

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 4

Gianna



I was back at the Rose Garden, which was basically a fancy way of saying a place where girls got dressed up to be arm candy for guys with too much money.

“I’m telling you, Mama D, they aren’t humans,” I groaned, throwing my head back so hard my ponytail nearly hit the floor. “They are like... six different flavors of Doom. It’s a Doom Buffet.”

Mama D, the only woman I knew who could look scary while wearing a floral robe and holding a cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. She looked us over like a mother hen guarding a bunch of sparkly chicks, “They’re Capones, G.”

“I saw more guns today than I’ve seen in my entire life!” I said, waving my hands around, “And they don’t even hide them. It’s like, ‘Oh, pass the salt, and also, here is my Glock.’ And the staring! Oh my god, the staring. They didn’t just look at me; they stared at me like I’d personally broken into their house and stolen their favorite children.”

Tasha laughed, her dark skin glowing under the vanity lights as she dusted gold shimmer over her collarbones, “Girl, at least they’re rich. If I’m going to be stared at by a man with a weapon, he better have a private jet and a designer suit.”

“It’s not funny, Tash! One of them, Adriano looked like he wanted to snap his fork in half just because my mom breathed,” I said, leaning over to grab a hair tie.

Jasmine was sitting right next to me, her dark hair pulled back as she carefully pinned a small, jeweled nose stud into place. She didn’t look worried at all. She just glanced at me through the mirror with a tiny, wicked smile.

“I don’t know, G,” she teased, “Maybe they weren’t trying to scare you. Maybe they just liked the view. You did wear that dress that makes your waist look like it doesn’t exist.”

“Their stares were hostile, Jas. Extremely hostile,” I muttered, but my mind immediately drifted to the one brother who stared at me harder than everyone else.

Raphael.

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine just thinking about him. He was the one I was most afraid of. He sat there with those sharp glasses and those eyes that felt like they were scanning my hard drive. Every time he looked at me, my heart stopped. I was so sure, so absolutely positive, that he was going to stand up, point a finger at me, and tell everyone he’d seen me at the Gold Room.

I'd been so careful. The club had dim lights, and I wore that heavy mask and the wig. He probably didn't recognize me.

I took a shaky breath, feeling a wave of relief wash over me all over again. He hadn't said a word. He'd just looked at me like I was a bug he didn't feel like squashing yet. He definitely didn't recognize me. He couldn't have. If he knew his future stepsister was the same girl he'd watched on a stage, I'd be at the bottom of a lake by now.

"I just need to stay out of his way," I whispered to myself, grabbing my brush. "I'll be fine. He's never going to find out. There is no way."

"What are you mumbling about?" Tasha asked, nudging me.

"Nothing," I lied quickly, forcing a bright, fake smile, "Just hoping my luck holds out. I'm going to go help Mama D with the inventory in the back."

In the corner, Morgan was vibrating. She was the baby of our group, barely eighteen. Her straight, jet-black hair was pulled into a high, sleek ponytail, and she kept tugging at the hem of her tight dress. She looked like she was about to go to her first prom, except the prom was a high event gala or something with men twice her age.

"Are they... are they going to come here?" Morgan asked, "The Capones?"

I softened, reaching over to pat her hand, "No. They stay in their castles. This place is too 'low-rent' for them."

She'd been practicing her sultry walk in the hallway for three hours.

"You'll be fine," Bri said, walking over and putting a protective arm around Morgan's shoulders, "Just remember, we look at them, but we don't see them. We're just here for the paper."

Emma walked over, her eyes soft as she squeezed my hand. "G, you don't have to go back to that house. You can stay here. Your mom... she can live her new life with them, but you don't have to be part of that."

I gave her a small, grateful smile. These girls were like my family. I met them when I was sixteen, five years ago, after I'd run away from a life that felt like it was crushing me.

They didn't ask questions, they just opened the door and took me in. It took my mother four months to track me down, and when she finally did, she tried to cut them out of my life like they were a disease. She thought she'd succeeded. She had no idea that not a single day had passed in five years where I hadn't talked to them.

Mama Denise ran the Rose Garden, but it wasn't what people thought. These girls were escorts, they were the arm candy for the elite. They went to the galas, they danced at the high-class events, but they were strictly off-limits. Mama D was like a lioness, no one was allowed to touch her girls. Not ever.

I wasn't officially on the roster, but I was always here. Since I didn't have a real job, I made myself useful. These women were the ones who stepped up when my world was

falling apart. They helped me pay for my mom's spine surgery. They kept us afloat when Senator Kinsley—Jules' father—died and left us drowning in mountains of debt.

Every time I needed a miracle, Mama D used her connections to make it happen.

So, yeah, I owed them everything. Helping out was the least I could do. Whether it was inventory, or filling in when they needed someone to look pretty at a party, I was there. They were my safety net.

“And leave my mother alone with those six giants from hell? No way,” I said, wrinkling my nose, “I have to be there for Jules. Someone has to make sure she doesn't accidentally become a mobster.”

“Which of you were at the Gold Room two nights ago?” Mama D asked, clapping her hands to get our attention. “There's a black car idling at the curb for you. A private request.”

My heart did a weird little stutter, a cold prickle of sweat hitting the back of my neck. “A request? From who?”

“High-end client,” Mama D said, “He sent cash up front just to get the car moving. He's at some estate out in the woods called The Void.”

Tasha and Brianna shared a look, then turned to Mama D.

“We were all there, Mama,” Tasha said, stepping forward while adjusting her earring. “Me, Bri, and G. But Gianna is off duty tonight. She isn’t on the books for house calls.”

“Yeah,” Bri added, nodding toward me. “The guy probably saw one of us. Send Tasha or me. We’re already dressed and ready to go.”

Mama D looked at the thick envelope of cash in her hand, then back at the girls, “Fine. Go on then. I’ve already vetted the guy, well, his people. They gave their word you’ll come back untouched. If he just wants a Gold Room girl, one of you will do.”

I watched them head for the door, and suddenly my heart hammered against my ribs.

He was there. My stepbrother. What if... what if he did recognize me? What if he was the one who sent that car?

No. That was impossible. I wore a mask, a wig, and the lighting was garbage.

“You okay, G?” Mama D asked, noticing my pale face.

“I’m fine,” I lied, “Just... tired. I should get going. I need to get back before mum notice I’m missing.”

I gripped my coat, my knuckles white, and stayed hidden in the shadows until I heard the low rumble of the car engine fade away. Tasha and Brianna were gone. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, leaning my forehead against the cool metal of the lockers.

I was safe.

Then, the world exploded.

The heavy front doors of the club didn't just open, they hit the wall so hard that I jumped, my heart leaping into my throat.

"Where's my money, Denise?" a voice boomed.

I peered around the corner. It was Cole Mercer. The leader of the Lake Street Reapers. He walked in swinging a heavy aluminum baseball bat. Behind him, four of his guys followed.

Smash.

Cole swung the bat, shattering a shelf of glass bottles behind the bar. Shards of crystal flew everywhere, raining down.

“The week is up!” Cole yelled, his eyes wide and manic. He stepped up to a table and flipped it over with one hand, the wood splintering, “I’m tired of waiting. This place looks busy. You’ve got my cut, or I start breaking legs.”

Mama D stepped forward, her face was cold though I could see her fingers trembling, “Cole, stop. You’re scaring the girls.”

“I don’t give a damn about their feelings!” he snapped, bringing the bat down on a chair, snapping the legs like toothpicks.

He walked over to where the girls were huddled. He stopped in front of Morgan. She was shaking so hard she could barely stand, her eyes huge and wet with tears. Cole leaned in close. He reached out and tangled his dirty fingers in her sleek black hair, pulling her head back.

“You’re the new one, right?” he sneered, “Maybe if Denise doesn’t have the cash, I just take you instead. We can find a way for you to pay the debt.”

“Get your hands off her!” I snapped, stepping forward before I could talk myself out of it.

Cole turned his head, a slow, ugly smile spreading across his face, “Ah, the little scientist. You got something for me, G?”

Mama D rushed to her desk and pulled out a thick envelope, “Here! It’s all I have right now, Cole. Take it and leave.”

Cole snatched the envelope, counted it quickly, and spat on the floor. “Seven? You owe me ten, Denise. You’re short.”

He raised the bat again, eyeing a massive floor-to-ceiling mirror.

“Wait!” I shouted. I reached into my bag, pulling out the three thousand from the tip I received two nights ago. I walked over and slammed the stack of bills onto the bar, “There. Three thousand. That makes ten. Now leave us alone.”

Cole picked up the cash, thumbing through it with a greasy smirk. He looked at me, then at the terrified girls. He stepped away from Morgan, finally letting go of her hair.

“Next time, don’t make me come down here and break your toys,” Cole said, pointing the bat at Mama D’s chest. “Next week, I want twelve. Interest for making me wait. Don’t be late, or I’ll burn this Garden to the ground with all of you inside.”

He laughed, a dry, hacking sound, and signaled his men. They kicked over one last lamp on their way out, leaving us in the flickering darkness.

Morgan collapsed into a chair, sobbing into her hands. I stood there, staring at my empty bag, my hands finally stopping their shake only to turn cold as ice.

“You didn’t have to do that, G,” Mama D whispered, “That was for you. You needed that for your college tuition. Your future.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and shook my head, not letting myself regret it for even a second. I walked straight over to Morgan, who was still trembling like a leaf, and pulled her small frame against my chest. I held her tight, letting her hide her face in my shoulder.

“I’ll figure it out, Mama,” I said.

I smoothed back Morgan’s hair, feeling her tears soak into my shirt.

“Don’t worry about the tuition, okay? We’ve got each other’s back. Always. Money comes and goes, but we’re family. We’ll find a way to fix this. I promise.”

I meant it, but as I looked at the wreckage of the room, I knew I was in deep.

My bank account was officially at zero, and my stomach felt like it was tied in knots. I had nothing left, no safety net, no backup plan, just the crushing weight of everything falling apart at once.

Ruby Walker