My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 311

15 Bar

Before I could say a word, she scrambled to her feet. Her hands reached out, her fingers digging into the sleeves of my jacket, and she pulled me into her.

The collision knocked the air right out of my lungs.

She wrapped her arms around my back, holding me so tight I could feel the sharp bones of her shoulders pressing into my chest. She buried her face into my neck, her hot tears soaking right through the fabric of my shirt. She smelled like mints, and something sweet-like vanilla. It was the smell from my dreams. She shook against me, her whole body trembling as she held on like I might disappear if she let go for even a second.

Then, just as quickly, she pulled back.

Her hands left my shoulders and began to move over my body. They moved fast, and frantic. She grabbed my wrists, pulling my sleeves up to my elbows, her eyes scanning my skin. She spun me slightly, her fingers running down my back, pressing against my spine, feeling my shoulders through my clothes. She reached down, grabbing my hands, turning my palms up to look at my knuckles.

“What...” my voice caught, “What are you doing? What are you looking for?”

My mother stopped. Her hands came up to my face, her palms warm against my cheeks. Her thumbs wiped away the tears I didn’t even know were falling down my own face. She looked into my eyes, her lips trembling, but she shook her head.

“Nothing,” she whispered, “Nothing, my beautiful girl. I just... I needed to see you. I needed to touch

But I knew what she was looking for. She was looking for bruises. She was looking for the marks.

“Let’s sit down,” a deep voice cut through the air.

you.”

Leone was standing a few feet away. He hadn’t moved closer, keeping his distance to give us space. He pointed a leather-gloved hand toward the vinyl booth.

My mother looked at him, her expression tightening for just a second as she recognized him but she nodded. She slid into one side of the booth, her eyes never leaving my face. I walked over and sat down opposite her. Leone moved to the corner of the diner, leaning his shoulders against the wall right by the kitchen doors, his arms crossed over his chest, watching the whole room.

“You’ve grown so tall,” my mother said. She reached across the table, her fingers lightly touching the tips of mine, “The last time I held you, your head only came up to my ribs. Now look at you. Do you... do you remember anything about me?”

“I... I remember your voice,” I whispered, speaking slowly so the words wouldn’t tumble out wrong, “You used to sing that song about the birds.”

A small, sad smile broke through her tears. “You remember that?”

We sat there for a long time, just tossing small pieces of our lives across the table, trying to build a bridge over eight years of emptiness. She told me about my little half-sister Jules. She told me about the garden she started, how she planted yellow roses because I used to pick them from the bushes when I was a toddler. I told her about the books I tried to read, omitting how hard the pages were for me to understand.

My mother’s smile slowly faded. She leaned closer across the table, her eyes dropping to the way I was holding my own hands tightly in my lap.

“Gianna,” she murmured, “Tell me the truth. How is it in that house? How does he... how does your father treat

+15 Bark you?”

My stomach twisted into a tight, hard knot. I could feel Leone’s eyes shift from the door straight to the back of my head

“He is fine,” I said quickly, the words coming out a little too sharp, a little too rehearsed.

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“Gianna, look at me,” Mom pleaded, her fingers gripping my wrists now. “You can tell me. He can’t hear you here. Are you still seeing that Doctor. Does he lock you away? I know what kind of man he is. I know the cruelty he keeps behind his desk.”

If I said the wrong thing, if the walls carried my words back to Chicago, the monthly visits would vanish. The fragile bridge we just built would be blown to pieces by my father’s anger.

I forced my lips to move, forcing a small, empty smile onto my face.

“The house is very big,” I said, directing the conversation away, “There are new gardens in the back now. And the cook, she makes those little lemon cakes I like every Tuesday. I spend most of my time in the library. It has windows that go all the way to the ceiling.”

My mother stared at me, her eyes searching my face again. She could see the wall I was putting up. She could see the way my shoulders had gone stiff, the way my eyes flicked toward the window instead of meeting hers. She knew I was deflecting, hiding the bruises that lived on the inside instead of the skin.

“Fine, you don’t have to talk about him,” Mom said, as another heavy tear spilled over her eyelid, tracking down her cheek before splashing onto the dark laminate table, “But look at me, baby. Just tell me one thing.”

I blinked, swallowing hard, “What?”

“Aren’t you exhausted?” she leaned closer, her fingers sliding down to squeeze my hands, “Doesn’t it hurt? Don’t you just want all of it to finally stop?”

A thick knot formed in my throat. I sniffled, the cold air stinging the inside of my nose, and nodded. “Yeah,” I whispered. “I do.”

“But it’s not going to stop,” she said.

I stared at her, my brow furrowing. The letters in my head jumbled up, spinning into a confusing mess. Why would she say that? Didn’t she believe the therapy was working? Didn’t she think the doctor could actually fix my brain so the words would stop moving on the page?

“What do you mean?” I asked, my voice dropping.

“It’s never going to stop until you make it stop, Gianna.”

“I can’t do that,” I said, pulling my hands back an inch. “You don’t know how it is. I can’t just tell them to stop.”

“You don’t have to do it alone,” she said quickly, “You just have to trust me. Do you trust me? You know I only want to protect you, right?”

I didn’t even have to think about it. Despite the eight years of separation, she was still my mother, “Yes,” I said.

“Then I need you to be my helper.”

“How?”

Mom glanced over her shoulder toward the windows, making sure the guards outside weren't watching, before reaching into her large leather purse. She pulled out a small, fluffy brown teddy bear. It looked like a regular toy, the kind you buy at a grocery store, but when she placed it on the table between us, she didn't let go of it.

"Every time that doctor comes to the house for your lessons, I want you to take this bear into the room with you," she whispered, her voice barely a breath. "Just press his belly twice. Right here on the button. It records everything

-the sound, the video, all of it. You just have to set it up on a shelf. Make sure it's facing the room. I need the doctor's face and your father's face completely clear in the clips."

I shook my head immediately, a cold sweat breaking out on the back of my neck. "Daddy is never in the room during the sessions."

Her fingers tightened on the toy, her dark eyebrows drawing together, "Why not?"

I looked down at the scratched wood of the table, my fingers tracing a faint line in the laminate, "Because he hates the noise," I muttered, the shame making my cheeks hot. "He said he can't stand it when I start screaming."

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Mom sucked in a sharp breath. It sounded like someone had punched her in the ribs. The sorrow in her eyes flipped instantly into a dark, burning fury, her jaw clenching so tight the skin around her mouth went white.

"Fine," she spat, "Just the doctor then. Please, Gianna. You have to do this for me. If I get enough evidence of what they're doing to you in that room, I can use it. I can get you out of that hell permanently. I can take you away from your father and that monster forever."

I blinked, "Take me away? Like... I'd never have to go back to Philadelphia?"

She nodded, her hand covering mine again, squeezing until it hurt, "Yes. Forever."

"But Dad will kill you," I whispered, panic rising in my chest, "He'll find us. He has people everywhere."

A strange, hard smile touched her lips. She didn't look scared at all. She tilted her head toward the back corner of the diner, pointing with her chin toward the tall man standing in the darkness behind her booth.

"He can't touch me," Mom said, "That's Don Salvatore Capone. His family owns Illinois, Gianna. Your father... he's nothing. I'm not afraid of him anymore. I have the power behind me now to protect you. There will be no more pain."

My chest heaved as I tried to process it. No more doctors. No more screaming. It sounded like a dream.

But then my mind caught on the one thing I couldn't leave behind.

I looked over my shoulder, my eyes finding Leone. He was still leaning against the wall by the kitchen doors, a fresh cigarette dangling from his lips. The moment he felt my eyes on him, he straightened up, his broad shoulders shifting beneath his coat. He blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling and raised one dark eyebrow, silently asking if I was okay, if I needed him to come over.

I gave him a tiny shake of my head, and he relaxed back against the wall, but his eyes never left me.

"I can't leave," I said, turning back to my mother. The realization hurt my chest. "I can't go to Chicago forever. I love Leone. I can't leave him."

Mom's expression hardened. Her lips thinned into a tight, straight line, and the warmth completely vanished from her face. "What has Leone ever actually done to help you get out of this, Gianna? How is he protecting you from those sessions?"

My frown deepened, "He helps me every day," I said, my voice growing defensive. "He always tells me that I don't need to be fixed to be his wife. He says it doesn't matter that my brain works backward. He told me I'm pretty enough that people will just look at my face and ignore my disabilities."

"And the fact that you don't even see what's wrong with that sentence is exactly why I'm taking you," Mom said, " You are not disable, Gianna. You don't need to be 'fixed' by some doctor, and you are definitely not just some pretty ornament for a mobster to keep on his arm to look good."

"But you don't understand," I argued, tears blurring my vision as I checked to make sure Leone couldn't hear us." We're together. We're husband and wife. I literally cannot live without him."

Mom slammed her hands flat on the table, "Gianna, you are fifteen years old! You are nobody's wife!"

“Yes, I am,” I insisted, as I leaned across the table, desperate to make her understand the depth of it, “I am his wife. In every single way.”

Mom froze. Her eyes went completely still, wide and dark, as she stared at me. Her gaze slowly traveled down my

face, looking at the blush on my cheeks, down to my shaking hands, and back up to my eyes. She was reading me, digging deeper into the secrets I didn’t even know I was giving away.

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“Gianna,” she whispered, “Are you... does he touch you? The way a man is supposed to touch his wife?”

“Yes,” I said softly, not understanding why her face was turning so pale.

She inhaled sharply, a ragged, horrified gasp that she tried to catch behind her teeth. She looked like she was going to be sick right there on the tile floor. “And how long... how long has that been happening?”

“Since I was thirteen,” I said, counting the years in my head, the numbers bouncing around before settling. “So almost three years now, because my birthday is in two months and I’ll be sixteen. You have to understand, Mom. I’m not leaving him. I can’t.”

A shadow fell over the table, Leone was standing right beside my seat. His warm hand came down on my shoulder,

“Time is up, Gianna,” he said, “Get up. We’re leaving.”

I looked from Leone’s hard jaw up to my mother’s pale face.

“Leone, please,” Mom gasped, her hands flying across the table to grab at my wrists again, “Just five more minutes. Please. We barely started talking. She’s my daughter.”

Leone didn’t even look down at her. He kept his eyes on the back wall, his lip curling into a sneer.

“I don’t give a shit what she is to you,” Leone said, “The boss said thirty minutes. Move your hands off her before I move them for you.”

Then, Leone looked down at me. Instantly, the ice in his face melted away. His eyes softened, turning warm and a small, reassuring smile touching his lips. He reached down with his other hand, sliding his fingers under my chin to tilt my face up.

“Come on, baby,” he murmured, his voice sweet and gentle, completely different from the monster who had just spoken to my mother, “Let’s go home. You’re crying again, and I don’t like it. I’ve got you.”

He pulled me up from the vinyl seat. My legs felt weak, like jelly, but Leone’s strong arm immediately wrapped around my waist. He began to guide me backward, away from the booth, his body acting like a wall between me and the rest of the world.

“Gianna! Wait!” Mom cried out.

She scrambled out of the booth. Leone didn’t stop walking, dragging me smoothly toward the exit, but Mom rushed forward. She didn’t try to touch me where Leone could block her. Instead, she lunged toward my free hand, the one hanging loosely at my side.

Before Leone could spin around to push her back, Mom’s fingers brushed mine.

She shoved something soft and small directly into my palm. My fingers automatically curled around it. It was the fluffy fur of the little brown teddy bear.

I looked back over my shoulder as Leone pushed the glass door open, the little bell jingling loudly above us.

Mom stood in the middle of the dirty tile floor, her chest heaving as she sobbed silently. She didn’t try to follow us into the cold air. She just locked her tear-stained eyes onto mine and gave me a single nod. Her gaze dropped down to my closed fist, then back to my face.

Trust me, her eyes begged.

Help me.

Janedoewritings

Author

Sorry, guys! I’m really busy right now and will probably stay busy with school for the whole week

I wrote this between classes.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 315

Gianna

“What have you been doing to yourself?” she wept, “My baby... what have you done?”

I couldn’t answer her. I couldn’t even feel my own body anymore. I just stood by the open door, staring down a the pile of my tools on the rug, my eyes completely blank and empty.

The room around me faded into a dull, distant blur as my mind retreated deep inside itself, into the dark, quiet space where her screams and her tears couldn’t reach me.

A slow heat started to burn under my skin. It wasn’t the kind of anger that made you want to scream or throw things. It was a cold, bone-deep exhaustion. I was just so tired.

But beneath the anger, a sharp spike of pure panic pierced my chest.

Raphael.

He was in here. I didn’t look toward the bathroom door, but I could feel his presence. He was in here somewhere, probably listening to every single word, watching every single piece of my ruined life get dragged out onto the floor.

A cold sweat broke out across my collarbone. I felt completely naked, stripped down to my very bones. The thought of him seeing this made my stomach violently churn.

Raphael was a man who carried himself like a king. He was powerful, cold, and hard. And now, he was watching how much of a mess I really was. He was looking at my broken pieces. In a second, he would look at me with either disgust or that soft, awful look. Pity.

He would feel sorry for the crazy girl who burned her own skin just to make the bouncing letters in her head go quiet.

My mom’s sobs turned into long, shaky gasps as she wiped her face with both hands, smearing the tears across her cheeks.

Using the edge of a shelf, she dragged her weak self up, forcing herself to stand. She didn’t look at me. Instead, her eyes dropped back down to the pile of tools scattered across the rug.

She bent down, her movements stiff and awkward, and began to gather the items. She picked up the thick wooden stick. She grabbed the metal blade, then, she scooped up the folded black cloth, the plastic water bottle, and the heavy electronic arc device.

She held them all clutched tightly against her chest, arms wrapped around them like she was protecting a pile of stolen treasure.

“I am taking all of it,” Mom said as she stepped out of the closet, her dragging foot scraping loud against the carpet as she faced me, “Every single piece. You are not going to keep doing this to yourself, Gianna. I won’t allow it.”

I stayed frozen by the door frame, my arms crossed over my chest, squeezing my own ribs so hard it hurt. I just watched her.

“From now on, I am keeping a close eye on you,” she whispered, “I am going to watch every move you make. I will check your room. I will check your body. You are not going to hide from me anymore.”

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She turned and began to walk toward the main bedroom door. I didn’t move to stop her. I didn’t ask for my things back. I just stood there in the closet.

A moment later, I heard the bedroom door opening and then slamming shut. The loud bang echoed through the walls, and the sound made my shoulders jump up in fear.

Then, I heard another door opening behind me. The soft click of the bathroom door swinging wide made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

He stepped out of his hiding place and into the closet with me. I could feel his gaze on me before I even saw him,

My chest squeezed and I kept my eyes glued straight down at the floor, staring at the empty spots on the rug where my wooden stick and the blade had just been lying.

I didn’t have the courage to look him in the eyes. I didn’t have the courage to even face him ever again.

I wanted the floor tiles to open up and swallow me whole. I wanted the dark rows of my clothes to swallow my body so he couldn’t see me. He knew everything now. He had heard my mother scream about the burns, heard her talk about my father, and he had seen the tools I used just to survive the noise in my own head.

“Gianna.”

Hearing him say my name made something hot and vicious explode inside my chest. All the panic, all the shame, and all the anger that I couldn’t throw at my mother suddenly turned around, looking for a target. And he was standing right there.

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“Don’t,” I snapped, as I finally lifted my head. I didn’t care that my face was wet with tears. I didn’t care that I looked crazy, “Just leave me alone. Get the fuck out of my room!”

Raphael didn’t even flinch at my tone, as if he fully expected it. He just took one slow step forward, his large body taking up too much space. “Gianna, we need to talk about-”

“I don’t need to talk to you about anything!” I screamed, stepping back until my spine hit the clothing racks.

I wanted him to get mad. I wanted him to yell back at me, to call me names, but he just stood there, his dark eyes watching me with this calmness that made me want to rip my own hair out.

“You must be having the absolute time of your life right now,” I taunted, a bitter, broken laugh ripping from my throat. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand, glaring at his perfect chest, at his perfect, unblemished skin. I bet you’re just loving this. You’re probably patting yourself on the back, telling yourself that you were right about me all along. You finally have proof of what a total freak I am.”

“That’s not what I’m thinking,” he muttered, his jaw tightening just a little bit, “I never—”

“Oh, really?” I mocked, cutting him off before he could try to fix it. My voice rose higher, dripping with pure venom as I threw every single ounce of my frustration at him. “Come on, Raphael! You can say it! You’re probably laughing your head off inside. It all makes perfect sense to you now, doesn’t it?”

I took a sharp, gasping breath, my chest burning as the old humiliation from the office rushed back to the surface, choking me.

“Does it make you feel good about yourself?” I snarled, leaning forward, my eyes narrowing as I dragged his own past actions out into the light. “Remember all those times you stood over my desk at the office? Remember how you yelled at me because I wasn’t good enough for you, or for your stupid office? It made you feel so big and powerful, didn’t it? Screaming at the stupid girl who couldn’t even put the files in the right order.”

I shook my head, my lips curling inward to hide how badly they were shaking, though my chin was still trembling violently.

“You’re just so perfect, aren’t you?” I whispered, “You never make a mistake. You never mess up. You’re this big, successful businessman in your own right. You didn’t even need your family’s backing to build a whole empire on your own. And look at me. I’m nothing. I’m a complete mess on the floor, and you get to stand there and watch me get my toys taken away by my mommy. Go ahead and laugh, Raphael! Tell me how pathetic I look! Tell me I’m useless! Tell me I am a worthless void! That’s your favorite thing to do anyway, isn’t it?!”

I was breathing so hard my shoulders were heaving, my fists clenched so tight my fingernails were cutting deep crescents into my palms. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to push him so far away that he would never be able to look at me, let alone look at me with pity.

“I never in my entire life called you a worthless void... or anything close to it,” his voice cut through, so incredibly soft that it only pissed me off more, “Yes, I yelled at you, Gianna. But I have yelled at hundreds of employees, too. I wasn’t singling you out. We can talk about this...”

Raphael stayed perfectly still, but I saw the small muscle in his jaw jump again. He didn’t look away from my face, not even when a heavy tear slid off my chin and hit the carpet between our feet.

“I didn’t know,” he said, “Gianna, I really didn’t know anything about you, you can’t blame me for something I didn’t even know. I’m sorry for-”

“Oh, you’re sorry?! So now you feel bad for the poor little disabled girl?” I mocked, “Is that what this is? You’re

+15 Benve going to be nice to me now because you found out about this? I don’t want your kindness, Raphael. I don’t want your pity. It makes me sick.”

I crossed my arms tightly over my chest, burying my hands into the thick white fabric of my bathrobe so he couldn’t see how badly my fingers were trembling. I felt so exposed under the bright ceiling lights, with the empty spots on the floor reminding me that my safety tools were completely gone.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 317

“Just go,” I whispered, the anger suddenly draining out of me, leaving nothing but a vast, hollow crater of exhaustion. My shoulders slumped, and I couldn’t even find the energy to keep my voice sharp, “You saw the freak show. You heard my mother. You know all my disgusting little secrets now. Just go back to your perfect little life and leave me alone.”

I dropped my gaze back to his feet, unable to look at him for another second.

The silence between us grew so loud I could hear the faint sound of his breathing. I stayed completely frozen, my chin tucked against my chest, waiting for the sound of his feet turning around on the carpet. I just wanted the door to close. I wanted to be alone in the dark where I didn’t have to be a person anymore.

But he didn’t walk away.

Instead, a sudden warmth moved through the air, and before I could even look up, his hand reached out toward my shoulder. His fingers were open, his palm moving slowly, trying to offer a soft touch.

The sight of his hand coming toward me made something wild and frantic snap in my brain.

Smack!

The sound of my palm hitting his cheek was loud. The force of the blow stung my own hand, sending a vibration right up my arm.

Raphael’s head snapped to the side from the impact. He froze, his hand remaining suspended in the empty air between us, his eyes wide with utter shock. He didn’t move a single muscle, his jaw clenching so tight the skin around his mouth turned white. A dark red mark was already starting to form across his pale cheekbone.

“Don’t you dare touch me!” I shrieked, “I am not in the right mind to sleep with you right now, Raphael! God! I can’t fucking believe you!”

I let out a harsh, breathless laugh that sounded completely hysterical, my tears spilling over my cheeks in a hot, blinding rush.

“Is that what you think this is?” I taunted, my voice shaking with pure disgust as I pointed a trembling finger at his chest, “You think because I’m breaking down, because my mother just did that to me, that I’m just going to let you use my body? You are sick! You are absolutely disgusting if you think I’m going to let you near me right now!”

Raphael stared at me, and for the first time since I had known him, he looked completely lost. Total disbelief washed over his hard features, his mouth opening slightly as if he wanted to speak, to defend himself, to tell me I was completely wrong. He looked at my wild, terrified eyes, and then down at his own hand, realizing exactly how I had taken his gesture.

He hadn’t been asking for that.

He had just been trying to hold me.

But the air in the room was too poisoned by my past.

Slowly, the shock in his eyes faded, replaced by a cold understanding. He let his hand drop back down to his side, his fingers curling into a tight fist. He didn’t yell. He didn’t get angry. He just closed his eyes for a single second, swallowed hard, and gave a slow nod to himself.

“Fine,” he muttered, his voice flat and completely devoid of life.

He finally pushed past me, as he walked out of the closet, his broad shoulders passing through the doorway

+15 8gr egre without a single backward glance. A second later, the heavy wooden bedroom door opened and clicked shut behind him.

He was gone.

The moment the lock clicked into place, the last string holding me together snapped.

My knees completely gave out beneath the weight of my white bathrobe. My body hit the carpet hard, my hands scraping against the floor as I collapsed into a tight, trembling ball.

I buried my face deep into my arms, my forehead pressing against the rough fabric of the rug, and finally just let it go. I didn’t try to hold the noise back anymore. A loud, broken sob tore from my throat, followed by another, until I was shaking so violently I couldn’t even catch my breath.

Janedoewritings Author

Swipe up.

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Chapter 318

Gianna

15 Bar

I snuck out of the house in the middle of the night, using the hidden passage Silvio had shown me.

And then I walked and walked until my legs throbbed. The guilt inside my chest pressed down on my lungs until I could barely breathe.

What had I done?

The memory of the loud smack echoed in my ears over and over again. I could still feel the burn in my palm from where I had hit his cheek. The look of total shock in Raphael’s eyes flashed behind my eyelids every time I blinked. He hadn’t been trying to take advantage of me. He had just been trying to hold me together while I broke. And I had treated him like a monster.

A strange, hollow ache throbbed in the center of my chest. I missed him. It was a stupid, terrifying feeling, but I wanted him next to me. I wanted the sound of his breathing to drown out the screaming in my head.

Without my tools, the itch under my skin was growing louder. My thighs felt like they were burning, begging for the blue current to make the noise stop. My fingers twitched against my pockets, empty and useless. The urge to hurt myself flared up so hot it made my vision blur. I needed a distraction. I needed a safe place.

I kept walking until I finally reached the street where the Rose Garden stood,

A small, breathless smile started to spread across my face as I turned the corner, my eyes searching for the familiar front door. I just wanted Mama D to hold me. I wanted my friends to laugh and tell me everything was going to be okay.

But the smile completely vanished from my lips.

I stopped dead in my tracks, my sneakers scraping against the pavement. The heavy fabric banners that usually hung from the brick walls, the ones with the pretty pink roses, were gone. The bright, welcoming lights over the entrance were dark. The large sign over the door had been ripped down, leaving only ugly, gray adhesive marks on the brick.

Everything to do with the Rose Garden was just... gone.

“No,” I whispered, my voice sounding tiny in the empty street.

I rushed forward, my hands hitting the glass of the front door. I pressed my face against the cool pane, trying to see inside. The beautiful lobby with the soft couches and the flower vases was completely empty. There was nothing but bare floors, exposed wires hanging from the ceiling, and a few cardboard boxes stacked in a corner.

Two men in dirty work overalls were moving a wooden desk across the bare floor inside.

Panic slammed into my chest. Where was Mama D? Where were my friends? Had Cole done this?

I grabbed the metal door handle and rattled it frantically, the loud metal clanging echoing down the street. “Mama D!” I choked out, my tears finally spilling over. “Please! Is anyone there?!”

The lock clicked, and one of the workers pushed the door open a few inches, wiping sweat from his forehead with a dirty rag. He looked at my wild eyes, my wet cheeks, and my shaking hands.

“Hey, kid, calm down,” he said, “The center is closed. They moved out three days ago.”

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“Moved?” I gasped, “Moved where? Where is the lady who runs it? Denise?”

The worker blinked, looking at me closer. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of white paper. “Wait. Are you Gianna?”

I nodded fast, my heart stopping. “Yes. Yes, I’m Gianna.”

“The lady left this for you,” he said, shoving the paper into my hand. “She said if a girl with brown hair and big green eyes came looking, I was supposed to give her this address. Said it was the new spot.”

I mumbled a quick thank you, snatched the paper, my eyes scanning the messy handwriting. It took my tangled brain a long, painful minute to make the numbers and letters sit still, but finally, I read the address.

I turned and ran. I took a bus and kept my head down, clutching the paper tight in my fist until my knuckles turned white.

Finally, I found the address.

It wasn’t a big, beautiful space like before. It was just a small, run-down house squeezed between two empty lots with overgrown weeds. The white paint on the porch was peeling away in long strips, and the front window was cracked, held together by a thick piece of grey tape.

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Chapter 319

I walked up the wooden steps, my whole body trembling from the cold and the fear. I reached out, my fingers wrapping around the rusty brass doorknob.

I turned it, pushed the door open, and stepped inside.

The small front room was packed. Sitting on a mismatched plaid couch and crowded onto the faded rug were all of them. Bri was painting her nails a bright neon pink, Emma and Morgan were sharing a bag of chips, Tasha and Jas were arguing over a phone screen. And sitting in a rocking chair in the corner, a cup of tea held in her hands, was Mama D.

The front door was loud as I stepped inside. Every single head snapped up. For a second, the tiny room went completely dead silent.

“Gianna!” Bri shrieked, dropping her nail polish directly onto the carpet.

In a flash, they scrambled off the couch and up from the floor, rushing toward me. Before I could even blink, five pairs of arms wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me into a massive hug. The familiar warmth of them hit me all at once, making my throat tighten.

“Oh my god, where the hell have you been?!” Emma scolded, pulling back just enough to smack my arm, though her eyes were wet, “We’ve been calling you for two weeks straight! We thought you were dead!”

“You literally scared us to death, G,” Jas chimed in, squeezing my waist tight. “Don’t you ever do that again.”

Morgan and Tasha were both talking at the same time, and Mama D slowly stood up from her rocking chair. She walked over, her face lined with deep exhaustion, but her eyes were full of a soft, motherly relief. She reached out and gathered my face in her warm palms.

“Look at you,” Mama D murmured, her voice shaking slightly. “You’re freezing, baby. Come sit down.”

“What happened?” I whispered, as I looked around the tiny, cramped room, at the peeling wallpaper and the small window with the gray tape, “What is this place? What happened to the Rose Garden?”

Instantly, the laughter died.

The girls all went completely silent, dropping their arms away from me one by one. Bri and Morgan left the room. While the rest sat back in their places.

Mama D let her hands drop from my cheeks. She let out a long, heavy sigh that seemed to drain the last bit of strength from her body.

“Come sit with me, Gianna,” she said softly, turning back toward her rocking chair.

“No,” I said, “Mama D, please. Tell me. Why did we leave the Rose Garden? Why is everything gone?”

Mama D stopped. She didn’t look at the girls, she kept her eyes on her teacup as she sat back down.

“I sold it, baby,” she said, her voice flat and quiet in the dead room.

I blinked, the words bouncing backward in my brain. “You... you sold it?”

“I had to,” Mama D whispered, finally looking up at me, her eyes full of a deep, painful sorrow, “Cole’s people... they were coming every night, Gianna. The threats were getting

worse. I couldn’t keep the girls safe there anymore. So I put the building on the market. I sold the property, took every single dollar of that money, and I gave it to Cole.”

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My heart stopped completely, dropping straight into my stomach.

“I made a good sum from the sale,” Mama D continued, trying to force a small, reassuring smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “It was enough to pay off a huge chunk of what we owed. Cole took the money, and he agreed to give us more time. He promised to keep his boys away from us while we figure out how to raise the rest of the debt. No more threats. No more guns at the back door.”

A terrible, suffocating heartbreak slaitimed into my chest, breaking whatever was left of my spirit.

“But... the Rose Garden,” I choked out, the tears finally bursting over my lower eyelids and streaming down my cold cheeks. “It’s gone.”

I looked at the girls. None of them would meet my eyes. The Rose Garden wasn’t just a building. It was our sanctuary. It was the only place in the entire city of Chicago where we could lock the doors and feel safe from the monsters outside. It was the only home these girls had ever known, the only place where Mama D could protect them.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 320

I was busy staring at the peeling wallpaper, when Morgan and Bri walked out of the tiny kitchen. The rest of the girls instantly shifted, stepping back to form a small circle around me, their faces forcing themselves to brighten into soft smiles.

In Morgan’s hands was a tiny, slightly lopsided vanilla cake and right in the center sat a single, small pink candle.

“Happy birthday to you,” they started to sing, their voices lifting together in the cramped front room.

“Happy birthday to you... happy birthday dear Gianna.... happy birthday to you.”

I froze. The words inside my head stopped bouncing, locking completely in place as a heavy wave of shock washed over me. I stared at the little burning candle, my mouth falling open in a small, breathless gasp.

My birthday.

With everything that had happened, my mind had completely fractured. I had completely forgotten my own life.

“Make a wish, G,” Tasha whispered gently, nudging my elbow.

I looked at the five girls standing around me in this tiny, run-down house. They had just lost their home. They had been forced into hiding in the poorest part of the city. They had absolutely nothing left, yet they had still found a way to buy a tiny cake and a single candle just to make me smile.

The hot tears kept pouring down my face, but this time, it wasn’t just from the heartbreak. It was from the weight of how much they loved me.

Please, I prayed to whatever was listening in the dark. Give me a way to save them. Give me a way to buy back the Rose Garden, to pay off Cole, and to get Mama D and these girls out of this horrible place.

And I wished that Raphael would forgive me...

I leaned forward, my chest aching, and blew out the tiny flame.

“Yay!” Bri cheered, clapping her hands as Morgan set the tiny, lopsided cake down on a chipped wooden coffee table.

“Okay, look, we know it’s not much,” Emma said, stepping forward with her hands tucked behind her back. A nervous, excited smile broke across her face. “But we all chipped in. Every single one of us. Even Mama D.”

She pulled her hands out from behind her back and held out a small, rectangular box wrapped in a piece of crumpled pink tissue paper.

I looked down at the box, my brow furrowing as the shape started to line up in my head. It was a phone.

My heart did a painful flip.

“No,” I said immediately, taking a step back and shaking my head so hard my hair flew across my face. I pushed Emma’s hands away. “No, guys, absolutely not. I can’t take that.”

“Gianna, shut up and take the box,” Tasha groaned, rolling her eyes, but her voice was soft.

“I’m serious!” I cried, “You guys just sold the Rose Garden! You’re living in a house with cracked windows and peeling walls, and you spent your money on a phone for me? You need that money for Cole! You need it to buy food, to pay rent, to stay safe! Take it back and get your money back right now.”

“Hey! Stop it,” Jas scolded, stepping in front of Emma and grabbing the box, shoving it forcefully right against my

+15 BOS chest. She glared at me, but her eyes were sparkling with love. “Do you think we’re stupid? We know we’re broke, Gianna. But you’ve been using that old, cracked phone for two years before you lost it.”

“We wanted you to have something nice,” Morgan added quietly from beside the coffee table. “After everything you did for us. Something that actually works. Something that belongs completely to you.”

“And besides,” Mama D smiled from her rocking chair, a soft, knowing look in her eyes, “How are we supposed to check up on our favorite girl if her phone is always dead? You take it, Gianna. It’s a gift from your sisters. Don’t you dare insult our hustle by trying to give it back.”

My fingers slowly curled around the pink tissue paper. I looked at all of them, my vision blurring completely as another fresh wave of tears hit my eyes. They had literally sacrificed their own safety net, yet their first thought was making sure I could see the words on my screen clearly.

“You guys are jerks,” I sobbed, a wet, broken laugh ripping from my throat as I pulled the box tight against my chest.