My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 301

Instead, Raphael just stared at me.

His eyes softened, as he reached out, his long fingers gently brushing a stray lock of dark hair away from my forehead. He tucked it behind my ear.

“I could spend a thousand mornings just like this,” he whispered.

I went completely rigid beneath him. The breath died in my throat, my eyes widening as I stared up into his face.

The soft tone of his voice stunned me. In an instant, a sudden, tight ache bloomed right behind my ribs, a warmth that made it hard to draw air into my lungs.

My heart hammered, not from the sex or the exhaustion, but from a sudden, terrifying realization that I couldn’t even put into words.

I wanted to deny it. I wanted to turn away, to laugh it off, but as I looked into his quiet, honest eyes, I knew I was completely helpless.

For the first time in my life, I had absolutely no control over where my heart was going.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight and dry under his soft gaze. “I’m... I’m going to go take a shower,” I murmured.

Without giving him a chance to answer, and without daring to look back into those deep, soft eyes, I quickly sat up. I pulled the bunched-up silk of my dress down over my hips, the cool fabric brushing against my thighs. As I slid off the bed, my legs felt weak, and I could still feel him clinging to my skin underneath my clothes.

Keeping my eyes fixed on the floor, I hurried toward the bathroom, desperate to wash away the physical proof of what we had just done... and the sudden, scary feeling blooming in my chest.

The warm steam from the shower had done nothing to wash away the frantic beat of my heart.

I tied the belt of my fluffy white bathrobe tight around my waist, taking a deep breath before I finally turned the handle and stepped back into the bedroom. I expected the space to be empty. I expected him to have slipped out back to his own wing, leaving me to gather my scattered thoughts in peace.

But he was still there.

Raphael was standing by the large window, looking out at the morning grounds. He had pulled on a pair of dark grey sweatpants that hung low on his hips, but he was still shirtless. The bright morning light poured over his broad shoulders, highlighting carved muscles of his back and the dark ink of his tattoos.

A sudden squeeze of affection tightened in my chest. He looked like he belonged here, in my space. But the moment the feeling registered, I quickly brushed it away, locking it deep in the dark corners of my mind where it couldn't hurt me.

"You're still here," I said, my voice sounding a little breathier than I wanted.

Raphael turned around slowly. His dark eyes swept over me, taking in my damp hair and the robe, before a quiet smile touched his lips.

"Everyone is awake downstairs," he said, "If I walk out of your room now, the whole house will see. I have to wait until they all head down to the dining room for breakfast."

I let out a soft sigh and nodded, walking over to my vanity, "Right. Of course."

Just as I reached for my hairbrush, a sudden, booming knock rattled the wood of my bedroom door.

Both of us froze instantly. My heart leapt into my throat, my hands locking tight around the plastic brush.

"Gianna!"

My mother's voice pierced through the door, annoyed, and completely pissed off. The harsh tone made me flinch.

"Gianna, open this door right now!" she almost yelled, "We need to talk! OPEN THIS DOOR!"

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 302

Raphael

–

The frantic pounding on the door rattled the wood, but it was nothing compared to the sudden, wild panic that erupted in the girl standing across from me.

Gianna froze like a rabbit caught in high beams. Her eyes went incredibly wide, darting from the door, to her own damp bathrobe, and then finally to me.

“Gianna! I know you’re in there!” her mother’s angry voice boomed through the wood again, “Open this door this instant!”

Gianna snapped. She bolted across the room toward me, her bare feet dragging on the rug, and grabbed my bare arms. Her hands were freezing, shaking so hard I could feel the tremors in my own bones.

“You need to hide,” she whispered, “Now. Raphael, you have to hide.”

I stood there, rooted to the spot, looking down at her. It was hard to take the threat seriously when she looked like this. Her hair was still damp, smelling faintly of sweet shampoo, and she was swallowed whole by that oversized, fluffy white bathrobe.

Her cheeks were flushed pink with panic, her chest heaving as she gasped for air. A dark, quiet amusement coiled in me. I was a grown man, and here she was, treating me like a guilty teenager caught sneaking into her bedroom.

“Gianna,” I said, my voice low and completely calm, “Relax.”

“No!” she gasped, her eyes darting around the bedroom, “You don’t understand. If she sees you here, shirtless, in my room…”

She didn’t finish the sentence. She just grabbed my wrist and tried to pull me. It was like a kitten trying to drag an anvil, but I let myself be moved anyway, just to see what she would do.

She dragged me toward the bed. “Under the bed. Can you fit under the bed?” She bent down, lifting the duvet, as she stared at the narrow gap between the wooden frame and the floor.

I let out a soft, dry chuckle, crossing my arms over my chest, “Gianna, look at me. I’m over six feet of muscle and bone. I am not squeezing my ass under a bed frame like a dusty shoe.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes flashing with a mix of anger and sheer panic, “This is not funny, Raphael! She is going to open the door herself if I don’t!”

The knocking came again, louder this time, accompanied by the jiggling of the brass doorknob, “Gianna! Open this lock! I am getting the spare key from the maid!”

That did it. Gianna’s face went completely white. She scrambled to her feet and shoved her hands against my chest, trying to push me toward the far corner of the room.

“The closet,” she whispered, “Get in the closet. Now!”

I let her push me, enjoying the firm press of her hands against my bare skin. I stepped backward into her massive walk-in closet, the scent of her perfumes instantly wrapping around us.

I leaned my shoulder against the doorframe, looking down at her with a lazy, amused smirk, “A closet, Gianna? Really? If she decides to check your wardrobe, I’m going to look very stupid standing here in my sweatpants.”

15 Bo

“I am not joking!” she whisper-yelled, as she grabbed the edge of the heavy closet door, ready to slam it in my face.

“And what if your mom comes into the closet to pick out a dress?” I countered, and stepped closer, crowding her space, enjoying her panic, “What then, Mess?”

Gianna gripped the waistband of my sweatpants, pulling me closer slightly so she could look straight into my eyes. Her breathing was fast and shallow.

“Then go through the closet into the bathroom,” she hissed, pointing a trembling finger toward the door at the back of the wardrobe that connected to her private bath, “Just... just go! Keep moving! Don’t let her see you!”

She looked so utterly terrified of the woman standing on the other side of that bedroom door. The amusement in my chest dimmed just a fraction, replaced by a darker, protective instinct. I didn’t like seeing her look this scared of anyone.

I reached out, my large hand wrapping gently around the back of her neck. I squeezed, forcing her to look up and meet my eyes. My calmness seemed to calm her as well for a split second.

“Hey,” I murmured, “I’m going. Relax. She won’t see me, take a breath, and open the door.”

She swallowed hard, nodding slowly.

I let go of her neck, stepping back into the closet. With one last panicky look at me, Gianna grabbed the handles of the closet doors and pulled them shut, plunging me into the darkness.

But I didn't let the doors latch.

As soon as her hands left the wood, I reached out and pushed the left door open just a tiny fraction. I kept my fingers on the edge, holding it still. Through the narrow, vertical gap, I had a perfect view of the bedroom, bathed in the pale morning light.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 303

1 stood silent in the darkness, my body completely still, watching her.

Gianna took a frantic, shaky breath. She quickly ran her fingers through her damp hair, trying to smooth down the wild strands, and adjusted the belt of her fluffy white bathrobe. She forced her shoulders down, trying to look calm, though I could see her hands still trembling against her thighs.

Outside, the click of the spare key turning in the lock echoed through the room.

Before the door could swing open, Gianna marched over and pulled it open herself.

"I was in the bathroom," Gianna said, her voice sounding a bit tight but loud enough to carry. She stood right in the doorway, blocking the path inside, "What's wrong? Why are you pounding on my door like this?"

Hazel stood on the other side of the threshold, and the sight of her immediately drew my eyes.

She looked angry, her face twisted in a glare, but one of her shoulders slumped lower than the other, and her left arm hung slightly loose, the hand trembling against her side. She was holding a small handbag, but her fingers were curled awkwardly around the strap, gripping it with a weak stiffness that looked painful.

When she stepped forward into the room, her left foot dragged slightly on the hardwood floor, a soft, scraping sound that made Gianna's eyes briefly dart downward.

Hazel didn't care that Gianna was trying to block her. She used her good side to push past her daughter, walking into the bedroom with uneven steps.

"Do not use that tone with me," Hazel said. She had to pause, taking a slow, shallow breath as her chest strained, " You think... you think I wouldn't notice?"

She turned around to face Gianna, her body swaying slightly before she forced her weight onto her stronger leg. She used her right hand to lift the bag, shaking it at Gianna with a weak, clumsy jerk of her wrist.

Gianna stood by the door, her back completely rigid. From my spot in the dark closet, I watched her. Her chest was rising and falling too fast, her eyes locked on her mother's weak, trembling frame.

"What is this?" Hazel asked, as she let go of the bag, throwing it straight at Gianna's feet.

The bag hit the floor, sliding open. Three small plastic bottles rolled out across the floor, their bright orange plastic catching the morning light, the tiny white pills inside rattling loudly.

Gianna's face drained of all color. She stared at the bottles, her lips parting as she took a half-step back, "What?"

"You haven't refilled your prescription in six months," Hazel said, "You haven't taken a single pill. I checked the pharmacy records, Gianna. Six months of nothing. Is your health a joke to you? Am I a joke to you?!"

Pills? I frowned, my eyes narrowing as I stared at the orange bottles on the floor. What pills? Why was Gianna on pills? I knew about her dyslexia, but there aren't any pills to fix that, not that it needs fixing anyway.

Gianna swallowed hard, and shook her head, "I don't need them anymore, Mom. I'm over it."

Hazel's eyebrows shot up, a look of pure disbelief washing over her face, "You don't need them?"

Gianna's eyes flicked toward the closet door, a split-second flash of pure panic in her gaze. I instinctively took a silent step back.

Then, Gianna looked back at her mother, her jaw tightening. "No. I'm fine. I've been fine."

"You're fine?" Hazel asked. There was no anger in her voice now, only a deep, painful worry. She stepped closer, her eyes searching Gianna's face like she was trying to read a map of her daughter's mind, "Show me, then."

Gianna tensed, taking another step back, "Show you what?"

Hazel took another slow, and reached out, her stiff, trembling fingers gently brushing against Gianna's arm, trying to coax her daughter to relax.

“Gianna, please,” Hazel whispered, “The doctor was so clear about this. He said you need them. You have to take them, sweetie. Mostly... mostly for the rest of your life. Especially after everything you had to go through.”

In the dark of the closet, I felt my entire body go rigid.

What she went through? What the fuck did that mean? My mind raced, trying to piece the puzzle together, but nothing made sense. This was medical. This was a doctor telling her she needed pills for the rest of her life just to stay stable. A cold, tense knot began to tighten in my stomach, my curiosity turning into a dark, frustrated Kunger for the truth.

Through the crack in the door, I watched Gianna’s reaction.

She flinched as if her mother had physically slapped her. She pulled her arm back, breaking the gentle contact, and tucked her hands deep into the pockets of her bathrobe.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 304

“I didn’t go through anything,” Gianna snapped.

She kept her gaze locked onto her mother’s face, but I could see the sheer panic vibrating in her tight shoulders. She was holding herself back, squeezing her lips together after she spoke. I could tell she wanted to scream, wanted to argue and fight back like she usually did, but she was keeping a tight lid on it. Her eyes flicked toward the closet for a fraction of a second, before she snapped her gaze back to Hazel.

She was trying so hard not to say too much. She knew I was standing right there in the dark, listening to every single word.

“Don’t lie to me,” Hazel said softly, her weak left arm trembled against her side, and she had to lean slightly against the edge of the vanity table to keep her balance, “I was there, Gianna. I saw what it did to you. I saw how you couldn’t even—”

“I said I’m fine, Mom!” Gianna cut her off. She took a step closer to her mother, trying to physically guide her away from the center of the room, “I don’t need the pills. I don’t want to talk about this right now. Please. Just drop it.”

A single tear escaped Hazel’s eye, sliding slowly down her pale cheek. Her lower lip began to tremble, and she didn’t even have the strength to wipe the wetness away.

What the fuck was going on?

“It’s for the stress, Gianna,” Hazel cried, “You know what happens when the stress gets too much. You need to control yourself under the pressure, or you will... you will break again. You will shatter, and I can’t... I can’t watch you go through that a second time.”

What kind of stress? What kind of breaking was her mother talking about? I wanted to step out of the dark, grab Gianna by the shoulders, and force the answers out of her. But I kept my body locked in place, my eyes glued to her.

“I am fine, Mom,” Gianna said, her voice flat, devoid of any emotion, “I’m not going to break. I don’t need the medicine. I don’t need anyone!”

“No, you aren’t fine,” Hazel sobbed, more tears spilling over her eyelashes, her slurred words becoming even harder to understand through her weeping. She took another clumsy, shuffling step forward, her weak left leg dragging heavily on the floor, “You are hiding it. You are always hiding it from me.”

Hazel reached out and grabbed the soft terry cloth of Gianna’s bathrobe sleeve.

“Show me,” Hazel begged, “Show me, Gianna! If you are fine, then show me!”

“I said no, Mom!” She took a step back, her eyes flashing with anger, “Stop doing this. I am not a child, and I am not showing you anything. Just leave me alone!”

But Hazel didn’t back down. The desperation inside her seemed to override the weakness in her muscles.

Before Gianna could react, Hazel lunged, her thin, trembling fingers reaching out to grab the lapels of Gianna’s white bathrobe. She clawed at the soft fabric, trying to yank the collar open, trying to force the bathrobe off her.

“No! Let go of me!” Gianna hissed, struggling against her mother’s grip.

They fought in the middle of the room. Gianna was stronger, but she was trying so hard not to hurt her mother’s frail body, which made her clumsy. Hazel used all her weight, pushing forward with desperate strength. She shoved Gianna backward.

Gianna lost her balance, her legs hitting the edge of the mattress, and she fell hard onto the bed.

Before Gianna could sit up, Hazel scrambled forward. With a shaky, gasping breath, she grabbed Gianna’s bare right foot, lifting it to look at the underside.

My breath caught in my throat. I leaned closer to the gap in the closet door, my eyes straining in the light. On the soft skin of the arch of Gianna’s foot, I could see thin, pale lines. Scars.

They were the fading scars of the exact same wound I had patched up myself when I found her bleeding in the woods during the hunt.

“See?!” Gianna cried as she tried to pull her leg back, her face red with embarrassment and anger, “They are old, Mom! They’re healed! There is nothing new there!”

But Hazel wasn’t listening. She gripped Gianna’s ankle tight with her stronger hand, her knuckles turning white as she tried to hold her down. In the struggle, as Gianna kicked and twisted to get away, the soft fabric of the white bathrobe parted, riding high up over her knees and pooling around her hips.

The morning light hit the pale skin of her inner thighs.

Hazel went completely still.

Janedoewritings Author

Swipe up!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 305

Raphael

15 Barhus

The morning light hit the pale skin of her inner thighs.

Hazel went completely still.

Every muscle in her mother’s face froze, the tears halting on her cheeks. Her mouth fell open in a horrified gasp

I knew what she was looking at. The bruises on the side of her thigh. Those bruises looked like they had been pinched hard, and right beside them, small, round, angry red marks, faint, circular burns.

Those weren’t marks from some accident. They were self-inflicted, I knew that, I fucking knew. It was the secret I had been waiting for her to trust me with, the truth I had patiently hoped she would one day tell me herself.

“Oh, God,” Hazel whispered, her voice barely a breath, her fingers trembling violently where she still held Gianna’s ankle, “Gianna... I knew it...”

Hazel let go of Gianna's ankle as if the skin had suddenly burned her. She stumbled back a step, her weak left leg giving out slightly so that she had to catch herself against the foot of the bed.

"I knew it," Hazel whispered again, she shook her head, tears streaming down her face, "I knew it... I knew you were doing this again. No matter how much you try to hide it from me, Gianna. No matter how much you lock yourself away... I always know."

She pressed her trembling right hand against her mouth, trying to choke back her cries.

"Why?" Hazel cried, as she reached out, her fingers curling into empty air as if she wanted to grab her daughter but was too terrified to touch her. "Why, Gianna? Why are you doing this to yourself again? What is so wrong that you have to hurt your own body like this? You don't need fixing. You're so perfect. I wish, I wish you could see how perfect you really are..."

Gianna lay on the bed, her bathrobe still parted, exposing the marks on her thighs. She didn't try to pull the fabric down anymore. She didn't try to fight. She just stared up at the ceiling, her chest rising and falling in fast, shallow gasps.

Then, slowly, the first tear slipped from the corner of her eye, tracing a wet path down her temple into her damp hair. She didn't sob. She just lay there, silently crying, her face turning pale and empty.

"Stop saying that! It's none of your business," Gianna whispered, her voice dead and flat, "Just leave. It has nothing to do with you."

"It is my business!" Hazel snapped, "It is my business because I am the only person in this entire, godforsaken world who actually gives a shit about what you do to your body! I pushed you out of my body, Gianna! I felt you breathe your first breath. I fucking care!"

Hazel gasped for air, her chest straining as her weak muscles fought to keep up with her heavy emotions.

"I have tried so hard," Hazel sobbed, the words tumbling out of her in a wet, broken rush, "I tried so hard to pull your father out of you. I tried to wash away every single thing he did, every sick thought he put into your mind. But I am losing. I am losing the battle, Gianna. He is still in there, living under your skin, and you are letting him win every single time you burn yourself. Every single time you hurt your own body, you are just letting him keep his grip on you!"

My jaw clenched so hard a sharp pain shot up the side of my face. The muscles in my neck turned to steel.

Her father?

A dark, cold curiosity clawed at my gut. What the hell did that man do to her? What kind of sick, twisted games did he play with her mind to leave her... like this?

“Daddy didn’t do anything!” Gianna screamed.

Her face flushed a deep, angry red, and her eyes flashed with panic.

“He didn’t hurt me!” she snapped, “He was trying to help me! He was just trying to make me strong!”

“Strong? Is that what you still think after everything?!” Hazel shook her head in sheer disbelief, her face twisting in pain as she stared at her daughter. Her shoulders slumped, the anger draining out of her to leave only a deep, hollow exhaustion.

“What if...” Hazel’s voice trailed off into a weak, shaky whisper.

She stared at the floor, her eyes filling with a deep, hopeless terror that seemed to age her by ten years in a single second.

“What if I am not here anymore?” she whispered, her lips trembling. “What if I am gone, Gianna? Who is going to watch you then? Who is going to take care of you? Who is going to save you from yourself when you don’t even know the difference between right and wrong anymore... between what is love and what is pain?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 306

Hazel’s voice broke completely, and she slumped against the wooden bedpost, sobbing heavily, looking so smal! and defeated.

“You will ruint yourself,” Hazel wept, “If I am not here to stop you, you will just keep going. You will keep punishing your body until there is absolutely nothing left of you. You will ruin yourself, Gianna... and there won’t be anyone left to piece you back together.”

Looking at Hazel, seeing the way her body was failing her, seeing the sheer, panicked desperation in her eyes as she talked about not being there, the truth clicked in my mind.

Hazel was dying.

She was running out of time, and she knew it. Her body was slowly shutting down from the illness, and her biggest, most terrifying fear wasn’t her own death. It was leaving her daughters behind. She was terrified that once she was gone, there would be no one left to protect Gianna.

I looked back at Gianna. She was still staring at the ceiling, her eyes wide and blank, completely unaware of the real reason her mother was crying so desperately. Gianna had no idea. She truly believed her mother was just dealing with another flare-up of spinal pain, completely missing the progression of the disease right in front of her.

I would protect her. The thought entered my mind, sudden and uninvited. The decision had already been made. I wasn't going to let her ruin herself. Even if I had to fight her own mind to do it, I was going to keep her safe.

The helplessness in Hazel's eyes suddenly hardened, turning into a fire. She wiped her wet cheeks with her sleeve.

"I can't let you do this," Hazel said, "I won't just sit here and watch you destroy yourself! What do you use, Gianna? What do you use to hurt yourself?!"

Gianna sat up slowly on the mattress, pulling the edges of her white bathrobe back over her thighs. She glared at her mother, her jaw set in a hard, stubborn line, "Nothing. I told you, I'm fine. Stop acting crazy."

"Do not lie to me!" Hazel shrieked, "Tell me what you are using right now!"

"No," Gianna snapped, "Get out."

That was the breaking point.

Hazel let out a harsh, choked cry of frustration. Ignoring the weakness in her left leg, she turned around and began to tear the bedroom apart. She pulled the drawers of the nightstand completely out of their slots, dumping notebooks, pens, and makeup onto the rug, kicking through them with her dragging foot,

"Mom, stop it!" Gianna yelled, scrambling off the bed. She tried to grab her mother's shoulders, but Hazel shoved her away.

"Where is it?!" Hazel screamed, her eyes wild as she ripped the cushions off the armchair, tossing them across the room.

Then, Hazel walked toward the vanity. She grabbed some box, flipping it upside down. Rings and necklaces spilled everywhere, until a black object clattered onto the wood.

It looked like a thick metal pen, but it had a heavy copper tip and a small digital screen on the side.

Gianna froze, her breath catching in her throat.

Hazel snatched it up, her eyes locking onto the small button on the side, "What is this? Is this it?"

“Give it back!” Gianna yelled.

But Hazel backed away, her hand shaking. To test it, she pressed the copper tip directly against the dark blue silk of a pillow lying on the bed. She held the button down.

A sharp, violent blue spark jumped from the copper tip. An electric snap echoed through the room, followed by the instant, acrid smell of burning fabric. A small, perfectly round black hole charred right through the silk pillow

It was shaped exactly like the spots on her thighs.

It was a high-voltage electronic arc device. And Gianna had been pressing that hot, snapping blue current directly into the skin of her inner thighs, burning herself over and over again.

“You are shocking yourself,” Hazel whispered, “Are you insane?! You are using electricity on your own skin?! How could you do this?!”

My mind went completely blank with shock.

Disbelief washed over me. I had imagined a blade. I had imagined a flame. But this, the cruelty of using a snapping electric current to hurt her own body made my blood run completely cold.

She was so young, so beautiful, and her mind was a dark, twisted prison that I hadn’t even begun to understand.

What the fuck? What kind of monster had put her in a place where this was how she survived?

“You are going to kill yourself!” Hazel screamed, tears streaming down her face as she shook the heavy black device at Gianna. She began to hobble toward the far side of the room, “I am taking this. There’s more, right? I know there are more of these...”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 307

* 1581)

Hazel’s eyes snapped toward the heavy wooden doors of the walk-in closet. She began to take stiff, angry steps straight toward the closet doors. Straight toward me.

As Hazel’s stiff, uneven footsteps clicked closer and closer to the closet doors, my instincts took over.

I didn’t panic. I simply moved.

I found the door at the back and pushed it open, stepping into her private bathroom. I didn’t shut the bathroom door all the way. I left it open, watching the closet through the gap.

A second later, the closet doors flew open.

Hazel hobbled inside. Gianna stood at the entrance of the closet, her face completely pale, her hands clutched tight against her chest as she watched her mother.

“Mom, please,” Gianna whispered, her voice small and broken, “There’s nothing in there. Just stop.”

“I am not stopping!” Hazel cried, “I have had enough of you doing whatever the hell you want with your life! You think I want to do this? You think I want to tear your room apart? I do this because I am your mother, you insolent child! You don’t even know what is good for you anymore, and if I don’t stop you, no one will!”

I knew how the human brain worked under pressure, and right now, my mind told me that Hazel was making a massive mistake. Ripping Gianna’s room apart, screaming at her, and calling her names was not going to fix this. It was only going to make it worse.

If you take a weapon away from a person who wants to hurt themselves, they do not suddenly get better. They just get desperate.

It was irrational.

With her stronger right hand, Hazel began to rip things off the shelves. Shoeboxes clattered to the floor, high heels scattered, and bags were tossed aside like trash.

Then, she reached the very back corner, pulling down a box from the top shelf. She dropped it. It hit the floor, the lock snapping open from the force.

The contents spilled across the floor.

I leaned closer, my eyes narrowing as I looked at the items scattered on the rug. My blood turned to absolute ice.

First, Hazel picked up a thick wooden stick. It was wrapped in dark grip-tape, the wood stained and chipped, looking like it had been used to strike hard surfaces... or soft skin, over and over again.

Next, she pulled out a small, gleaming metal blade, the kind of tool that could slice through skin with barely any pressure at all.

But the last thing made my heart stop completely.

It was a heavy black cloth, folded neatly beside a large, flexible plastic bottle with a narrow nozzle.

My mind spun as the reality of those two items slammed into me. A cloth. A water bottle. A dark, violent fury roared to life inside my chest.

Who had done this to her? Her father?

What kind of man, what kind of father, teaches his own daughter to do... this and why? I wanted to find whoever

+15 Bartus had put these ideas into her head and tear them apart piece by piece.

My eyes locked onto Gianna, who was standing frozen by the closet door. She was staring down at the pile of tools on the floor, but her eyes were completely blank. She looked so utterly empty, as if she had already detached her mind from her physical form. She was shutting down, retreating deep inside herself where her mother's screams couldn't reach her.

"Oh, God, Ginny..." Hazel sobbed.

She fell to her knees, her weak left leg folding awkwardly beneath her. She slowly lifted the thick wooden stick She held it close to her face, as she stared at the dark, brownish-red stains dried into the wood. It was blood.

Hazel clutched the stained wood to her chest, rocking back and forth on the floor as if she were holding a dying child.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" Hazel wept, "My baby... what have you done?"

Janedoewritings Author

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 308

Gianna | Age 15

The leather of the passenger seat was cold, even through my jeans. I pressed my back hard against it, trying to stop the shaking in my legs, but the tremor just traveled up to my chest.

Outside, the highway was a blur of trees and empty fields. We were somewhere in the middle. Not Chicago anymore, but not yet Philadelphia. Just the empty space in between. The neutral ground.

My hand sat on the gear shift console, my palm damp and freezing.

Then, Leone's hand slid over mine.

His fingers were warm, and rough from the gym and the streets. One by one, he slotted his fingers between mine, squeezing until there was no space left between our palms. He did not look away from the road. His jaw was/set, his dark eyes watching the asphalt ahead, but the grip he had on my hand was everything.

I looked at our joined hands. His skin was tan against my pale knuckles. I took a shaky breath, the air catching in my throat.

Seven years old. That was the last time I had seen her. I barely remembered the smell of her perfume, only the way her voice sounded when she sang me to sleep, a sound that had grown fainter and fainter in my mind with every passing year. Now I was fifteen. Eight years of lawyers in suits walking in and out of my father's study, of hearing my mother's name whispered like a curse in the hallways of our house.

She had fought for me. She had spent every dollár, used every connection, but my father's shadow was too long. His reach was too deep.

In our world, the law belonged to the man with the most guns and the deepest pockets.

My father had won.

But today, a tiny crack had opened. Once a month. Under supervision.

I turned my head to look at Leone.

He was only sixteen, but he did not look like a boy. There was a thin, fresh scrape across his cheekbone from a training session–or a fight-the day before. He had already taken the oath. He had kissed the gun, bled on the paper, and burned the picture of the saint in his hands. He belonged to the family now.

"We are ten minutes away," Leone said.

"I don't know what to say to her," I whispered. My voice sounded small, like it belonged to the seven-year-old girl who had been left behind, not the teenager sitting in this car, "What if she looks at me and doesn't see her daughter anymore? What if I look like him?"

Leone pulled our joined hands up, lifting them off the console, and brought my knuckles to his lips. He pressed a warm kiss against my skin. His dark eyes flicked over to me for just a second, intense and burning, before returning to the road.

“She will see you,” he said. His voice left no room for doubt. “And you look like yourself, Gianna. No one else.”

“I’m scared, Leone,” the truth slipped out.

“I know,” he murmured. He pulled my hand closer to his side, resting our locked fingers against his thigh, “But I am right here. I will be in the room. I will stand by the door, and I won’t take my eyes off you. If you want to leave,

+15 Bon we leave. If you want to cry, I will block her view so she doesn’t see. You don’t have to be strong. I have enough for both of us.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, staring at his profile. The hard line of his nose, the sharp angle of his chin. To the world, he was a monster in training. To me, he was the only place I could breathe.

I squeezed his hand back, using all the strength I had in my fingers.

“Don’t let go,” I whispered.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 309

Leone shifted his grip, locking his wrist against mine, securing us together, “Never.”

The car slowed down, Leone steered us into the parking lot of an old, abandoned diner. The sign on the roof was rusted, the neon letters of LUNCH hanging crookedly by a few black wires.

The white paint on the wooden walls of the building was peeling away in thick, dry flakes, showing the dark, rotting wood underneath. The windows were covered in layer of thick gray dust, making it impossible to see what was waiting inside.

My heart did a hard flip against my ribs. I stared at the front of the building.

Parked near the side entrance was a black SUV with dark tinted windows. Standing near the hood were three men. They wore long dark coats, their hands buried deep in their pockets. Even from this distance, I could see the way they stood, backs straight, heads turning slowly, eyes scanning the empty road and then our car.

The Chicago Outfit. My mother's people.

They looked like the men who stood in the hallways of my own home, but they belonged to the other side. They were the ones my father warned me about. They looked hard, cold, and ready.

Panic crawled up my throat like hot wire. I leaned forward in my seat, pressing my forehead against the cool glass of the passenger window. I strained my eyes, trying to peer through the dirty glass of the diner doors, trying to see if there was a shape, a shadow, a woman sitting at one of the booths.

Is she in there? Is she waiting?

Suddenly, a warm, heavy hand cupped the side of my face.

Leone's fingers slid into my hair, his palm resting against my cheek. He gently but surely turned my head away from the window, forcing me to look at him.

His dark eyes were right there, inches from mine, "Don't look at them, look at me," he murmured.

Before I could answer, he leaned across the console and pressed his lips to mine.

The kiss wasn't gentle, but it wasn't rough either, tasting of the mint he had been chewing earlier. He deepened the kiss, his thumb rubbing the soft skin just under my ear, pulling me into him until the cold diner, the black SUV, and the men outside didn't exist anymore.

When he finally pulled back a fraction of an inch, his lips brushed against mine as he spoke.

"When we get back to the hotel tonight," he whispered, "I'm going to eat you out until you forget your own name. You are going to feel so good, Gianna. I'll make sure of it."

My cheeks flared hot, a bright, burning red. The cold fear that had been choking me for the last two hours suddenly evaporated, replaced by a wave of shock and embarrassment.

"Leone!" I gasped.

I brought both hands up and shoved his broad shoulders, pushing him back against the driver's seat. He didn't budge much, just let out a low, husky laugh that vibrated in his chest.

"What?" he teased, his dark eyes tracing the blush on my neck. "Just trying to make my girl smile. Did it work?"

A laugh bubbled up in my throat, breaking through the tightness in my chest. I couldn't help it. I reached out and slapped his shoulder, though there was no force behind it. "You are disgusting. We are about to meet my mother!"

"And I'm going to be a perfect gentleman," Leone said, his grin widening as he adjusted his tie, though his eyes stayed locked on me, "But afterward... my offer stands."

The heavy weight in my stomach was still there, but as I looked at him, the terror didn't feel so loud anymore.

Leone opened his door and stepped out into the cold air. Through the glass, I watched him walk around the front of the hood. He didn't look at the Chicago men again, but his hand stayed tucked inside his heavy coat, right over the shape of his gun. He reached my side and pulled the door open.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 310

"Let's go, baby," he murmured.

The moment my feet touched the ground. He stepped right into my space, using his broad shoulders and wide chest to block me from the view of the SUVs. He threw one heavy arm over my shoulder, tucking my body tightly against his side. I buried my face into the rough fabric of his jacket, inhaling the scent of his cologne. He walked us forward, his pace was slow, treating his own body like a shield.

As we reached the wooden steps of the diner, the guards standing by the door shifted. They looked at Leone, their eyes dropping to his coat, then up to the hard, dead look on his young face. He gave them a single/sharp nod, the cold greeting of a Made Man. One of the Chicago guards stepped back, reaching out to push the heavy glass door open for us.

The little bell above the door jingled, the sound lonely in the quiet room.

The air inside smelled like old grease, burnt coffee, and dust. The floor was covered in faded black-and-white tiles, many of them cracked and coming loose at the corners. A long counter ran down the middle with vinyl stools, their stuffing popping out like yellow fluff.

And there, in the very last booth by the back window, a woman stood up.

My breath trapped itself in my lungs. My feet glued themselves to the floor tile.

She looked older than the picture I kept hidden under my mattress. Her hair was the same light brown color as mine, but it was clipped back tightly, and there were thin lines

around her eyes and mouth. She wore a simple cream-colored sweater, her thin fingers clutching a paper napkin so hard her knuckles were white.

Hazel. My mother.

For a second, she just stared at me. Her eyes traveled from the top of my head, down to my face, and down to my shoes, as if she couldn't believe I was real. She took a tiny, shaking step forward, leaving the safety of the booth.

"Gianna?"

It was the same voice from my dreams, but it sounded fragile now, like glass about to shatter.

The moment she said my name, her knees seemed to completely give out.

Her body lurched forward, her leg hitting the edge of the laminate table with a loud thud. The paper napkin dropped from her hand, fluttering down to the dirty floor. She didn't even notice. Her hands flew out, scraping against the edge of the table to catch herself as her whole body began to sink toward the tiles. She gasped for air, her chest heaving, her fingers trembling so badly they couldn't find a grip on the smooth surface.

"Hazel!" a man's voice came from the shadows of the back corner but he didn't move fast enough.

Before she could hit the floor, Leone's arm tightened around my waist, keeping me in place, while his other hand stayed ready at his side.

My mother managed to catch her weight on one knee, her hands flat on the dusty seat of the booth, her head hanging low as she sobbed. Eight years of courtrooms, eight years of closed doors and threats, all breaking apart in the middle of a dirty, abandoned diner.

I wanted to run to her, but I couldn't move. I could only watch her small, shaking shoulders, my heart battering against my ribs like a trapped bird.

Leone leaned his head down, his lips brushing the side of my hair, "Go," he whispered, "I'm right here."

15 Ban

The heat of Leone's hand left my waist as I took my first step forward. My sneakers made a soft scraping sound against the dirty white tiles.

I didn't run, because my mind couldn't quite understand that the woman kneeling by the booth was really mine.

But with every step I took, the space between us shrunk until I was standing right over her. She looked up, her cheeks wet, her eyes red and puffy.