

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 41-50

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

I wanted the woods to pulse. I wanted the ground to feel like it was breathing.

I opened a side menu of tools, items we kept in the heavy, locked crates in the estate's sub-basement. I dragged

an icon for restraints to the clearing. I added tools scattered through the trees.

I sat back, my breathing a little heavier than before. I closed the file and locked it with my thumbprint.

Everything was ready.

All I needed now were the right prey to fill the dark.

I left my car at the front, tossed the keys to one of the soldiers and walked into the mansion. It was late, the kind of hour where the house usually felt dead.

But as I passed the hallway toward the stairs, a sharp clink echoed from the kitchen. It sounded like a plate hitting the counter too hard.

I changed my direction. I reached the wide archway of the kitchen and stopped, leaning my shoulder against the cold doorframe.

Gianna was there.

She looked nothing like the girl in the office. She was wearing a t-shirt so big it swallowed her whole, the hem reaching her mid-thigh. Her hair was a messy nest on top of her head. She was standing by the stove. She was humming a low, sweet tune that I didn't recognize.

Then I looked down.

Her feet were wrapped in thick, white medical tape. She was standing on her tiptoes, trying to keep her weight off her heels.

I stayed there and watched. She didn't see me. She flipped a grilled cheese sandwich in the pan, the smell of butter and toasted bread filling the air.

For someone who had spent the entire day acting like she didn't need anyone's help, she looked oddly small right now. She looked like a kid sneaking a snack in the middle of the night.

She lifted the sandwich onto a plate and carried it over to the large marble island. She pulled a stool out, her movements were awkward as if every step was a battle. She sat down, let out a long, tired breath, and picked up the sandwich.

Just as she opened her mouth to take the first bite, her eyes shifted and she saw me.

She froze. The sandwich stayed inches from her face. Her green eyes went wide. I stayed leaning against the wood, a small, mean smile tugging at the corner of my mouth.

I felt a surge of mild amusement watching her. This was the same girl who tried to play me with an unbuttoned shirt. Now she was sitting in my kitchen, looking like she wanted the floor to open up and swallow her.

The pride was still there, though. I could see it in the way her shoulders stayed stiff and her eyes refused to drop.

That was the part that grated on my nerves.

She walked around this house like she didn't need anything from us, like our help was some kind of insult.

Meanwhile her mother slept under our roof, her sister ate our food, and every bill with their name on it was paid with Capone money.

And still she acted like she stood above it all.

That kind of pride begged to be tested. I had half a mind to bury her in work until that stubborn confidence cracked, just to see how long it would take before she finally understood something simple.

Nothing in this house existed without our say. Not even her.

"Late for a snack, isn't it?" I said.

I watched the way her throat moved as she swallowed, the panic rising in her face.

I straightened up and walked toward her. She watched me the whole way, the sandwich still clutched in her hands like she didn't know what to do with it anymore. I stopped close enough that she had to tilt her head back to look

at me.

My eyes dropped to the sandwich then to her hand. A small idea formed, nothing complicated just enough to push I reached out and wrapped my hand around hers. I felt her flinch, a tiny jolt of electricity passing between us, but I didn't let go.

I pulled her hand and the sandwich up toward my face.

I kept my eyes on hers the entire time. I leaned in, and took a bite right from her fingers. I chewed slowly, watching the way her pulse jumped in the hollow of her throat.

I swallowed, my gaze dropping to her mouth for a split second before snapping back to her eyes. I could see the heat in her face, the way her grip on the bread tightened. She looked like she wanted to run and scream and fight all at the same time.

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“Too much butter,” I commented and let go of her hand.

Gianna’s eyes flashed with a sudden fire. She pulled her hand back and slammed the rest of the sandwich down. onto the plate like I had ruined it.

“Seriously?” she snapped as she pushed the plate away from me a few inches, “Get your own sandwich, or maybe try asking first,” she added, “Or do you only know how to take things? Considering you were the one calling me a thief the other day, I figured you’d be a little more careful about stealing my food.”

That stubborn pride again.

It sat under her skin like a challenge waiting to be answered.

I rested one hand on the edge of the island and leaned forward slightly, close enough that she had to tip her head back a little further to keep eye contact.

“You’re confusing two very different things,” I said calmly.

My gaze flicked down to the plate, then slowly back to her face. I reached out and dragged the plate back toward me with two fingers.

“Stealing requires ownership,” I continued, “You don’t own anything in this house.””

My eyes dropped briefly to the oversized shirt hanging off her shoulder, the bare skin of her legs, the clumsy tape around her feet. When I looked back up again, my expression hadn’t changed.

“The roof over your head belongs to us. The food in this kitchen belongs to us. The electricity keeping these lights on belongs to us.”

I tore off another small piece of the sandwich, chewing slowly as I held her gaze.

“So no,” I finished evenly, brushing a crumb from my fingers. “I’m not stealing your food. It’s already mine.”

She went very still after that.

Then she let out a short breath through her nose. Her eyes dragged slowly over my face like she was studying something unpleasant she couldn't quite believe existed.

"You know," she said slowly, "it's impressive."

I lifted an eyebrow slightly.

"The confidence," she continued, "The certainty that everything around you exists for your convenience. Food. Houses. People. You really are the perfect example of everything that's wrong with men like you."

She pushed the plate a little farther away from both of us, like the sandwich had suddenly become something unpleasant to look at.

Her eyes flicked briefly to my chest before returning to my face.

"Money. Power. A big house full of men who think intimidation counts as personality. Congratulations. You've built the perfect little museum of male ego."

I watched her while she spoke, studying the sharp intelligence in her eyes, the stubborn set of her mouth. Most people in this house knew better than to talk to me like that.

She didn't seem to care.

Or maybe she cared very much and refused to show it.

Slowly, I straightened and stepped closer, "You're very confident for someone living under my roof," I said quietly, "Let me correct something for you."

My gaze dropped briefly to her taped feet. Then slid back up the length of her legs before settling on her face again.

"You think I behave this way because I'm a man," a faint smile touched the corner of my mouth, "You're wrong.)

I leaned a little closer.

"I behave this way," I murmured, "because I can."

Her jaw tightened. For a moment it looked like she might fire another sharp reply. Instead, she slid off the stool with a small movement, clearly trying not to put weight on her heels.

“Enjoy the sandwich,” she muttered.

Then she turned and walked out of the kitchen, her steps uneven as she disappeared down the hallway.

I watched her go.

After a moment, I glanced down at the plate she’d shoved toward me. The sandwich was still warm, the cheese melted perfectly between the slices.

I shrugged.

Then I picked it up and finished the rest in two slow bites.

Annoying girl.

Good sandwich, though.

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Author

Now... who's excited for Gianna's first day at his office AND the next hunt?

I need to know what you think, spill all your thoughts!

104

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Gianna

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The classroom was already half full when I slipped inside. I walked to my usual seat near the side wall, not too close to the professor and definitely not too close to the center where people liked to talk.

I pulled out my laptop and notebook. My hands were still a little stiff from the cold morning air outside. Around me, people were talking about internships.

That was normal this time of year.

The seventh semester meant everyone was scrambling for something to put on their résumé.

G****e.

Startups.

Research labs.

The guy two seats ahead of me was bragging about a small fintech internship downtown, “I’ll probably convert it into full-time,” he was saying loudly.

Someone behind me snorted, “Dude, it’s unpaid.”

He shrugged, “Still better than nothing.”

I kept my eyes on my notebook. The door opened and Professor Adler walked in with a stack of printed papers under his arm.

“Morning, everyone,” he said.

He set the papers down and started connecting his laptop.

“Before we start today’s lecture,” he said, scrolling through something on his screen, “I want to talk about internship placements. As most of you know, internships in your senior year can influence your final academic standing.”

A few laptops stopped typing.

“The Computer Science department allows certain internships to count as practical credit if they are directly related to your field.”

My pen paused. I already knew that. I had read the policy three times.

“Now,” he continued, “some placements are more competitive than others.”

His eyes moved across the room then they landed on me. I immediately looked down at my notebook but it was late.

“Gianna,” he said, “Stand up for a moment.”

People turned to look at me. My legs were stiff, locking into place as I stood. I forced my weight onto the balls of my feet, leaning into the burning fire of the wounds hidden under the tape. Professor Adler glanced at the screen on his laptop again.

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“I received a verification email this morning,” he said calmly. A few students shifted in their seats, “You’ve accepted a junior analyst internship with Orion Vector Technologies. Correct?”

The room went completely silent. Every single head turned toward me. My throat felt dry, “Yes,” I said quietly.

Someone behind me whispered, “No way.”

Another voice closer to the window muttered, “That’s impossible.”

Professor Adler nodded once, “Well done.”

A girl in the front row turned around fully in her seat, “Wait,” she said, disbelief written all over her face, “You mean the government contractor?”

Another student leaned forward, “They don’t hire undergrads,” he said.

Someone else added quietly, “They barely hire master’s students.”

I stared at the edge of my desk. The attention made my skin crawl.

Professor Adler raised a hand slightly, “Let’s keep the reactions professional.”

A few people sat back, but the whispers didn't stop.

"How did she get that?"

"They only take Ivy League."

"Is she related to someone?"

Professor Adler continued like the noise didn't exist, "Orion Vector is one of the top predictive intelligence firms in the country," he said, "They work closely with federal agencies and financial security systems," saying that he looked back at me, "Positions like this are extremely competitive."

My ears burned.

"But they also qualify for department internship credit," he continued as he walked a few steps closer to my row, "If you maintain the position through the semester, it can count toward your professional experience requirement. In practical terms," he said, looking around the room, "this means Gianna will receive additional credit hours applied to her senior record."

A few students typed something quickly into their laptops.

“Internship credits don’t raise GPA directly,” he explained, “but they strengthen the academic evaluation attached to your final record. So when graduate schools or employers review transcripts,” he continued, “high- level industry placements carry weight.”

He glanced at me again.

“In short, it reflects very well on a student’s academic standing,” Professor Adler gave a small but proud nod, “You can sit down, Gianna.”

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My legs felt weak as I lowered myself back into the chair. Immediately the whispers started again.

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“She never even talks in class.”

“How the hell did she land that?”

“That company works with the Department of Defense.”

I stared at my notebook. My pen hovered over the page.

The lines blurred for a second.

Professor Adler turned back to the board and began the lecture.

“Today we’ll continue discussing neural network optimization...”

His voice faded into the background.

I could still feel the eyes on my back like everyone in the room was trying to solve the same question.

How someone like me, someone quiet, awkward and barely speaking in class ended up with a job at Orion Vector.

But now I knew for a fact that I couldn't lose this job. It maybe my Stepbrother's company but Orion Vector wasn't just another internship someone could shrug off and replace. People fought for positions there. Students with perfect transcripts. Perfect speaking voices. Perfect resumes.

People who didn't stumble over simple sentences.

If I worked harder than everyone else, maybe I could keep up. Maybe that would be enough. I didn't have the luxury of giving up halfway through. I just had to push through it, one day at a time.

This internship wasn't only about grades or credits on a transcript. It meant something bigger than that.

It meant independence.

It meant not needing anyone to carry me.

I wanted a life where I could stand on my own feet. Where my mother didn't have to worry about whether I could make it in the world. Where my little sister could look at me and see someone strong enough to hold things together.

So I would stay up later.

Study longer.

Check every line of code three times if I had to.

I would fight through every report and every meeting and every humiliating moment in that glass building if it meant keeping that position.

Because I wasn't going to lose this opportunity just because my brain made words harder for me or because my stepbrother thought pushing me around was some kind of game.

I would prove that I belonged there.

Even if it cost me every ounce of strength I had.

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The elevator doors slid open on the twenty-second floor, and the first thing I noticed was the quiet.

The hallway outside was bright, glass walls reflecting the morning light from the city skyline. The floors were polished, the lights were soft and warm instead of the harsh white ones universities liked to use.

My shoes pressed against my heels when I stepped out.

Pain spread up the back of my feet immediately, sharp and familiar under the layers of tape.

Good.

I shifted my weight slightly and walked forward anyway, keeping my shoulders straight.

If it hurt, it meant I would pay attention.

If I paid attention, I wouldn't make mistakes.

The reception desk sat in the middle of the open floor. A woman looked up from behind it as I approached. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun. Her blazer looked like it had never seen a wrinkle in its life.

"Good morning," she said. "You must be Ms. Toricelli."

I nodded once.

"Yes," my voice came out smaller than I meant it to.

She stood up and walked around the desk, offering her hand, "I'm Aileen. Operations manager," her handshake was quick and firm, "First day?"

I nodded again.

“Right on time,” she said and turned, gesturing down the hall, “Come on. I’ll show you where you’ll be working.”

I followed her, trying to keep my steps even. Every few steps my heels burned harder, the skin pulling under the tape. The pain made my back straighten automatically.

Don’t limp.

Don’t slow down.

Be perfect.

The hallway opened into a large workspace filled with rows of desks and tall monitors. Screens everywhere. Some showed lines of code. Others showed moving graphs and long streams of numbers.

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My eyes locked on the numbers immediately.

One of the screens showed shipping data across several ports. A long graph curved upward near the end.

Something about the shape was wrong.

My brain started tracing it automatically. Trend line. Delay point. Inventory correction. The spike wasn't demand. It was a routing bottleneck.

I stopped walking without realizing it.

“That graph is wrong,” I said quietly.

Aileen paused and turned around, “Which one?”

I pointed toward the screen, “The logistics one.”

She followed my finger.

“The red spike,” I added.

Her eyebrows lifted slightly, “You’ve been here thirty seconds.”

I shrugged a little, my eyes still on the screen, “The curve doesn’t follow the earlier pattern,” I said, “It breaks too suddenly.”

Aileen looked at the monitor for another second, her head tilting slightly as she studied the graph. Then she glanced back at me, a small, thoughtful smile touching the corner of her mouth.

“Well,” she said lightly, “that’s encouraging. We were all convinced you were just another nepotism hire.”

The words hit me so suddenly I inhaled wrong. Air caught in my throat and I coughed once, blinking at her, “A... what?”

“A nepo baby,” she repeated, already turning and walking again.

I hurried after her, my backpack shifting against my shoulder as I tried to keep up. She didn’t look back. She just kept moving down the hallway like she hadn’t said anything strange at all. She stopped near a desk by the tall windows and gestured toward it.

“This one’s yours.”

The desk had two monitors, a thin laptop docked to the side, and a small stack of folders sitting neatly next to the keyboard.

I sat down carefully.

The pressure on my heels eased a little once I was in the chair. The sting settled into a dull pulse instead of sharp bursts.

Aileen leaned against the edge of the desk.

“You’re joining the strategy team,” she said, “Your job is translating technical analysis into something executives

and clients understand.”

My stomach tightened slightly.

+15 Agus

Translate.

Words.

Explaining things always felt like trying to carry water with my hands.

“You’ll mostly work with prediction models,” she continued, “Risk analysis. Behavioral forecasting. Data summaries.”

That part was easier, numbers behaved. They followed rules. Words liked to twist themselves into knots. She picked up the top folder from the stack and set it in front of me.

“Let’s start simple,” she said, “Your first assignment.”

She placed a folder in front of me.

“Build a corrected version of the prediction model. Show what the forecast looks like if the data starts where you think it should.”

My fingers tightened slightly around the pen.

“You want... a report?” I asked.

“Not a long one,” she said. “Just a short summary and a visual explanation.”

Summary.

Words again.

I nodded anyway.

‘Okay.’

She started walking away, then paused and glanced back at me.

“Gianna?”

“Yes?”

“Try not to overthink it,” she smiled faintly, “Mr. Capone likes clear answers.”

My stomach twisted a little at the mention of his name. After she left, the office noise faded into the background again.

The dataset stretched across both monitors, columns moving down the screen in neat rows. I leaned forward in my chair, one elbow on the desk, my pen moving across my notebook while the model slowly took shape.

Boxes. Arrows. Ratios.

I typed slowly, fingers hovering over the keyboard between lines of code. My thoughts ran faster than my hands. The error message flashed red across the screen and I went back, fixing it carefully.

After an hour the model finally ran. The graph shifted.

Instead of a jagged spike near the end, the curve rose earlier, smoother, more natural. I stared at it for a moment. The shape felt right. A small breath slipped out of me.

Now came the harder part.

The report.

I opened a blank document and looked at the empty page. The cursor blinked. The white space felt too wide, like it was waiting for me to fail.

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My fingers rested on the keyboard but nothing moved.

Writing always felt like pushing through mud.

I reached into my bag and grabbed my phone. I had to use my tricks, they weren't perfect but they worked.

I took a picture of the folder and used an app to turn the image into text. Then I put my earbuds in. A flat, robotic voice started reading the words to me. It was slow and boring, but it helped my brain see the sentences without them scrambling.

The phone read the text out loud through my earbuds. The voice was flat and robotic, but it slowed the sentences down just enough for my brain to catch them.

“...prediction model begins at search behavior index...”

“...regional interest spike precedes shipment demand...”

I listened once.

Then again, while the voice played, I whispered into my phone, using the voice-to-text.

“Change that... start with consumer data... no... wait... delete that word.”

The speech-to-text system typed the corrections onto the screen but faster than trying to build every sentence from scratch.

I copied the text into the document on the screen, then I listened again. Sometimes the words still tangled. Sometimes the software heard the wrong thing and replaced it with something strange.

I fixed the ones I noticed, some of them might have slipped past me.

The report slowly grew into two pages.

A short explanation at the top. A chart in the middle. A few bullet points under it explaining what the model predicted.

I read it one more time through the audio playback.

“...This model demonstrates earlier demand detection and improve shipment planning accuracy...”

Improve.

Not improves.

I frowned.

Something about that line felt off, but the meaning still made sense.

I left it.

My stomach fluttered when I saved the file. It wasn't perfect. I knew that but the numbers were right and that mattered more.

I printed the report and slid the pages into a thin folder. When I stood up, the pain in my heels returned instantly, sharp enough to make my breath catch.

I forced my steps to stay even as I walked down the hallway. Aileen's desk sat near the glass conference rooms.

+15 Bonus

She was typing quickly when I approached, her attention locked on the screen.

I stopped a few feet away, "I... finished the model," I said.

She looked up and I held out the folder. She opened it and started reading. Her eyes moved down the page slowly, pausing at the chart. For a moment her expression didn't change then one corner of her mouth lifted slightly.

“You rebuilt the prediction sequence,”

I nodded, “Yes.”

She flipped to the second page. Her finger tapped lightly against one of the bullet points, but then she closed the folder.

“You’ll need to take this Mr. Capone.”

My stomach tightened again, as she slid the folder back toward me.

I hesitated, “You want me to... give it to him?”

Aileen leaned back in her chair, “He asked to see any early strategy adjustments personally,” she said calmly, “This counts.”

My fingers tightened slightly around the edge of the folder. The paper suddenly felt much heavier than before.

Aileen studied my face for a moment, “His office is at the end of the hall,” she added. “Last door on the left.”

She turned back to her computer like the conversation was finished.

I stood there for another second. Then I nodded to myself and started walking, each step making me wince.

Stay focused.

Don't mess this up.

The numbers inside it were solid. I trusted those. The words... I hoped they behaved.

The hallway grew quieter the farther I walked.

At the end stood a dark wooden door with frosted glass across the center.

One name etched into it.

1. Capone

I stopped in front of it.

The pain in my feet pulsed, my fingers tightened slightly around the papers. Then I raised my hand and knocked.

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Author

Don't forget to drop a Like and leave a Comment before you swipe up for the next update

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1. Capone

I stopped in front of it.

The pain in my feet pulsed, my fingers tightened slightly around the papers. Then I raised my hand and knocked.

The door didn't open with a handle. Instead, a sharp, loud buzz echoed through the wood, and the lock clicked open on its own, just like his bedroom door.

I pushed the door open, and the office was huge. He was sitting behind a massive black desk, his back to the window. He was leaning back in his chair, a phone pressed to his ear.

"... The Ministry doesn't care about 'potential' threats, Elias," his voice reminded me of the words he said to me last night, "They want the behavioral AI to flag the target before he even buys the burner phone. If the algorithm isn't predicting the movement with 99% accuracy, the contract is dead. Fix the back-end lag or I'll find someone who can."

I stood there, my feet throbbing as I held the folder out, my hand shaking just a little.

Without stopping his conversation, Raphael reached out. He took the folder from me without a word, his eyes still fixed on the wall as he listened to the man on the other end of the line.

“No, I don’t want excuses,” he snapped, “I want results. The facial recognition analytics are showing a three- second delay in the subways. That’s enough time for someone to disappear.”

He flipped the folder open.

While he talked, his eyes began to move. They didn’t just read, they scanned the pages like a laser. He reached out with his free hand and grabbed a red pen from the desk.

I watched, my heart sinking into my stomach, as he began to multitask, It was like his brain was split into two different worlds. One world was dealing with high-level surveillance, and the other was destroying my hard work.

Scratch.

The red pen moved across the first page. He didn’t even slow down his speech.

“The risk scores for the offshore accounts are too high,” he said into the phone, his eyes narrowing at my chart,” Lower the threshold. We need to see the anomalies before the banks do.”

He circled the word improve-the word I knew was wrong. He didn’t just circle it, he drew a thick, angry red ring around it. Then he moved to the next line. He underlined a sentence where the grammar was messy. He crossed out a whole paragraph where my voice-to-text had messed up the meaning.

Red marks started to fill the white paper like blood.

He flipped to the second page. His eyes stopped on my rebuilt model, the graph I had worked so hard on. For a split second, the red pen stayed still. He looked at the numbers. He analyzed the math, his brain crunching the logic while he continued to tear apart the man on the phone.

“If the Ministry pulls out, Elias, you’re the first one I’m cutting loose,” Raphael murmured, his tone so cold it made me shiver, “Don’t call me again until the predictive loop is closed.”

He slammed the folder shut.

He didn't hang up the phone yet. He kept it to his ear, listening to the man scramble to apologize. For the first time since I had entered the room, Raphael looked at me. His eyes were dark. He looked at me, then looked down at the red-stained folder in his hand.

He tossed the folder across the desk. It slid over the smooth surface and stopped right in front of me.

Red marks covered both pages.

Circles.

Lines.

Notes in the margins.

"The math is good."

My chest loosened slightly.

“The rest of it is embarrassing.”

Heat rushed straight up my neck.

Raphael leaned back in his chair, “You’re supposed to be translating technical analysis,” he said calmly. “This reads like someone fell asleep on a keyboard.”

His chair moved. The quiet scrape of it against the floor made my stomach twist as he stood up, buttoning his suit jacket smoothly.

Raphael walked around the desk slowly, the red pen still in his hand. I suddenly felt very aware of how large he

was.

Tall, broad shoulders and too close. He stopped beside me. I instinctively took a small step away. He followed and the distance disappeared again.

Raphael flipped the page open between us. The red circle around improve stared up from the paper.

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“You wrote this sentence three different ways,” he said, “And still managed to make it wrong.

He leaned slightly closer as he spoke. I swallowed. Raphael’s gaze lifted slowly from the page to my face.

“You’re a senior in computer science, correct?”

I nodded once, “Yes.”

His eyebrow lifted a little, “Then explain something to me,” he raised the paper between two fingers and took another step closer. My back brushed the edge of the desk.

There’s no space left!

My brain screamed at me but I couldn’t get a single word out.

He tapped the chart with the red pen, “How does someone capable of building this model...” the pen tapped the numbers again, “...write like this?”

My throat tightened, words crowded my head but none of them came out right. Raphael watched my silence then he stepped closer. His height blocked the light from the window behind him, his shadow fell over the desk. Over

Men did that.

They used their size and strength like a weapon, as if space belonged to them like the rest of us were supposed to shrink.

I hated it.

God, I hated it.

But my body didn't move, it never did.

The office suddenly felt smaller, much smaller.

"The numbers are the only reason I didn't throw this away," he said quietly, "Because the writing certainly isn't."

My heart began beating faster, the sound loud inside my ears. Raphael leaned down slightly, closing the space between us until I could feel the heat of his body. Our faces were only inches apart now. His eyes moved slowly across my face, studying every reaction like he had all the time in the world.

Waiting.

Watching.

Something in my chest snapped tight.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I lifted my hand and pressed it against his chest. The fabric of his suit was smooth under my palm, but the muscle beneath it felt solid as stone. I pushed him back just enough to break the space between us.

A clear message.

You don't get to stand this close.

Raphael moved back easily, like the pressure meant nothing to him. His gaze dropped to my hand where it rested

+15 Bgs

against his chest. For a second he simply looked at it.

Then his eyes lifted back to my face.

A slow, amused smile spread across his mouth, it was not the calm, professional expression he had been wearing behind the desk.

This one looked familiar.

The same bastard from last night.

The same man who enjoyed pushing people just to see how they reacted.

After a second I pulled my hand away, once the distance between us felt safe again. My fingers curled back around the folder as I lifted my chin slightly and looked straight into his eyes.

I wasn't going to step back.

I wasn't going to shrink.

The message stayed in the silence between us.

I'm not afraid of you.

Not you.

Not your size.

Not your games.

Raphael watched me for another moment, the amusement still sitting faintly in his expression. Then the warmth disappeared from his face like a door shutting.

“Fix it,” he said, “Tomorrow.”

He tapped the folder once with the red pen.

“Or find a different career.”

His gaze held mine for one final second, before he tipped his head towards the door.

“Get out.”

ram

The door to my room closed softly behind me as Jules slipped inside. She was already wearing pajamas, with a bag of chips crinkled in her hand.

She climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged beside me, immediately grabbing the report.

Her eyes widened, “Whoa,” she flipped the page, “Did someone attack this with a marker?”

I leaned back against the headboard and rubbed my face with both hands, “It’s bad.”

Jules slid off the bed without a word and walked to my desk, pulling my chair out like she had done this a hundred times before.

Which she had.

THER

“Laptop,” she said.

I pushed it toward her.

+15 Bonus

The document opened on the screen. Red notes from Raphael's pen were scribbled across the printed pages beside it. Jules leaned forward, chewing on a chip while she read the sentences slowly.

Her lips moved slightly as she sounded out the words.

I grabbed my phone and took a photo of the report page. The text scanner app pulled the sentences into digital text, then began reading them through my earbuds.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

“...this model demonstrates earlier demand detection and improve shipment planning accuracy...”

Jules stopped chewing.

“Improve?”

+15 Bonus

“I know.”

“It should be improves.”

She typed quickly, fixing it.

The robotic voice kept reading the paragraph. I listened carefully while speaking corrections quietly toward the phone.

Jules snorted, “Did you just write ‘shipment lizards’?”

I grabbed the keyboard, “That’s not what I said. I said logistics.”

She leaned back in the chair laughing, “Apparently the computer heard reptiles.”

I fixed the word and kept listening to the audio playback.

Jules leaned closer to the screen, pointing at another sentence, “This one sounds like Yoda wrote it.”

I groaned, “Just fix it.”

She deleted half the line and rewrote it with simple words.

“You think too much,” she said casually.

“You think too little.”

“Yeah but my sentences work.”

She grinned at me over her shoulder and I stuck my tongue out at her. For the next hour we worked like that. The phone read the report out loud. I corrected what I could. Jules hunted down the grammar mistakes and punctuation like a tiny editor with snacks. Every time she found a weird sentence she made a dramatic face.

Eventually the red circles on the printed pages started disappearing from the new document.

Jules stretched her arms over her head, “So what’s the big scary meeting tomorrow?”

I turned the laptop slightly toward her, “The client is a bank.”

She raised an eyebrow, “Like... a normal bank?”

“Not exactly.”

The briefing file opened on the screen, “Midland Trust Financial,” I read. “They’re buying a predictive fraud system.”

Jules leaned closer, “What does that mean?”

“They want the AI to catch fraud before it happens.”

Her nose scrunched, “How?”

T

than 10

+15 Bgnus

I pointed at the screen where the data model sat, “The system watches behavior patterns. Spending habits. Travel patterns. Device logins.”

“Okay...”

“If someone suddenly behaves different from their normal pattern, the AI flags it.”

I kept scrolling through the file.

“They lost thirty million dollars last year from identity fraud. Their current system only catches it after the transactions happen.”

“So they’re making a smarter robot.”

“Basically.”

1

ransaction

I opened the chart I had built earlier, “This model predicts risk earlier,” I explained. “Before the transaction actually happens.”

Jules stared at the graph, “How do you even see that?”

I shrugged, “The pattern is obvious.”

She squinted harder, “I see noodles.”

I laughed quietly, “That’s because your brain is normal.”

She spun the chair slowly and hugged me by wrapping her arms around my neck, “You’re gonna do fine.”

I shook my head, “He implied my writing was embarrassing.”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah well he sounds embarrassing too.”

I snorted, “Don’t let him hear you say that.”

“Why?”

“Because he might throw you out a window.”

Jules grinned, “Worth it.”

She turned back to the screen and cracked her knuckles dramatically.

“Alright genius,” she said. “Let’s make this report less terrible before Mr. Fancy Pen sees it again.”

Jules was still leaning over the laptop, her feet tucked under the chair, when a knock sounded at my door. Three short taps. We both looked toward the door at the same time.

“Are you expecting someone?” she asked.

“No.”

The knock came again, softer this time. I pushed myself off the desk and walked across the room, the floor cool under my bare feet. My heels stung when I stepped down, but the pain was dull now.

I pulled the door open.

One of the house maids stood in the hallway, her hands folded neatly in front of her apron.

C

+15 Banus

“Miss Gianna,” she said politely.

“Yes?”

“Don Vincenzo would like to see you in his study.”

My stomach dropped to my feet.

Now?

I glanced down at myself automatically.

Old gray shorts.

A t-shirt.

Bare feet.

Not exactly appropriate for a meeting with the head of the Capone family.

“I-“I hesitated.

The maid gave a small nod toward the staircase, “He asked for you now.”

Behind me, Jules whispered loudly, “You look fine.”

I shot her a glare over my shoulder, “Stay here.”

She saluted dramatically from the chair, “Yes, boss.”

I stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind me. The maid waited quietly, then began walking down the long corridor. I followed a step behind her, trying to smooth the wrinkles out of my shirt with my hands.

My feet burned slightly with each step down the staircase. The maid walked through the main hall and stopped in front of a large wooden door near the end of the corridor.

P

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Don Vincenzo's study.

She turned toward me and gave a small polite smile, “You can go in.”

My fingers curled slightly at my sides.

Through the thick door I could hear the low sound of men's voices. The maid knocked once and then she opened. the door for me.

I stepped inside.

The study smelled faintly of leather and old wood. Books lined the tall shelves on every wall, and a large desk sat near the center of the room.

Don Vincenzo stood behind it.

Adriano leaned against one of the shelves, arms crossed.

Dante sat in a chair near the window, one ankle resting over his knee.

Raphael stood near the desk working on his laptop.

In the far corner of the room, a couch sat near the fireplace. Salvatore was sitting there with my mother beside him. Her hands were folded tightly in her lap. The room fell quiet as the door closed behind me.

Six pairs of eyes turned toward me at the same time.

I suddenly became very aware of the fact that I was standing barefoot in the middle of a room full of Capone men.

“Come here, Gianna,” Vincenzo said calmly, his voice filled the room without needing to rise.

I stepped further inside, my heels still burned slightly with every step, but I ignored it and stopped a few feet from the desk.

He finally leaned back slightly and looked toward Raphael, “I need you to give Raphael all your personal details.”

Raphael’s head tilted slightly.

Vincenzo gestured lightly toward me, “University records. Student identification. Tuition schedule.”

My stomach twisted.

Vincenzo continued speaking like the decision had already been made hours ago and then turned to Raphael, “Set up a proper account in her name,” he said calmly, “Tuition payments, every other expenses, research materials.”

My fingers curled slightly at my sides.

“Make sure the university fees are handled before the next semester deadline,” Vincenzo added, “Make sure the payments are automated. The university shouldn’t have to chase invoices.”

Raphael nodded once, “Of course.”

Vincenzo continued, “And a personal account as well. Give her access to an educational trust,” he continued, “ Books, software licenses, conference travel if needed.”

My brain struggled to keep up with the list.

hape 50

+15 B

Conference travel.

Software licenses.

Research funds.

“Set up a credit card as well,” Vincenzo added calmly. “Limited for now until she proves she won’t spend it on nonsense.”

My mother cleared her throat, “That’s not necessary, Vincenzo-”

Vincenzo lifted one hand slightly and mom stopped speaking immediately.

“It is necessary,” he said calmly, “She’s family now,” then Vincenzo looked back at Raphael, “Handle the paperwork tomorrow.”

Raphael nodded once, “I will.”

Then his eyes shifted toward me again like he had just been handed a new problem to solve.

I suddenly remembered the red circles covering my report from earlier.

My stomach sank a little.

I hadn't meant to speak that loudly, but the word was already out. My heart was pounding hard in my chest now, but I didn't look away from the desk, "I don't want it!"

My mother shifted slightly on the couch, "Gianna-"

"I don't need a trust fund," I said quickly, "I don't need a credit card or an account or whatever else you're planning."

Salvatore frowned, "That's not the point-"

"It is the point. I'm already paying my tuition."

Raphael's gaze hadn't moved from my face.

My hands tightened again, “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

Dante slowly leaned forward in his chair now.

Adriano’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

Salvatore rubbed his temple like he already had a headache.

“Gianna,” my mother said softly.

I shook my head, “No.”

My eyes returned to Don Vincenzo, “I appreciate the offer,” I said, forcing the words out evenly, “But I’m not taking money for something I can do myself.”

My throat felt tight, but I looked directly into Raphael’s eyes as I said the next words.

“I’m not a charity case.”

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