

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 11-20

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

I squeezed my eyes shut, expecting another cold remark, but the weight on me shifted instantly

“Whoa, hey, easy there,” a voice said.

I blinked my eyes open. A man was hovering inches above me, his arms braced on either side of my shoulders to keep from crushing me. He was young, maybe in his mid-twenties, with messy dark hair and eyes that crinkled at the corners. He wasn’t wearing a suit like the others, he just had on a simple fitted tactical vest over a t-shirt.

“You okay?” he asked, a lopsided, charming grin spreading across his face. “You’re running like the

house is on fire.”

“I... I’m sorry,” I stammered, “I wasn’t looking. I was just-”

“It’s fine,” he stated, chuckling as he nimbly rolled off me and stood up. He reached out, offering me his hand with a friendly, open palm.

I didn’t even look at it.

I ignored his hand entirely, pushing myself off the cold floor with my own strength. My muscles were still shaking from the adrenaline of the last ten minutes, but I forced my legs to lock into place. I stood up on my own, brushing the non-existent dust off my t-shirt.

His hand stayed in the air for a heartbeat too long before he realized I wasn’t going to take it. He didn’t look offended, though. He just tucked his thumb into his belt loop, his head tilting to the side as he watched me.

“I’m Ciro. I’m one of the guys supposed to be keeping an eye on this place. You’re shaking,” he noted, his smile fading into a look of soft concern, “Did something happen?”

“I just got lost,” I snapped, trying to hide the tremor in my hands, “The house is... it’s too big.”

“Yeah, it’s a fortress,” he agreed, his lopsided grin returning, “Tell you what. Why don’t you tell me whose wing you’re staying in? I’ll walk you back so you don’t run into anyone else tonight. I’d hate for those pretty knees to get any more bruised than they already are.”

I looked down at my legs, then back at his face. He seemed sweet, his eyes bright and full of a kind of charm that felt like a trap.

“I can walk myself,” I said, my voice cold.

“I’m sure you could,” Ciro said, as he stepped back, giving me a respectful amount of space and shoving his hands into his pockets. “But I know every inch of this place. I could... simply walk you there? No strings attached.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Every instinct I had told me to tell him to get lost, that I didn’t need a man to guide me like a child. But the thought of turning another corner and seeing another one of the Capones made my stomach turn.

+15 Bonus

“I’m staying in Salvatore’s wing,” I finally muttered, relenting. It felt like a defeat. I glanced down at my knees, they were scraped and angry red from the fall, the skin stinging. I quickly pulled my gaze back up, not wanting him to see the weakness or the injury.

Ciro’s eyebrows shot up, and he let out a short, low whistle, “The big boss’s wing, huh? You must be the

new guest everyone is talking about.”

He started walking, keeping a slow pace.

“Well, don’t feel bad about getting turned around. This place was built to confuse people. It’s more of a maze than a home.”

stayed a few feet away from him, my arms crossed tightly over my chest. He didn’t try to make small talk or crack more jokes, which I appreciated. He just led me through the halls. Even so, I couldn’t help but notice how he checked every dark corner before we turned it.

“Here we are,” he said, stopping at the heavy double doors that led to the private wing. He turned to face

me, his expression softening again, “Don Salvatore’s territory. You’re safe here.”

I looked at the doors, then back at him. “Safe,” I repeated, the word tasting like poison in my mouth.

Ciro reached into his vest, and pulled out a small piece of paper and a pen. He scribbled something down and held it out. “Look, I can see that you don’t like help. But if you ever get lost again... call me. I’m usually the one standing on the other side of the door anyway.”

I looked down at the paper in his hand, then back up at his face. Something about the way he stood there, not towering over me, just waiting made me relax just a tiny bit.

I reached out, took the paper from him, and let a small, genuine smile touch my lips.

Janedoewritings

Author

So, I'm trying something new... posting shorter chapters, but more of them every day. Would you guys like that?..

Also... what do you think of today's little update? I was a bit busy, but here we are

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Gianna

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The sun was barely up, but I was already dressed and ready to go. I had on my favorite pair of baggy cargo pants and a simple gray crop top. My light brown hair was pulled back into a bun, and my heavy backpack was slumped over one shoulder.

I looked like every other girl on the UIC campus, which was exactly what I wanted.

I checked my phone one last time. Between the disability aid I received and the extra cash I made from my side projects, I was barely keeping my head above water without taking out more loans.

I didn't want to owe anyone anything, especially not the men in this house like my mother wanted for me.

My head hurt from staring at my laptop screen. Because of my dyslexia, the letters liked to dance around when I was tired, and my machine learning project was a mess of blurry lines. I just needed to get to the computer lab where I could use my special software to get some real work done.

I moved quietly down the hallway, hoping I could find the front door without getting lost in this maze of a

house or worse, running into someone.

Especially that stronzo from last night.

I had just reached the bottom of the stairs when a voice stopped me.

“Gianna! You’re leaving already?”

I turned around. Claire was standing near the arched doorway that led to another part of this stupidly big house. She looked glowing and happy, her hand resting on her stomach.

“I have a long day,” I said, “I have to get to the lab before my first lecture.”

“You can’t go to school on an empty stomach,” Claire said, walking over to me with a kind smile, “Come inside. We’re all having breakfast. It’s a beautiful morning, and I’d really love for you to sit with us for a bit.

I looked in the direction of the living room. Freedom was around there somewhere. I could practically taste the cheap campus coffee. But Claire was looking at me with so much hope in her eyes that I felt my walls start to crack.

“Just for a few minutes?” she asked softly, “Your mom is already at the table, and she’d love to see you before you go. She was worried about you yesterday.”

I let out a slow breath, “Okay. Just a few minutes, Claire. I really can’t be late.”

“Perfect!” she chirped.

Claire didn’t give me a chance to change my mind. She linked her arm in mine, leading me toward the

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large, sun-drenched dining room.

The room was already full. The entire Capone family was there, gathered around a long table that looked like it belonged in a museum. My mother was sitting near Salvatore, looking more relaxed than I'd seen her in years, and my little sister, Jules, was next to her, happily munching on a piece of toast.

Seeing them there, looking so comfortable, made my chest tighten. They looked like they belonged.

While I felt like an alien who had just crashed into their perfect world.

"Look who I found!" Claire announced, her voice bright and cheerful.

Everyone looked up as she dragged me into the room.

She pulled out the chair beside her. "Sit here, Gianna. I saved you the best seat in the house." She winked. "Mostly because it's between me and Maddie, and we're obviously the best people at this table."

I sat down, the weight of my backpack pulling at my shoulders as I dropped it by my feet. When I looked up to settle in, my heart skipped a beat.

Raphael Capone was sitting directly across from me.

He sat there in a perfectly tailored navy suit, broad shoulders straight, the expensive fabric fitting him. perfectly. His dark hair was flawless, not a strand out of place, reading glasses resting on his nose as he studied the iPad in his hand.

He looked like the definition of wealth and power.

Nothing like the monster I'd seen in the dark last night.

He didn't even look up, calmly sipping his espresso, yet the corner of his mouth curved into a slow, cruel

smirk.

He knew I was staring.

I could tell.

And he was savoring every second of my discomfort.

“Coffee, Gianna?” Madeleine asked, reaching for the pot, “Or are you strictly a tea person?”

“Coffee is fine,” I managed to say, my voice sounding flat even to my own ears.

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I didn’t want to be here. I didn’t want to drink their coffee or sit at their table. I’d thought I had time to figure something out before my mother moved in with the Capones. Now that time was gone and I had no idea what to do next.

Salvatore looked at me, “Would you like some breakfast, Gianna? I can ask the chef to make you anything

you want.”

“No, thank you,” I said, standing up and reaching for my bag, “I’m not hungry. If I don’t leave right now, I’m going to miss my bus.”

Then Don Vincenzo set his fork down, and looked directly at me, “You don’t need to take the bus. We have a dozen cars and drivers standing by. One of them will take you wherever you need to go. It’s safer and faster.”

“I’m fine with the bus,” I said, as I gripped the strap of my backpack until my knuckles turned white.

“Gianna, don’t be difficult,” my mother pleaded, giving me a look that told me I was embarrassing her, “It’s a long walk to the stop from here. Just let them drive you.”

“I’ve been taking the bus for three years, Mom. I think I can handle one more day,” I replied. I looked at Vincenzo and Salvatore, my chin lifted, “I don’t need a driver. I don’t need a car. I like my routine, and I like taking care of myself. I’m not changing how I live just because the scenery changed.”

I wasn’t going to let them buy my comfort. I wasn’t going to become another person in this house who relied on the Capones for every little thing.

I was self-sufficient, and I intended to stay that way.

“The bus is public, slow, and full of people we don’t know,” Adriano Capone said, his voice dropping an octave. He leaned forward, his large hands intertwined on the table, “The

second you step out of this house, you're a target. If anyone tied to this family stands alone on a street corner... they end up in the trunk of a car or at the bottom of the river. We have enemies who have been waiting years for a weak spot. Last night you were a stranger. This morning, your face is on every hit list in Chicago."

Vincenzo nodded, "We don't ask you to take a driver because we want to be nice. We do it because we don't feel like cleaning your blood off the sidewalk this afternoon. I'm pretty sure your mother would hate to see you in a body bag."

I looked at my mother, but she just looked away, staring at her coffee. They weren't just trying to control us, they were trying to scare me in a way that felt like a chokehold.

"I'm actually leaving for school too," Madeleine said, her voice soft, her fingers grazed my arm, "You don't have to go alone. You can come with me."

I looked at her, surprised. I hadn't realized she was a student. Based on how the men in this house acted, I assumed they kept their women locked up like trophies.

"I finished my vet tech diploma last year," she explained with a kind, shy smile. "But I wanted to go all the

1:2

way. I'm in my first year of vet school now."

She looked at me with the kindest eyes I had ever seen in this house. She didn't look like a Capone, but she definitely looked like someone who spent her days saving puppies and kittens.

"Which university are you at?" she asked, tilting her head.

"I go to UIC," I answered, "University of Illinois Chicago. I'm a senior."

Madeleine's smile brightened, "Oh, that's wonderful! It's a great school. I'm actually just a short drive away at Midwestern University."

I knew that school. It was the most elite, most expensive private vet school in the area. Only the best of the best got in there.

"Since we're both headed to class, why don't we just go together?" Madeleine suggested. She looked at my mother with a hopeful expression, then back at me, "It would make me feel so much better to have some company."

She leaned in a little closer, lowering her voice so the men couldn't hear.

“Please? For me? It’s my first big exam week, and I’m a little nervous. I could use a friend in the car.”

I looked at her for a long second. I could see what she was doing. She wasn’t really that scared of an exam, she was just being sweet. She was making up a reason to help me so I wouldn’t feel like I was giving in to the men.

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I didn’t want to take a Capone car, but I didn’t want to say no to her, either.

I let out a quiet breath and gave a small nod, dropping my bag to the floor and sliding into the chair. "Okay," I murmured, "I'll go with you."

"Yay!" Madeleine chirped, her face lighting up like the sun had just popped into the room. She turned to the rest of the table, flashing a bright, winning smile, "See? Problem solved. We'll head out as soon as we finish breakfast."

Before I could say I wasn't hungry, she slid my coffee back in front of me. Then, she started piling food onto my plate, a stack of fluffy pancakes, a scoop of scrambled eggs, and a few strips of crispy bacon.

Salvatore turned his head toward to where Jules was sitting, "Jules, did you wake up early enough to see the birds this morning?"

Jules's face lit up instantly. She dropped her fork, her eyes wide and bright, "Yes! I saw them right outside my window!" she leaned forward, her hands moving excitedly as she talked, "There were so many! I saw green ones, and little blue ones, and all kinds of birds I've never seen before. It was like a movie. I love parrots. I love it here. It's way better than our old house. It's like living in a big park."

Salvatore let out a laugh, "I'm glad you like it, little one. There are even more in the gardens behind the pool. Perhaps you can see them later."

I watched my sister, feeling a sharp pang in my chest. She was so young, so innocent. She didn't see the guards at the gate or the coldness in the men's eyes.

To her, this place was a fairytale.

I poked at the eggs Madeleine had given me, the appetite I didn't have disappearing completely. I just wanted to get to campus, where things were normal and away from here.

"If you like the parrots so much, Jules," Silvio said. He was the youngest brother and supposed to be the nice one according to my mother, but he had a dark spark in his eyes as he leaned back, "You should ask Dante to show you his collection. He has a special way of making birds stay very, very still."

Dante let out a laugh, "They weren't parrots, Silvio. They were pigeons. I was just practicing my aim."

"Practice makes perfect," Adriano chimed in, snatching a piece of bacon off Silvio's plate, "Though, last time you practiced, the gardener spent three hours cleaning feathers off the fountain."

Jules giggled, not catching the hidden meaning of their words, "Were the feathers pretty?"

"Bright red," Raphael said. He finally set his iPad down on the table. He looked at my little sister with a look that made my blood run cold, "Everything looks better in red, doesn't it, Jewel?"

“Don’t scare her,” Madeleine said.

“I’m not scared,” Jules said, puffing out her chest, “I like red. It’s the color of hearts.”

+15 Banus

And other things,” Silvio muttered, earning a sharp look from Claire

I sat there, my fork frozen halfway to my mouth. I felt sick. They were sitting here, eating breakfast and joking about killing things right in front of a ten-year-old.

“Jules, not Jewel,” I snapped, and everyone’s attention turned to me. From the corner of my eye, I caught Mum sighing softly, already shaking her head at me like I was the one being difficult.

Because the annoyance in my voice wasn’t subtle. She’s Jules, not some shiny little thing you get to rename because you feel like it.

Raphael tilted his head slightly, studying me like I was mildly entertaining. Then his eyes flicked back to my sister, “Jewel,” he repeated smoothly, like he hadn’t heard a single word I said.

The smug bastard even smiled this time. A smile that said he was doing it on purpose.

“Are you deaf?” I asked flatly.

Raphael leaned back in his chair, completely unbothered, long fingers drumming lazily against the tabletop.

“No,” he said calmly, “I heard you.”

His gaze slid past me again, landing right back on her like I’d never spoken at all.

“I just disagree,” The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, “Jewel suits her better.”

Then he tilted his head, directing the question where he clearly wanted it to go.

“Don’t you think?” he asked Jules.

I shot my sister a warning look.

Jules glanced between us, clearly aware she had just been dropped into the middle of something. Her fingers toyed with the sleeve of her sweater as she shifted slightly in her chair.

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Raphael just leaned back, one arm draped over the chair, “Well?” he said lightly.

Jules hesitated another second. Then, very quietly, she said, “I... actually like Jewel.”

My head snapped toward her.

She gave a small, sheepish shrug, clearly trying not to smile “It’s kind of pretty.”

Across the table, Raphael’s mouth curved slowly.

“See?” he murmured.

Then he picked his iPad back up like the matter had been settled all along.

“Jewel.”

“Raphael, stop it,” Madeleine said gently.

She was still smiling, though she shook her head at him in quiet reprimand, like she already knew he was enjoying this far too much.

“Okay,” Madeleine said, pushing back her chair and rising to her feet. She smoothed a hand over her skirt, “Gianna and I really have to go, or we’ll both be late for our first lectures.”

I stood up instantly, grabbing my backpack from the floor. I followed her out of the dining room as fast as I could without running. Once we reached the grand foyer, she told me to wait there while she ran upstairs to grab her things.

I stood by the heavy front door, crossing my arms over my chest. I felt small under the high ceilings, my eyes darting toward every shadow.

Then I felt something, a shift in the air behind me. The kind of presence that makes the back of your neck prickle before you even turn around. I slowly glanced over my shoulder.

Raphael.

He was standing a few feet behind me now, tall and perfectly put together like he had stepped out of some expensive magazine. The reading glasses on like that tiny piece of glass could somehow make him look normal.

It didn't.

Not when I'd seen the way his eyes looked in the dark last night. My heart slammed hard against my ribs. Why was he doing this?

Did he recognize me?

Did he know I was the girl from the club?

+15 Bonus

Was he going to tell my mother... or keep it to use against me later?

Raphael took a slow step closer. His shadow slid over the floor until it swallowed mine.

I went still.

“My room is soundproof, by the way,” he said casually, “If you had screamed your lungs out last night,” he continued, adjusting the glasses slightly on his nose, “no one in this house would have heard you. Not even your mother.”

My breath caught. I forced my face to stay blank, but my fingers tightened around the strap of my backpack.

Don't react.

Don't give him anything.

Raphael's eyes moved slowly over me. It was not a quick glance. It went from my face... to my throat... to the bare strip of skin above my waistband.

"Next time," he said, "stay on your side of the house. If you're that desperate to steal something, go ask your new daddy for it."

His gaze flicked toward the dining room behind us.

"I'm sure Salvatore has a soft spot for charity cases," then his eyes came back to me, "But stay out of my

space."

For a second I couldn't even process what he'd said.

A thief?

He thought I'd been sneaking around his room to steal from him.

He didn't recognize me, not as the girl on the stage, not as the girl who stripped for him, he just saw me as a poor girl trying to grab a piece of their money.

A gold digger.

The words burned in my throat. I wanted to snap back, to tell him I didn't want a single dollar from him or anyone in this house but my body refused to move.

Raphael stepped past me. Close enough that the sleeve of his jacket brushed my arm. The contact was brief, barely there but heat shot straight up my spine.

He just kept going across the foyer with the calm confidence of a man who knew the entire world moved around him and I was nothing more than a bug he'd already crushed under his shoe.

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Gianna

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I was still frozen, when Madeleine came jogging back down the stairs. She had a thick textbook tucked under her arm and a bright smile. The normalcy of it felt strange after the moment I'd just had with Raphael.

"Ready?" she asked, her voice light.

I nodded quickly, not trusting my voice. I just wanted to be outside of this house so I could breathe.

We walked out the front doors and toward a sleek, dark SUV idling in the driveway. I expected to see some guard in a suit. But when we reached the car, the driver's door opened, and Adriano stepped out.

"I thought we had a driver," I muttered, my voice low.

"We do," Madeleine said, her eyes softening as she looked at him, "He just doesn't like anyone else behind the wheel when I'm in the car."

I slid into the back seat, pressing myself against the door and pulling my backpack onto my lap. A second later, Adriano climbed into the driver's seat. The whole car seemed to shrink when he entered, he was too big, too loud, too much. Madeleine sat beside him, and the moment she buckled her seatbelt, the energy in the car changed.

Madeleine buckled her seatbelt beside him, but Adriano didn't start the engine right away. Instead, he reached across the console and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck, pulling her gently toward him. He didn't even glance at the rearview mirror. It was like I didn't exist in the car at all.

"Do you really have to go?" he murmured, "I should lock the doors and keep you here."

"Adriano, stop," Madeleine giggled, though she didn't pull away. She leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering shut for a second, "Gianna is right there and I have a lecture."

"Gianna isn't looking," he said, his eyes dark and fixed on his wife's lips. He leaned in, his nose brushing hers, "Are you, Gianna?"

"Looking at the trees," I said sharply, my face heating up.

He let out a low, dark chuckle and finally put the car in gear. As we pulled out of the gates, Madeleine turned in her seat to look at me, trying to be the good host.

"So, Gianna," she started, "What's your first class today?"

“Al lab,” I answered, keeping my words short. I tried to focus on the road, but it was hard to ignore what was happening in the front.

Adriano’s right hand wasn’t on the steering wheel. It was on Madeleine’s thigh. I heard Madeleine’s

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- 15 Bonus

breath hitch She gripped her textbook tighter, her knuckles turning white

“That that sounds so hard,” Madeleine managed to say, “Do you have to do a lot of math?”

“Some,” I said.

Adriano shifted his grip, his hand sliding higher up her leg. He looked perfectly relaxed, steering with one hand while his eyes stayed on the road.

Madeleine’s face turned a deep shade of pink, “Tell me about the campus. Is there a good place for lunch?”

“I usually just eat a granola bar,” I replied.

I watched in the rearview mirror as Adriano leaned over at a red light. He didn’t kiss her. He just pressed his lips against the sensitive skin right below her ear and breathed in deep, his eyes closing. Madeleine let out a tiny, soft sound, halfway between a sigh and a protest.

“You smell like those flowers in the hall,” he muttered against her skin, “I think I’ll pick you up early. Forget the library. You don’t need to study that hard.”

“I have to study,” she gasped, her hand reaching up to feebly push at his chest, “Gianna, tell him.. tell him I have to stay for the full day.”

I looked at the back of Adriano’s head. He loved her. It was obvious in the way he touched her, like she was the only thing in the world that mattered.

But it seemed scary... kind of love that looked like it could swallow someone whole. Trusting someone that much was just asking for them to eventually break you.

“I think he only hears what he wants to hear,” I said, looking back out the window at the gray Chicago

streets.

Adriano caught my eye in the rearview mirror. He gave me a sharp, appreciative look, like I had finally passed some kind of test. “Smart girl,” he said. Then he looked back at his wife, ‘She’s right, Maddie I only hear you. And right now, your heart is telling me you want to go home and forget all about these

books.”

“My heart is telling me I have a quiz,” Madeleine whispered, pushing him away

The car slowed down as we pulled up to the curb at UIC. I didn’t wait for Adriano to come around and open the door. I grabbed the handle and hopped out the second the car stopped

“Have a great day, Gianna!” Madeleine called out. She looked flushed, her hair a little messy from Adriano’s wandering hands.

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“Thank you for the ride,” I replied quickly, adjusting my backpack on my shoulder
“Goodbye”

I hiked my backpack higher on my shoulder and walked toward the entrance I reached the lab a few minutes before the lecture started.

The door was half open. I stepped in quietly and took my usual seat near the wall, not the front, never the front. The professor liked to ask questions there

My laptop booted up slowly while I opened my notebook The page from last week stared back at me

Words scratched out, letters written twice, arrows pointing everywhere because I could not keep a straight line of thought on paper. It looked messy and childish I pressed my lips together and flipped to a clean page before anyone around me could see

The professor walked in a minute later and placed his bag on the desk

“Today we continue with convolutional neural networks,” he said.

He began drawing a grid on the board. It was small squares, pixels. Then beside it he wrote a 3×3 filter

matrix.

Numbers.

My brain caught onto it immediately. The grid moved in my head before he even finished explaining.

Slide the filter.

Multiply.

Add.

Move again.

Multiply.

Add.

The pattern formed so clearly it almost felt obvious like watching gears click together. My pen started moving quickly to keep up.

Convlution.

I stopped. The word looked wrong. I tried again.

Convoultion.

It was still wrong, I know it. My stomach tightened. I scratched the word out harder than I meant to.

This always happened.

+15 Bonus

My brain could hold the idea perfectly. I could see how the filter detected edges in an image. How multiple filters would find different features. How deeper layers turned edges into shapes.

But when the idea had to leave my head, through my mouth or my hand... everything broke apart.

Letters switched places, words came out backwards. Sentences tangled before they even formed.

Dyslexia.

Dysgraphia.

That was what the doctor called it when I was six years old. And to me it just meant something in my

brain was built wrong.

My whole life, reading took twice the time. Writing took three. And speaking... speaking was the worst. Because by the time I managed to push a sentence out, the class had already moved three steps ahead.

I looked down at my notebook again. The page already looked terrible, the crossed words, half

sentences, arrows.

It looked like the notes of someone who did not belong in a seventh semester AI and Machine Learning

course.

I kept my grades decent enough to pass. I stayed quiet in class. I spent nights staring at code until patterns finally made sense.

From the outside it looked impressive but the truth sat right there on the paper in front of me. I could barely write one clean paragraph of notes.

If the professor asked me to explain convolution layers right now, the idea would shatter the moment I opened my mouth.

My thoughts were fast, too fast. They ran in shapes and numbers and patterns but words felt like stones in my throat. I pressed the pen harder against the page.

“Idiot,” I muttered under my breath.

The word was meant for myself.

What kind of computer science student could not even spell the word convolution properly?

I tried writing it again slowly.

Convolution.

The letters still leaned the wrong way. My chest burned with shame. I closed my notebook halfway so no one walking past could see the page.

Everyone here looked so comfortable, typing, asking questions, answering questions. Their words flowed easily, like water. Mine always came out broken. And somehow I still walked around pretending I belonged here.

Pretending I was smart.

Pretending I was not one bad question away from everyone realizing the truth.

“Worthless,” the voice in the back of my head hissed, an echo from years ago. “You’re a fucking disappointment, Gianna. I swear I tried with you, but there’s nothing in that head of yours. Nothing but empty space. You’re good for nothing.”

“No matter how hard you try, you’ll always be stupid.”

“I’ve tried being patient with you, Gianna, but patience doesn’t fix stupid.”

“Just sit there and stay quiet. The less you talk, the less everyone notices how slow you are.”

I looked at the screen, my vision blurring for a second. Get it together, Gianna.

I tore my eyes away from the notebook. I couldn’t let those voices win.

No one knew, not even my mom.

She thought I had grown out of it. That all the therapies, the endless appointments, the stupid drills they made me repeat over and over had actually fixed something.

In her mind, her daughter had beaten it. Her daughter was brilliant.

She didn't know the truth.

I was a liar.

A good one. Too good.

I had spent years learning how to hide it, how to nod at the right time, how to smile like I understood everything, how to pretend I could keep up when my brain felt like it was tearing itself apart just to form a single sentence.

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Because if anyone ever saw what was really inside my head... they'd know exactly how useless I felt. And if I failed here, I had nothing.

No backup. No safety net.

I'd end up exactly where men like him always said I belonged, standing quietly in the shadow of someone else's life.

I'd never be able to give my mom and Jules the future they deserved.

And if I gave up now... then they'd be right. I'd just be what they always called me.

Dumb.

Useless.

Gianna.

The professor's voice cut through my thoughts, "Gianna," he said, looking straight at me, "Explain how multiple filters work in one convolutional layer."

My stomach dropped. The words were right there in my head. I saw the patterns. I saw the numbers, the flow of data, the way each filter caught edges before the next layer stacked them into something

meaningful.

But my mouth refused.

I opened it, closed it and then opened it again. The letters tangled up before they left my lips.

“It... uh... each filter... it... um...”

“Go on,” he prompted.

I could feel every eye in the room on me. My hands shook on the desk. My notebook felt heavier than a

brick.

“Filters detect... patterns... in images... then... they... um...” I stopped.

My throat ached. My brain was screaming, trying to push the perfect answer out in numbers and symbols, but the words the stupid, simple words refused to cooperate.

The professor sighed and shook his head, “Gianna... you really need to work on articulating your thoughts. You know the material, but you sound like you’re making it up as you go.”

Making it up as I go.

That's exactly what it felt like. Always like I was pretending. I slumped back in my chair, chewing the inside of my cheek. My ears burned. The voice at the back of my head, the one that never went quiet, started screaming.

+15 Bonus

Idiot. Worthless. Pathetic. Everyone's going to see what a disgrace you are. Just shut the fuck up and disappear.

I pressed my fingers into the notebook, crushing the pages slightly. Everyone else was moving on, talking about kernels and pooling layers, but I stayed frozen, trapped in the shame of my own failure.

The professor had moved on too, but I didn't.

The voice didn't just crawl into my ears, it lived in my blood.

"I'm only saying this because I love you. I'm saving you from the embarrassment. Don't open your mouth in front of these people again. They don't want to hear what you think, they just want to see how you look in those jeans. And you look so delicious, baby."

“You have such a perfect body, why would you waste it trying to be smart? You don’t need a brain when you have an ass like that. Just stay quiet, look beautiful.”

The professor kept talking, but I couldn’t hear him anymore. The voice in my head was too loud now.

“Why are you even interested in computers, Gianna? You know you can’t do it. Do something within your standards. Why don’t you go to yoga classes instead? You should work on your body a little bit. You’re gaining a little weight.”

I looked down at my stomach, feeling a sudden, sharp wave of disgust. I felt huge.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head. Leave the thinking to the men. Your job is just to stay fit and stay beautiful. If you lose your looks, you’ll have nothing left. No one wants a girl who is both stupid and out of shape.”

A hot tear burned at the corner of my eye. I blinked it away before it could fall.

I wouldn’t let them win.

I turned back to my keyboard, my fingers trembling as they hovered over the keys before finally pressing down. Line after line of code began to fill the screen. I focused on the patterns, the logic, the numbers. The only language that never betrayed me.

I had to prove I was stronger than those voices.

I had to prove my mind belonged to me.

I didn't need a man to tell me who I was. I didn't need a brother to stand in front of me or a father to decide my worth.

My heart felt small and bruised in my chest, like it could crack if someone touched it the wrong way. Fear curled low in my stomach, and the loneliness of the crowded room pressed against my ribs but I refused to stop.

I would build my life out of numbers and code and stubborn, relentless effort.

I would be the one who gave Jules and my mum the life they deserved.

And when I was done, no man would ever get to stand over me and decide my worth again.

Janedoe writings

Author

+15 Bonus

Messy hair, trembling fingers, and a mind that won't shut up-welcome to Gianna's life.

What do you think so far? This is only one layer of her... trust me, there's plenty n

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Gianna

+15 Bonus

The room was too big. It was too quiet, and it smelled too much like expensive flowers and floor wax. I lay in the middle of the massive bed, feeling like a speck of dust in this giant, cold mansion. I pulled the silk sheets up to my chin, but they didn't feel warm.

They just felt empty.

I let out a shaky breath, and then the first sob broke through. I pressed my face into the pillow to muffle the sound. I hated myself for it. I hated how small I felt. I sniffled, my nose running, my eyes burning from the salt of my own tears.

I was supposed to be the strong one. I was the one who was going to get us out of here. But right now, with the moonlight hitting the floor, I just felt like that empty, stupid girl the voice talked about.

Stop it. Stop being so pathetic.

I pushed myself off the bed. My feet hit the cold floor, and I walked toward the walk-in closet. It was bigger than my old bedroom.

I reached the top shelf, under the sweater and pulled it out.

It was just a long, heavy wooden stick. To anyone else, it was just wood. To me, it was the only thing that kept me determined to be better. It was what I used when I was too slow, when I couldn't get the words right, when I needed to remember that I had to be better.

It was my punishment and my teacher.

I held it in both hands, feeling the smooth, hard grain of the wood. I walked over to the full-length mirror and looked at myself. My eyes were red and puffy. My hair was a mess. I looked exactly like what the voice said, a joke. A useless thing that couldn't even spell a ten-letter word.

I raised the stick, my heart hammering. I looked at my reflection and felt a wave of pure, hot anger.

"Why are you like this, Gianna? Why can't you just be normal?"

"Gianna?"

I gasped... that wasn't the voice in my head. It was my mother. She was right outside my door.

"Gianna, honey? Are you still awake?"

Panic surged through me. My stomach dropped. If she saw me like this, if she saw the stick, she would know. She would every lie, she would see everything I try so hard to hide from her.

“One second, Mom!” I croaked.

I shoved the stick back into its hiding spot, making sure it was completely comes shyly, noth shaking so hard I almost dropped it I smoothed my hair down and wiced my face wh

hand, scrubbing at the tear stains until my skin fett raw

I rushed to the door, my heart thudding against my ribs. I took a deep breath, trying to force my face o something that looked like... fine

I couldn't let her in. I couldn't let her see the mess inside my head. She didn't need that sher the ide se had. She needed someone strong. And I have to be that someone

I opened the door just a little bit, “Hey, what are you doing here?” I asked forced a fake smile, but my heart was racing, “I was just about to go to sleep.

My mother didn't say anything at first. She just searched my face with her eyes I felt like I was going to lose it. I wanted to turn around and hide under the covers. Then she narrowed her eyes and looked at my red nose, "Have you been crying?"

"No," I said, but my voice was shaky. My stomach felt like it dropped through the floor

She sighed and walked right past me into the room. That was when I saw Jules trailing behind her, holding onto her shirt like she was scared of me. That little traitor. My mom closed the door and turned around, cupping my face with both her hands.

"Is it about this morning?" she asked softly.

I froze. Did she know? Did someone call her? Did she see my messy notebook? 1. what?

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

“I’m sorry about breakfast,” she said, and I realized she was talking about something totally different, “I know this is a huge change, Gianna. It’s just been us for so long. And the Capones... they’re a lot. But we have to follow the rules of this house now. It’s just basic decency. We need them, honey. We need this

roof over our heads.”

I pulled back from her touch, “Mom, you can’t be serious. You can’t trust them. You can’t trust any man, especially not men like this, not even Salvatore. He’s being nice now, but how long does that last? Men like him always have a price.”

She dragged me over to the bed and sat me down, holding my hand tight, “Gianna, stop. You don’t understand.”

“I understand plenty,” I snapped, “I see the way they look at us. You’re trading our freedom for a fancy house. It’s a bad deal, Mom. It’s only a matter of time before he turns on you.”

“Salvatore is different,” she said, and her voice was so confident it scared me. She looked me right in the eyes. “No one has ever loved me the way he does. And I know it’s real because it’s not about... it’s not physical for him. He hasn’t even tried to touch me like that, never have and never will and he is fine with that. He just wants me here. He wants to take care of us.”

“That makes it even weirder!” I said, shaking my head. “If he doesn’t want that, then what does he want? People don’t just give away millions of dollars and giant houses for nothing. He wants control. He wants to own us like we’re part of the furniture. You’re putting our whole lives in the hands of a man who kills people for a living.”

“And what was our life before?” she asked, “Working odd jobs? Watching you struggle to pay for school? Watching Jules grow up in a tiny apartment where the heat didn’t work? Salvatore gave us safety. He gave us a future. Is it so wrong to want to be protected? Is it so wrong to let someone carry the weight for a while?”

I stared at her, my chest feeling like it was about to burst. I can give her all those things too. Why can’t she see that? I wanted to scream it. I was the one staying up until 4:00 AM staring at code until my eyes bled. I was the one fighting my own broken brain every single day just to get a degree that would pay us a real salary. I was building a future with my own two hands, line by line, number by number.

Why did the protection always have to come from a man? Why did it have to be a guy with a gun or a big bank account? I was right here. I was smart, and I was working, and I would have walked through fire to keep them warm.

It felt like a slap in the face, like all my hard work didn’t count because I wasn’t a man in a suit. I didn’t want a protector, I wanted to be the protector. I wanted her to believe in me as much as she believed in

someone like Salvatore.

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt,” I said, my voice small.

“I won’t,” she promised, leaning over to kiss my forehead. “And neither will you. Just try to be kind, okay? For me?”

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“Okay, Mom,” I whispered, “I’ll try. I’ll be good.”

+15 Bonus

The tension left her shoulders all at once. She let out a long breath and opened her arms. I didn’t hesitate. I leaned into her, burying my face in her neck. She smelled like the lavender soap we used to buy at the dollar store, a scent that felt like home no matter where we were.

“My sweet, brave girl,” she murmured into my hair.

She pulled back and patted the mattress. “Come here, both of you. Lie down.”

I crawled back onto the giant bed, and Jules scrambled up on the other side. My mother lay in the middle, spreading her arms wide. I tucked myself against her left side, resting my head on her shoulder, while Jules curled into her right.

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