around mine, “I know.”

“I don’t even know their names.’

“I know.”

“I should.”

“You couldn’t possibly remember every name.

“I should still know.”

He turned his face slightly, his cheek brushing my hair, “You saved the ones you could.”

My eyes filled again, “What about the ones we couldn’t?”

He didn’t answer immediately and that was one of the things I loved about him. He never gave me an easy lie just because the truth hurt.

“We don’t get to change what happened to them,” he said. “But we can decide what happens to the ones who survived.”

I breathed in slowly, “And the dead?”

His hand settled over mine, his thumb brushing slowly across my knuckles, “We’ll remember them. We’ll find their families and give them the answers they’ve been waiting for. And I’ll be beside you while you do it.”

My throat burned, “Is that enough?”

“No, but it’s what we have.”

The bathroom was quiet again, steam covered the mirror. The world outside this room could have been miles away.

I turned my head slightly, enough to see him, “You’re hurt.”

“So are you.”

“You have bruises everywhere.”

“So do you.”

“Raphael.”

“Gianna.”

I stared at him.

He stared back.

Then his mouth softened into that small smile again, “You’re still checking me.”

“You were blown across a room.”

“And you were nearly strangled.”

“I was fine.”

“You were not.’

“Neither were you.”

“I am now.”

I studied his face, “Promise?”

His thumb brushed beneath my eye, “Promise.”

That was all I needed. I turned back around and rested against him again. His arms settled around me, and I let my eyes close.

For the first time that night, I didn’t have to be the woman who made decisions. I didn’t have to count the children. I didn’t have to think about the dead. I didn’t have to decide what happened to Philadelphia or the Toricelli name or the facility.

For a few minutes, I could simply be Raphael’s Gianna.

Raphael pressed a slow kiss against my uninjured temple and I reached for his hand again. He gave it to me without asking why and we stayed that way, holding onto each other while the water slowly cooled around us.

Eventually, he brushed his fingers through my wet hair and said quietly, “Come on.

I opened my eyes, “What?”

“Shower.”

He stood first, then held out his hand. I took it. The moment I stepped onto the cold floor, my knees wobbled. Raphael caught me around the waist before I could stumble, then he guided me beneath the shower.

Warm water struck my skin.

I tipped my face upward and closed my eyes.

Raphael stepped behind me and carefully gathered my hair away from my face. His fingers were slow as he worked through the knots, separating them one by one instead of pulling.

“That hurts?”

“Not anymore.”

He smiled and reached the shampoo, he poured some into his palm and worked it into my hair. His fingertips moved against my scalp in small, gentle circles.

I sighed.

“Better?”

“Mhm.”

The bathroom filled with the clean smell of shampoo. His hands moved through my hair, careful around the wound at my temple.

When he reached that side, he stopped, “Does this hurt?”

“A little.”

He didn’t touch the wound again. Instead, he rinsed the shampoo from my hair, shielding my face with one hand so the water wouldn’t run into my eyes.

Raphael reached for the conditioner.

“You’re spoiling me,” I murmured.

“You were almost killed tonight. I’m allowed.”

I smiled, “This wasn’t part of our rules, Raph. We weren’t supposed to get this close...”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 896

Hs mouth brushed the back of my neck, barely there, just enough to make my smile deepen, “Platonic,” he murmured.

I let out a soft laugh. While the conditioner sat in my hair, Raphael reached for the soft loofah and the body wash. He worked up a rich, sweet-scented foam before turning me around to face him.

He started at my shoulders, gliding the soft mesh gently over my skin, washing away every last bit of dust, dried blood and lingering dirt.

He moved down my arms, over my wrists, and down to my fingertips. He was so thorough, so careful, treating my body like something precious that needed to be held with total care. His eyes were soft, dark, and completely focused on me.

He set the loofah down and brought the warm water stream over my shoulders to wash the soap away. Then, his hands replaced the water.

Raphael leaned in close, his lips brushing softly against the side of my neck, right over the dark mark Leone had left. He pressed a warm, lingering kiss there, then another near my collarbone.

“Raphael...” I breathed out, my hands coming up to rest on his wet chest.

He just lowered his head further, his mouth tracing a slow trail of kisses down the front of my chest. He pressed his lips against the peak of my left breast, his warm mouth wrapping around my nipple, sucking gently until a soft gasp escaped my lips. My fingers tangled in his wet hair as he moved to the other side, kissing and sucking gently.

The warmth of the water mixed with the heat of his body. Raphael dropped down onto his knees on the tiled shower floor.

He placed his hands on the sides of my waist, his thumb stroking my skin. He pressed a soft kiss to my belly, right near my belly button, before moving his lips sideways to kiss the hard point of my hip bone.

He looked up at me for a second, his eyes filled with this intense kind of devotion, before leaning forward again. His head dipped lower, right between my thighs. He pressed a warm kiss to the soft skin of my mound, making my knees go weak. Then, he parted his lips and licked me smoothly, his warm tongue moving over me with a slow, sweet stroke that sent a deep shiver straight up my spine.

I held onto his shoulders to keep my balance, my head resting back against the warm glass wall as a soft moan pulled from my throat. He stayed there for a moment, kissing the inside of my thighs, holding me tight against him, before standing back up to his full height.

Raphael turned me around once more, wrapped his arms around me from behind, pulling my back flush against his chest. He rinsed the remaining conditioner from my hair, his lips resting against the back of my neck, pressing sweet, quiet kisses into my skin while the warm water washed over us both.

There was too much behind that moment.

Too many things we had almost lost.

Raphael straightened and tucked wet hair behind my ear.

“I’ve got you.”

My fingers curled around his wrist, “I know.” 15 8gnus

He kissed my forehead once more, then he reached for the soap again for himself. By the time he finished, the water running from my skin was clear.

Raphael shut off the shower and wrapped me in a towel before I could reach for one. He dried my hair first slowly and patiently.

When he was done, he pulled me against his chest and kissed the top of my head.

I rested my cheek against him. His heart was beating beneath my ear. Raphael picked me up, his strong arms sliding beneath my knees and back as if I weighed nothing at all. He carried me out of the steamy bathroom and into the dark bedroom, placing me down gently on the soft mattress.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 897

He pulled the heavy blanket over us both, climbing into the bed right after. The cool air of the room vanished the second he drew me close.

I immediately turned toward him, craving his warmth. I slid my arms around his waist, pushing my body against his again and again, burying my face into the crook of his neck.

My thighs tangled with his, my skin pressing tight to his solid chest until there was no space left between us at all I couldn't get close enough. Every instinct in me screamed to get closer to him.

Raphael's large hands moved down my back, smoothing over my skin with comforting strokes, holding me tight against his body.

I shifted slightly, tilting my head back to look up into his dark eyes. The moonlight filtering through the window softened his features.

"I want to go to sleep tonight feeling you inside of me," I whispered, my fingers resting gently against his jawline, "We don't have to do anything... no moving, no rush. Just stay inside of me, just like you did once before."

Raphael looked at me for a long moment, his dark eyes searching my face with understanding. He didn't ask questions, and he didn't try to change my mind.

He knew I didn't need passion or intensity-I just needed him.

"Okay," he breathed softly against my lips.

He shifted his weight over me carefully, making sure not to press down on me. His hands were impossibly gentle as he parted my thighs, guiding himself to my center. He sank into me slowly, millimeter by millimeter, letting my body adjust to his length until he was halfway buried inside me.

A long, trembling breath escaped my lips. The hollow, empty ache in my chest instantly dissolved, replaced by a deep, overwhelming sense of safety.

Raphael lowered himself down onto his elbows, resting his forehead against mine. He didn't move an inch. He simply stayed buried deep within me, his full, warm presence filling me completely.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, locking him close. We shifted beneath the sheets until we were facing each other, our bodies close, legs tangled together beneath the covers. Raphael's arm settled around my waist, keeping me against him while I tucked myself into the space between his chest and the mattress.

His forehead rested against mine.

The room was dark except for the faint light coming through the curtains.

Then his voice broke the quiet, "Gianna."

Something in the way he said my name made my eyes open, "What?"

He didn’t answer immediately. His thumb moved slowly along my side, once, then stopped, “There’s something we talked about... something from before, something I can’t-”

My brows pulled together, “What about it?”

His gaze dropped briefly before finding mine again. He let out a slow breath. “I’ve been thinking about it all night.”

“About what?”

His fingers tightened around mine, “Children.”

ent quiet.

Because that was exactly what had been running through my own mind.

I couldn’t stop seeing those children. And what my own father did to them. The ones who had survived, and the ones who hadn’t.

Then Raphael added quietly, “Our children.”

I stopped breathing for a second.

Our children.

I wasn’t prepared for those words, not now. Maybe not for years. I wasn’t mentally in the right place for it either After everything I’d seen tonight, I didn’t even understand why he was bringing this up.

His eyes stayed on mine, “I don’t think I want them. I don’t think I ever have.”

Janedoewritings

Author

We’re officially at the point where we start tying up all those loose ends!

And please, if I’ve forgotten about something, REMIND ME.

Because when you’ve been writing a book for this damn long, there’s bound to be a few things that have somehow esca

Janedoewritings

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 898

Guys!

I’m NOT going to be bullied into giving someone children again. I have nine other couples. NINE. And guess what?” Almost all of them have children. Some have multiple children. So if you need babies to feel emotionally fulfilled, there are plenty of families in this universe for you to visit.

In my previous book, I wanted Alessia and Rino to finally just live for each other after everything they’ve been through. But apparently babies are the missing ingredient to complete a marriage.

And now, after years of Allegra and Remo (Their children from their respective marriages) being their entire personality and their first priority, apparently Isabella is next because, let’s be honest, good parents prioritize their children, that’s just facts.

But God forbid Gianna and Raphael decide they want to work on themselves, heal, grow, and become better versions of themselves before bringing a child into the picture, or even bringing one at all.

Apparently, according to some people, having a baby is basically a magical cure-all.

Bad mental health? BABY.

Trauma? BABY.

Relationship problems? BABY.

Existential crisis? BABY.

And apparently nobody has learned anything from real life, so... drumroll please

Lindsay Clancy.

People with bad mental health should not have children before working on themselves first!

But yes, let’s continue pretending that parenthood automatically fixes people instead of acknowledging that sometimes people need to work on themselves BEFORE they become responsible for another human being.

Anyway, I said what I said.

At this point, I’m genuinely concerned for the men in some of these women’s real lives because according to the comments, only Gianna is allowed to have feelings, opinions, boundaries, and free will.

Raph? Personality? Who needs it.

His opinions? Irrelevant.

His feelings? Please, he’s a man.

His job is apparently to stand there, nod enthusiastically, and say, “Whatever you want, my queen.”

And God forbid he makes a decision Gianna doesn’t like. Suddenly I’m the devil for giving a fictional MAN a personality.

Honestly, prayers for their husbands, boyfriends, and future husbands. May they be strong. May they survive. May they remember they are also human beings with opinions. A

And before someone inevitably misunderstands me: I’m a hardcore feminist in real life.

C actively advocate for women’s rights, equality, women having their own choices, careers, independence, safety, and the freedom to live their lives however the hell they want.

But there’s a difference between feminism and “women good, men bad” feminism.

It’s 2026. We really don’t need to turn every relationship into a gender war. Men are allowed to have feelings, boundaries, opinions, personalities, and sometimes even be right. Shocking, I know.

Gianna doesn’t have to sacrifice herself for Raphael, and Raphael doesn’t have to sacrifice himself for Gianna They’re both human beings.

That’s literally the point.

Also, before anyone asks, this note cost you absolutely nothing. It’s a note chapter, so you didn’t spend a coin, a key, or anything on this one.

You’re welcome.

Chape

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 899

Ganna

His eyes stayed on mine.

“I don’t think I want them. I don’t think I ever have,” he paused, his thumb brushing once over my knuckles before stopping there, “But after you told me what Salvatore said, I kept thinking about it. If I didn’t make myself clear, you might misunderstand me.”

My head moved before I even realized it, “What?”

Raphael drew in a slow breath, “All that bullshit he fed you,” his mouth pressed into a thin line, “I don’t care about any of that. I never did. And I don’t want you carrying his words around thinking they had anything to do with why I don’t want children.”

For once, Raphael seemed to have no prepared answer waiting behind his teeth. He could walk into a room full of armed men and make decisions without wasting a second. Now he was lying beside me, staring at our joined hands as if they were more difficult to understand than any problem he’d ever solved.

“You know me, Gianna. Better than anyone.”

There was something strange about the way he said it. There was no arrogance, no certainty. Almost like he was standing on unfamiliar ground and had no idea where to put his feet.

“You were my first friend,” he continued. “My first girlfriend. And if you choose to have me, you’ll be my first everything else too.”

My chest gave a small, painful pull.

“Because I’m yours,” he said. “From now until my last day, I’m yours. I mean that. That part isn’t complicated to me.”

He brought my hand toward his mouth and pressed a kiss against my knuckles.

“I’ll never stop you from wanting what you want. If you want a family someday, I’ll do it for you. If you want a house full of them, I’ll learn and work on myself to live in a house full of them. If you don’t want them, that’s fine too. I won’t make that decision for you.”

He paused, his eyes returned to mine.

“I don’t think I deserve to be a father.”

For perhaps the first time since I'd known him, Raphael looked almost uncomfortable with his own words.

He was not afraid, Raphael rarely looked afraid but he looked more nervous.

That was different.

The man who could walk into a room full of armed men without blinking was lying beside me, choosing every word with painful care because he was terrified of saying the wrong thing to me.

I swallowed, "Why?" I asked quietly, "Why do you feel that way?"

A faint smile appeared, but there wasn't much humor in it, "Because I made you suffer."

I frowned, "What? No, you didn't..."

He nodded, "I did... I wasn't very good at understanding what someone I loved needed from me. I still struggle with it. You already know that."

I did.

His gaze dropped to our hands.

"You had to explain things to me that other people probably understand without being told. You had to teach me/ how to listen. How to notice when you needed me. How to understand that sometimes you weren't asking me to solve something. You just wanted me there."

My lips parted, but no words came.

"And children..." he paused, considering the thought as if it were a problem he hadn't been able to solve, "Ldon't understand them."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

Raphael looked offended, "They're very unintelligent creatures."

I covered my mouth, laughing harder, "Raph."

"What?"

"Because they're literally babies."

"Yes," he nodded, "That's the problem. You can't reason with them."

“They’re babies.”

“They don’t explain themselves.”

“They’re babies.”

“They cry because they’re hungry. Then they cry because they’re tired. Then they cry because you gave them the wrong cup.” 1

I covered my mouth, trying not to laugh louder.

Raphael continued with complete seriousness, “And this is considered normal behavior for them.”

I muffled my laugh into his shoulder, for a second, the weight between us eased, then Raphael’s smile faded into something softer.

Chapter voo

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 900

You had to hold my hand through most of our relationship. It wasn’t fair to you.”

My laughter disappeared.

“If you hadn’t pushed me away when you did, I might never have understood how much I loved you. You forced me to face things I would’ve avoided forever.”

His thumb moved slowly over the back of my hand.

“You had to navigate so many of your feelings by yourself while I stood there, waiting for you to tell me exactly what you needed. Sometimes you practically had to spell it out for me,” he gave a quiet breath that almost sounded like a laugh at himself, “I was an idiot.”

“You were.”

That earned me a small smile, “But what happens if I’m the same with our children?”

The question came out quieter.

“What if they need something and I don’t understand? What if they try to tell me they’re hurt and I don’t notice? What if they need affection and I don’t realize they’re asking for it?”

He looked at me.

“What if they grow up thinking their father doesn’t love them because I don’t know how to show it?”

Then I caught the faint shine in his eyes, the kind that only appeared when a thought hurt him more than he wanted me to see. Somehow, that made the whole conversation hurt even more.

Raphael could control his voice, his face, his hands. He could control almost everything about himself but he couldn’t control the emotion showing on his face right now.

“What if they look at Vincenzo? Or Adriano? They know how to do this. They know how to make people feel safe. They know how to be fathers. Have you seen them with their children? They are natural at it.”

His eyes held mine.

“What if our children look at them and then look at me and decide I wasn’t good enough?”

He stopped. For a long moment, neither of us spoke. Then, very quietly, he asked the question that seemed to scare him more than all the others.

“Gianna… what if I’m not good enough? What if I love them and they still never know it?”

For a few seconds, I couldn’t find anything to say. The question had come from Raphael, but somehow it had landed inside me too.

What if I’m not good enough?

I knew that question.

I’d asked myself versions of it for years.

My eyes dropped to our joined hands. His fingers were still wrapped around mine, but there was none of his usual certainty in the way he held me.

And I understood him.

Because I didn’t know if I was good enough either.

Children.

The word brought too many faces with it now.

The children in those rooms.

The ones who had survived.

The ones who hadn't.

The little bodies I had carried away from that place, some of them so weak that I had been afraid they would stop breathing before we reached help.

"Raph..."

He waited, taking a deep breath in through his nose.

"I don't want children right now either."

The words came quietly, but once they were out, something in me loosened.

"Not because of what Salvatore said. Not because of my dyslexia. And definitely not because I think there would be something wrong with them. I just don't think I'm ready."

His hand came up to the side of my face, but he didn't interrupt. My voice caught in my throat as Jules came into my mind.

My little sister.

The girl who had needed me when our mother died.

I hadn't been there.

I had left her with the Capones because I thought I was doing what I needed to do to survive. Maybe I had been. Maybe there had been no other choice I could see at the time.

But knowing that didn't erase the fact that Jules had been left behind,

"I wasn't even the sister Jules deserved," I whispered, "When Mom died, Jules needed me. She needed someone familiar. Someone who wasn't going to disappear," my fingers tightened around his, "And I left."