

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 31-40

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

The whole city of Chicago was spread out below, but I didn't care about the view. All I saw was the long black table in the middle of the room.

And Raphael.

He sat at the head of the table, a laptop was open in front of him, casting a faint glow over the sharp angles of his face. His suit was perfectly tailored, the kind that looked like it had been made for his body alone.

A pair of thin reading glasses rested low on his nose, softening nothing. His dark hair fell slightly over his forehead, just enough to look careless, even though everything about him was precise.

His jaw was rough with a shadow of stubble, and the faint crease between his brows showed how deeply he was concentrating on whatever was on the screen. One hand rested near the keyboard, the veins along the back of it visible under the warm light covered in ink.

He didn't look up when I walked in.

"You're two minutes early," he said, his voice cold. He finally looked up, his dark eyes boring into mine. He didn't smile, "I like people who don't waste my time."

He turned a second monitor around so it was facing the empty chair across from him. The screen was filled with lines of code, thousands of small, flickering characters.

"Sit," he ordered, "Before we look at your paperwork, I want to see if you can actually do the work. There's a bug in this script. It's breaking the surveillance flow. You have ten minutes to find it and fix it."

I sat down, my legs feeling like they were made of wood. I looked at the screen, and my breath hitched.

The code was dense. It was a wall of text with no spaces, no breaks, just endless lines of symbols and letters. To my dyslexic brain, it looked like a bowl of alphabet soup. The characters started to swim and crawl over each other. The 's' turned into '8', and the brackets looked like teeth.

I felt a cold sweat break out on the back of my neck. I couldn't even read the first line, let alone find a mistake in a complex AI algorithm.

Raphael leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. He tapped his finger against his arm, watching me.

The numbers in the corner of the screen started counting down.

09:58

09:57

The ticking wasn't loud, but it might as well have been a hammer inside my skull. I leaned forward slightly, staring at the screen. The code was still a solid wall. Lines and lines of letters, symbols, brackets, numbers. My eyes tried to follow the first line, but the characters slipped over each other like wet paint.

An s turned into an 8.

A bracket bent the wrong way.

The word stream looked like starem and then steam and then something else entirely.

My fingers curled slowly in my lap.

Okay.

11

Breathe.

+15 Bohus

I blinked hard and looked away from the code for a second. The huge windows behind Raphael showed the whole city spread out below us, but the sunlight bouncing off the glass towers only made my head feel worse.

When I looked back at the monitor, the letters were still moving.

09:21

My throat tightened.

I couldn't read it like this.

I knew that feeling well. It was the same feeling from school when teachers would hand out a worksheet and everyone else started writing immediately while I sat there staring at the page like it was written in another language.

But code wasn't like normal words. Code had rhythm, patterns, shapes. And shapes... I could understand.

Slowly, I reached forward and touched the mouse. Raphael didn't move. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look at him. Looking at him would make my brain shut down completely.

Instead, I highlighted the entire block of code.

Blue filled the screen, then I scrolled fast. The lines blurred together into moving bands. Dark and light shapes repeating again and again.

There.

Something in the pattern snagged my attention.

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Most of the script had the same spacing. The same structure. A line would start, indent, close, indent again like steps on a staircase but halfway down the screen the rhythm broke, just slightly.

I squinted. The letters still swam when I tried to read them normally, but the shapes didn't lie.

That section looked... crooked like someone had kicked one stair out of place. My heart beat a little faster. I leaned closer.

07:43

Okay.

Okay.

I dragged the window wider so the lines stretched across the screen. When the code got longer, it was easier for my brain to see the structure instead of the letters.

I didn't try to read the words, I watched the shape, bracket, indent, command, close, bracket.

Again and again.

Then-

There.

My finger hovered over the trackpad.

One bracket pointed the wrong direction. It was small, almost invisible. To most people it would probably look normal but the pattern was broken.

My brain liked patterns. It held onto them the way other people held onto sentences. I clicked the line and moved the cursor slowly across it.

The letters still blurred, but I knew the structure.

Open.

Close.

Open.

Close.

Except here, my stomach dropped.

The bracket was backwards, not just backwards. It was sitting in the wrong place, pushing the rest of the line forward like a domino.

The room felt hotter by the second.

Without thinking about it, I reached up and loosened the top buttons of my shirt. The collar had been pressing against my throat, and suddenly it felt like I couldn't breathe properly.

The fabric shifted slightly as I leaned forward again.

I pressed backspace, and the line shifted slightly. Then I typed the correct bracket. The cursor blinked.

For a second nothing happened.

My pulse thudded in my ears, then the entire block of code realigned itself like someone had straightened a crooked stack of papers.

The structure snapped back into place, the shapes were clean again.

Perfect stairs.

I exhaled without realizing I had been holding my breath but the timer was still running.

02:11

My hands were shaking now, that couldn't be the only problem. Scripts this big never broke from just one mistake. I scrolled again, letting the lines blur into shapes.

My brain followed the rhythm.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Pause.

Step.

Pause.

+15 8chus

Wait.

I froze.

My eyes narrowed at the lower section of the code, two lines looked identical like someone had copied one and pasted it twice.

That would break the flow, my fingers moved quickly now. I clicked the second line and deleted it, the cursor blinked again, the program ran, the screen flashed and new lines of data began to scroll across the side monitor.

Clean.

Fast.

Working.

My head snapped toward the timer.

00:14

Fourteen seconds.

My lungs finally pulled in a full breath. I leaned back slowly in the chair, my heart still hammering like I had just

run a mile.

For a moment the room was completely quiet.

I finally looked up. Raphael hadn't moved from where he was sitting across the table. His arms were still crossed over his chest but the tapping of his finger had stopped.

+15 Bonus

Then slowly, he stood up, straightened his jacket, and then footsteps followed. I kept my eyes on the laptop screen even though the code had already stopped moving. The program was running clean now. Perfect rows of data scrolled down in rhythm.

Then his shadow fell across the keyboard.

Raphael stepped up behind my chair and leaned forward. One of his hands came down on the table beside the laptop, long inked fingers spreading against the black surface.

The other hand rested against the back of my chair. He bent slightly, towering over me.

From the corner of my eye I saw the sleeve of his suit stretch over his forearm as he leaned closer to the screen. The faint scent of his cologne drifted toward me, dark, expensive, something sharp under it.

His gaze moved over the laptop, scanning the lines of code that were now running smoothly.

A low sound left his throat, “Interesting,” he said quietly. His voice was close enough that I felt the vibration of it along the back of my neck. My fingers curled slightly against my lap.

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For a moment he didn't say anything else. His eyes kept moving across the code like he was retracing every step! had taken.

Then he spoke again, "Nice trick though."

I frowned slightly, confused, and finally looked up at him over my shoulder. I blinked, stunned, "I fixed the bugs."

"Not the code, Gianna," he sneered, slowly, his eyes dropped lower and stayed there, "The cleavage. It's a classic move. You realize you're losing, so you decide to give me a little

show to make me lose my focus. You thought I was busy looking at your skin, I wouldn't notice if you messed up the logic."

My stomach tightened, I followed his gaze down and froze. My shirt. Three buttons open. The fabric had shifted when I leaned forward earlier, the collar pulled wide. Cool air brushed against the skin of my chest.

The black lace edge of my bra was visible.

A lot of it.

My face burned with a heat so hot it felt like my skin was peeling. I looked like the very thing I hated, the girl who used her body because she wasn't smart enough to use her brain.

"I... I wasn't... I couldn't breathe," I stuttered, my voice small and weak.

I reached up with a shaking hand, desperate to grab the fabric and hide myself. I wanted to button it back up and run out of the building. But before I could touch the buttons, his hand shot out like a snake.

Raphael grabbed my wrist. His grip was like a steel cuff, cold, hard, and impossible to break. He didn't hurt me, but he held me in place, curling his long inked fingers around my hand.

“Don’t,” he said, as he leaned down until his lips were inches from my neck, “I never said I wasn’t enjoying the view. If you want to act like a certain type of woman to get ahead, who am I to stop you? It fits what I already know about you, doesn’t it?”

I seethed. A hot, white rage started to boil in my chest, fighting with the shame. Men like him always thought a woman’s value was only as deep as her skin.

“Let go of me,” I hissed through my teeth.

He leaned down until his lips were touching my ear. I could feel the cold metal of his watch press against the back of my hand as he kept me pinned.

“Keep it open. If you want this job, you stay like that. Because if you try to fix that shirt, I’ll pick up the phone and call your mother right now. I’ll tell her the truth, Gianna. I’ll tell her that her ‘genius’ daughter is a fraud. I’ll tell her that you lied about being at the top of your class. I’ll tell her you’ve never seen a 4.0 in your life and that you’re just an average, struggling student who is barely passing her classes.”

My stomach tightened, and the warmth rushing to my neck was impossible to hide. I knew he saw it and enjoyed it.

“You know,” he went on calmly, “it took me less than five minutes to call the university registrar and verify everything before you even walked into this building.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“Now imagine what else I might find if I actually decided to look into you.”

A faint pause.

+15 Bohus

“Tell me... how many more lies are there?”

I forced myself not to yank my wrist away like I wanted to. My spine straightened slowly instead. He watched the movement with mild interest.

“You wouldn’t,” I whispered, but I knew he would.

He was a Capone. He didn’t care about mercy.

“Try me,” Raphael said, “You want this job? You want to keep your mother’s heart from breaking? Then you stay exactly like that. I want to be reminded of exactly what kind of ‘talent’ I’m hiring. It’ll make the long hours much more fun for me,” saying that, he let go.

My heart slammed against my ribs like a trapped bird, frantic and wild, but my mind was already racing somewhere else, counting the cost of my pride.

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If he called my mother, everything would fall apart, years of lies, years of pretending. She believed in me. She believed I was strong, capable, brilliant. The daughter who had everything under control. The one she could look at with pride instead of worry.

If the truth came out, that image would shatter. She wouldn't see the person she trusted anymore. She would see the girl who struggled to read simple lines without the letters twisting. The girl who might not be strong enough to carry everything the way she promised she would.

And I couldn't let that happen, not when she looked at me like I was the one thing in her life that had gone right.

Slowly, I lowered my hands back onto the table.

The buttons stayed undone.

Raphael watched the movement carefully, with a satisfied look on his face. He picked up a pen and tapped it lightly against my résumé.

"Good," he said.

Then, just like that, the predator vanished. His expression returned to that cold, professional one. He turned his attention back to the monitor where my fixed code was still glowing. He scrolled through the lines I had realigned, his eyes moving fast.

“This section,” he said, pointing to the logic jump I had sensed through the patterns, “My head programmer spent an hour on this yesterday. He couldn’t find the break. He told me the entire script was a loss.”

He looked back at me, and for the first time, I saw a flicker of something that wasn’t hate. It was a cold kind of respect. He gave a single, sharp nod.

“You found it in under ten minutes. You did what a man with ten years of experience couldn’t do.” He clicked the laptop shut with a sharp snap, “You’re smarter than I thought, even if you are a liar.”

He took a step and stood just to my right, his eyes scanning me from my sleek bun down to the open collar of my shirt, reminding me that he still held the leash as he looked down on me.

“Congratulations, Ms. Toricelli,” he said, his voice flat, almost bored, “You’re hired.”

I didn’t have time to feel relieved. Before I could even blink, he reached out. His large hand moved toward my chest. I flinched, my heart jumping into my throat, but he didn’t stop.

Raphael bent slightly, his tall frame leaning into my space as his fingers caught the edges of my white shirt. Slowly, he began to do up the buttons I had opened. His fingers were warm, and he wasn’t being careful.

As he pushed the first button through the small hole, the back of his hand brushed against the curve of my breast. He let his hand linger there, pressing into me for a second longer than he needed to, making sure I felt the weight of his touch.

I froze, my breath catching. I wanted to slap his hand away. I wanted to scream that I wasn't his toy. But I sat like a statue, staring at his tie while he dressed me like a doll he had just finished playing with.

He reached the top button, his knuckles grazing my collarbone. He leaned in one last time, his voice a low whisper, "Don't be late tomorrow."

Then he stepped back, pulling his hand away as if nothing had happened, like the moment had meant nothing at all. He straightened his jacket and glanced at me once more.

"Welcome to Orion Vector... step-sister."

+15 Brus

He walked toward the door without looking back, leaving me sitting there in the silence, shaking and covered in the memory of his touch.

Janedoe writings

Author

Wait! Don't swipe just yet

Leave a comment and spill all your thoughts about this chapter and yes, I need to know how you feel about Raphael buttoning her shirt

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Gianna

+15 Bhus

I slammed the door to the small apartment we all shared. My hands were still shaking, and the spot on my chest where his knuckles had brushed felt like it was on fire.

I pressed my palm there again without thinking, then again like maybe if I rubbed the spot enough it would erase the feeling.

It didn't.

I could still feel it.

His hand.

"G, what's wrong, sugar?" Mama D said, looking up from the kitchen table.

They were all there. The whole group. Tasha was painting her nails on the couch, Em and Jasmine were using their phones, and Bri and Morgan Lee were sharing a bag of chips. They all looked up at once, their smiles fading when they saw my face. My hair was falling out of the tight bun, and I looked like I had just escaped a car wreck.

"I hate them," I choked out. My voice was thick with a rage so hot I thought I might actually throw up, "I hate every single one of them. They are all pigs. Every man on this earth is a disgusting, power-hungry pig."

"Whoa, G, what happened?" Tasha asked, dropping her nail polish. She stood up and pulled me toward the couch.

I fell onto the cushions, my folder hitting the floor with a loud thud. I couldn't stop shaking. The image of Raphael's cold, dark eyes kept flashing in my head.

"The interview," I started, I had already texted them last night, telling them all about it. My breath coming in short gasps, "Raphael. He... he's a monster. I was struggling to breathe because I was so nervous, and I unbuttoned a few buttons of my shirt. Just to get some air, you know what I'm like when I'm nervous. I wasn't thinking. I was just trying to survive the test."

I looked at my friends, my eyes stinging.

"He cornered me. He stood right behind my chair and leaned over me until I could feel his breath on my neck. He told me it was a 'nice trick.' He looked at me like I was garbage off the street. He told me I only showed him my skin because I was too stupid to do the math. He said I was the kind of woman who used her body to get ahead."

"He said what?" Morgan hissed. Her face turned a deep, hot red as she leaned forward,

The words started to pour out of me then, faster and messier. I told them everything. I told them how the interview went, how he had towered over me, and the way his fingers had felt against my skin. I looked down at my lap, my nails digging so hard into my palms that they left deep, white crescents.

"He made me... he made me feel like I was still that girl," I whispered, my voice breaking. I didn't finish the thought. I couldn't, "The one I was... back then."

Mama D didn't say a word. she just walked over, and wrapped her arms around me, pulling my head to her chest. I leaned into her, finally letting out a long, shaky breath that felt like it had been trapped in my lungs.

I sat there, tucked into her warmth, surrounded by the only people in this city I could actually trust.

"The world was built by men, for men, and that its only goal was to keep us small, quiet, and down in the dirt," I

+15 Benus

snapped.

Tasha shifted on the sofa, her dark eyes looking at me with a mix of love and worry. She didn't look angry anymore. She looked sad.

"G," Tasha said softly, leaning forward. "What he did was trash. Raphael sounds like a bully, and he's using his power to mess with your head. But you can't let him turn your heart into stone."

I pulled back from Mama D's hug, my eyes hard, "All men are like that, Tasha. They just hide it better until they have you in a corner."

Tasha shook her head slowly, "That's not true, and you know it. You're starting to sound like you hate the whole world. That kind of anger... it's like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. It's only going to hurt you, Gianna. It's going to make you lonely and bitter."

"She's right, baby," Mama D added, as she rubbed my shoulder with her warm hand, "Don't let one bad man or even two make you blind to the good ones. There are men out there who don't want to own you. They want to stand beside you."

"Maybe you should try being with someone," Em suggested, "Not someone like your step brothers... or him. Someone who is just a normal guy."

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I felt my jaw tighten. The thought of letting a man close felt like walking onto a battlefield without a shield, ” Why? So they can find a new way to break me? I’m better off alone.”

“You’re not,” Morgan said, reaching out to touch my knee, “You’re building a wall so high that you’re trapping yourself inside. You’re turning into someone who only sees the worst in half the people on earth. That’s a heavy way to live. It’s toxic, G. It’ll eat you alive.”

“Just one date,” Bri whispered, trying to make me smile. “Someone sweet. Someone who thinks a fair fight means sharing the last slice of pizza. It might change how you see things. It might remind you that you’re more than just a... survivor.”

I looked around at them. They weren’t judging me. They weren’t telling me I was wrong to be hurt. They were trying to pull me out of the dark hole I was digging for myself. They saw the way I was starting to look at every man, with a sneer and a sharp word and they knew it would eventually turn me into someone I didn’t recognize.

“You don’t have to forgive anyone,” Tasha said, “But don’t let anyone turn you into a version of yourself that hates everyone either. Don’t give them that much power over your soul.”

I looked down at my hands. They were finally still. I didn’t want to be a person full of hate, but the fear was so loud.

“I don’t know if I can,” I whispered.

“You can,” Mama D said, kissing the top of my head, “You just have to be brave enough to believe that not everyone is out to get you.”

I sat at the table with the girls, listening to their soft laughter and the clink of forks. They were trying to pull me back to the light, but my mind was still in that cold, glass office.

After dinner, I hugged them all goodbye. The walk back to the Capone estate was long. Every step felt heavier than the last. The huge iron gates of the mansion appeared in the distance, glowing under the streetlights.

I thought about what Tasha had said. It’s like drinking poison.

I wanted to be strong, but my chest felt tight, like I was wearing a corset made of bricks. I didn’t want to be bitter. I just didn’t want to be hurt again.

As I got closer to the gate, a figure moved in the shadows. My heart jumped, and my hands balled into fists. I ready to fight.

Then the light hit his face. It was Ciro.

He was leaning against the stone pillar, looking relaxed. When he saw me, his whole face lit up. He pushed off the wall and started walking toward me, a wide, genuine smile on his lips.

“Hey! It’s you,” he said, his voice bright and friendly. He reached out as if to give my arm a playful squeeze.

“Don’t touch me!” I snapped.

My eyes were wide with a wild, angry light. I pulled my arm back so fast I almost tripped.

Ciro froze. The smile vanished from his face instantly. He moved fast, but not toward me, he took two big steps back, putting several feet of empty air between us. He held his hands up in the air, palms open, showing me he was empty-handed.

“Whoa,” he breathed, his eyes wide with shock, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to... I was just saying hi.”

He stayed back, giving me all the space in the world. He looked like he wanted to help, but he was afraid to move a muscle.

I stood there, my chest heaving. My heart was slamming against my ribs. I looked at his open hands and his worried face. He wasn’t towering over me or threatening to break my life.

“Don’t let one bad man make you blind to the good ones,” Mama D’s voice whispered in my head.

The silence stretched out, cold and awkward. I felt the heat of a different kind of shame crawl up my neck. I had attacked him for being nice. I was becoming the person my friends were worried about.

I took a shaky breath and let my shoulders drop.

“I... I’m sorry, Ciro,” I whispered, looking down at my shoes. I couldn’t look at his kind eyes. “I’m just... it was a long day. A really bad day. I didn’t mean to yell.”

Ciro let out a long breath, his hands slowly dropping to his sides, “It’s okay,” he said softly. “I get it. Let me walk you to the front doors.”

Ciro didn’t try to walk right next to me. He stayed a few feet behind. Every time I glanced back, he was there.

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+15 8gnus

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Halfway to the front door, he cleared his throat, “That bag looks heavy. You want me to carry it for you? Give your shoulder a break?”

My grip on the strap tightened until my knuckles turned white. My head snapped toward him, my eyes flashing.

“I don’t need a man to carry my things!” I barked. “I have two arms and a spine. I can handle my own weight. I’ve been handling it my whole life without anyone’s help, and I’m certainly not going to start falling apart over a laptop bag.”

Ciro stopped walking immediately, “Okay,” he said simply, “You got it.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. He wasn’t trying to prove he was stronger than me. He was just being... nice. And I had bitten his head off for it. I thought of Tasha’s voice, telling me I was drinking poison. My anger was starting to leak out onto people who didn’t deserve it.

I stopped and let out a long, shaky sigh. My head dropped forward.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, “I did it again. I’m... I’m really sorry, Ciro. You’re just trying to be helpful and I’m being a jerk. It’s not you. It’s just... everything else.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ciro said, stepping a little closer but still keeping a polite distance. “You’ve got a lot on your plate. I can take a few hits. I’m tough.”

We reached the massive front doors of the mansion. I didn’t go inside right away. I turned to face him, “Thank you.

“You never texted,” he said softly, “I stayed by my phone for two nights.”

I felt a tiny flush of heat in my cheeks, “I lost your number,” I lied.

The truth was, I had thrown it the second I got into my room that night. I had told myself I didn’t need any more men in my life, especially not a Capone-adjacent one. But standing here now, looking at his messy hair and his kind face, that choice felt a bit silly.

“Lost it, huh?” he chuckled, not sounding like he believed me for a second, but he didn’t call me out. “Well, since we’re being honest... I don’t think I ever actually got your name. I’ve been calling you ‘the girl from the hallway’ in my head.”

“It’s Gianna,” I said.

“Gianna,” he repeated, and smiled, and this time, it didn’t make me want to run, “It suits you. It sounds strong.”

“It’s just a name,” I said, though I felt a small spark of something that wasn’t hate in my chest.

“See you around, Gianna,” he said, giving a small wave before turning to head back toward the gate house.

I watched Ciro turn around. His back was to me as he started to walk down the stone steps.

Don't let one bad man make you blind to the good ones...

"Wait!" I called out.

Ciro stopped. He turned around slowly, his eyebrows pulled together, "Yeah?"

I didn't say anything at first. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. The screen was cracked in the corner, a little web of broken glass. I walked down the two steps toward him.

C +158gnus

*15 Bynu

I didn't look him in the eye. I couldn't. I just held the phone out toward him.

“Here,” I said.

Ciro looked at the phone, then at me. He didn’t move for a second, “What’s this?”

“I... I really did lose it,” I said, “The number. Put it in.”

A slow, bright smile spread across Ciro’s face. It wasn’t a mean smile or a proud one. It was just happy. He stepped forward, taking the phone from my hand. His fingers brushed against mine for a second.

He tapped on the screen, his thumbs moving fast. The light from the phone made his face look soft.

“There,” he said, handing it back, “Saved. I guess, I’ll wait for your call now.”

He gave me a smile and then started walking away again, his steps lighter this time.

I walked into my room and slammed the door. I didn’t just close it, I turned the lock until I heard that sharp click. It was the only sound that made me feel like I could finally stop pretending.

I stood there in the dark for a second. I had passed. I had the job but it didn't feel like a win. It felt like I had just climbed onto a higher ledge, and the fall was going to be much worse when I finally slipped.

How long until Raphael realized the truth?

I threw my bag onto the floor and walked to the closet. I again reached to the very back, under a pile of thick sweaters I never wore. My fingers found it. The wooden stick.

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The Reminder.

I walked to the mirror and stared at myself. I saw my five-year-old self staring back at me with tears in her eyes.

“Read it!”

The voice exploded in my head.

It wasn’t my voice.

“What are you, stupid? It’s right there! Look at the letters, Gianna. They aren’t moving. You’re just lazy. You’re useless. You’re a waste of space.”

“Your tits make up for the nonsense that comes out of your mouth.”

“Why did I do wrong to deserve you, Gianna?!”

The voices were so loud they felt like physical hands pushing me down. I could remember the feeling of the wooden desk against my arms. I could feel the hot, stinging tears on my cheeks while the boy behind me laughed because I couldn’t read the word apple.

“You will do it,” I hissed at my reflection, “You will show him. You won’t be the dumb girl, not again.”

I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the cold floor. I pulled off my shoes and socks. My feet looked small and pale in the dim light. I gripped the wooden stick with both hands, my knuckles turning white.

“If you want to act like a certain type of woman to get ahead, who am I to stop you? It fits what I already know about you, doesn’t it?”

Raphael’s voice joined the others. I could feel him leaning over me again.

I raised the stick high and slammed it down onto the arch of my right foot as hard as I possibly could.

CRACK.

The pain was a white-hot flash that blinded me for a second. It felt like a bolt of lightning had shot up my leg and settled in my brain. I gasped, my mouth falling open, but I didn’t make a sound.

“Again,” I whispered. I was shaking. I was sweating, “Do it again. Learn. Remember. Don’t be stupid.”

I raised the stick again and brought it down with even more force. This time, I hit the bone. The pain was so sharp it made my stomach turn. I felt the skin start to swell, the heat of the bruise already blooming under the surface. I wanted the pain to be louder than the voices.

I raised the stick and swung it again, and again, and again. I hit my feet until they were red and purple. I hit them until the blood started to smear on the wooden stick.

“You will do this job,” I scolded myself. I was hitting my own feet to punish the part of me that couldn’t read, “ You will prove everyone wrong. You will be better than him.”

I hit myself one last time, a hard, final blow that made my toes curl in agony.

I dropped the stick. It clattered against the floor. My hands were shaking so hard I had to press them against the floor just to stay upright.

I looked down at my feet, and the first sob finally broke through my teeth.

+15 Brows

It wasn't just a bruise. I had gone too far. The skin across the bridge of my foot was torn. And the sight of my own blood on the floor made my head spin, but the pain was worse.

"Oh God," I whispered, "Oh God."

I reached out with trembling fingers and tried to hold my feet, but even the lightest touch made me gasp. I pulled them close to my chest, curling into a ball on the cold floor. I wrapped my arms around my shins and fucked my face into the space between my knees, trying to disappear.

I stayed there in the dark, clutching my bleeding feet, the only sound in the room was the wet, muffled gasps of my own breath. I felt so small. I felt like the little girl in the back of that room again, hiding her face so nobody would see her crying over a book she couldn't read.

I looked up at the mirror, my vision blurry and I saw a tiny girl standing in a cold room, her face red from crying. She was holding out her hands, and they were the same color as my feet, swollen, red, and shaking.

I was supposed to be the one who saved her. I was supposed to be the one who finally made the world stop hurting her for being different. Instead, I had picked up the weapon. I had become the very thing she was afraid of.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Janedoewritings

Hey, loves! @

Author

I hope today's updates resonated with you.

What are your thoughts on Gianna's moments of struggle and vulnerability?

104

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Raphael

+15 B

The Minister of Defense had been speaking for twelve minutes and thirty-two seconds.

A blue map of the city flickered on the wall, covered in red dots that moved and changed as our behavioral AI predicted the next hour of traffic and crime.

I sat at the head of the long glass table, my hands folded. To everyone else, I was listening. I was the CEO of Orion Vector Technologies, the man who sold them the future. But inside, my mind was running a different program

An image of Gianna flashed across my brain.

It was like a static screenshot.

I saw the way the light hit her hair. It was a light brown color, pulled back into a bun so tight it looked painful. I remembered the small, stray strands that had escaped near her ears. Then there were her eyes, bright green, wide, and full of a panic she couldn't hide.

My mind moved down to her face. Her skin was pale, her lips looked full. They had been trembling slightly when I stepped behind her chair.

I looked at the Minister, nodding as he spoke about data encryption, but I was actually seeing the white fabric of Gianna's shirt. I remembered the moment it opened. I saw the curve of her breasts, the soft rise of her skin against the harsh office lights.

The memory remained fixed, like a three-dimensional model rotating slowly in the dark space behind my eyes. It was not a pleasant memory, just a precise one.

The tactic itself had been obvious.

She had been cornered by the problem on her screen. The code maybe had trapped her in a loop she couldn't escape for a few minutes. The pressure of the deadline had tightened around her. So she reached for the simplest tool available.

Distraction.

A button opened.

Then another.

The human brain was easy to manipulate if you understood where to apply pressure. Most men would have looked away from the logic on the monitor. Most men would have looked

exactly where she wanted them to. It was a crude move. Low level. The sort of thing women used when they realized they were losing.

“Mr. Capone? Your thoughts on the facial recognition lag?” the Minister asked.

I blinked, the image of her nervous face fading back into the dark corners of my mind. I didn’t care about her fear. I didn’t care about the way she looked. She was just a new piece of hardware I had brought into the building. A piece of hardware with a glitchy history and a very pretty, very desperate face.

“The lag is irrelevant. The delay you’re seeing is a visual buffer on the interface. The actual processing time happens on the backend servers. That system has already been optimized.”

The Minister frowned slightly, “How optimized?”

+15

“Enough that you’ll never notice the difference,” I replied. I let two seconds pass before finishing, “It will be ready by Monday.”

I went back to the meeting, but the screenshot stayed in the background. The green eyes, the lips, the open shirt. It wasn’t a memory I enjoyed. It was just data.

I leaned back in my leather chair, my eyes tracking the data lines on the wall, but my fingers were restless. I tapped my index finger against the arm of the chair.

Every part of my brain wanted to open a new tab. I wanted to dig. I wanted to see the truth behind those green eyes. My company was built on knowing things before they happened. I had the tools to pull up every text she had ever sent, every photo she had ever taken, and every grade she had actually earned in middle school.

My skin felt tight with the urge to just type her name into our deep-search engine and watch her whole life spill out in black and white. My fingers actually itched, a sharp, annoying prickle under the skin.

But I stopped. I curled my hand into a fist until the itching went away.

I looked across the table at the empty seat where my brother sometimes sat. We were Capones. My brother was the head of the family. He had given his word that this girl was to be treated as one of us. Our father had brought Hazel into our home, and Vincenzo had placed Gianna under our protection.

In our world, words were the only thing that kept the floor from falling out from under us. If a Capone gave his word, it was law. If my brother said she was off-limits for a deep-dive, then she was off-limits. We didn't spy on our own. We didn't go behind each other's backs. To betray his trust was to break the family, and a broken family was a dead one.

Support

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

I forced my hand to go flat on the table. I wouldn't run the check. I wouldn't use the satellites or the bank records. I would respect the line my brother had drawn in the sand.

"The meeting is over," I said, standing up.

I stood up and left the meeting room without saying a word to the men behind me. I walked down the long hallway until I reached a door that looked like a solid slab of silver. There were no buttons and no keyholes.

I pressed my thumb against a small glass square on the wall. A thin line of green light scanned my/skin, reading the tiny loops and lines of my fingerprint. With a soft hiss, the

doors slid open. This was my private elevator. It didn't go to the lobby. It didn't go to the parking garage.

I stepped inside and the doors closed. I didn't press a floor number.

The floor dropped. We zoomed past the lobby, past the basement, and deep into the dark earth beneath the city of Chicago. When the doors opened again, the air was different.

I walked into the hub.

This was the heart of the Chicago Outfit. Above us, people thought Orion Vector was just a tech company. Down here, we ran the city. The room was huge, filled with rows of black servers that blinked with thousands of tiny, blue lights.

Men in dark hoodies sat at long tables, their faces lit up by the glow of multiple monitors.

On one screen, I saw millions of dollars moving in small, silent jumps from a bank in London to a hidden account

in the islands.

Another screen showed a live feed of a police station's evidence room, a cursor moved across the screen, deleting a digital file as if it had never existed.

To my left, a programmer was rewriting the code for a city's traffic lights, creating a "green wave" so a shipment of illegal goods could cross town without ever hitting a red light.

We were making sure the family never got caught. We were the ones who wiped the security cameras before the cops could arrive. We were the ones who crashed the servers of anyone who tried to talk to the FBI.

I walked to the center of the room, looking at the main wall. It showed a map of Chicago, but it wasn't for traffic. It showed the location of every burner phone, every tracked car, and every person who owed the Capones money.

I stood there, the blue light of the monitors reflecting in my eyes. This was my true office. This was where the real power lived.

I stopped behind a man sitting at a terminal. His shoulders instantly hiked up to his ears. He didn't turn around, but I saw his fingers begin to shake as they hovered over the keys.

"Show me the laundry list for the South Side accounts," I said.

"It's... it's almost done, Mr. Capone," he stammered. He scrambled to open a folder, "The encryption was a bit thicker than we thought. We had to—"

“I didn’t ask about the encryption,” I interrupted, “I asked to see it. Now.”

He swallowed hard, and clicked the mouse three times, his hand jerking. When the list appeared, I scanned the numbers.

+15 Bghus

Bgnus

“If I see a decimal point out of place when I come back,” I stated, “you won’t be working in the basement anymore. You’ll be part of the data we delete.”

“Yes, sir,” he choked out.

I walked toward the back of the hub, through a door made of thick, reinforced steel. This was my private office, the dark heart of the basement. Inside, there was only a single, massive desk and a wall made of high-definition

screens.

I sat down and tapped the glass surface of the desk. The blue lights of the hub faded, replaced by a bird's-eye view of a massive forest.

The Void.

I moved my fingers across the desk, and the map zoomed in. I could see every ravine, every hidden trail, and every swampy patch of ground.

I leaned forward, my face inches from the screen. The forest of the Void looked back at me, but tonight, the green and brown map felt too simple. I tapped a command on the desk, and the layout changed. The map turned a deep, bruised purple and blood-red.

This Hunt was going to be different.

I moved my hand, dragging new icons across the private land. I wasn't looking for cliffs or ravines this time. I was looking for spots where the trees grew so thick the moonlight couldn't touch the ground. I marked a large clearing and added a layer to the map, a series of hidden speakers and low, red lights that would be buried under the leaves.

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