My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 451

Raphael

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The therapist’s office was on the thirty-second floor. There were glass walls, expensive furniture and neutral colors.

The kind of place designed to make people feel comfortable.

The receptionist looked nervous when I stepped off the elevator. I walked past her desk and she immediately stood.

“Mr. Capone-”

“I know where I’m going,” I told her as I continued walking.

The office door at the end of the hallway was already open. Inside, Dr. Walker sat behind his desk.

He was around mid-fifties, gray hair, calm posture, and calm eyes. The kind of man who probably thought he understood people.

The moment I entered, his attention shifted toward me. Then toward the two soldiers standing behind me, then toward the four thick folders sitting on his desk.

The folders alone would have made most people reconsider their career choices. There were non-disclosure agreements, additional non-disclosure agreements, confidentiality clauses, financial penalties, security protocols, emergency procedures, contingency procedures and contingencies for the contingencies.

Every document had already been reviewed by three lawyers and one federal judge.

I pulled out the chair across from him and sat.

Dr. Walker folded his hands, “I’ve never seen paperwork quite like this.”

“I know.”

He smiled politely, “You had my entire office investigated.”

“I did.”

“You ran background checks on my staff.”

“Correct.”

“You reviewed ten years of financial records.”

“I had to.”

He raised an eyebrow, “You interviewed my ex-wife.”

“She was surprisingly helpful.”

The therapist stared at me and I stared back. Finally he sighed, “Mr. Capone–”

“Raphael.”

“Raphael.”

I nodded once.

“Why exactly are you here?”

I leaned back in my chair, crossed one ankle over my knee and answered immediately, “Because I’m not stupid.”

That earned a blink.

I continued before he could speak, “People hear the word therapy and assume weakness. I don’t.”

I adjusted the cuff of my watch.

“If a machine develops a fault, you inspect it.”

Dr. Walker opened his mouth.

I kept talking, “If a business starts underperforming, you identify the problem.”

His mouth closed again.

“If an operation becomes inefficient, you correct the inefficiency.”

The therapist watched me carefully.

I pointed at myself, “Same principle.”

“So you view yourself as a machine.”

“No.”

“An operation?”

“No.”

“A business?”

“No.”

I folded my arms, “I’m significantly more valuable than all three.”

The therapist stared at me, his expression was unreadable and cold. I appreciated that.

“My point is simple. Ignoring a problem because it involves your brain instead of your liver is irrational.”

“That’s actually a reasonable position.”

I glanced around the office, books, diplomas, plants and an aggressively comfortable couch. Nobody with serious responsibilities should own that many throw pillows.

Finally I stood, crossed the room and sat on the couch. The cushions sank beneath my weight. The therapist remained behind his desk for approximately four seconds..Then he moved to the chair opposite me, notebook in hand, pen ready.

I decided to save us both some time, “Lately something unusual has been happening.”

The pen paused, “Go on.”

“I’ve experienced several lapses. You could call them brief interruptions.”

“Interruptions?”

I nodded, “My thought process disappears.”

“For how long?”

“A few seconds.”

His pen moved, “Minutes?”

“No.”

“Hours?”

“No.”

“Then what exactly concerns you?”

I looked at him because that was the problem. Nobody else would understand why it mattered.

A few seconds meant nothing to normal people but a few seconds could change entire lives in my world.

“A surgeon doesn’t accidentally cut the wrong artery. A pilot doesn’t randomly forget how to land. A bomb technician doesn’t lose focus halfway through a wire,” I leaned forward slightly, “My margin for error is very small. I don’t lose my mind.”

The words came automatically, the same way they always did, as a fact, a certainty, a law of nature.

I rested my forearms on my knees, “Or at least I didn’t.”

The therapist watched me carefully now. I continued before he could ask questions.

“I’ve reviewed my sleep schedule.”

“How much sleep are you getting?”

“Enough.”

“How much?”

“That wasn’t the question.”

A corner of his mouth twitched.

“I’ve reviewed nutrition, exercise, workload, caffeine intake, stress factors and I found no abnormalities.”

The therapist raised an eyebrow, “None?”

“Nothing sufficient to explain this but something has changed.”

The therapist leaned back, “Tell me about the first time it happened.”

Immediately the control room appeared in my mind and I stood.

The therapist blinked, “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sit down.”

I remained standing, one hand slid into my pocket. This feeling was familiar, it was the same feeling I got whenever a conversation drifted somewhere I didn’t want it to go.

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I looked toward the windows, toward the city below, toward anything except the memory that had appeared without permission.

I turned back to him, “I considered diagnosing myself.”

One of his eyebrows lifted slightly, “I assumed someone like you would.”

I started pacing, the couch was no longer tolerable, “I spent six hours researching.”

The therapist looked unsurprised, “Six?”

“Closer to eight.”

That earned the faintest hint of amusement.

“I reviewed neurological disorders. Sleep disorders. Stress-related conditions. Hormonal issues, vitamin deficiencies, adrenal dysfunction, cardiovascular abnormalities.”

The therapist leaned back slightly, “And what conclusion did you reach?”

I stopped walking, “According to the internet, I have cancer.”

His mouth twitched, the man actually looked entertained.

“The internet always says cancer.”

A bookshelf passed on my left, then the window, then the couch, then the bookshelf again, “I searched one symptom.”

The therapist nodded.

“Temporary mental lapses. Three websites later I apparently had a terminal illness.”

His shoulders moved slightly and I knew he was laughing internally.

“Then I reviewed the symptoms,” I spread my hands, “I have none of it.”

The therapist opened his mouth.

I immediately continued, “So unless cancer has developed a sense of humor, that isn’t the answer.”

“Raphael-”

“No.”

He blinked.

“No?”

“I know what you’re going to ask.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

I pointed toward him, “You’re going to ask about timing.”

He nodded, “Yes...”

“The first incident happened during a meeting.”

The therapist finally lowered his notebook slightly.

My eyes remained on the skyline, “I was having a conversation with someone I trust. He informed me of something,” I shoved both hands into my pockets, “Something hypothetical.”

The therapist waited.

I kept talking, rubbing the back of my neck, “A possibility.”

I glanced at him and the man had mastered the art of looking patient.

“I thought someone might get hurt.”

The therapist’s attention sharpened.

“Not me. It wasn’t concern for myself. I remember standing there,” the memory returned, the screens, the conversation and then that sudden feeling like somebody had grabbed my thoughts and ripped them sideways, “I stopped hearing the room. I stopped hearing him. I knew he was speaking…”

The therapist nodded once, “But?”

“But it was like everything disappeared for a second.”

Everything muffled except one thought, one person… Green eyes.

I rubbed a hand across my jaw, “The second incident was worse. There was an argument. I was already frustrated.”

That was putting it mildly.

“I remember her walking away.”

The memory hit harder than expected and I frowned.

“The next few seconds are unclear.”

The therapist finally spoke, “What do you remember?”

“I remember following her. I remember stopping her. I remember being… angry. And then I remember wondering why I was standing where I was standing.”

The therapist looked thoughtful. I disliked thoughtful. Thoughtful usually led to questions. Questions led to answers and answers were currently the problem.

“The third incident happened this morning.”

His attention lifted immediately, “Today?”

“Yes.”

The therapist sat straighter.

“It was a conversation.”

“With the same person?”

I sighed, “Obviously. She was creating a problem.”

The therapist nodded, gesturing em to continue.

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“She was maintaining contact with someone she should not have been maintaining contact with. The situation. required correction. The risk was obvious.”

The therapist slowly nodded. I knew that nod. That was not agreement. That was therapist nonsense. The professional version of continue digging your own grave.

“The situation required immediate intervention.”

The therapist gestured toward me, “Go on.”

“I explained the issue very clearly, directly and professionally and the next thing I remember is her calling me. evil.”

The therapist watched me carefully, “How did that make you feel?”

I stared at him then I laughed, “What kind of question is that?”

“It’s a normal question.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“It is.”

I shook my head, “Feelings are not useful data.

The therapist sighed, “There it is.”

“There what is?”

“The reason you’re here.”

I frowned, “No.”

The therapist leaned back slightly in his chair. A small smile appeared on his face, “Mr. Capone-”

“Raphael.”

“Raphael,” he corrected, “Let’s try something simpler.”

“I enjoy simple.”

“What was the common factor?”

I stared at him, raising an eyebrow.

“In the three situations, the moments you described. What is the common factor?”

I leaned back onto the couch, “A woman.”

The therapist nodded, “Tell me about her.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because she’s irrelevant.”

The therapist actually laughed, “Interesting.”

“What’s interesting?”

“You answered too fast.”

For some reason that made me dislike him slightly.

The therapist picked up his pen, “Tell me about the woman.”

I sighed, “She’s twenty-two.”

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Chapter 453

The therapist waited.

“She has green eyes. Statistically uncommon. Depending on the population you’re looking at, somewhere around two percent of the world.”

His pen moved.

“Her hair is brown but appears almost black in low lighting conditions. It’s annoying because photographs never capture the correct color.”

The pen stopped briefly.

I continued, “Her nose is straight. Proportionate. The tip turns upward slightly.”

The therapist was looking at me strangely now.

“Her lips are usually pale. I’ve considered the possibility of iron deficiency more than once.”

“Have you?”

“Yes.”

I frowned, “She doesn’t take proper care of herself. Her diet is objectively terrible. Processed sugar, excessive caffeine, very little nutritional value. And yet her health indicators remain relatively normal.”

The therapist nodded slowly.

I rubbed my jaw, “She was a ballerina. Her posture is still there. The balance too. Most people don’t notice it.”

“Incredible…”

I frowned slightly, “What?”

The therapist set his pen down, “You said she was irrelevant.”

I immediately nodded, “She is.”

“Raphael, you just spent three minutes describing her in extraordinary detail.”

I stared at him, “That’s because you asked.”

“Do you normally memorize people’s dietary habits, posture, facial proportions and probable nutritional deficiencies?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. For some reason, his words irritated me, “I mean, it’s more than that. She is someone really close to me. We work together and we had an arrangement.”

The therapist looked up, “What kind of arrangement?”

I immediately regretted answering unfortunately it was too late, “The adult kind.”

The therapist waited.

I waited.

Then I eventually sighed, “Benefits.”

The therapist nodded, “And?”

“And what?”

“You seem intelligent enough to understand that wasn’t the whole answer.”

I hated therapists.

“We’re technically stepsiblings.”

The pen stopped moving. For the first time all session, the therapist looked surprised,

I gave my head a shake, “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Judge.”

“I’m not judging.”

“You are.”

“I’m really not.’

“You paused.”

“Most people would pause.”

I glared at him but the man had no survival instincts.

Finally he cleared his throat, “How long?”

“A few months.”

“And it ended recently?”

“Yes.”

“Who ended it?”

“She did.”

“And why did she end it?”

“I don’t know.”

The therapist blinked, “You don’t know?”

“No.”

“Did she give you a reason?”

“Several.”

“Which one was the real one?”

I frowned, that was actually a reasonable question, unfortunately I didn’t have a reasonable answer.

“That’s the problem.”

The therapist waited.

1 continued, “She says one thing,” my fingers tapped against the armrest, “Then later it becomes another thing then somehow I’ve upset her again. I’ll say something completely logical.”

The therapist nodded.

“Then she gets that look.”

“What look?”

I frowned harder. I knew the look, I just couldn’t explain it, “That look.”

The therapist waited.

I sighed, “Like I’ve kicked a puppy.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing offensive.”

“According to who?”

“Me.”

The therapist’s eyebrows lifted.

I ignored that, “I’ll explain something. I’ll solve a problem. I’ll give her an answer. Then suddenly she looks upset.

The therapist nodded slowly, “And that bothers you.”

“No.”

His eyebrow rose.

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“You just spent five minutes talking about it.”

“Because it’s confusing.”

The therapist looked unconvinced.

I let out a frustrated groan, “I don’t understand what keeps happening. One minute everything is fine,” I gestured vaguely, “The next minute she’s looking at me like I’ve done something wrong and the worst part is she never says anything.”

The therapist stayed quiet.

“So I have to guess. Do you know how inefficient guessing is?”

The therapist smiled, “Very.”

“Exactly.”

“Have you asked her?”

“Of course.”

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“And?”

I laughed once, “She says nothing.”

The therapist tapped his pen against the notebook, “Then what happens?”

“Then I say something else.”

“And?”

“Then somehow that makes it worse.”

The therapist leaned back again, his expression softened slightly, “Raphael.”

I already disliked that tone, “What?”

“Have you considered that she may not be reacting to the information itself?”

I frowned, “What does that mean?”

“Maybe she’s reacting to how you’re delivering it.”

I stared, “I’ve already explained that. That I…” I stopped.

The therapist waited, “Go on.”

I looked toward the window, “That I’m not particularly good at…” I made a vague gesture with one hand.

“At?”

I blew out a breath, “Translating.”

His pen moved, “Translating?”

“Thoughts into words.”

The therapist nodded slowly.

I continued before he could interrupt, “The issue is that I know what I’m trying to communicate. Somewhere between my brain and my mouth the message becomes…. distorted.”

The therapist’s expression remained suspiciously neutral.

I frowned, “What?”

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Chapter 454

“You just described an emotional communication problem.”

“No. I described a transmission error.”

For some reason, that made him smile. I didn’t appreciate it.

The therapist set his notebook down on his lap,.”Raphael, I’m going to tell you something and I need you to resist the urge to argue with me for at least ten seconds.”

I immediately frowned, “That’s an unreasonable request.’

“Try anyway.”

I considered leaving. Unfortunately, curiosity won.

The therapist folded his hands, “Everything you’ve described today points to a pattern. You’re extremely good at identifying what you think.”

“Obviously.”

“You’re extremely good at identifying what other people might do.”

“Also obvious.”

“But every time this woman becomes involved, something changes.”

I leaned back against the couch, “That’s the problem.”

“No,” he said calmly, “That’s the clue. You describe conversations, events and risks, even her looks with remarkable detail. But when I ask what was happening inside your head during those moments, you either change the subject, start pacing, make a joke or begin explaining something completely unrelated.”

I opened my mouth.

He pointed his pen at me, “That wasn’t an invitation to demonstrate.”

I closed my mouth again.

“I’m not diagnosing anything today,” he continued. “That would be irresponsible but I am telling you that one appointment isn’t enough.”

I sighed, “That’s unfortunate.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t enjoy this.”

His expression remained neutral, “Most people don’t enjoy discovering blind spots.”

I frowned, “I don’t have blind spots.”

“Everyone has blind spots,” he added confidently, “If you want help understanding these lapses, I need more information. I need to observe patterns over time. I need context. One conversation isn’t enough.”

“How many?”

His eyebrow lifted, “How many what?”

“Sessions.”

“We’ll see.”

“I dislike vague answers.”

“And I dislike patients who try to turn therapy into a business transaction.”

I considered informing him that all transactions were business transactions before I could, my watch vibrated)

My eyes dropped automatically, the screen lit up and I stood immediately.

The therapist blinked, “That’s it?”

“That’s all the time I could take out today.”

I picked up my jacket and as I reached the door, his voice stopped me, “Raphael.”

I looked over my shoulder.

“If you’re coming back because you want a quick diagnosis, you’re going to be disappointed.”

I narrowed my eyes slightly, “Why?”

“Because what you’re describing isn’t something I can solve in a single hour. If you actually want help with the lapses, then I need to see you again.”

I considered that briefly then nodded once, “Fine.”

I opened the door, “I’ll schedule another session soon. Try not to diagnose me with cancer before then.”

The therapist laughed.

I closed the door before he could answer. The elevator ride down was quiet. I checked my watch twice before reaching the lobby.

Outside, the city was loud. Horns. Sirens. Construction somewhere in the distance. Thousands of people moving from one place to another for reasons that probably made sense to them.

I got into the car.

The driver glanced at me through the mirror, “Home, boss?”

“Yes.”

The vehicle pulled away from the curb.

For most of the drive, I looked out the window. Traffic moved around us in uneven waves. A man crossed the street without looking. Two cyclists nearly collided at an intersection.

People were constantly making bad decisions.

It was exhausting.

Unfortunately, my thoughts returned to the therapist.

Then to Gianna.

Then back to the therapist.

Then immediately back to Gianna.

I frowned at the window.

By the time we reached the estate, I had solved three business problems, approved two acquisitions, rejected four proposals and still somehow ended up thinking about the same woman.

The gates opened.

The car rolled up the driveway.

I stepped out before the driver could reach the door. Someone greeted me and I nodded without slowing down.

The front doors opened as I approached. Staff moved through the hallways carrying trays and folders. Somewhere in the distance someone was arguing. It sounded like Dante and Jewel.

The familiar corridor stretched ahead. The doors to Vincenzo's study were partially open. I pushed one of them wider and stepped inside.

Vincenzo sat behind his desk. A file was open in front of him, he looked up when I entered.

Then he took one look at my face and slowly closed the file. Something in his expression changed, "What happened?"

I walked farther into the room, "Vince, we need to talk."

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 455

Gianna

A speaker sat near one of the flower beds, filling the warm afternoon air with soft piano music. The sun was beginning to dip lower in the sky, painting everything gold.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I wasn't thinking about college.

Or work.

Or Raphael.

Or Leone.

I was thinking about ballet.

Just ballet.

My feet were bare against the floor. My hair was twisted into a tight bun. My muscles burned pleasantly from the last hour of training.

And I couldn’t stop smiling.

The instructor Maddie had somehow managed to fly in from another continent was everything I could have hoped for.

He was strict, blunt, terrifyingly talented and completely obsessed with technique.

Which meant he spent most of his time correcting every tiny thing I did.

Again.

And again.

And again.

“Shoulders.”

I immediately lowered them.

“Better.”

He circled me slowly, studying every movement, every adjustment, every tiny mistake. The focused look on his face reminded me of someone else.

A certain irritating, impossible man who stared at computer screens like they personally owed him money.

I immediately shook my head.

No.

Absolutely not.

I was having a good day.

Raphael Capone was not invited into my thoughts, not after he had acted like I was personally trying to bring down the entire family’s security by answering one phone call.

Prick.

“Again.”

I repeated the movement.

“Stop thinking.”

“I am not thinking.”

“You are.”

“I promise I’m not.”

“You are literally arguing while dancing.”

I adjusted my position.

The instructor stepped closer, “Core.”

His hand settled lightly against my stomach and I immediately tightened the muscles.

“No,” he shook his head, “Here.”

A small press and I corrected myself. His hand remained there while he studied my posture then he nodded.

“Again.”

I repeated the movement.

“Good.”

A tap against my stomach.

“Very strong.”

Another tap.

“Very controlled.”

A third.

“Most dancers lose stability here.”

I felt myself practically glow under the praise. Years. I hadn’t danced properly in years. Years of believing that part of my life was gone forever. Years of trying not to think about it.

And now someone who had trained some of the best dancers in the world was standing in front of me telling me I wasn’t hopeless.

The feeling was almost overwhelming.

The instructor moved to my side, checking alignment, checking posture, checking balance. Every correction made me stand a little taller, move a little cleaner and breathe a little easier.

Then he smiled, “Your core is so... tight. It’s exceptional.”

My eyes widened, “Really?”

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The question escaped before I could stop it.

His smile softened, “Absolutely.”

Hope hit me so hard it almost hurt, “You mean I still have a chance?”

I hated how young I sounded, how desperate but I couldn’t help it. For years I had buried this dream so deep 1 convinced myself it wasn’t there anymore.

The instructor looked at me for a long moment then he nodded, “You have much more than a chance.”

Then-

“What the fuck is going on here?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Every head on the terrace turned. Two of the Capone brothers were standing ne the entrance.

Vincenzo looked deeply pissed and Raphael looked even worse.

Vincenzo pointed directly at my instructor, “Anyone want to explain why some random guy is touching my sister?

Claire immediately groaned, “It’s ballet.”

Vincenzo stared, “Ballet? And that requires all that touching?”

The instructor folded his arms, “Actually, yes.”

Neither Vincenzo nor Raphael looked convinced. The instructor looked between them.

Then sighed dramatically, “Oh dear.”

Vincenzo narrowed his eyes, “What?”

The instructor slowly looked him up and down, “I assure you, darling, your sister is safe with me. I’m gay,” the instructor continued smiling, “If anything, you’re significantly more my type.”

I choked, actually choked. Vincenzo looked like someone had slapped him across the face with a fish.

“I’m married,” he grumbled.

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Chapter 456

The instructor placed a hand over his chest, “Oh. My deepest apologies.”

The apology lasted approximately two seconds then his eyes drifted away from Vincenzo and landed directly on Raphael.

I saw the exact moment Raphael realized what was happening.

The instructor tilted his head, “Oh.”

A smile tugged at my mouth immediately because Raphael looked uncomfortable. Actually uncomfortable.

It was like spotting a unicorn in the wild.

“And who is this?” the instructor asked.

Claire’s eyes lit up. I immediately knew this was about to become a disaster, “That’s Raphael.”

The instructor continued staring.

Claire smiled sweetly, “He’s single.”

I bit the inside of my cheek.

The instructor’s entire face brightened, “Oh.”

Raphael looked ready to throw himself off the terrace.

The instructor folded his arms, studying him, “Hmm. You have beautiful eyes.’

I almost fell over because Raphael looked like his brain had completely stopped functioning.

A laugh escaped before I could stop it.

Because seeing Raphael Capone completely out of his element was, apparently, one of the funniest things I had ever witnessed.

It was glorious.

Absolutely glorious.

I pressed a hand against my mouth, trying to contain myself. It didn’t work.

The instructor was still saying something to Raphael, but I wasn’t listening anymore because

Raphael’s eyes narrowed on me.

He wasn’t looking at Vincenzo.

Or Claire.

Or anyone else.

He was looking at me.

Just me.

The laughter caught in my throat. His face had changed, the irritation was gone, the annoyance was gone. Even that cold expression he wore most of the time had disappeared.

His eyes looked... softer?

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He looked like he had forgotten where he was for a second. My heart stumbled painfully against my ribs.

The look lasted barely a moment, a few seconds at most but it felt much longer.

Because I had never seen Raphael look at anyone that way. There was something in his expression I couldn’t name.

My thoughts slammed to a stop. I looked away immediately, heat rushed into my face. When I glanced back a second later, the moment was gone.

Raphael's expression had returned to normal. As if I had imagined the whole thing but my pulse refused to believe that.

And Vincenzo caught that.

His gaze moved from me to Raphael, then back to me and then back to Raphael. A small crease appeared between his brows.

My stomach immediately dropped. Raphael either didn't notice or pretended not to, because with him, it could have gone either way.

Vincenzo kept staring another second before exhaling heavily, "Gianna."

I straightened, "Yeah?"

His eyes never left my face, "My study."

Every alarm bell in my body started ringing, "What?"

"My study," he repeated.

"Why?"

"Because we need to talk."

My heart sank straight into my shoes. Around us, Claire and Maddie were still laughing at something the instructor had said. Nobody noticed the death sentence that had just been handed to me.

"Now?" I asked weakly.

"Now."

I looked toward Claire for help, but she was too busy talking to the instructor then I slowly turned toward Raphael.

Vincenzo was already walking back toward the house.

Raphael looked at me and I looked at him. For a second neither of us said anything then his mouth twitched, just enough to be called a smile. Enough to make me want to throw something at him.

"Oh, that's nice," I muttered.

His eyebrows lifted, “What’s nice?”

“The fact that you’re enjoying this.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I stared at him. He stared back. The mutual glared lasted exactly three seconds. Then we both looked away at the same time because Vincenzo had stopped walking and was now looking over his shoulder.

I immediately hurried after Vincenzo. A second later, Raphael fell into step beside me. We entered the house and followed Vincenzo through the long hallway.

The distant laughter from outside faded behind us. The closer we got to the study, the more nervous I became because nobody got sunmoned into Vincenzo’s study for fun.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 457

My pulse picked up, the study doors came into view and Vincenzo pushed them open then immediately stopped. I nearly walked into his back.

Adriano was sprawled across Vincenzo’s chair like he paid the mortgage. His feet were resting on Vincenzo’s desk. His expensive black shoes planted directly on the wood.

Vincenzo’s eye twitched. Without saying a word, he walked around the desk. He grabbed both of Adriano’s ankles and shoved hard.

Adriano’s feet slammed off the desk, “Ow.”

“You have your own space.”

“I know.”

“Use it.”

Adriano stretched lazily, “No.”

Vincenzo looked like he was reconsidering murder. Adriano noticed immediately which only encouraged him.

“You know,” Adriano said thoughtfully, looking around, “I think I understand why your blood pressure is so high.

“My blood pressure isn’t high.”

“You organize paperclips by size.”

“Because that’s how organization works.”

Adriano pointed toward a perfectly aligned pen holder, “You adjusted that three millimeters while you were talking.”

“It was crooked.”

“It wasn’t.”

“It was.”

Adriano turned toward me, “See what I deal with?”

Vincenzo pinched the bridge of his nose, “I genuinely don’t understand how we came from the same parents.”

Adriano grinned, “Genetics are fascinating.”

“They failed.”

“They succeeded.”

Raphael quietly closed the study door behind us and Adriano leaned back in the chair.

Vincenzo gestured toward one of the chairs, “Sit down, Gianna.”

I sat immediately. Adriano glanced between all of us. His eyebrows slowly climbed, “Oh.”

Vincenzo moved around the desk and stopped beside my chair instead of sitting down. One hand rested against the edge of the desk while he looked down at me. I suddenly felt about twelve years old.

“Gianna.”

My shoulders immediately straightened, “Yeah?”

His voice softened slightly, “You’re not in trouble.”

I didn't believe him, apparently my face said exactly that because a small smile touched his mouth.

"You look terrified. I'm not accusing you of anything but I need the truth."

My stomach twisted.

Uh-oh.

"There shouldn't be anything in this room you feel the need to hide from me. Do you understand?"

I nodded, "Yes..."

Vincenzo folded his arms, then finally asked, "Are you currently in contact with Leone Caruso?"

My head whipped toward Raphael so fast I nearly pulled a muscle.

The bastard.

The absolute bastard.

I shot him a look that promised violence and he looked completely unbothered. In fact, he almost looked annoyed that I was looking at him.

Before I could continue glaring, a large hand suddenly cupped my jaw. Vincenzo gently turned my face back toward him.

"No," his gaze stayed locked on mine, "You talk to me."

"No."

His eyebrow lifted, "No?"

"I don't intend to stay in contact with him."

Vincenzo studied my face for several long seconds then he smiled, "That's a much better answer."

He pulled his hand away, then tapped the top of my head lightly.

"Alright, piccolina," he said, "Start from the beginning."

"Do I have to?"

Adriano leaned forward immediately, “Oh, absolutely.”

“Why are you here?” Raphael asked him.

“Entertainment,” Adriano answered.

“Information,” Vincenzo corrected.

“Entertainment,” Adriano repeated.

Vincenzo ignored him, “Who contacted who first?”

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I stared at the ceiling, maybe if I pretended to die, this conversation would end.

“I texted him first.”

“Okay... why? There had to be a reason.”

I stared down at my hands, “There was.”

Vincenzo’s voice remained gentle, “What was it?”

And somehow that question felt a lot harder to answer than anything that had come before it. I swallowed and picked at the edge of my sleeve.

“Leone was my fiancé once,” I said softly. “Before that, he was my best friend. We grew up together. He was part of my life for as long as I can remember. I was promised to him the day I was born. He was there for sixteen years, “I continued, “And one day I just... missed him.”

I hated how small the words sounded out loud.

“It wasn’t anything more than that. I was thinking about the past and I reached out,” I shrugged weakly, “It was stupid.”

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Vincenzo didn’t interrupt.

Sol kept going, “But after that, I remembered why things ended. I remembered who he is. I remembered what he did,” I finally looked up, “And whatever I thought I was missing wasn’t there anymore. I don’t want to talk to him again,” I said firmly. “I answered the call to tell him to not call me again. I’m done with it. That’s all it was. I missed someone who used to be important to me.”

A bitter smile pulled at my mouth.

“Then I remembered that some people are better left in the past.

Vincenzo watched me carefully like someone trying to figure out if I was telling him the whole truth.

Finally, he nodded once, “Okay.”

The single word eased some of the tension in my chest.

Then his expression became more serious, “That doesn’t change the security problem. If this man has been calling repeatedly and attempting to reestablish contact, then we need to assume he may continue trying.”

Raphael immediately nodded, “I can lock her device down.”

I already didn’t like where this was going.

Raphael continued, “I can create a filtered contact system. Unknown numbers won’t get through. Calls can be screened before they ever reach her. I can block entire networks if necessary.”

He basically wanted control over who could reach me.

Vincenzo looked at me for a long moment before speaking, “I’d sleep a lot better if you gave your phone to Raphael for a few hours.”

And suddenly a completely different thought had appeared in my head. A thought that had been sitting there quietly for days.

I looked down at my hands, “Actually…”

Three pairs of eyes landed on me and I suddenly wished they hadn’t.

I inhaled slowly, “I think I have a better solution. I think…” I paused. “I think maybe it’s time for me to move out.”

For a minute, nobody said a word. The only sign he’d heard me was the slight narrowing of his eyes.

I rushed forward before anyone could misunderstand, “I’m not saying it because I’m upset. I’m not trying to be disrespectful. I love living here.”

That was the truth.

“This place gave me a family when I didn’t have one. You gave me a family. You all did but I don’t think I can stay twenty forever. I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

I looked at Vincenzo and his jaw tightened immediately.

“Salvatore gave me an apartment. I understand the security concerns, they’re valid but if someone contacting me creates a risk for everyone here, then I get it.”

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I took a breath.

“But maybe the answer isn’t locking everything down even more.”

Vincenzo folded his arms, “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe I need to start building a life that’s actually mine. I’ve spent most of my life relying on somebody.”

My father.

Leone.

Now them.

“I don’t regret being here but every major decision I’ve made since arriving has happened with someone standing behind me.”

A small smile touched my mouth, none of it was the reason, I wanted to love out. The real reason was standing somewhere in the room, staring at me. I couldn’t stand to stay in Raphael’s company anymore.

“I think I’m finally at a point where I need to figure out who I am on my own. I want to know what choices I make when nobody is making them for me.”

My voice softened.

“I want to know what my life looks like when I stop hiding behind everyone else.”

Vincenzo interrupted, “Are you unhappy here?”

My eyes widened, “No. No. God, no. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m happy here. You all take care of me. Sometimes too much. I’m not trying to run away from this family. You’re my family,” I swallowed, “I just don’t want to spend the rest of my life being taken care of.”

I watched his face carefully, waiting for him to argue, waiting for him to tell me all the reasons why moving out was a bad idea.

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Instead, he just stared at me.

Adriano had gone strangely quiet too but he wasn’t staring at me or Vincenzo, he was looking at the man standing behind me.

Vincenzo finally exhaled, “If you want to move out,” he said evenly, “then we do it properly.”

Hope immediately flickered inside my chest, “Okay.”

His eyes narrowed, “Don’t get excited yet.”

The hope died instantly.

Vincenzo pushed away from the desk, “You want independence?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You want your own place?”

“Yes.”

“You want to start building a life outside the estate?”

I nodded.

His jaw flexed, “Fine.”

My eyebrows shot up. Fine? Just like that? I glanced toward Adriano but he was still looking at Raphael.

Vincenzo gave me a nod, “You can move out.”

I blinked, “What?”

“You heard me.”

For a second I thought I might actually cry from relief.

“After you sign the papers.”

My smile vanished, “What papers?”

“The adoption papers.”

The room went silent.

“...what?”

“You will live outside my protection while still being under my protection.”

I frowned, “Why would I need to sign adoption papers to move into an apartment?”

“Because if you leave this estate,” he said calmly, “I want legal authority.”

I blinked, “Authority?”

“Yes.”

“I’m twenty-two.”

15 Ben

“And?”

“You already treat me like family.”

“Correct.”

“Then what’s the difference?”

His answer came immediately, “Permanence. If somebody threatens you outside these walls, I want the law, the courts, every piece of paperwork possible connecting you back to us,” something softened slightly in his expression, “You leave this estate with our name attached to yours.”

The room faded into the background because suddenly all I could think about was Raphael, not the paperwork, not the apartment, not even the name.

Permanent.

Official.

Irreversible.

If I signed those papers, nothing would really change. We already lived under the same roof. We already acted like family.

And yet somehow everything would change.

Because there would never be any room left for the stupid, impossible feelings I couldn't seem to get rid of, not that there was any room now but this would make it real.

On paper. In law. In black and white.

Brother.

The thought hurt more than it should have. I stared down at my hands. It was ridiculous, really. Raphael didn't want me. Raphael didn't love me. Half the time I wasn't even sure he liked me. And even if he did, it wouldn't matter.

He was a man who struggled to understand his own emotions. A man who looked at feelings the way other people. looked at complicated math equations.

Something to solve.

Something to analyze.

Something that made no sense.

Love and Raphael didn't belong in the same sentence.

So signing the papers wouldn't actually change anything. Because there had never been a future there to begin with.

Still...

My chest ached anyway.

Because some foolish part of me had apparently been holding onto a door that had never been open.

And this felt like watching it lock forever.

"You're my first friend..."

“For once, I want to be free with you.”

“You are safe whenever I am around you, Gianna. Never doubt that, not for a single second.”

“Because I’m your stepsister.”

“No, because you’re under my protection.”

“You’re family... That means people around you get screened differently. Situations around you get handled differently.”

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

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

“I know exactly what kind of man I am. 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. I don’t even notice half the feelings women expect me to notice. I’m not dragging somebody into a marriage just because society thinks I should want one. That’s why this works.”

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“I can’t love anybody. And you... are already in love with someone else.”

The ache in my chest hadn’t gone away. I wasn’t sure it would anytime soon but I need to get over it now.

If I can get over Leorie, getting over Raphael would be easy.

Then I nodded, “I’ll sign them.”

Something eased Vincenzo’s face, “Good girl. As soon as the paperwork is signed, we’ll discuss the apartment.

My chest tightened again, but I forced myself to nod, “Okay.”

Vincenzo turned toward Adriano, “The documents.”

Adriano blinked, “What documents?”

“The adoption papers I gave you three weeks ago.”

“Oh.”

Something in Adriano’s tone immediately made Vincenzo’s eyes narrow.

“Oh?” Vincenzo repeated.

Adriano rubbed the back of his neck, “Funny story.”

Vincenzo closed his eyes, “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“What happened to the papers?”

Adriano pointed toward the ceiling, “Nero happened. The kid is currently in a phase where everything goes into his mouth. Furniture, toys, shoes, remote controls, human fingers...” he paused, “The adoption papers.”

Vincenzo stared at him, “You lost legal documents to a baby.”

“I didn’t lose them.”

“You just said he ate them.”

“Exactly. That’s not losing them. We know where they went.”

Vincenzo pinched the bridge of his nose so hard I was surprised he didn’t break it. Finally he looked toward Raphael, “Tell Dante to draft new ones.”

Raphael nodded once, “I’ll have them on your desk tomorrow before breakfast.”

Vincenzo looked back at me, “You can go.”

I pushed myself out of the chair. I took a step toward the door, then another and as I passed Raphael, my eyes lifted automatically.

The moment couldn’t have lasted longer than a heartbeat, maybe less but I looked away first.

I reached the door and wrapped my fingers around the handle, then stopped. Turning around, I looked back at the three men, “One thing.”

T

Vincenzo raised an eyebrow.

“My mom. I want to tell her myself that I’m moving out. I don’t want her hearing it from somebody else,” my fingers tightened around the handle, “Please.”

He gave a single nod, “Of course. That’s your conversation to have, piccola. We’ll keep out of it.”

Relief loosened something in my chest.

“And…” I shifted awkwardly. “Please don’t mention Leone to her either. She was never exactly his biggest fan.

A dark chuckle escaped Adriano, “Based on everything you’ve told us, I’d say you’re not exactly a member of his fan club either.”

A reluctant smile tugged at my mouth.

“I’m not…”

Before I could finish, Adriano’s gaze slid immediately toward Raphael. I wished he hadn’t done that.

Vincenzo pointed toward the door, “Go on, piccola.”

I nodded, “Okay.”

A small smile lingered on my face as I opened the study door and stepped into the hallway.

The door clicked shut behind me and the smile vanished instantly.

Brother.

The word slammed into me all over again. My stomach dropped once more. I stood there for a second staring at nothing because somehow it felt worse now that I was alone.

I had agreed to it.

I understood why.

I even wanted it, in a way.

This family had given me more love than I’d ever had before.

But none of that changed the sharp ache sitting in the middle of my chest.

Raphael would become my brother.

And the stupid, hopeless part of me that still looked for him in every room suddenly felt very, very sick.

I pressed a hand against my stomach.

God.

I might actually throw up.

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Raphael

15 Bes

The glowing green and white code on the four massive monitors burned into my retinas, but none of it was making sense anymore.

It was two in the morning. My fingers smashed against the keyboard, the loud, aggressive clack-clack-clack echoing off the walls of the basement, but I was just spinning my wheels.

I couldn’t concentrate. My mind was completely fried, fucking good for nothing therapist.

With a loud curse, I struck the desk with my fist, making my cold cup of coffee jump. I forced myself to look back at the lines of data.

I was in the middle of a massive routing skim, hijacking a hidden digital pipeline between two major offshore banks in the Cayman Islands. By bouncing the encryption keys through six different dummy servers in countries that didn’t have extradition laws, I was pulling fractions of a cent off millions of dark-money transactions.

By the time the sun came up, the Capone accounts would be thirty million dollars heavier, and the banks wouldn’t even notice the leak for another fiscal quarter.

It was a beautiful, high-stakes heist, the kind of job that usually gave me a rush. But tonight, I just wanted to smash the screens with a hammer.

Suddenly, the metal door at the top of the basement stairs groaned open. I didn’t even bother looking up from my screens. I knew that arrogant stride anywhere.

“I’m working, Adriano,” I snapped, my fingers flying across the keys again, trying to lock down a rogue firewall, ” Get the fuck out unless the house is burning down.”

“Oh, the house isn’t burning, little brother,” Adriano’s deep voice boomed through the room, “But your brain definitely is. I can smell the smoke from upstairs. You’ve been working for thirty-six hours straight.”

Then I heard a strange chorus of soft clicks, shuffling feet, and nervous whispers following behind him.

Annoyed, I ripped my eyes away from the financial data and turned my chair around.

My jaw practically hit the floor.

Adriano wasn’t alone. Behind him, walking in a slow, clumsy single-file line, were eight women. They were sex workers, clearly hired from one of our high-end clubs uptown.

Adriano had made sure they couldn’t see a single piece of the confidential, million-dollar banking data flashing behind me, every single one of them wore a black silk blindfold tied tightly around her eyes.

They were a mix of everything, different skin tones, shapes, heights, and ethnicities, all of them shivering slightly in the basement cold air, dressed in nothing but tiny, brightly colored bikinis.

“What the actual hell is this?” I asked, as I stared at the absurd parade.

Adriano smiled, looking entirely pleased with himself as he gestured to the lineup like a salesman, “This, my highly stressed little brother, is therapy. I brought you a buffet. Every shape, size, and flavor you could possibly desire. Pick one for the night, let her fix your brain, and then get back to making us rich. Hell, pick two or three. My treat.”

Γ

15 Boru

A wave of intense, visceral disgust hit my stomach so hard I felt sick. The very thought of touching a woman, of being near one, made my skin crawl with a burning irritation.

“Get them out of here,” I spat, turning my back on them and facing my monitors again, “Now. Before I delete our entire routing protocol and blame it on you.”

“Oh, come on!” Adriano groaned loudly, stepping closer and slapping his hand onto the back of my chair, forcing me to spin back around to face the lineup, “Look at them! Pick one that’s your type.”

“I don’t have a type because I don’t want any of them...” I said through clenched teeth, my temper finally snapped. I stood up from my chair, towering as much as I could, “I am in the middle of routing thirty million dollars through the Caymans. If my timing is off by three seconds, the federal watchdogs will catch the spike. And you walk down here with a synchronized swimming team?”

“They are blindfolded, you idiot! They can’t see your precious numbers!” Adriano snapped back, “I am trying to help you! A good, solid hour of recreational sin will clear your head. It’s medical science!”

“It’s not medical science,” I answered, pointing a furious finger toward the stairs, “I don’t want to get laid, Adriano! The thought of a woman touching me right now makes me want to peel my own fucking skin off! Get your bikini squad out of my basement.”

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Adriano stared at me for a long, tense second, his face deadpan. He turned back to the line of women, clapping lus hands loudly. “Alright, ladies, change of plans. Back to the limo. I’ll pay you extra for the stairs.”

The girls began to turn around, bumping into each other clumsily due to the blindfolds, muttering complaints as Adriano guided them back up the steps.

I let out a long breath, rubbing my temples until my skull hurt. I turned back to my four monitors, my fingers resting on the keyboard, and finally left to my millions in absolute peace.

But that peace lasted for about two seconds.

The door at the top of the stairs banged open again, and the annoying sound of Adriano’s shoes echoed down the walls. He marched right back into the room, leaning his frame against the side of my desk.

“I think I finally figured out your fucking problem,” he said, his tone suddenly very serious.

“Yeah? Enlighten me, what’s that?” I asked dryly, my fingers never stopping their rapid clicking on the keyboard. I didn’t give him an inch of my attention.

“What if I brought Gianna down those steps right now?” he stated, leaning forward, his massive hands planting flat on my desk, “Would you still be sitting there looking all disgusted, you fake-ass priest?”

For a split second, my entire brain went completely blank. The code on the screen froze. My heart did a strange, sudden jerk against my ribs-a physical sensation I couldn’t even name or understand. The moment her name left his mouth, a weird, hot pressure flared deep inside my chest, making it hard to draw air.

I pushed out of my chair, spinning around to face him, my eyes narrowing into slits, “What the fuck did you just say to me?” I hissed.

Adriano just stared down at me, his eyes dead serious, “You don’t make mistakes, Raphael. That’s your whole fucking brand. You’re the most logical, calm, calculated bastard in this entire family, and you’re a better man than all of us combined. I fucking mean that. But you finally slipped up, didn’t you? You completely fucked up, and now your nerd brain can’t handle the data. You’re down here punishing yourself, running yourself into the ground because you can’t fix it.”

“I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about,” I stated, as I turned back to my monitors, typing aggressively just to make noise, “I’m working on it, alright? Tell Vince I’ll fix the fucking errors in a week or two.”

“Error? You’re a fucking human being, Raphael! You’re bound to make errors your entire life, just like the rest of us.”

“Look, Adriano, I already talked to a doctor,” I snapped, slamming my hand on the desk as I stood up to face him. I needed a medical answer for this weird tightness in my chest, a clinical label for why my brain short-circuited whenever she walked into a room, “I have a consultation in a couple of days. I told the guy I want a full neurological diagnosis as soon as possible, and he’s working on it. It’s just a cognitive glitch.”

“You don’t need a fucking doctor to tell you what’s wrong with you, you goddamn idiot. I can tell you right fucking now,” Adriano stepped right into my personal space, “You want your fucking stepsister. You want her so bad it’s driving you insane, but you know you can’t touch her, and it’s making you completely irrational.”

I let out a harsh, ugly scoff, crossing my arms tight against my chest to stop the weird shaking in my fingers, “I don’t fucking want her. Whatever that was, it’s completely over.”

“It’s over?” Adriano barked, a mean, mocking smile twisting his lips, “Yeah, sure, it’ll be over when you stop

staring at that girl like you’re a starving dog and she’s the only fucking piece of meat left in the entire world. You look like you want to devour her every time she walks into space.”

“I don’t do that-”

“Vincenzo saw you, you dumb piece of shit!”

I froze instantly. My entire body went rigid, the air locking tight in my throat. “What?”

“Vincenzo knows,” Adriano said, “He doesn’t know the full story. He doesn’t know how far this shit has actually gone between you two, but he saw the way you looked at her, and he fucking knows. I didn’t bring those sex workers down here tonight because I wanted to, Raphael. Vincenzo sent them. He told me to tell you to fuck whatever this fixation is completely out of your system tonight, and to never even look in her direction again.”

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Chapter 463

I stared at the blinking cursor on my screen, but I wasn’t seeing the numbers anymore. My fingers hovered over the keys, trembling just enough to make them click softly against each other.

Vincenzo knew.

If Vincenzo knew, then the game was over. He was the head of this family. I respected him more than anyone else in this rotten world. If he told me to stop, I had to stop.

That was the only logical choice.

But for some reason, my brain felt like it was short-circuiting again. That strange pressure in my stomach twisted into a physical knot that made it hard to swallow. It wasn’t an error code I could just delete. It felt like hot acid pouring into my veins, making my skin feel too tight for my body.

“Tell him it’s done,” I said.

Adriano just stood there, watching me, “Raph...”

“I said tell him it’s done, Adriano,” I snapped, my head whipping around to glare at him, “I hear him. Loud and clear. He’s the boss.”

I swallowed hard, looking back at the glowing monitors, though everything was just a blur of green light now.

“The girls,” I whispered, the words scratching against the back of my throat, “Tell Vince... I don’t want them. I can’t. But tell him he doesn’t have to worry about her anymore. I’ll lock it down.”

He let out a rough breath that sounded almost like a sigh, but it was too angry for that. He took two heavy steps forward until he was right next to my chair, shadowing me completely.

“You’re a fucking idiot, Raph,” Adriano said, “You think you can just press a button in your brain and delete a whole person?”

I didn’t answer him. I kept my eyes locked on the screen, my teeth grinding together so hard my ears hummed.

“You’re allowed to want her, Raph,” Adriano said, “You’re a man. It’s not a crime to actually look at a girl and feel something.”

“No,” I snapped instantly, “No, I’m not. That is not what this is. I am not capable of this. I don’t get distracted. It has never happened before in my entire life, and it’s not happening now.”

Adriano let out a soft, mocking breath, “And who the fuck told you that? Your expensive doctor?”

“I told myself that,” I hissed, “If I allowed myself to get soft over some girl, if I spent my nights thinking about women instead of the grids, we wouldn’t have a billion-dollar digital empire. I built this shit because my head is clear. I don’t do this.”

I looked at the monitor. Green code moved across the screen, numbers, transfers, accounts and millions of dollars.

For the first time in years, I wasn’t reading any of it.

“Alright.”

I ignored him, shaking my head.

“No, seriously,” he said, “Let’s pretend I’ve suffered a fucking head injury and need this explained to me. How did this even happen? Out of every woman on this planet, how the fuck did you land on the one girl guaranteed to create problems?”

My mind slipped completely away from these walls.

I remembered the nightclub, the scent of smoke and expensive liquor, and the bright spotlight hitting the center of the stage. I remembered her in that tiny, black outfit. It left almost nothing to the imagination, hugging every single curve of her body.

I had a weakness for dancers. I loved the way a woman’s body could move with absolute flexibility, bending and twisting with perfect control, fluid like water. Gianna had been

hypnotic. She moved like she didn't have a single bone in her body, stretching and arching in the sparkling light, every movement designed to drive a man completely insane.

She had belonged to the stage, but that night, her eyes had found mine in the dark.

A small, cold smile pulled at the corner of my lips, "It was before," I said, "It was like two or three days before she ever came to this house. Before her mother ever put a ring on our father's finger. She wasn't my sister then. She was just a girl and I only saw her once."

Adriano looked intrigued now, his eyes scanning my face for any sign of a lie, "Where? Where the hell did you see her? What did you two even talk about? Did you know who she was?"

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"We didn't talk," I replied softly. The memory was so vivid I could almost smell the perfume she was wearing that night, "We didn't exchange a single word. We didn't need to. She danced for me."

Adriano raised an eyebrow, "Ballet?"

"Something like that," I whispered.

I didn't tell him that she hadn't been wearing a white tutu or dancing to classical music on a grand stage. I didn't tell him that she had been wearing a tiny, scraps of black lace that left her soft skin completely bare under the flashing neon lights. I didn't tell him that her eyes locked onto mine while the rest of the crowded room disappeared into nothingness. I kept that private piece buried deep inside my own mind.

Adriano shook his head, "Seriously, though, what the fuck is it with you and these dancers? Every time you actually show a sliver of interest in a woman, she's always some girl who moves for a living. What is that?"/

I shrugged lightly, my fingers tracing the edge of the keyboard without really noticing I was doing it, "I find the movement of their bodies... mesmerizing," I said more quietly this time, "Most people don't move like they mean it. Everything is a bit off. A bit rushed. Like their bodies are always a second behind their thoughts."

I leaned back slightly, eyes unfocused for a moment as the memory surfaced.

"But she didn't move like that," I continued. "It was... clean, like nothing in her body was arguing with itself... just flowed. As if she didn't have to think about it at all. It was

quiet," I added. "Even though she was moving, it felt quiet. I've never seen anything move like that before. It didn't feel human."

I glanced briefly at Adriano, then away again.

"And I couldn't stop thinking about it."

Adriano stepped closer to my chair. I could feel him before I saw him properly.

"Look, Raph, I know this whole situation is completely fucked," he said, "And I know what I'm about to say is so goddamn twisted, it's out of line even by my standards."

That made my jaw tighten a little, "Then don't say it," I replied flatly.

He ignored me.

That was Adriano.

He pulled a breath in through his nose, slower this time, like he was choosing every word on purpose.

"Hazel is on borrowed time," he said. "A few months, tops."

I raised an eyebrow, "What the fuck?"

Adriano kept going anyway, "Dad's not saying it out loud to everyone yet, but it's done. You know how it is. When it starts going downhill like that, it doesn't turn around."

I finally looked at him, just slightly. His face wasn't joking now. That alone made it real.

He leaned one hand on the edge of my desk, closer than I liked.

"I'm not telling you this to mess with your head," he said.

I frowned, "Get to the point."

He nodded once, slow, "Listen to me carefully, Raphael Capone."

I hated when he used my name like that.

"Once Hazel goes," he continued, "that whole setup dies with her. The marriage, the papers, the name, all of it. Gone."

I didn't like that feeling.

Adriano’s voice dropped a little, “And you know what that means. It means Gianna stops being anything tied to us by law.”

My fingers pressed lightly into the arm of the chair.

Adriano watched me for a second, like he was making sure I wasn’t missing it, “And I know you’re going to hate this part, but someone has to say it..When Hazel dies, Gianna’s going to fall,” he said, “Hard. And you?” he tilted his head slightly. “You’re the only one in this whole family who’s already inside her head whether you like it or not.”

My throat tightened a little, and I hated that even more than the words.

“So I’m saying it simple,” he said. “Don’t be stupid about it. Don’t act like you don’t see it. When she falls, you make sure you’re the one there.”

I finally turned my chair a little toward him.

“Make sure the landing isn’t ugly,” he added, “Because if you don’t, someone else will catch her. And you’re not going to like who that is.”

15 B

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 465

The monitors behind me kept glowing, steady and useless. My hands stayed still.

Adriano straightened slightly, like he’d said enough to get punched, “Patience is a virtue,” he muttered, almost to himself now, “Even for emotionally stunted assholes like you.”

I stared at him for a long second.

The monitors kept glowing behind me, green lines moving like nothing in the room had changed at all. But my attention wasn’t on them anymore.

Slowly, I turned my head back toward the screen. I wasn’t seeing the code, so I looked back at him again. I couldn’t believe he had actually just suggested that I sit around and wait for our stepsister’s mother to die just so I could get my hands on her. Something in me snapped into focus.

For a moment, I genuinely wondered if he had suffered some kind of head injury in childhood.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I asked, “No, seriously, let’s examine this for a second. Your solution to this situation is what, exactly? I wait around like some kind of deranged vulture?”

Adriano folded his arms, “You know that’s not what I said.”

“That’s exactly what you said.”

“It isn’t.”

“You literally fucking just suggested I prepare for her mother’s death.”

He just shook his head once, slow, “You don’t get to pretend you’re outside of it anymore,” he said. “Not after the way you’ve been acting. Not after the way she reacts to you.”

A short laugh left my nose before I could stop it.

“How do you even know how we react to each other?” I said. “You have the emotional awareness of a drunk gorilla.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, “And you’re in love with our stepsister,” he said flatly.

That made everything in me pause, not the room, not the sound.

Me.

I froze, staring at him. For a terrifying second, there was absolutely nothing in my head that felt usable. My entire system crashed.

Then, I forced the words out past my clenched teeth, my voice rough. “I don’t love her.”

Adriano let out a quiet, completely humorless breath, looking at me with pure pity. “You really are the dumbest motherfucker in this entire family, Raph.”

My jaw tightened until the bone ached, “That’s Dante.”

“Close second,” Adriano shot back immediately.

“Dante once microwaved a ball of aluminum foil just to see what would happen.”

“You’re still losing to him.”

“Dante got banned from three different casinos, including one that we literally fucking own.”

“Yet somehow,” Adriano shrugged, his face dead serious, “he’s still miles ahead of you.”

I stared at him, and he stared right back at me. The worst, most frustrating part of this entire conversation was that he genuinely, truly believed what he was saying.

As if love was just some logical conclusion you arrived at after checking off a few boxes.

As if I had somehow missed an obvious answer on a test. Which was completely ridiculous.

Love wasn't the reason I was losing my concentration at two in the morning.

Love wasn't causing these frustrating memory lapses where all I could see was her dancing.

Love wasn't responsible for that tight, suffocating pressure that kept appearing in my chest every single time Gianna looked disappointed or hurt.

Those were just symptoms. And symptoms had physical causes. Causes could be identified, they could be diagnosed by a doctor, and they could be solved.

"Okay, let me ask you a simple question," Adriano said, "And you have to tell me the goddamn truth, Raph. When was the last time you went more than an hour without wondering exactly where she was?"

I opened my mouth to put him in his place, to give him a cold, logical answer that would shut him up for good.

And then I froze.

Fuck.

Janedoewritings Author

Hey, everyone!..

Looks like Raphael finally figured something out, didn't he?

*15 8grius

Janedoewritings

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 466

For readers who subscribed to and paid for the old version of the book before the 29th, they can simply continue reading the old version and delete the new version if they wish.

Please note the following:

. If you accidentally remove the old version from your library, you can contact customer support with your purchase record, and they can restore it to your library so you can continue reading the old version.

matters.

For readers who added the book to their library and subscribed on or after the 29th, only the new version will be available. The old version can no longer be found through search.

A Note From Me

First of all, thank you for your patience while we all navigate these changes together. I know the transition has been confusing, and I truly appreciate everyone who has taken the time to ask questions, help other readers, and stick with me through it all.

I never imagined this story would grow into the community it has become. Whether you've been here since the very beginning or you've only recently discovered my books, your support means more to me than I can put into words.

Please don't stress if you're having technical issues. Most of these things are completely outside of my control, but I will always do my best to keep you informed whenever I learn something new.

Thank you for reading, for caring about these characters, for laughing, crying, screaming, and occasionally threatening my fictional people alongside me. This little corner of the internet has become something very special because of all of you.

I love and appreciate every single one of you.

With love,

Jane

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 467

NOTE: I highly recommend listening to All the Things She Said by t.A.T.u. while reading this chapter. Trust me, it enhances the experience by at least 87% and the emotional instability by 200%.

Raphael

At three-fifteen in the morning, I was standing on the front porch of Dr. Walker's house.

The neighborhood was quiet.

The kind of place where people worried about lawn care and property taxes instead of money laundering, cartel routes, and dead bodies.

The porch light flicked on. A few seconds later the front door opened. Dr. Walker stared at me. He was wearing plaid pyjamas, a faded university t-shirt, and a pair of glasses I had never seen before.

"Raphael," he said.

"Doctor."

"It's three in the morning."

"I'm aware."

He looked past me toward the black SUV parked at the curb and at least thirty men surrounding his home then he looked at me again.

"Did somebody die?" 1

"No."

"Is somebody trying to kill you?"

"No."

"Then this can wait until your appointment."

I took a step forward, "No."

Dr. Walker sighed. I was beginning to hate that sigh. Everybody had been sighing at me lately.

Gianna.

Adriano.

Vincenzo.

Now him. 1

“What part of ‘I don’t do emergency sessions’ was confusing?” he asked.

“You make exceptions.”

“I don’t.”

“You do for me.’

15 Bartus

His eyebrows lifted, for a second neither of us spoke, then he rubbed his face slowly like a man questioning every life choice that had led him to this moment, “Five minutes.”

I walked inside immediately.

“Raphael.”

“What?”

“I hadn’t agreed yet.”

“You were going to.”

Dr. Walker closed the door behind me, “I charge double for this.”

“I’ll pay triple.”

He glared at me, “I wasn’t negotiating.”

“You are now.”

He pointed toward the living room and I immediately sat down. Dr. Walker dropped into an armchair across from

He looked tired. I wasn’t, I was exhausted. There was a difference. Exhaustion implied rest was possible. Rest hadn’t existed for weeks.

“Talk.”

I leaned forward. My elbows landed on my knees. My hands locked together. For a long moment I just stared at the floor, then the words came out.

“My brother said something.”

Dr. Walker waited for me to continue.

“He thinks he knows what’s wrong with me.”

“And?”

“He thinks it’s obvious.”

He nodded once, “Did he tell you what he thinks?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

My jaw tightened, the answer refused to leave my mouth, even now, even after driving here, even after standing on this man’s porch like a psychopath.

The word felt ridiculous. Impossible. As if somebody had accused me of growing wings.

Dr. Walker watched me carefully, “What did he say, Raphael?”

I looked up, “He said I’m in love with someone.”

“The daughter of your stepmother?” he asked carefully.

“That’s what he said…” I stated.

His expression remained calm, and I wanted to throw something.

“Raphael.”

“What?”

“Why would that be shocking?”

I stared at him. What the fuck kind of question is that? Because it was shocking. Wasn’t it?

I had built an empire worth billions. I had cracked military encryption. I had broken banking systems. I had written algorithms governments couldn’t replicate.

I solved problems.

That was what I did. That was who I was.

“I don’t understand it.”

Dr. Walker nodded, “Okay.”

“No, that’s not okay,” I leaned forward harder. The frustration scraping raw against my throat, “You don’t understand. My entire life,” I said, “I have been the person with answers.”

I jabbed a finger toward my chest.

“People come to me when things stop making sense.

Another jab.

“I solve problems.”

Another.

“I find patterns.”

My breathing had gotten heavier. I hadn’t even noticed.

“So explain this.”

Dr. Walker remained silent, analyzing me with his beady eyes.

I stood abruptly, the energy under my skin was unbearable, so, I started pacing.

“I can’t focus,” I said. “I sit down to work and end up staring at the same screen for twenty minutes. I can’t sleep worth a damn. I can’t think straight.” I laughed once, but there wasn’t anything funny about it. “I could be moving millions of dollars across three continents, and somehow my brain decides that’s the perfect time to wonder where she is.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 468

Dr. Walker stayed silent, that only made me keep talking.

“Whether she’s eaten. Whether she’s upset. Whether somebody said something that hurt her. Whether she’s safe.” I shook my head, annoyed with myself. “I find myself checking the security feeds. Not because I need to. Because I want to know what she’s doing. If she’s studying. If she’s dancing. If she’s smiling.”

I stopped. My pulse hammered. The realization hit me half a second before I could stop it. Because every single example had been about her.

Only her.

Dr. Walker folded his hands, “How long?”

“What?”

“How long has that been happening?”

“A few months,” I muttered.

Dr. Walker folded his hands together, “What changed?”

I rubbed the back of my neck, “There was a moment.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly, “What moment?”

I let out a slow breath. The memory arrived instantly like it had been sitting there waiting for me.

“We were studying,” I said. “Well... I was helping her study. She’s dyslexic. Sometimes she gets frustrated with certain things, so I was explaining something to her.”

I frowned, the details were blurry.

“We were just talking. Nothing important. I honestly can’t even remember what the conversation was about.”

That bothered me. I remembered encrypted banking routes from five years ago. I remembered passwords, account numbers, coordinates. Yet somehow I couldn’t remember the actual conversation.

Only her.

“I remember looking at her,” I said quietly. “Her eyes. That stupid shade of green. We’d already crossed lines by that point. We were deep into our benefits arrangement. It wasn’t like physical closeness was some new experience. That’s not what threw me.”

I stared at the floor.

“It was something small. So small it shouldn’t have mattered,”

I remembered her leaning closer, the warmth of her, the smell of her shampoo, the way she’d looked at me.

Then the kiss.

And that kiss was nothing compared to everything else that had happened between us at that point but somehow it had hit harder.

“She kissed my cheek. It wasn’t even a real kiss,” I said, irritated. “It was a peck. Half a second. Meaningless.”

Except it wasn’t because I still remembered it. Every detail, months later.

“I remember wanting to get away from her afterward.”

Dr. Walker watched me carefully, “Why?”

“Because something felt wrong,” I laughed bitterly, “No. That’s not accurate. Something felt different. I couldn’t categorize it. It got under my skin.”

I looked toward the window.

“After that, everything got worse. She’d walk into a room and I’d notice,” I rubbed my jaw, “She’d leave a room and I’d notice that too. I started remembering stupid things.”

Dr. Walker remained silent.

“The way she takes notes, the way she wrinkles her nose when she’s annoyed, the way she gets excited when somebody compliments her work,” I closed my eyes briefly, “None of that information is useful.”

When I opened them again, Dr. Walker was still watching me.

“I don’t understand it,” I admitted, “I’ve spent my entire life understanding things. People make sense. Systems make sense. Patterns make sense. If it’s really, what Adriano says it is. Then why didn’t I figure it out? What is wrong with me? I need an answer.”

I looked directly at him.

“I should know. I know everything.”

Dr. Walker didn’t answer right away. I was standing in the middle of his living room at nearly three in the morning, exhausted, furious, and one bad sentence away from putting my fist through his wall.

“Say something.”

The therapist leaned back slightly in his chair.

I dragged both hands through my hair, “Give me an answer.”

Dr. Walker studied me for several seconds, “You want certainty.”

“I want facts.”

“You want a diagnosis.”

“I want to know what the hell is wrong with me.”

I immediately hated how desperate they sounded. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t trust my own brain. That realization alone was enough to make me sick.

“I don’t even care about the feeling anymore. I care about understanding it. She’s the first real friend I’ve ever had. I like being around her. I look forward to talking to her. I know when she’s having a bad day before she says

anything. I know what foods she likes. I know she pretends she’s fine when she isn’t. None of that information helps me. It’s useless.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

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Dr. Walker raised an eyebrow, “Is it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it doesn’t make money.”

His eyebrow rose higher.

“It doesn’t help me run an organization.”

Higher.

“It doesn’t help me identify threats.”

Higher.

“It doesn’t help me solve anything.”

Finally, Dr. Walker sighed, “Raphael.”

“What?”

“You just spent two straight minutes listing things you know about her.”

“So?”

“None of those things were physical.”

I frowned, “What?”

“No mention of her body. No mention of sex. You didn’t talk about attraction, or what you felt during intimacy with her. You talked about her feelings, her happiness, her safety, her comfort.”

The pressure in my chest returned but was far stronger than before.

The bastard looked amused, “What you’re describing doesn’t sound abnormal. It sounds human.”

I immediately disliked that answer, “That’s not a diagnosis.”

“No.”

“Then give me one.”

Dr. Walker rubbed the side of his jaw. He looked like he was choosing his words carefully, “Based on everything you’ve told me so far, there is something I strongly suspect.”

I crossed my arms, “Which is?”

“I think you’ve spent most of your life experiencing emotions without properly identifying them.”

I stared, “That’s stupid.”

“It isn’t.”

“I know what emotions are.”

“You know what emotions are academically.”

1 frowned, “Meaning?”

“You understand them intellectually. You analyze them. You categorize them. You observe them but you don’t always recognize them when they’re happening to you. There’s a condition called Alexithymia.”

I stilled.

“It isn’t a mental illness. It isn’t psychopathy. It isn’t narcissism. It isn’t a personality disorder. It’s a difficulty identifying and describing your own emotions.”

I stared at him, “What?”

“You feel things. People with Alexithymia often mistake emotions for physical sensations. They notice tension, pressure, restlessness.”

I looked away because every example felt uncomfortably familiar.

“They know something is happening. They just don’t know what to call it.”

I swallowed, “What causes it?”

“Different things. Sometimes, it’s childhood, sometimes trauma, sometimes neurodevelopmental differences, and sometimes a combination.”

A question sat in my head, a much older one. Something I hadn’t thought about in years.

“There’s no single cause, Raphael…”

I stared at him, “What about prenatal drug exposure?” 1

His eyes sharpened slightly, “Why are you asking that?”

I looked away, “My father told me my mother was using drugs.”

The words felt strange in my mouth. I rarely talked about her. There wasn’t much to say.

“My father called it cheap street garbage. He said she used while she was pregnant… And after while breastfeeding. I never really thought about it before. I had bigger problems. But if we’re making a list of reasons my brain works like a malfunctioning supercomputer… Does that matter?”

The therapist leaned back slightly, “It could.”

I immediately focused on him, “Could?”

“It depends on what substances were involved.”

I clenched my jaw, “No idea.”

“How much?”

“No idea.”

“How often?”

“No idea,” I spread my hands, “My father wasn’t exactly keeping detailed medical records.”

Dr. Walker nodded slowly, “Then nobody can say for certain.”

I hated uncertainty.

I hated it more than almost anything.

“But yes,” he continued, “prenatal exposure to drugs can affect brain development. It can affect emotional regulation, attention, impulse control, and social processing.”

I stared at him, “So that’s it.”

“No.”

I frowned, “What do you mean no?”

“Because that’s not how this works,” Dr. Walker leaned forward, “If exposure happened, it may have influenced certain things but it wouldn’t explain your entire personality.”

“Why not?”

“Because human beings aren’t built from one event. You are not the result of a single cause. You’re the result of genetics, environment, experiences, loss, trauma… everything.”

“So you’re saying my mother might have contributed.”

“Possibly.”

“But she’s not the reason.”

“Not entirely.”

For years I had quietly assumed there was some hidden defect buried inside me. A faulty wire somewhere deep in the machinery. Some explanation for why everyone else seemed to understand things I couldn’t.

“You know what concerns me?” he asked.

“What?”

“You keep treating your ability to care as evidence that something is wrong. Raphael, from everything you’ve told me so far, I don’t think you’re a man who lacks emotion.”

I looked at him, “So what am I?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 470

Dr. Walker smiled faintly, “I think you’re a man who spent thirty years speaking a language he never realized he was speaking.”

I sank back into the chair, and I stared at the floor between my shoes.

For years, I had operated under the assumption that I was different, not better, not worse, just different.

I always felt like everybody else had received a manual for being human and mine had been lost somewhere in shipping.

And now this man was calmly suggesting that maybe nothing had ever been missing at all. Maybe I had simply been reading the wrong section.

“Different things. Sometimes childhood. Sometimes trauma. Sometimes neurodevelopmental differences. / Sometimes a combination,” I repeated his words quietly.

Then I looked up.

“So you’re telling me I’ve been feeling things this whole time.”

Dr. Walker nodded, “Most likely.”

A strange laugh escaped me. I leaned back into the chair and stared at the ceiling, “If that’s true... and if what Adriano said is true... If I love her...”

The words sounded foreign. My chest tightened again, not painfully this time, just enough for me to notice it.

“If that’s what this is...” I continued slowly, “Then I have to tell her.”

I looked back at him and one of his eyebrows lifted.

“Maybe, I don’t have the right words and I don’t know how people normally handle this but I know one thing. I’m not a coward.”

The words came out harder than I intended.

“I built a billion-dollar company from a basement before I was twenty; I graduated top of my class every single year from elementary school to university. I taught myself languages most people never bother learning. I can break into systems governments spend fortunes protecting. I’ve managed international operations, negotiated with men twice my age, and built financial networks that generate more money in a month than some corporations see in a year.”

I held his gaze.

“If I can do all of that, then I can tell one woman the truth.”

Dr. Walker watched me carefully, “Can you?”

I stopped, “What does that mean?”

“It means telling the truth isn’t always the brave part.”

I frowned.

The therapist folded his hands, “What happens if she doesn’t feel the same way?”

For a second, I almost dismissed it. Then my mind immediately dragged me somewhere else.

Not to the times she kissed me.

Not to the times we slept together.

It dragged me toward every moment I couldn’t understand, every conversation. And suddenly the pieces started moving.

Like somebody had dumped an entire puzzle onto the floor and I was seeing the picture for the first time.

“You seem unsure, Gianna. Is there a problem with me bringing a guest?”

“Of course not! That’s a great idea.”

“Right.”

“Anyway, I should go. I have... I have a lot of college work to finish before tomorrow. And I need to get some sleep.

“I mean, wasn’t it you who said we were open to dating other people? I was the one who said we should stay exclusive, you know, to avoid any messy overlapping or cheating. But... since you insisted on changing the rules, I thought, why not follow your lead?”

“I don’t remember insisting on anything,” I had said to her, “I simply suggested it was an option.”

“And I thought it was a wonderful suggestion, Raphael. It’s good for us. It keeps us both very aware of our reality... Stepbrother.”

“We keep this thing between us. Just you and me. No one else.”

“And what do we have, Raphael? What is this... thing?”

“This... whatever this is, Gianna. It’s our setup. And I’m not sharing it with anyone else.”

“It’s like you are only your real, crazy self when you are alone with me. You only let me see the real Gianna.”

“It’s... it’s because of you. You make me... you make me feel comfortable..You make me comfortable enough to be myself. With everyone else, I have to be careful. I have to hide. But with you... I can just be me. Even when I’m being annoying. You’re the only one who makes me feel safe enough to do that.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 471

Gianna leaned into my hand, giving me that look again.

I didn’t understand it. I wanted to.

“What?” I said, “Why are you looking at me like that, Mess?”

“I thought we had a date planned, Little Mess,”

“A date?” We can’t date, Raphael. Remember? We have a cold contract. We are a secret transaction behind closed doors.”

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

“Because I’m your stepsister.”

“Because you’re under my protection.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was definitely not nothing.”

“I just forgot who I was talking to for a second.”

“Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything wrong.”

“You seriously don’t get it, Raphael?”

“Then explain it to me because I’m obviously missing something.”

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

“I care about you.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, “Like family.”

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

“That’s the problem.”

“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… Forget it.”

“No. Finish that sentence.”

“There you go again with the practical thing.”

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

“You really believe that.”

“Yes.”

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

“No.”

Something flickered across her face again.

That look.

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

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

“This?”

“Us.”

“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.”

“I like that about you. 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.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

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

“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.”

“Gianna, you’re not making any sense. We can’t just pretend we don’t know each other.”

“Yes, we can. 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 our parents, we don’t speak. For you, I do not exist anymore. And for me, you are completely gone.”

“And… Please don’t mention Leone to her either. She was never exactly his biggest fan.”

“Based on everything you’ve told us, I’d say you’re not exactly a member of his fan club either.”

“I’m not…”

“Raphael,” Dr. Walker pulled me out of my thoughts, “I asked you a question. What happens if she doesn’t feel the same way?”

I looked at him.

For the first time all night, I didn’t overthink it, I didn’t analyze it, I didn’t try to solve it like a problem.

A strange calm settled over me, “She does.”

I had spent months missing what was right in front of me but I wasn’t missing it now.

The realization settled into my chest with a strange sense of peace.

She loved me.

The same way I loved her.

The difference was that she’d figured it out long before I had.

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy!!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 472

Gianna

I didn’t want to go downstairs.

That realization hit me the second I opened my eyes,

The room was quiet. Morning sunlight spilled through the curtains, painting soft golden lines across the floor but it did absolutely nothing to improve my mood.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. The papers, the stupid, horrible papers and I had agreed to sign them.

I understood why Vincenzo wanted it. I understood the security concerns. I understood the protection. I understood all of it.

That didn't make it hurt less because protection was one thing and permanence was another.

Soon there would be documents, signatures, legal records, a last name and a family tree. A hundred different pieces of paper telling the world that Raphael Capone was my brother.

I squeezed my eyes shut. It was almost funny because apparently I had managed to do something spectacularly stupid.

I had fallen in love with the one man I couldn't have.

The universe had looked at me and said, Let's make her life as complicated as possible.

A miserable laugh escaped me, then I dragged myself out of bed.

An hour later I was standing outside the dining room trying to gather enough courage to walk inside.

The sound of conversation drifted through the open doors. Claire laughing, Jules talking, Adriano being loud. Everything sounded normal.

Meanwhile I felt like I was heading toward my execution. I took a breath and walked inside.

Mom sat beside Salvatore, Jules was talking to them with her mouth full, Maddie looked half asleep for some reason.

Claire immediately noticed me, "There she is."

Before I could escape, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the empty chair between her and Maddie.

I dropped into the seat.

Claire immediately started loading food onto my plate.

“Claire.”

“What?” she asked.

“That’s too much.”

“You look sad.”

“I’m not sad.”

“You look like somebody cancelled Christmas.”

I sighed.

Maddie looked over, “You do look miserable.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Claire patted my arm, “We’ll fix it with pancakes.”

T

I stared at the pancakes then I looked around the table. Which was a big mistake because my eyes found Raphael immediately like they always did.

Every single time.

He had his coffee beside him, phone in one hand, completely composed, completely controlled, completely-

His eyes lifted and met mine.

Everything inside me stopped and I forgot how to breathe, just like I always do. The room faded, the voices disappeared, the table disappeared, there was only him.

And something was different about him. I couldn’t explain it. I just knew. Usually when Raphael looked at me there was intensity, attention, and focus like he was trying to solve a problem. As if he was studying something nobody else could see.

This was different.

The look in his eyes felt warmer before I could dwell on it, Claire shoved a plate in front of me and the spell shattered.

I looked down immediately. Heat rushed into my face. God. This was torture. I picked up my fork and focused very hard on not looking at him again.

It lasted approximately twelve seconds then I looked anyway because apparently I had no self-control.

Raphael was still watching me, not openly, not enough for anyone else to notice but enough. Enough that my chest hurt.

God.

Why did he have to be so... him?

Why couldn't he be selfish? Cruel? Annoying? Something. Anything other than how stupid he was.

It would have been so much easier if he were the kind of man who lied, or cheated, or treated people badly. It would have been easier if he wasn't the man who remembered every little thing I said.

It would have been easier if he wasn't Raphael.

If he wasn't brilliant.

If he wasn't patient.

If he wasn't the safest place I had ever found.

+15 8 graus

Then maybe getting over him wouldn't feel impossible. I looked down at my plate, suddenly very interested in my breakfast. Anything was better than looking at him.

Anything was better than remembering that none of this could ever happen.

Across the table, Raphael lowered his coffee mug slowly, his attention never quite leaving me.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 473

When I glanced up again, for the strangest moment, it almost looked like he wanted to say something... something important, something impossible but neither of us spoke.

Because the entire family sat around us.

Because reality still existed.

Because some things were too complicated to fit into words. So we just sat there, looking at each other across the table...

Close enough to see, far enough to lose.

I had just managed to convince myself to look down at my plate and focus on something as simple as scrambled eggs when Vincenzo's voice cut cleanly across the table.

"Raphael."

Raphael looked up from his coffee. Vincenzo sat at the head of the table, perfectly put together as always, not a wrinkle in his suit, not a hair out of place.

"Did you speak to Dante about the paperwork?"

Then Dante looked up from his phone, "The what?"

Vincenzo slowly turned toward him, "The paperwork."

Dante blinked, "What paperwork? I was supposed to know about paperwork?"

Across the table, Raphael exhaled slowly. And something about that tiny breath made me look up, "I forgot."

Vincenzo stared at Raphael and Raphael stared back.

I nearly dropped my fork because Raphael Capone forgetting something was like the sun forgetting to rise.

Dante looked between them, then pointed at Raphael, "Wait. You forgot?"

Raphael's jaw tightened.

Dante looked genuinely fascinated, "You?"

Nobody answered him.

Dante slowly looked around the table, "Oh my fucking God. The apocalypse is finally happening."

Across from him, Adriano slapped the table, "I knew it."

“Knew what?” Claire asked.

Adriano pointed dramatically toward Raphael, “The robot is malfunctioning.”

Silvio wheezed, “The software is corrupted.”

Dante grinned, “The hardware is failing.”

“The machine spirit has abandoned the vessel,” Adriano laughed.

Luca nodded seriously, “We should probably unplug him and plug him back in.”

Claire raised her hand, “I volunteer.”

Meanwhile Vincenzo wasn’t laughing, not even a little. His gaze remained fixed on Raphael. Raphael met his stare without looking away.

Something between them felt strange, neither man said a word but something passed between them anyway. Something I couldn’t quite understand.

Then Vincenzo slowly raised one eyebrow and Raphael’s expression hardened. The stare continued for one second, two seconds, three seconds...

Finally Vincenzo gave a small shake of his head, not enough for anyone else to notice but I noticed. Raphael noticed too, his shoulders went rigid and then looked away first and a slow breath left him.

Across the table, Adriano pointed dramatically at Vincenzo, “Look at that. That’s the exact look Vincenzo used to give me when we were kids right before I got punched.”

“You guys used to punch each other when you were kids?” Maddie asked with a frown.

“Frequently.”

Maddie shook her head, “Why are you all like this?”

“Genetics,” Adriano answered immediately.

“Bad genetics,” Dante corrected.

“Criminal genetics,” Luca added in his monotone way.

Silvio nodded, “Very expensive genetics.”

Maddie started laughing. The conversation exploded into complete chaos after that. People talking over each other. Silvio And Dante making ridiculous comments. Adriano deliberately making things worse because apparently peace caused him physical pain.

For a moment, the tension faded. The noise wrapped around the room. I found myself smiling despite everything.

And then, I looked up again, straight into Raphael's eyes. The smile disappeared from my face because he was already watching me.

The conversation continued around us.

Nobody noticed.

Nobody cared.

But something inside me stopped moving.

There was no irritation in his expression, no distance, no coldness, no walls, just those beautiful eyes fixed on mine.

My pulse stumbled because I had no idea what that look meant.

The laughter around the table was still going strong when Vincenzo set his coffee cup down. His eyes moved toward me, "Gianna."

My stomach immediately dropped..I already knew what was coming.

"Would now be a good time to speak with your mother?"

I stared at him, my heart started beating harder. Beside me, Claire's smile faded slightly and Maddie looked between us.

Jules looked up from her pancakes, "About what? What did she do?"

"I didn't do anything," I muttered.

"That sounds exactly like something guilty people say."

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 474

“Jules.”

“What?”

My little sister glared at Raphael and then looked back at me, “If she murdered somebody, I want details.”

Mom laughed softly and the sound pulled my attention toward her. She sat at the table with her tea in both hands, smiling at Jules with so much affection it made my chest ache.

“You watch too many crime shows, my darling,” mom laughed.

“They’re educational. They teach me things, right, Dante?” she turned to him with a wide grin.

Dante nodded proudly, “Absolutely, J-Bug.”

Then Mom looked at me, the smile on her face softened immediately, “Ginny. What is it?”

I looked down at my hands, then back at her and then down again.

Coward.

Just say it.

Mom furrowed her eyebrows in an affectionate way, “Whatever it is, sweetheart, you can tell me.”

My eyes moved around the table.

Claire.

Maddie.

Adriano.

Silvio.

Luca.

Dante.

Vincenzo.

Salvatore.

Then Raphael.

His gaze met mine immediately. Something inside my chest twisted painfully. Because after today...

Brother.

The word slammed into me again.

Brother.

I took a breath and somehow found enough courage to speak, “I’m moving out.”

Adriano muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “Well, there it is.”

But I couldn’t look at any of them. I was watching my mother, only my mother.

T

158gms

And the entire table went silent around us. The smile disappeared from mom’s face so quickly it startled me. 1 frowned, “Mom?”

Her eyes were locked on me, wide, almost frightened. The color drained from her face. The teacup in her hand trembled.

“Mom?”

My stomach dropped, something was wrong very wrong because her breathing suddenly changed. A sharp inhale, then another, way too fast.

“Hazel,” Salvatore was out of his chair before anyone else moved. His hand immediately found her shoulder.

Mom wasn’t looking at him, she was looking at me, “No.”

My confusion turned into alarm, “What?”

“No.”

Her breathing became faster. Her chest rising and falling too quickly. My mother looked terrified, actually terrified and I didn’t understand why.

I moved toward her immediately, “Mom, what’s wrong?”

Her eyes filled with tears so suddenly it made my heart lurch, “No, no, no. You can’t.”

Jules looked scared now as mom grabbed my wrist hard, far harder than she normally would.

“You can’t.”

“Mom-”

“You can’t leave. You can’t.”

I stared at her as she looked completely lost. My mother wasn’t a dramatic person. She had never reacted like this to anything in my entire life apart from when she found out about my self harm.

“Mom,” I said carefully, “it’s the apartment Salvatore has given me and I promised Vincenzo that I won’t deny any security or anything-.”

“No!” she snapped, “No.”

Salvatore crouched beside her chair, his face had gone tight. Tight enough that something cold started crawling through my stomach, “Hazel.”

She shook her head harder, “No.”

His hand moved to her face, “Look at me.”

She wouldn’t, she couldn’t seem to. Her eyes stayed locked on me like she was trying to memorize every inch of my face like she was scared I would disappear if she blinked.

“She can’t leave, Salvatore, she can’t.”

I knelt beside her chair. My confusion was rapidly turning into fear, “Mom, what’s happening?”

She grabbed both my hands, “You stay. You stay here.”

“Mom-”

“You stay with… me.”

Absolutely none of it made sense. I looked around the table and nobody looked comfortable anymore.

Salvatore closed his eyes briefly as if he was fighting something, then he opened them again and immediately focused entirely on his wife. He reached up and brushed her hair away from her face, “You need to breathe.”

Mom’s eyes immediately filled with fresh tears, “She can’t leave.”

“I know.”

His thumb brushed beneath her eye, wiping away another tear before it could fall.

Something cold settled deep inside my stomach. I looked around the table, nobody looked surprised, nobody looked confused, nobody looked shocked and suddenly it felt like everyone knew something I didn’t.

I pulled my hands away from Mom’s gently, “Why? Why can’t I leave?”

Mom’s face crumpled.

My confusion immediately turned into frustration, I stood up, “This isn’t fair. I’ve done everything right. I listened to every word you say. I asked respectfully. I explained why. I’m not running away. I’m not disappearing.”

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Chapter 475

Mom lowered her head, “Gianna…”

“No,” my chest hurt, “I don’t understand.”

Claire pushed her chair back, and came towards me, “Hey, come here, your mom is attached to you.”

I laughed weakly, “Attached?”

“Yes.”

“Claire, I’m going to live ten minutes away.”

“I know.”

“Then why is everyone acting like I’m moving to another country?”

Maddie came over and squeezed my hand, “Did something happen?”

I frowned, “What?”

“Did somebody say something to you?”

“No.”

“Are you unhappy here?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again because the answer was complicated.

No, I wasn’t unhappy, that was the problem. I loved this family, I have grown to love this house. I loved breakfast at this table. I loved movie nights. I loved Claire. I loved Maddie.

I loved all of them.

And that was exactly why I needed to leave.

My eyes drifted across the table, straight to Raphael. He was already watching me. My heart immediately betrayed me again.

God.

I was so tired, so tired of seeing him every day, so tired of hearing his voice, so tired of wanting things I could never have.

I needed distance, I needed space, I needed a chance to forget because staying here meant watching him become my brother, watching him become family, watching him belong to me in every way except the one that mattered.

I couldn’t do it.

“Gianna,” Maddie’s voice pulled me back, “What is it?”

I shook my head, “Nothing.”

I looked away. Claire exchanged a look with Maddie, then back at me.

“Honey,” Claire’s voice softened even more, “People don’t suddenly decide to move out overnight.”

I swallowed, “Maybe they do.”

15 Barius

Then Mom spoke, very quietly, “Gianna.”

I looked at her immediately. She wasn't crying anymore. She held her hands together in her lap so tightly her knuckles had turned white.

"Do you really want to know why?"

I nodded.

Mom smiled, a small sad one. The kind that made my chest hurt and suddenly I couldn't breathe because something inside me already knew, before she even spoke, "Because I'm dying."

The world stopped.

I stared at her.

The words didn't make sense.

They reached my ears but they didn't mean anything because they couldn't.

My mother smiled softly through her tears, "So when you tell me you're leaving... I know you're not leaving forever," A tear slipped down her cheek, "But I am."

My knees nearly gave out.

No.

No.

No.

Mom reached for me, "All I want... is my entire family with me for whatever time I have left," she looked around the table and then back at me, "Is that really so much to ask, my darling girl?"

The room disappeared, the people disappeared, the sounds disappeared, everything disappeared.

Except my mother.

And the impossible words that had just shattered my entire world.

"No," the word left my mouth before I could stop it. My head shook automatically, "No."

Mom looked at me through tear-filled eyes. I couldn't breathe properly, nothing made sense anymore.

“No. You’re emotional. You’re upset because I said I’m moving out. This is emotional blackmail!” I snapped.

The moment the words left my mouth, pain flashed across Mom’s face.

“You’re trying to make me stay.”

“Gianna.”

“No,” I shook my head harder, “No. It’s your spine.”

Because this wasn’t real. It couldn’t be. My mother had a bad back, a damaged spine. That’s what all the doctors said. That was the explanation. That was something I understood.

This wasn’t.

Mom reached for my hand. Her fingers trembled, “Bambina. My spine is fine.”

I stared at her, “What?”

Mom swallowed, a tear slid down her cheek, “My spine is fine.”

C

The knot in my stornach tightened, something cold spread through my chest, “What are you talking about?”

She looked down at her hands and Salvatore’s hand immediately settled over hers.

When she looked back up, her eyes were red, “I have ALS.”

The letters meant nothing, absolutely nothing. I blinked, “No, you don’t!”

Mom’s lips trembled, “My body is slowly stopping. My muscles don’t work the way they should anymore. It means eventually-”

“No.”

The word tore out of me because I didn’t want to hear the rest. I didn’t want the sentence finished. I didn’t want the explanation. I didn’t want any of it.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 476

And suddenly I understood why everyone had been acting strange.

Why Salvatore looked at her the way he did.

Why Vincenzo insisted on taking her to the doctor himself.

Why Claire checked on her constantly.

Why everyone seemed careful around her.

God.

God.

God.

My stomach lurched.

Mom's voice broke, "Every day that passes.... is one less day. One less day with you. One less day with Jules and one less day with this family."

Then suddenly a chair scraped violently against the floor. Jules was already running.

Tears streaming down her face, "No! No!"

She launched herself at Mom, practically climbing into her lap. Her arms wrapping around her mother's neck so tightly it looked painful.

"No, Mommy."

Mom immediately wrapped her arms around her, holding her close, holding her like she never wanted to let go.

Jules buried her face against her shoulder, "No, no, no. Mommy, don't say that."

Mom started crying harder. So did Claire. Maddie turned away completely.

Jules clung tighter, "So we'll fix it. We'll get doctors. The best doctors. Papa Sal said he has lots of money. We'll buy better doctors," her little hands grabbed mom's face, "We'll buy all of them. We'll fix it."

Mom broke completely, pulling Jules against her chest, crying into her hair. Meanwhile I stood there frozen unable to move, unable to think, unable to process.

Because suddenly every strange thing from the last few months made sense, every conversation, every look, every moment. My mother's words kept echoing inside my head.

ALS.

ALS.

ALS.

Every single person at this table knew, every single one, except me, except Jules.

My eyes moved around the room slowly.

Claire.

Maddie.

Vincenzo.

Adriano.

Salvatore.

Raphael.

All of them.

The realization hit harder than the diagnosis itself, "You knew."

Claire looked down.

Something ugly twisted inside my chest, "You all knew."

Nobody answered and that was answer enough.

"Gianna-"

"No."

Claire stopped talking immediately.

I looked directly at her, "You knew?"

Pain flashed across her face, "Gianna-"

"You knew."

Her shoulders dropped, “Yes.”

I laughed, a short, disbelieving laugh, “Wow.”

“Sweetheart-”

“No, Claire.”

I looked at Maddie next. So much for being my friends, those fucking liars. Maddie couldn’t even meet my eyes, ” You too?”

Her throat moved, “Gianna, please listen-”

“You too?”

She looked miserable, “Your mother asked us not to tell you.”

I stared at her, then laughed again, “That’s funny. After every lecture I’ve gotten about honesty from you.”

Maddie’s eyes filled with tears, “That’s not fair.”

“No? Because I remember being told family doesn’t keep secrets. I remember being told family tells each other the truth. Apparently that rule didn’t apply to me.”

“Gianna,” Maddie whispered.

I shook my head, then my gaze landed on Raphael. The second our eyes met, pieces started falling into place.

15 Benut

All those afternoons, all those times, every single moment. The way he’d suddenly tell me to go home. The way he’d insist I take days off. The way he’d practically force me to spend time with Mom. The way he’d tell me work could wait.

I stared at him, “You knew.”

His jaw tightened. I stood there waiting for him to deny it but he didn’t and the anger inside me exploded, “That’s why you kept telling me to go home early, insisting I take days off to spend time with my mom. Every single time. You knew she was dying.”

His expression barely changed but something moved behind his eyes.

“You sat there and watched me complain about deadlines. You listened to me talk about assignments. You listened to me plan for next year. And you knew.”

Finally Raphael spoke, “Your mother asked us not to tell you.”

I wanted to scream instead I looked away because somehow hearing him say it hurt more. My gaze snapped toward my mother, tears streamed down her face.

“Baby-”

“You don’t get to call me that right now.”

The words left my mouth before I could think. Pain flashed across her face instantly and guilt hit me but then anger hit harder.

“How could you not tell me?”

My mother’s hands trembled, “Because I wanted you to live.”

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Chapter 477

I stared at her, “What?”

“I wanted you to be happy. I wanted you to go to college, graduate. I wanted you to dance. I wanted you to laugh. I wanted you to have one year where you weren’t worrying about hospitals and medications and doctors”

Her hand pressed against her chest.

“I wanted one year where you got to be young.”

I shook my head. Every word made me angrier, “That wasn’t your decision.”

“I know.”

“That was my choice.”

“I know.”

“You stole it from me.”

My mother’s face crumpled, “I know.”

The fact she agreed made tears burn behind my eyes.

Jules' crying filled the room. She was still wrapped around in Mom's arms, still holding on.

Tears slipped down my face. I wiped it away angrily, "I'll never forgive you. I mean it. I will never forgive you for taking that choice away from me."

Mom looked like I had physically struck her but I couldn't stop.

"You decided what I could handle. You decided what I deserved to know. You decided how much time I got with you."

Mom covered her mouth with her hand, "Gianna..."

"No," I shook my head, "No, because every birthday, every holiday, every dinner, every stupid movie night-"my voice broke completely, "I would've known. I would've known they mattered."

I looked around the table.

The betrayal sat heavy in my chest.

"I won't forgive any of you either. I trusted you. All of you."

Then my mother spoke, "You don't have to forgive us but if you need somebody to be angry at..." her voice wavered, "Be angry at me."

"Mom-"

"I asked them not to tell you. I made that choice. And if I had to do it again... I'd probably make the same one."

"No," Jules cried, "No, Mommy. No."

My chest hurt, "And I would've chosen you."

I wiped angrily at my face then looked at my mother.

15 8gn

"I love you but I'm so angry with you and I don't know how to be both things at once."

Mom just cried harder, "I know, baby."

I looked away because suddenly it was getting harder to breathe, harder to stand, harder to think.

All these months.

All these months I had been living inside my own little world.

Complaining about assignments.

Stress.

Internships.

Grades.

Dyslexia.

Exams.

Work.

My stupid feelings.

My stupid heartbreak.

My stupid obsession with a man who would never love me back.

The realization hit so hard I almost flinched.

God.

I was selfish.

The thought made me feel sick, while I was crying over Raphael, while I was wondering why he couldn't love me, while I was trying to figure out how to stop loving him.

My mother had been dying... actually fucking dying.

Every single day, every single week, every single month and I hadn't seen it, I hadn't asked enough questions, I hadn't looked closely enough because I had been so wrapped up in my own problems.

My own wants.

My own future.

My own heartbreak.

The guilt hit me so hard my stomach turned.

I looked at Mom again, the woman who had worked herself to exhaustion raising me. The woman who had loved me through every mistake. The woman who had sat through every dance recital, every school event, every bad day.

And I had spent the last few months thinking the biggest tragedy in my life was loving someone who couldn't love me back.

The thought felt disgusting now. It was small and meaningless because none of it mattered, nothing mattered more than the woman sitting in front of me.

And for the first time since she had spoken those terrible words...

I was terrified.

Because suddenly I could see it, the possibility, the reality, the future without her.

And I couldn't breathe through it.

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Author

Please be gentle with me after this chapter.

I know.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 478

Gianna

1YT

I didn't remember falling asleep.

One second I had been sitting on the floor beside the bed. The next second, a hand touched my shoulder. I jerked awake so fast my neck immediately protested.

For a moment I didn't know where I was, then reality crashed back into me. Mom. ALS. Everything.

My eyes snapped toward the bed immediately. Mom was still there, she was still breathing. Jules was curled against her side, one small hand fisted into Mom's pajama shirt even in sleep.

Relief hit me so hard it almost hurt.

Then I realized somebody was standing beside me.

Salvatore.

The room was dark except for a small lamp glowing softly in the corner.

I scrambled upright, "Oh God. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep in here, I'll go," I rubbed at my face, "You probably wanted some privacy."

Salvatore nodded toward the bed, "You can take my side."

I stared at him, "What?"

"The bed."

"No."

A faint smile touched his mouth, "Why not?"

Because it was his place, because he belonged there, because he was her husband and she loved him.

I shook my head, "I can't take your spot."

Salvatore studied me for a second. Then, without another word, he lowered himself onto the floor beside me.

I blinked, "What are you doing?"

"Sitting."

"Here? Why?"

His eyebrow lifted, "Because apparently we're both refusing to use the furniture."

Despite everything, a tiny laugh escaped me. It lasted less than a second but it happened. I pulled my knees toward my chest as my eyes went back to Mom.

I couldn't stop looking at her, like if I looked away for too long something terrible would happen.

Salvatore followed my gaze, and his eyes softened, his shoulders relaxed like simply looking at her made something inside him quieter.

I had seen that look on his face before. When she laughed. When she fell asleep on the couch. When she got excited talking about something. When she spoke. When she smiled. When she simply... existed.

I had never understood it, now I did, “How do you do it?”

The question left my mouth before I could stop it.

Salvatore glanced at me, “Do what?”

My chest hurt, “You’ve had more time than I did. You knew her before I came back. You knew her when she was younger. You were there when she was alone after Senator Sterling’s death. You were there before she found me.

I rubbed my hands together, trying to get rid of the nervous energy crawling under my skin.

My eyes burned, “And then somebody tells you she’s dying. I don’t understand. How did you handle that?”

I looked at him, not as Salvatore Capone, not as the former head of one of the most powerful crime families in the country, not as the man everyone listened to. Just as my mother’s husband, just as the man who loved her.

“What did you do?” I asked quietly, “When they told you? What happened when you realized there wasn’t a way to fix it?”

Because that was the part I couldn’t understand, nothing in this family stayed broken. Problems got solved, threats disappeared, money fixed things, power fixed things, connections fixed things.

The Capones fixed things.

But this... this was still here.

For a long moment, Salvatore didn’t answer, he just looked at mom, like he was deciding how much truth I could handle.

Finally, he let out a slow breath, “The first thing I did? I told the doctor he was wrong. Three different specialists. I paid for the best. Then I paid for better. I flew people in from other countries. People with degrees so long they needed two business cards.”

Salvatore shook his head.

“I argued with every single one of them. I found studies. Experimental treatments. Clinical trials. I spent months trying to prove somebody had made a mistake.”

I tilted my head, “And?”

Salvatore swallowed, “And eventually there were no more doctors left to argue with.”

My eyes burned, “So you just accepted it?”

Salvatore actually laughed. A short, tired sound, “No... No, I absolutely did not. I still haven’t. I wake up every morning hoping somebody calls me, hoping somebody tells me they found something. I know it isn’t rational but hope rarely is.”

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1 stared at the floor.

After a few seconds, Salvatore spoke again, “You know what changed?”

I looked up, “What?”

His expression softened, “Her.”

I frowned, “What do you mean?”

His gaze stayed on mom, “When she found out. She spent exactly one day crying.”

My throat tightened, “One day?”

Salvatore nodded, “Then she got up the next morning, she made coffee like nothing ever happened and she told me she wanted to marry me.”

The pieces started clicking together in my head. The rushed wedding, the urgency. The way Mom had seemed determined to get everything settled as quickly as possible.

I looked at Salvatore, “So she already knew before the wedding. That’s why she pushed for it so fast.”

I looked toward Mom sleeping beside Jules.

“She was trying to make sure we were taken care of. She wanted security for me and Jules,” I swallowed, “A family. That’s why she married you.”

The words felt ugly the second they left my mouth and I turned my attention back to him. His eyebrows lifted slightly.

“She was scared and she thought you’d protect us after she was gone. What if that was the reason?”

For a moment I thought I had upset him, then Salvatore smiled, “Gianna. You sound exactly like your mother.”

That wasn’t the response I expected, “I just mean-‘

“I know what you mean,” the smile on his face softened immediately, “You think she married me because she needed something.”

I didn’t answer because yes. Part of me thought exactly that.

Salvatore rubbed a hand over his jaw, “Your mother is many things,” a small laugh escaped him, “Stubborn. Difficult. Terrifying when she’s angry but she would have never married me just to take advantage of me.”

The certainty in his voice made me pause.

He looked at me, “Do you know how many times she rejected me over the years?”

I blinked, “What?”

A grin pulled at his mouth, “For years.”

My eyes widened, “Years?”

“Oh, yes,” he looked entirely offended by the memory, “I was a respected Don. A powerful man. Women practically threw themselves at me.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head at him. A second later, he reached across the space between us and casually messed up my hair, leaving the strands sticking out in every direction.

“And your mother looked me dead in the eye and told me that if I wasn’t helping her find you, she wouldn’t spare me five minutes of her time.”

My mouth fell open, “She actually said that?”

“Several times.”

I burst out laughing.

Salvatore looked deeply offended, “I’m pouring my heart out, bringing flowers, taking her to dinner and she keeps talking about her missing daughter.”

A laugh slipped out before I could stop it. I lowered my voice to a whisper, careful not to wake Mom or Jules,” You’re lying.”

He pointed toward mom sleeping peacefully on the bed, “That innocent-looking woman rejected me so many times I started questioning my own face.”

Another laugh escaped me. He leaned back against the bed and sighed.

“One day I thought we were finally having a romantic conversation.”

I was already smiling, “What happened?”

“I spent twenty minutes telling her how beautiful she was.”

“And?”

Salvatore looked betrayed, “And she asked if I had any new information about Gianna.”

I covered my mouth to stop laughing.

His expression became even more wounded, “Not a thank you, not a smile, nothing.”

“Poor you.”

“I suffered.”

For a second we both looked toward mom. She was still asleep with Jules curled against her side.

Salvatore’s smile softened, “Worth every second, though.”

The words came so quietly I almost missed them.

“I loved my first wife,” he said after a while, “Isabella. She was beautiful. All my boys got their looks from their mother.”

I smiled softly, “I think they look like you.”

Salvatore immediately looked mockingly scared, “That’s a terrible thing to say about your brothers.”

Despite everything, I smiled.

Brothers.

The word didn’t feel as strange as it used to, most of them fit easily now. Most of them... except for one. I pushed the thought away before my mind could wander toward the one exception.

15 Bars

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 480

He smiled faintly before looking back toward Mom.

“They got more of her than me,” he said. “Thank God for that.”

A small smile touched his mouth before fading

“I was a different man back then. I loved Isabella, but we were terrible for each other. Too young, Too proud. The angry,” ” his eyes drifted toward the floor, “We spent years hurting each other. Every time she cut me, I made wire to cut deeper. Every time I crossed a line, she’d cross one right back. For a long time, I thought that was when lo looked like.”

His jaw tightened slightly.

“Then years later, I watched my son, Vincenzo fall in love with Claire. I watched him fight for her, protect her, and respect her. My Vincenzo made me a better man... for Hazel,”

I listened quietly.

“I spent years earning that woman. She didn’t marry me because she was scared. She didn’t marry me because she was dying, Gianna... She married me because somewhere along the way...” A small smile appeared on his face,” she fell in love with me too.”

“How do you know?” I asked quietly.

That finally made him look at me.

His eyes softened immediately, “Because every morning she reaches for me before she even opens her eyes. Half the time she’s still asleep. When she’s scared, she comes to me. When something good happens, she tells me first.

He swallowed. The movement caught my attention because it was the first real crack I’d seen in him all night. The first sign that this was hurting him too, really hurting him.

“And when she found out she was dying…” he said quietly, “…the person she wanted beside her was me.”

My eyes burned again.

Salvatore looked down at his hands for a second, then he smiled, “And because she calls me her best friend”

Something twisted painfully inside my chest.

Best friend.

For one stupid second, another voice pushed into my head.

Raphael’s.

You’re my best friend, Gianna.

The memory hit so fast it almost knocked the air out of me. I could practically hear him saying it, see the way he looked at me, the way he smiled, the way he always made me feel safe.

My throat tightened then I shoved the thought away so hard it almost hurt.

No.

Not now.

Not anymore.

I stared at Mom sleeping beside Jules. Raphael didn’t matter anymore, my feelings didn’t matter, my stupid heart didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except the woman lying in that bed.

The woman who had spent years searching for me, the woman who was running out of time. Guilt crawled up my throat like acid.

While Mom had been getting weaker… I had been worrying about Raphael, thinking about Raphael, wanting Raphael.

God.

I felt sick.

I lowered my eyes to the floor because suddenly I couldn't look at either of them.

Not Mom.

Not the image of Raphael that still refused to leave my head.

I didn't get to be selfish anymore, not when every second mattered.

Something broke inside my chest, "What do I do?"

The question sounded pathetic but I didn't know who else to ask.

"You stay," he caressed my hair gently, "You sit with her. You make her laugh. You tell her you love her. You tell her every chance you get."

My throat burned. Salvatore rubbed one hand across his face.

"I spent years working, building things and now I'd trade every dollar I own for another twenty years with her. Nothing matters in the end."

Neither of us spoke for a while.

"You're a lot like her."

A laugh escaped me, "No, I'm not."

"You are, you are stubborn, terrible temper and big heart," Salvatore nodded once, "Exactly like her."

Fresh tears slid down my cheeks, I looked away and then Salvatore reached over and squeezed my shoulder.

"You don't have to go through this alone."

The walk to my room felt longer than usual.

Somewhere downstairs a door closed. I heard distant voices. A television. Footsteps.

Life.

The world kept moving which felt offensive somehow because my mother was dying. The thought kept crashing into me over and over again.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 481

Every few steps it would hit me again.

Mom is dying.

Mom is dying.

Mom is dying.

By the time I reached my door, my chest felt hollow. I pushed it open and then froze. Someone was sitting in the chair by the window.

For one stupid second, my heart jumped.

Raphael.

The room was dim. The last light of evening stretched across the floor, catching the sharp edges of his face. He looked like he'd been there for a while, waiting.

The moment he saw me, he stood, "Gianna."

Something inside me immediately hardened, not because of him but because of everything, because I was exhausted, because I was angry, because I couldn't survive another thing breaking tonight.

I stayed where I was, "What are you doing here?"

His jaw shifted slightly, "I wanted to talk to you."

I stared at him, I didn't have any more emotions to waste on him, "Really?"

His gaze stayed on mine, "Yes."

I nodded slowly, "That's interesting," I pushed the door shut behind me, "You wanted to talk."

Raphael looked at me for a moment, then he said carefully, "I know you're upset."

The laugh that came out of me this time sounded almost hysterical, "Upset?"

His brow pulled together, just slightly. I hated that I still noticed things like that. I hated that part of me still wanted to understand him.

“That’s what we’re calling this?”

His shoulders stiffened, “I know this is difficult.”

“Difficult?” I repeated, the word tasting like acid. “Difficult?”

I shook my head, my vision suddenly blurring with hot, angry tears.

“You knew. You sat right across from me at that table every single day. You listened to me talk about the future. I trusted you with things. You fucked me over and over again…”

He physically flinched at that word, his chest heaving under his shirt.

My throat tightened so badly I could barely breathe, “And the whole damn time, you already knew.”

When he spoke his voice was barely audible, “Your mother asked me not to tell you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, letting out a rough breath. There it was. That same, scripted, pathetic answer. Everyone at that table had the exact same line, like they’d all rehearsed it together in the dark. As if repeating the words enough times would somehow erase the betrayal.

When I opened my eyes again, I glared directly into his face, “You always told me you were different from the rest of your family. You always acted like honesty was the only thing that mattered to you. You said things straight. You didn’t play games with me. You didn’t hide things from me.”

“Gianna-”

“No,” I cut him off immediately, “Do you know how many times I trusted you because of that? You made me believe I could ask you anything. And every single time I did, you answered. So don’t stand here and pretend this is the same thing.”

Raphael’s eyes never left my face, “It wasn’t my information to share.”

I let out another dry, mocking laugh, rubbing my palms over my face. God, I was so incredibly tired of him. “So that’s the line this time? That’s the logical justification your brain came up with?”

He didn’t answer immediately and for some reason that made me even angrier because Raphael always had answers.

Always for everything but not this.

“I don’t want your pity, Raphael. I don’t want your concern, and I sure as hell don’t want your excuses,” I said, as I stepped toward the door to open it, “I told you before, and I am making it entirely clear now, I don’t want any version of you. Stop meddling in my life. Stop talking to me. Stop looking at me. I won’t be stepping foot in your office ever again, and I won’t be sharing a single part of my existence with you. Not even as family. So do me one last goddamn favor, and leave me the fuck alone.”

He took three steps, then stopped. I stood there breathing hard, my hand still wrapped around the doorknob as he stared at the floor.

15 Bus

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Then Raphael looked at me, like he was forcing himself to do it. As if every movement required actual effort,” Gianna.

I closed my eyes, “What?”

I didn’t even have enough energy left to be angry anymore.

He sighed, “I don’t think you’re understanding something.”

A bitter laugh escaped me, “Oh, trust me. I understand everything perfectly.”

“No,” his brows pulled together immediately, “No, you don’t.”

The frustration in his voice surprised me. It wasn’t anger. It was frustration. He was failing at something and didn’t know why.

Raphael opened his mouth, then closed it, opened it again and then stopped. I watched him struggle for almost ten seconds, “When you’re not around…” he stopped, “When I don’t know where you are, it affects my ability to focus.”

I blinked.

What?

Raphael continued, “I check things I normally wouldn’t check. I think about things that aren’t relevant.”

I stared at him, completely lost.

Raphael rubbed a hand across his face, clearly irritated with himself, “I make mistakes. I don’t sleep properly,” his eyes lowered briefly, “My concentration drops.”

I just looked at him, waiting for it to make sense. Because surely there was more, surely there had to be more. Instead he stopped talking like that explained everything.

My eyebrows shot upward, “Raphael, that means absolutely nothing to me.”

His expression tightened, “I’m trying.”

“Trying to explain what?”

His jaw clenched, “You matter… you shouldn’t.”

I stared, letting out a scoff.

Raphael looked frustrated immediately, “No,” he dragged a hand through his hair, “I mean-

He stopped again.

God.

“You occupy space.”

I blinked, “What?”

His expression somehow became even more frustrated, “You occupy space in my head.”

”

I actually laughed, a short, disbelieving laugh, “You came up here to tell me I’m a real estate problem?”

His eyes narrowed, “That’s not what I said.”

“Then what are you saying?”

He looked completely trapped. His shoulders were rigid, his jaw locked and his eyes dark with concentration like he was standing in front of the world’s most complicated equation.

And still getting the answer wrong.

“When something happens to you...”

He stopped, swallowed and tried again.

“It affects me.”

I stared, waiting again. He gave me nothing... again, just another vague sentence dropped into the middle of the room.

And suddenly something inside me snapped, “Stop.”

Raphael froze.

I shook my head, “Just stop it,” the anger came rushing back, “Stop doing this.”

His brows furrowed, “Doing what?”

“This,” I threw my hands into the air, “Talking in riddles. Talking in circles. Acting like I’m supposed to decode whatever weird computer language you’re speaking.”

“I’m trying to explain—”

“No, you’re not!” I snapped and the tears returned immediately, “You know what, Raphael? I don’t have time for this. I don’t have time to sit here and figure out what you’re trying to say.”

His face tightened.

“My mother is dying. Do you actually realize that?”

Suddenly, the fiery anger drained completely out of me, leaving behind a cold, hollow exhaustion that made my knees tremble. My shoulders dropped. My voice fell into a flat, broken whisper that sounded incredibly small in the dark bedroom.

“My mother... is actively dying. And my little sister is only ten years old.”

I swallowed hard, the muscles in my throat tightening until it felt like I was choking on sand.

“Ten.”

The mere number hurt. God, it hurt so much it felt like a physical blow to my ribs.

“She already lost one parent before she could even form proper memories,” I said, “And now, before she even grows up, she’s going to watch her mother fade away into nothing. Everything I have left in my soul belongs to them now. My energy, my hours, my

attention.” A hot tear finally broke free and slipped down my cheek, burning my skin, “I don’t have a single drop of anything left over for this. For whatever this mess is between us.”

Raphael stood perfectly still. He didn’t blink. He just stared at me, his chest barely moving as he took in every single word.

“I can’t spend the next few months trying to decipher your riddles,” I whispered, shaking my head. “I can’t waste my time wondering what you mean or what you want from me. I don’t have room for you in my life anymore. Raphael.”

15 Bar.

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Raphael’s fingers twitched against his sides. He took a slow, painful step toward me, his face almost remorseful

“I know...” he said, “I know what it feels like. I lost my mother too, Gianna.”

A dark, vicious snap happened inside my head. The grief twisted into something purely venomous, and I wanted to rip away his calm, logical peace until he was bleeding on the floor just like me.

“No, you don’t,” I spat, “Don’t stand there and compare the two. It is not the same thing, Raphael. Not even close

I took a sharp step closer, looking up into his face.

“You told me yourself, remember? You sat beside me and told me that when your mother died, you didn’t cry. You just stood there and watched them bury her.”

Raphael violently flinched. The color completely drained from his face, leaving him looking like a ghost.

“That clearly shows what you are,” I sneered, “It shows you didn’t love her. You couldn’t. Because you are physically incapable of feeling love, Raphael. You don’t understand a single thing I am saying right now, and you never, ever will. Because that is just how you are built.”

I let out a harsh, ugly laugh, leaning into his space..

“What kind of child doesn’t cry when their loving mother dies? What kind of normal person just stands there with a straight face while their family screams? A freak. A cold, unfeeling freak like you.”

The exact second the last syllable left my lips, the ugly rush of adrenaline vanished. A cold, sickening realization hit me square in the stomach.

I saw the immediate change in his eyes, the sudden, deep shatter behind his dark pupils, the way his jaw went completely slack before tightening into a rigid line of absolute agony.

It was the most human expression I had ever seen on his face. He looked like I had just reached into his chest with my bare hands and ripped his lungs out.

A sudden, sickening wave of horror crashed over me. My stomach dropped into a cold, dark pit.

Oh God. The realization hit me instantly, making my skin go completely flush with shame

I had taken the deepest, most vulnerable secret he had ever trusted me with, the hidden defect he hated about himself, and used it to mutilate him.

My breath caught in my throat. Regret washed over me, “Raphael, I—”

“I’ll leave,” he cut me off.

His voice didn’t carry anger. It didn’t carry hatred. It was just completely flat, dead, and empty.

“Raphael, I didn’t-”

But he was already turning away. He walked to the door, opened it and paused for half a second.

“I know you don’t want me around but if your mother needs something...”

He paused, his fingers tightened slightly around the handle, his chest lifting in a shallow, labored breath that he tried desperately to hide.

“If Jewel needs something... If you need something...”

Raphael finally turned his head, his dark eyes locking onto mine one last time.

“I’m still here.”

The words were so simple but somehow, they hurt more than any insult he could have ever thrown back at me

“I’ll stay out of your way,” a faint swallow moved his throat, “But if you need anything at all, Gianna…” his voice dropped lower..”…you know where to find me.”

And then he left.

And suddenly I was alone with the horrible realization that I had just taken the deepest wound he had ever shown me…

And shoved my finger directly into it.

Janedoewritings Author

Um… so that happened…

Let me know what you think!

XOXOI

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 484

Gianna | Age 16

I sat stiffly on the edge of the leather examination chair, my hands tucked under my thighs to hide the way they were shaking.

In the corner of the room, sitting on a chair, was Perla. My stepmother looked out of place among the glass cabinets and medical tools.

Her face was incredibly pale, her fingers twisting a tissue into shreds in her lap. My father had put her there. He didn’t care about my comfort, but he knew what Doctor Vance was. He had ordered Perla to sit in every single session, to keep her eyes wide open, just to make sure the doctor’s hands never went under my clothes or touched me in an inappropriate way.

But my father didn’t care about the other types of pain. He welcomed them. He thought they would fix me.

“You really thought you were clever, didn’t you, Gianna?” Doctor Vance’s voice was carried a nasty edge that made my stomach twist into a hard knot.

He was standing by his desk, unbuttoning his white lab coat and tossing it onto a chair. He was furious. The red patch on his neck told me exactly how angry he was.

He knew about the recordings. He knew I got caught with them. He knew I was trying to get leverage to run away from my father, to escape the Philadelphia Outfit entirely, and fly to Chicago where my mother was waiting.

But Leone had betrayed me and now, I was trapped.

“A recording device,” Doctor Vance muttered, walking slowly toward the metal tray beside my chair. The wheels of the tray squeaked against the floor, “You wanted to show the world our little private lessons. You wanted to run back to mommy.”

“No... I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“You’re not sorry, you’re only sorry because you got caught,” Doctor Vance snapped, “And my job is to make sure your broken brain works the way your father wants it to. But you keep resisting. You keep fighting the medicine.”

I looked down at my lap. He called it medicine.

Over the last ten years, he had tried everything to cure my dyslexia. He had used a silver metal rod heated over a blue flame to burn the under my feet, telling me the heat would stimulate my nerve paths.

He had attached wet sticky pads to my temples and turned a black dial, sending sharp waves of electricity crashing through my brain until my jaw locked and my tongue bled.

He had strapped a thick gray towel over my face and poured ice-cold water over my nose and mouth until my lungs screamed and I believed I was drowning on dry land.

He had done all of it to fix the way I read letters but the letters still danced. The words still flipped upside down. My dyslexia persisted, stubborn and deep inside my bone marrow, and today, because I had tried to expose him, I could see that he was done being patient. He was going to punish me for the recordings.

“The electricity didn’t clear the blockages,” Doctor Vance said, as he reached into a deep drawer and pulled out a long, heavy silver instrument. It looked like a thick, blunt metal needle with a smooth handle, the tip glinting under the harsh lights, “The water didn’t wake up the sluggish tissue. We need to go deeper, Gianna. We need a direct physical stimulus to the sensory nerves.”

Perla let out a small, choked gasp in the corner. She stood up, her purse slipping to the floor “Doctor Vance. perhaps we should call her father first. This looks... Giovanni didn’t mention a new tool.”

“Giovanni wants results, Mrs. Toricelli,” Doctor Vance said, not even looking at her, “Sit down. Unless you want to tell the Don that you interfered with his daughter’s medical treatment.”

Perla’s mouth trembled. She looked at me, her eyes full of a helpless, pathetic pity that made me want to scream, and then she slowly sank back into her chair. She couldn’t save me. Nobody could.

“Hands on the armrests,” Doctor Vance ordered, stepping right into my space. He smelled like strong mints and rubbing alcohol.

“Please,” I whispered, my voice cracking as I pulled my hands closer to my chest. “Please, don’t. I won’t do it again. I won’t try to leave.”

“Quiet.”

He grabbed my right wrist. His grip was like an iron vice, his thick fingers squeezing the bone until it throbbed. He slammed my forearm down onto the cold metal armrest of the chair, and before I could pull away, he dropped a heavy, padded leather strap over my wrist, buckling it tightly. He did the same to my left arm. I was pinned. I couldn’t move anything but my head.

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“This is called localized deep-tissue nerve stimulation,” Doctor Vance murmured, his breath hot against my cheek as he leaned over me. He picked up the heavy silver tool. The tip wasn’t sharp enough to stab like a knife, but it was narrow, hard, and blunt, designed to apply an immense amount of pressure to a single, tiny point, When the brain refuses to process visual symbols correctly, we must create a counter-signal so intense that the neural pathways are forced to reset.”

He didn’t wait. He didn’t give me a second to brace myself.

He brought the heavy metal tip down right onto the sensitive, soft skin directly beneath my thumbnail. And then, with all his weight, he pressed down.

A sound tore out of my throat that didn’t even sound human.

It wasn’t a normal pain. It was a blinding, white-hot explosion that shot straight up my arm and directly into the center of my skull.

The blunt metal tip pushed deep into the flesh, crushing the thousands of tiny nerve endings packed under the nail. I felt the skin split. I felt the hot, wet rush of blood immediately starting to pool around his fingers, staining the silver instrument.

“Keep your head straight, Gianna,” Doctor Vance hissed, his face turning red as he pressed even harder, leaning his entire upper body weight onto the tool.

“Stop! Please, stop!” I shrieked, my legs thrashing wildly against the chair, my spine arching so hard I thought it would snap. The room began to spin. The white light above me blurred into a long, streaky mess.

The pain was so absolute, so vast, that it swallowed every other thought in my head. I couldn’t remember my name. I couldn’t remember my mother’s face. I couldn’t remember Chicago. There was nothing in the entire universe except the feeling of my flesh being ground against the bone of my finger.

“Look at the chart on the wall,” Doctor Vance commanded, his voice sounding like it was underwater. “Read the first line, Gianna. Let the pain clear the letters.”

I tried to look, but my mind was completely fracturing. The agony was tearing through my brain like a wild animal, ripping away my sanity piece by piece. I couldn’t see the chart. I couldn’t see the room. The edges of my vision were turning black, full of bright, dancing sparks of light.

“She’s bleeding, doctor! She’s going to pass out!” Perla was screaming now, her voice high and panicked, but she stayed in her corner, too terrified of my father to move.

“She is processing the treatment,” Doctor Vance said through his teeth.

He slid the blunt silver tip away from my thumb, leaving a ruined, bleeding crescent mark behind, and moved it to the center of my palm. He dug it in again, twisting the heavy metal handle.

That was the moment I completely lost my mind. The pain broke through the final barrier of my consciousness.

I started to laugh, a horrible, choking, sobbing sound that couldn’t stop. Tears and sweat poured down my face, dripping onto my shirt.

I was entirely gone, floating somewhere outside of my own body, watching a girl with my face scream and bleed in a sterile white room.

My lungs caught, and I let out a loud, ragged sob that shook my entire chest. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. The only thing that existed was the heavy silver tool digging into the center of my hand, grinding against the bone.

With a desperate surge of strength, I began to thrash. I yanked my pinned wrists against the leather straps, pulling so hard the rough material scraped the skin off my arms. My legs kicked out, my boots slamming violently against the metal base of the chair, making a loud noise that echoed off the white walls. I was throwing my weight left and right, trying to twist away from his hand, trying to save myself.

“Hold still, you stubborn little bitch,” Doctor Vance whispered.

He leaned over me, his face completely red, his breath smelling like mints. He tried to press the tool deeper into my bleeding palm, but my moving body made his hand slip. The silver tip dragged across my skin, slicing oper another red line.

He let out an angry curse. Before I could even blink, he lifted his hand and slapped me across the face like he had done a hundred of times when I was being difficult.

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The blow was so hard my head violently snapped to the left. The iron taste of blood instantly filled my mouth as my lip split against my teeth. My ears buzzed with a loud, ringing sound, and for a second, my body weru completely limp against the chair.

“Hey!”

A panicked scream tore through the room.

It wasn’t me. It was Perla.

Through my blurred vision, I saw a flash of dark fabric. Perla didn’t stay in her corner anymore. She launched herself across the white tiles, her face twisted into a look of pure rage. She reached out and grabbed Doctor Vande from behind, her fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt.

With a loud cry, she threw her entire weight backward and shoved him away from me.

Doctor Vance wasn’t expecting it. He lost his footing, his boots sliding out from under him. He stumbled backward into the metal tray, his lower back slamming hard against the edge. The tray flipped completely over. Dozens of silver instruments, glass jars, and sharp needles hit the concrete, shattering and scattering across the room in a mess of broken glass and rolling metal.

Doctor Vance hit the floor, his hands coming down on the sharp pieces, his face twisting with a look of utter shock.

Perla didn't even look at him. She turned to me immediately, her eyes wide and wild with tears. She grabbed the buckles on the leather straps, her hands shaking so violently she could barely work the metal pins. "I've got you. I've got you, Gianna," she sobbed.

She ripped the right strap open, then the left, freeing my bleeding hands. The moment the leather released me, Perla threw her entire body over mine. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders, burying my face against her neck, shielding me completely from the room with her own back. She was trembling like a leaf, but she held onto me like she would never let go, pressing her cheek against my hair.

"I've got you, baby. I'm right here. He's not going to touch you again," she whispered over and over, her breath hot and wet against my skin, "I've got you, Gianna."

My face pressed against her shirt, my tears soaking into the fabric as I held my ruined hands against my chest. Every single finger was throbbing with a heartbeat of pure fire, but the warmth of her arms felt like the only safe thing left in the world.

"Get off her!"

Doctor Vance's voice roared from the floor. He scrambled to his feet, his face dark purple with rage. He was shaking, a small line of red dripping from a cut on his palm where the glass had sliced him. He looked down at his ruined room, his chest heaving under his shirt.

"This is completely unacceptable!" he shouted, "This is interference with a medical procedure! You are crossing lines, Mrs. Toricelli! Get away from the girl right now!"

Perla didn't move an inch. She gripped my shoulders tighter, her fingers digging into my sweater, making her body even smaller over mine, "No!" she screamed back, "No! Look at her! You're breaking her! I'm not letting you touch her again!"

"She is a patient! I am fixing her brain!" Doctor Vance stepped forward, his boots crushing a glass jar beneath his heel, "Your husband gave me full authority to do what is necessary! Move, or I will have the guards remove you

15 Bar from this building!"

"Call him then!" Perla yelled, her face buried in my hair, her spine rigid against him, "Call Giovanni! Tell him you slapped his daughter! Tell him you split her face open! See what he does to you!"

Doctor Vance stopped. The mention of my father's name made a flicker of cold fear pass through his furious eyes. His chest rose and fell as he stared at us, realizing Perla wasn't going to budge. She was going to stay right there, acting as a shield for a girl she wasn't even related to.

“Fine,” Doctor Vance hissed, “Fine. We will let the Don decide if he wants his daughter to remain a broken freak for the rest of her life.”

He turned on his heel, stepping over the scattered metal tools, and walked over to the heavy black phone sitting on his desk. He slammed his hand onto the receiver, lifting it and forcefully dialing a number.

15 Bras

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 487

Perla kept stroking the back of my head, her hand warm. Looking back, she had changed so much over the long years we had spent under the same roof. In the beginning, she hadn’t liked me much at all, she had kept her distance, treating me like an unwanted reminder of my father’s past.

But slowly, day by day, the walls between us had melted away. She had warmed up to me, letting her guard down until the coldness disappeared completely, and she started to truly love me as if I were her very own flesh and blood.

“Giovanni,” Doctor Vance said into the phone, “We have a critical situation. Your wife has physically assaulted me during the treatment. She has broken my instruments. She is refusing to let me proceed with the neural stimulation, and the girl is completely resisting the process. You need to come down here immediately. The entire procedure is being compromised.”

He listened for a second, his jaw tightening, then he nodded once.

“Yes. I will wait.”

He slammed the phone back onto the base and turned around, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn’t try to clean up the broken glass. He just stood by his desk, staring at us with a hateful glare, waiting for the master of the house to arrive and put us in our place.

I don’t know how long we sat there. Time didn’t mean anything anymore. The pain in my thumb and palm had settled into a deep, sickening ache that made my stomach turn over and over.

Perla never let go. She kept holding me, rocking me slightly in the chair, whispering quiet words that I couldn’t quite understand through the loud buzzing in my ears.

Then, door flew back against the wall with a massive, violent thud.

The sudden noise made Perla flinch, her grip tightening on my shoulders.

I lifted my head slightly, my blurred vision clearing just enough to see the doorway.

Standing in the frame was my father, Giovanni Toricelli. There was no emotion on his face, no anger, no worry, just a dead, freezing coldness that made the entire room feel like it dropped twenty degrees.

And right behind his shoulder, stepping into the room with his hands tucked casually into his pockets, was Leone. His dark eyes swept over the broken glass, the tipped tray, the blood on my hands, and the red mark swelling on my cheek and he paled. I saw the color leave his face instantly.

My father took one slow step inside, his black shoes crunching softly against a piece of stray metal. He looked at Doctor Vance, then his eyes slid slowly down to where I sat crushed under Perla's arms.

"Explain," my father said.

Doctor Vance straightened his shoulders, pulling at his cuffs as if he could hide the red cut on his palm. He looked at my father, trying to force his voice back into that grand, important tone he always used.

"Giovanni, the girl was completely out of control today," Doctor Vance said, "She was actively resisting the neural stimulation. She was thrashing, kicking the equipment, and refusing to follow simple visual commands to clear her brain pathways. I was implementing a deep-tissue nerve correction under the nail-a perfectly standard procedure to force her brain to recognize the symbols-and she chose to fight me instead of cooperating."

He took a step closer to his desk, his face darkening as he looked at Perla, who was still holding me tightly against her chest.

"And then your wife completely lost her mind," Vance hissed, "She physically attacked me from behind. She threw me across the room, shattered hundreds of dollars of medical glass, and ruined my sterile instruments. She is completely compromising the safety of this treatment. I am a professional, Giovanni. I cannot do my work with an emotional woman hovering over the patient, screaming and breaking things. If Mrs. Toricelli remains inside this room, I am done. I will pack my bags, I will walk out that door, and your daughter can remain a broken, illiterate freak for the rest of her life."

My father didn't blink. He didn't look at the broken glass on the floor, and he didn't look at Doctor Vance's bleeding hand. His eyes stayed completely flat, fixed on Perla's back.

Slowly, Daddy walked across the white tiles, and stopped right beside the chair. Without saying a single word, he reached down and grabbed Perla by the upper arm. His fingers dug so deeply into her skin that her sweater bunched up.

15 Bg

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 488

With a single yank, he tore her away from me.

“No! Let me go!” Perla screamed, and thrashed against his grip, using her free hand to claw at his wrist, trying to break his hold, “Giovanni, stop it! You can’t let him do this to her! He’s breaking her hands! He’s hurting her!”

My father didn’t care. He didn’t even look at her face as he dragged her backward toward the doorway, his arm completely solid.

“You are done here, Perla,” Daddy said, “You have forgotten your place in this family. You were sent here to watch, not to think.”

“You are a monster!” Perla shrieked, her face turning bright red with tears as she struggled with every ounce of strength she had left, “She is your daughter, you goddamn coward! Look at her face! Look at what he did to her lip! You are letting a sick bastard torture your own blood! I hate you! I fucking hate you!”

Daddy dragged her out into the dark hallway, his large frame completely blocking the light for a second. Outside, two heavy security guards immediately took her by the shoulders, her screams turning muffled and distant as they forced her down the corridor toward the elevators.

My father walked back into the office, adjusting the lapels of his dark coat. He didn’t look at me once. He turned his head slowly, his eyes landing on Leone, who was still standing perfectly still by the doorframe with his hands buried deep inside his pockets.

“From this moment on, you sit in the chair,” Giovanni ordered Leone, “You will stay in every single session. You will ensure the doctor is not interrupted, and you will make sure the girl stays in the seat until the treatment is complete. Do you understand me?”

Leone didn’t answer right away. His dark eyes slowly shifted from my father’s face down to where I sat trembling in the leather chair.

For the first time since we had entered the room, I looked back at him. My vision was blurry from the tears and the blood dripping from my split lip, but the hatred inside my chest was burning hot.

I glared at him through the dark strands of my hair, my ruined, bleeding hands shaking in my lap. I wanted him to see my disgust. I wanted him to see what his betrayal had bought me.

Leone's face didn't move. He kept his jaw locked, his expression perfectly smooth and expressionless but as his eyes locked onto my bleeding thumb, onto the purple swelling on my cheek where the doctor had struck me, a tiny, almost invisible muscle in his throat jumped.

"I understand, Don Gio," Leone murmured.

Daddy gave a single, satisfied nod, then turned on his heel and walked out of the room, the door closing behind him.

Doctor Vance let out a heavy breath, shaking his head as he walked back to his desk to find a clean cloth for his hand, "Good. Finally, some order in here."

Leone didn't move from the doorway immediately. He stood there, his broad shoulders casting a long, dark shadow across the white tiles.

For the first time in his life, he wasn't just hearing about the sessions after they happened, he was getting a firsthand look at the real, raw terror of what I went through behind these closed doors.

He took his hands out of his pockets, and walked slowly toward the chair where Perla had sat. He dropped into the

15 Bar seat, his dark eyes never leaving my face, his breathing shallow and tight.

"Proceed, Doctor," Leone ordered, looking into my eyes.

The next sixty minutes didn't feel like time anymore. They felt like a long, endless hallway of white light and screaming.

Doctor Vance didn't stop. Because my father had given him permission, and because Leone was sitting in the corner like a guard, the doctor took his time.

He used the blunt silver needle again and again, pressing it into the soft skin under my other fingernails until the silver handle was slick with my blood. Every single second was a fresh explosion of heat that shattered my thoughts into tiny, useless pieces. I screamed until my throat felt like it was tearing open, until no sound came out but a dry, rattling gasp.

Through the entire hour, Leone never looked away. He sat perfectly still on that chair, his broad shoulders stiff, his face as pale as a sheet of paper. His dark eyes tracked every single drop of blood that hit the white tiles. I could see his chest heaving under his shirt, his breathing heavy, his knuckles turning a ghostly white as he fisted his hands in his lap.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 489

He was watching the girl he claimed to love get broken into pieces, and he was the one who had locked the door.

“That will be all for today,” Doctor Vance finally said, his voice completely calm as he wiped his bloody hands on a white towel. The wet fabric turned a bright, sickening pink, “The neural pathways have received a sufficient baseline. We will continue on Thursday.”

He didn’t help me. He just walked over to his sink and started running the water, the loud splashing noise filling the room.

The leather straps around my wrists had already been undone, but I hadn’t moved. My arms were shaking so violently they were practically jumping against the armrests. My fingers were completely ruined, dripping dark red onto my lap, throbbing with a massive, burning pain that made my whole body feel sick.

Get out... my brain whispered through the thick fog of pain. You have to get away from him.

I forced my weak, trembling legs to move. I slid my body forward, my clothes sticking to the leather chair from my own sweat, and tried to plant my boots on the slick floorboards. But the moment my feet took my weight, my knees completely gave out. My muscles felt like water.

I fell hard, my body crashing straight down onto the cold white tiles. My ruined hands hit the floor first to catch my fall, and a sharp scream tore out of my throat as the fresh injury slammed against the stone.

“Gianna!”

Before I could even blink, a pair of strong hands grabbed my shoulders. Leone was on the floor beside me in an instant, his knees sliding into the pool of my blood. His face was completely ruined now. His hands were shaking as he tried to slide his arms under my back to lift me up against his chest, “Gianna, don’t move. I’ve got you. Let me carry you. Please, just let me help you up.”

The touch of his hands felt like a burning iron against my skin. The fury inside me flared up, hot and vicious, giving me a sudden jolt of strength.

With a loud gasp, I twisted my body away from him and used my elbow to shove his chest back with everything I had. “Don’t touch me!” I shrieked, my voice hoarse. I bared my bloody teeth at him, glaring through the messy strands of my hair, “Get your hands off me! Don’t you dare touch me!”:

Leone froze, his palms hovering in the air, his dark eyes filling with pain, “Gianna, please… you can’t even stand. Your hands are bleeding. Let me just take you to your room.”

“No!” I choked out, a heavy sob tearing through my chest.

I refused to let him help me. I refused to let him play the savior after he was the one who had handed my recording device to my father. I dragged my shaking body away from him across the floor, until my back hit the leg of a wooden examination table.

Using the solid wood for balance, I slowly, painfully began to drag myself upward. My fingers screamed in agony as I forced them to grip the edge of the table, my blood leaving thick, messy streaks across the surface.

My legs were trembling so badly I thought they would break, but I forced them straight. I stood up on my own two feet, my breath coming in gasps, my chest heaving.

I didn’t look back at the doctor, and I didn’t look back at Leone. I turned toward the door and began to walk.

Every single step was a battle. The room was spinning in lazy, nauseating circles, the white walls blurring together. I had to reach out with my forearm, sliding it along the cold wall to keep myself from crashing back down onto the floor.

I stumbled, my boot catching on a stray piece of metal, but I gripped a doorframe and kept moving, dragging my body out of that sterile hellhole.

“Gianna, stop. Please, just listen to me for one second,” Leone begged, but he didn’t try to grab me again, he was too scared of my reaction but he stayed right at my shoulder, his voice breaking in a way I had never heard before. He sounded like a little boy, “I had to do it. If your father found out from someone else, it would have been worse. I was trying to protect you. I love you, Gianna. Please, let me help you bear this.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 490

I kept moving, my shoulder scraping against the wall as I limped down the endless corridor. His words meant nothing to me. They were just empty, noisy static.

“From this day onwards,” I whispered, as I stopped walking for a split second, pressing my back against the wall to catch my breath, and turned my head slowly to look him dead in the eye. My split lip bled down my/chin, “From this exact moment... I am entirely on my own.”

Leone stopped, his chest heaving, his face pale and completely broken as he stared at the hatred in my eyes,” Gianna, don’t say that. You have me. I’m right here.”

“I have no one,” I bit out, and then let out a bitter laugh, “I will never have anyone in this house. I am completely alone in this world. My father doesn’t care if I break, my mother is gone, and you... you are a liar.”

Fresh tears burned my eyes, but I wiped them away violently with my sleeve, refusing to show him any more weakness.

“I’m done waiting for someone else to save me,” I whispered, my voice raw from crying. “I handed you every fragile piece of myself. My trust. My faith. My future. I put all of it in your hands because I believed you would protect it.”

I looked down at my shaking fingers before lifting my eyes back to his.

“And you crushed it. It isn’t cracked, Leone. It isn’t damaged. It’s gone. You broke something inside me so completely that I don’t think I’ll ever know how to put it back together.”

I slowly lifted my trembling hands between us, staring at the blood running over my knuckles.

“Do you see this?”

My eyes met his.

“From now on, I’ll bandage my own wounds. I’ll wipe away my own blood. I’ll carry my own pain. Because the day

I trusted a man to keep me safe was the day I learned how dangerous hope really is.”

I took one step closer.

“I will survive this family on my own. I will survive my father on my own. I will survive this entire godforsaken Syndicate on my own.”

A tear slipped down my cheek, but I didn’t bother to wipe it away.

“And if I have to spend the rest of my life with no one standing beside me, then so be it. Solitude is kinder than betrayal.”

I looked straight into his eyes, letting every ounce of my disappointment settle over him.

“I will never trust another man for as long as I live, not my father, not the Syndicate,” I leaned in until only inches separated us, “...and never, ever you.”

Leone looked like I had just shot him straight through the heart. His mouth opened slightly, but no sound came out, his eyes wide and completely hollow as the reality of my words settled into his bones.

He had wanted to keep me safe by keeping me trapped, but he had ended up destroying the only part of me that had ever looked at him with kindness.

I didn’t wait for him to process the blow. I turned away, gripping the wall with my forearm, and continued down the long, freezing hallway toward my bedroom, leaving him standing completely alone behind me.

Janedoewritings

Author

Swipe up for the next update

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 491

Raphael

I stood in front of the grave with my hands in my pockets and stared down at the stone.

The grass had been cut recently, the flowers were fresh. Claire replaced them every few weeks.

The wind moved through the trees above me, leaves rustled softly. I looked at my mother's name then I looked away, then back again.

I wasn't sure how long I stood there, ten minutes. Maybe thirty. Time felt different in cemeteries.

The words kept replaying inside my head over and over like a broken recording.

What kind of child doesn't cry when their mother dies?

My jaw tightened as I looked down at the stone, "I know," I said quietly.

The sound of my own voice felt strange. I didn't talk much when I came here. Usually I just stood. Usually that was enough but today wasn't.

Today Gianna had taken something I spent years trying not to think about and shoved it directly in front of my face.

I understood why.

She was grieving, she was angry and she was terrified. That didn't mean her words hadn't stayed with me, they had. They were still there, sitting in my head, refusing to leave.

I stared at the grave, "I did care."

The words came out flat, not because I didn't mean them because I wasn't good at saying things like that. I never had been.

A normal person would probably know how to talk to a grave. A normal person would probably know how to talk about feelings.

I didn't, so I settled for facts. Facts made sense. Facts were easier.

"I remember the hospital."

My eyes drifted toward the rows of graves beyond hers.

"I remember the smell."

Antiseptic, medicine, those strange plastic curtains. I remembered all of it. I remembered exactly what she looked like the last time I saw her alive. I remembered the color of her blanket. The shape of her hands. The way her wedding ring looked loose on her finger. I remembered all of it.

I swallowed, "I remember being angry."

I remembered not understanding why everyone was crying, not because I didn't care because my brain was busy trying to solve the problem.

There had to be a solution.

There was always a solution.

There should have been one.

There wasn't.

My fingers curled slightly inside my pockets. The wind brushed across my face.

I closed my eyes briefly, "When they buried you..." the sentence stopped as an uncomfortable pressure settled inside my chest.

The same pressure that always appeared when I came here.

The same pressure that never went away.

"I didn't cry and I know that sounds bad," the corner of my mouth twitched slightly, "You would've yelled at me for saying that."

Because she always did, whenever I called myself strange, whenever I pointed out all the ways I wasn't normal.

My chest tightened harder, "I didn't cry because I was trying to understand where you went. You were there then you weren't."

The math didn't work, none of it worked. One day she existed, the next day she didn't. Everyone else seemed to understand how that happened.

I didn't.

"I kept expecting to see you," the admission slipped out before I could stop it. I looked away immediately, toward the trees, toward the sky. Anywhere except the grave, "When something happened, I kept thinking I should call you."

My jaw tightened.

"When I graduated, when I launched my first company, when Vincenzo left us, I kept forgetting."

I swallowed as I looked down at the grave again.

“I don’t cry the way other people do, I know that. I don’t always understand what I’m feeling. I know that too.”

I stared at the stone for a long time, then finally looked down at the engraved dates.

The beginning.

The end.

An entire life reduced to numbers.

That seemed unfair.

“You taught me how to read.”

I said it suddenly.

“I remember that.”

Another memory appeared, then another, then another. Her hand in my hair, her voice, her laugh her perfume. The way she’d kiss my forehead even when I tried to pull away.

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The way she’d sit beside me while I worked. The way she’d smile whenever I started talking about something nobody else cared about.

The pressure in my chest became unbearable, “I loved you.”

The words slipped out before I could stop them. I froze. The sentence hung there between me and the grave, between me and the silence.

My throat tightened painfully, “I just didn’t know how to show it. I still don’t.”

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Chapter 492

And for the first time since leaving Gianna’s room, I allowed myself to admit something. The reason her words hurt wasn’t because they were true. The reason they hurt was because they weren’t.

Because nobody had ever loved me the way my mother did and nobody ever would again.

I heard the crunch of gravel, I didn't turn around immediately. I already knew who it was.

Nobody else came to this part of the cemetery, it was Capone property. Adriano walked through life like a wrecking ball. Dante wasn't much better. A second later, two shadows appeared beside me.

"What are you two doing here?" I asked flatly.

Adriano sighed, "The same thing you're doing, dickhead."

Dante stepped forward, holding a handful of fresh white roses, "We came to see Mom."

For a moment, all three of us just stood, just three grown men standing in front of the woman who had once tucked them into bed and kissed their foreheads.

Dante placed his roses beside mine. Adriano followed.

Then Adriano suddenly laughed.

Dante frowned immediately, "What the fuck are you laughing at?"

I looked at him. Adriano was staring at the grave with the strangest grin on his face.

He crouched down slowly. His fingers brushed across the marble, "Mom," he said, "Mom, I'm about to tell you something that would've made your entire fucking year."

Dante sighed.

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

Adriano pointed directly at me, "Your favorite little genius is completely screwed."

I already hated where this was going.

Dante looked between us, "What are you talking about?"

Adriano's smile became vicious, "Raphael is in love."

Dante blinked, "No."

Adriano nodded happily, "Oh yes."

Dante turned toward me, "Who?"

Adriano answered before I could, "Gianna."

Dante's entire face froze. For several long seconds, he simply stared at me. His expression suggested he had just witnessed a serious traffic accident and wasn't sure how many people survived.

"Our Gianna?" he finally asked.

I sighed, "She's not-"

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Dante held up a hand, "I need a second," hee looked away, then looked back, then away again like his brain was rebooting, "Our stepsister?"

I rubbed my face, "Technically-"

"Our. Stepsister."

The way he emphasized every word made me feel irrationally violent.

Adriano turned back toward the grave, "Mom, if Hazel wasn't already sick, Raphael would've accidentally destroyed Dad's marriage."

I glared at him.

Dante made another disgusted sound.

"You know how Dad's been walking around acting all proud because Gianna and Jules are finally his daughters?" Adriano's grin became pure evil, "Imagine his face when he realizes Raphael is trying to turn one of those daughters into a daughter-in-law. I swear to God, Mom, if Heaven has windows, you're getting front-row seats for this one. Watching Dad's blood pressure hit the fucking ceiling would've made your entire year."

Dante stared at me for another few seconds, "He's a fucking Lannister."

I blinked, "A what?"

Dante looked horrified, "A Lannister."

I stared at him then I looked at Adriano. Adriano looked at Dante, raising an eyebrow.

Dante threw his hands into the air, "How do neither of you know this?"

"I'm employed," I replied.

"And I have hobbies," Adriano added.

Dante looked insulted, “Watching television is a hobby.”

“No. Watching television is watching television.”

Dante groaned dramatically, “Jesus Christ, the Lannisters.”

I waited.

Nothing.

Eventually I sighed, “You’re going to have to use actual words.”

Dante rubbed his face, “The brother and sister were sleeping together.”

I stared at him.

Adriano stared at him.

Then Adriano burst out laughing, “You motherfucker.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, “She’s not my sister.”

Dante made another disgusted expression, “That is exactly what an incest guy would say.”

I contemplated homicide.

Briefly.

Adriano was laughing so hard he had to crouch down again.

I finally snapped, “For the last fucking time,” I said, glaring at both of them, “I met her before she was our stepsister. Before Hazel married Dad. Before any of this circus existed.”

Dante made a face like he’d bitten into something rotten, “Yeah, that’s not helping your case.”

“It is literally the most important detail.”

“No,” Dante said. “The most important detail is that if Vincenzo hears this story, he’s going to have a fucking aneurysm.”

“I am aware.”

“And after he’s done killing you, he’ll probably kill me.”

Adriano’s laughter died instantly both of us turned toward him slowly.

“What the fuck did you do?” Adriano asked.

Dante sighed so deeply it sounded like a confession.

“I’d like to start by saying I am not participating in whatever incest-adjacent nightmare Raphael has created.”

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“It’s not incest, you illiterate bastard.”

“Sure.”

“It’s objectively not.”

“Fantastic. Wonderful. Congratulations.”

I contemplated smashing his head into the marble.

Dante pointed at me, “But while you’re busy trying to fuck up Dad’s blood pressure, I’ve been busy creating my own problems.”

Adriano narrowed his eyes, “Dante.”

Dante rubbed his face.

“Dante,” Adriano repeated.

“What?”

“What did you do?”

Dante stared at the grave, then at the sky. The bastard actually looked embarrassed.

Finally he sighed, “I’m sleeping with a married woman.”

Silence.

Adriano blinked.

I blinked.

“Wait,” I said, “That’s the confession?”

“No.”

The word came out so fast it almost overlapped mine.

“No, that’s just the introduction.”

Adriano immediately groaned, “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

“The husband is an arms supplier.”

Adriano paused, “...Okay.”

“The biggest one we work with.”

Adriano’s grin disappeared, “...Okay.”

Dante looked at our mother’s grave, “He doesn’t know.”

Adriano smacked Dante’s head, “You suicidal motherfucker.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment,” I stated.

Adriano ran a hand through his hair,.”You are sleeping with the wife of a man who literally owns anti-aircraft missiles.”

Dante nodded, “Correct.”

“A man with private soldiers,” I asked.

“Correct.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Adriano barked, “That man supplies half the Chicago Outfit’s hardware pipelines. Half. You understand what that means?”

I stayed quiet, watching Adriano spiral. He wasn’t joking anymore. This wasn’t teasing. This was damage control panic.

Adriano paced once in a tight circle, dragging a hand through his hair.

“That man can shut down shipments. He can choke routes. He can flip suppliers overnight. One word from him and half our Eastern supply chain turns into scrap metal and silence,” he jabbed a finger at Dante, “And you’re fucking his wife?”

Dante frowned slightly.

“This isn’t some random married woman. This is a strategic asset’s wife. You don’t touch that. You don’t breathe near that. You don’t even look at that direction unless you want everything we built to start bleeding from every corner.”

Dante frowned, “At least I’m not trying to fuck the family tree.”

I glared at him, “Oh, go to hell.”

“I’m just saying.”

Adriano glared at him too, “And I’m saying if you keep talking, they’re going to need a second grave.”

Dante finally shook his head, “Mom would’ve been so disappointed.”

Adriano snorted, “No, shit,” he pointed at me, “This one wants his stepsister,” then he pointed at Dante, “This one is one bad phone call away from starting an international incident.”

Then Adriano slapped a hand over his face and groaned.

Dante sighed and turned towards her grave, “If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure Vincenzo is the only normal one.”

Adriano and I immediately looked at him. Dante thought about that.

Then slowly nodded, “You know what? Never mind. We’re all fucked.”

I killed the engine.

For a moment, I just sat there on the bike, hands still on the grips, listening to the sudden absence of sound.

My shoulders loosened slightly.

Tonight I had taken that thing inside me and given it somewhere to go. That was the only way I could describe it. Not healing, not peace, just release like pressure letting out of a sealed container before it broke.

I swung my leg off the bike and stood. I exhaled slowly, already thinking about nothing.

That was the plan.

Nothing.

Then I saw her.

At first I thought my eyes were adjusting wrong. The darkness plays tricks when your mind is still too sharp from too much adrenaline.

But she didn't move.

Gianna was sitting on the trunk of one of the cars like she had always been there for a time now. Knees drawn up slightly, arms resting on them, head tilted just enough to look in my direction.

Waiting.

My steps slowed without permission.

I didn't stop them. I just... noticed it happening.

For a second, I didn't understand what she was doing there then it came back. Everything from earlier.

Her voice. The words. The way she had looked at me like I was something she needed to push away fast before it got worse.

My jaw tightened slightly. So this was it, the ending part. She came to finish it clean.

I walked closer, slower than usual. My boots made small sounds. I stopped a few steps away from her.

Gianna didn't stand up, she just watched me. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Finally, I broke it first, "Is your mother okay?"

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Gianna blinked, then something softened in her face, "She's okay."

The pressure eased immediately.

Gianna looked down briefly, then back at me, “I waited.”

“Why.”

She shifted slightly on the trunk, fingers tightening around her arms, “You know why.”

My mind ran through possibilities. Logical ones. Practical ones. Patterns. But none of them matched the way she was sitting there, not leaving, not running away.

“You don’t get to just stand there and take it. You don’t get to let me say things like that and then disappear like it didn’t matter.”

My fingers curled lightly at my side.

I didn’t understand what she meant by “matter” in the way she was using it. But I understood tone. I understood pressure in speech. I understood change in breathing.

She was not calm.

Neither was I.

“I am not mad at you,” I said.

Gianna let out a short, quiet laugh, “You should be. I was wrong,” she said finally. “About what I said. About how I said it.”

I nodded once.

Her voice dropped slightly, “I was angry. And I said things I shouldn’t have said.”

I studied her face, not in the way people usually mean. I noticed the small changes. Tightness around her eyes. The way her shoulders stayed tense even when she tried to look strong.

Gianna looked away for a second, then back at me again, like forcing herself to stay in place, “I didn’t mean everything I said,” she added, “I shouldn’t have said those things. I was angry. I was hurting. I wanted somebody else to hurt too. And you were standing there.”

I wasn’t sure what the correct response was. I didn’t want to mess up with her more than I already had.

She laughed weakly, “I think that’s the worst part. You didn’t even fight back.”

No. I hadn’t, because she was hurting and she needed someone, fighting back would have not improved the situation. So I hadn’t.

Gianna wiped quickly at her eyes, “I know you loved your mother. I shouldn’t have used that against you. I shouldn’t have taken the worst thing you’ve ever told me and thrown it back at you. I’m sorry.”

The words hit harder than the insult had because this time she wasn’t trying to hurt me, this time she meant them.

Then Gianna laughed nervously, “Can you please say something?”

I blinked, “Oh.”

Finally she groaned, “Raphael.”

“I’m processing.”

“Process faster.”

I considered that.

“That isn’t how processing works.”

She covered her face and a small smile almost escaped me then she lowered her hands, and the smile disappeared immediately.

Because she looked scared, not of me... of my answer.

I took a slow breath, “There’s nothing to forgive. I know why you said it.”

She stared at me.

I shrugged, “The circumstances were unfavorable.”

A disbelieving laugh escaped her, “That’s your description?”

“Yes.”

“My mother is dying and I emotionally destroyed you and your conclusion is unfavorable circumstances?”

I smiled, “Extremely unfavorable.”

She laughed again, this time she couldn’t stop it. The sound echoed through the driveway and something inside my chest eased.

I like the sound of her laugh.

And that sound did more for me than any amount of violence in the Hunt.

Because the problem had never been the noise in my head. The problem was sitting on the hood of my car.

Looking at me, breathing, existing,.occupying space.

My space.

The only space that seemed to matter anymore.

Gianna looked at me for another second then she slid off the hood of the car. My eyes followed the movement automatically. She landed lightly on the ground and started walking toward me.

My heartbeat started doing that strange thing again. The thing it always did around her. The thing I still couldn't properly define.

She stopped directly in front of me, close enough that I could smell her shampoo. Close enough that I could see the faint shadows beneath her eyes.

Her eyes were still swollen from crying.

And somehow she was still the most distracting thing I had ever encountered.

Then her hand lifted. Her palm settled against the center of my chest. Every muscle in my body immediately locked, not because I wanted to move away.

The exact opposite.

The warmth of her hand soaked through my shirt. My lungs forgot how to work for a second. Her hand moved slowly, sliding across my chest, then upward.

My eyes stayed on her face, he wasn't looking at me. She was looking at her hand like she was trying to find the right words.

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Chapter 495

Eventually her fingers reached my shoulder, then moved higher until her hand settled against the side of my neck.

The moment her skin touched me there, something inside my chest tightened. I didn't even realize I was moving until it happened.

My head tilted slightly, leaning into her touch, just enough to feel more of it.

Gianna's eyes lifted, our gazes met. And I knew what I probably looked like. Pathetic. A grown man leaning into a touch like he'd been starving for it.

My brain spent most of the day looking for her, listening for her, tracking her location without meaning to.

And now she was standing here, touching me. My system immediately stopped treating the world like an emergency.

Her expression softened, then she smiled. The kind that only existed because it was meant for me.

My chest tightened again.

Gianna slowly rose onto her tiptoes. I froze. Every thought in my head vanished completely.

She leaned closer, then pressed a soft kiss against my cheek. It was brief, simple, and gone almost immediately but somehow my brain treated it like a major event.

A very major event.

Possibly catastrophic.

Gianna dropped back onto her heels, then she smiled again. This time there was sadness in it and something else I couldn't quite identify.

Affection, Raphael, it's affection.

"You're important to me, Raphael," she whispered, her hand was still resting against my neck, "I know things are a mess right now. My whole life feels like it's falling apart but you're still my person."

Something twisted sharply inside my chest. Pain? No, not exactly but something close to it.

"You've always been there. And I need that. I need my best friend."

The words hit harder than the kiss.

My best friend.

The title should have made me happy instead it felt complicated. She was right. She was my best friend. The first real friend I'd ever had. The person I looked for first. The person I wanted to tell things to. The person I trusted. The person who occupied far too much space inside my head... far too much.

Gianna squeezed the back of my neck gently, "Please don't disappear on me. I can't lose anyone else right now."

Something in my chest immediately shifted and the answer arrived immediately, "I won't. I am exceptionally difficult to get rid of."

A startled laugh escaped her. Good. That had been the objective. I reached up and carefully wrapped my hand around hers where it rested against my neck, not holding it, just touching it, making sure she understood.

"I told you before. If you need something..."

1 paused because there were thousands of things I wanted to say and none of them translated properly.

So I settled for the truth, "The answer is yes."

She stared at me confused, "Yes to what?"

I considered that, then shrugged, "Whatever the question is."

A shaky smile appeared on her lips, growing wider and wider until her eyes started to shine with unshed tears. Before I could react, her forehead pressed lightly against my chest.

Then her arms slipped around my waist, holding on tight. Just my best friend asking me to stay. I stood there for a second before my arms slowly wrapped around her shoulders.

Gianna sniffled against my chest, "I really am sorry."

I closed my eyes briefly, "I know."

The noise in my head had finally faded and somehow, standing here with her arms around me, I felt lighter than I had all night.

She didn't move away.

Neither did I.

I listened to her breathing, counted the seconds, memorized them because that was what I always did.

I collected things about her.

The sound of her laugh.

The way she rolled her eyes.

The way she said my name.

The way she reached for me without thinking.

The way she trusted me.

My fingers curled slightly against her hair. There were still thousands of words trapped inside me. Thousands. None of them came out correctly. None of them ever would.

So I kept them where they had always lived, locked inside my head, hidden behind every awkward sentence, every failed explanation that would push her away from me.

I lowered my chin slightly until it almost brushed the top of her head.

Then I closed my eyes and for once, I allowed myself to think the words I would probably never be able to say.

I love you, Gianna...

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 496

Gianna

LPT

The gardens behind the estate were beautiful.

The flowers were in full bloom, filling the air with sweet scents that drifted with the gentle breeze. Tall hedges lined the stone pathways, fountains bubbled quietly in the distance, and sunlight filtered through the large oak trees overhead.

It looked peaceful like nothing bad could exist in a place like this but my chest still felt heavy.

I sat on one of the white wooden benches tucked beneath the shade of a flowering tree.

Mom sat beside me.

Jules was curled against her other side, her head resting on Mom's shoulder while absentmindedly braiding and unbraiding the ends of her own hair.

My phone buzzed again in my hand. I stared at the screen.

Leone.

The knot in my stomach tightened. After everything that had happened these past few days, I didn't have the energy for this.

Still, I unlocked the phone.

His newest messages filled the screen.

Leone Caruso: I know you're upset, but shutting me out isn't going to fix whatever is going on. You reached out to me, Gianna. You don't get to disappear again and expect me to pretend I don't care. I've spent too long loving you to walk away because you're pushing me out again.

Leone Caruso: Answer the phone. Talk to me. Because if you won't come to me, I'll come to you. I need to know you're okay, whether you want me involved or not. This isn't me giving up on you. It never will be.

Nothing about the message was openly threatening. There were no direct threats but underneath every word was something far more unsettling.

Certainty.

As if my silence wasn't an answer he was willing to accept. As if my boundaries were temporary obstacles instead of decisions I had every right to make.

The message wasn't asking what I wanted. It was telling me what he had already decided. That he would stay. That he would come. That whether I welcomed it or not didn't really matter.

As though loving me gave him permission to ignore the word no.

A cold feeling settled heavily in my stomach. Because people who believed they were acting out of love were often the hardest people to stop.

My thumb hovered over the screen then pressed firmly.

Block Contact?

Yes.

The confirmation appeared. I stared down at my phone before slipping it into my pocket.

The breeze lifted strands of Mom's dark hair. She looked tired, beautiful but so weak. The realization made my chest ache all over again.

"You know," she said softly, watching the fountain ahead of us, "this is exactly why I didn't want you girls to know."

I frowned, "What?"

Mom looked at me, "I didn't want this to become your entire life."

I immediately shook my head, "Don't do that, please, not right now, I'm still mad at you."

She gave me a look, "Gianna."

"I mean it."

Her expression softened, "You put a stop to ballet lessons. You've barely gone to college this week. You don't go to work anymore."

"I-"

"You barely sleep."

My throat tightened.

"You sit beside me during every meal to make sure I eat."

1 looked away.

"You follow me from room to room."

Mom's voice cracked slightly.

"And every time I wake up at night, you're checking to make sure I'm still breathing."

Tears burned behind my eyes, "Mom-"

"I didn't want this for you."

I turned toward her completely, "Then what did you want?" my voice shook, "For me to pretend none of this is happening?"

“No.”

“Because I can’t do that,” the words came out harsher than I intended, “I won’t.”

Mom stared at me.

“I spent months not knowing what was wrong with you,” I whispered, “I spent months watching you be tired and sick and pretending everything was fine because you told us it was,” tears blurred my vision, “I’m not doing that again.”

“Sweetheart-”

“No,” my voice broke, “I’m sorry, but no,” I grabbed her hand, holding it tightly, “I’m not leaving you alone

15 Au because it’s easier.”

Mom squeezed my fingers, “Gianna.”

“I love you,” I looked at her, “I don’t care about college right now.”

“Your education matters.”

“You matter more,” tears slipped down my cheeks, “I don’t care about work.”

“You need your own life.”

“You are my life.”

Mom’s face crumpled.

I held onto her hand tighter.

“And ballet…” My voice cracked, “Ballet will still be there. I can go back later but I can’t get this time back with you.”

The tears in Mom’s eyes finally fell, “Oh, sweetheart.”

I leaned forward, wrapping my arms around her carefully, “I’m stubborn,” I mumbled against her shoulder.

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Jules smiled solemnly, “You got that from her.”

Mom let out a watery laugh, “You absolutely did.”

15 Ban

I pulled back just enough to look at her, “So no,” I wiped at my face, “I’m staying.”

“You can’t stop living your life.”

“I’m not stopping it,” I squeezed her hand again, “I’m choosing where I want to spend it.”

Mom stared at me for a long moment then reached up, brushing tears from my cheeks with gentle fingers, “I hate that you’re both hurting because of me.”

The sound of footsteps interrupted us. I looked up. Claire walked toward us first and Madeleine beside her.

Claire’s expression softened immediately when she saw Mom, “There you are,” she said gently.

Madeleine offered a small smile, “We’ve been looking for you.”

Claire and Madeleine lowered themselves onto the bench beside Jules.

The wooden bench wasn’t made for that many people. Jules crawled onto mom’s lap immediately like she wanted to get inside her skin. Madeleine squeezed herself carefully onto the edge while Claire settled beside Mom with the familiarity of someone who had done it a hundred times before.

For a few seconds, nobody spoke.

Jules leaned against Mom’s chest, absentmindedly playing with the bracelet on Mom’s wrist.

I stared ahead at the rose bushes.

Then Claire broke the silence, “Are you still angry with us?” she asked quietly.

I looked at her. Claire wasn’t smiling, neither was Madeleine.

Madeleine twisted her fingers together in her lap, “Because if you are…” she started softly, “I understand why.”

I swallowed, “I don’t know,” I admitted honestly. “I just… You both knew.”

Mom sighed beside me, “Gianna. It’s not fair,” she said gently.

I immediately shook my head. “Mom-”

“No,” her voice remained soft, “You don’t get to be upset with them for respecting my decision.”

I frowned.

“I asked them not to tell you,” Mom continued. “I made that choice. Claire and Madeleine honored it because I asked them to.”

“They should’ve told me,” I whispered.

Claire’s expression softened.

“And betrayed Hazel’s trust?” Claire asked quietly, “She made me promise.”

I looked down at my hands.

“I thought I was protecting you,” Mom admitted softly.

“You weren’t protecting me,” I whispered.

“I was,” Mom said, her voice suddenly sharper than before. “Look at yourself now, Gianna. You’ve put your entire life on hold for me. And what’s to say you won’t keep punishing yourself even after I’m gone?”

A small, distressed sound escaped Jules. She immediately shook her head. “Please don’t say that,” she pleaded, her voice wobbling. “You’re not going anywhere.”

Tears burned behind my eyes.

“I already feel like I lost so much time with you,” I whispered. “I don’t want to lose any more. What if something happens while I’m gone?”

Mom reached up, brushing the tears from my cheeks with gentle fingers.

“Then Claire will call you,” she said quietly.

I shook my head, “What if—”

“Gianna,” the seriousness in her voice made me stop, “I need you to hear me.”

I wiped at my face.

“You are my daughter,” she said softly. “You are not my caretaker.”

“I want to take care of you.”

“I know.”

“I should take care of you.”

Mom smiled sadly, “You should also go to college. You should continue working.”

I frowned.

“You should dance.”

Tears gathered in her eyes now.

“You should keep being Gianna.”

“I can do that later.”

Mom shook her head, “Later isn’t promised to anyone.”

Then Madeleine spoke, “We’re going to take care of her too.”

I looked at her.

Madeleine smiled softly, “You don’t have to carry this alone.”

Claire nodded immediately, “Exactly.”

“I should be here,” I stated.

“You should,” Claire agreed. “But you shouldn’t disappear in the process. This is exactly what Hazel didn’t want.”

I looked down.

“Gianna,” Claire continued gently, “I’ve been taking care of your mother since the day she came into this house.” Mom laughed quietly beside her.

Claire smiled faintly, “I’ve been there through doctor’s appointments. Through good days and terrible days. I’ve held her hand through some really difficult moments.”

Madeleine reached for Mom’s other hand, “And I’ve helped too.”

Claire looked directly at me, “We’ve done a good job loving her. You don’t get to take that away from us just because you know now.”

I blinked rapidly.

“We love her too,” Madeleine whispered.

“You don’t have to do this by yourself,” Claire added.

I looked between them then at Mom and then down at Jules, who had gone quiet.

“I just don’t want to regret anything,” I admitted.

Mom reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, “You know what I would regret?”

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1 sniffled, “What?”

A small smile appeared on her face, “Never seeing you dance again.”

I shook my head immediately, “Mom-”

“I’m serious.”

“No.”

“Gianna.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because...” My voice cracked. “Because I can’t stand up there pretending everything is normal.”

Mom’s expression softened, “I’m not asking you to pretend.”

“Then why?”

“Because watching you dance has always been one of my favorite things in this world,” Mom said softly. “When you were little, I used to sit in that ballet studio for hours just to watch you. Then, when you were sixteen, I signed you up again because I knew how much you loved it. Since then, seeing you on that stage, doing what you love, has become one of my favorite things in life.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

“When you dance,” Mom whispered, “you look happy.”

I shook my head, “I’m not happy right now.”

“You don’t have to be,” she added, “I just want to see my daughter doing something she loves.”

My chest hurt, “Please.”

Jules suddenly looked up, “You should dance. Mommy always cries when you dance.”

Mom laughed through her tears, “I do not.”

“You do,” Jules insisted, “Happy crying.”

Mom smiled at me, “I’ve never been prouder than watching you on that stage.”

I pressed my lips together, “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“You can,” Claire said immediately.

“We’ll help you,” Madeleine added.

“I’ll make sure Hazel has everything she needs while you’re at rehearsals or performances,” Madeleine promised.

Mom squeezed my hand tighter, “One more performance,” she whispered. “Please. I can’t leave this world without seeing you dance one last time. Let me go knowing I watched my daughter do the thing she loves most.”

I stared at our joined hands, “One performance?” I whispered.

Mom’s entire face lit up, “One last performance.”

“And after that, I’m still taking care of you.”

Mom kissed the top of my head, “You can help take care of me.”

The soft sound of rain tapping against the windows filled Mom's bedroom.

I sat cross-legged near the foot of her bed, sorting through the collection of old photo albums she'd insisted on pulling out earlier that afternoon.

Mom rested against the mountain of pillows behind her, looking tired but peaceful as Jules sat tucked into her side, pointing excitedly at pictures from years ago.

"Look at Gianna's hair!" Jules gasped dramatically.

I groaned, "I was eight."

"You looked like a fluffy chicken."

Before I could defend myself further, there was a knock against the partially opened bedroom door.

The room quieted, then Raphael stepped inside and my breath caught instantly.

He wore a charcoal gray suit that fit him perfectly, the sleeves pulled down to his wrists with not a single wrinkle in sight. His glasses rested low on his nose.

His eyes found mine immediately and everything inside me tightened. The expression on his face shifted almost imperceptibly. It was gone quickly, replaced by the same careful control he always wrapped around himself but not quickly enough.

I had seen it.

I smiled before I could stop myself, it was small, the corner of Raphael's mouth moved slightly in return.

I forced myself to look away first. Turning toward Mom, I adjusted the blanket over her legs.

"How are you feeling?" Raphael asked her.

Mom gave him an amused look, "I'm feeling perfectly fine. I feel really good today. What brings you here?" she asked.

Raphael adjusted the tablet in his hand, "The monitoring system."

Mom frowned, "The what?"

"The medical monitoring system," he clarified. "Claire mentioned there were delays receiving alerts from your wearable devices."

Raphael finally stepped farther into the room.

“The smart watch and the room monitoring equipment transmit data to Claire’s phone and the nursing team. There were intermittent connectivity interruptions overnight.”

He glanced toward the equipment beside Mom’s bed.

“The alert latency averaged three minutes and twelve seconds.”

Mom blinked and looked at me, “You understood any of those words?”

“No,” I admitted, smiling.

Raphael pushed his glasses higher on his nose, “The system wasn’t functioning efficiently.”

He moved toward the equipment.

“I redesigned the network architecture this morning.”

“You redesigned the entire medical system?” I asked.

He didn’t look at me, “I optimized it.”

“Raphael,” Mom said slowly, “did you build me a custom healthcare network?”

He paused, “Yes.”

I bit back a smile.

Raphael connected the tablet to one of the devices near Mom’s bed.

“The updated system now provides real-time monitoring with backup failover protection.”

Mom looked at me, “I have no idea what he just said.”

“It means if something changes with your condition,” I translated softly, “the alerts go through immediately.”

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Raphael remained focused on the screen, “I also integrated predictive analytics based on your previous medical data trends.”

I stared at him, “You did all of that?”

He finally looked up, his gaze found mine instantly. The intensity of it nearly stole the air from my lungs, “Yes,” he answered simply.

Because this was Raphael.

He protected people in the only way he knew how.

Mom’s expression softened, “Thank you.”

He glanced down at the tablet in his hands before looking back at Mom.

“It wasn’t difficult,” he said, “It seemed like the most efficient way to avoid communication delays and to make sure everyone has accurate information.”

His gaze flickered toward me for a fraction of a second before returning to Mom.

“If there are any issues with it, let me know. I can modify the system.’

Mom’s expression softened, “That was very thoughtful of you.”

“It was a practical solution,” Raphael replied evenly, “Hopefully, it’ll be useful.”

I knew him enough to know that Raphael didn’t spend hours solving problems that didn’t matter to him.

His attention remained on the tablet in his hands yet somehow, this felt more intimate than words ever could.

Because while everyone else heard efficiency and practicality, I heard the truth hidden beneath it.

He had found a way to take care of me without ever having to admit that was what he was doing.

My heart beat harder when his attention shifted toward me once more and I became painfully aware of everything.

The slight tension in his jaw.

The way his fingers tightened almost imperceptibly around the tablet.

The familiar scent of his cologne.

The memory of his hands.

The warmth that spread through my chest simply from being near him.

Raphael inhaled slowly, his expression remained carefully neutral but his eyes betrayed him.

“There’s... a few things I should explain about the system,” he said, clearing his throat softly, “If you have a minute.”

I was already pushing myself off the bed.

“Yeah,” I answered quickly, “Of course.”

I followed him out of the room, pulling the door closed quietly behind me and leaned against the wall beside the door.

I waited for him to start explaining the system.

He didn’t.

Instead, he stood there with his tablet tucked under one arm, looking unusually uncertain.

Then his eyes landed on me, “Are you sleeping?”

The question caught me off guard, “What?”

“You look tired,” he said after a brief pause, “More than usual.

I stared at him.

Of all the things I expected him to say, that wasn’t one of them.

“I sleep,” I answered.

He nodded once, “You should sleep more.”

“I’ll work on it,” I said softly.

Silence settled between us.

It was awkward.

Not the easy silence we'd somehow fallen into before. This felt different like we were both trying to navigate around broken glass.

My eyes drifted over his face. The dark circles beneath his eyes were faint, but they were there, "You don't look like you've been sleeping either," I said.

His gaze shifted away from me almost immediately, "I've been occupied."

The silence returned. It wasn't exactly uncomfortable, just... strange. We had fought, argued, teased each other, and made each other angry. We had kissed against the walls and looked at each other like the rest of the world didn't exist.

But this careful politeness between us felt unfamiliar.

"I've been attending my classes online," I said after a while, "And Mom convinced me to go back to ballet."

Raphael nodded once, "Good. You should continue with those things," he said quietly. "College. Ballet."

My smile faded a little, "What if something happens while I'm gone?"

His jaw tightened, "The system will notify you if there's any change," he replied evenly, "You'll know immediately," he hesitated for a fraction of a second, "You don't have to stop existing outside of this."

I looked up at him, "And you?" I asked softly, "Are you taking your own advice? You don't have to disappear into work either."

His eyes moved back to mine, "I don't know how to answer that question correctly."

The honesty caught me off guard, "You don't have to answer it correctly," I said softly. "You can just answer it."

He was quiet for so long that I thought he wouldn't respond at all. Then, very carefully, he said, "I don't

+15 Beras particularly know what to do outside of work."

The conversation should have ended there.

It almost did.

We both stood in that hallway, caught in something too soft to name properly and too awkward to ignore like neither of us knew how to leave first without making it worse.

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Then I swallowed and reached into my pocket, “Raphael.”

His eyes shifted to me immediately.

I pulled out my phorie and held it out to him. He didn’t take it at first, just looked at it then at me.

“What is this?”

My grip tightened slightly, “Leone.”

Something changed in his expression. A dark stillness that wasn’t there before.

“He’s been messaging me non-stop,” I said quietly. “Calling too. I blocked him. A lot. I don’t even know how he keeps getting through. He threatened me... if I don’t talk to him, he’ll come here. To see me. I don’t want that,” added quickly. “I don’t want him near me.”

Raphael didn’t move but his eyes dropped to my phone again then back to me like he was making sure he heard me correctly.

I rushed on, because the quiet suddenly felt too loud.

“I don’t trust him,” I said. “And I don’t want to deal with this alone. So I’ll take security with me to college. Just... make sure he can’t contact me again,” my voice lowered, “Please.”

His hand slowly reached for the phone, “He contacted you repeatedly,” he said.

I nodded once.

“You blocked him,” he repeated softly.

“Yes.”

“And he still found ways to reach you.”

“Yes.”

His jaw flexed once then again. It was subtle, but I saw it. Something in him recalculating, not just the situation.

Me.

Raphael's voice dropped slightly, "You don't want him."

It wasn't a question again.

I blinked, "What?"

His eyes stayed on me, "You don't want him," he repeated, slower this time, like he was confirming it out loud.

I shook my head, "No," I said honestly. "I don't."

The words settled between us and I saw it then. The smallest shift in his expression like something he had been holding in place for a long time had just... loosened.

His grip on my phone tightened once then relaxed, "Good, I'll handle it. And the security," he said, "you will take it?"

I blinked, "Yeah..."

That made something almost like disbelief flicker across his face.

Capone security wasn't something you casually agreed to, especially not me, especially not after everything I had refused before.

And yet he wasn't surprised.

He looked... relieved.

His hand lowered slightly with my phone still in it, "I'll make sure he cannot contact you again," he said, "And he won't come near you."

"Okay," I whispered.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The awkwardness came back again like we had stepped too close to something real and didn't know how to move away from it.

Raphael finally exhaled once, "Go to college," he said. "With security."

I nodded, "Okay."

Raphael shifted like he was about to turn away but something in me moved before I could think too much about it, "Raphael."

He stopped immediately. I stepped forward and caught his arm lightly. He looked down at my hand on him for half a second, then up at me. His expression didn't change much, but his body did. He stayed still.

I rose onto my tiptoes without really thinking about it and for a second, his breath changed like he already knew what I was going to do.

His head tilted down slightly, almost automatically, closing the space between us without hesitation.

I pressed a quick kiss to his cheek.

I pulled back just a little, still holding his arm, "Thank you," I said quietly. "For everything you did for my mom. For setting all of that up. I know you didn't have to."

His eyes stayed on me for a second longer. Then his jaw shifted slightly, like he was holding something back. His gaze dropped slowly to my lips. My breath caught before I could stop it. He leaned closer, too close now. His face leaned in, inch by inch, until there was barely any space left between us.

So close I could feel his breath.

So close our noses almost touched.

That was when it happened.

A gasp.

I turned immediately.

Claire stood at the end of the hallway, completely frozen. One hand slightly lifted like she had walked in at the exact wrong moment and didn't know whether to step forward or disappear into the floor.

Her eyes were wide.

Her gaze flicked from me.

To Raphael.

To where I had just been holding his arm.

Then back again.

Janedoewritings

Author

I hope you guys enjoy today’s chapter! I know not much happened in this one, but we’ll definitely be picking up the pace soon