

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 21-30

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

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The bed was huge, but we all huddled together in the very center, making ourselves a small island of safety. My mother wrapped her arms around us, pulling us in tight. She held us like we were still toddlers, like we weren't twenty-one and ten years old. One of her hands stroked my hair, her fingers gently untangling the knots, while her other arm held Jules close.

"I've got you," she whispered, "I've got both of you. Nothing is going to happen to you. I will make sure of it, even if it's the last thing I do on this earth."

She wasn't just talking to me and Jules, she was talking to the walls of the mansion, to the men downstairs, and to the world that had been so mean to us for so long. She was telling the universe that

we were hers, and she would burn everything down before she let anyone hurt us again.

I felt her heart beating against my ear, fast and hard. I knew she meant it. My mother would give up her very soul just to keep us safe.

I forced myself to relax against her. I wanted her to feel like I was on her side. I looked up at her face and tried to sound light. “So, what about the wedding?”

She let out a little laugh, suddenly looking shy, like she was a young girl again. It was a look I didn’t recognize. “What about it? It’s going to be something small. Just us. Something simple.”

“I can’t believe you’ll be Mrs. Capone in just two days,” I said.

“I can’t believe it either,” she whispered, her eyes looking far away, like she was seeing a dream come

true.

“I can!” Jules piped up. She was beaming, her face full of excitement. “And I’m so happy about it. I love it here! It’s like a palace!”

I scoffed, “Of course you do, Jewel!” I snapped, putting as much venom as I could into her new nickname.

I looked at her, remembering how she had turned on me at breakfast. She had acted like she didn’t even know me just to look cool in front of those men.

“You were embarrassing us while they were just being friendly,” Jules shot back, sitting up and crossing

her arms, “And I didn’t lie. I like Jewel better. It sounds fancy.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Your Highness,” I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt. “I didn’t realize you’d been a Capone for five minutes and already lost your mind. It’s Jules. J-U-L-E-S. Or did you forget how to spell your own name?”

“I can spell fine, unlike some people,” she whispered, just loud enough for me to hear.

My blood boiled, “You little brat! I’m the one who did your math homework for three years!”

She scoffed, “And Salvatore told me I could have a pony if I wanted. A pony, Gianna, not just some stupid math homework!”

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“A pony? In the middle of Chicago?” I snorted, “Where are you going to put it, Jewel? In the garage next to the Ferraris? It’ll be covered in oil and smelling like exhaust in a week.”

“He said there’s an estate with stables!” she shot back, her voice getting high and squeaky.

“You’re such a sell-out,” I said, poking her side.

Jules turned red, her eyes wide, “At least I don’t walk around the house looking like I smelled something rotten all the time. Your face is going to get stuck like that, and then no one will want to marry you, and you’ll have to live in my pony’s stable!”

“Girls, stop,” Mom laughed, but she didn’t sound mad. She sounded happy.

I reached over Mom to poke Jules in the arm again.

“Stop poking me! Mom! The gargoyle is touching me!” Jules squealed, trying to hide behind Mom’s shoulder.

“I’ll gargyle you in a second!” I huffed, reaching for a pillow, “Jewel sound like a cat that belongs to a rich old lady. ‘Come here, Jewel, time for your expensive tuna!’”

“It’s better than Gianna,” Jules stuck her tongue out, “Gianna sounds like a librarian who only eats plain

crackers.”

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“Girls, please,” Mom groaned, but she was smiling.

“She started it!” we both said at the same time, pointing fingers at each other.

I swung the pillow across Mom's lap. The pillow caught Jules right in the face with a soft whump. She gasped like I had just committed a terrible crime against humanity.

"Mom!" she squealed, clutching her face, "Did you see that? The gargoyle attacked me!"

"Oh please," I snorted, already grabbing another pillow. "If I actually attacked you, you'd be on the floor crying."

Jules lunged across Mom and yanked the pillow out of my hands before I could react. She smacked it straight into my face, and feathers puffed from the corner seam like a tiny cloud.

"You little gremlin!" I barked, grabbing another pillow and swinging it back, "I'm going to return you to the

ZOO."

Mom groaned between us while we leaned over her like two wild animals fighting over the same territory, "Girls, please-"

THWACK.

Jules smacked me again before Mom could finish the sentence. I shoved her shoulder while she burst into laughter, nearly falling sideways onto Mom.

“Stop hitting me!”

“You started it!”

“You insulted my face!”

“You insulted my name!”

Mom tried to sit up between us, reaching out to catch Jules’ wrist before the next swing landed. But her hand missed slightly, her fingers closing around empty air before she tried again.

The pillow dropped onto Mom’s lap.

Jules and I both froze for a second when Mom rubbed her hand against the blanket. Her fingers were shaking just a little, like the muscles were tired.

“Mom?” Jules asked softly.

Mom gave a small laugh, like she had just noticed it herself. She flexed her fingers slowly, watching them for a moment.

“Oh, that,” she said lightly. “It’s nothing.”

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Jules scooted closer and grabbed Mom’s hand before she could pull it away. The tremor was small but noticeable now, a gentle uneven shaking in her fingers.

“Your hand is shaking,” Jules said.

Mom gently pulled her hand back and rested it on the blanket again, “It does that sometimes.”

“Since when?” I asked.

Mom looked between us for a moment before answering, “Since the surgery.”

I nodded slowly.

Her cervical spine surgery had been rough on her. She had spent weeks barely able to move her neck without pain, and the doctor had warned us that nerve problems could happen afterward.

Mom shrugged softly, “Sometimes nerves act strange. The doctor said the signals from my spine might stay a little messy. These tremors might follow me for the rest of my life.”

Jules’ eyes widened, “Forever?”

Mom reached over and brushed Jules’ hair behind her ear, smiling gently. Her hand trembled again, and she quietly tucked it under the blanket like she was trying to keep it warm.

“Well,” I said, nudging Jules with my foot. “You see what happens when you attack Mom with pillows. You break her nerves.”

“I didn’t break anything!” Jules protested.

“You probably did. Your giant head has dangerous physics.”

“My head is normal!”

“Your ego is not.”

Mom laughed softly and pulled both of us closer again, wrapping an arm around our shoulders. Jules curled into her side instantly, resting her head against Mom’s chest.

I leaned into her other shoulder, “I’m still perfectly capable of handling you two monsters,” Mom said, kissing the top of Jules’ head, “Shaky hand or not.”

The room settled into a quiet warmth again as we laid there together in the middle of the massive bed. Mom’s arms stayed wrapped around us like she was holding something fragile.

And for the first time that night, the room didn’t feel quite so big.

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Raphael

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I leaned against the cold marble wall, my glass heavy in my hand. My brothers were all around me, a solid wall of dark suits, expensive cologne, and mean faces. We stood in the shadows of the hall, watching the reception like it was a funeral.

Across the room, our father was actually smiling. It made my skin crawl. He looked soft. He looked weak. He was standing there with Hazel, who looked like a piece of white glass that would shatter if you breathed on her too hard.

“This is a fucking shit show,” Adriano muttered. He was messing with his cufflinks, his knuckles still bleeding from a job he’d finished an hour ago.

“He’s acting like a clown,” Dante added, “He treats that kid, Jules, like she’s his own blood. It’s pathetic. And don’t even get me started on the older one...”

“Gianna,” I said.

The name tasted like smoke on my tongue.

I could still see her face from breakfast two days ago. People usually shake when we enter a room. They look at their shoes. They pray we don't notice them but she didn't. She looked Vincenzo right in the eye and told us to back off. She threw our protection back in our faces like it was trash.

"She's a problem," Luca said. He was scanning the room, his hand resting near the holster under his jacket, "She thinks her little college campus is a safe zone. She has no idea how fast a girl like her can be snatched off the street in Chicago."

"She needs to be put in her place," Dante said, "You don't say 'no' to a Capone and just walk away. She needs to learn that she's ours now. Everything in this house belongs to us."

I took a slow sip of my drink, feeling the burn in my chest, "Let her be," I said, "If she wants to walk into the dark alone, let her. If she ends up in a ditch, it's not our problem. I'm not wasting my best guys on a girl who thinks she's too smart for a bodyguard."

"What is wrong with you guys?" Vincenzo let out a dry laugh. He was the calmest one, which made him the scariest. He was the one who did the things the rest of us didn't even want to talk about. He adjusted his tie, looking at our father, "The old man wants this. He wants to feel like he's a good person for five minutes. Let him have his fun. It keeps him happy, and as long as he's happy, he stays out of my business."

"He's going soft for a woman who has nothing but a sad story and a nice face," I said, my grip tightening on my glass until I thought the crystal might crack.

"She makes him feel like a human, Raphael," Vincenzo said, turning to look at me. "Try to be a son today instead of an asshole. Just for an hour. Can you do that?"

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I didn't answer. I looked back at them. Hazel was beaming at my father, but my eyes went straight to the girl standing behind her.

Gianna was smiling wide, her face glowing. She was wearing a pink dress that hugged every curve of her body. It matched the flush on her cheeks and the tip of her nose.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a gear turned. I'd seen her before. Not at breakfast, and not in the hallway of this house. It was somewhere else. I knew that face. I'd seen it in a different light, in a different place.

I racked my brain, trying to pull the memory forward, but it stayed just out of reach. It was like a word on the tip of my tongue that I couldn't spit out.

I felt a surge of pure heat in my chest, and it wasn't from the bourbon. I was pissed. I was beyond pissed. I looked over at Vincenzo, who was still standing there completely calm.

This is his fault.

I would have run a full background check the second they moved in. I wanted her phone records, her school files, her bank accounts, everything. I wanted to know who she talked

to and where she went when she wasn't studying. But Vincenzo had shut me down. He told me to respect the old man's wishes. He had tied my hands and let a complete stranger walk into our home.

Because of him, I was standing here looking at a girl I knew I'd seen before, and I had no way of knowing where. The memory was a itch in my brain I couldn't scratch, and it made the air in my lungs feel tight

and hot.

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As if she felt the weight of my stare, Gianna's head turned.

Across the crowded hall, her eyes locked onto mine. She didn't look away. She didn't blush or act shy like a normal girl would when a man like me caught her looking. Instead, her smile died instantly. Her face went stone-cold, and her green eyes sharpened into blades.

I let my gaze turn dark, letting her see exactly how much I hated her presence in my home.

She glared back at me with a look so full of pure, unfiltered spite that it actually surprised me.

Finally, she was the one to break it. She didn't look down, she looked away, turning her back on me. She went back to talking to her mother as if I didn't even exist.

That little gold digger thought she won that little moment.

“Raphael,” Vincenzo’s voice came from beside me, “Take a walk. You’re scaring the bridesmaids.”

∩∩

The liquor was hitting. The expensive bourbon was starting to burn away the control, turning the annoyance in my gut into something sharper and more fun.

I scanned the room, looking for the only person in this gold-plated cage who actually mattered to me. I found her on the floor, tucked away in the arms of that stone-faced beast she called a husband, Rino fucking Lombardi. Alessia. She was my aunt, my mother figure, and the only reason I hadn’t completely lost my mind yet. She was the only softness I was allowed to have, and seeing her with him always made my teeth ache.

Without a word, I caught Dante’s eye and tilted my head toward the floor. Silvio was already moving. We walked over like a hit squad, cutting through the sea of tuxedos until we reached them.

“Alright, Lombardi, hand her over,” I said, cutting through the crowd. I slid into the space between Rino and Alessia, giving him a smirk that I knew made his blood pressure spike, “You’ve had her all night. You’re hogging the goods.”

Rino’s jaw tightened. He looked like he wanted to reach for the piece under his arm, but before he could say a word, Dante and Silvio materialized on my other side. We flanked her, so he couldn’t get to her.

“She’s sitting down,” Rino warned, “She’s tired.”

“She looks bored to tears, Rino,” Silvio laughed as he grabbed Alessia’s hand and spun her away from Rino with a grin, “She needs some actual fun. Real Capone fun.”

“Hey!” Alessia gasped.

She was laughing as Silvio spun her right into Dante’s chest.

“Don’t worry, Alessia baby,” Dante said as he dipped her dangerously low, his hand safely on her waist. I

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watched Rino’s hand twitch. The man was one second away from a heart attack or a homicide, “We’ve got you. We’re going to show these old people how to actually move.”

Then we were all around her, Dante was twirling her like she was made of light, and Silvio was doing

some ridiculous, fast footwork.

“You guys are going to get yourselves killed!” she laughed. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright.

“If he kills us, we die happy,” I joked, locking eyes with Rino.

He stood on the edge of the floor, arms crossed over his chest.

Just when we were starting to have fun at this godforsaken wedding, the old man clicked his glass. The room went dead silent. He didn’t look at his new wife. He looked at us... the six sons he’d spent a lifetime failing.

“I know I haven’t been a man worth celebrating for a long time,” Dad started, “I’ve made choices that left scars on this family. Scars on your mother. Scars on you.”

I felt my jaw lock. Adriano leaned back, a mocking smirk on his lips. Dante looked like he was ready to pull his gun and end the speech right there.

“But tonight isn’t just about me finding a new life,” Salvatore continued, his gaze moving across each of us, “It’s about recognizing the men you’ve become despite me. You six... you are the only good thing Isabella and I ever made. You’re fierce, you’re loyal, and you’re better than I ever was at your age.”

He took a jagged breath, and for a split second, I felt that same sharp coldness in my own chest. It was the hole our mother left behind. For one heartbeat, seeing him look that broken reminded me that under the expensive suits and the Capone name, we were all just haunting the same empty house.

“I don’t expect you to clap. I don’t even expect you to forgive me tonight. But I want to toast to my sons. To the legacy of your mother that lives in your eyes. I’m proud to be your father, even if you’re ashamed to be my sons.”

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He raised the glass high

To the Capone men,” he said, “I am a man with many sins, but you sox are my only truth. I love you more than anything in this world.”

Then, Vincenzo reached for his glass. He looked at Adriano, then the rest of us, a silent order in his eyes. Slowly, one by one, we followed. We didn't say a word. We didn't smile. We just lifted our glasses an inch, a cold, hard acknowledgment of the blood we shared.

Then the slow music started playing. Vincenzo took Claire to the floor, and Adriano grabbed Maddie. Dad led Hazel to her seat because she looked like she was about to collapse from exhaustion, and then he turned and asked Gianna for a dance.

Dante disappeared into the crowd with his date, leaving Luca, Silvio, and me at the table. We were fine just sitting there until Adriano's phone buzzed. He checked the screen, his face turning serious, and he walked off to take the call.

Before I could even blink, Madeleine was standing in front of me. She didn't ask, she just grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the floor. I didn't have a choice. I followed her into the middle of the crowd, I couldn't help but smile as we started to move. She was such a tiny little thing, even with those high heels on. It was honestly kind of adorable how small she looked next to me.

The music slowed down, getting deeper and the floor was crowded, and the lights were dim. It was time for the switch. It was a tradition at these big family parties, you swap partners and keep the circle

moving.

I let go of Maddie and stepped toward Claire. She was glowing, her belly big with my brother's kid. I reached out and took her hand gently, sliding my other arm around her back to support her.

“Careful there, big guy,” Claire teased, leaning her weight into me as we moved slowly, “Don’t step on my feet. I can’t see them anymore.”

7 got you, Clairie. You’re safe with me,” I held her with a kind of soft respect I didn’t show anyone else in the world.

Then it was time to switch again.

I softly spun Claire and she left my space, someone else was pushed toward me. She stumbled slightly, her heels catching on the floor. I reached out and caught her by the waist to stop her from falling. My hands landed on the silk of that pink dress, and a jolt of heat went straight up my arms.

It was Gianna.

My step sister.

She crashed into my chest, her small hands flying up to hit my shoulders to steady herself. Her eyes widened, the green in them flashing like a warning light. She looked up at me, breathless and trapped, her face just inches from mine.

I didn't let go. I pulled her in closer, my grip on her waist tightening until there was no space left between us. I could feel her heart thudding against my ribs like a caught bird.

She tried to lean back, just a little, her body pushing against mine like she needed space.

I didn't give it to her. My hands stayed firm on her waist, holding her right where she was as the music dragged us through another slow step.

Her fingers dug harder into my jacket, wrinkling the expensive fabric without caring. Her jaw was tight, lips parted slightly like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the air.

The movement of the dance made her brush against me again.

And again.

The silk under my palms was warm from her skin, the curve of her waist fitting perfectly between my hands. I lowered my head a little, my gaze dragging slowly across her face.

Up close, she was even more of a problem.

Her green eyes were too sharp, her mouth set in that stubborn little line like she was ready to argue with the world if it looked at her wrong. The soft pink dress made her look harmless, but there was nothing harmless about the way she held my gaze.

Somewhere in the back of my mind that same thought kept clawing forward.

I had seen this girl before.

Somewhere darker than a wedding dance floor.

Somewhere that made the tension between us feel a lot less innocent.

And the way her body stayed rigid in my arms told me she knew exactly what I was trying to remember.

“Have we met before?” I asked.

Her head jerked up so fast I felt the movement through my hands where they were still resting on her waist. Her eyes snapped to mine, wide for half a second.

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Then the color drained out of her face like someone had flipped a switch.

There it was.

That flash of panic.

Did she just give herself away?

“N-no,” she said quickly. “I... I don’t think so.”

The stutter slipped out before she could stop it. Her fingers tightened on the front of my suit jacket, wrinkling the expensive fabric like she needed something solid to hold onto.

That was a lie.

I tilted my head slightly, watching her the same way I watched a man during an interrogation.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

The music moved around us, forcing our bodies to stay close as the dancers shifted in a lazy circle. She had no choice but to follow my lead.

She swallowed hard. I saw the movement in her throat. Then she nodded quickly, “Positive.”

I hummed softly under my breath, sliding one hand a little higher along her waist to guide her into the next step of the dance. Her back went stiff immediately.

“I just feel like I’ve seen you somewhere,” I said slowly, “I just... can’t place it.”

She shrugged, but the motion looked forced, like her shoulders had turned into stone, “You probably saw someone else,” she said quickly, “Not me.”

The way she said it was defensive. My hand tightened slightly on her waist when she tried to lean away, not enough to hurt her, but just enough to remind her she wasn’t going anywhere.

Vincenzo's voice echoed in the back of my head. He never said I couldn't make her talk.

I leaned down a little, lowering my voice so only she could hear me. The scent of her perfume drifted up.

"You're nervous," I said quietly.

Her eyes flashed with irritation, but the nerves were still there, sitting just under the surface.

"I'm not nervous."

"You're stuttering."

"I am not," she stopped herself, pressing her lips together.

That made the corner of my mouth twitch.

The crowd around us kept moving, bodies brushing past ours, the music slow and heavy in the air. But right now it felt like the entire room had faded away.

There was just her and the way she kept trying to lie straight to my face. I leaned a little closer, my voice dropping lower, “If you’re going to lie,” I murmured, “you should at least make it convincing.”

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Her back straightened immediately. For a moment I thought she might actually push me away and storm off the dance floor. The fire in her eyes burned bright enough for it. Instead she lifted her chin slightly and looked right back at me.

“I’m not lying,” she said carefully, “You’re just mistaken.”

Maybe.

Maybe not.

I studied her again, letting my gaze move slowly over her face like I was trying to memorize every detail. The memory was right there, just out of reach.

A place.

A moment.

A glimpse of that same face somewhere it shouldn't have been.

Finally I exhaled slowly and straightened up again. My hand stayed on her waist, holding her in place as the music carried us through another slow turn.

"Maybe," I murmured, my voice low enough that only she could hear it, the words brushing against her ear, "But if you're lying to me..." I let the sentence hang there for a second, my gaze dropping slowly to her mouth before lifting back to those sharp green eyes, "I will find out, step-sister."

My hands lingered on her waist a moment longer than they needed to, the heat of her body still burning through the thin silk under my palms. Then, slowly, I loosened my grip and let her slip away with the moving circle of

dancers.

But I didn't step back.

I just stood there, watching her as the next person moved between us.

A slow smile crept across my face, dark and patient.

Because the truth was a lot like prey.

You didn't chase it blindly. You tracked it. You watched it. You waited for it to slip.

And hunting had always been my favorite thing.

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Gianna

L&T

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I paced back and forth across the rug in my new room. I was already dressed for my classes, a pair of tight blue jeans, a soft white crop top but I couldn't bring myself to open the door.

My stomach felt like it was full of angry snakes. Every time I thought about going downstairs to that long, marble breakfast table, I felt a wave of cold sickness wash over me.

He knows.

I stopped in front of the mirror and stared at my face. I looked pale. My eyes were wide and filled with fear. I kept seeing Raphael's face in my head. I saw the way he looked at me on the dance floor.

I closed my eyes, and the memory hit me so hard I had to grab the edge of my dresser. I saw the club. I saw the bright, hot lights and the smell of perfume. I saw myself on that stage, wearing almost nothing, just tiny scraps of black lace that left nothing to the imagination. I remembered the way I had danced for him, moving my body for the money he held out.

He hadn't just seen me. He had paid for me. He had touched me. He had watched me in the skimpiest lingerie ever made, and now he was my stepbrother. He lived in the same house. He ate at the same table.

I leaned over and took a deep breath, trying not to throw up right there on the expensive rug. The thought of him telling my mom made my head spin. He could destroy our lives with one sentence. He could tell everyone that the good girl who studied hard was actually the girl who took off her clothes for strangers in a dark room.

My mom would never trust me again.

Maybe I can just jump out the window. Maybe I can run to the bus station and never come back.

Just as I was about to grab my bag and try to sneak out the back way, a soft knock hit my door. I jumped so hard I nearly hit the ceiling.

“Gianna? Are you awake?”

The door creaked open, and Madeleine stepped inside. She looked beautiful and bright, her hair perfectly done, wearing a soft dress that made her look like a dream.

“Oh, you’re all ready for school! You look great,” she said, her voice bright. She walked over and touched my arm, and I had to fight the urge to flinch. “Come on downstairs. Everyone is waiting for breakfast. Salvatore wants the whole family together this morning.”

My throat felt like it was full of sand, “I... I’m not really hungry, Maddie. I think I’ll just go to class early.”

“Nonsense,” she laughed, gently pulling on my hand. “It’s a big morning. Your mom is already down there, she looks so good. You need a good meal before you head to the university. Then we’ll leave together.”

I let her lead me toward the door. Every step down the hallway felt like a step toward my own execution.

I could hear the clinking of silverware and the low rumble of men's voices coming from the dining room. I knew Raphael would be there. I knew he would be watching me, waiting for the perfect moment to tear my world apart.

I felt like I had "STRIPPER" written in big, ugly letters across my face.

I took one last deep breath, trying to settle the sickness in my stomach, and followed Madeleine down the stairs.

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My mum will kill me.

Madeleine guided me to the long table, and I slid into the same spot I had sat in before. I was squeezed right between Maddie and Claire. It felt like being trapped between two soft pillows.

Claire looked up and gave me a warm smile. Without a word, she picked up a heavy silver spoon and started filling a plate for me. She piled on eggs and fruit, treating me like I was a guest of honor.

"Eat up, Gianna," Claire whispered, pushing the plate toward me.

I tried to smile back, but I didn't look up. I kept my eyes locked on the eggs, watching the steam rise. But I didn't need to look up to know who was sitting directly across from me.

I could feel him.

I finally risked a tiny glance, just a peek through my hair.

Raphael was sitting right there. He was wearing a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up just enough to show his expensive watch. His hair was neat, and perfectly styled.

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He wasn't eating. He was leaning back in his chair, a cup of black coffee held loosely in one hand. He was just watching me. He just stared at me with those dark, knowing eyes, like he was reading every panicked thought running through my brain.

I picked up a fork with a shaking hand. I tried to take a bite of the eggs Claire had given me, but they tasted like cardboard. Every time I chewed, I could feel his gaze on my neck, on my face, on my hands.

“Is the food okay, Gianna?” my mother asked from the other end of the table.

I jumped, the fork clattering against the china plate. I looked at her, my face burning.
“Yes, Mom. It’s... it’s great.”

I kept my head down, focusing on a piece of toast like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

“So, Gianna,” Salvatore’s voice cut through every conversation on the table. I froze, my fork halfway to my/ mouth, “Hazel tells me you’re quite the brain.”

Before I could even swallow, my mother beamed. She sat up straighter, her eyes sparkling with a kind of pride that made my chest ache. She loved me so much, and she had no idea that her genius daughter was a heartbeat away from a total breakdown.

“Oh, she’s doing amazing things,” Mom said, as she started counting on her fingers, “She’s specializing in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning.”

Salvatore tilted his head, looking genuinely curious, “Like the robots that are going to take over the world?”

My mom laughed, waving her hand. “Not quite! She builds models that learn. She showed me a project once where she taught a computer how to recognize different types of cells. She’s had a 4.0 GPA since she started. She’s the top of her class.”

I felt my face get hotter and hotter. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me.

“That is impressive,” Salvatore mused, “What comes next?”

I swallowed hard and finally looked up, “I have one more year. But right now... I’m really focused on finding a senior internship. I need a real-world placement to graduate. I need to work with big data sets.”

I poked at my eggs, trying to sound like a normal, bored student.

“I’ve been looking at a few tech firms downtown. I need somewhere that does high-level coding, maybe some predictive modeling. It’s hard to find a spot that actually lets you touch the core systems, though.”

“She stays up until three in the morning sometimes,” Mom added, “She’s so dedicated. She’s worked so hard to get here, all on her own.”

Salvatore let out a loud laugh that made the silver on the table shake. He slapped his hand down and pointed a finger at Raphael.

“You’re looking for an internship?” Salvatore asked, “Gianna, you’re sitting right across from the answer. My son, Raphael runs his own tech empire. He has offices downtown that handle more data than most banks. He can hire you today.”

My stomach dropped. It felt like the floor had opened up beneath my chair. I shook my head fast, my hands gripping the edge of the table until my knuckles turned white.

“No,” I said, my voice coming out a little too loud. “No, thank you. I... I want to find something on my own merit. I

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don’t want a job just because of who I live with. I want to earn it.’

That was only half the truth. The other half was screaming in my head. If I worked for him, he would see everything. He would see how I struggled to read long emails because the letters jumped around the page. He would see how my handwriting looked like a mess because of my dysgraphia. My dyslexia was my secret wall, and if I worked for a man like Raphael, he would tear that wall down in a day.

He would think I was stupid, or worse, he'd find another way to break me.

"I can't just have things handed to me," I added, "It wouldn't be right."

"Oh, honey, don't be silly," Claire said, reaching over to squeeze my hand, "Working for a Capone isn't a handout. If anything, it's harder. Raphael is a beast when it comes to work. He won't give you a pass just because we have dinner together."

"She's right," Adriano chimed in, leaning back with a smirk, "If you can survive a week in one of his offices, you can survive anywhere. It's not a gift, Gianna. It's a test."

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

“Exactly,” Maddie added, smiling at me. “You said you wanted real-world experience. You won’t find anything more ‘real’ than the systems Raphael builds. It’s the best place for you to prove how smart you really are.”

Silvio nodded, “Go for it. Show him you’re better than the guys he already has.”

I looked around the table. They were all ganging up on me, but they thought they were being helpful/They thought they were giving me a golden ticket.

I looked at Raphael. He hadn’t said a word. He was just sitting there. He looked like he wanted this even less than I did. He didn’t want the “stripper” in his shiny glass office, messing up his perfect systems.

“I don’t need a head start,” I said, “I want to apply like everyone else. I want a fair fight.”

“Well, Raphael?” Salvatore asked, like he was done listening to my excuses, “What do you say? Give the gir/her fair fight. Put her through the ringer. If she’s as smart as she says, she’ll be an asset. If not, you fire her. Simple.”

Raphael took a slow, deep breath. He set his coffee cup down and adjusted his cuffs. He looked at his father for a long second, then his dark eyes slid over to me.

“Fine,” Raphael said. He looked at me with so much coldness I felt it in my bones, “If you’re so set on merit, then show up at my main office downtown on Monday morning. Eight o’clock sharp.”

He leaned in just a little, his eyes locking onto mine.

“But don’t expect me to be nice,” he warned, “You’ll go through the technical interview just like a stranger off the street. I don’t hire people who can’t handle the pressure, and I definitely don’t hire people I can’t trust. If you fail, you’re gone. And you’ll never mention my name to another employer again.”

I looked straight at Raphael, and for a second, I forgot to be afraid. All I felt was a hot, sharp need to stay as far away from him as possible.

“No,” I said, “I’m not interested.”

Raphael raised an eyebrow, his dark eyes tracking the way my chest was heaving.

“Excuse me?” Salvatore asked.

“I’ve spent three years working my way through this,” I said, looking from Salvatore back to Raphael, “I didn’t do that just to become a family hire. I don’t want to be the girl who got a job because her mom married the boss. I want to build something that belongs to me.”

“Gianna...” Salvatore sighed.

I turned my gaze back to Raphael, my heart hammering, “And besides, I don’t think your son even wants me there.

Raphael leaned back, a small, mean smile playing on his lips. “I don’t. I don’t hire people based on who they’re related to.”

I nodded, “Exactly. So it’s settled. I’ll find my own way.”

My mom turned to look at me, her voice softening. “Gianna, honey, just give it a chance. You don’t have to take the job if you hate it. But think about what you could learn from a company like his. Think about the doors it would open for you later.”

She looked back at Salvatore, then at Raphael, her face pleading.

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“Please, just let her try. Raphael, if you could just give her one interview. Let her show you what she can actually do. If she isn’t the best person for the spot, then don’t hire her.”

I looked at my mom, and my heart broke into a million pieces. Why was she so stuck on the idea of buying a future for me? It felt like she was trying to hand me a life I hadn’t earned, instead of letting me stand on my own two feet.

“Mom, I really don’t think-”

“One interview,” Salvatore interrupted, as he looked at Raphael, “On Monday. You put her through the same test as everyone else. If she fails, she fails. But you will give her the seat at the table.”

Raphael’s eyes stayed locked on mine. He looked like he was watching a bug he was about to squash.

He stood up, towering over the table, “Come ready to work on Monday. I won’t be easy on you just because my father is watching. If you can’t keep up, I’ll fire you before lunch.”

I stared back at him, my jaw tight. I was terrified of what he would find out, but I couldn’t let him see me blink, I’ll see you Monday, Raphael.”

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy!

XOXOI

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Gianna

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I stood in front of the full-length mirror, my hands shaking so much I had to tuck them under my arms. I was dressed in a white button-down shirt and black slacks.

I spent ten minutes pulling my hair back, brushing it until every stray strand was flattened into a sleek, tight bun at the nape of my neck. I wanted to look sharp. I wanted to look like the kind of girl who never made a mistake, someone who saw the world in perfect, straight lines.

But my world wasn't straight lines. It was a jumble.

I looked down at the thick leather folder on my bed. Inside were my documents, my official transcripts and my resume. Every time I looked at the letters on the page, they started to dance. "Data" looked like "Date." "Linear" looked like "Learner."

I thought about my mom. I thought about the way she bragged at breakfast, her eyes shining with pride. Top of her class. A genius. A 4.0 student. Every word she had said felt like a heavy stone being added to my pockets. I had lied to her for years. I wasn't a genius. I was just someone who worked ten times harder than everyone else because my brain didn't work the right way. I spent my nights staring at screens until my eyes bled, using every trick and software and hack I could find to hide my dyslexia and dysgraphia.

I wasn't brilliant, I was just a really good actress.

And now, I was going to perform for the scariest audience in the world.

Raphael.

The thought made my stomach do a violent, sick flip. I grabbed the folder, my fingers digging into the leather. I could almost hear his voice already, mocking me, calling me out in front of everyone.

I took a deep breath, trying to push the sick feeling down. I checked my reflection one last time.

"Fake it until you make it," I whispered to the empty room.

I picked up my backpack, and walked toward the door, my heart hammering against my ribs. I was walking into a war, and the only weapon I had was a pile of lies and a bun so tight it was giving me a headache.

The elevator ride up to the top floor felt like being in a rising coffin. My stomach stayed on the ground floor while the rest of me climbed higher and higher. When the doors finally slid open with a soft ding, I was met with a wall of glass and steel.

The lobby of Orion Vector Technologies was huge. It didn't look like a normal office. It was all white marble and black metal, looking more like a high-tech spaceship. Right in the center was a massive digital screen glowing with the day's schedule and scrolling lines of data.

I stopped in front of it, clutching my folder to my chest. I looked up, trying to find my name among the lists of government meetings and security checks.

And then it happened.

The bright white light of the screen hit my eyes, and the black letters started to break apart. My name didn't stay

still. The 'G' slid over the 'i', and the 'n's started to flip upside down until they looked like 'u's. It looked like a jumble of sticks and circles. I blinked hard, my heart starting to race. Come on, focus, I told myself. You know your

own name.

But the more I stared, the worse it got. I couldn't tell if they had spelled it right. To anyone else, it was just a list. To me, it was a moving puzzle I couldn't solve.

"Can I help you, miss?"

I jumped, turning to see a receptionist behind a long desk. She looked perfect, not a hair out of place.

“I... I’m here for the eight o’clock,” I said, my voice sounding tight.

She checked her computer, “Ms. Toricelli? Mr. Capone is waiting for you in the main room. Through those doors and to the left.”

I nodded and walked toward the heavy glass doors. My heels clicked loudly on the floor. I pushed the doors open and stepped into a room that was almost entirely windows.

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