My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 401

Raphael

—

The trees still creaked softly above us while the cold wind moved through the branches. Somewhere far away, water dripped steadily into the creek behind the eastern ridge. The sensors hidden through the property blinked faintly on my watch screen every few seconds.

But compared to the sounds she had been making five minutes ago?

Yeah.

Quiet.

I sat back against the tree trunk, breathing slowly while Gianna stayed curled against my chest in the leaves. Her legs were tangled with mine, her black dress still wrinkled all the way up around her thighs from everything we had just done.

She looked exhausted... used up in that boneless kind of way that came after too much adrenaline.

Her cheek rested against my shoulder while she stared up through the trees. Her hair was a complete mess now. Leaves were caught in it. One long strand stuck to the gloss on her mouth.

I reached over without thinking and pulled it away from her lips.

Her eyes flicked toward mine immediately and a smile pulled at the corner of my mouth before she looked away again.

The moonlight kept catching against the ribbon around her throat. My eyes stayed on it longer than they should have. It looked wrong now like I'd ruined something neat and pretty just by touching it.

Fair enough.

That was usually what happened when I got too interested in things.

Gianna shifted beside me with a small groan, stretching one leg over mine. Her body immediately tensed after, probably feeling every muscle in her thighs.

I snorted quietly.

She glared up at me. “Don’t.”

“You’re the one who kept running.”

“It’s not from running, I feel sore…”

I shook my head slowly while she kept glaring at me like she genuinely believed she had survived some kind of traumatic event instead of enthusiastically participating in it.

I rubbed a hand over my mouth, trying not to laugh again.

For a second neither of us said anything. The wind moved softly through the branches overhead while she stayed curled against my side, warm and exhausted.

Then she shifted again and another tiny wince crossed her face.

I raised an eyebrow, “You good?”

She immediately straightened, “I’m fine.”

“Mhm.”

“I am.”

“You look like your legs are about to file a police report.

That earned me a sharp smack against my chest. I caught her wrist easily before she could hit me again. Her fingers stayed trapped in my hand while she glared up at me.

“You’re unbelievably annoying after sex,” she informed me.

I laughed quietly and let her wrist go. She stayed there for another moment before exhaling heavily and dropping back against me again, much more carefully this time.

“You know,” she muttered, “I genuinely thought I was going to die when that trap grabbed me.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

“I flew into the air, Raphael.”

“You screamed too.”

“Because I was upside down!”

“You screamed my name.”

“That was not romantic.”

I looked down at her instantly, “Who said anything about romantic?”

Her mouth snapped shut, a strange look crossed her face and then she shook her head, “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said quickly.

“Sure.”

“I didn’t,” she added defensively.

“You looked pretty romantic wrapped around my-”

“Finish that sentence and I’ll push you into the creek.”

I laughed again, louder this time. I couldn’t remember the last time being around someone felt this easy.

Usually after sex I wanted silence. Most women started talking too much after a while. Asking stupid questions. Fishing for reassurance. Acting different once they thought they had some emotional foothold on me.

Gianna just threatened violence every few minutes and argued like a feral cat.

Way better.

Then her eyebrows pulled together slightly. Something clicked behind her eyes, “Wait,” she said slowly.

I looked down at her.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 402

“When I came here the first time...” she started, “there were people everywhere.”

I stayed quiet.

“There were girls running through the woods with me. There were men everywhere too.” She pushed herself up slightly onto one elbow, looking around at the dark trees again, “Tonight it’s just us.”

I looked out into the woods instead of at her. Motion sensors blinked across the security map on my watch face Guards along the outer perimeter. Cameras online. Patrol route clear.

“I cleared the grounds,” I said simply.

Her forehead wrinkled, “You what?”

“I shut the hunt down tonight.”

She blinked at me, “You cancelled the entire thing?”

“Moved it,” I corrected, “The others are on the south property.”

Her mouth opened slightly before she looked around again, finally understanding why the woods had felt so empty all night.

“You did all that because of me?”

I frowned slightly at the question itself, “What did you think I was gonna do?” I asked, “Let random people wander around these woods while you were out here?”

Her eyes held mine carefully now.

I shook my head once, leaning back against the tree again, “Absolutely fucking not.”

The thought alone made something ugly shift low in my chest. The idea of one of those drunk idiots seeing Gianna hanging upside down from my tree like that, flushed, laughing, dress around her waist, looking at me with those huge green eyes...

Yeah.

No.

I wasn’t insane.

“Those men pay stupid amounts of money to come here,” I said flatly, “Some of them are decent. Some aren’t. I’m not risking one of them seeing you.”

Her gaze stayed fixed on my face.

“And the women?”

I shrugged one shoulder, “Same answer.”

She looked at me for another long second like she was trying to pull something out of my head that even I couldn’t explain properly.

I exhaled slowly through my nose.

“You’re family,” I said finally, “That means people around you get screened differently. Situations around you

+15 Bartus get handled differently.”

Her lashes lowered slightly, “And me hanging upside down sucking your soul out through your dick falls under family protection?””

A laugh ripped out of me before I could stop it.

Jesus Christ.

I rubbed a hand over my face, still half laughing. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I actually don’t.”

I looked down at her again and there it was. That look she got sometimes, the one that made me feel a little.... uneasy.

“I mean,” I said slowly, “that I know exactly how men look at women in places like this.”

Her expression hardened slightly at that, “And?”

“And I didn’t want anybody looking at you that way.”

“Because I’m your stepsister.”

“Because you’re under my protection.”

The second the words left my mouth, her expression changed again. Her whole face closed off slightly, like I’d said the exact wrong thing.

I frowned, “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was definitely not nothing.”

She shrugged one shoulder and looked out toward the trees, “I just forgot who I was talking to for a second.”

Gianna pushed herself upright. Dry leaves clung to her bare legs as she stood, brushing dirt off her legs with sharp, irritated movements. I watched her tug the black dress back down over her hips with tight little jerks.

“You’re doing that thing again,” I said.

“What thing?”

“Getting pissed off without explaining why.”

“I’m not pissed off.”

“Bullshit. You were fine thirty seconds ago.”

I stared at her while she fixed her hair with shaky fingers. The moonlight caught the side of her face and I noticed the redness around her eyes again. Her mascara had smudged slightly beneath them.

I stood up off the forest floor and zipped my pants properly this time while watching her, “Gianna.”

“What?”

“What did I say?”

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“Nothing.”

“You fucking changed moods in the middle of a sentence.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 403

She started walking toward the path without looking at me, and I followed her immediately, “Can we not do this right now?”

She kept walking faster through the trees while I stayed right behind her.

“Seriously,” I said, “What the fuck did I do this time?”

“Nothing.”

The closer we got to the lights near the main grounds, the more closed off she became. I could physically see her retreating back into herself. It made something uncomfortable settle under my ribs.

“Gianna.”

She stopped so suddenly I almost walked into her then she turned around. Her eyes hit mine with enough force to stop me cold.

“No reason, okay?” she snapped. “You didn’t do anything.”

I opened my mouth immediately, but she beat me to it.

“I just…” her voice cracked slightly before she swallowed it back down, “I need a shower.”

The anger drained out of her face too quickly after that and suddenly she just looked exhausted.

“I feel gross,” she said quietly.

My jaw tightened instantly, “You feel gross because of me?”

Her eyes widened slightly like she hadn’t expected that question then she looked down at the dirt on her legs instead.

“I don’t know,” she admitted softly, “I just need to wash everything off.”

I stepped closer before I even thought about it. “Mess.”

She flinched a little at the nickname this time and that bothered me even more. I reached for her arm carefully, but she pulled away before I could touch her.

“I’m tired, Raphael.”

I stared at her for a long second before exhaling slowly through my nose, “Fine,” I muttered, taking a step back.

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I dropped into the leather chair in front of the main monitors and rolled my neck slowly. My muscles still felt tight from chasing her through the woods.

Worth it.

A faint sound of running water echoed from the private bathroom down the hall.

Then I unlocked my phone and opened the delivery app automatically because I already knew what was going to happen in about twenty minutes.

She was going to come out of that shower starving.

Apparently sex turns Gianna into a fucking raccoon digging through cabinets at three in the morning.

I leaned back in the chair slightly while scrolling through restaurants.

Burger place.

Fries.

Milkshake.

Extra cheese.

I paused for a second before adding mozzarella sticks too because she ate those aggressively for some reason.

My mouth twitched faintly.

The girl could deepthroat me hanging upside down from a tree and still destroy junk food like an exhausted college athlete afterward.

I placed the order and tossed my phone onto the desk beside me just as the sound of the shower stopped.

A few minutes passed quietly after that then the door opened. I looked up automatically and froze for half a second.

Gianna stepped into the room wrapped in a white towel from chest to thigh. Damp hair clung to her shoulders and down her back in dark wet strands. Steam still followed her out from the bathroom behind her.

But that wasn’t what caught my attention.

It was her eyes.

Red.

The whites looked irritated, faintly bloodshot around the edges and slightly puffy.

My brows pulled together immediately, “The fuck happened to your eyes?”

She blinked at me once like the question confused her, “Oh,” she rubbed one eye lazily with the towel, “Probably because you shoved your dick halfway into my lungs.”

I stared at her. She stared back. Then I barked out a laugh before I could stop myself.

“Jesus Christ.”

“What?” she muttered, “You asked.”

I shook my head slowly while looking back at her eyes again.

They were definitely irritated.

I leaned forward in the chair slightly, “Does it hurt?”

She frowned, swallowed and then shrugged, “A little.”

“You should’ve told me earlier.”

Her eyebrows lifted instantly at that, “Why?” she asked. “Were you gonna apologize to my throat?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 404

“No,” I said flatly, “I would’ve adjusted the angle.”

Gianna walked farther into the room barefoot, drying her hair absently with another towel she had thrown over her shoulder.

My eyes dragged over her automatically, “You hungry?” I asked.

Her head snapped toward me instantly, then her expression changed slightly. “...Maybe.”

I pointed toward the desk, “Food’s coming.”

Her eyes narrowed immediately, “Really?”

“You act like I haven’t met you before.”

She looked offended, “I don’t eat that much.”

I laughed outright this time, “Mess, I watched you eat cold leftover pasta directly from the container at four in the morning.”

“That was one time.”

“You dipped garlic bread into ranch dressing.”

“It was good.”

“You ate mozzarella sticks while sitting on the kitchen counter in your pajamas.”

She blinked at me. “That sounds completely normal, but why the hell do you even know all this?”

I looked at her flatly, “I run the security system in the house, Gianna.”

I rubbed a hand over my mouth, still laughing quietly under my breath. Gianna walked closer finally before dropping into the chair beside mine with a tired groan. She tucked one leg underneath herself carefully, wincing halfway through the movement.

I noticed immediately, “So it is from the running, right?”

She glared at me instantly, “I hate you.”

“No you don’t.”

“After tonight? Maybe a little.’

I smirked faintly and slid a bottle of water across the desk toward her. She took it without arguing.

For a while neither of us said anything.

The monitors hummed quietly around us while Gianna drank her water beside me wrapped in nothing but a towel and my bite marks.

And somewhere in the middle of the silence, I realized this felt dangerously close to domestic.

Which was ridiculous.

Because there was absolutely nothing normal about me fucking my stepsister.

I sent one of my men a quick text to bring the food up to the control room before heading for the shower myself

The moment the hot water poured over my shoulders, every tight muscle in my body finally started to unclench.

I stood there longer than I meant to, letting the heat run down my back while my brain replayed flashes from the woods whether I wanted it to or not.

By the time I stepped back into the hallway wearing fresh black sweats and a T-shirt, the smell of burgers and fries had filled the control room.

And it was quiet.

I walked inside and immediately noticed the food sitting half untouched on the desk. That alone told me something was wrong. Gianna abandoning fries was unnatural.

Then I saw her.

She wasn't sitting curled in the chair anymore. She was standing near the long metal desk beneath the monitor wall, completely still.

My towel from earlier had been replaced with one of my spare shirts. It swallowed her whole, hanging to the middle of her thighs with the sleeves rolled messily to her elbows. Her damp hair was still wet down her back.

But none of that was what made my stomach tighten slightly.

It was the file in her hands.

Fuck.

I recognized the dark folder instantly.

Gianna slowly looked up at me, her face had gone completely blank.

"What's that?" I asked anyway, even though I already knew.

Gianna let out a quiet breath through her nose filled with disbelief.

She sat down sideways in the chair, one bare leg tucked beneath her, damp hair falling over one shoulder. Her phone rested against her thigh, the Black Veil app still open on the screen. The soft voice reader continued scanning lines from the folder in her lap.

She lifted the file slightly between us, "You tell me."

I stayed near the doorway for a second, towel hanging around my neck, water still dripping slowly down my back from the shower.

The robotic voice from the app continued reading.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 405

“Leone Caruso. Philadelphia Syndicate. Current underboss. Financial movement patterns. Known business fronts. Psychological indicators...”

Gianna’s eyes flicked back up to mine.

I walked farther into the room and grabbed the bottle of water off the desk. Mostly because it gave me something to do with my hands.

“Gianna-”

“No,” she cut me off immediately, “No, actually explain this to me because I genuinely want to understand what goes on inside your head.”

I took a slow drink.

“You investigated my ex fiancé.”

“Yes.”

Her stare sharpened instantly at how easily I admitted it, “You say that like it’s normal.”

“It is normal.”

“For you, maybe!”

She pushed wet hair back from her face aggressively. Her eyes were still slightly red from earlier, but now there was anger sitting underneath it.

“I left him years ago,” she continued. “Years, Raphael. I don’t even live in the same city anymore. I don’t speak to him. I don’t see him. So why the hell are you digging through his life?”

I leaned against the desk, “He contacted you.”

“One text message!”

“He’s a high-ranking underboss in an active crime syndicate, Gianna.”

“And he is also someone I loved!” she snapped, “Did that little detail make it into your creepy little report too, or did you leave that part out?”

My jaw tightened slightly. The app voice continued calmly reading from the page in her lap.

“Subject displays territorial tendencies. High aggression markers. Possessive behavioral—”

“You don’t get to talk about people I cared about like they’re a fucking threat assessment!” she snapped.

“He is a threat assessment.”

Her laugh this time sounded genuinely angry, “See? That!” She pointed at me sharply with the folder. “That right there. You say crazy shit like that like it’s absolutely nothing.”

“And?”

Her lips parted, her breath catching, “And? That’s really what you’re going with? Just... and?”

“I run high-level security operations for a living, Gianna,” I said calmly. “I assess threats. I check backgrounds. I gather information. It’s not a personal thing against your ex. Everyone is nothing but a digital file to me. That’s just how the real world works.”

“No,” she shot back immediately, “That’s how you avoid acting human.”

I ignored that comment completely because it didn’t even make sense.

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“The facts are simple,” I continued, staring right back at her. “The guy texted you after years of total silence. A man with heavy, organized crime ties suddenly reaching back into your life is a red flag. It gets looked into. Automatically. No exceptions.”

Gianna stared at me for another second before looking back down at the file again. The anger in her face shifted slightly the more as the robotic voice read.

“You went through my past without asking me.”

“You think people ask permission before becoming threats?”

“Oh my God, you really do reduce people into categories in your head.”

I stayed quiet and that only irritated her more. Her eyes moved slowly around the room after that. Across the glowing monitors. Across the files stacked near the desk. Across the security screens.

Then back down toward the folder in her hands. Then slowly... very slowly... she looked back up at me. There was something different in her expression now.

“Do you do this to everyone?”

I frowned slightly, “What?”

“These,” she lifted the file a little, “Do you keep reports on every person around you?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether they matter.”

The second the words left my mouth, her face changed again. I noticed it immediately. That small flicker in her eyes. The way her breathing slowed slightly. Then she looked back down at the folder again before asking very carefully,

“Do you have one on me too?”

Janedoewritings Author

Hey, guys!

Enjoy today’s update and let me know what you think!

XOXO

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 406

Raphael

15 8am

“Do you have one on me too?”

The question hung between us.

Gianna stood near the desk, damp hair dripping slowly onto the carpet while she stared at me like she wasn’t sure she actually wanted the answer anymore.

“I asked you something,” she said more quietly now, “Is there one on me too?”

I looked at her for a long second before answering, “No.”

Her expression didn’t change, but she shook her head, “I don’t believe you.”

I exhaled once and added, “I was going to.”

That got a reaction, her jaw tightened immediately.

“But I didn’t,” I continued before she could explode, “Vincenzo shut it down.”

She blinked once, “Vincenzo?”

“He’s the head of the family,” I said simply. “He told me to leave you alone. So I dropped it.”

Gianna stared at me for another second before letting out a soft laugh through her nose, “So otherwise you would’ve done it.”

I parted my lips to answer her on instinct, but the words stalled halfway out. There wasn’t any point in lying. I hated pointless dishonesty, and Gianna deserved more respect than that.

“...Yeah,” I admitted calmly.

Something in her face shifted again after that like she already expected it but hearing it out loud still clearly pissed her off.

“That’s actually fucking horrible.”

“It’s practical.”

“No, Raphael, it’s creepy.”

I stayed leaning against the desk, arms folded loosely over my chest while she paced once across the room again.

“You really just investigate people like it’s nothing?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t feel weird about it?”

“No.”

Her eyes flashed, “How?”

I sighed, “Because that’s what people are to me.”

Her eyebrows pulled together. I looked toward the monitors for a second before speaking again.

“Names. Histories. Patterns,” my voice stayed even, “Who their father is. What is their net worth. Who they owe money to. School records. Arrest records. Financial movement. Burner phones. Travel history. Social habits. What kind of cars they drive. What kind of men or women they sleep with. Who they call after midnight. What accounts they hide offshore. Whether they lie under pressure.”

Gianna went completely quiet after that, staring at me in a way that made it feel like she was seeing a stranger sitting in front of her instead of the man she thought she knew.

I continued anyway, “Everyone leaves patterns behind. Most people don’t even realize it. You’d be amazed how easy it is to map out someone’s life once you stop looking at them like a person and start looking at them like data.”

Her expression tightened more with every word, “You make people sound like… spreadsheets.”

I shrugged lightly, “That’s usually all they are.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“No.”

Her mouth pressed into a hard line. Goddamn it! There it was again. That look. The one that made my chest feel strange even though I never knew what the hell to call it. I pushed away from the desk finally and walked toward her slowly.

“When your entire life is built around security,” I said, “you stop having the luxury of taking people at face value.”

“That’s such a sad way to live.”

“It’s an effective one.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

I looked down at her, “I didn’t look into you,” I said finally.

“You wanted to.”

“Yes.”

“Then what changed?”

That answer took me longer, not because I didn’t know it but because I did. I just didn’t know why it mattered enough to hesitate over.

“At first,” I said slowly, “you were just another stranger living in the house.”

Her face hardened slightly at that.

“I figured I’d run a standard check eventually. Mostly because you showed up out of nowhere and nobody knew anything about you besides basic surface-level shit.”

“That’s comforting.”

“You know what family I was raised in, Gianna.”

“That doesn’t magically make it okay.’

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“No,” I agreed calmly, “But it explains it.”

She crossed her arms tighter over herself.

I continued before she could interrupt again, “After Vincenzo told me to back off, I left it alone.”

“But you did it again,” she guessed immediately.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 407

I looked at her once and that was enough answer for her.

Her eyes narrowed, “Wow.”

“I opened the request.”

“And?”

“And I closed it.”

“Why?”

I went quiet for a second, because the answer sounded stupid in my own head. Because it made no logical sense. Because it was the exact opposite of how I usually operated.

Finally, I looked at her again, “By then,” I said evenly, “you stopped feeling like a file.”

I rubbed a hand slowly across the back of my neck before continuing.

“I didn’t want to know you that way.”

Her throat moved once, “What way?”

“Artificially.”

The word sounded strange coming out of my mouth.

“I didn’t want reports telling me who you were before you told me yourself,” I looked at her steadily, “That’s not how I wanted to know you.”

Something shifted in her face for a brief second. Her eyes softened slightly, the anger easing just enough for me to notice it. Then she shut it down again almost immediately.

“But you looked into Leone.”

“Yes.”

Her face hardened all over again.

“Because he’s not you,” I added.

Gianna stared at me and for the first time since this conversation started, she didn’t immediately throw another argument back at my face.

She just looked at me quietly like she was trying to find something underneath the words I was saying. Her fingers tightened slowly around the folder in her hands until the papers bent at the corners. She looked down at them for a second, blinking once too hard.

Then again.

And that's when I realized her eyes were getting glossy.

My stomach tightened strangely, "Gianna," I said carefully.

She laughed softly under her breath before shaking her head once, "You know what's crazy?" she asked quietly, still looking down at the file, "You actually think that was supposed to make me feel better."

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I frowned immediately, "It was better."

"How?"

"Because I chose not to do it."

Her mouth pulled into this tiny, pained smile that made something in my chest twist wrong.

"That's your argument?" she whispered.

I pushed off the desk completely now, "I'm telling you the truth."

"I know you are."

"Then what's the problem?"

Her eyes finally lifted back to mine and again with that look on her face. The one that always made me feel like I'd missed part of a conversation nobody bothered explaining to me.

"You don't hear yourself when you talk, do you?"

I frowned harder, "What does that mean?"

Her lips parted immediately like she had an answer ready then nothing came out and that seemed to frustrate her even more. She looked away quickly, pressing the heel of her palm hard against one eye for a second before dropping her hand again.

And suddenly I understood something very important. She was trying not to cry. My entire body went alert instantly.

Fuck.

I took a step toward her automatically, “Hey.”

She shook her head fast, “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything wrong.”

That was clearly the wrong thing to say because her face crumpled for half a second before she turned away from me completely.

“You seriously don’t get it,” she whispered.

I genuinely didn’t. I could read financial behavior patterns across six countries. I could predict security breaches before they happened. I could tell when someone was lying within the first thirty seconds of a conversation.

But this?

This shit felt like trying to read a language I’d never learned.

“Then explain it to me,” I said, frustration slipping into my voice now, “Because I’m obviously missing something.”

“You talk about me like I’m different from everyone else,” she said softly, “but you never say why.”

I opened my mouth immediately because the answer was obvious. She was different but the second I tried putting it into words, everything in my head just... stalled.

“See?” she whispered.

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“I care about you,” I told her, the words came out rougher than I expected.

She looked at me for a long second after that, “Yeah,” she said quietly, “Like family.”

“I don’t understand what you want me to say.”

“That’s the problem.”

I rubbed a frustrated hand over my face. The room suddenly felt too hot and too fucking complicated.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 408

“I don’t know how to do whatever this conversation is,” I admitted finally.

That made her look back at me again. There were tears sitting in her eyes now, even though she clearly hated that I could see them.

“I know,” she whispered.

Her fingers moved restlessly against the edge of the file in her hands, smoothing wrinkles that didn’t exist anymore just to give herself something to do.

I stayed where I was, watching her carefully.

Trying to understand where the hell this conversation had gone wrong.

A few hours ago she’d been laughing while hanging upside down from my tree. Now she looked like I’d just shattered something inside her without even noticing.

Finally, she spoke again, “Maybe we shouldn’t have done this.”

I frowned immediately, “Done what?”

Her eyes lifted slowly toward mine, “This,” she gestured vaguely between us, “Whatever this thing is.”

I stared at her for a second, genuinely confused, “Why?”

A soft, disbelieving laugh left her, “Seriously?”” 1

“Yes.”

That seemed to frustrate her all over again. She tossed the file onto the desk harder than necessary before crossing her arms tightly over herself.

“We’re step siblings sleeping together in secret,” she snapped, “That’s not exactly healthy behavior, Raphael.”

“We already established it’s fucked up.”

“That was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before it started…” She stopped herself abruptly and shook her head. “Forget it.”

I watched her closely, “No. Finish that sentence.”

She pressed her lips together stubbornly. Then finally exhaled hard through her nose, “What are we even doing?” she asked quietly, “Like realistically. Long term.”

Long term?

I honestly hadn’t thought that far ahead. Why would I? Things between us worked. More than worked. We barely fought besides whatever the hell this current conversation was.

We liked being around each other.

The sex was insane.

She understood my schedule.

I understood hers.

There were rules.

Structure.

So I genuinely didn’t understand the problem. 1

“I don’t see why we need to overcomplicate it,” I said honestly.

Her face fell slightly at that answer, “Of course you don’t.”

“Gianna-”

“What happens later?” she interrupted, “What happens when you get married someday? Or I do? How are we supposed to stand in the same room after all this and pretend none of it happened?”

Her throat bobbed hard.

“How am I supposed to introduce you as my stepbrother while remembering…” she stopped herself, shaking her head once, “And what am I supposed to do if you bring home some perfect wife one day? Smile at her? Sit across from her at dinner knowing what you and I were doing in secret?”

I stared at her then actually laughed once because the idea sounded ridiculous to me.

“I’m not getting married.”

She frowned, “You say that now.”

“No,” I corrected calmly, “I mean ever.”

That got her attention.

I shrugged lightly and leaned back against the desk again, “I don’t want marriage.”

“That’s a very strange thing to say.”

“It’s not strange. It’s practical.”

“There you go again with the practical thing.”

I ignored that.

“I don’t need a wife,” I continued. “I don’t need romance. I don’t need whatever fantasy everybody else keeps chasing.”

Gianna’s eyes searched my face carefully, “You really believe that.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t think you’ll ever fall in love?”

The question came out quieter than the others and I answered just as honestly, “No.”

Something flickered across her face again.

I frowned slightly, “Why does that upset you?”

She looked away immediately, “It doesn’t,” but before I could say that, she spoke again, “What about your family?”

“What about them?”

“Your aunt clearly wants you married eventually.”

I snorted softly, “My aunt wants a lot of things.”

“And?”

“And I’m not ruining some poor woman’s life because my family wants wedding photos.”

Gianna stayed quiet while I continued.

“I know exactly what kind of man I am.” My voice stayed calm, “I work eighteen hours a day. I disappear for weeks sometimes. I treat most human interaction like business negotiations. I don’t do emotional reassurance. don’t even notice half the things women expect men to notice.”

Her eyes lowered slightly at that.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 409

“I’m not dragging somebody into a marriage just because society thinks I should want one. That’s why this works.”

Her eyebrows pulled together faintly. “This?”

“Us.”

She went very still.

“From the beginning, you knew exactly what you wanted. You made rules. Clear ones. No emotional bullshit. No overlapping with other people. No pretending this was something it isn’t.”

Her throat moved once, “You remember all that?”

“Obviously.”

A faint, bitter laugh escaped her. Of course I remembered. I remembered everything about her.

Every rule.

Every expression.

Every habit.

The exact food she craved after sex.

The way she looks for sharp corners to hurt herself when she’s anxious.

I remembered all of it.

“I like that about you,” I said honestly, “You know what you can handle. Most people don’t and it works perfectly for people like us.”

She stared at me strangely after that, “People like us?”

“Yeah.”

Her eyebrows pulled tighter together, “What exactly does that mean?”

“It means I can’t love anybody. And you,” I continued evenly, “are already in love with someone else.”

Gianna slowly looked up at me and I stared at her, waiting for her to say something but she just stood there looking at me. I opened my mouth again, wanting to know why she kept looking at me like this.

Then one of the monitors pinged sharply. My attention snapped toward the sound instantly. A red notification flashed across the lower security screen.

Two-vehicles entering the private gate.

I leaned forward automatically, fingers flying over the keyboard. The live camera feed pulled up immediately.

Black SUV.

Second black SUV behind it.

Fuck.

Top 100

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath.

Gianna blinked, still visibly shaken, “What?”

I zoomed the camera feed closer and immediately saw the two men getting out of the front vehicle.

A cold curse left my mouth, “Vincenzo and Adriano.”

Gianna went completely pale, “What?!”

Adriano was smoking beside the SUV now and Vincenzo was talking to one of the guards. Neither of them looked relaxed, and the fact that Vincenzo was covered in blood... that was never a good sign.

Vincenzo didn't get his own hands dirty unless somebody had pushed him far enough to deserve it. And when my brother reached that point, people usually stopped breathing afterward.

I checked the timestamp.

"Why are they here?" Gianna whispered behind me.

"I don't know yet."

That answer clearly didn't help her breathing. I glanced over my shoulder once and her fingers were shaking hard. The sight did something uncomfortable to my chest again.

I crossed the room fast and grabbed her wrist, "Hey," I said, making her look at me. "Breathe for a second. I'm here," her pulse was racing beneath my fingers, "Nothing's going to happen to you while I'm standing in this room. Understand me?"

Her eyes snapped to mine, "Raphael-"

"I'll handle them."

She swallowed hard, "What if they know?"

"They don't."

"You don't know that."

"I do."

Because if Vincenzo knew I was fucking our stepsister in the woods behind one of our private compounds, he wouldn't be calmly walking through the front gate. He'd already be kicking my teeth in.

Another ping hit the monitors.

Access door opening.

They were inside.

I grabbed Gianna gently by the arm and pulled her toward the back corner of the control room.

Behind the main monitors was a narrow side section separated by dark tinted glass and server walls. You could see directly into the control room from there through the one-way panel, but from the outside it looked completely black.

Nobody could see in unless the internal lights were switched on.

I pushed the hidden panel open.

15 Boru

“In there.”

Gianna looked toward the dark space nervously. “Raphael-”

“Go. I’ve got you.”

She hesitated for half a second before slipping inside.

I leaned closer before shutting the panel, lowering my voice one last time, “No matter what happens,” I said, stay quiet.”

Her green eyes locked onto mine through the darkness then I slid the panel shut fully just as the main door opened.

Janedoewritings Author

Swipe up

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 410

Raphael

Her green eyes locked onto mine through the darkness then I slid the panel shut fully just as the main door opened.

Adriano walked in first with the same dead-eyed expression he always wore, like homicide was less of a crime to him and more of a recreational hobby.

Blood covered the front of his white dress shirt in uneven streaks, splattered all the way up to the collar. One sleeve was rolled halfway to his elbow, and he had a cigarette hanging lazily from the corner of his mouth.

Behind him, Vincenzo stepped into the room and the entire place immediately felt heavier.

My older brother looked beyond pissed off. He looked murderous. The kind of angry that made men start explaining themselves before he even opened his mouth.

And the fact that he was standing inside the Void at all told me enough already.

Vincenzo hated this place.

If he came here personally instead of calling me, it meant he needed something handled immediately.

Blood soaked the front of his white button-up, dark across the chest and cuffs. Some of it had dried near his throat already. More was smeared across his knuckles like he'd stopped bothering to wipe his hands clean.

His jaw looked locked hard enough to crack teeth.

Adriano shut the door behind them and let out a long whistle through his teeth.

"Well," he muttered dryly, tossing his bloody gloves onto one of the desks, "that escalated emotionally."

Vincenzo said nothing.

Adriano glanced sideways at him and snorted quietly, "You stabbed him six times."

"Seven," Vincenzo corrected flatly.

"Ah," Adriano nodded thoughtfully, "My bad. The chest cavity started looking abstract around number four."

I stayed leaning against the console casually even while every nerve in my body stayed alert. Behind the black glass panel ten feet away, Gianna was hidden in complete silence.

Adriano grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the side cabinet without asking permission and twisted the cap off with blood-covered fingers.

"You know," he said conversationally, taking a drink straight from the bottle, "in Roberto's defense, threatening your wife in front of you was probably just a minor social misunderstanding."

Vincenzo slowly turned his head toward him.

Adriano raised one hand immediately, "No, no. You're right. Murder was the mature response."

Then Vincenzo finally looked at me, "Wipe the footage. Claire's gallery."

Straight to business.

Always.

I pushed off the console and walked toward the monitors, “Okay.”

Behind me, Adriano dropped into one of the chairs with a groan and stretched his legs out carelessly, tracking blood across my clean floor.

“You know what the funniest part was?” he asked no one in particular. “He really thought apologizing was gonna help after he mentioned Claire.”

Vincenzo’s expression darkened even further somehow.

Now the blood made sense.

I kept my face neutral while pulling up the surveillance files on-screen. Nobody in this family survived long by reacting emotionally when Vincenzo got like this.

Adriano, however, seemed physically incapable of shutting the fuck up.

“He actually cried near the end,” Adriano added thoughtfully, “Like real tears. Snot too. It got depressing after a while.”

“Adriano,” Vincenzo said quietly.

Adriano lifted both hands. “Right. Quiet time,” he paused, “Still think the screwdriver was excessive though.”

Vincenzo ignored him completely and moved closer to the surveillance wall instead, eyes scanning across the monitors with cold focus despite the blood drying across his jaw and collar.

Then suddenly, his attention shifted downward. On the edge of the console desk, tangled halfway beneath one of the headsets, was a black lace bra.

Fuck

Vincenzo reached down and lifted it slowly between two fingers.

“There’s a woman here?” he asked flatly.

Every muscle in my body locked.

Across the room, Adriano saw what was in Vincenzo’s hand and physically recoiled, “Oh, Jesus Christ,” he muttered immediately. “Vince, maybe don’t hold that.”

Vincenzo frowned slightly, still holding the bra between his bloody fingers.

Adriano looked deeply uncomfortable for the first time all night, which was impressive considering he'd apparently just participated in torture.

"That just feels..." Adriano gestured vaguely, "Wrong. Put it down."

Vincenzo slowly turned his head toward Adriano. And Adriano realized too late how suspicious that sounded.

He pointed vaguely at the bra like it was radioactive, "You are a married man. Put the mystery lingerie down."

"It was sitting on his desk," Vincenzo said flatly.

"Still," Adriano replied, "Boundaries. Morals. The sanctity of womanhood."

My jaw locked while I walked forward and took the bra straight out of Vincenzo's hand before this situation became even worse. Adriano's eyes flicked toward me for one very loaded second. He knew exactly whose it was.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 411

"Who's here?"

My brain moved fast. Not because I was nervous about Gianna specifically. Nervous wasn't the right word.

Protective was.

Very different problem.

"One of the girls from the hunt."

Adriano went very still at that answer. Vincenzo's eyes narrowed slightly like he was deciding whether he believed me or not.

"And where is she now?"

"Inside the panel," I told him the truth.

I folded the lace into my fist without thinking.

Behind the hidden black glass panel ten feet away, Gianna was probably hearing every single second of this conversation while trying not to breathe too loudly.

Adriano suddenly stood from the chair with the exhausted energy of a man who wanted absolutely no involvement in whatever disaster was currently unfolding.

“You know what?” he announced, “I actually don’t care about mystery women at all. Shocking personal growth for me.”

Vincenzo kept watching me carefully. My older brother knew me too well. And unfortunately for me, he was in one of those moods tonight where his brain worked even faster than usual.

“You brought some random fucking girl into the control room?” he asked slowly.

When I didn’t answer fast enough, Vincenzo let out a short laugh that held absolutely no humor in it and dragged a blood-covered hand down his mouth.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me. You’re supposed to be running security for half the Outfit from this room,” he continued, stepping closer, “Every camera feed. Every gate. Every patrol route. Every panic lock in this compound runs through these systems.”

His eyes dropped to the lace still clenched in my fist.

“And instead you’re back here playing hide the fucking bra with some girl?”

Adriano took a step back like a man distancing himself from an incoming explosion.

“Okay,” he said carefully, holding both hands up. “To be fair, maybe she’s important to him.”

Vincenzo turned slowly toward him, “Important?”

Adriano shrugged cautiously, “I don’t know. Maybe Raphael likes her.”

The room went dead quiet for one second then Vincenzo barked out a dark laugh, “No woman is special to Raphael,” he said coldly, wiping blood off his knuckles with the edge of the table, “You know what this sick bastard does? He chases pussy through the woods like a fucking animal, screws them dumb until they can’t walk straight, then tosses them out before sunrise like yesterday’s trash. That’s his whole emotional range.”

Adriano grimaced. “Alright, wow. That was aggressive even for you.”

1 barely reacted outwardly but my jaw locked anyway. Not because Vincenzo was insulting me. I stopped caring about that years ago.

It was because Gianna was ten feet away behind that black glass hearing every single word coming out of his mouth.

And for some reason I couldn't explain, the thought of her believing him bothered the hell out of me.

Vincenzo kept going anyway.

"He doesn't date. He doesn't love. He barely even tolerates people breathing near him. Women to him are just warm holes with names he forgets five minutes later. So don't stand there feeding me bullshit about some' special girl' hidden behind my security walls while I'm out carving traitors apart."

His jaw flexed hard.

"This psycho used to profile girls before he slept with them," he scoffed. "Backgrounds. Family connections. Behavioral patterns. Whether they'd become a problem later. Like he was running threat assessments instead of getting laid."

Adriano exhaled hard. "Okay, to be fair, he was like twenty and deeply deranged."

"He still does it," Vincenzo snapped. "You think this cold bastard suddenly grew a heart?"

My teeth clenched hard, but not because of him. I didn't give a shit if they painted me like some cold-blooded machine incapable of feeling anything. I'd lived with that reputation my entire life.

What got under my skin was the thought of her hearing it and believing that to me, she was nothing more than another woman I dragged into bed and forgot afterward.

"Blade, Jesus Christ, calm down," Adriano cut in, rubbing tiredly at his face. "You're unloading on the wrong person here."

"No," Vincenzo snapped immediately. "Absolutely not."

He jabbed a bloody finger toward me.

"You brought some woman into the middle of an active control center while we're cleaning up bodies tonight. You let her sit a few feet away while we talk routes, security rotations, disposal sites, fucking family business?"

His expression darkened further.

"She just heard me casually confess to homicide," he said flatly, "Bring her the fuck out."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 412

My jaw tightened instantly, “No.”

Vincenzo’s eyes flicked to mine and the room changed temperature immediately.

Adriano cursed quietly under his breath, “Okay, bad tone. Very bad tone.”

“She saw nothing,” I said flatly.

“She heard enough.”

“She’s not a threat.”

“And you know that how?” Vincenzo shot back. “Because your dick told you?”

Vincenzo took another step toward me. Blood stained the front of his shirt so heavily it almost looked black now.

“You know what buries empires?” Vincenzo asked softly. “Cunt.”

Adriano muttered, “Jesus Christ.”

“One slick little bitch gets her claws into a man, spreads her legs, whispers in his ear, and suddenly bosses who used to own cities start thinking with their dick instead of their brain.” Vincenzo stalked closer, “You remember Alessandro Costello?”

Of course I did.

Everybody did.

One of the smartest men in New York. A tech ghost. Built half the surveillance systems the east coast still used then he got obsessed with the wrong woman.

And the woman turned out to be federal.

The Feds ripped through his family like wildfire after that.

Adriano dragged a tired hand down his face, “Alright, maybe let’s not compare every woman on earth to a federal agent right now-”

Vincenzo ignored him completely, eyes still locked on me.

“You think I’m stupid enough to sit here while my brother hides some stray pussy inside the safest room in this compound?” his voice dropped lower, “I’m not Costello. I’d put a bullet through your skull before I let some cunt destroy this family because my brother got hard and forgot who the fuck he belongs to.”

“She’s handled,” I said evenly.

The second the words left my mouth, Adriano physically recoiled again. I looked at him briefly and he was staring at me with pure horror.

“That,” Adriano said slowly, rubbing a hand over his face, was the worst possible thing you could’ve said to him.”

Vincenzo’s expression went completely blank, “Handled,” he repeated softly.

I already knew where his brain went with that word.

“I just walked in here covered in another man’s blood,” he said quietly, “and you’re telling me there’s a girl hidden behind my walls who’s ‘handled’?”

“She’s not a threat.”

Vincenzo’s stare sharpened on me again, “You brought a woman into the control room during operational hours. How many times do I have to fucking repeat myself.”

“She wasn’t near the system.”

“You trusted her enough to let her stay.”

“I trusted the room.”

“Bullshit.”

Vincenzo suddenly held his hand out toward the hidden panel.

“Open it.”

“No.”

Vincenzo’s eyes narrowed, “You refusing me now?”

“I’m telling you she doesn’t need to be dragged into this.”

“The fuck she doesn’t,” he snapped, “She already is. She heard enough in the last five minutes to get buried in a lake. I’m not repeating myself,” he said quietly, “Bring her out.”

Behind the black glass panel, I could almost feel Gianna's fear as she might be hearing every filthy word coming out of Vincenzo's mouth.

This was not the version of him she knew.

She knew the calm, caring man who kissed Claire's forehead at dinner and spoke softly to women like they were something precious. The older brother who kept his voice low around the family and acted like the devil in him had manners.

This was the real Don Vincenzo Capone.

Blood on his hands. Rage in his eyes. Speaking the way men like us actually spoke when there were no women around, no family dinners forcing civility down our throats.

The part digging under my skin wasn't him insulting me. Vincenzo had been ripping pieces out of me with his mouth since I was old enough to hold a gun. That was nothing new.

It was knowing she was hearing him like this for the first time.

Hearing the ugliness underneath the loving older brother.

To me, this was normal.

To Gianna...

This was probably the first real look behind the curtain,

The first time hearing what Capone men sounded like when nobody we cared about was supposed to be listening.

Vincenzo stepped closer until he was right in front of me, "She comes out now," he said quietly, "Or I drag her out myself."

Janedoewritings

Author

Not gonna lie, this is genuinely one of the worst comment sections I've ever had, Imao

Read, don't read, hate-read, rage-read... honestly, do whatever you want at this point Or better yet, write your own stories exactly how you'd like them to go....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 413

Raphael

The second Vincenzo moved toward the panel, something inside me snapped tight. It was not anger. It wasn't even a thought. It was just instinct.

Pure, sharp fucking instinct.

One second he was walking toward the black glass with that cold look in his eyes, blood still drying across his knuckles, and the next my body moved before my brain caught up.

I caught him by the front of his shirt and slammed him hard into the wall beside the monitors.

Adriano swore violently somewhere behind me and then silence.

My hand was fisted in Vincenzo's collar. Blood smeared instantly across my knuckles from his shirt. My forearm locked against his chest hard enough to keep him pinned.

For one second, I didn't even fully understand what I'd done.

Vincenzo stared at me.

There wasn't anger in his eyes, just shock. He looked actually shocked because I never touched him like that.

Then my brain finally caught up.

Fuck.

I let go immediately and stepped back at once, not out of fear but out of respect.

Years of it.

My older brother straightened slowly against the wall, jaw flexing once as he adjusted the front of his blood- covered shirt where I'd wrinkled it in my grip.

Adriano looked between us with the face of a man watching a bomb count down in real time, "Okay," he said carefully into the silence, "So that happened."

Vincenzo's eyes stayed locked on mine, murderously calm, "You put your hands on me."

I forced myself to answer evenly despite the adrenaline still hammering through my body, "You were about to scare her."

It wasn't the answer he expected. I knew it immediately from the way his expression changed.

"Scare her?" he repeated softly.

I exhaled slowly through my nose, trying to get my head working properly again.

Because what the fuck had that been?

I never lost control. Ever. Not like that, not physically, especially not with him.

Vincenzo was my older brother. My Don. The man who practically raised me after our father stopped bothering.

I had spent my entire life respecting him.

But the second he started toward that panel, something inside me twisted violently All I could think about was Gianna standing behind that black glass completely alone, listening to him talk about dumping bodies into lakes, listening to him speak about her like she was some danger that needed to be eliminated.

Hearing that cold tone in his voice, hearing the real monster underneath the version he showed the family. And for one irrational second, all I cared about was stopping him from reaching her.

Vincenzo took one slow step toward me, "Do you have any idea," he asked quietly, "how fucking insane what you just did was? You put your hands on me... for a woman?"

"Yes."

Adriano rubbed both hands over his face. "Fantastic. Amazing family moment. Really healthy communication tonight."

Vincenzo's eyes searched my face carefully now like he was seeing something he didn't like, "You blanked out," he said suddenly.

That made my jaw tighten because he was right. I had blanked out. For maybe two seconds, maybe less than that but long enough to put my hands on my brother.

"I told you, she's handled," I said finally, forcing my voice back under control.

"She clearly isn't," Vincenzo snapped suddenly, "You brought a civilian into an active operations room during cleanup after a fucking execution."

"She's not civilian."

The words left my mouth automatically. Vincenzo went still again. Adriano closed his eyes slowly like he physically could not believe the conversation getting worse.

I realized too late what I'd said.

"She's..." I answered carefully. "She's under my protection."

"And that somehow makes this better to you?"

"It means I know exactly who she is."

"That's the problem," he snapped, "You think your judgment isn't compromised right now."

"It's not."

Vincenzo laughed once in disbelief, "You just slammed me into a fucking wall."

I dragged a hand down my face roughly before speaking slower this time, "She is not some random girl I dragged in here for entertainment."

"Then what is she?"

I didn't answer immediately because I didn't actually know how to. And Vincenzo noticed, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"There it is," he said quietly.

I frowned, "There what is?"

"That hesitation."

Vincenzo stepped closer again, lowering his voice, "Fuck, you do care about her."

Adriano looked between us carefully now, suddenly less amused than before.

"She matters enough," Vincenzo continued, "that you just forgot who the fuck I was for a second."

"That's not what happened."

15 Bartus

Chapter 414

“Really?” he asked softly.

I looked away from him for one second toward the black panel. Vincenzo followed my line of sight slowly then looked back at me.

And whatever he saw in my face made him less explosive, “You trust her?”

“Yes.”

“With your life?”

“Yes.”

“With ours?”

That answer came slower, not because I doubted her but because of what the question meant. This wasn’t just about me anymore.

“Yes.”

Vincenzo stared at me for a long moment after that then he spoke quietly, “If you ever make me regret that answer, Raphael… there won’t be enough left of either one of you to bury.”

I held his stare, “I know.”

Another long silence stretched through the room. Then finally Vincenzo looked toward the black panel one last time before dragging a bloody hand down his jaw.

“Fine,” he said coldly, “She stays hidden.”

Relief hit me so fast and sharp it almost pissed me off because Vincenzo saw it immediately and that seemed to irritate him all over again.

Adriano moved first.

Probably because he was the only person in the room reckless enough to touch Vincenzo when he looked like this.

“Alright,” he muttered, stepping between us slightly, “Before the two of you turn this room into a homicide documentary…”

He grabbed the front of Vincenzo’s ruined shirt, fixing the twisted collar where I’d slammed him against the wall.

“You wrinkle like a bitch,” Adriano added casually while straightening the fabric near Vincenzo’s throat, “Very undignified for a feared crime lord.”

Vincenzo looked ready to shoot him too and Adriano ignored that completely because he ignored most threats the same way normal people ignored bad weather.

“You need a healthier outlet,” Adriano continued. “Maybe I’ll arrange a cage fight for you.”

Vincenzo dragged a hand down his face, “With who?”

Adriano’s eyes lit up instantly with genuine evil, “Remo Lombardi.”

I stared at him flatly, “You just want an excuse to hurt Remo again.”

“Yes,” Adriano answered immediately. “Obviously.”

Vincenzo looked unimpressed, “What did he even do this time?”

“He exists loudly,” Adriano said darkly, “Every time he walks into a room I feel violence in my soul.”

Vincenzo finally snorted once despite himself and dropped heavily into the chair near the monitors. The tension in the room shifted slightly after that.

Vincenzo leaned back slowly, exhaustion finally starting to show underneath the rage. Blood had dried dark around the cuffs of his shirt now.

Then his eyes lifted toward me again, “I need you to destroy somebody.”

My brain switched immediately, “Who?”

“William Whitmore.”

The name clicked instantly in my head. He was mid-fifties, Chicago old money, private equity predator, owned half the redevelopment contracts moving through the west side.

Public image: philanthropist.

Reality: parasite.

I already knew the basics before Vincenzo continued.

“He’s been feeding information to the Attorney General’s office through shell foundations,” Vincenzo said flatly, “Money laundering task forces. Federal redevelopment audits. Port investigations.”

Adriano leaned against the desk beside him. “Translation,” he said dryly, “the billionaire’s been sucking government dick behind closed doors.”

“Three raids in six months,” Vince continued. “Frozen accounts. Delayed shipments. Federal pressure suddenly appearing every time we move construction assets through the south district.”

I stayed quiet, listening, and building timelines already. Patterns, connections. Whitmore was too smart to move directly. Men like that never dirtied their own hands. They hired lawyers, consultants and political puppets. They destroyed people through paperwork while pretending their hands were clean.

“What changed?” I asked.

Vincenzo’s expression darkened instantly, “He touched family.”

That answered enough already.

“Claire’s charity foundation got flagged yesterday morning,” he said quietly. “Anonymous financial complaints. Federal review requests. They froze donations tied to the pediatric hospitals.”

My jaw tightened immediately, not because of the money but because Claire’s hospitals were real. Children actually depended on that foundation.

Whitmore knew that.

Which meant this wasn’t business anymore. This was a message.

Adriano’s expression lost all humor now too, “He wanted headlines,” Adriano muttered darkly, “Thought making Claire look dirty would force Vince to back off city contracts.”

Vincenzo leaned back slowly in the chair, eyes cold as death now, “He tried to embarrass my wife publicly,” he

15 Baru said softly, “He made reporters circle her foundation like vultures while sick children sat waiting for funding approvals.”

Fuck

Vincenzo glared in the distance, “I want him stripped so bare he starts begging me for permission to breathe.”

Adriano whistled quietly under hits breath.

Vincenzo looked at me agaiCtrl+K Open command paletten, “I don’t want him dead.”

Men like Whitmore feared humiliation more than death anyway.

“You want leverage.”

“No,” Vincenzo corrected coldly, “I want annihilation.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 415

I could already feel my brain working, as I rolled my neck, “His companies?”

“All of them.”

“Family?”

“Untouched,” Vincenzo answered immediately, “His wife and daughters stay clean. I’m not him.”

That narrowed the field. I walked toward the monitors slowly, already pulling systems online. Corporate databases, private banking mirrors, offshore movement trackers.

William Whitmore’s entire digital life started unfolding across the screens in front of me. I leaned forward slightly, eyes scanning financial movement patterns.

“There,” I said quietly.

Vincenzo stood immediately. A Cayman account flashed onto the monitor, then another, then another. Layered foundations hidden beneath environmental redevelopment grants, government laundering channels, political kickbacks.

And underneath all of it, human trafficking payments. Hidden carefully between shipping contracts.

Adriano’s face twisted instantly, “Oh, that’s ugly.”

Very ugly.

I kept digging.

More accounts appeared. Private island transfers, escort routing services, judges getting paid through fake consulting firms. Whitmore hadn’t just been cooperating with the government. He’d been buying them.

I leaned back slightly in the chair. The man was dead already, he just didn't know it yet.

"He's dirty," I said calmly.

Vincenzo stared at the screen quietly, "How dirty?"

I clicked another file open, pictures filled the monitor. Young girls entering Whitmore's private jet. Different cities, different dates but same handlers.

Adriano's expression went flat, "Well," he muttered, "Looks like we're ruining a billionaire tonight."

I looked toward Vincenzo, "Do you want him bankrupt first," I asked evenly, "or suicidal?"

Vincenzo smiled then, "Both."

Vincenzo kept staring at the monitor for another few seconds after the last file loaded across the screens.

Pictures.

Bank transfers.

Politicians.

Girls.

Enough dirt to bury Whitmore ten times over.

Then finally, slowly, he pushed himself out of the chair, "I trust you with this now," he continued while adjusting the cuff of his sleeve. "I want every account ripped open. Every judge he paid exposed. Every shell company burned to the ground." His eyes lifted to mine. "I want that cocksucker crying on live television before the week ends."

My head tilted once, "Done."

Vincenzo started toward the door, then stopped halfway there.

Slowly, he looked back at me again.

"And Raphael?"

I already knew from his tone I wasn't going to enjoy whatever came next. His eyes dropped meaningfully toward the black lace bra still sitting beside my keyboard.

“Keep your dick away from business operations,” his voice turned colder, “This room controls half the fucking Outfit. Cameras. Security systems. Panic locks. Shipment routes. I don’t give a shit how pretty some pussy looks spread across your desk, you do not bring women into my control centers again.”

Adriano coughed violently into his fist like he was trying not to laugh.

“You wanna chase tail through the woods like some sex-crazed animal?” he continued. “Fine. Do it outside. But if I walk into another Capone operations room and find lingerie next to surveillance equipment, I’m gonna beat you unconscious with your own fucking keyboard.”

I stayed quiet mostly because arguing would only make him worse.

Vincenzo pointed toward the monitors with one blood-covered finger, “You don’t get to think with your dick in here.”

Adriano leaned against the desk beside him with now a cigarette hanging from his mouth. “To be fair,” he said thoughtfully, “he’s probably multitasking.”

Vincenzo looked ready to kill him too.

Adriano lifted both hands immediately. “I support workplace professionalism. Continue.”

Vincenzo dragged a hand down his face slowly like he was reconsidering every life choice that led to this family.

Then his eyes shifted toward the hidden black panel. Vincenzo stared directly at the dark glass for a long second. Not able to see through it, but fully aware she was standing there listening.

“Since my brother nearly put me through a fucking wall over you,” he said evenly, “I suppose that means I should properly meet you.”

A pause.

“I’ll see you at the house for dinner tomorrow night.”

Adriano rubbed a hand over his mouth hard, staring at the floor like he physically did not want to witness the disaster currently unfolding.

Vincenzo kept looking at the panel another second before finally turning away.

“Get me results by morning,” he ordered me.

Then he walked out.

Toptur 4

The door slammed shut behind him hard enough to rattle the monitors.

Silence hit immediately afterward. Then Adriano looked at the closed door. Then at me. Then back at the door again.

“You,” he said finally, sounding genuinely disturbed, “are so unbelievably fucked.”

I exhaled slowly and reached for the keyboard again but the second I moved, Adriano crossed the room fast and grabbed me violently by my shoulder.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 416

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he hissed.

I looked down at his hand calmly, “You’re emotional tonight.”

“I’m emotional?” Adriano repeated in disbelief. “You just body-checked the head of the Chicago Outfit.”

“I pushed him.”

“You shoved Vincenzo into a wall.”

“He was upsetting her.”

Adriano stared at me for a full second, then another and then he actually looked horrified like he came to some fucked up conclusion in his head all by himself.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered.

I frowned immediately, “What?”

Adriano leaned closer fast, lowering his voice enough that it wouldn’t carry toward the black panel.

“You are destroying that girl.”

My eyebrows pulled together instantly, “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Gianna,” he snapped quietly, “Use your fucking brain for one second.”

“She’s fine.”

“No,” Adriano said flatly, “She isn’t.”

I pulled his hand off my shirt harder this time, but he stepped right back in front of me anyway.

“You think this is just sex?” he demanded under his breath, “Sneaking around. Hiding her behind walls. Lying to Vince. Grabbing him because he scared her?”

I looked at him coldly but stayed quiet. That seemed to piss him off even more.

“She’s our stepsister,” he said sharply, “Not some random woman from one of your hunts. You’re so emotionally fucked in the head you don’t even realize what position you just put her in.”

I said nothing, because explaining my business to Adriano is not my priority right now. Right now, I wanted him to leave so I could check on her.

“You made her life difficult,” Adriano continued. “You shoved her behind black glass while Vince stood ten feet away talking about dumping bodies. She’s a girl, she’s not supposed to see that.”

My molars locked together, my chest tightened slightly at that, not because I thought he was entirely right but because for the first time tonight, I could almost see it from outside my own head.

The sneaking around.

The lying.

The hiding.

Putting her in a situation she shouldn’t be in.

Gianna standing behind black glass while I handled bodies and security footage with blood still drying on my brother’s hands.

And somehow until now, none of it had looked wrong to me.

Adriano watched my face carefully, “There,” he muttered quietly. “Now you’re finally thinking.”

I frowned harder, “What exactly do you want me to do?”

He stepped closer again and lowered his voice even more, “I already warned you once. I’m serious this time, Raphael. End it.”

His eyes moved briefly toward the hidden panel too before coming back to me.

His eyes hardened slightly, “This shouldn’t become normal for her… She shouldn’t get used to sneaking around like somebody’s hidden piece on the side. Hiding behind black glass while you pull your pants up and talk business over dead bodies.”

My jaw flexed once.

Adriano stepped closer until we were almost shoulder to shoulder, “You know what happens if Vince finds out?” he asked quietly.

“He won’t.”

“That’s not the point.”

His voice dropped lower.

“You think Vincenzo scared her tonight?” Adriano asked, “Imagine what happens when he realizes his younger brother’s been sneaking around with our stepsister behind the family’s back”

I said nothing.

Because for the first time tonight, I actually pictured it clearly.

Not the anger.

The fallout.

Gianna getting dragged through whispers and judgment and ugly conversations she didn’t deserve.

I rubbed a hand slowly over my mouth, “You’re acting like I forced her into something,”

“No,” Adriano said quietly, “I’m acting like you’re the older one between you.”

That shut me up for a second.

“She trusts you,” he continued. “And whether you realize it or not, Gianna follows your lead.”

“She doesn’t follow anybody.”

“You know what I mean.”

Yeah.

Unfortunately, I did.

Adriano exhaled hard before speaking again, “You think you care about her but I’m not blind.” He pointed toward the panel again, “If you actually care about her even a little, then stop before this turns into something ugly.”

Adriano’s voice softened just slightly when he spoke again.

“You know why Vince got suspicious so fast tonight? Because you never protect an outsider like that.”

My eyes lifted back to his.

“You protect family.”

That sat heavy in my chest immediately.

Adriano gave me one last hard look before stepping back, “I’m telling you this as your brother and hers,” he said quietly, “End it now before you destroy her life.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Swipe up!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 417

Gianna

I stayed perfectly still behind the black glass long after the door slammed shut behind Vincenzo.

My heart still would not slow down.

Everything felt too loud.

The blood rushing in my ears. The sound of Adriano and Raphael talking outside. My own breathing trapped inside this tiny dark space. I pressed my hand harder over my mouth because I suddenly felt sick.

I should never have been here.

That thought kept repeating over and over inside my head like something sharp scraping against my skull.

I should never have followed Raphael here tonight, never let this happen, never let it keep happening.

Because now I was standing hidden behind secret walls while men covered in blood talked about executions like they were discussing the weather.

And somehow that was my normal now.

I squeezed my eyes shut hard but I could still hear Vincenzo's voice.

No woman is special to Raphael.

The words dug deeper now that I was alone.

I hated that they hurt this much.

I hated that part of me immediately tried arguing against them even after everything Raphael himself had said tonight.

I don't want marriage.

I can't love anybody.

This works.

Practical.

The words all blended together until my chest started hurting again.

I leaned back against the wall behind me slowly. The cold metal pressed against my spine through Raphael's shirt.

It still smelled faintly like him and somehow that only made everything worse.

Because that was the problem.

Everything with him felt too good right until the moment it didn't.

I swallowed hard and looked down at my shaking hands.

What the hell was I even doing anymore?

Sneaking around with my stepbrother in dark forests. Letting him touch me against trees. Hiding behind black glass panels while his brothers talked about murder ten feet away from me.

I sounded insane.

No.

Worse.

I sounded pathetic.

A small broken laugh almost left my throat at the thought, but it turned into something shaky instead. I pressed my fist harder against my mouth immediately.

God.

My mother.

The thought hit so suddenly my stomach twisted painfully.

If she found out... I squeezed my eyes shut again. I could already picture her face. The disappointment. The heartbreak. The humiliation.

After everything she went through, after finally finding happiness again, I was sneaking around with her husband's son like some disgusting secret.

I felt dirty all over again, not because of Raphael touching me because I had wanted him to.

Every single time.

I slid slowly down the wall until I was sitting on the floor in the dark. My knees pulled tightly against my chest while my thoughts kept getting uglier and uglier.

I thought about the way Raphael shoved Vincenzo into the wall. My breath caught softly. That moment replayed differently in my head now.

At first it scared me.

Then it made something warm bloom painfully inside my chest because he protected me.

Not himself.

Me.

And that should have made me feel safe instead it somehow hurt worse.

Because Raphael would do things like that... then look me in the eyes five minutes later and talk about us like we were some convenient arrangement with rules attached to it.

I rubbed both hands hard over my face.

I did this to myself.

Raphael never lied to me, not really. He told me exactly who he was from the beginning. I was the idiot who kept searching his actions for meanings his words never gave me.

I thought about the way he remembered things about me.

The food I liked.

The way I hurt myself on corners when I was nervous.

The way he looked at me sometimes when he thought I wasn't paying attention.

Nobody noticed small things like that unless they cared.

Right?

But then Vincenzo's voice came crashing back into my head again.

Warm holes with names he forgets five minutes later.

I physically flinched.

Because no matter how cruel the words were, part of me could not stop wondering if maybe Vincenzo knew Raphael better than I ever would.

They grew up together, not me, maybe this was normal for Raphael.

Maybe protecting women meant nothing to him. Maybe remembering details meant nothing. Maybe touching me like I mattered was just another thing men like him learned how to do well. I hated myself for even thinking it but I could not stop.

Chapter 418

That was the problem with people like Raphael.

You never knew where you stood emotionally because they never stood anywhere themselves.

I wiped angrily at my face when I realized tears had started slipping down my cheeks again.

I was so tired of crying lately, everything inside me felt worn down, like I had slowly been pulled apart for months and only now realized pieces of me were missing.

And even now... even after hearing all of that... a part of me still wanted Raphael to open the panel and come ge

That realization hurt more than anything else. I was already too deep in this. I lowered my head against my knees and tried breathing slowly.

The room outside stayed quiet for another few seconds after Adriano stopped whispering.

I could not see both of them clearly from where I sat on the floor behind the black glass, but I could still make out their shapes through the tinted panel.

Adriano looked at Raphael for a long moment after saying those last words. Then Adriano finally stepped back with a tired exhale and grabbed his cigarettes from the desk. Then he turned and walked toward the door without another word. The handle clicked softly beneath his hand before he paused one last time.

“You know I’m right,” he muttered quietly.

Then he left.

The door shut behind him softer this time and suddenly it was just us again.

Me hidden behind black glass.

Raphael standing alone in the middle of the control room.

I stayed completely still on the floor, arms wrapped around my knees tightly while silence filled the space around

Raphael didn’t move at first. He just stood there with both hands braced against the edge of the desk, head lowered slightly like he was trying to collect his thoughts.

The monitors painted blue light across the side of his face. His shoulders rose and fell slowly with each breath.

I watched him drag one hand down his face roughly before straightening again. Then he turned toward the screens. His fingers moved over the keyboard automatically. Security cameras flashed across the monitors one after another.

Front gate.

Outer road.

Vehicle tracker.

I watched the black SUVS slowly disappear through the front gates of the property. Their headlights vanished farther and farther down the road until finally they were gone completely.

Raphael kept staring at the cameras for another few seconds anyway like he was making sure, like part of him still expected them to come back.

15 Bar

Then the room went quiet again except for the soft hum of electronics and my heartbeat pounding inside my ears.

I quickly wiped under my eyes hard with the sleeves of his oversized shirt when I saw him finally move toward the panel.

I scrubbed at my face again faster this time, trying to erase every sign of crying before he saw it.

I did not want him seeing me like this. Stupid enough to cry over words he practically confirmed himself.

The hidden panel slid open quietly, light spilled into the dark space around me and I looked up immediately.

Raphael stood there staring down at me.

His face changed the second he saw me sitting on the floor. His eyes dropped to my face too fast. To my swollen eyes. My cheeks. The tears I clearly had not hidden well enough.

Something tightened in his expression immediately.

“Gianna.”

I stood up too quickly before he could say anything else. My legs felt shaky beneath me, but I ignored it and brushed past him immediately.

“I’m fine.”

My voice sounded wrong.

Raphael turned after me at once, “Mess-”

“I said I’m fine.”

I kept walking toward the desk because I needed space between us. Needed air. Needed to stop feeling like I might cry again the second he touched me.

Behind me, I heard his footsteps getting closer, “Hey.”

I felt his hand reach for my arm. The second his fingers brushed my skin, panic climbed up my throat so fast it almost choked me.

I pulled away immediately, “Don’t.”

Raphael froze.

I wrapped my arms tighter around myself and stared at the monitors instead of him. My reflection looked pale in the dark screens.

“Don’t touch me right now,” I said quietly.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 419

The silence behind me stretched for one painful second too long.

Then, softer this time, “What happened?”

I almost laughed at the question.

What happened?

Everything.

That was the problem.

I shook my head quickly before he could see my face properly again.

“Nothing happened.”

I pressed my lips together harder. His footsteps came closer again, slower this time like he was trying not to scare

“Gianna.”

There was something careful in his voice now. That almost made it worse. Because this was exactly how it always happened with him.

Cold one second.

Gentle the next.

Enough softness to keep me attached.

Enough distance to keep me hurting.

I swallowed hard and kept staring straight ahead.

Then, “You were crying.”

Embarrassment hit me instantly.

I rubbed angrily at my face again even though I knew it was pointless now, “I’m tired.”

“That’s not why you were crying.”

I closed my eyes for one second.

God, why did he always notice things like that?

I took a slow breath before finally turning around to face him, Raphael stood only a few feet away now. Damp hair still messy from the shower. His expression tight in that way it always became when he was trying to understand something emotional and failing at it.

“I’m okay,” I said quietly.

Raphael frowned immediately, “No, you’re not. Is it about what Vincenzo said—”

Something sharp twisted inside my chest at how fast he answered. I looked away from him before my face betrayed me again.

“You should focus on your work,” I muttered softly. “That Whitmore or whatever.”

“Gianna.”

“I mean it.”

I could feel him still watching me. Trying to solve me the same way he solved computer systems and security problems but feelings did not work like that.

People did not work like that.

And suddenly I felt so tired of standing here hoping he would eventually understand something he already admitted he could not feel.

And suddenly I felt exhausted. My brain had finally reached a point where it could not keep carrying all of this anymore.

The hiding.

The lying.

The confusion.

Him.

I rubbed my hands slowly up and down my arms beneath the sleeves of Raphael’s shirt, trying to warm myself even though the room was not cold.

My voice came out quieter this time.

“I think you should work,” I said without looking directly at him, “You should probably finish whatever you need to do first.”

Raphael’s brows pulled together immediately like the idea irritated him.

“I’ll handle Whitmore tomorrow.”

I finally looked at him then. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Vincenzo wanted it by morning.”

“I said I’ll handle it.”

The answer came flat and immediate like the conversation was already over in his head.

“What you wanted to say matters more right now.”

I looked away from him again before my face betrayed me, “I don’t want to talk here,” I admitted quietly.

The control room suddenly felt suffocating now. Too many monitors. Too many memories from tonight. Too much blood still burned into my brain.

Raphael watched me carefully for another second before speaking softer this time, “Okay.”

That was it. There was no argument. There was no pressure. He reached for his phone instead and dialed someone immediately. His voice turned colder the second the call connected.

15 Bou

“Bring my car around the back exit.”

A pause.

“No. The rear gate.”

Another pause.

“And clear the route before I leave.”

Then he hung up and slid the phone back into his pocket. The room went quiet again after that.

I stayed standing near the monitors while Raphael leaned back lightly against the desk across from me. His eyes stayed on my face the entire time like he was still trying to figure out what exactly had broken inside me tonight.

The worst part was that I did not even fully know myself.

Raphael rubbed one hand slowly across the back of his neck before speaking again, “There’s something I need to say too.”

My stomach tightened immediately. I looked up at him carefully.

“But you go first,” he said.

I hesitated instantly because now that the moment was actually here, I suddenly did not know how to say any of it out loud.

How was I supposed to explain this mess inside my head without sounding pathetic?

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 420

Without sounding like exactly the kind of emotional complication he clearly did not want?

I looked down at the floor for a second, twisting the sleeve of his shirt between my fingers nervously.

“Can we just...” I swallowed hard, “Can we talk in the car?”

Raphael studied my face for one long second before nodding once, “Yeah.”

Another silence settled between us after that. It was not the comfortable silence from earlier tonight when I was curled against him laughing in the woods.

This one felt fragile like one wrong sentence could crack something open between us permanently.

Raphael pushed himself away from the desk finally and walked toward me slowly. I stiffened a little without meaning to. The movement did not escape him. I saw it immediately in the way his jaw tightened slightly but he still stopped a few feet away instead of touching me again.

“Mess.”

I hated how gentle he sounded saying that nickname now.

It almost made me cry all over again.

“The car’ll be here in a minute,” he said quietly.

I nodded once.

Neither of us moved after that.

And for the first time since this thing between us started, I genuinely did not know how to act around him.

The drive gate notification flashed quietly across one of the monitors. Raphael glanced toward it once before looking back at me and pulling on a black t-shirt over his black sweatpants.

“It’s here.”

I nodded even though my throat suddenly felt too tight again. Raphael grabbed his keys from the desk and motioned toward the hallway. I followed him silently out of the control room.

The sound of our footsteps echoed softly against the floors while security lights glowed faintly overhead. Raphael walked slightly ahead of me at first, then slowed until he was beside me instead.

He was making sure I stayed close. I hated that even now part of me noticed little things like that. We reached the back exit and cold night air hit my skin immediately.

A black car waited near the gate with headlights glowing softly against the pavement. One of Raphael's men stood nearby before stepping away the second he saw us coming.

I stopped automatically when my bare feet touched the cold ground outside.

Right.

My shoes.

Somewhere out in those woods probably.

I took another step anyway.

Then suddenly Raphael bent down and lifted me straight into his arms.

"Raphael-"

He lifted me against his chest like I weighed nothing, "You're barefoot."

"I can walk."

"No."

His answer came instantly.

I frowned at him anyway, "It's literally a parking lot."

"There's broken glass near the east wall."

I blinked once, "How do you even know that?"

"I had two men repairing cameras there yesterday."

Of course he noticed something like broken glass in the middle of a private compound nobody else probably paid attention to.

Raphael carried me all the way toward the car. One arm stayed firmly under my knees while the other held my back against his chest. The warmth of him soaked through the oversized shirt I still wore and my stupid heart betrayed me again by hurting harder because of it.

I looked away from his face.

The man opened the passenger door quickly for us and Raphael lowered me carefully into the seat like I might break. He was always careful with me physically.

Emotionally was another story.

Before I could reach for the seatbelt myself, Raphael leaned across me and pulled it over my lap.

His arm brushed lightly against my stomach. I held my breath automatically. His face stayed close to mine for one quiet second while he clicked the belt into place.

Then his eyes lifted toward mine. We stared at one another for a few seconds and then I looked away first.

Raphael shut the passenger door gently before walking around the front of the car. I stared out the window while he got in beside me.

The engine started softly beneath us. Then we pulled away from the Void. Neither of us spoke at first. Streetlights flashed across the windshield one after another while dark trees blurred past outside.

I kept my hands folded tightly in my lap. Finally I looked toward him, “We came here on your bike.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 421

Raphael glanced at me briefly before looking back at the road, “We did.”

“Then where did the car come from?”

“I always keep one here.”

I blinked once, “At the Void?”

“Yeah.”

I stared at the side of his face quietly for a second. Then something else hit me slowly, “The first time too?”

Raphael looked at me again, this time with the faintest pull at the corner of his mouth, “Yes.”

I frowned slightly, “You had a car here that night too?”

“Obviously.”

Every time he asked me to get on the back of his bike... every single time. He had another option. A safer one. A less intimate one but he still chose the bike.

And I always climbed on.

I looked back out the window quickly before my face gave something away again.

Outside, the city lights stretched quietly across the dark roads while silence settled between us again. I could feel Raphael looking at me every few minutes. He was giving me space to start talking first. And every single time I felt his eyes on me, my heartbeat sped up all over again.

I hated how aware I was of him all the time.

The sound of his breathing.

His hands on the wheel.

The quiet shifts in his expression every time he looked over at me.

At one point I glanced toward him at the exact same moment he looked at me. Neither of us looked away immediately.

Then Raphael turned back toward the road again.

The closer we got to the estate, the worse my chest felt because once we got home...

This became real.

The giant black gates of the Capone estate finally appeared ahead of us. My stomach dropped instantly. The sensors recognized Raphael’s car immediately. The gates started sliding open slowly without him even needing to stop.

I held my breath as we drove through. The estate stretched dark and massive around us while security lights glowed along the driveway. Most of the house windows were dark now.

Raphael didn’t drive toward the front entrance. Instead he turned down the lower path leading toward his private garage beneath the east side of the estate.

The garage doors lifted automatically as we approached then the car rolled inside. Everything became quiet again

Moonstories

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“Just breathe,” he whispered.

Check It Out

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the second the engine shut...

Raphael leaned back against the seat slowly, one hand still resting loosely near the steering wheel. Then finally he turned his head toward me.

I gathered the courage and looked at him. We stared at one another in silence for five whole minutes. Then Raphael reached toward me quietly. His fingers brushed against my mouth first before he gently pulled a strand of hair away from where it had stuck against my lips.

His eyes stayed on my face while his hand slowly lowered again.

“You’re the prettiest girl in this city,” he said quietly.

A small smile pulled at my mouth automatically, but it hurt so badly I could barely hold it there, “First the mansion,” I whispered softly. “Then your office. Now the whole city.”

I looked down at my hands twisting together in my lap.

“Too bad we can’t keep going after that.”

The faint expression on his face disappeared immediately.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to keep speaking before I lost the nerve completely.

“Because whatever this is between us....” my voice came out smaller than I wanted, “This deal... it needs to stop. I’m ending it.”

The silence after that felt horrible.

Raphael looked down slowly toward the steering wheel for a second before a quiet breath left him through his nose. Something disappointed flickered across his face so quickly I almost missed it. Then he let out a slow breath through his nose before nodding once to himself.

“That’s interesting,” he murmured quietly.

I frowned slightly.

He rubbed his thumb against the steering wheel absently before finally looking back at me, “I was sitting here trying to figure out how to tell you the exact same thing.”

And somehow hearing that hurt even worse.

Janedoewritings Author

Hey, guys!✓✓✓

This feels like a breakup, right?

As always, let me know what you think here and over at Janeverse. I love reading your thoughts, reactions, and theories.....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 422

Gianna

He rubbed his thumb against the steering wheel absently before finally looking back at me, “I was sitting here trying to figure out how to tell you the exact same thing.”

And somehow hearing that hurt even worse.

For a second, I wished he had argued. I wished he had told me I was wrong. I wished he had fought for it. Instead he just sat there beside me looking... calm, like he always does.

My chest tightened so hard it felt difficult to breathe. I swallowed hard and forced myself to nod, “Right. That’s probably for the best.”

Raphael wasn't looking at me anymore. His eyes were lowered toward the steering wheel, his jaw tight, like he was concentrating on something very hard.

"I don't even recognize myself anymore," I whispered.

Raphael's eyes lifted briefly, I looked away before they could hold mine.

"When you first suggested it, I thought..." I laughed softly and shook my head. "I don't know what I thought. I convinced myself it was simple."

He frowned slightly, "It was supposed to be. It has always been for me."

"But that's not me," I swallowed hard and forced myself to keep talking before I lost the courage, "I don't even know what I was thinking when I agreed to it. I actually convinced myself this was a good idea. What kind of idiot does that?"

"Gianna-"

"No," I shook my head immediately, "I mean it. I should've never agreed to any of this. I should've never kissed you back in the office the first time," my eyes burned, "I should've never let it get this far."

Raphael looked away toward the windshield. His jaw tightened slightly but after a few seconds he nodded, "Yeah, maybe."

I just stared at him. That was it? After everything I had just said? That was all he had?

Yeah, maybe.

The answer hit me with a strange kind of disappointment because it sounded so casual. So detached, like we were discussing tomorrow's weather instead of ending whatever this had become.

I looked away before he could see how much that hurt. I stared at the dashboard lights glowing softly in the darkness, "My mother would be devastated if she knew. She finally looks happy. After everything she went through. And here I am sneaking around with her husband's son."

The words sounded uglier out loud... much uglier.

Raphael remained silent, his eyes stayed fixed ahead as he breathed through his nose.

"I keep thinking about what people would say. What they would think about me. God," the shame crawled over my skin all over again, "We've been acting like this is normal."

Then I looked out the window toward the closed garage doors.

“If anybody found out…” I couldn’t even finish the sentence at first, my stomach twisted, “They’d think I’m disgusting.”

Raphael immediately frowned at that, “Gianna.”

“They would.”

“They don’t matter.”

“But they would,” I looked back at him, “People would think there’s something wrong with me. They’d think I was desperate.”

His expression darkened slightly.

“They’d think I was sick.”

“Stop.”

“They’d think I couldn’t find anybody else.”

“Gianna.”

“They’d think I’m one of those girls who—”

“Enough.”

The sudden firmness in his voice made me stop. The car fell quiet again. Raphael leaned back slightly in his seat and dragged a hand slowly across his mouth and jaw.

His eyes stayed lowered. Fixed somewhere near the steering wheel. I knew that look. He was thinking. Carefully.. Picking through every sentence before allowing it to leave his mouth.

“I agree that this should end. I agree that things got more complicated than either of us intended.”

Raphael paused briefly. His fingers tapped once against the steering wheel before going still again.

“I agree that hiding it was never sustainable. I agree that it’s creating problems for you,” his jaw flexed, “I can agree with all of that.”

His voice dropped lower.

“But I’m not going to sit here and listen to you talk about yourself like that.”

I looked away again, “You know what I mean.”

“No. I know what you’re trying to say,” his jaw tightened again, “But those aren’t the same thing.”

I stared at the dashboard lights, “They kind of are.”

“They aren’t.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 423

I laughed softly, “You really don’t see it?”

Raphael leaned back against the seat, “No.”

I shook my head slowly, “Of course you don’t. You never do.”

15 B

His eyes turned into two slits. I knew my words were hitting a nerve. I could tell I was hurting his pride, but not because he cared about losing me. He was just mad because he couldn’t understand why I was reacting like this.

To him, this was just a business deal that had run its course and needed to be canceled. To him, it was just a bad idea that didn’t work out.

But to me? To me, it felt like the most humiliating, heartbreaking mistake of my entire life. I was dying inside because I loved him, and he was treating it like a broken contract.

My throat tightened again, “I think I finally see how ridiculous this whole thing looks.”

I looked down at the soft black fabric of his oversized shirt drowning my frame. The anger had drained right out of me, leaving nothing but a vast, hollow ache that made my bones feel heavy. I didn’t want to say anything anymore. I didn’t have the breath for it.

I lowered my eyes to the shirt hanging off my shoulders. His shirt. The fabric still carried traces of his scent. I stared at the loose fabric gathered in my lap. At the shirt, that was far too big for me. At all the small reminders of him that seemed impossible to escape.

Then I swallowed hard, “I don’t just want to end whatever this was between us. I want to end all of it, Raphael,” the lump in my throat grew painfully larger, “I want everything between us to be over.”

1 pressed my lips together afterward, holding back the rest, holding back the truth that hurt too much to say aloud because the real problem wasn't being with him.

The real problem was that I didn't know how to be around him without wanting more.

I didn't know how to sit across from him at dinner and pretend my heart didn't notice.

I didn't know how to work beside him every day and act unaffected.

I didn't know how to turn him into family when he had become something else long before that.

And maybe that was the most pathetic part of all. So I kept that piece to myself.

Raphael turned his head slowly, his eyes searching my face in the dim glow of the dashboard.

"What does that mean, Gianna?" he asked.

I took a slow, deep breath, forcing my hands to stay completely still in my lap so he wouldn't see the tiny tremors in my fingers, "It means I don't want you in my life. At all. Not in any way."

He frowned, his forehead wrinkling as he tried to process the words, "We live in the same house. Our parents are married."

"I don't care," I whispered, looking back out at the dark garage wall. "It only complicates things. It makes everything messy, and I can't live like this anymore. I don't want you as a stepbrother. I don't want you as my family. I don't want the platonic version of you, and I don't want the version of you that looks out for me. I just want it over."

Raphael leaned in a fraction of an inch closer, his large frame casting a long shadow over my side of the car." Gianna, you're not making any sense. We can't just pretend we don't know each other."

"Yes, we can," I said, finally turning my head to look right back into his eyes and I remembered the first time, I looked into them. The same light, piercing brown, like clover honey held up to a flame, "You will ignore me, and I will ignore you. When we pass each other in the hallways, we look away. When we sit at the dinner table with qur parents, we don't speak. For you, I do not exist anymore. And for me, you are completely gone."

A small, hard line formed between his eyebrows. He let out a short, rough breath through his nose, shaking his head just a fraction, "You're overreacting right now. You had a rough night, you heard things that you shouldn't have, and now you're letting your head spiral."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 424

“I am not overreacting, Raphael,” I replied softly. I didn’t raise my voice. I didn’t snap. I just let the cold truth of my words hang in the space between us, “My mind is completely made up. I’ve been thinking about it the entire drive hotne. I kept replaying everything. The hiding. The lying. Sneaking around corners. Pretending nothing was happening whenever somebody walked into a room. And the more I thought about it, the clearer it became.”

The ache in my chest stretched wider with every word.

“For the first time in months, I think it’s actually clear,” then I said the part that hurt the most, “I don’t want anything to do with you anymore, Raphael.”

His jaw clenched tightly, the muscles along his neck hardening as he stared at me. He looked like he was trying to find the lie in my face, trying to find the emotion he could use to dismiss what I was saying. But there was nothing for him to grab onto. I was just tired.

“You’re forgetting one thing,” he said, his voice dropping into that cold, professional tone he used when he was running his empire, “You still work for me.”

“For exactly four more weeks,” I countered quietly, matching his tone, “Our six-month contract expires next month. I checked the dates yesterday. I will show up to the office, I will do my data work, and I will be a perfect employee for thirty more days. You will be my boss, and only my boss. Nothing else.”

“And after the month is up?” he asked, his eyes tracking the rise and fall of my chest.

“After that, I am completely done. I won’t work for you anymore. I graduate at the end of the term, so the internship hours are already locked in. The university won’t have any issues with me leaving the firm,” I reached over, my fingers wrapping around the cold metal of the seatbelt latch. I pressed the button, and the click resounded in the quiet car, “I’m serious about every word I said, Raphael.”

I didn’t look back as I stepped out of the car, my bare feet hitting the smooth garage floor. The chill traveled straight up my legs. I gripped the hem of his oversized shirt, pulling the fabric tighter around my thighs, just trying to feel small. Trying to feel invisible.

Slowly, against every single survival instinct I had left, I turned around to look at him through the open passenger door.

Raphael hadn’t moved an inch. He was still sitting back against the seat, his large frame completely still.

His broad shoulders were strangely stiff, locked tight as if he were physically forcing his lungs to take in air. He wasn't blinking. He was just staring straight ahead at the empty steering wheel.

Then, he slowly turned his head toward me. When his dark eyes finally found mine, there was nothing left in them. There was no heat. There was only a vast emptiness that made my knees feel weak.

"So," Raphael said, "It's goodbye, then?"

The question wasn't an argument. It was a conclusion. He was checking the data, verifying the terms, and closing the file.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a fraction of a second, "Yes, Raphael," I whispered into the quiet garage, "Goodbye."

And just as I was about to close the passenger door, his voice stopped me, "That's a hell of a way to end something. Just saying a word is too easy, Gianna."

I stopped, my hand still resting on the cold glass of the door. I furrowed my eyebrows, looking back at him through the opening. "I don't know what more you want me to say, Raphael."

"I'm not asking you to say anything," he corrected softly.

He shifted his weight, leaning slowly across the center console toward my side of the car. This time, when his dark eyes locked onto mine, the freezing emptiness vanished completely. A dark shadow came over his face. His gaze went completely pitch-black, his pupils expanding until there was no light left in them at all. His jaw hardened, the muscles locking so tight the bone looked sharp enough to cut under his skin.

"Kiss me goodbye," he ordered.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my fingers tightening against the car door. I shook my head slowly, my heart betraying me by slamming hard against my ribs, "I don't think that's a good idea."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 425

"Why not?" he asked, his eyes tracking the way my lower lip trembled.

"Because..." I swallowed hard, "Because it's not. It's over, Raphael. We literally just said it was completely over."

“I don’t care what we just said,” he rasped, his voice dropping an octave.

He looked like an animal that was watching its prey try to climb out of its cage, his large hand gripping the top of the steering wheel so hard that it groaned under his power.

“You want to end it? Fine. You want me to ignore you for the rest of my life? Fine. You want to pretend I don’t exist after next month? I will let you walk out of this garage and I will never touch you again. But you have to kiss me first,” he said but it sounded more like a threat, “You put your lips on mine. You finish this. Do that, and you can walk away.”

“Raphael… no,” I whispered, my voice shaking so badly the words were barely a breath in the air, “.I… I can’t do that.”

I forced myself to stand tall, gathering every single ounce of courage I had left inside my chest to put an end to this right now. I wasn’t going to let him pull me back under. I needed to walk away, I needed to protect my heart, and I needed to finally move past him for good.

I couldn’t look at him for another second. The way his dark eyes were burning into mine, demanding that kiss. It was a trap, and I knew if I leaned back into that car, if I let his lips touch mine just one last time, my heart would completely shatter into pieces. I would never be able to walk away.

I needed to protect myself.

With every single bit of strength I had left in my shaking body, I gripped the edge of the car door and slammed it shut, cutting off the view of his face.

I turned around instantly, my bare feet slapping against the floor. I kept my eyes glued to the wooden door at the far end of the garage, the door that led into the hallways of the main estate.

I had only taken five fast steps when a loud sound echoed through the hollow space behind me.

BANG.

It was the sound of his driver’s side door flying open and slamming shut against the car with a brutal force. I flinched violently, my entire shoulders jerking upward as the noise shot straight down my spine like an electric shock. My heart jumped right into my throat, choking off my breath.

Then came the footsteps.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

His boots hit the floor, loud, but they were moving fast. Incredibly fast. Panic exploded inside my chest. My legs went totally weak, but I forced them to move quicker. I started walking faster and faster. The fabric of his oversized shirt flapped against my bare thighs as my pace turned into a frantic, uncoordinated power-walk.

THUD-THUD-THUD-THUD.

He was closing the distance between us with ease. His strides were too long, too powerful.

My fingers finally hit the cold metal of the door handle. I twisted it down with a desperate yank and threw my weight forward, bursting through the frame and into the main house. The warm air of the estate hit my face, but it

didn’t do anything to calm the wild fire of panic burning in my chest.

1 didn’t stop to shut the door behind me. I just ran.

My bare feet made soft, frantic slapping sounds against the smooth marble floors of the hallway. Ahead of me, the massive, curved grand staircase rose up into the second floor. Safety was up there. My bedroom was up there. If I could just reach the steps, I could lock myself away from him.

I reached the bottom of the stairs, my hand flying out to grab the thick wooden banister. I planted my bare foo onto the very first step, ready to sprint upward.

I never made it to the second one.

A hand shot out from behind me and wrapped around my upper arm. The grip was so tight it instantly pinched my skin. Before a single cry could even leave my throat, Raphael used his strength to yank me backward. He spun my entire body around so fast the room blurred.

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Then the back of my head and my shoulder blades collided violently with the wall. The impact knocked the wind clean out of my lungs, leaving me completely breathless.

He didn’t use his hands to hold my arms down. Instead, his fingers shot upward and clamped directly around the front of my throat.

He didn’t squeeze to choke me, but the pressure of his palm against my neck locked me firmly in place. It tilted my chin up toward the ceiling, forcing me to look directly into his face.

He looked completely out of his mind. His jaw was locked tight, a thick vein throbbing wildly against his temple, and his nostrils flared with every ragged breath he took. He looked so furious, that for one terrifying second, I genuinely thought he was going to hurt me.

Instead, he dropped his head and crashed his mouth straight down onto mine.

He smashed his lips against mine with so much violent force that my teeth slammed together, the sharp taste of copper instantly bursting across my tongue as the inside of my lip cut against my teeth.

I couldn't breathe. His heavy face was pressing so hard against my nose and mouth that he was cutting off my oxygen completely. My chest heaved underneath his, desperate for air, but he didn't give me an inch.

My hands pushed at his chest when a sharp, shattering noise echoed through the dark.

The panic inside me flared into a completely new kind of terror. With every single bit of strength left in my body, I planted both of my palms against Raphael's chest and shoved him away from me.

His fingers slipped off my throat. He stumbled back a single step, his breathing rough and loud in the dark, his dark eyes still wild and completely black as he stared down at me, breathing heavily.

My back scraped against the hard wall as I scrambled away from him, my chest heaving as I sucked the cold hallway air back into my burning lungs. My lips felt swollen. My eyes frantically darted down toward the marble floor to see what had dropped.

A heavy ceramic bowl lay shattered into pieces right near the edge of the kitchen doorway. Bright red strawberries, blue berries, and slices of orange were scattered everywhere, rolling across the white stone floor.

Then, my eyes moved slowly upward.

My heart completely stopped.

Standing just a few feet away, right in the doorway, was Jules.

She looked absolutely frozen. Her tiny frame was trembling, her hands still held out in front of her empty chest in the exact shape of the bowl she had just dropped.

She was staring right at us. Right at my neck. Right at Raphael's chest. Right at the space where he had just been pinning me to the wall.

"Jules," I breathed, my voice coming out as a tiny, broken gasp.

She didn’t look at me. Her wide, innocent eyes were locked onto Raphael, filled with a sudden, overwhelming horror. She looked completely stunned, like she had just walked into a nightmare.

Then, the first big tear spilled over Jules’s lower eyelid, tracking a wet line down her pale cheek. Another one followed instantly, her chest giving a hitch. Her tiny mouth opened, trembling uncontrollably as she looked

between the two of us, finally realizing exactly what she had just witnessed.

A loud, piercing scream ripped out of her throat, “Mom...” she whispered.

“Jules, wait, please-“I begged, taking a blind step toward her over the broken pieces of ceramic.

But she didn’t hear me. She twisted around on her bare heels, her small feet slipping slightly on a stray strawberry, and began to run as fast as her little legs could carry her. She scrambled toward the back staircase that led straight up to Salvatore’s wing.

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy!

I’ll make it up to you with a double update tomorrow.

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Chapter 427

Gianna

LET

I paced.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

The soft carpet sank beneath my bare feet as I crossed the room for what felt like the hundredth time.

My heart still hadn’t settled.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the garage.

The car.

Raphael's face.

The look in his eyes.

Then Jules.

God.

Jules.

A sick knot twisted deeper inside my stomach. I dragged both hands through my hair and turned sharply toward the window. Outside, the estate grounds were dark. The fountains glowed softly beneath the garden lights. Everything looked peaceful.

Meanwhile my entire life felt like it was collapsing.

What if Jules told Mom?

What if she told Salvatore?

What if she told Vincenzo?

My breathing became uneven again. I pressed my palm against my chest. Maybe Raphael caught her before she reached them. Maybe she hadn't said anything yet.

Maybe-

The bedroom door suddenly burst open and I jumped. The sound echoed through the room. My head whipped around.

Raphael stepped inside first and Jules was tucked beneath one of his arms. She was fighting him. Actually fighting him.

Her little legs kicked wildly, her fists were swinging, tears streamed down her face. She looked absolutely furious.

"Mmff! MMFF!"

Raphael had one large hand pressed carefully over her mouth as she tried to scream. He was not hurting her, just stopping the noise because if she started yelling in the hallway, the entire house would hear it.

My stomach dropped, “Raphael-”

The second the door slammed shut behind them, he released her immediately. Jules launched herself away from him like he’d caught fire.

She ran straight across the room, straight toward me, “Gianna!”

A second later she crashed into my arms so hard she nearly knocked me backward. I wrapped both arms around her instantly, “It’s okay,” I whispered.

“It is not okay!” her voice came out shrill but I held her tighter. Her entire little body was shaking.

“Jules-”

“No!”

She twisted around suddenly and pointed directly at Raphael, “You were hurting her!”

The accusation echoed through the room. Raphael stood near the door, silent and motionless.

Jules looked ready to cry all over again, “You grabbed her! I saw it!”

“Jules-”

“You pushed her against the wall!”

My stomach twisted painfully.

Oh God.

She really had seen everything. Every single second.

Jules pointed at him again, her little hand was trembling, “And then you forced a kiss on her!”

The room fell silent, dead silent. I felt my face burn. Raphael’s jaw tightened slightly.

Jules looked between us like she couldn’t understand what she was seeing like the world suddenly didn’t make sense anymore.

The tears spilled faster down her cheeks, “You’re her brother. You’re our brother!”

Brother.

I closed my eyes briefly.

Jules shook her head violently, “I thought it was funny before,” she stated in a low voice, my eyes opened again. I thought you were teasing her like Dante does. I thought it was a joke but kissing her isn’t funny. That’s weird.”

My stomach dropped, “Jules-”

“No!” she shook her head again, “You can’t do that!” Her eyes moved back to Raphael, “She’s your sister!”

The panic that shot through me was immediate. I grabbed her shoulders gently, “Listen to me.”

Jules suddenly pulled away from me, her cheeks were bright red. Tears still clung to her eyelashes, making her green eyes shine in the bedroom light. She turned toward Raphael again, “Vincenzo told me you’re our brother. He said all of you protect this family but that’s not what I saw! You grabbed her! You pushed her against the wall and held her by the neck!”

The room fell silent except for Jules’ uneven breathing. She wiped furiously at her face with the back of her hand

“I thought you were supposed to keep us safe,” she whispered brokenly, “Not be the person we’re scared of,” then she looked at him with all the hurt and disappointment a child could carry, “You hurt my sister.”

Raphael looked away for a second, just a second then his eyes found mine and he looked lost. His jaw flexed, “I don’t know how to handle this.”

My exhaustion. My fear. My heartbreak. All of it rushed to the surface at once. I stared at him, “Of course you don’y

His eyes narrowed slightly. I kept one arm around Jules. My entire body felt like it was shaking, “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“Gianna-”

“No. You don’t get to interrupt me.'”

Jules immediately buried herself against my side again. I held her tighter.

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Chapter 428

My eyes never left Raphael, “This is exactly why I ended it.”

His expression hardened at my words.

I kept going, “This,” I pointed toward Jules, “Look at her. She is terrified.”

The guilt that flashed across his face lasted less than a second but I saw it.

And somehow that made me even angrier, “Why? Why couldn’t you just let it end?”

“Gianna, listen-”

“No. You couldn’t leave it alone. What if somebody else had seen us?”

Raphael opened his mouth. I didn’t let him speak.

“What if it hadn’t been Jules? What if it had been Mom? What if it had been Salvatore? What if it had been Vincenzo?”

That one landed, I saw it immediately. The muscle in his jaw tightened.

I shook my head, “You weren’t thinking. You were thinking about yourself.”

His eyes darkened at that but I didn’t care.

“You wanted the last word.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“Then what happened? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you made everything worse.”

Raphael took a step forward. I instantly stiffened and Jules did too. The movement wasn’t even threatening but after everything that had happened, both of us reacted anyway.

Raphael stopped immediately.

The realization hit him at the same moment it hit me.

Jules was afraid of him.

Then I swallowed hard, “Leave.”

His eyes found mine, “Gianna.”

“Leave.”

The word came out softer this time but somehow stronger. My chest hurt. Everything hurt. I wrapped both arms around Jules, holding her close, protecting her.

“Please leave.”

Finally Raphael lowered his eyes, just for a second. When he looked back up, something in his face had shut down completely. The familiar cold mask sliding back into place.

Without another word, he turned, opened the bedroom door and walked out. The click of the door shutting behind him echoed through the room.

I looked down at Jules and her little face was still blotchy from crying. Her eyelashes were wet. Her small hands twisted together in her lap as now she sat cross-legged on my bed.

For a second, I thought maybe she was finally calming down then she looked up at me. The fear was still there but now there was confusion too.

“Why did you kiss him?” she asked quietly.

I closed my eyes briefly then slowly sat down beside her. For a few seconds I just stared at my hands trying to figure out how to explain something I barely understood myself.

Finally, I sighed, “Jules... You know that Raphael isn’t actually our brother.”

Her forehead wrinkled immediately, “Yes he is.”

“No, sweetheart.”

“He is.”

I shook my head gently, “Our parents are married. That’s true but being family and being related aren’t always the same thing.”

She blinked. I could practically see her little brain working, trying to sort through it, trying to fit it into neat boxes.

“When Mom married Salvatore, our families joined together.”

She listened carefully.

“That made Raphael our stepbrother. It means we’re connected because our parents are married but we don’t share the same mom or dad.”

Jules thought about that, “But everybody will still calls him our brother.”

“Yes...”

“Then why did you kiss him?”

I laughed weakly, searching for words that wouldn’t make things worse, “Sometimes adults make mistakes.”

Jules immediately frowned, “You kissed him by accident?”

Despite everything, I almost laughed, “No.”

“Then that’s not a mistake.”

Fair point.

I rubbed my forehead.

God..

How was I supposed to explain this?

“Okay. Sometimes grown-ups get confused.”

Jules looked horrified, “How?”

“I don’t know,” I honestly didn’t, “Sometimes they care about somebody. Then they care a little too much. Then they keep making bad decisions because of those feelings.”

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She looked concerned now.

I continued carefully, “Raphael and I became very close over the last few months. We spent a lot of time together and eventually things became complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

I hesitated, then chose the simplest answer, “We started caring about each other in a way we probably shouldn’t have.”

She made a disgusted face, “People hug because they care. They hold hands because they care. Mom kisses my forehead because she cares but kissing on the mouth is different. Only people who love each other do that.”

My chest tightened instantly. Jules studied my face for a second.

“Do you love Raphael?” she asked.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out because for months I had lied to everyone.

To Raphael.

And to myself.

I had called it an arrangement.

My lips trembled and I looked away because if I looked at Jules right now, I knew I was going to start crying and once I started... I wasn't sure I would stop.

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Chapter 429

The pressure built and built until it felt impossible to breathe. I pressed my hand against my mouth, tried to hold it together, tried to keep everything locked inside but I couldn't.

A broken sound escaped me and then the tears came. I bent forward suddenly and covered my face. My shoulders shook. I hated feeling weak but the hurt had been building for too long.

Weeks.

Months.

Maybe longer.

And now it was spilling out of me whether I wanted it to or not.

"Gianna?"

I immediately pulled her into my arms hard, almost desperately. I wrapped both arms around her little body and buried my face against the top of her head.

She smelled like strawberries.

"I didn't mean for this to happen," I whispered, "I really didn't."

Jules slowly hugged me back.

"I tried not to. I kept telling myself it wasn't real."

Jules just listened.

“I thought I could control it.”

I laughed weakly, a horrible little laugh. The kind that comes right before another wave of tears.

“I thought I was smarter than this.”

Jules’ small hand rubbed my back and the gesture nearly destroyed me. Because somehow my little sister was comforting me, not the other way around.

“I didn’t want to love him. I didn’t want this. I didn’t ask for it. I tried so hard not to but… I fell in love with him anyway.”

The confession left me shaking.

“I don’t know when it happened. Maybe it happened slowly.”

I remembered his office.

The little fights we had.

When he stole my grilled cheese sandwich.

The motorcycle rides.

The woods.

The way he always looked for me in crowded rooms.

The way he bought Claire’s painting before I even had the chance to tell him how badly I wanted it.

The way he listened when nobody else did.

The way he found out about my dyslexia and didn’t treat me differently afterward. No sympathy. No awkward looks. No disappointment. He just accepted it and carried on like it changed absolutely nothing about me.

The way he took my pain personally, and the way those men at the gas station paid for it.

The way he made me feel safe.

And completely unsafe at the same time.

“Maybe it happened from the very beginning. I don’t know.”

Jules stayed quiet. I rested my forehead against hers. My heart felt like it was breaking all over again.

The worst part wasn't loving him, the worst part was knowing it didn't matter anymore because I had already ended it.

I had walked away and he had agreed.

The memory hit me so hard I almost doubled over. I squeezed my eyes shut. Trying not to think about the look on his face inside the garage. Trying not to think about his voice. Trying not to think about goodbye.

But it was impossible.

Because it was everywhere.

Inside my chest.

Inside my head.

Inside every breath.

"I love him," I whispered.

A fresh tear slid down my cheek.

"And I can't do anything about it."

Jules sighed, holding onto me tighter, "Because he is our brother."

I smiled,."Even if he wasn't my brother," I said quietly, "it still wouldn't work."

Jules blinked, "Why?"

I looked away from her, crying harder, "Because he doesn't love me."

Her eyes widened, "What?"

A fresh ache spread through my chest. I forced a small smile, "He doesn't."

"But-"Jules stopped. Her face scrunched up in confusion, "He kissed you."

I closed my eyes briefly. If only life were that simple, "He did."

Jules stared, "Then he loves you."

The certainty in her voice almost made me laugh again. I gently brushed some hair away from Jules' face, "It doesn't always work like that."

Her eyebrows pulled together immediately, "Why?"

Because I had spent months asking myself the same question.

"Sometimes people kiss each other even when they aren't in love."

Jules looked horrified, "Why would they do that?"

A sad smile tugged at my lips. That was actually a very good question. Why would they? Why would anybody willingly break their own heart? Why would anybody keep reaching for something they couldn't have?

"I don't know," I admitted quietly.

"That sounds stupid."

Despite everything, I laughed, "Yeah."

"It sounds very stupid," he added, and folded her arms, "Then Raphael is stupid."

I laughed harder. She looked deeply offended on my behalf.

"If he kissed you and doesn't love you, then that's stupid."

I shook my head, "It's more complicated than that."

Jules climbed fully into my lap then. Resting her head against my shoulder. After a few moments she spoke again. Very quietly this time.

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Chapter 430

"Do you wish he loved you?"

A lump formed in my throat. I hugged Jules tighter, "So much," I whispered, my voice cracked, "So much that it hurts."

Jules immediately wrapped both arms around my neck. Holding me as tightly as she could like somehow she could fix it, like somehow a hug was enough to repair a broken heart

For a few seconds neither of us said anything. The crying had stopped. The panic had stopped. All that remained was exhaustion.

I rested my cheek against the top of her head and closed my eyes. After a while, I brushed my fingers through Jules's hair, "Will you stay with me tonight?"

Jules immediately lifted her head, "Of course."

The answer came so fast it almost made me laugh. She looked genuinely offended that I had even asked.

"Why wouldn't I?"

I smiled weakly, "I don't know."

Jules scooted closer and wrapped her arms around my waist again, "You're sad."

The simple honesty nearly broke me all over again, "Yeah."

"Then I'll stay."

I kissed the top of her head, "Thank you, bug."

A few minutes later we crawled beneath the blankets together. Jules immediately claimed half the bed like she owned it.

I changed into pajamas while she disappeared beneath the comforter and emerged looking like an angry little burrito.

For the first time all night, I actually laughed. Jules smiled proudly at herself. Then she reached over and turned off the bedside lamp. Darkness settled over the room. Only the faint glow of moonlight remained.

I listened to the sound of her breathing. The way children always seem to fall asleep no matter what happens around them. Eventually her grip on my shirt loosened then loosened again. A few minutes later I looked down, Jules was asleep.

One hand still clutching the blanket, her mouth slightly open, completely unaware of how much I envied her. I stayed still for another few minutes, making sure she was really asleep...Then I carefully reached toward my nightstand and grabbed my phone.

The screen lit up immediately.

A string of unread messages.

My stomach dropped before I even opened it.

Raphael.

For a long moment I simply stared at his name then I opened it.

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Raphael:

Gianna, I'm sorry. What happened downstairs should not have happened. There isn't a justification for it. You asked me to leave you alone and I ignored that. That was my mistake.

Raphael:

I spent the last hour trying to understand why I reacted the way I did. I don't have an answer. I lost control of the situation for a few seconds and made it worse instead of better. I understand that now.

There was another pause before the next message appeared.

Raphael:

You were right about one thing. Things have become more complicated than they should be. Complicated situations require clear decisions. You made yours and I will respect it.

My chest tightened painfully.

I kept reading.

Raphael:

Starting tomorrow, I will keep my distance. At home, at work, anywhere else. You don't need to worry about further conversations or misunderstandings. I won't put you in that position again.

My vision blurred slightly.

I blinked hard and continued.

Raphael:

As for Jewel, she shouldn't have been exposed to any of this. That responsibility is mine. I don't want either of you carrying stress because of my actions. You and Jewel deserve to be comfortable here. This house should feel like home to both of you. I have no intention of making your lives more difficult than they already are.

The final text was short.

Raphael:

I'll honor what you asked for.

Goodnight, Gianna.

That was it.

A problem identified and solved.

Exactly the way Raphael handled everything else in his life.

I stared at the message until the words started blurring together. Then slowly I lowered the phone onto my chest.

Beside me, Jules shifted in her sleep and instinctively moved closer..Her small hand found my arm beneath the blanket.

I closed my eyes.

Tomorrow he would wake up and do exactly what he promised.

He would keep his distance.

He would ignore me.

He would treat me like a professional obligation and nothing more.

Exactly what I had asked for.

Exactly what I wanted.

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy!

I'll be dropping another chapter in about an hour because apparently I enjoy enabling your addictions.

...

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 431

Raphael

agry

The sun was already coming up.

I knew that because the first pale streaks of morning had started slipping through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Seven in the morning.

I hadn’t slept, not even for a minute. My bedroom was silent except for the faint hum of the climate controls built into the walls. I sat on the floor beside Medusa’s enclosure with my back resting against the side of my bed.

The python was draped across my lap.

One heavy coil rested over my thigh while the rest of her body moved slowly through my hands.

I ran my fingers carefully along her back. Medusa flicked her tongue once against my wrist.

The corner of my mouth twitched, “Morning.”

She stared at me with the same blank expression she always had.

I preferred that.

People complicated things.

Snakes didn’t.

I slid my hand beneath her body and lifted her closer. She settled immediately against my chest. My fingers moved absentmindedly across the patterned scales along her neck.

“You know,” I muttered quietly, “I think it’s just us again.”

The words sounded strange out loud, almost stupid but Medusa didn’t judge. I lowered my head and pressed a brief kiss against the top of her scales.

The snake remained completely relaxed. I leaned my head back against the mattress behind me. The ceiling blurred slightly as I stared upward. My thoughts had been running in circles all night.

The same conversation, the same garage and the same look on Gianna's face, over and over again, like a surveillance clip stuck on repeat.

I rubbed a hand across my jaw, "I lost my first friend."

The words came out quieter than I expected. Medusa shifted slightly in my lap.

Months ago I wouldn't have cared.

Friends were distractions. Attachments created weaknesses. Weaknesses created vulnerabilities.

That was how I had always viewed things.

Then somehow Gianna happened and now she was gone, not dead, not missing, not taken, just gone... by choice.

People left all the time, employees, associates, business partners. I replaced them every day. The Outfit functioned because people were replaceable. Everything was replaceable.

Except apparently this.

And I still couldn't explain why.

I looked down at Medusa, "Do you know what the problem is?"

She continued being a snake.

I scratched gently beneath her jaw, "I blanked out twice in a single night"

The admission sat badly in my throat because it was true. I had replayed it all night. The sudden feeling that something was being ripped out of my chest.

Then nothing.

A gap.

A complete break in thought.

The next thing I remembered was chasing her and after that everything became clear again.

I exhaled slowly, “I don’t do that.”

I don’t lose control. I don’t act first and think later. That wasn’t how I survived. That wasn’t how I built everything. That wasn’t how I kept people alive. Yet somehow I had managed it twice in one night.

First with Vincenzo.

Then with Gianna.

Medusa slowly wrapped another coil around my forearm.

I looked down at her, “Do you understand how bad that is?”

Of course she didn’t but I kept talking anyway because there was nobody else I could say it to.

“One mistake becomes two. Two become ten.”

The morning light was getting brighter now.

Chicago was waking up. Meetings would start soon. Reports, calls, problems, people waiting for answers, waiting for decisions, waiting for me.

My fingers tightened slightly against Medusa’s body, “Vincenzo can make mistakes. Adriano can make mistakes,” a small humorless smile touched my mouth, “God knows Dante and Silvio specializes in mistakes.”

Then that smile disappeared quickly.

“But not me.”

I looked toward the city skyline.

“That’s not my job.”

Never had been. I was the contingency plan. The insurance policy. The one who fixed things when everyone else broke them. The one who stayed calm. The one who thought ahead. The one who caught problems before they happened.

That was my role.

That was the reason people trusted me because I didn’t crack. I didn’t panic. I didn’t lose control.

And if I did, I lowered my eyes, “If I fall, everybody falls.”

The Outfit.

The businesses.

The operations.

The people who depended on us.

The family.

Aurelia and Nero.

My brothers, and their wives.

My father.

And now, even Hazel, Jewel and Gianna.

A thousand moving pieces balanced on decisions made every day. Wrong decisions had consequences. People got hurt. People died.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 432

There wasn't room for emotional mistakes. There wasn't room for blind spots. There wasn't room for whatever the hell had happened to me last night.

I rubbed my thumb over Medusa's scales. Eventually the noise in my head began settling. They weren't disappearing, they were becoming manageable.

I looked down at the python, "You know what the solution is?"

Medusa blinked. I took that as permission to continue, "I do exactly what I told her I'd do. I keep my distance.

Because that was what I was good at.

Problems appeared.

I fixed them.

And right now I was the problem.

So I would fix that too.

I pressed one final kiss against the top of Medusa's head before carefully lifting her back toward the enclosure.

"You are a terrible therapist."

The python remained completely unimpressed.

The shower did nothing.

The water was hot enough to turn my skin red. I stood beneath it longer than necessary, letting it pound against the back of my neck while I stared at the tiled wall. Normally it helped. Normally the routine worked.

Wake up.

Shower.

Work.

Think.

Solve problems.

Simple.

Today my thoughts kept drifting. I turned the water off harder than necessary.

Enough.

I had work to do.

I dried off, dressed, fixed my watch, and walked out of my room. Everything felt normal. The house was quiet. The hallways were quiet. The estate was waking up slowly. Exactly like every other morning.

Then I reached the staircase and stopped. The mess Gianna, Jules and I made last night right here was gone but something smelled different.

I frowned, for a second I couldn't place it. It was something familiar. The scent drifted through the house. Comforting.

I stood there for a second longer than necessary then I started walking faster. The closer I got to the kitchen, the stronger it became.

And suddenly I knew.

A smile tugged at my mouth before I could stop it. I pushed through the kitchen doorway and there she was.

My aunt.

Standing in front of the stove, her dark hair was tied back loosely. Several pans were working at once, something, baked in the oven, something simmered on the stove.

She was moving around the kitchen like she owned it. Which, honestly, she practically did.

Alessia always had that effect.

She could walk into any room and somehow make it feel smaller and warmer at the same time.

For the first time since last night, my shoulders loosened slightly.

“Well,” she said without turning around, “Good morning to you too, my giant robot.”

I blinked, “How did you know it was me?”

“Because you’re built like a refrigerator.”

She finally glanced over her shoulder. The second she saw me, her entire face lit up. Before she could say anything else, I crossed the kitchen. Then I wrapped both arms around her from behind. Alessia immediately laughed and the sound filled the entire room.

“There he is.”

I buried my face against her shoulder and just stood there holding her. And for some reason I didn’t want to let go. Her hands settled over my forearms.

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

I closed my eyes briefly, “Morning.”

She patted my arm then another thought hit me. I looked down automatically and froze. My aunt wasn’t pregnant anymore. The realization arrived a second late.

No round stomach.

Nothing.

The baby was here.

A strange feeling moved through my chest. I straightened slightly, “Where’s the baby?”

Alessia laughed immediately, “There it is.”

“What?”

“First question.”

I ignored her, “Where is it? What is it?”

She smiled, “It’s a she... and her father stole her.”

I frowned, “What?”

“She had a doctor’s appointment this morning,” she pointed a wooden spoon at me, “And before you ask, everything is fine.”

I relaxed slightly. Alessia returned to stirring whatever was cooking.

“Her father wanted to take her himself.”

I could picture that.

Unfortunately.

Rino motherfucking Lombardi carrying a baby around like a priceless diamond while terrifying every nurse within a fifty-foot radius.

The image almost made me laugh.

“He’ll be back this evening and drop her off here.”

I nodded, then without really thinking about it, I hugged her again, harder this time. My arms tightened around her waist.

Alessia went still and slowly lowered the spoon. Then covered my hands with hers. I already knew something was coming.

Alessia had always been dangerous, not because she carried a gun but because she paid attention to all of us. Far too much attention.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 433

She tilted her head slightly, “Raphael.”

I hummed.

“You okay?”

Fuck, I should have expected it. I loosened my grip slightly, not enough to let go, just enough to look normal, I’m fine.”

“You’re lying to me?”

I smiled despite myself, “You asked a question.”

“And you gave me a fake answer.”

I rested my chin briefly on her shoulder, “I’m fine.”

Alessia turned slightly in my arms, not enough to fully face me, just enough to study my expression. Her eyes narrowed. I recognized that look immediately. The same look she used before uncovering somebody’s entire life story.

Unfortunately, she was usually right.

She examined my face carefully because of the fact I was hugging her like a man clinging to a life raft.

Nothing escaped her, “You didn’t sleep.”

“I slept.”

She stared and I stared back.

Alessia sighed dramatically, “You know, you’ve been a terrible liar since you were ten.”

“I was excellent at ten.”

“You literally held your breath until your face turned blue because I caught you red-handed at the cookie jar and your brain completely fried trying to think of an excuse.”

“They were my cookies.”

“I baked them.”

“You baked them for me.”

She laughed and then watched me for another few seconds. The smile slowly faded from her face and concern replaced it.

Her hand moved to my cheek, “Raphael.”

“Everything’s fine.”

But she still kept looking at me.

And for one dangerous second I almost told her the truth. That I hadn’t slept, that I couldn’t stop thinking, that everything felt wrong, that I had somehow managed to ruin the best thing that had happened to me in years.

Instead I smiled, the same smile I gave investors, lawyers, politicians, “I’m good.”

Chago 233

Alessia studied me for another long moment then she sighed softly, not because she believed me but because she didn’t. But she also knew I wasn’t going to tell her anything.

So she reached up and kissed my cheek. Exactly like she used to when I was a kid, “Alright,” then she pointed toward the dining room, “Go sit down.”

I didn’t move.

She narrowed her eyes, “Raphael.”

I tightened my arms around her one last time then finally let go. Alessia’s concern deepened immediately because now she definitely knew something was wrong.

And I knew she was going to spend the rest of the day trying to figure out what it was.

I finally left the kitchen when Alessia threatened to hit me with a wooden spoon if I stood in her way any longer.

Adriano was sitting at the table, Madeleine was standing beside him. And Adriano had one hand wrapped around her waist while kissing her like he’d forgotten other people existed. Madeleine was barely five feet tall while Adriano stood at a six-foot-four, so the only way a kiss actually worked without breaking someone’s neck was with him sitting down while she stood over him.

I stopped, stared and shook my head, “Disgusting.”

Neither of them moved.

“Actually fucking revolting.”

Still nothing.

“People eat in here.”

Madeleine finally laughed against Adriano’s mouth. And Adriano, the bastard actually finished kissing his wife before looking at me like he was annoyed I had interrupted.

“Good morning, Raphael.”

“That wasn’t a good morning.”

“It was for me.”

I pointed at him, “What was that?”

Adriano glanced at Madeleine then back at me, “Kissing my wife.”

“You looked possessed.”

“I was.”

Madeleine covered her face, “Oh my God.”

I pulled out a chair as Adriano pointed directly at me, “You,”

“Me what?”

“You do not get to judge me.”

“I absolutely do.”

“You absolutely don’t, asshole.”

Madeleine immediately looked between us, her eyes narrowing, “Why?”

“Nothing,” Adriano answered quickly.

“Nothing,” I agreed.

Madeleine looked even less convinced. Adriano leaned back in his chair. One arm hooked possessively around her waist, “As I said... this is my wife.”

I looked at Madeleine, “Forced wife.”

Madeleine immediately nodded, “Yep.”

“Thank you.”

Adriano looked offended, “You mean that?”

Madeleine shrugged, “You trapped me.”

“And?”

“You chained me to a bed.”

“It was temporary.”

I nodded, “Listen to her.”

“It worked out.”

Madeleine laughed.

Adriano looked smug, “As a matter of fact,” he continued, “I made it work.”

“You terrorized her.”

“She loves me.”

“You traumatized her.”

“Still loves me.”

Madeleine sighed, unfortunately she wasn’t denying it. Which only made Adriano more insufferable.

He turned toward me, the smile on his face suddenly becoming darker, far more entertaining, “Besides.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 434

I already didn’t like that tone.

Adriano leaned back, crossing his arms, “If we’re discussing complicated situations…”

I stared at him.

He stared right back.

“…I don’t think I’m the one with problems.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Madeleine immediately looked between us, “What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing,” Adriano agreed.

The bastard was smiling now.

“You look tired,” he added casually.

“I didn’t sleep.”

“Clearly.”

Madeleine frowned, “Are you okay?”

“Perfect.”

Adriano immediately snorted. I looked at him and his grin widened. I made a mental note to kill him later.

The dining room doors opened before I could.

Vincenzo walked in first. Claire beside him, his hand rested automatically against her lower back. Claire looked significantly more awake than he did.

Vincenzo took one look at Adriano’s expression, then mine, “What happened now?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing,” Adriano echoed.

A few minutes later, the heavy doors swung open again. My father walked in first, with Hazel moving stiffly right by his side. Christ, the resemblance was staggering, she looked exactly like her daughter. A bright smile lit up Hazel’s face, making her look absolutely radiant despite the sickness eating away at her.

The sight made something uncomfortable twist inside my chest.

I looked away.

Then Silvio, Dante and Luca arrived, the three of them walked in together, still dressed from travel.

Dante immediately dropped into a chair. Luca followed. Silvio grabbed coffee before even saying hello.

“Why are you all here?” Claire asked.

“We landed three hours ago,” Dante answered.

“Vegas lost money,” Silvio added.

Luca glared at Dante, his jaw tight. “That’s because Dante cheats like a fucking amateur. He’s loud and sloppy about it, it’s fucking embarrassing.”

“I do not.”

“You absolutely do.”

“I prefer high-risk strategy.”

“You’re banned from three casinos, Dante. Including one that we own because your execution is so pathetic.”

Dante shrugged, “That is unrelated. Vegas was stupid.”

Silvio nodded, “Vegas is always stupid.”

Luca looked half asleep, “I hate airports and planes. And people.”

Nobody disagreed, then suddenly, the kitchen door opened. And Alessia stepped into the dining room carrying a tray.

Everything stopped.

Then all hell broke loose.

“ALLESSIA?” Claire was already out of her chair.

Madeleine squealed, “Alessia!”

The next few seconds became complete chaos. Claire was first as always, launching herself across the room then Madeleine, then Silvio.

Aunt Alessia laughed so hard she nearly dropped everything, “Guys. Guys. Guys, breathe.”

Claire pulled back first, immediately looking around, “Where’s the baby?”

The entire room went silent again instantly. Everybody started looking around, under the tray, around the doorway like the baby might randomly appear.

Alessia blinked, “The baby isn’t in my purse.”

Luca frowned, “Where is it?”

“She is with her father,” Alessia added and hugged all of us once more again.

“Why didn’t you bring her?”

“Do you have pictures?”

“How much hair does she have?”

“Can she walk?”

Alessia blinked, “She’s two weeks old.”

I leaned back in my chair. The pressure inside my chest eased slightly, and everything almost felt normal again.

Then the dining room door opened. My body recognized her before my brain did. The small bit of relief I had

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Gianna stepped into the room.

And suddenly every sound around me seemed much farther away than before.

She was wearing light blue jeans and a white crop top that showed a small strip of skin above the waistband. The shirt had bright pink lettering across the front.

I’M NOT LAZY. I’M ON ENERGY SAVING MODE.

Silvio snorted immediately, “That’s the most Gianna shirt I’ve ever seen.”

Gianna rolled her eyes, “I bought it for finals week.”

A tiny smile appeared on her face, it disappeared almost immediately then Jewel walked in behind her.

The second her eyes landed on me, her entire face scrunched up. A full glare, it was not subtle either. An aggressive, ten-year-old glare.

Jewel attached herself to Hazel’s side immediately. Gianna barely had time to react before Alessia pulled her into a hug.

Eventually everybody settled into their chairs. Gianna ended up across the table from me like always.

She never looked in my direction. She spoke to Hazel, to Claire, to Aunt Alessia, to Jewel, to literally everyone except me.

Exactly what she’d asked for.

Exactly what I’d promised.

Breakfast continued for another few minutes, the noise never really stopped. A normal morning.

Then Vincenzo casually reached for his coffee and changed the entire atmosphere of the room with a single sentence, “It’s good you’re here, Aunt Alessia.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 435

Alessia looked up from cutting pancakes for Jewel, “Why?”

Vincenzo took a sip, “I invited Raphael’s girlfriend to dinner tonight.”

Across from me, Gianna went completely still then all hell broke loose.

“WHAT?”

“Raphael has a girlfriend?”

“Since when?”

“How?”

“Who is she?”

“Is she real?”

“Did somebody verify this?”

Alessia looked at me, “I don’t believe it.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Believe what?”

“That you have a girlfriend.”

The entire table immediately agreed, “Yeah.”

“No chance.”

“Impossible.”

“He’s too weird,” Dante made a disgusted face.

“Thank you, Dante.”

Alessia looked genuinely suspicious, “What is her name?”

I continued eating.

“What does she look like?”

I reached for my coffee.

“How old is she?”

I drank the coffee.

“Does she have pictures?”

I closed my eyes.

“Oh my God, does she know what family she’s marrying into?” Madeleine asked, “Because you have to tell her.”

Silvio shook his head, “I don’t believe it. It’s probably just some new high-tech robot he built in his lab to take care of his needs, or he’s finally just customized a blow-up doll with a working mouth.”

“Children at the table!” Claire warned, glaring at him.

Vincenzo looked disgustingly amused, “I assure you she’s real and he’s serious about her too.”

Alessia frowned, “What do you mean serious?”

Vincenzo looked directly at me, “He put his hands on me.”

“You WHAT?” Dante nearly choked. “You hit Vincenzo?”

“No.”

“You punched him?”

“No.”

“You stabbed him?”

“No.”

Adriano looked delighted, “He body-checked the head of the Chicago Outfit.”

I closed my eyes, and sighed, “Adriano.”

“He launched himself across the room.”

“Adriano.”

“Like an emotionally unstable linebacker.”

“Adriano.”

Claire turned toward her husband, “Raphael shoved you?”

Vincenzo looked personally offended by the memory but nodded, “Into a wall.’

“You actually put your hands on Vince?” Dad asked, stunned, like he couldn’t believe what was going on.

I sighed, “Briefly.”

Luca glared at me, “No woman is worth that.”

Adriano immediately snorted, “That statement becomes funnier every time one of us gets married.”

Alessia slapped both hands over her mouth, “Oh my God.”

Luca looked at me, “I genuinely cannot picture that.”

“Neither can I,” Dante admitted, “You’ve never even raised your voice at him.”

Adriano nodded, “He did it for a girl.”

Alessia blinked at me, “Oh, this is serious.”

“No.”

“Oh, it absolutely is.”

“No.”

“Raphael.”

“No.”

She ignored me and then she leaned across the table, “Is she pretty?”

I stayed silent.

Alessia gasped again, “She’s pretty.”

“That’s not what-”

“How long have you been together?”

“We aren’t.”

“Do you love her?”

“Alessia.”

“Does she love you?”

“Alessia.”

She looked ready to climb across the table then suddenly she sat back. A huge smile spreading across her face, ” Oh, thank God.”

I frowned.

“Put a ring on her immediately.”

The entire table burst out laughing.

Alessia nodded confidently, “I’m serious. We may never get another opportunity. Raphael finally found a woman willing to tolerate him. So lock it down immediately. I’ve waited years for this.”

Luca nodded, “I honestly thought he’d die alone like me.”

“Thank you,” I said flatly.

Dante shrugged, “I thought he’d eventually marry a laptop.”

“Or a spreadsheet,” Adriano added.

“Or a security camera,” Luca said.

“Or that snake,” Dante finished.

“Medusa deserves better,” Adriano replied immediately.

I closed my eyes, counted to three. When I opened them again, Gianna was already looking at me from across the table. The sight hit me harder than it should have.

For one brief second, her eyes locked onto mine then she immediately looked away like she regretted it the second it happened.

Something ugly twisted low in my chest. The questions kept coming, the jokes, the theories and the endless fucking interrogation.

And suddenly I’d had enough, “She’s not coming!” I snapped, just hard enough to cut through every conversation at the table.

The effect was immediate. Every head turned toward me. And the entire room went silent.

Alessia frowned, “Why?”

I looked back at my coffee and said the words as evenly as I could, “She ended things last night.”

Janedoewritings Author

Hey, guys!

I hope you enjoyed today’s updates. As always, I’d love to hear your thoughts, so don’t forget to drop a comment and let me know what you think!...

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 436

Gianna | Age 16

The butterflies in my stomach would not settle down.

I stood in front of the mirror for the third time, smoothing my shaking hands over the fabric of my dress. Then I checked my hair. Then I smoothed the dress again. I knew I looked completely ridiculous, but I couldn't stop the wide, breathless smile from stretching across my face.

Today.

Today was finally the day.

I pressed my palm hard against my chest, feeling the wild, rapid thumping of my heart. Just a few more hours. Just one more car ride, one more meeting at the diner, one final handoff, and then my entire life would change forever.

Mom would have the evidence. She would have the recordings, the hard proof, the weapon we needed to break these chains. Six long months of secret recordings, all captured on the tiny device hidden deep inside the stuffing of that little brown teddy bear.

Every horrible thing he had ever done to me was on that tape. Every booming scream. Every cruel word. Every single piece of my suffering.

I wasn't carrying it past the front gates myself. That would have been stupid. My father had armed guards stationed at every single exit of the estate, and his men searched everything I owned. They checked every bag, every pocket. So, three days ago, I had given the bear to Leone.

Léone kept my secrets. Nobody in this house ever questioned him. Nobody searched his car or went through his things. The guards would never think to look there.

A happy smile pulled at my lips as I imagined it. He probably had the bear tucked away somewhere perfectly safe already. When we arrived at the diner, he would hand it back to me, and I would place it right into Mom's hands.

And then... freedom.

The word felt strange and heavy inside my head. Freedom.

I grabbed my small purse from the bed and hurried out of my room. My bare feet practically floated down the long hallway. For the first time in years, the weight on my shoulders was gone, I felt light, hopeful, and truly happy. I even skipped the last two steps of the grand staircase, a small laugh bubbling in my throat.

Then, I froze.

The entire world stopped spinning, and slowly, the smile vanished from my face. My stomach dropped so fast and so hard it felt like I had just been pushed off a high cliff into the dark.

Three men were standing right in the middle of the spacious living room.

My father.

Leone.

And Leone's father.

Nobody was speaking. Nobody was moving. My eyes immediately bypassed the men and landed on the object clutched in my father's scarred hand.

A small, brown teddy bear.

No.

No. No, no, no.

My father held the bear loosely, its soft, furry body dangling lifelessly toward the floor.

I stared at it, my brain refusing to process what I was seeing. Then I looked at Leone, and then right back at the bear. My heart began hammering violently against my ribs, the sound rushing in my ears like a waterfall.

Leone wouldn't look at me. He stood completely stiff and rigid beside his father, his broad shoulders tense, his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides.

"Leone?" my voice came out impossibly small, a tiny gasp in the room.

He finally lifted his eyes to meet mine. For a split second, I saw a flash of emotion there, regret, pain, and deep fear.

He shook his head slowly, his jaw tight, "I can't lose you."

The words hit me. I stared at him, my mind spinning. I couldn't understand the words. I couldn't make them fit together with the boy I thought I knew.

"What?" I breathed.

My father suddenly let out a loud laugh. The sound was ugly, and mean, echoing off the high ceilings of the room, “What?” he barked, his lip curling into a cruel sneer. “You want to know what happened, Gianna?”

His face twisted with a sudden rage. The thick veins in his neck stood out, throbbing wildly, and his grip tightened around the teddy bear until the seams groaned, “You stupid little girl.”

My entire body flinched at the harshness of his tone.

“You think you’re smarter than me?” he roared, stepping forward. The sheer force of his booming voice seemed to shake the very walls of the house, “You think I wouldn’t find out what you were doing under my own roof?”

“Daddy-”

“Shut up!”

I jumped violently, the tears instantly flooding my eyes and spilling over my cheeks.

My father raised his arm, pointing the brown bear directly at my face, “You were going to hand this over to that manipulative, crazy bitch?”

9

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 437

“Daddy, please-“I sobbed, reaching out with trembling hands.

“That woman spent years trying to destroy this family! She tried to ruin everything I built! And you were helping her!”

“No!” I rushed forward, the panic exploding in my chest. “It isn’t like that! Daddy, please, listen to me -”

“Then what the fuck is it like?” he screamed. His face was bright red now, his eyes wide and completely wild. You sneak around behind my back! You lie to my face! You betray your own blood!”

I started crying hysterically, my chest heaving. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you!”

My father looked down at me as if I had suddenly become a total stranger, a piece of trash beneath his feet. For a moment, that cold, dead look hurt worse than all his yelling. Then, his eyes dropped to the teddy bear in his hand, and something inside his brain completely snapped.

The first tear happened so fast I barely saw his hands move. With a brutal yank, his huge fingers ripped the bear straight down the middle. The heavy stitching burst apart with a loud pop, and white cotton stuffing exploded into the air, drifting down like snow. The tiny black recording device slipped out of the fabric and hit the marble floor with a clatter.

“No!” I lunged forward, my hands scraping the air.

But my father got there first. His shoe came down with a sickening, crushing force.

CRUNCH.

The plastic shell shattered instantly. He didn’t stop. He raised his boot and stomped on it again, again, and again, his face twisted in pure rage. Pieces of wire and metal scattered across the floor. The little red indicator light flashed once and died forever.

“No!” I dropped heavily to my knees, the hard stone hurting my joints.

My hands shook uncontrollably as I looked at the floor. The broken pieces were everywhere, small, mangled bits of plastic, sharp wire, a tiny green circuit board, clumps of white cotton, and shreds of brown fur.

When I tried to reach out a trembling finger to touch them, my father swung his boot and violently kicked the remains across the room. The pieces slid away from me, disappearing under the furniture. They were completely gone. Destroyed.

Month.... months of secret recordings. Months of crying into that bear. Months of pure, desperate hope. All of it gone in a single second.

Sometimes, when the pain became completely unbearable, I would hit play on the little recorder and pretend I was actually talking to my mother. It was the only thing that helped me get through the nights, but she will never hear those words now. She will never get those messages, ever again.

I broke. A loud, ragged sob tore from my throat, ripping my chest apart. “Daddy, please!” I scrambled forward on my knees and grabbed his arm, but he ripped it away from my grip with a shove, “Daddy, I’m sorry! Please!”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t move. He just stood there, breathing heavily, looking down at me with pure disgust.

“I’m so sorry!” I wept, my forehead almost touching the cold floor.

Still nothing.

“I didn’t mean to-”

“You didn’t mean what?” he thundered, “You didn’t mean to tell that woman our private business? You didn’t mean to betray your father?”

I was shaking so hard I could barely draw air into my lungs. My throat felt tight, choked with panic. “Please. Please don’t be angry with me. Daddy, please.”

Slowly, I turned my head toward Leone. He looked incredibly pale, his skin almost white, like he was about to be physically sick right there on the rug. But he didn’t move an inch. He didn’t step forward to help me up. He didn’t say a single word to defend me.

The realization hit me slowly. He hadn’t thought of me. He hadn’t kept the bear safe. He had walked into this room and handed it over willingly. Leone had told him everything. I stared at him, the world blurring through my thick tears.

“Why?” I whispered, the word broken and bleeding. “Why did you do this?”

Leone finally looked at me, “I couldn’t let her take you away,” he rasped, “He would have hunted you down, Gianna. I couldn’t let her cause your death.”

A fresh sob escaped my lips, a painful sound that made my entire chest ache. Everything hurt. My heart felt like it had been put into a meat grinder.

My father raised his arm, his finger pointing directly toward the grand staircase, “Go to your room.”

I didn’t move. I couldn’t. My legs felt like lead.

“Now!” he roared.

I didn’t look at him. Instead, I dropped my eyes back to the floor. I couldn’t just leave it here. I couldn’t let them sweep my hope into the trash like it was nothing.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 438

Moving on pure, desperate instinct, I crouched low to the ground, my knees scraping against the marble. With shaking, clumsy fingers, I began to gather the ruined remnants of the bear. I scooped up the torn, hollowed-out brown skin, dragging it into my lap. I

reached under the edge of the couch, pulling out small clumps of the white cotton stuffing, squeezing it tightly in my fist as if I could somehow put it back together.

My tears dripped directly onto the shredded fabric, darkening the brown fur. I picked up a piece of the black plastic casing, the edge cutting into my thumb, but I didn't care about the pain. I gathered every single wire, every tiny piece of broken metal, hoarding them against my chest like they were precious jewels. It was all I had left of my mom.

I clutched the broken, deflated remains of the teddy bear tightly against my stomach, burying my face into the torn fur, and wept silently on the floor while the three men stood above me, watching my world fall completely into pieces.

The shadow of his body fell over me again, blocking out the bright morning sun.

My father dropped down to his haunches right in front of me before I could tuck the ruined pieces of the bear away, his hand shot forward. His fingers clamped around my jaw, his thumb digging brutally into one side of my cheek while his fingers crushed the other. He didn't just hold me, he squeezed until my bones ached, forcing my face upward until I had no choice but to look directly into his eyes.

He was so close I could feel the hot rush of his breath against my wet cheeks, "Look at me, Gianna," he murmured.

I couldn't nod. I couldn't move my head even a millimeter. His grip was a vice, completely controlling the movement of my neck.

"You think I do this because I'm cruel?" he asked softly, his eyes searching mine with a look that almost resembled genuine pity. He shook his head slowly, a small, sad smile touching his lips. "No, my darling girl. I do this because you are mine. I do this because I am the only person in this whole godforsaken world who actually gives a damn about keeping your stupid self alive. Your mother? She doesn't love you, Gianna. She just wanted to use you to get to me. She's a disease. And I am protecting you from her."

A tiny, broken sob hitched in my throat, but the pressure of his hand against my throat made it hard to even draw air. My chest heaved, desperate for oxygen, but he was crowding my space so completely that it felt like he was inhaling all the air in the room before it could ever reach my lungs. He controlled everything. He controlled the room, he controlled my body, and right now, he controlled my very breath.

"Daddy, please..." I choked out through my squeezed lips.

"Listen to me very carefully, my sweet girl," he whispered, his thumb pressing deeper into my flesh, tilting my face just an inch higher so he could look down his nose at me, "You are never going to see her again. Do you understand me? Never. Not next month. Not next year. Not for the rest of your life."

The words felt like bricks crashing down onto my chest.

Never.

“You belong to this house,” he continued, his tone turning sweet, almost loving, as he used his free hand to gently, softly brush a stray strand of hair behind my ear, “I give you your clothes. I give you your food. I give you the very air you breathe, Gianna. Every good thing you have comes from me. And from this day forward, your mother is dead to you. If you even whisper her name in this house again, I will make sure the consequences are something your little heart won’t survive.”

He stared deep into my eyes, waiting, watching the hope completely drain out of my soul until there was nothing

+15 agr

This Vincenzo was sitting at a breakfast table trying to explain himself to his wife and somehow losing.

Smiling, my eyes met with Raphael again. I found him looking at me with a smile of his own, and immediately my smile fell.

Claire folded her arms, “What exactly did this poor girl do to deserve that?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why would you say it?”

Vincenzo looked around the table, searching for support.

Adriano raised his coffee cup, “I’d like the record to show that I was against threatening the girlfriend.”

“You laughed,” Raphael said.

“I laughed supportively.”

“That’s not a thing.”

“It is for me.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 439

Gianna

The silence that followed Raphael's words felt painfully heavy.

It settled over the entire dining room, the excitement died down. Nobody reached for their coffee, nobody touched their food.

I sat perfectly still in my chair, my fingers wrapped around my coffee mug so tightly my hands hurt.

Across the table, Raphael looked exactly the same as always like he had just announced a canceled business meeting instead of the end of something that had completely destroyed me.

My heartbeat wouldn't slow down. Every thump felt too loud. I kept staring at my plate because I was terrified somebody would look at me and somehow know.

Somehow see everything written across my face.

"What do you mean she ended things?" Vincenzo's voice cut through the silence.

I looked up before I could stop myself and Raphael looked at me at the same time, reaching for his coffee," Exactly what it sounds like."

Vincenzo seemed confused, "Why?"

For a second Raphael said nothing then he took a slow drink, set the cup down and answered, "You scared her."

My stomach dropped.

Vincenzo let out a scoff, "I scared her?"

"Yes. You came into a room covered in blood," Raphael rested one arm on the table, "You talked about disposing of bodies and then you threatened her."

I peeked a look at him and Vincenzo looked offended, "I did not threaten her."

"You did," Raphael stated.

"I threatened you."

"She was standing ten feet away."

Claire slowly turned her head towards Vincenzo, "You threatened his girlfriend."

I risked a glance toward Vincenzo and suddenly, he looked strangely human, like he was somehow the victim in this conversation, “I didn’t threaten her.”

Raphael didn’t even look up from his coffee, “You did.”

“No.”

“You did.”

“I was talking to you.”

Everyone in the family talked about how Claire was the only one capable of making Vincenzo rethink his life hapter 459

+15 @grius choices and now, I was seeing it too.

Vincenzo sat straighter and suddenly I understood why everyone found this funny.

Because the man who terrified judges, politicians, gangsters, and federal agents looked like he was trying not to get yelled at by his wife.

Vincenzo pointed at Raphael, “I threatened him.”

“While she was standing there,” she asked.

“Technically.”

Claire blinked, “Oh, that’s much better.”

Around the table people started hiding smiles.

Raphael took a sip of coffee then calmly made everything worse, “He told me she belonged at the bottom of a lake.

Claire’s head snapped toward Vincenzo, “WHAT?”

Vincenzo immediately glared at Raphael, “Context matters.”

Raphael continued speaking, “He also informed me there wouldn’t be enough left of either of us to bury if something happened to the family.”

Vincenzo closed his eyes, just closed them like maybe if he couldn’t see the problem it would disappear.

Claire looked horrified, then angry, and then horrified again, “Vincenzo,” his name came out very quietly.

“It was a private conversation,” Vincenzo added.

“You threatened your brother’s girlfriend.”

“I threatened Raphael.”

“About his girlfriend.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Vincenzo.”

He stopped talking immediately.

I actually laughed because this was not the same Vincenzo from last night. Last night he looked like something carved from ice and violence. A man who spoke about dead bodies and consequences without blinking. A man who made my heart stop every time he looked in my direction.

This Vincenzo was completely different.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 440

Claire ignored both of them.

Her attention never left her husband, “You scared her enough to break up with him.”

“I wasn’t trying to.”

“Did you scare her?”

Vincenzo opened his mouth, “...possibly.”

Claire raised an eyebrow, “Possibly?”

“Fine. Yes.”

“Vincenzo.”

“What?”

“Apologize.”

The entire table froze, even me, especially me because apparently watching the head of the Chicago Outfit get ordered to apologize was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Vincenzo looked personally offended, “Right now?”

“Yes.”

“She isn’t even here…”

Beside me, Madeleine pressed her lips together trying not to smile.

Raphael smiled, “That’s alright. I’ll make sure the message gets delivered.”

His eyes flickered toward me again and my stomach dropped because nobody else understood it.

To everyone else, he was talking about some mystery girlfriend.

But I knew.

Finally Vincenzo looked toward Raphael, then muttered something.

“What was that?” Claire asked sweetly.

Vincenzo’s jaw tightened, “I said I may have overreacted.”

And that was the closest thing to an apology anybody was ever getting from Vincenzo Capone.

And judging by Claire’s expression, even she knew it.

“But… that creates another problem. The things she heard last night. The things she saw,” Vincenzo glared at Raphael, “How do we know she isn’t a liability now?”

I looked down at my coffee again. Suddenly I didn’t feel hungry anymore.

Raphael lifted a shoulder, “I know she isn’t.”

Vincenzo's eyes narrowed, "How?"

"Because I know her. I've known her long enough," the muscles in Raphael's jaw moved once, "I've investigated her. I know everything about her family."

My smile vanished.

"I know where the money comes from. I know where it goes. I know every debt. Every tax issue. Every lawsuit."

His eyes moved briefly toward Vincenzo.

"If necessary, I have enough information to bury them so deep they'd never recover."

My stomach tightened. My thoughts immediately spiraled. Did he really mean that? Had he actually gone that far?

A cold, sinking feeling spread through me as my mind jumped to my father. To things I didn't even want to imagine existing about him online. He never kept records. He never trusted systems. He never even trusted doctors with my name properly. There was nothing. There couldn't be anything but the idea still made my hands go numb.

Dante stared at him, "You blackmailed your own girlfriend before dating her?"

Raphael frowned, "No."

"That sounded exactly like what you said."

"So," Adriano said slowly, "She really dumped you."

Alessia's expression softened immediately, almost sympathetic, "Oh... that's why you were-" She stopped herself mid-sentence, shaking her head.

Meanwhile I wanted the floor to open and swallow me whole.

Raphael simply shrugged, "It happens."

My chest hurt. I should get used to his coldness by now, but I still wasn't. He said it so easily like I hadn't spent half the night crying into my pillow, like he hadn't kissed me against a wall.

Alessia kept watching him, her head tilted slightly. Then she set her fork down, "No," she said quietly, "It doesn't just happen to you."

Raphael sighed immediately, "Alessia-"

Her eyes never left his face, “Don’t do that thing you do.”

He rubbed a hand down his face, “Can we not do this?”

Her voice softened, “I know you better than you know yourself. You’ve been pretending things don’t affect you since you were a kid.”

The room grew quieter.

Alessia smiled sadly, “You used to fall off your bike, scrape half the skin off your knees, and tell me you were fine while you were bleeding through your socks. And you still do it.”

Raphael scoffed and looked away.

Alessia shook her head, “So no, sweetheart. I don’t believe for one second that this is just a case of ‘it happens.’

Raphael stared down into his coffee. For the first time all morning, nobody had a joke ready, nobody interrupted, nobody laughed.

I found myself looking at him before I could stop myself. Something uncomfortable shifted inside my chest.

For one stupid second, I remembered last night. Him sitting in that car, asking if it was goodbye.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 441

The look on his face afterward.

The messages.

The apology.

The promise.

Starting tomorrow, I will keep my distance.

My stomach twisted. Maybe... Maybe this wasn’t as easy for him as I thought.

Maybe-

Raphael suddenly let out a harsh breath. Then he dropped his coffee cup onto the table harder than necessary,' Jesus Christ," he muttered, dragging a hand down his face. "Can we please talk about literally anything else?!"

I flinched, the reaction was instant before I could stop it. The sound wasn't even that loud but my body reacted anyway. Raphael's eyes snapped toward me immediately.

And suddenly that tiny moment I'd had? The one where Alessia's words had started getting into my head? The one where I almost let myself believe he cared?

It vanished.

Just like that.

Across the table, Raphael's eyes stayed on me for another second before he looked away.

Then Vincenzo leaned back in his chair. His eyes shifted from Raphael to me, "Hey, kid."

My head lifted automatically.

Vincenzo was looking directly at me, "You alright?"

The question caught me so off guard I just blinked then I forced a smile, "I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting the noise."

His eyes narrowed immediately like he didn't believe me.

Across the table Raphael pushed his chair back. The legs scraped against the floor, every head turned as he stood. Without looking at anyone, he picked up his phone and keys, "I've got work."

Then he walked toward the door and was gone in a second.

Vincenzo stared at the closed doors, his jaw flexed once then he shook his head, "No."

Claire sighed immediately, "Vincenzo."

"No."

He pointed toward the door Raphael had disappeared through, "That. The hell is that?"

Claire pinched the bridge of her nose, "Leave him alone."

"No."

"Vincenzo."

“No.”

Alessia folded her arms, “He just got broken up with.”

Vincenzo looked at her like she’d missed the point entirely, “I don’t care. I care that he’s acting strange.

Vincenzo looked around the table. His eyes inoved from face to face, “He hasn’t slept. He looks distracted.”

Luca frowned, “He is distracted.”

Vincenzo leaned forward, “And none of that would matter if he sold cars for a living but he doesn’t. He runs half the systems that keep this organization alive.”

Nobody interrupted him now because this wasn’t family talk anymore. This was business.

“The ports, the finances, the servers, the communications, the security fucking infrastructure,” his eyes hardened, “One bad decision from him creates problems for all of us.”

Alessia glared at Vincenzo, “He’s having a rough morning. I will handle him.”

“A rough morning gets people killed. He’s acting fucking weird.”

Claire frowned, “Vincenzo.”

“No,” he pointed toward the door again, “That isn’t Raphael. You know what I did when I realized I wasn’t thinking straight?”

Claire immediately closed her eyes, “Oh no.”

His attention stayed on the doorway, “I left. I walked away from my family. I stayed away. I kept my distance. I stayed away from people I cared about. Because if I wasn’t operating at one hundred percent, then everybody around me paid for it. I wasn’t worried about myself. I was worried about the damage I’d cause if I made the wrong decision.”

A strange feeling settled in my stomach. Because suddenly I wasn’t hearing Vincenzo anymore. I was hearing Raphael.

My mind drifted back to last night. To Jules crying, to her screaming, to Raphael standing in my bedroom looking completely lost while she accused him of hurting me.

I remembered the look on his face. The confusion, the way he’d stopped moving the second either of us flinched.

Then I remembered myself. The knot in my stomach tightened.

I had been hurt.

But had I stopped for even one second to think about him?

About what Jules saying those things had done to him? About what it felt like to have a ten-year-old look at him like he was some kind of monster?

I pressed my lips together. The answer came immediately.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 442

No.

I hadn’t.

I had been so busy drowning in my own heartbreak that I never stopped to consider his.

A memory surfaced.

“I don’t know how to handle this.”

At the time I’d taken it as proof that he didn’t care.

Now I wasn’t sure, maybe he genuinely hadn’t known what to do. Maybe watching Jules cry had affected him too. Maybe seeing fear in her face had shaken him more than I’d realized.

My throat tightened.

Because if that was true...

Then I’d left him completely alone with it.

Across the table, Vincenzo was still talking.

“If I thought for one second I might hurt this family... Then this family didn’t need me near it,” Vincenzo looked toward the door one last time, “So he can do one of two things. He can get his shit together or he can tell me he isn’t in the right headspace to do his job.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw.

“Because I’m not about to get blindsided.”

Claire sighed, “You’re talking about him like he’s a machine.”

Vincenzo’s eyes never left the door, “I’m talking about him like he’s one of the most important assets this family has. I already watched Nikolai Costello’s empire collapse because he trusted blood over judgment. Do you know it cost them? Federal investigations. Raids. Missing shipments. Dead soldiers. Women taken into custody. Children ripped away from their parents. So forgive me if I don’t find this situation reassuring.”

Adriano shrugged, “I’ll talk to him.”

“About what?”

“About whatever crawled up his ass and died.”

“Adriano.”

“What?”

Vincenzo stared at him. For a second something strange passed between them.

“He’ll be fine,” Adriano said and sighed dramatically, “Look, the guy has probably spent the last twelve hours overthinking something stupid.”

“He doesn’t do stupid.”

“He does, Vince, he owns a snake. Give him a day.”

“A day?”

“A day.”

“That’s your professional assessment?”

“Yes,” Adriano smiled, “I’ll talk to him and tomorrow he’ll be back to terrifying accountants and solving problems.”

And I just sat there, staring down at my plate, with this heavy feeling in my chest like something had gone badly wrong and it all started with me.

I was the problem sitting right in the middle of this table.

I never should’ve gotten involved with him in the first place. I should’ve kept my distance from the very beginning, before it got messy, before people noticed, before I became something that could even cause this kind of reaction in a room like this.

My fingers tightened around my cup, but it didn’t help.

The more I listened, the more it sank in that ending it last night wasn’t just necessary… it was safer.

For him.

For me.

For everyone sitting here who clearly saw him as something far more important than I ever realized I could affect.

And I hated that realization but it didn’t go away.

It just sat there, growing heavier in my chest, until all I could think was…

This was always going to end badly.

And at least now it had ended before it got worse.

I shouldn’t have texted Leone.

That thought had been repeating in my head all morning.

Over.

And over.

And over again.

My thumb hovered above my screen as I walked through the estate.

Twenty-three unread messages.

Seven missed calls.

Three missed video calls.

All from Leone Caruso.

The screen lit up again.

Leone Calling...

1 stared at it then immediately declined it. I squeezed my eyes shut. God. What had I been thinking? I knew exactly what I had been thinking.

I was desperate, so, I'd sent a message to the one person who used to know me before all of this. Before Chicago, before the Outfit, before Raphael.

The problem was that now I regretted it deeply because Leone wasn't stupid. One random message after years of silence wasn't normal.

I kept walking. The front doors were already open ahead of me. Sunlight poured across the marble floor. My classes started soon. I needed to leave, I needed distance, needed fresh air, needed anything that wasn't this house.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 443

My eyes stayed glued to the screen. Another call appeared as I stepped through the doorway and immediately slammed into something solid.

My phone nearly flew out of my hand, "Oh my God-"

The words died in my throat. Everything stopped because it wasn't something.

It was him.

Raphael.

For a second neither of us moved, neither of us spoke. I just stared and my stupid heart immediately betrayed me. It hurt. The kind of hurt that settled somewhere behind my ribs and squeezed.

Because this was the first time I'd really looked at him since last night, not across a breakfast table, not through stolen glances, not while pretending he wasn't looking.

And he looked exactly like Raphael. Perfect, controlled and untouchable. He held a tablet in one hand and the other held his phone.

His hair was still slightly messy like he'd been running his hands through it. For some reason that tiny detail almost broke me because it made him look human. And I wanted him to look like the man who could walk away from this without feeling anything.

Instead he looked... tired.

The morning breeze moved between us before reality came crashing back. I looked away first.

I took a step to the left. At the exact same moment Raphael stepped left too.

We both stopped.

I immediately stepped right. Raphael stepped right too.

I looked up.

He looked down.

For one ridiculous second we just stared at each other.

Then I tried left again and he moved left again. A tiny crease appeared between his eyebrows like he was just as annoyed with himself as I was.

I couldn't believe this was happening.

We were trapped in a doorway like two confused idiots.

I stepped right, he stepped right again. This time Raphael closed his eyes, just briefly. A slow breath left him, then he opened them again. His shoulders dropped a fraction.

Without saying anything, he stepped completely out of the way. One of his hands lifted, his head tilted slightly.

The gesture was small and respectful like a gentleman stepping aside and giving someone the entire path.

After you.

I swallowed then forced my legs to move. I passed beside him.

Then his voice stopped me dead in my tracks, "I'd hate to frighten you any more than I apparently already have."

My brows pulled together immediately, I turned, "What?"

Raphael was looking at me, still standing beside the doorway. His expression was impossible to read but his words sounded harsh, almost mean, like he'd thrown them out without thinking.

Suddenly he let out a quiet laugh. A short breath through his nose and shook his head, looking down at the ground, “Fuck. Right,” he adjusted the tablet beneath his arm, “I’m not supposed to talk to you. My apologies.”

His tone was polite. The kind of politeness that hurt more than anger.

A muscle jumped in his jaw, “I’ll try not to make that mistake again.”

Before I could say anything, he stepped backward, creating distance. He gave a brief nod almost like we were strangers. Then he turned and walked back inside without looking at me again.

I stood frozen on the front steps. My throat burned. I hated how calm he sounded. I hated that stupid nod. I hated everything about this.

A sharp vibration buzzed in my hand. Frustrated, I finally unlocked the screen. Ready to mute him. Ready to ignore whatever he’d sent this time.

Then I saw the message.

And all the anger instantly drained out of me.

Leone Caruso: I’ve been patient, Gianna. That patience is running out. I know exactly where you are, and if you keep ignoring me, the next conversation won’t happen over the phone. Open your mouth and talk to me before I decide to show up exactly where you live.

Janedoewritings Author

How worried are we about Leone on a scale of 1 to “this is going to become everybody’s problem”?

Drop a comment!

XOXO

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 444

Gianna

1PT

The phone rang again.

And again.

And again.

I stared at the screen while standing outside one of the campus buildings.

Leone Calling.

The name no longer made my stomach flutter. It didn't make my pulse race. It didn't make me smile. It just made me tired.

For years, that name had meant something. It had carried memories, feelings, and comfort. Now it was just a few letters lighting up my screen.

The call ended.

I know, without a single doubt, that a year ago this conversation would have ended very differently.

A year ago, if Leone had shown up in front of me, I probably would have run straight back into his arms. I would have convinced myself that everything could go back to the way it was. That he was familiar, he was safe. And he was mine.

But standing here now, watching his name on my screen, I felt absolutely nothing. Not because my heart had hardened but because somewhere along the way, I finally learned what love was actually supposed to feel like.

Love doesn't keep you trapped, it doesn't make you smaller. Love never asks you to sacrifice pieces of yourself just to keep it.

Real love felt different.

I found it in places I never expected.

I found it in the way people noticed when I went quiet.

In the way a seat was always waiting for me at the table, as if it had belonged to me long before I ever sat in it.

I found it in the constant questions about whether I'd eaten, whether I was sleeping enough, whether I was okay. In the way they pulled me into conversations when I tried to disappear into the background. In the way they remembered things I mentioned once and somehow never forgot.

It was in the small things. The ordinary things.

For the first time in my life, I knew what it felt like to have people who genuinely cared if I smiled or cried, who wanted me safe simply because I mattered to them.

I knew what it felt like to belong somewhere.

To be protected without being owned.

To be cared for without conditions attached.

To be loved without having to prove I deserved it.

And once you've known the difference, once you've felt what real love looks like, you can never mistake control for love again.

So when Leone's name appeared on my screen now, all I felt was a strange sense of distance, not anger, not heartbreak, just distance.

Whatever feelings I once had for him belonged to someone else. A version of me that no longer existed.

A girl who didn't understand her own worth.

A girl who accepted scraps of affection and convinced herself they were enough because she'd never been shown anything different.

A girl who mistook familiarity for love.

But that girl wasn't here anymore.

The call ended.

Three seconds later, my phone started ringing again.

I let out a slow sigh.

Around me, students crossed the courtyard in groups, laughing, talking, carrying books beneath their arms. The afternoon sun warmed my skin. Somewhere in the distance, music drifted through the air from a speaker.

The phone kept vibrating in my hand and finally, I accepted the call. I didn't even raise it to my ear immediately.

The silence on the other end lasted less than a second, "Gianna?"

His voice came out rough but relieved as if he had been holding his breath for days.

I swallowed, “What do you want?”

For a second there was nothing but breathing.

Then he laughed softly, the sound disbelieving and almost broken, “Fuck...” he muttered, “Fuck. it’s really you.”

I closed my eyes briefly, “Leone-”

“No, wait,” the words came out quickly, “Just... give me a second.”

I could hear him breathing on the other end of the line.

Almost seven years.

Seven years of nothing.

“You actually answered, I’ve been calling every day, trying to get to you...”

I leaned against the brick wall behind me, “I noticed.”

“Do you have any idea what happened when I saw your message? I thought I was imagining it.”

I looked across the courtyard. Students walked past carrying books and coffee cups.

“I must’ve read that text fifty times.”

My fingers tightened around my phone, “I know.”

He went quiet after that. I had known Leone almost my entire life. He knew every shift in my voice, every change in my mood. He could tell when I was lying, when I was scared, when I was trying to hide something.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 445

Of course he felt the distance, the indifference and the complete lack of warmth.

I could practically hear him trying to figure me out, trying to find the version of me he remembered. The version that wasn’t there anymore.

His voice softened, “Are you okay?”

A year ago that question would have affected me, now it didn't. It was strange. I had expected anger, pain and longing whenever I thought about what we had in the past. Instead I felt absolutely nothing.

"I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"You didn't call to discuss my feelings, did you, Leone?"

"You texted me first."

The reminder immediately made my jaw tighten. A mistake. A stupid moment. A weak moment.

I closed my eyes briefly, "I know."

His voice grew gentler, "I wasn't expecting your message.'

I shook my head, "I shouldn't have sent it."

"What?"

"I said I shouldn't have sent it."

"Why-"

"It was a mistake!"

His breathing changed, just slightly, "You don't mean that."

"I do."

"No."

A small smile touched my mouth. There it was already, the Leone I remembered. The one who heard only what he wanted to hear.

"You sent me a message after years, Gianna..." he trailed off.

"And?"

"You reached out and you told me that you missed me.'

I rolled my eyes, "It doesn't mean what you think it means. I was having a bad day."

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

My face scrunched up in annoyance, “I don’t care what you believe.”

The words came out snappier than I intended. For a second neither of us spoke.

Then he sighed, “You’re still angry.”

“No.”

“You’re still hurt.”

I wasn’t either of those things, not angry, not hurt, “No.”

“Gianna, you have no idea what I went through after you-”

I pushed away from the wall and started walking, “I only answered because you wouldn’t stop calling. That’s it I wanted to tell you to stop.”

“Gianna, I kept calling because I was worried,” his voice tightened, “You reached out to me after all these years and then vanished. What was I supposed to think? I thought something was wrong. I thought maybe you needed me. Maybe you needed help-”

I almost laughed, not because it was funny but because it was ridiculous.

Worried.

The word rolled around in my head. It didn’t move me. It didn’t soften me. It didn’t make me feel safe. It did nothing.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” I said. “There are already people doing that.”

“I’ll always worry about you.”

My voice sharpened, “You never did. All you cared about was what you could get out of me at night. And please, I do not need your help. I only texted you because I was confused about my feelings. Now, I’m not.”

A long silence stretched between us then he spoke carefully, “Who is he?”

I blinked, “What?”

“The reason you sound different. The reason you were confused.”

I actually laughed this time. A short, humorless sound, “Everything isn’t about a man, Leone.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Then what changed?”

I looked up at the bright sky.

What changed?

Everything.

Me.

My life.

My future.

“I did. I changed. I grew up, I learned.”

His voice turned softer, “I’ve missed you.”

His words didn’t stir up anything inside of me, no butterflies, no ache. Nothing. The realization hit me so suddenly that I nearly stopped walking.

Oh.

Oh.

I really didn’t love him.

Maybe I never did.

The discovery should have been sad instead it felt freeing like cutting the final thread tying me to a life I had already outgrown.

“Leone.”

His voice immediately warmed, “Yeah, my love?”

“Don’t call me that,” I walked down the stone path, “My head is clear now.”

“Gianna-”

“No. Listen,” I cut him off and for once, he did. I took a breath, “I don’t want this.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means stop calling.”

His tone changed instantly, not much, the softness remained but something harder appeared underneath it, “I waited years for you.”

I shook my head once, “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“You reached out first. That has to mean something! Why did you text me?”

I rubbed my forehead because the truth was embarrassing. For one stupid moment, I had been lonely and lost inside my own head.

And when everything started feeling too complicated, I reached for something familiar, something from my past, something I already understood.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 446

Because Raphael had turned my entire world upside down.

He made me feel too much, too quickly. Every conversation, every look, every moment with him seemed to lodge itself somewhere beneath my skin. It was overwhelming. Confusing.

And for a little while, I didn’t know what to do with any of it.

But that confusion belonged to me, not to Leone.

And I wasn’t about to hand him pieces of myself just because he wanted answers.

I wasn’t giving him an explanation.

I wasn’t giving him my thoughts.

I wasn’t giving him Raphael.

Most of all, I wasn’t giving him any part of me.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

“It shouldn’t,” I snapped.

His patience was starting to crack now. I could hear it. Tiny fractures beneath the calm voice, “Gianna.”

“What?”

“Tell me where you are right now.”

I stopped walking, “No.”

“Why?”

“You really want to ask that question?”

He let out a rough sigh, “I can find out.”

He sounded so confident, and I knew that it was a threat disguised as a fact. Unfortunately for him, it was the wrong threat because he was talking to the old Gianna, not this one,

And suddenly I almost felt sorry for him, “No, you can’t, Leone. You can’t.”

“Try me.”

A small laugh escaped me. The sound seemed to surprise him because I wasn’t scared, not even slightly.

“You have absolutely no idea where I am,” I said. “You’re bluffing.”

Because he was.

Raphael once told me that the estate didn’t officially exist anywhere, no searchable address, no map marker. Nothing that could lead a stranger to the front gate.

At the time, I thought he was exaggerating.

Then I saw Raphael’s basement.

And learned that when it came to security, the man treated paranoia like a full-time profession. If Raphael didn't want someone finding a place, they weren't finding it.

Simple as that.

"Gianna, I'm not the same guy you left-"

I cut him off, "I don't care, Leone. I want you to listen to me carefully. If I wanted you to know where I live, you would already know. Showing up is not an option..."

"It is for me."

"No, it isn't. You have no idea what kind of world I'm living in. Even if you somehow found the front gate, that as far as you'd get."

His breathing slowed, he was finally understanding this wasn't a game.

"You don't know the men standing behind me. You don't know what they're capable of."

His voice lowered, "You're threatening me?"

"I'm warning you."

The difference mattered.

"Leone, whatever influence you think you have... whatever power you think you have..." I shook my head, "It doesn't compare."

The silence on the other end became absolute. For the first time since answering, he had no response ready.

"Stay where you are."

He let out a laugh, "You're telling me to be afraid?"

"No. I'm telling you to be smart."

Then he laughed again, softer this time, "Wow. You really have changed."

I didn't answer.

"You sound so confident now. So sure of yourself. The Gianna I remember couldn't get through a conversation without tripping over half her words."

My grip tightened around the phone.

“There were times I’d spend ten minutes trying to figure out what you were actually trying to say.”

The words landed exactly where he intended them to.

For a second, I was a teenager again.

Embarrassed, frustrated and ashamed every time my tongue couldn’t keep up with my thoughts.

Every time the words came out wrong. Every time someone looked at me with pity but that girl wasn’t standing here anymore.

I had spent years working on myself.

Years pushing through speech therapy, tutoring, practice, frustration, and setbacks.

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Years refusing to let my struggles define me.

There were still bad days.

Still moments when words tangled together but I had worked too hard to let anyone use that against me.

Especially him.

I looked across the campus, across the life I had built. The future waiting ahead of me, “I’m sorry that I texted you out of nowhere but please, don’t contact me again. I don’t want you, Leone. I don’t need you.”

Then I pulled the phone away from my ear.

“Don’t call me again.”

“Gianna-”

I ended the call and the screen went dark.

And for several seconds I simply stood there staring at my reflection in the glass.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 447

Waiting.

For heartbreak.

For regret.

For grief.

Nothing came.

Only relief.

And for the first time since his name had appeared on my screen...

I smiled.

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The office floor hummed around me.

Monitors glowed from every direction. Lines of code scrolled endlessly across screens. Phones rang. Analysts argued quietly over reports. Somewhere near the back, someone cursed at a server that had decided to die at the worst possible moment.

Exactly what I needed after that phone call.

I sat at my workstation, staring at a complicated routing diagram spread across three monitors. A shipment report had arrived an hour ago, and half the numbers didn't match the database.

I stared at the patterns and right now, the pattern looked ugly. I clicked through another file, frowning.

I was halfway through fixing it when a shadow appeared beside my desk.

I looked up. One of the security guys stood there.

"Toricelli."

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Capone wants you upstairs."

I blinked, "What?"

He shrugged, “His office.”

For a second I just stared at him.

Raphael wanted me?

Specifically me?

“Are you sure?”

The man snorted, “Trust me. Nobody mistakes his order. No one wants to die.”

Before I could ask anything else, he walked away.

I slowly turned back toward my screen. Raphael wanted me? The thought alone was strange.

Raphael didn’t need help. Raphael was the person everyone else called when they needed help. The person who always had an answer, always had a solution and always had a backup plan.

Half the time I was convinced his brain operated three years ahead of everyone else’s.

So what exactly could he possibly need from me?

I stared at the screen for another few seconds, then I saved my work and stood.

My stomach immediately betrayed me, a nervous flutter and it had nothing to do with work.

The problem was Raphael himself.

Unfortunately, my heart had never gotten the memo that certain people were completely off-limits.

I started toward the elevators. Every step made me more irritated with myself. It wasn’t like he had done anything. Raphael never gave me hope, he was honest from the beginning. He was always... careful with his words.

And there was nothing to be angry at except my own stupid feelings.

By the time the elevator doors opened upstairs, I had mentally lectured myself at least twenty times.

Work.

This is work.

Nothing else.

Just work.

I stepped into the hallway leading toward his office. The closer I got, the more something felt wrong. People were moving faster, nobody was talking. Several employees kept glancing toward the closed office doors before immediately looking away.

I reached the door before I could knock, a voice cut through the wood, “Get out.”

The words came out sharp enough to make me jump. A second later the door opened and one of the senior analysts practically escaped. The poor man looked like he’d survived a natural disaster. He walked past me without making eye contact.

I stared after him then slowly looked back toward the office. Well, that couldn’t be good. I knocked lightly.

“Come in,” the response came instantly.

I pushed the door open and stopped.

Raphael looked furious, and not his normal pissed off face. His tie was gone, his suit jacket was gone. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled to his elbows.

Several screens covered the walls behind him, every single one was filled with data. Maps, numbers, surveillance feeds, reports.

The desk in front of him looked like a battlefield. Folders were scattered everywhere, coffee sat forgotten beside a keyboard.

Raphael stood in the center of it all, one hand gripping the back of his chair. His jaw was tight, his eyes were dark.

For a brief moment, I simply stared.

Because seeing Raphael look so unhinged in the office felt unnatural like watching a mountain move, like watching the ocean forget where it belonged.

Then his gaze landed on me and something shifted. The tension in his shoulders loosened a fraction, “Close the door.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Swipe up

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 448

Gianna

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Then his gaze landed on me and something shifted. The tension in his shoulders loosened a fraction, Close the door.”

I obeyed immediately. The lock clicked behind me as he pointed toward the screens.

“Come here.”

I approached carefully, “What’s wrong?”

Raphael dragged a hand through his hair, “I’ve been staring at this for two hours.”

I blinked.

Two hours?

That alone was concerning.

Raphael didn’t spend two hours on anything. He solved problems before most people finished identifying them.

He tapped a key and several reports appeared side by side, “I know something is wrong. I know someone altered these files. I know they’re hiding something.”

I stared at him, then at the screens, then back at him.

My disbelief must have shown because he narrowed his eyes,

“What?”

I opened my mouth, closed it and opened it again, “You need my help?”

The words escaped before I could stop them.

Raphael stared, “Yes, Gianna.”

My eyes narrowed, “You already know the answer, don’t you?”

“No.”

“You’re testing me.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

A frustrated sound escaped him, “Would you stop arguing and look at the damn reports?”

I stared, then, unexpectedly, he pointed at the screens again.

“Please.”

The single word nearly knocked the breath out of me. Raphael never said please, not because he was rude because he never needed to.

For some reason that made my chest hurt. I looked away before I could think about it too much before I could think about him too much.

Before my stupid heart started doing stupid things again.

Work.

Just work.

I stepped closer to the screens. Rows of numbers immediately filled my vision. Most people would probably start reading from left to right.

I couldn’t.

Entire lines seemed to twist when I looked at them too long. So instead, I did what I had always done. I looked for the patterns and shapes.

Things that felt wrong.

The room fell quiet behind me. The only sounds came from the faint hum of computers and the distant noise of the office outside.

I leaned forward slightly. My eyes skipped over entire sections, searching for something I couldn’t explain.

I barely noticed Raphael moving until he stopped beside me, so close, not touching, but j just there.

I swallowed, my fingers moved across the keyboard and Raphael remained beside me.

Watching.

At least, I assumed he was watching the screens.

That was the logical explanation, the professional explanation and the safe explanation. Unfortunately, my logic had never stood much of a chance around him.

A strange awareness crawled over my skin. The feeling of being observed, not in a threatening way, not even in a professional way. Just... seen.

I clicked another report and my heartbeat stumbled.

I knew he was looking at me.

I didn't know how.

I didn't know why.

I just knew.

The same way I knew when someone was standing behind me.

The same way I knew when something was wrong in a block of code.

You just knew.

I kept my eyes firmly on the screen.

"You going to solve it today?" he asked, his voice rough, and too close.

I hated how aware I was of every word, "I'm trying."

Without thinking, I pulled my phone from my pocket and set it beside his laptop, and opened the app he made for

My attention never left the reports.

1 was too busy chasing patterns, too busy trying to untangle whatever mess had driven Raphael into a rare bad mood.

Raphael shifted beside me, and my concentration immediately cracked. I became aware of everything again. The warmth of his presence beside me. The way neither of us had moved very far from the other. The way silence seemed to settle differently when it was just us.

I hated that my heart noticed these things. Even more, I hated that it remembered them because nothing would ever come from it.

Nothing could.

Raphael was Raphael.

A man with an entire empire balanced on his shoulders. A man responsible for thousands of things every single day.

And I was...

Me.

The girl who still had to reread restaurant menus three times before ordering.

I zoomed in on one column and then froze. Something snagged in my brain. My eyes narrowed and I leaned closer.

The same strange feeling returned. Something was wrong. I opened another report, my pulse picked up when I found it.

A tiny formatting difference, almost invisible, a single spacing pattern repeated across multiple files and my brain latched onto it immediately.

Raphael instantly moved, “What?”

I pointed at the screen, “This.”

His attention snapped toward the monitor. For the first time since entering the office, his focus completely left me and I felt absurdly relieved and absurdly disappointed.

“This spacing,” I said.

His eyes narrowed, “What about it?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 449

I opened three more files, then placed them side by side, “There.”

Raphael leaned forward, his shoulder nearly brushed mine, neither of us moved, neither of us acknowledged it.

The room seemed to hold its breath, then I watched understanding slam into him. His eyes darkened and suddenly the frustrated puzzle pieces began clicking together.

I pointed again, “It isn’t random.”

Raphael stared at the screen then slowly smiled, the kind of smile that made grown men rethink their life choices.

I looked up and he looked at me at the same time. For a second neither of us spoke, the office disappeared, the screens disappeared. Everything disappeared.

Then something lit up in my peripheral vision.

My phone.

The screen flashed beside his laptop. The second I saw the name, my stomach dropped.

Leone.

I snatched the phone so fast that it nearly slipped from my fingers. I immediately locked the screen and shoved the phone face down onto the desk.

Slowly, I looked up and Raphael was staring at me.

His expression had gone completely blank. Which was somehow worse. Because I had learned that Raphael’s calmest faces were usually the most dangerous ones.

My pulse stumbled, “What?”

His gaze flicked briefly toward the phone then back to me, nothing moved on his face.

“Nothing.”

That single word sounded sharp enough to cut glass.

I frowned, “Then why are you looking at me like that?”

One dark eyebrow lifted, “I wasn’t aware I was looking at you any particular way.”

“You are.”

His attention returned to the monitor. For approximately three seconds, then he sat back in his chair and put one leg over the other, “That was quick.”

I blinked, “What was?”

“You end one arrangement and a few hours later you’re taking calls from another mobster.”

My confusion lasted exactly one second.

Then understanding hit.

My eyes widened.

“Efficient.”

1 stared at him, actually stared because there was no way Raphael had just said that.

Heat rushed into my face, “That’s not what’s happening.”

“No?”

His voice remained calm and I hated calm Raphael.

Angry Raphael was easy.

Cold Raphael was terrifying.

I shoved the phone into my pocket, “I’m not taking the call.”

Raphael’s eyes flicked toward me for barely a second before returning to the screens.

“Mm.”

I rolled my eyes then he reached for his keyboard. At first, I thought he had already moved on. That assumption lasted about three seconds. His fingers moved across the keys with terrifying speed.

A black window appeared on one of the side monitors, lines of information began scrolling down the screen. Then he highlighted a line and leaned back in his chair.

A second later, a robotic voice echoed through the office, “Cross-reference complete.”

My stomach immediately sank.

No.

No way.

The robotic voice continued, “Phone number identified.”

My eyes widened, “Raphael—”

He held up one finger without looking at me.

The machine kept talking, “Primary owner linked to Gianna Toricelli.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

Raphael looked completely relaxed, one ankle crossed over the other, one hand resting against the arm of his chair. As if he wasn’t casually invading my privacy from three different continents away.

The robotic voice continued, “Recent incoming communications detected.”

My mouth fell open, “Raphael.”

The machine continued, “Contact identified: Leone Caruso.”

The robotic voice rattled off the application used for the call, then the exact timestamp, then the call duration, down to the second.

I watched Raphael slowly turn his chair toward me. The kind of look that reminded people why entire organizations were terrified of letting him near their systems.

“You answered.”

1 folded my arms, “You’re unbelievable.”

His gaze drifted toward the monitor, “The call lasted seven minutes and forty-three seconds.”

I glared at him.

He ignored it, “The location data places you un campus.”

“Stop tracking me.”

“I wasn’t tracking you. You left your phone next to my laptop. As a general rule, Gianna, if you place a connected device within arm’s reach of me, you should assume I know everything it knows.”

I stared.

He stared back.

Then his eyes flicked toward the screen again.

“I have to admit,” he said calmly, “the Underboss has persistence. And if he keeps calling-”

“He won’t.”

The answer came out a little too fast.

Because despite everything, despite the distance between us now, despite the fact that I wanted nothing to do with Leone anymore, there had once been a time when he had been one of the most important people in my life.

Those feelings were gone but the memories weren’t. And I didn’t want to imagine what would happen if he ignored the warning I had given him.

I didn’t want him near the Capones, near Raphael.

Leone might be powerful where he came from, but power was a relative thing. There was always someone bigger. Someone smarter. Someone more dangerous.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 450

And for the first time since answering his call that morning, I found myself hoping he would listen

Not for my sake.

For his own.

“If you’re planning to sit in our house and maintain contact with an Underboss from another organization, Vincenzo needs to know.”

I blinked.

The statement hit me like a bucket of cold water, “What?”

“That’s how security works.”

“Raphael-”

“Imagine explaining it from my side.”

He gestured toward the phone now buried in my pocket.

“You live inside one of the most secure properties on the continent. You know routes. You know names. You know things people kill for.”

The room seemed quieter suddenly.

“Now imagine I discover you’re having conversations with a high-ranking member of another criminal organization and choose not to report it.”

I stared at him, “I’m not having conversations with him.”

The phone vibrated again right on cue. Raphael looked toward my pocket then back at me. One eyebrow rose.

“I answered one call.”

“Mm.”

“One.”

“Mm.”

The blue light from the monitors reflected in his eyes, turning them hard as ice.

“If I discover an active line of communication with another syndicate and choose to ignore it, that becomes my failure.”

I stared at him, “Vincenzo isn’t going to hurt me.”

“No. He won’t hurt you. He thinks of you as his little sister…”

The answer came instantly, that should have made me feel better. It didn’t because I know Raphael wasn’t finished.

“He’ll handle the threat.”

My stomach dropped. The way he said those words told me everything and suddenly Vincenzo with blood all over his face flashed before my eyes.

My phone vibrated again inside my pocket.

The sound seemed impossibly loud. Raphael’s eyes lowered toward it then lifted back to me.

“Still calling.”

“He’s not-”

“He is.”

Raphael watched me for a long second then looked away first like he couldn’t stand looking any longer or maybe didn’t want to.

“I don’t care who you used to be to each other. I care about risk.”

The words shouldn’t have hurt but they did because some stupid part of me had spent months hoping I mattered to him. And standing here now, listening to him reduce everything to protocols and threat assessments, it felt painfully obvious how wrong I’d been.

“Are you still attached to him?”

My heart lurched, “What?”

“Simple question,” he raised an eyebrow, “Are you?”

The answer should have been easy.

No.

Absolutely not.

But my throat suddenly felt too tight and my silence stretched one second too long. Something dark moved behind his eyes.

When he spoke again, his voice was even calmer, “That’s what I thought.”

And before I could find the words to explain, he stood from his chair. The movement was sudden enough to make me straighten instinctively.

“End it.”

I blinked, “What?”

His gaze pinned me in place, “End it. No more calls. No more messages. No more contact.”

My pulse hammered, “Raphael-”

“No. You answer once, they call twice,” his jaw tightened, “You answer twice, they think they have a chance,” the muscles in his neck flexed, “And men like him don’t stop until somebody makes them.”

I exhaled slowly, “You don’t have to worry about him. I’ll handle it. I don’t want anyone here dragged into something that has nothing to do with them. I won’t put this family at risk. Ever.”

Something flickered across his face at that word. Finally, he gave a single nod. The gesture felt less like approval and more like a command being acknowledged.

I turned toward the door.

My chest felt tight, not because of Leone, not because of the conversation but because every time Raphael looked

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+15 BL at me like this, cold and distant and impossible to read, it felt like standing in front of a locked door and knowing it would never open.

I took three steps.

Four.

My hand wrapped around the door handle, “Gianna.”

I looked back over my shoulder.

“Vincenzo is still hearing about this.”

My eyes widened, “What? Are you serious?”

“Very.”

I released a soft breath filled with disbelief, “Raphael.”

“Security issue.”

“Raphael.”

“Documented contact.”

“Raphael.”

One eyebrow lifted, “Start preparing your defense. You can leave.”

At this point, I barely recognized him.

Gone was the man who had spent months quietly helping me rebuild pieces of myself.

In his place stood the same ruthless asshole who had interviewed me on my first day and somehow managed to accuse me of trying to seduce him when I was literally struggling to breathe.

“You’re fucking evil.”

“You’re only realizing that now?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “I traffic in extortion, cybercrime, and money laundering, Gianna. Evil wasn’t exactly hidden in the job description.”

Raphael looked back toward his screens.

Already dismissing me.

Already pretending our conversation was over.

“Close the door on your way out.”

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy!