

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 3

Raphael

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Gold-digging whores.

I didn't even have to look at them to know that's exactly what they were. The smell of desperation always clung to women like them, no matter how much expensive perfume they sprayed on their wrists to hide it.

Hazel Kinsley. She was the widow of some pathetic senator who had managed to die and leave her with a mountain of debt and a name that wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. So, naturally, she did what people like her do best. She found a shark. She latched onto my father like a leech, hoping his shadow would be enough to hide her from the world.

My father, the great Don Salvatore Capone, was a joke. He couldn't even figure out how to be a father to his own blood, yet here he was, tripping over his own feet to play hero for a woman who probably didn't even know his favorite food. He was so eager to take care of her and her baggage. It was embarrassing.

And the worst part about all this was... Hazel was sitting in my mother's chair.

That chair was sacred. Seeing this stranger—this parasite—sitting there felt like watching someone spit on a grave.

Right next to her sat the older one. Genevieve, or whatever forgettable name she had. She was trying to look small, trying to blend into the furniture, but I could see the way her eyes darted around, probably counting the silverware and figuring out how much she could hock it for.

And then there was the ten-year-old, Juliet. She was bouncing in her seat, looking at the chandelier like it was made of diamonds.

I didn't want them here. I didn't want their noise, their cheap problems, or their fake smiles. This was my home and my father had just opened the gates for a bunch of nobodies.

Every time Hazel laughed, I felt a pulse of pure, dignified hatred in my neck. She looked far too comfortable. Her hands were small and soft, the hands of someone who had never worked a day in her life, someone who had spent her husband's money until the well ran dry.

Now she was here to drink ours.

I leaned back, taking a slow drag of my cigarette, letting the smoke cloud the space between us. I wanted her to feel unwelcome. I wanted her to feel like an intruder, because that's exactly what she was.

"So, Gianna," Claire said. As the Donna and my sister-in-law, she was basically the queen of our home, and she sounded way too friendly for a table full of people who looked like they wanted to commit a felony, "You're in college, right? What are you actually studying?"

I expected her to say something useless. Art history. Philosophy. Something that required zero brain cells.

"Tell them, honey. It's very advanced," her mother added.

Gianna, her name was Gianna...

"I'm studying Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning," she said, "Mostly deep neural networks."

I didn't move, but my head tilted just a fraction of a millimeter.

My brain did a quick scan. AI and ML? Deep neural networks? That was the language I used to build the back-end systems that moved our money across the globe.

I finally shifted my gaze, letting it settle on her for the first time. Long, light brown hair. Green eyes that seemed to be fighting to stay calm.

My memory is a filing cabinet of faces, names, and patterns, I don't forget things.

And looking at her, a warning light flickered in the back of my mind.

She looked familiar. It was vague, but I'd seen those eyes before.

Green eyes were a rare find. My brain doesn't make mistakes, and it was telling me right now that this wasn't the first time our paths had crossed.

I didn't know where I had seen her, but the more I stared, the more my skin prickled. I leaned back, my eyes narrowing behind my glasses. I'd figure it out.

"That is incredible," Maddie said. My other sister-in-law's face lit up with that genuine, annoying warmth she always had, "That's complicated stuff. We actually have a genius in the family who works with that kind of tech all the time. Raphael, you have to talk to Gianna!"

I felt the trap snap shut around me. What the fuck, Mads? Adriano was looking at me from across the table, a smug look on his face. He knew I hated being forced to interact with the help, and that's all these women were to me.

I took one last pull of my cigarette and crushed it out in the crystal ashtray.

"It's interesting work," I finally muttered as I adjusted my glasses, "You'll need a good server cluster..." I just said.

Most students just play with toy datasets. They don't have the compute power for anything real.

I expected her to look away, to be intimidated by the coldness in my tone. Most people were.

Instead, she leaned forward, "Oh! Are you... building models?" she asked, "For what kind of application?"

I felt a strange, sharp prickle at the base of my skull. I didn't answer her. I couldn't. Because if I told her what I used my models for, I'd have to kill her before the dessert was served.

"Papà Salvatore, do I get my own room?" the little one, Julia, chirped.

Of course. There it was. The real reason these parasites had crawled out of the woodwork and into our dining room.

They weren't looking for a family, they were looking for real estate. They were already measuring the bedrooms, picking out which corners of our legacy they could claim for themselves.

The transparency of it was disgusting

Adriano choked on his wine, and the dinner turned into the train wreck I knew it was always going to be.

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I tossed my glasses onto the dresser. I didn't actually need the prescription, my vision was perfect but when you spend eighteen hours a day dissecting code and staring at glowing monitors, blue-light protection becomes a necessity, not a choice.

I valued my efficiency too much to let my eyes fail me.

During the day, I had a legit tech firm to run, but at night? At night, I ran the Chicago Outfit. I did it all from behind a screen, digitally controlling everything. It took hours of staring at the glass, moving numbers, and watching data streams.

My job was simple: keep us getting richer and keep ruining the lives of anyone who got in our way.

I could drain a bank account before the owner even finished typing their password. If I wanted to, I could erase a person's entire existence, social security, credit history, birth certificate with a few clicks.

And right now, my only job was to figure out which one of these parasitic women was trying to bleed my family dry. We don't do "new beginnings" in this house, and we definitely don't do "happy families." We do assets and liabilities.

And these women looked like the kind of liabilities that needed to be liquidated.

I started with the most obvious target. The one leading this little gold-digging expedition.

The mother.

Hazel Kinsley.

I wanted to see the exact moment she decided my father was her winning lottery ticket.

By the time I was done with her, she wouldn't just be out of our house, she'd be wishing she'd never even heard the name Capone.

The click of the lock was the only warning I got.

"Raphael."

My father's voice cut through the silence in my room. I didn't even have to look to know he'd stopped dead in his tracks the second his eyes hit the surveillance photos on my laptop of his girlfriend. I closed my eyes for a split second, a cold, sharp sigh escaping my lips as I felt my patience thinning.

I turned my head slowly, expecting to see him standing there alone, probably looking for another round of excuses for his pathetic dinner choices or his sudden need for a soulmate.

Instead, I found him flanked by Vincenzo.

My oldest brother. The Don.

Vincenzo stood there with his arms crossed. He was the one man in this world whose orders were absolute, the final authority I couldn't ignore, no matter how much I wanted to.

Seeing them together made the situation clear, whatever my father was about to ask. He brought the Don along to make sure I understood whatever this was, it wasn't a favor or a request. It was a mandate. An order.

"Yeah?" I asked, my voice flat and monotone, matching the cold glow of the screen. I didn't even bother to minimize the windows.

My father stepped further into the room, his eyes landing on the data-heavy screens and the high-res photos of Hazel Kinsley I had pinned to the desktop.

He didn't look angry, he looked like he'd expected exactly this.

He gestured toward the screen with a flicking motion of his hand, "That," he said, his voice dropping into that low, serious tone he used when business was on the line, "That is exactly why I'm here, Raphael. I knew you'd already be digging. I knew you'd be trying to find a reason to tear this apart before it started."

I kept my gaze locked on Vincenzo, "What, I'm not even allowed to run a basic background check anymore? I already sat through the dinner. I endured the disrespect to my mother's table and listened to your little sob story. Is there something else you need from my schedule, or can I get back to actual work?"

“Raphael,” my father repeated, “I saw that look in your eyes at dinner. I know how your mind works. You see a new variable, and you want to solve it. You want to dig.”

My head snapped towards him, a muscle in my jaw twitching.

He stepped closer, “I’m telling you right now, let it go. Hazel and her girls are not a project. They aren’t a threat to be analyzed. I want you to respect their privacy. That means no deep dives, no hacking their bank statements, and absolutely no background checks. You stay out of their digital lives.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You’re asking me to be blind, Dad? In this house?”

“It’s not a request,” my father snapped, his jaw tightening.

Vincenzo finally moved. He took a single step forward, and the temperature seemed to drop. He didn’t have to raise his voice, the authority he carried was enough to crush the lungs of a lesser man.

“It’s my order as well, Raphael,” Vincenzo said, “You will stand down on this. If I find out you’ve been sniffing around their history or running their names through your servers, I’ll take it as a direct middle finger to me. They’re under my protection now. Am I making myself clear?”

I felt the burn of frustration in my chest. My instincts were screaming at me that something was wrong, that those rare green eyes were a puzzle I needed to solve but I was a Capone. I understood the chain of command.

“Crystal,” I bit out.

“Good,” Vincenzo said, giving me a single, stiff nod. “Go on a hunt. Do your thing. Go burn off that energy on some real enemies. Just leave those women out of it.”

The second the words left his mouth, the rage boiled over. I didn’t even think, I just grabbed my laptop and hurled it across the room with everything I had. It hit the hardwood floor, snapping into two pieces, the screen flickering one last time before going dark.

Vincenzo gave his head a shake before leaving. But my dad stopped. He walked over, and placed a hand on my shoulder. He gave it one squeeze before turning and leaving me alone.

I stood up and shoved my chair back, the screech of metal against the floor echoing my mood. I walked over to the closet and ripped off the charcoal suit, tossing the expensive fabric onto the floor like it was trash, and replaced it with a black muscle-fit shirt that clung to my chest and shoulders. Next came the heavy, black tactical trousers, military grade, built for movement and utility.

I slid my customized handguns into their holsters and tucked my knives into their hidden sheaths. Every blade was sharp enough to split a hair, every weapon was a part of me. I rolled my shoulders and cracked my neck.

My phone vibrated. A single text glowed on the screen: Is the hunt on for tonight?

Yeah, I typed back.

I slid the phone into my pocket. I needed the hunt. I needed the clarity of the chase to wash away the irritation of the dinner and the weight of Vincenzo's order felt like a collar around my neck, and I hated the way it pulled.

I headed down to the garage. The heavy steel doors slid open, and rows of supercars sat under the glow of LED strips. Ferraris, Lamborghinis, custom-built monsters that could outrun a helicopter.

My eyes landed on my favorite, the Ducati Panigale V4. It was a blacked-out demon of a bike. I grabbed my helmet, pulled it over my head, and the world went quiet, just the sound of my own breathing.

I kicked the engine over, and the bike roared to life, a deep, aggressive growl that vibrated through the floor and up my spine. I hit the throttle, and the garage door couldn't open fast enough. I blurred out into the night.

The party was at The Void. That was the name of our massive, black-stone mansion tucked so deep into the woods that the law couldn't find it even if they had a map.

It was a place where things disappeared

I pulled up in the driveway, the bass from the music was so loud I could feel it in my teeth. The house was glowing, lights spilling out onto the lawn where hundreds of people were already losing their minds. This was a typical mob party, expensive booze, dangerous men, and women looking for a way in.

The second I cut the engine and pulled off my helmet, everything changed.

“Yo, RC!” someone shouted over the music.

“Holy shit, Raphael is here!”

I felt the eyes on me immediately. People cleared a path as I walked toward the entrance. I was aggravated. I was pissed. I wanted to be invisible, but when your last name is Capone, you’re a sun that everyone wants to burn in.

“Raphael!”

A group of girls drifted toward me. One of them, a blonde with lips plumped to perfection, leaned into my space, her hand brushing my bicep.

“Raphael, baby, you look like you want to kill someone,” she purred, her eyes scanning my tactical gear.

I didn’t push her away. I didn’t even look at her. I wasn’t mad at them, they were just playing the game they were born to play. I was mad at the glitch in my head. I was mad that I was being told to play nice with parasites.

“Move,” I ordered.

She didn’t look offended, she looked thrilled. That was the problem with people like this. They loved the edge of the knife until it actually started to cut.

I needed to drown out the sound of my father’s voice. I needed to forget the Don’s orders. But most of all, I needed to figure out why I felt like the hunt tonight wasn’t going to be enough to fix my head.

I pulled out my phone. My thumb hovered over the screen for a second before I dialed.

“Enzo,” I said, my voice cutting through the bass of the party.

“Yes, boss?” Enzo answered immediately.

“You remember the girl from the Gold Room two nights ago?” I asked.

I didn’t need to describe her, he knew which one had my attention.

“The dancer? Yeah, I remember.”

I didn’t care what it cost. I didn’t care who she was. I just needed to clear my head, and she was the only thing I’d seen in days that made my blood run hot for the right reasons.

“Find her,” I ordered, “Get her to the Void. Now.”

Ruby Walker