My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 501

Gianna

1PT

Claire stood at the end of the hallway like somebody had physically stopped her mid-step.

My hand was still wrapped around Raphael's arm. Raphael was still standing far too close. And Claire was staring at us with the kind of expression people usually had when they found buried treasure.

My stomach dropped.

Oh no.

I immediately let go of Raphael and took a quick step backward, "Claire."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Claire," I repeated, "It's not what it looked like."

The second the words left my mouth, Claire's expression changed completely, "Oh my God," Claire pointed directly at both of us, "Oh my God."

"Claire-"

"You two were about to kiss."

"What?" I squeaked.

"You were."

I shook my head, "We weren't."

"You were."

"We weren't!"

Claire looked at Raphael and Raphael looked back at her and he didn't even deny it.

Then Claire pointed at him, "You... tell me the truth. You were about to kiss her."

For a moment, Raphael simply stared at her, then he blinked once, “I was standing near her. We were having a conversation.”

Claire stared.

I stared.

Raphael stared back.

“You were two inches from her face,” Claire informed him.

Raphael considered that, “Approximately.”

Claire threw both hands into the air, “See! You just admitted it.”

“I admitted proximity.”

“You admitted almost kissing her.”

“I did not.”

Claire pointed accusingly, “You leaned down.”

“I am taller than her.”

Claire looked at me. I looked at Claire. Then we both looked at Raphael.

Raphael looked mildly concerned now, like he had somehow ended up in an argument without understanding haw

Then a huge grin appeared on her face, “Oh, this is incredible.”

I stared at her, “Incredible?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because if something is happening between you two, I am completely supportive.”

I almost choked on my own spit, “What?”

Claire nodded enthusiastically, “One hundred percent supportive.”

I looked at her like she had lost her mind, “You’re not upset?”

That seemed to genuinely confuse her, “Why would I be upset?”

I stared.

She stared back.

Then she waved a hand between me and Raphael, “You’re not actually related. You didn’t grow up together as siblings.”

“Claire.”

She ignored me completely.

“In fact,” she said thoughtfully, “if we’re being honest, Capone men have a long and deeply concerning history of finding women who are minding their own business, dragging them into this family, and then refusing to let them leave.”

My eyes widened. Beside me, Raphael looked mildly offended.

Claire pointed down the hallway, “Vincenzo did it. Adriano definitely did it. Dante hasn’t done it yet, but I have concerns,” then she pointed directly at Raphael, “Honestly, I’m more surprised it took this one so long.”

“Claire,” I choked out.

“What?”

Raphael scoffed, “You make us sound like kidnappers.”

Claire looked at Raphael.

Then at me.

Then back at Raphael.

“I was literally brought into this house unconscious.”

Raphael considered that, “That was a unique circumstance.”

Claire waved a dismissive hand, “The point is, nobody in this family has ever met a woman they liked and responded normally. So, it makes perfect sense that Raphael would choose the one woman in this house everyone assumes is off-limits.”

I shook my head, “No, nothing like that happened. We’re not… together like that. We’re friends.”

Claire immediately looked at Raphael. I looked at Raphael too. For some reason, he didn't answer. Raphael's jaw tightened. His fingers shifted slightly around the tablet tucked beneath his arm.

I frowned.

Why was he taking so long?

This wasn't a difficult question.

Claire noticed it too. Her eyebrows slowly climbed higher, "Oh."

Raphael looked at her.

Claire pointed dramatically, "Oh, that's interesting."

"What is?" I asked.

Claire didn't answer me. She kept staring directly at Raphael. The corner of her mouth twitched, "Raphael."

His expression became completely blank, "Claire."

The man could explain advanced software systems in under thirty seconds but apparently couldn't answer one simple question.

CIRY

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 502

"We're friends," I repeated firmly.

Claire kept looking at Raphael. Something flashed across his face. It was gone so quickly I almost missed it. Finally, he spoke, "Yes."

Claire perked up immediately, "Yes?"

Raphael's jaw flexed, "We are friends."

The words sounded strangely forced coming from him like each one weighed ten pounds. I stared at him. That was odd.

Very odd.

Because Raphael usually answered questions immediately, confidently, and logically without hesitation. Now he looked like he'd just signed paperwork he didn't agree with.

Claire grinned, "Friends."

Then he nodded once, "Yes."

The answer came out flat and somehow completely unconvincing.

I frowned. Why was this so difficult? It wasn't like Claire had accused him of being secretly in love with me.

The thought barely registered before I dismissed it.

That wasn't even possible. Raphael wasn't like that. He'd told me himself that he'd never love anyone.

Half the time he couldn't even explain what he was feeling.

Love wasn't what was happening here. Friendship made sense. Comfort made sense. Trust made sense. Everything else was just Claire being Claire.

Claire suddenly sighed dramatically, "Fine."

I immediately relaxed, "Thank you."

She pointed at me, "I don't believe you," then she pointed at Raphael, "And I definitely don't believe him."

Raphael closed his eyes for a brief second.

I groaned, "Claire."

"Nope."

"Claire."

Claire snorted and crossed her arms tighter over her chest "Relax. I'm choosing to accept your highly questionable explanation. I'll respect the whole 'we're just friends' story."

The way she said friends made it sound like she didn't believe a single word coming out of my mouth.

"Because that's what we are," I said.

I stared at her. She stared right back with the most innocent expression I'd ever seen on her face. It was completely fake.

Then she smiled, "I'm giving you both time. Whatever this is, you can figure it out yourselves. And when you eventually realize I'm right, you'll come find me and tell me absolutely everything."

I covered my face with both hands, "Oh God. Please don't tell Vincenzo," I said through my fingers.

She rolled her eyes dramatically, "Gianna, I know how to keep a secret. And don't worry about him I'll deal with my husband."

My eyebrows lifted, "I don't think you understand how terrifying he is to normal people."

Claire looked genuinely confused, "Terrifying? No, he's not. I wasn't scared of him before I even knew who he was.

"That's because you're insane."

"That's because he's not scary."

I laughed in disbelief, "Claire, people literally stop talking when he walks into a room."

"Because he's rude..."

I shook my head, "You're married to him. Your opinion doesn't count."

"Or," Claire said smugly, "I'm the only one here seeing him correctly. Besides," she continued, pointing a finger at me, "when this ridiculous drama inevitably blows over-and it will-you should remember something important."

I frowned, "What?"

Claire's grin widened, "The only person in this house capable of telling Vincenzo Capone to sit down and shut up is me."

Raphael made a quiet sound that suspiciously resembled agreement.

Claire pointed at herself proudly, "So if I were you, I'd stay on my good side."

I laughed despite myself, "Is that a threat?"

"It's friendly advice."

"Those are not the same thing."

“They are when they’re coming from me.”

Then she started backing away down the hallway, “Goodnight, you two.”

I immediately narrowed my eyes, “Claire.”

“Yes?”

“We’re friends.”

She smiled far too innocently, “Of course you are.”

“Claire.”

“Absolutely. Best friends.”

My face heated instantly.

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Claire’s grin became impossible to deal with, “Sleep well, lovebirds.”

Then she disappeared around the corner before I could find something heavy enough to throw at her.

I let out a laugh and shook my head, “She’s completely insane.”

The words died halfway out of my mouth. Raphael wasn’t laughing. He wasn’t even looking in the direction Claire had gone. He was staring at the floor, his jaw tight enough to crack teeth. A deep frown pulled between his eyebrows.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 503

I blinked, “Hey.”

His eyes lifted to mine. For some reason, the expression on his face made my chest hurt.

I understood why.

Claire’s assumptions had been awkward, embarrassing and uncomfortable and Raphael wasn’t like his brothers..

He wasn't Vincenzo, who looked at Claire like the rest of the world didn't exist.

He wasn't Adriano, who would probably set a city on fire for Madeleine.

Raphael was... Raphael.

He was different.

It hurt sometimes. More than I liked admitting. But that wasn't his fault. Just because I loved him didn't mean he owed me the same thing.

Friends was all he could give me.

Friends was all he wanted.

And if the alternative was losing him completely... I'd take friendship every single time.

I swallowed and forced a small smile, "Don't worry about her. Claire sees romance everywhere. I mean, thing is ridiculous anyway."

His eyes narrowed slightly, "Is it?"

I laughed awkwardly, "Obviously."

The single word came out much weaker than I intended.

the whole

The smile on my face felt strained now, "I mean..." I shrugged, "You're not really like your brothers. They're..." I searched for the right words. "They're the type to lose their minds over somebody," I forced a laugh, "You know. The dramatic kind of love."

The word scraped against my throat.

Love.

God.

Even saying it hurt.

Because a part of me had wanted that once. I wanted it from him but life didn't always give people what they wanted and Raphael had never pretended to be something he wasn't. Beside, my mother had all of my attention now.

I looked back at him and smiled softly, "And that's okay. You're allowed to want different things."

His jaw tightened, “Different things.”

I nodded, “Yeah. I’ll support whatever makes you happy, Bestie.”

Raphael looked horrified, “Bestie?”

I burst out laughing, “Bestie is terrible.”

“It is.”

I nodded seriously, “Very cringe.”

“Extremely.”

That somehow made it worse. His mouth tightened like he was trying not to react at all, failing slightly anyway..

A small silence settled between us after that, not awkward exactly, just... lighter than before.

I glanced toward the door behind me. The warm light from Mom’s room spilled into the hallway

Right.

I should go back inside.

I still had to sit with her. I still had to make sure she was okay. I still had to be there, every second I could.

“I should go back inside,” I said quietly, almost like I was reminding myself more than him.

He gave a small nod, “Yeah.”

I nodded too, pulling in a steady breath, and stepped back toward the door. For a second, I paused with my hand on the handle, then looked over my shoulder at him. He was still standing there in the hallway, watching me without saying anything else.

I gave him a small, tired smile, “Goodnight, Raph.”

His eyes flickered at the nickname, “Goodnight, Ginny.”

The grass was still wet with morning dew.

Every time I stepped onto the marble platform in the middle of the gardens, the cold climbed through my pointe shoes and into my bones.

The Capone estate was quiet this early, the fountains whispered, the trees moved with the wind. Somewhere in the distance birds sang. It should have felt peaceful.

Instead, my stomach was tied into knots, “From the beginning.”

The words were sharp enough to cut through the silence. I lifted my head. Lucien Moreau stood near the stone staircase with both hands resting on the top of his cane.

Since arriving three days ago, he had corrected everything.

My feet. My hands. My shoulders. The angle of my neck. The way I breathed. Even the way I blinked and he called it discipline.

His blue eyes swept over me like he was inspecting cracked porcelain, “You think too much.”

“I have dyslexia.”

“What does reading have to do with your shoulders?”

I blinked, “...nothing.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 504

“Exactly.”

His accent wrapped around every word, “You dance from here,” he tapped his temple,.”You need to dance from here,” he pressed a hand over his chest, “Again.”

I wanted to throw myself into the fountain. Instead I walked back to my starting mark. The music floated softly from the portable speaker resting beside the garden steps.

No famous score.

No familiar melody.

A pianist had written it two weeks ago from pages of notes I’d scribbled down during nights I couldn’t sleep.

It wasn’t perfect.

Neither was I.

The first notes drifted through the air. I closed my eyes. Four counts, then I moved. My feet knew where to go before my mind did.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath. When I opened them again, I wasn’t standing in a beautiful garden anymore.

I was standing in my childhood home.

My body folded inward. My shoulders curled. My arms wrapped around myself so tightly my fingers dug into my skin.

Small.

I made myself smaller.

One careful step backward another. My head turned sharply over my shoulder, listening, waiting.

My hands lifted halfway before dropping again like a child wanting comfort but already knowing it wasn’t coming.

My feet moved quickly across the marble, short, uneven, almost running, almost hiding. I spun once the turn stopped too early.

My balance broke.

I caught myself before falling.

I kept dancing. My hands rose toward my face, then covered my ears, not because there was music but because there were voices only I could hear.

The shouting, the slammed doors, the sound of my own heartbeat, the electric shocks, the burns, the cuts, the blood. My body flinched before I could stop it. The movement looked ugly. I left it exactly as it was.

The music changed, the tempo slowed. My arms opened. For one beautiful second they reached outward.

Freedom.

Then invisible chains pulled them back hard. My wrists crossed behind my back. My chest lifted but my feet refused to move. I fought against something no one else could see.

Every step forward dragged another step backward. Every turn ended where it began. Round and round. The same circle. The same prison. The same promises. The same lies.

My fingers stretched toward the sky. Someone else's hand seemed to catch them then close around them. I twisted, pulled, turned but nothing.

The harder I fought, the smaller the circle became until I stood trapped inside my own arms again. My breathing grew heavier.

The music changed for the third time.

The piano became softer, almost gentle. I took one careful step forward, then another like I was walking toward someone.

My face lifted. A tiny smile touched my mouth before I could stop it.

Hope.

It only lasted a second. My hand reached into an empty space, nothing met it. I reached again, still nothing.

The movement repeated, again, again, again. Every time slower, every time weaker. Until my arm finally fell back to my side.

I turned as if I had heard someone call my name. No one was there. I smiled anyway. The smile broke before it ever reached my eyes.

My chest tightened. I wrapped my own arms around myself because there was no one else to do it.

One slow turn, another, the world blurred, the trees disappeared, the fountain disappeared. Everything disappeared except a pair of impossible brown eyes that existed only inside my memory.

The final spin stopped suddenly. My balance cracked. One knee hit the marble. I stayed there, looking at the empty space in front of me, knowing nobody was coming.

The last part of the music began.

I pushed myself back to my feet. Every movement became slower now like my body weighed twice as much. My arms lifted carefully, not reaching anymore.

Remembering.

I looked upward. The morning sun slipped through the branches overhead. For one heartbeat, I could almost see my mother sitting in the front row, smiling, clapping, calling me her little prima ballerina.

15 BOALS

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 505

My throat burned. I stepped forward and she disappeared. My fingers closed around empty air. I pressed both hands against my chest, trying to hold onto something already leaving. The final notes echoed through the gardens.

I stood completely still.

One hand over my heart, the other hanging uselessly at my side.

The music ended.

Only the fountain kept moving. My breathing sounded too loud. I slowly lowered my arms.

Lucien hadn't moved. He walked toward me without saying a word. His cane tapped softly against the marble.

He stopped only a few feet away, his eyes searched my face, then my hands, then my feet, "What is this called?"

My lips felt dry, "The Four Lives I Never Chose."

He waited.

I looked across the gardens, "The first girl grows up afraid of her own home. The second mistakes a cage for love, "I swallowed, "The third finally finds someone worth loving... and never gets to keep him. And the last girl loses the only person who ever made her feel safe."

Lucien looked toward the empty stage, "And which one are you?"

I stared at the marble beneath my feet, "My body remembers all four."

For a long moment he said nothing then he stepped closer. His fingers lightly pushed my shoulder back, "You have beautiful technique but halfway through... you stopped dancing and started remembering. That's good."

I blinked.

He turned away, “The audience does not cry because the dancer cries, they cry because the dancer tells the truth. We begin again in ten minutes.”

For the first time since writing this routine...

I wasn’t scared that people wouldn’t understand it.

I was scared they would.

By the third day of finals week, I was surviving almost entirely on coffee, stubbornness, and pure spite.

The university library looked like a battlefield. Students were sleeping on couches. Some had built little forts out of textbooks. One guy was snoring face-first on his laptop while his study group quietly continued working around him like this happened every semester.

I understood him.

My own backpack weighed enough to count as gym equipment. I dropped it onto the table with a dull thud and rubbed my eyes. Artificial Intelligence Strategy. Machine Learning. Two finals back to back.

I opened my notebook. The words stared back. For a second they stayed exactly where they belonged then they shifted, just enough that my brain stopped trusting them.

One sentence became three, the line underneath blended into the paragraph above it. My eyes traced the same page again and again.

The girl sitting across from me flipped through six pages in the time it took me to understand one definition.

My jaw tightened. I reached for my phone. My thumb hovered over one app before pressing it. The screen opened immediately. Simple and clean with no bright colors, no unnecessary buttons. Exactly the way Raphael had designed it.

The app read every paragraph aloud while highlighting each word one at a time. The font automatically changed into one my brain found easier to process. Long paragraphs broke themselves into smaller pieces. Important concepts appeared as diagrams instead of walls of text.

If I stumbled over a sentence, I could press one button and it would explain the idea using different words./

It felt less like reading, more like someone patiently walking beside me.

I was so grateful for it.

The soft voice read through the first chapter. I followed along, decision trees, model optimization, bias, overfitting, underfitting.

Halfway through the explanation, my own handwriting stared back at me from the margin.

I frowned, “What does that even say?”

I tilted the page, turned it sideways. It looked like a spider had fallen into ink and fought for its life. I squeezed my pen harder.

Around me, pages turned, keyboards clicked, someone laughed quietly, everyone else seemed to understand, everyone else seemed to move forward. I was still trapped on one sentence.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 506

The familiar pressure started behind my ribs. It climbed into my throat. My fingers curled tighter around the pen.

A voice I had spent years trying to silence whispered exactly what it always whispered.

You’re too slow.

You’ll never catch up.

You’ll never be enough.

I stared at the edge of the table. My nails dug into my palm until little crescents formed in my skin. The pressure wanted somewhere to go.

It wanted out.

It wanted anything that would drown out the frustration for just a second.

My breathing became uneven. I closed my eyes.

Mom.

I saw her sitting in her wheelchair only two nights ago. She had smiled when I showed her my notes.

She couldn't lift her arms the way she used to anymore, but she'd still managed to touch my cheek, "So proud of you."

Three quiet words, that's all she'd said. Three words that somehow weighed more than every textbook in front of

I opened my hand.

Tiny red marks covered my palm where my nails had pressed into my skin. They would fade, mom wouldn't.

I picked up my pen again, one line, just one. If I understood one line, I could understand the next. The app read the paragraph again, slower this time. I listened, stopped fighting the words, started following them.

The idea finally clicked, not because I was smarter because I stayed.

I wrote the answer underneath, the letters leaned in different directions. Some were too big, some too small. One looked like a number. Another looked like it belonged to another alphabet entirely.

I kept going, hours passed. The sunlight disappeared behind the library windows, someone brought pizza, someone else cried over calculus.

I highlighted another page, then another, then another. By midnight my head hurt so badly I could barely think.

I packed everything away and walked back to the estate with Capone security trailing behind me silently.

I stopped outside my mother's room, the door was open a crack. A nurse adjusted her blanket before slipping out.

Mom was sleeping peacefully, the machine beside her hummed softly.

I stood there for almost a minute, "I'll pass," I whispered so quietly only I could hear it, "I don't know how but I will."

The next morning the lecture hall was packed. The nervous sound of people pretending they weren't nervous. I sat near the middle.

My accommodations let me use Raphael's accessibility app during the written portions and gave me extra time.

Even with that, my stomach twisted.

The professor placed the exam face down, “Begin.”

Paper flipped all at once.

The first question blurred. I blinked, read it again. The app quietly read it into my headphones and the words settled.

I understood.

My pencil moved.

Question two.

Then three.

By question seven, I had crossed out half the page because I’d mixed up two terms.

When I finally handed my paper to the professor, my wrist ached.

My brain felt hollow. I walked out into the hallway and leaned against the wall. For a second I simply stood there, then my phone buzzed.

A reminder from the app flashed across my screen.

“Drink some water. Your brain works better when you do.”

My fingers paused over the phone. A small, tired smile pulled at my mouth before I could stop it. We hadn’t really spoken since that night. Since the night he’d almost kissed me.

I’d made sure of that.

I kept my distance because I didn’t trust my own heart around him anymore.

I missed him more than I wanted to admit but missing someone didn’t make them yours.

And Raphael Capone had never been mine to begin with.

Janedoewritings

Author

Today, you got Gianna’s chapter. Tomorrow, it’s Raphael’s turn.

Enjoy today’s update.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 507

Raphael

Six monitors cast a cold blue glow across the room. Lines of code crawled across two screens. Financial records occupied another. Security feeds filled a fourth. The remaining monitors displayed data I had been collecting for the last three hours.

My fingers moved across the keyboard. The number Leone Caruso had been using to harass Gianna sat in the middle of one screen.

Most people thought a phone number was just a phone number. It wasn't. Everything left a trail, every message every connection, every tower handshake, every account tied to it.

People believed technology made them anonymous.

People were idiots.

I leaned back in my chair as another set of information populated across the monitor.

The burner phone Leone was currently using had connected to the same public network twice within fourteen days.

My fingers moved again. One database became three, three became six, patterns emerged addresses, transactions, travel records, hotel bookings.

A few minutes later I found what I was looking for. I stared at the screen. Leone hadn't crossed state lines. He was still sitting in Philadelphia.

I opened another window and began dismantling everything Leone had built around that number. The process wasn't complicated, just time-consuming.

Within twenty minutes, several accounts connected to that phone ceased functioning. Within thirty, backup accounts disappeared too. Within forty, access points vanished one after another, not deleted, destroyed.

Deletion could be recovered.

Destruction was permanent.

By the time I finished, Leone's favorite method of contacting Gianna no longer existed.

I looked at the clock, then pressed a button on my desk phone, “Send Ciro into my office now.”

The response came immediately, “Yes, sir.”

Seven minutes later a knock sounded against the door, “Come in.”

The door opened and Ciro stepped inside. He looked different from the last time I’d seen him, less confident and more careful. The months at the docks had apparently been educational.

Pain was an excellent teacher.

He stopped in front of my desk, “Boss.”

I gestured toward the chair. He remained standing, it was either respect or fear. Possibly both.

“Ciro.”

His jaw tightened slightly, “I know you’re still angry. I deserved it after everything the Capone family has done for me, I shouldn’t have put one of you in-“he cut himself off, “I never meant for anything bad to happen to her.”

His voice was honest. Most men lied poorly but Ciro wasn’t lying.

“I know.”

His eyes lifted, “I was stupid,” he continued. “I should’ve paid attention. I should’ve been more careful.”

“You should have.”

He nodded immediately. The docks had clearly improved him, “I liked her,” he admitted. “Not like that, Jesus Christ, but as a friend. I would’ve never intentionally put her in danger.”

“I know,” I said and turned one of the monitors toward him. A photograph of Leone Caruso filled the screen.

Ciro frowned, “Who’s that?”

“A problem.”

His expression sharpened immediately. I opened a file, addresses, photos, schedules and everything I had gathered.

“I need eyes on him.”

He looked back at me, “In Philadelphia?”

“Yes.”

“Permanent assignment?”

“For now.”

His gaze returned to the screen. The seriousness of the situation was beginning to register, “You want surveillance.”

“I want information. You told me you wanted to make up for your mistake.”

His jaw tightened, “I do.”

I slid a folder across the desk, “Then start with this.”

Ciro picked it up, “When do I leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

He closed the folder, “I’ll watch him.”

“You’ll do more than watch. If he so much as breathes in Chicago’s direction, I want to know.”

Ciro smiled, the kind of smile the soldiers wore when they understood exactly what was expected of them, ” Understood, boss.”

I nodded once and Ciro turned and left. The door closed behind him.

I looked back toward the monitors. The corner of my mouth twitched despite myself.

Leone had charm, he had the looks, he knew how to talk, he knew how to flirt considering the countless affairs that showed up in his files.

Meanwhile I had spent half my relationship with Gianna communicating like a malfunctioning operating system.

And somehow she still looked at me the way she did.

The realization made something dark and smug curl inside me but then my smile faded.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 508

Gianna loves me, the thought should've felt victorious instead it felt strangely hollow.

Because what exactly was I supposed to do with that information?

Nothing.

Absolutely fucking nothing.

A few days ago I would've spent hours trying to calculate possibilities, variables, outcomes. Now... her mother was dying.

Everything else had become insignificant.

Including me.

Especially me.

I slowly removed my glasses and rubbed a hand across my face.

The image of her standing there crying while talking about Hazel refused to leave my head. It kept replaying over and over like corrupted code stuck in a loop.

I swallowed hard.

The truth was simple.

If Gianna needed me tomorrow, I would go.

If she needed me next week, I would go.

If she hated me for the next ten years and called me every name she could think of, I would still answer if she called, not because I was noble, not because I was selfless but because I couldn't stop myself.

And right now she didn't need somebody in love with her.

She needed a friend.

She needed somebody to protect her family.

She needed somebody to quietly remove threats before they ever reached her.

And that, at least, was something I knew how to do.

The bookshelf against the left wall had one hundred and thirty-two books. The plant beside the window needed water. The clock on the wall ran four seconds ahead.

I knew that because I had been coming here long enough to memorize everything, none of that information was useful.

I knew it anyway.

Doctor Walker sat across from me in the same chair he always used.

I sat in mine, hands folded, back straight, leg still. The session had been going for twelve minutes and twenty-one seconds.

“How is Gianna?”

My jaw tightened immediately, “Her mother is dying.”

Walker nodded slowly, “I know.”

I stared at the bookshelf, “The situation is progressing exactly as expected.”

“Expected by whom?”

“The doctors.”

“And how is Gianna handling it?”

I looked toward the window, “Poorly.”

“How are you handling it?”

I looked at him, “She cried. She stopped sleeping properly. She stopped eating regularly. She follows her mother around the house,” I frowned slightly, “Her hands shake sometimes. And she calls me a friend.”

The sentence had come out before I intended it to. Of all the information available, that had apparently been the one my brain selected.

Walker rested his pen against the pad, “And that bothered you.”

I rubbed my thumb against my palm, “It is inaccurate.”

Walker looked amused, “Inaccurate?”

“Yes.”

“Explain.”

I sighed and searched for words, “When she isn’t around…” I paused, “My ability to function decreases. I become distracted. I check my phone repeatedly. I monitor her location. I get blanked out and I think about conversations that happened months ago.”

Walker nodded slowly, “And?”

I clenched my jaw, “And I miss her.”

I didn’t like that word. Miss. It sounded stupid. Weak, vague and inadequate.

It still happened to be true.

Walker leaned back, “Have you told her any of this?”

I laughed once, “No.”

“Why?”

Because her mother was dying. Because she already carried enough weight to crush most people. Because she looked exhausted. Because every time I saw her lately there were dark circles beneath her eyes. Because she had exams. Because she had ballet. Because she spent every waking moment worrying about Hazel. Because she deserved peace.

Because I wanted something from her, something she could not currently give.

I looked at Walker, “Because it would be selfish.”

Walker tilted his head slightly, “That’s a strong word.”

“It is accurate.”

He tapped his pen once, “Explain.”

I exhaled slowly, “She has approximately one hundred immediate concerns. Her mother, her sister. School and Ballet.”

I looked down at my hands.

“If I tell her…” I stopped, “If I tell her, then she has to deal with that too. And she shouldn’t have to.”

Walker studied me, “You think she loves you.”

I nodded, “Yes.”

The answer came immediately.

Walker noticed, “And?”

I stared at the clock, “That changes nothing.”

“Why not?”

“Because timing matters.”

Walker nodded slightly, “Go on.”

I leaned back in my chair, “If somebody is drowning, you don’t hand them another object to carry.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 509

“Even if it’s important?” he questioned.

“Especially if it’s important.”

Walker folded his hands, “So your solution is to say nothing.”

“Correct.”

“And you’re comfortable with that?”

I laughed again, “No. I want to tell her.”

Walker didn’t react.

I continued, “I want to tell her every time she smiles at me. Every time she touches me. Every time she calls me her friend,” My jaw tightened hard enough to hurt, “Especially then.”

Walker watched me carefully, “Why especially then?”

I stared at the wall because everytime she called me her friend, it felt like I was being skinned alive and the fact that she smiled while saying it.

She looked happy.

She trusted me.

And she had absolutely no idea what she was doing to me.

I rubbed a hand across my face, “Because she thinks that’s all this is. That’s the problem. She thinks she understands the situation. She thinks we’re friends.”

The sentence sat badly in my mouth.

“She says it constantly now. ‘You’re my friend, Raphael,'” My jaw tightened, “You’re my best friend, Raphael.””

The pressure behind my ribs increased.

“And every single time she says it, she looks relieved, like she’s solved something.”

Dr. Walker folded his hands, “And why is that a problem?”

I looked at him, “Because she believes what I told her. For months I explained myself to her..I told her I don’t experience things the same way other people do. I told her there was something wrong with me and now she accepts it.”

I looked away. There was too much energy in my system. It felt trapped, contained and looking for somewhere to go. My hands flexed against the arms of the chair. Breaking something suddenly seemed like a very reasonable solution, which meant I was significantly more upset than I wanted to admit.

“She thinks she’s respecting my boundaries. She thinks she’s being considerate,” My fingers curled into fists, She thinks she’s helping. It’s fucking absurd.”

Dr. Walker raised an eyebrow.

I leaned forward so abruptly the chair protested beneath me, “Do you know what she said? She told me that not everyone loves someone like my brothers do. She told me she’d support my lifestyle choices.”

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The last words came out dripping with disbelief.

Dr. Walker’s mouth twitched.

“She stood there and reassured me that she understood. She looked genuinely proud of herself. She thinks she’s helping me. She thinks she’s making this easier. She thinks calling me her friend is a kindness.”

For several seconds I didn’t say anything. I focused on the bookshelf, the window, and the clock. Anything except the feeling building under my skin. It wasn’t working.

My lungs pulled in a sharp breath. Suddenly I wanted movement, I wanted violence. I wanted somewhere to pur all the energy clawing around inside my chest.

A hunt.

A fight.

Something that bled.

Something I could break.

“And I can’t even correct her,” the words exploded out of me, “Because her mother is dying.”

I dragged both hands through my hair, pulling at the strands.

“She’s exhausted, she’s grieving, she’s trying to hold together college, ballet, her sister, her family. And somehow I am supposed to walk into that disaster and tell her that every time she calls me her friend I spend the next three hours trying not to lose my fucking mind?” I shouted the last words.

My chest expanded sharply before I forced myself back against the chair. I tried regulating my breathing. It produced no measurable improvement.

“I can’t,” my voice dropped, “I won’t because she doesn’t need that right now. She needs stability and support. She needs a friend.”

I laughed quietly, then shook my head.

“The irony is almost impressive because I spent months convincing her I was incapable of feeling something. And now she believes me so completely that she never even considers the possibility that I might be standing three inches away from her trying not to tell her the truth.”

For a long moment, I just stared at the wall then I let out a slow breath.

“And for what may be the first time in my life…”

I laughed again, “...I am deeply frustrated that someone listened to exactly what I told them.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 510

The encrypted file was buried deep within three layers of security firewalls on my private server. I didn’t need to look at the folder name to find it, my fingers moved across the keyboard on pure instinct, unlocking the video data that I had kept hidden from the rest of the world.

I leaned back into the leather office chair-the exact same chair where the footage had been captured-and led the video fill the massive, high-definition monitor on my wall.

The screen flickered, and suddenly the quiet room was filled with the glowing blue light of the recorded security cameras.

My hand went straight to the belt of my trousers, unbuckling the leather and sliding the zipper down.

I reached inside my underwear, my fingers closing around my length. I was already thick, straining against my clothes from just looking at the title card, but the moment the audio kicked in, I turned to solid, pulsing iron.

On the screen, the playback showed her pinned against my chest, her small wrists locked tightly behind her back with that black plastic zip tie.

Her crisp white shirt was torn wide open, hanging off her shoulders and framing her bare breasts. The camera from the upper corner captured the view perfectly. Every time I drove into her from below, her tits bounced violently, the soft flesh shaking.

“Ah... Raphael... oh god,” her recorded voice echoed through my current quiet room, a high, broken sob of pure friction that hit my ears like a physical touch.

I let out a low, rough groan in the dark, my grip tightening around myself. I began to stroke my cock, a motion that matched the pace I was watching on the wall.

My eyes devoured the contrast on the screen, my own scarred hands digging fiercely into her soft skin, leaving dark marks while she took me.

“Look at that,” my own past voice ordered from the speakers, “I want you to watch how you’re taking me.”

On the main screen, the high-definition lens zoomed in with clarity right between her legs.

I stared at the point of impact, watching the skin stretch wide open to accommodate the thick head of my rubber- wrapped cock as it disappeared halfway inside her, over and over.

The sound on the recording was fucking everything, slapping noise that filled the soundproof room, mixed with the desperate friction of her body rolling against mine.

I stroked myself faster, my thumb rubbing hard against the head of my cock, mimicking the heat of her. My breathing turned shallow and heavy, my chest heaving as I watched her on the screen start to roll her hips in that wicked, grinding circle.

She was a natural.

On the monitor, her spine was arched, her head thrashed back against my shoulder, her eyes half-closed and glazed with pure pleasure.

Every time her hips rolled forward on the video, her skin puckered, and her tight nipples bounced in rhythm with her gasps.

“I’m gonna cum, Raph,” her digital self gasped, her lips parted in a silent scream of surrender.

Hearing her say my name like that... shattered, begging, completely undone tripped the final wire in my head.

My hand on my cock turned frantic, squeezing and pulling with a desperate friction that had me straining toward the edge. I watched the video reach its peak, watching her eyes finally snap away from the cameras to look straight into mine on the screert, clear and filled with a terrifying need.

“Go ahead,” my recorded voice whispered, my past self rubbing her clit on screen, “I’ve got you. I’m right here.”

“Raph... oh God!” she shrieked on the tape, her body violently locking up, her muscles flexing in her thighs as the ripples of her orgasm took her completely, making her tip over in the chair.

The sight of her climaxing on the screen, her chest heaving and her tits shaking as she cried out my name, pushed/ me completely over the precipice.

I bared my teeth in the dark room, my body going totally rigid in the leather chair. I gave my cock three more hard, blinding strokes, and then I came hard, splashing violently across my fingers and dripping onto my palm.

!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 511

I let out a long, wrecked groan against the quiet wall, my jaw clamped shut as the final waves of the release shot through my chest down to my fingertips.

On the monitor, the video showed us both gasping, my past self burying his face in the crook of her neck, breathing her in.

I stared at the screen. A sharp ache settled somewhere behind my ribs. I wanted that.

Her.

Right now.

I wanted to pull her close and press my face against her neck. I wanted the familiar scent of her shampoo. The warmth of her skin. The quiet certainty that came whenever she was within reach.

I wanted to stay there until the constant noise in my head finally stopped until I could sleep.

But I sat there alone, my chest rising and falling, staring at the final frame of her flushed, ruined face before I saw myself retreating back into myself and pushing her away from me.

My jaw tightened.

A sudden surge of... aggression moved through me so quickly my hands curled against the edge of the desk.

I wanted to reach through the monitor and grab that version of myself by the throat.

Because he had been standing in front of the one person who consistently chose him and his response had been to back away.

I stared at the screen, “You absolute fucking moron.”

The version of me on the monitor said nothing, just kept creating distance.

My fingers tightened harder, “If I could go back in time, I’d beat some sense into you.’

The pressure behind my ribs increased, every signal, every opportunity, every indication. And somehow he had still managed to reach the worst possible conclusion.

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes briefly. The urge to break something was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

“Fucking unbelievable.”

I opened my eyes and looked at the screen again.

There she was, looking at me with those soft green eyes.

And there I was... acting like proximity was dangerous when losing her had always been the actual fucking threat.

“The acquisition only makes sense if we absorb their research division before the patents expire.”

The presentation continued across the massive screen at the end of the conference room. Twenty-two people sat around the black table, three vice presidents, four department heads and two lawyers.

The rest were analysts and executives waiting for me to decide whether Orion Vector Technologies would spend

another two hundred million dollars.

The answer was yes.

I had already decided fourteen minutes ago.

The meeting was simply the process everyone else needed.

My fingers tapped once against the table, “The cybersecurity concerns?”

The chief security officer cleared his throat, “We’ve already built three contingency plans.”

“Four.”

He blinked, “I’m sorry?”

“You built four.”

He looked down at his tablet, “...Yes.”

I looked toward legal, “The lawsuit?”

“We expect they’ll settle.”

“They won’t. Prepare for trial.”

A chorus of nods answered me.

Outside the conference room, employees moved through the glass hallways carrying laptops and coffee cups. Phones rang somewhere in the distance.

Then movement caught my attention. I looked through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls surrounding the conference room.

Vincenzo stood outside, hands in his pockets. He wasn’t looking at anyone else, only me. Our eyes met through the glass. He simply lifted two fingers and tilted his head once toward the hallway.

Follow me.

Then he turned and walked away.

I closed the folder in front of me, “We’re done.”

One executive glanced at the agenda, “We still have-”

“We don’t.”

“But the quarterly-”

“Email it.”

Within sixty seconds the conference room emptied.

By the time I stepped into the hallway, Vincenzo was already halfway toward my office. Vincenzo walked inside without waiting.

I followed and quietly shut the door behind us. Vincenzo walked all the way to the windows, then stopped. His hands settled behind his back. He stood there without speaking, looking out across the skyline.

I stayed near my desk.

My mind immediately began sorting possibilities.

Family.

Business.

The Outfit.

Hazel.

Gianna..

One by one I eliminated them.

If someone had died, he wouldn't have come himself. If the police had moved, he would've called. If there hád been an attack, security would've reached me before he did.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 512

"Is everything alright?" I asked, "When you interrupt a meeting without warning," I said quietly, "I generally assume somebody has been shot."

That finally earned a reaction. The corner of Vincenzo's mouth moved just enough to almost become a smile.

He kept looking out across the city, "No, no emergency."

I studied him, "Then why are you here?"

He walked toward my desk before placing both hands against the wood, "When Hazel dies... she expects me to look after her daughters."

He didn't say if.

He said when.

"She trusted me with them but trust means responsibility and I don't fail responsibilities."

I nodded once, "I know."

He pulled a thin folder from beneath his arm and dropped it onto the desk, "I intend to keep that promise whether Gianna agrees with me or not."

I understood exactly what he meant. Vincenzo didn't view protection as permission, he viewed it as obligation.

“If someone I care about is walking toward traffic,” he said quietly, “I don’t ask if they’d like to move. I drag them out of the road. Hazel asked me for something...”

I opened the file and read its content.

“Gianna’s been spending time with filth she should’ve never laid eyes on again,” his mouth twisted with open disgust, “Women who sell themselves for a stack of cash and the parasite pimp living off their backs.”

He looked back at me.

“They encouraged Gianna when she was barely old enough to understand what they were pushing her toward. They wanted her painted up, half-naked under stage lights, smiling for old bastards with enough money to buy another girl’s future when she was just seventeen.”

His jaw clenched.

“They would’ve happily watched every piece of innocence get stripped off her as long as somebody was throwing bills. Leeches. Parasites. Every last one of them.”

His fingers tapped once against the folder.

“Hazel spent years pulling her daughter away from that sewer. And I’ll be damned if I let those scavenging whores drag her back into it while she’s grieving and vulnerable.”

He leaned back slightly, but the anger never left his face.

He glanced toward me, “So I want every name, every address, every boyfriend, every drug habit, every debt. I want to know who they’re talking to, who they’re sleeping with, who owes them money, and who they’re trying to recruit.”

He tapped the folder once.

“If one of them gets within arm’s reach of Gianna again, I want to know before she does.”

1 flipped through another page. Photographs, social media accounts, phone records. Half the work had already been started.

Those were the same women who had taken Gianna to my sex hunt party where everything between us had begun. The same women who had argued with me over her. The same women I had ordered my men to escort out.

“You’ve been watching them,” I asked.

He nodded, “I started the day Hazel spoke to me. I don’t make promises I have no intention of keeping.”

Then I closed the file, “I’ll have complete profiles by tonight.”

Vincenzo gave one short nod, “I knew you would.”

For him, that was as close to gratitude as anyone ever received.

He turned toward the door, but stopped halfway. After a moment, he came back and rested a heavy hand on my shoulder, “I’m glad you finally pulled your head out of your ass.”

“What?” I asked.

A dry laugh escaped him, “I can’t toss a sweet little rabbit into a pit full of starving wolves and act surprised when one of the bastards sinks his teeth into her.”

His hand squeezed my shoulder once before letting go.

“We are who we are,” he said as he looked toward the skyline beyond the glass, “But at least you came to your senses.”

He patted my shoulder.

“It was the right decision.”

Then he walked out, leaving the office quiet enough for his words to linger long after he was gone.

Janedoewritings

Author

Just a little note: everything that happened in this chapter and Gianna’s last chapter spans around three months. A lot of time has passed behind the scenes, even if we didn’t see every single day of it.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 513

Gianna

I sat curled up on the couch with my phone in my hand, staring at the screen.

The call rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Then voicemail.

I frowned and immediately hit redial. Mama D always answered. Always. Even if she was busy. Even if she couldn't talk. Even if she was in the middle of screaming at one of the girls.

The second she found out about Mom, she had started checking on me almost every day. The call went to voicemail again.

A small knot formed in my stomach, "That's weird."

I opened my contacts and pressed Emma's name. The phone rang but no answer. I tried Brianna next, nothing.

Morgan... nothing.

Jasmine... nothing.

Tasha... straight to voicemail.

My eyebrows pulled together. I stared at the screen. Then I tried Mama D again, Voicemail again.

The knot in my stomach tightened, maybe they were all together, maybe they were out somewhere working.

I hated maybe.

I looked down at the screen and typed out a quick message.

Me: Call me when you get this.

Me: Everything okay?

My fingers drummed against my knee. For months those women had somehow managed to actively check on me whether I was visiting them or not.

Mama D especially. She called constantly, asked for my pictures, and sent voice notes.

Silence wasn't normal.

I looked down at my phone again, still nothing. My stomach twisted, across the room Mom sat in her wheelchair beside the large window. Sunlight spilled across her blanket and the wheelchair still didn't look real.

Every time I saw it my brain rejected it.

Mom belonged everywhere... in the kitchen, in the garden, walking through the house, not sitting in a wheelchair.

She looked smaller somehow. She had lost a lot of weight, the thought made my chest hurt. Salvatore sat beside

15 Ban her with several papers spread across the coffee table.

A laptop rested open near his elbow. He looked completely focused and Mom looked completely amused.

"You know," she said, watching him, "most people hire assistants for this."

Salvatore didn't even glance up, "Most people don't trust assistants."

"You don't trust anyone."

"That is because everyone is disappointing. I don't even trust myself half of the time."

Mom laughed softly, the sound immediately made me look up. I found myself doing that a lot lately, every time she laughed, every time she smiled, every time she spoke because I was collecting pieces of her, trying to save them somewhere inside my head.

Salvatore pointed toward one of the documents, "The flight is already arranged."

Mom rolled her eyes, her speech slurred, "Of course it is."

"Our Gianna has a performance in New York," he said, "Both of us need to be there."

The showcase.

I wanted to invite Mama D and the girls too but they weren't picking up my calls or answering my texts. Was Cole giving them trouble again?

Salvatore continued in the background, "We leave two days before the performance."

Mom opened her mouth and he immediately raised a finger, "No."

She narrowed her eyes, “I haven’t... even said anything.”

“You were about to tell me we don’t need two days.”

“We don’t.”

“We do.”

Mom looked at me, “See what I deal with?”

I smiled despite myself.

Salvatore ignored both of us, “The jet is already prepared.”

Mom groaned, “We could take a normal flight.”

Salvatore looked horrified like she’d suggested traveling by horse, “Hazel, I have never voluntarily stepped onto a commercial airplane in my entire life.”

I blinked, “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Mom laughed, “Why not?”

Salvatore leaned back in his chair and actually considered the question.

After a few seconds, he shrugged, “Best case scenario, I’d get arrested.”

Mom was laughing, “And worst case?” she asked.

Salvatore looked completely serious, “I get irritated halfway through the flight, decide the pilot is incompetent, and attempt to take control of the aircraft myself.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 514

I stared at him.

Mom laughed harder, “Salvatore!”

“What?” he asked innocently. “You think I’d sit quietly while some stranger informed me what I can and cannot do for four hours?”

I watched the familiar exchange, the bickering, the teasing. The easy comfort between them, it felt normal.

For a few seconds it felt almost normal then Salvatore turned the laptop slightly, “I already spoke with the medical team. They’ll travel with us. A respiratory specialist. A nurse and a backup nurse.”

Mom dropped her head back dramatically, “You are being ridiculous.”

He folded his arms, “I have enough money to solve problems before they happen.”

“You can’t solve everything,” the words slipped out of me quietly.

And the next moment,.Mom’s smile faded. I squeezed my eyes shut and wished I could shove the sentence back into my mouth.

Then Salvatore reached over and gently took Mom’s hand. His thumb brushed across her knuckles, “No,” he said quietly, “I can’t. Everything else, though? Everything else will be taken care of.”

Something flickered across her face... love, gratitude and sadness.

Mom leaned forward slowly, the movement took effort now. She pressed a soft kiss against his forehead and Salvatore immediately looked pleased with himself.

Mom smiled, “Thank you.”

His eyes softened, “For what?”

“For taking care of me. For all of it... thank you for loving me this much.”

I looked at them sitting together beside the window. Mom in her wheelchair and Salvatore beside her. Their fingers intertwined, their heads close together and suddenly I understood something.

Love wasn’t always dramatic.

Sometimes it looked like a man trying to solve impossible problems because doing nothing would break him.

| My eyes drifted back to my phone, still no messages, still no missed calls. The knot in my stomach tightened again.

I looked at Mama D’s contact picture.

Something felt wrong. I couldn’t explain it but I felt it.

It was late enough that most people were asleep.

Mom had gone to bed hours ago, Jules too. I stood in the darkness of my room staring at the garden outside my window.

The knot in my stomach had only gotten worse. I couldn't sit around wondering anymore. I needed answers.

+15 Por

Twenty minutes later I was pulling on a hoodie and slipping through the hidden passage Silvio had shown me months ago.

I climbed out quickly and brushed dirt from my clothes. For a second I stood there looking back toward the massive estate. Then I started walking.

An hour later I was sitting alone on a nearly empty train heading toward the rougher part of Chicago.

The farther south I traveled, the more the city changed.

By the time I stepped off the train, my stomach was twisting itself into knots. I pulled my hood lower and kept walking.

A group of men stood smoking outside a liquor store. A woman pushed a shopping cart filled with blankets. I wrapped my arms around myself and kept moving.

Eventually I reached the cramped house. I climbed the worn wooden steps slowly, each one creaking beneath my weight. My hand closed around the tarnished brass doorknob, the metal cool against my skin.

For a second, I just stood there.

Then I twisted the handle, pushed the door open, and stepped inside because the door wasn't locked.

Fear immediately crawled up my throat. Every horrible possibility rushed through my head at once.

Mama D sat on the couch. Emma sat beside her and Morgan was leaning against the wall. Jasmine and Tasha occupied the kitchen table.

Brianna sat in somebody's lap.

Several men filled the room and the color immediately drained from my face. I recognized these men. They were

Cole’s men.

The same men Mama D hated. The same men she used to curse every single day. Nobody smiled when they saw me, nobody looked happy, nobody even looked surprised.

My pulse sped up, I looked around the room, “What happened here?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 515

Emma looked away first. Morgan stared at the television. Tasha suddenly became very interested in her drink.

A cold feeling settled into my stomach, “Mama D?”

She sighed heavily, “Kid...”

I took another step, “What is going on?”

One of the men stood, “The fuck this bitch is doing back here?”

“Sit down, I’ll handle her,” Mama D snapped.

The man sat immediately. I looked around again. The atmosphere felt strange, uncomfortable like everyone had already had this conversation except me.

Emma finally spoke, “You need to leave.”

I blinked, “What?”

“You heard me.”

For a second I genuinely thought she was joking then I saw her face and realized that she wasn’t.

The hurt landed harder than I expected, “What did I do?”

I looked toward Brianna, Morgan, Jasmine but none of them would look at me.

My throat tightened. I walked directly to Mama D, “I came because nobody was answering.”

Mama D rubbed both hands across her face, “Gianna, I think it would be better if you just leave.”

I blinked, “Why?” And then looked at Cole’s men, especially glared at the one who had Brianna on his lap, “And what are they doing here?”

Mama D sighed, “What do you need? Why are you here?”

I swallowed, she had never talked to me like this before, “I wanted to invite you to my showcase in New York.”

The room became even more uncomfortable somehow.

Mama D closed her eyes, “Oh, sweetheart.”

I frowned, “What?”

She looked up at me, “That’s exactly why you need to leave.”

I stared, “I don’t understand.”

A bitter laugh escaped Morgan. The sound surprised me, she never laughed like that.

Mama D pointed around the apartment, “Look at us.”

I did. I looked at the stained walls, the broken furniture, the cheap alcohol, the exhausted faces. The men hanging around because nobody had anything better waiting for them.

Then she pointed at me, “Now look at yourself. You’ve got your mother back, your sister and now you’ve got a family that loves you.”

A lump formed in my throat, “What does that have to do with anything?”

Mama D looked away, “You’re not one of us. Stop trying to be. Every time you walk through that door… the girls… they get jealous, they get insecure. You keep flaunting your life in their faces, it not fair to them-”

“I never did anything to make them feel that way.”

“I know,” her voice softened for a second, “But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.”

She reached for my hand, but instead of comforting me, it somehow hurt more.

“You walk in here with your dance performances, your classes, your plans for the future. You walk in here knowing there are people waiting for you when you leave. And my girls look at that and realize they don’t have any of it.”

My eyes burned, “Mama D...”

She looked at me with a sadness that felt almost cruel, “They see a life they were never given.”

I pulled my hand back slowly, “I never wanted to make them feel like that.”

“I know,” she looked down, “but sometimes people don’t have to mean to hurt you for it to happen. Please, leave and don’t come back here. We have no room for you anymore. Please, sweetheart,” Mama D whispered. “Just go.”

My throat tightened, “No.”

Mama D closed her eyes.

I shook my head, “I’m not leaving until somebody explains what’s actually happening.”

Then suddenly a hand grabbed my waist from behind. I froze, before I could react, something wet pressed against my cheek. My stomach turned. I shoved backward immediately with all my strength.

“What the hell!”

I spun around so fast my hoodie twisted around me. Cole Mercer grinned, making my skin crawl. His eyes dragged slowly over me and I immediately wanted to scrub my skin raw.

“Damn,” he said, shaking his head. “You slipped right through my fingers, G. You would’ve been fun.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 516

Every alarm in my body went off at once. I looked around and nobody even looked surprised. That scared me more than Cole did.

I turned sharply toward Mama D, “What is he doing here?”

Mama D looked exhausted, older than I had ever seen her, “We owe him money.”

I stared, “I know that but what is he doing here?!”

“We sold the Garden.”

“I know.”

“The debt didn’t disappear.”

I looked between her and Cole, then back again, “How much?”

Mama D swallowed, “When everything was over…” her voice dropped, “…we were still short.”

My chest tightened, “Short by how much?”

Then she said quietly, “Twenty-five million dollars, sweetheart. That’s why Cole and I work together now.”

Cole clicked his tongue, “You and your whores work for me, Denise.”

I looked around the apartment, at the stained walls, at the broken furniture, at the girls, at Cole and then back to

Mama D.

“No,” the word came out immediately, “No.”

Mama D’s expression hardened, “It’s done.”

“You’re working with him?”

Mama D looked away.

“Oh my God,” my voice cracked, “Oh my God,” I pointed directly at Cole, “Him?”

The girls looked miserable and Cole looked amused. That told me everything. This is exactly what he wanted.

This wasn’t about escorts, this wasn’t about business, this wasn’t about protection, this was ownership, “He’ll destroy this place. He’ll destroy all of you.”

Mama D’s jaw tightened, “That’s enough.”

“No!” I took another step forward, “He’ll turn every one of you into products.”

Cole laughed and the sound made me want to throw up.

I ignored him, “Mama D, look at me. We can fix this. The Capones will help.”

The entire room froze, every single person. Even Cole’s smile disappeared for a second.

“They’ll pay it. I’m serious,” my words rushed out, “Salvatore wouldn’t even blink at twenty-five million. Raphael could probably transfer it before breakfast. We can fix this.”

Shock flashed across her face, then anger, “No.”

I blinked, “What?”

“We are not taking their money, we’re!or taking your money!”

I stared, “Why?”

“Because this is our problem.”

“I’m a part of you,” my voice came out little and broken.

“No, you’re not.”

I shook my head desperately, “Please.”

“No!”

The shout made me flinch, tears filled my eyes. She never yelled at me, never, not once.

“We don’t want your help. We don’t want their money,” her voice broke, “We don’t want their favors,” I couldn’t breathe, “We don’t want anything that comes attached to you.”

The words shattered something inside me then Mama D grabbed my arm and roughly dragged me with her. She walked me toward the front door.

“Mama D-” tears ran down my face and the girls wouldn’t look at me.

Mama D opened the door, cold night air rushed inside. I looked at her, hurt, “Mama D...”

Her face crumpled. For a second I thought she would change her mind. Instead she shook her head, “You need to let us go. Don’t ever come back.”

The tears spilled down her cheeks now but she shoved me out of the door, and stepped back into her place, back toward Cole.

The door slammed shut.

The theater was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

Everything gleamed, the floors were polished. The walls were spotless. People moved quickly around me with clipboards and headsets, speaking in hurried whispers as dancers stretched and prepared for their performances.

Somewhere beyond the heavy velvet curtain, hundreds of people filled the audience.

I sat in front of one of the mirrors, staring at my reflection. My costume was finished and makeup was done. My hair had been pinned into a perfect bun so tight it felt like my thoughts had been secured in place too.

A pale blue tutu spread around me like layers of clouds. Tiny crystals sewn into the fabric caught the light every time I moved.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 517

I should have been excited. I should have been focused. Instead, I kept thinking about Mom.

She was the only reason I was doing this. That thought settled somewhere deep inside my chest.

Claire, Madeleine and Jules were practically vibrating with excitement. Salvatore had somehow rented half the front row.

I adjusted the ribbon wrapped around my ballet slipper and glanced toward the stage entrance.

A voice announced another performer, applause followed. My cue was getting closer, my hands felt cold. I rubbed them together then I heard footsteps behind me.

Something inside me immediately reacted, I turned and I forgot how to breathe.

Raphael stood in the doorway.

For a second I genuinely thought I imagined him. My heart jumped so hard it almost hurt. He shouldn’t have been here. The Outfit needed him in Chicago. That had been the entire reason I hadn’t expected him.

Vincenzo had stayed behind, Adriano had stayed behind, Dante had stayed behind, and Raphael was supposed to be there too.

My mouth opened, “... Raphael?”

The corner of his mouth moved slightly, the smallest sweetest smile, “I’ve been informed that this is generally considered an appropriate response when somebody travels unexpectedly.”

I stared at him, “What are you doing here?”

His eyes moved over me slowly, taking everything in, the costume, the makeup, the ballet shoes.

Something flickered across his face, “I came to watch you dance.”

I blinked, “But Chicago-”

“Will survive.”

I laughed softly, “No, seriously.”

“Gianna,” he said quietly, “there was never a version of this where I wasn’t here.”

Something tightened painfully inside my chest and I just looked at him. The last few months had been strange. We barely spoke outside of family dinners and the occasional conversation about Mom. I hadn’t said goodbye to him before leaving Chicago. I hadn’t asked him to come. I hadn’t expected him to.

And yet here he was.

Standing backstage in New York, looking at me like being here was the most obvious thing in the world.

A warmth spread through my chest, dangerous and familiar because whenever Raphael did things like this, it became harder to remember all the reasons I wasn’t supposed to hope.

Sometimes he would look at me and my heart would immediately start making stupid decisions.

Sometimes he would show up without being asked, solve problems before I even knew they existed, and stay beside me through the worst days of my life.

And for a few reckless seconds, I would wonder.

Then I would remember that Raphael was still Raphael.

He reached into his pocket, “I brought something.”

I frowned, “What?”

His fingers opened. A delicate gold chain rested in his palm. A tiny diamond pendant hung from it. The stone caught the backstage lights and scattered them across his hand.

It was beautiful.

My eyes lifted to his, “Raphael...”

His gaze dropped briefly to the necklace, “It belonged to my mother.”

I froze, “What?”

His fingers tightened slightly around the chain, “My mother wore it often.”

I looked back down at it, suddenly afraid to touch it.

“I wanted to give it to you...”

I immediately shook my head, “No, Raphael, I can’t take something like that.”

“I want you to have it.”

The seriousness in his voice made my chest ache.

“Why?”

His eyes met mine then he said quietly, “Because it matters to me and you matter to me.”

Carefully, I reached for the necklace. His fingers brushed mine and my entire body reacted to it. Heat rushed through me instantly. I hated how easily he affected me. I hated how much I liked it.

I quickly looked down at the necklace, trying to ignore the warmth spreading through me. Then I noticed tiny letters engraved on the back.

Frowning, I turned it over.

“Ti amo.”

I looked up immediately, “Raphael... You do realize what this says, right?”

For a second, he just looked at me then the corner of his mouth curved upward, “It says ‘I love you.’

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 518

He stood there looking at me like he had handed me the answer to a question I'd been asking for months.

Then, slowly, he took my hand. Not lifting it, not drawing me closer, just threading his fingers through mine between us atid holding on, his thumb brushing softly against my skin as though that small touch meant everything.

And suddenly I wasn't sure how to breathe anymore. I couldn't even process what had just happened because he hadn't looked confused. He hadn't laughed, he hadn't said it was an accident.

He hadn't explained it away.

He had simply looked at me... And answered.

It says I love you.

The words hit me all over again, harder this time. My pulse thundered in my ears. I stared at the calm expression on his face. At the man who had just casually destroyed every functioning thought in my brain.

"Gianna!" I jumped.

My instructor appeared beside me, "When I say your name, I expect you to move."

I blinked, "What?"

"Your entrance."

My entrance? Right. Ballet. New York. The performance. I had completely forgotten where I was.

The instructor grabbed my shoulders immediately, "Listen to me."

I nodded automatically as he started talking, something about timing, breathing, posture, stage position, confidence.

I knew he was speaking. I could see his mouth moving but none of the words reached me because all I could hear was-

It says I love you.

My eyes drifted past him. Raphael was still standing there, watching me.

It says I love you.

My heart slammed against my ribs. The instructor kept talking but I heard absolutely none of it.

Because Raphael was still there, standing a few feet away, looking at me and every time I blinked, I heard his voice again.

It says I love you.

The instructor snapped his fingers in front of my face, “Focus.”

I nodded immediately, “I am.”

I wasn’t, not even a little.

“Gianna,” My instructor pointed toward the stage entrance, “It’s time.”

My stomach dropped, the curtain was opening. The audience beyond it disappeared into darkness, thousands of people waiting, months of preparation, everything had led to this moment.

And somewhere out there, my mother was waiting to watch me dance... maybe for the last time.

I should have been terrified, instead I looked over my shoulder one last time. Raphael hadn’t moved, his hands were in his pockets.

The necklace was still in my hand. I looked down at it then at him, then back at the pendant.

It didn’t match my costume. My instructor would probably have a heart attack. I wasn’t supposed to wear jewelry during a performance.

I knew all of it.

But my fingers moved anyway, before I could talk myself out of it, I fastened the chain around my neck. The tiny diamond rested just above my collarbone.

Wrong for the costume.

Wrong for the performance.

Wrong for every rule I had spent years learning.

I didn’t care.

For some reason, stepping onto that stage without it suddenly felt impossible. My hand rose and closed around the pendant for a second then I looked back at Raphael.

His eyes dropped briefly to the necklace, a small, surprised look crossed his face. I caught it and something warm spread through my chest.

My name was called.

I took one last breath, let go of the pendant, and stepped toward the stage carrying a piece of him with me.

And as the lights rose around me, there was only one thing repeating over and over inside my head.

Not the choreography.

Not the music.

Not the performance.

Just Raphael's voice.

It says I love you.

Janedoewritings

Author

You know, it's a little disappointing how everyone can understand Gianna's struggles, but Raphael being alexithymic seems to get overlooked. Not everyone processes or expresses emotions the same way, and that's kind of the point.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 519

Gianna

The stage was dark, not completely but just enough light to reveal the outline of a small wooden chair sitting alone in the center.

The music hadn't started yet, he audience was silent and I know that there were thousands of people, watching and waiting.

I stood motionless in the darkness, my heart beating steadily beneath my ribs.

The necklace rested against my skin, the tiny diamond felt heavier than it should have, then the first note sounded.

A single piano key. It was soft and lonely. The spotlight appeared and I stepped into it like I was someone afraid of being seen.

The theater disappeared, the audience disappeared, the lights disappeared.

There was only the music.

And me.

My bare arms wrapped around my stomach as I took another step forward, small steps... hesitant steps. The kind a child takes when they don't know if they're safe. My shoulders curved inward, my head lowered.

The piano continued.

I reached the chair, my fingers touched the back of it then immediately pulled away. The movement earned a murmur from somewhere in the audience.

I circled the chair slowly, never fully turning my back to it, never fully relaxing, my body remained tight and alert.

Waiting, the way frightened children wait. The way they learn to listen for footsteps, for voices, for doors opening, for danger.

The music shifted.

A violin joined the piano. I lowered myself onto the chair, perched on the edge. Ready to run, ready to leave, ready for something bad to happen.

My hands folded tightly in my lap, my gaze fixed on the floor. I stayed there for several seconds, completely still.

Then my head lifted suddenly as though I had heard something,

The audience couldn't hear it but I could. The memory, the fear, the waiting.

My body reacted before my mind did and I stood quickly, the chair scraped slightly across the stage.

My breathing changed, the music grew louder, strings pulling tighter, tighter, and tighter.

I began to dance, not the graceful ballet people expected. This movement wasn't about beauty. It was about survival.

My arms folded around myself, opened, closed again, one step forward, two steps back. A turn that stopped halfway. A leap that never fully committed. Everything interrupted, everything unfinished like a child learning that happiness never lasted long.

The choreography pulled me across the stage, then back again, then back again, never escaping, always returning, always trapped inside the same small circle.

The spotlight followed, the circle felt smaller each time.

My chest rose sharply, the music climbed. I lifted onto pointe, balanced and reaching upward, just for a second, like a little girl hoping, dreaming, wanting something, anything.

Then the orchestra struck a harsh note.

My body folded immediately, the hope disappeared. I could feel the audience watching. I could feel them understanding.

The next sequence was slower, and harder for me because every movement felt heavy, like walking throughy water, like carrying something invisible.

The stage suddenly felt enormous, empty and cold. I stood alone in the center of it, one small figure surrounded by darkness.

The piano returned and I sank to my knees, not gracefully, just tired, so tired. My hands rested against the floor, my head bowed. The audience couldn't see my face anymore. Only the shape of a little girl curled inward, protecting herself.

The final notes drifted through the theater one by one until only silence remained.

I stayed perfectly still curled on the floor, breathing hard. The darkness slowly returned, swallowing the stage, swallowing the little girl and as the lights faded completely, the first life came to an end.

Then the music changed, the soft sounds from before disappeared. A sharp violin note cut through the theater like invisible walls were closing around me.

The stage lights narrowed until only a pale circle remained around my body. Everything outside of it vanished into darkness.

I stood perfectly still in the center, then the first pull came. My arm lifted sharply, not because I wanted it to because something else was moving it, controlling it like a puppet.

The choreography had always felt uncomfortable to perform, that was the point. Nothing in this section was graceful, nothing felt free.

My movements became rigid and restricted. Every extension stopped halfway, every turn ended too soon. Every step seemed interrupted by something invisible.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 520

1 reached forward, my hand stopped. I tried again, stopped again like glass stood between me and everything! wanted.

The orchestra swelled, the pressure grew. I moved across the stage, but never in a straight line. Something always forced me backward, sideways, away.

I knew exactly what it represented. The feeling of wanting to run while someone else held the leash. The feeling of never belonging to yourself.

My body folded inward, arms wrapping around my ribs, head lowered, making myself smaller, smaller and smaller.

The spotlight seemed enormous now. I felt tiny inside it, the dancers entered then, dressed in dark colors. They circled me slowly, and I kept dancing, trying to move forward.

Every time I did, one of them stepped into my path, blocking me, redirecting me, controlling where I could go.

The audience couldn’t know every detail, they didn’t need to, they only needed to understand the feeling of being trapped, being watched, being owned.

A hand caught my wrist, another caught my shoulder, another blocked my path. The shadows moved me around the stage like a doll.

I wasn’t leading anymore. I was being led. The music became louder, more chaotic. I spun between them, trying to escape, trying to find space, trying to breathe.

For one brief moment I broke free. I ran. The entire stage opened before me, freedom, just for a second. Then one of the dancers grabbed my arm, the movement jerked me backward.

I felt my chest tighten because I remembered exactly what that felt like, not the choreography, the feeling, thinking you escaped, only to realize the cage was still there.

The dancers slowly lifted their arms around me, creating bars. A prison made of bodies until it felt like I could barely move inside it.

I pressed my palms against the invisible walls.

The orchestra trembled. A single piano note echoed through the theater. My hands slowly dropped, my shoulders lowered.

Defeat.

For a moment, I stopped fighting. The cage had won, the shadows remained around me. The stage grew quiet so quiet I could hear my own breathing.

Then something cold touched my collarbone.

The necklace.

The tiny diamond resting against my skin, my fingers brushed it during the choreography, just for a second. A tiny movement no one else would notice but I felt it. The cool metal, the engraved words hidden on the back.

Ti amo.

His voice... his eyes..The way he had looked at me backstage. The way he had said the words without looking away.

+1580s

Something shifted inside me, just slightly and the cage shattered.

For a few seconds, I remained completely still in the center of the stage. My chest rose and fell.

I lifted my head slowly, and looked over my shoulder. Nobody was there. A tiny ache opened inside my chest, the movement began..I turned a few times.

Each turn ended the same way.

My eyes searching. My body stopping as if I expected to find someone standing behind me. Someone who never appeared. The audience couldn’t know his name. They couldn’t know who this part belonged to.

But they understood anyway.

Because everybody knew what it felt like to reach for something that wasn’t theirs. I took three slow steps forward.

Then extended my hand, not toward the audience, toward empty space beside me like someone was standing there.

My fingers remained outstretched, nothing touched them. The music continued and I lowered my hand but it hurt

Then I began the pas de deux.

Alone.

Every ballerina knew the choreography. The man’s hand should have been on my waist. His arm should have guided the turn. His strength should have supported the lift.

There was nobody.

I rose onto pointe anyway, my body moved through the familiar sequence. I leaned backward, trusting empty air, my heart jumped, instinct still expected someone to catch me but nobody did.

I caught myself at the last second.

The audience gasped softly. I heard it, then the music pushed forward. I kept dancing.

One hand lifted toward an invisible face. My fingertips hovered against nothing. My eyes followed something that didn’t exist. Someone that wasn’t there.

I spun again and again, searching, looking but finding nothing. The loneliness built gradually. The way rain slowly fills a room through a leak nobody notices until everything is underwater.

The choreography reached its most difficult section.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 521

A series of movements designed for two dancers. I performed both sides alone, one side reached, the other should have answered, but nobody did.

One side loved.

The other remained silent.

The music began building toward the ending. This was where I was supposed to collapse, this is where the third movement ended. Alone, unanswered and unchosen.

That was the original choreography, that was what I had rehearsed. My body moved automatically through the familiar sequence.

I stepped backward, lifted my arms, reached into empty space.

And suddenly, Raphael's voice filled my head, "It says I love you."

I saw him standing backstage, hands in his pockets, looking at me like he had already made up his mind like he wasn't hiding anymore.

The music continued.

I wasn't supposed to change anything. I did anyway instead of letting my hand fall. I pressed my fingers against the pendant, against the words hidden on the back, against the proof that I hadn't imagined any of it.

Then I smiled, most people probably wouldn't even notice it but it was there,

A small, fragile thing.

The first hopeful moment in the entire performance, the audience wouldn't understand why, they weren't supposed to.

This part belonged to me.

I lifted my chin.

And for the first time during the entire movement, I stopped looking behind me, stopped searching, stopped reaching for someone who wasn't there because he had been there.

He came.

He showed up.

Just like he always did.

The realization settled somewhere deep inside my chest. The final note of the movement echoed through the theater.

Then music changed so slowly that at first I almost didn't notice it.

The orchestra softened until the notes felt distant, fragile like something already slipping away.

My chest rose and fell as I stood in the center of the stage, sweat cooled against my skin, the bright stage lights blurred at the edges of my vision.

This is the part I dreaded the most...

Movement III ended with hope but this one began with reality.

I lowered my eyes. Every muscle in my body seemed to resist, the choreography demanded slowness, control, restraint but nothing dramatic, nothing violent, just weight that nobody else could see.

I moved across the stage.

Nothing mattered anymore.

There was only me and her.

Mom.

I thought about the wheelchair beside the window. The way she smiled even when speaking exhausted her. The way her hands had become thinner. The way she tried to comfort everyone else while she was the one hurting.

My arms trembled, not because I meant it to because my body betrayed me, because I was thinking about all the things I hadn't said yet.

All the things I still wanted to do with her, the vacations, the dinners, the phone calls, the birthdays and all the ordinary moments people never realize are important until they start running out.

My arm lowered, the music followed, heartbreakingly quiet.

I turned slowly, one rotation, then another, much slower than before like grief had wrapped itself around my ankles.

The choreography demanded balance but it felt like loss. I was trying to stay upright while the ground disappeared beneath me.

I sank toward the floor, my knees bent, my body folded inward, simply yielding, accepting.

The orchestra whispered around me, a single violin, a distant piano, nothing else. The silence between notes felt louder than the music itself. I pressed one hand against my chest against my heartbeat.

My vision blurred, I kept dancing, because stopping wasn't an option, because Mom was watching, because she had asked for this.

One final performance.

One last time.

I rose onto pointe, the movement shook slightly. My calves burned, my lungs burned, everything hurt.

Grief hurt and it was supposed to. I crossed the stage slowly, the spotlight narrowed, the darkness around me grew larger, the world shrinking, the light growing smaller until there was only one path left.

One destination.

One inevitable ending.

I walked toward it. The final spotlight waited alone at the front of the stage like a goodbye.

The orchestra nearly vanished. A few trembling notes lingered. I stepped into the light and stopped.

For several seconds I didn't move, the theater was silent, thousands of people completely silent.

I looked upward, my eyes stung, my throat tightened then I lifted my hand one last time, not desperately, not begging, not reaching for a miracle, just reaching.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 522

The way a daughter reaches for her mother, the way a child reaches for home, the way you reach for someone you love even when you know they cannot stay forever.

My fingers stretched toward the darkness above and for one impossible second...

I could almost see her, not sick, not in a wheelchair, just Mom, laughing, smiling looking at me the way she always did like I hung the moon.

The tears finally escaped, one rolled down my cheek, then another. I smiled through them then slowly... very slowly... I lowered my hand.

The music released its final note.

I bowed my head, curtsied and accepted what neither love nor money nor hope could change.

The spotlight vanished and everything went black.

After the blackout, I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything either, the entire world felt suspended then the theater exploded.

The applause hit me like a physical force. A wave of sound crashed over the stage. Thousands of people, clapping, cheering.

I stood frozen in the darkness. I wasn't expecting that, the lights slowly returned. The audience came back into view, rows and rows of people, an ocean of faces.

Claire, Maddie and Jules stood up cheering the loudest, then more stood, then even more. The noise grew louder and louder until it filled every corner of the theater.

I bowed again automatically because years of ballet training took over when my brain stopped working.

The curtain began to close, then immediately opened again, another bow, more applause. The noise somehow grew louder.

I looked toward the front rows, toward the section where my family was sitting and there she was.

Mom in a wheelchair, crying and smiling, trying her best to clap but she couldn't move her hands fast enough.

Jules was crying, not cute little tears. She was wiping at her eyes with both hands. Claire and Madeleine had tears running down their faces.

Salvatore wasn't crying but his expression looked tight in a way that made my chest hurt.

Then my eyes found Mom again and the sight nearly broke me. I pressed a hand over my mouth. Mom lifted her hand and slowly blew me a kiss. I immediately laughed through my tears.

The curtain finally closed, the second it did, my legs almost gave out.

Several dancers rushed toward me, someone hugged me, then another person, then another. Voices filled the backstage area.

"That was incredible."

“You were amazing.”

“I’ve never seen the audience react like that.”

“Gianna…”

my ballet instructor, Lucien appeared in front of me and then he grabbed both sides of my face, “You changed the third section.”

My stomach dropped.

Uh oh.

“You changed it.”

“Yes… I can-”

“It was better.”

I blinked, “What?”

“It hurt to watch.”

I laughed weakly, “I don’t know if that’s a compliment.”

“It is.”

Before I could say anything else, he pulled me into a hug so suddenly and so tightly that my feet nearly left the ground.

Then everything happened at once. People surrounded me from every direction, photographers, stage managers, other dancers.

Questions flew at me faster than I could answer them. Congratulations, handshakes, flowers, so many flowers. Someone shoved another bouquet into my arms, then another, then another.

I smiled when I was supposed to smile, and answered when I was supposed to answer. I thanked people when I was supposed to thank them but my attention kept drifting.

My eyes searched over shoulders, past the crowds, toward every doorway, every hallway, every corner backstage, looking for one person.

Raphael.

He wasn’t there. The realization settled strangely in my chest. I adjusted the flowers in my arms and turned in another slow circle.

My fingers rose instinctively to the necklace resting against my throat. The tiny diamond caught beneath my fingertips, warm from my skin.

I swallowed, a strange mixture of confusion and frustration twisted inside me.

What was that supposed to mean?

He had shown up without telling anyone, crossed half the country, handed me something that had belonged to his mother, stood backstage and told me exactly what those words engraved on the pendant meant.

Then vanished before I could even properly talk to him.

I curled my fingers around the necklace. My heart was still racing from the performance or maybe not entirely from the performance.

“Raphael fucking frustrating Capone,” I muttered under my breath.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 523

A stage assistant glanced at me, “What?”

I forced a smile, “Nothing.”

But it wasn’t nothing because people didn’t hand away pieces of their mothers. They didn’t give away things that mattered, not unless it meant something.

And if it meant something...

Then disappearing immediately afterward felt incredibly unfair.

My fingers tightened around the pendant. I wasn’t thinking about the performance. I wasn’t thinking about New York. I wasn’t thinking about the audience.

I was thinking about one infuriating man who had somehow managed to say everything and nothing at the exact same time.

The restaurant sat high above the city.

Floor-to-ceiling windows surrounded us, turning the entire dining room into a sea of lights. New York stretched endlessly outside. Yellow taxis crawled through the streets below. Skyscrapers glittered against the dark sky. The table was covered with far too much food. Salvatore had apparently interpreted celebration dinner as feed everyone until they physically cannot move, not that anyone was complaining, Jules certainly wasn't. She was halfway through her second dessert and somehow still talking, "I've decided." Salvatore looked immediately concerned, "What have you decided?" he asked carefully.

Jules pointed her spoon dramatically toward the window, "I'm moving to New York."

Salvatore closed his eyes, "Oh no."

"Yes."

"You are ten."

"I'm planning ahead."

"You're ten."

She ignored him completely, "I'm going to live here."

"No."

"I'm going to go to NYU."

"No."

"I'm going to own an apartment."

"No."

"I'm not going to ask you before doing all that."

Salvatore pointed his fork at her, "I'd like to see you try."

Mom laughed so hard she almost spilled her water. The sound instantly pulled my attention toward her.

She looked happy tonight.

I wanted to freeze the moment, keep it forever. My fingers drifted absentmindedly toward the necklace resting beneath my dress. I traced the chain lightly then immediately forced myself to stop.

Because every time 1 touched it...

I thought about him.

And once I started thinking about Raphael, it became impossible to stop.

Where had he gone? The question kept circling through my head.

A part of me wanted to be angry, unfortunately, another part of me knew exactly who Raphael was.

Disappearing after emotionally devastating somebody was practically one of his hobbies.

“Gianna.”

I looked up.

Mom was smiling at me, “You still with us?”

Heat rushed into my face, “Sorry.”

Claire immediately narrowed her eyes, “Oh, she’s gone.”

I frowned, “What?”

“Mentally.”

Madeleine laughed softly into her drink.

Claire pointed at me, “She’s sitting here but nobody is home.”

“I’m literally right here.”

“No,” Claire said. “Your body is here. Your soul left approximately twenty minutes ago.”

Madeleine smiled, “I think she’s just tired.”

“I am, thank you for noticing,” I said.

Claire shrugged, “Or maybe, she is thinking about somebody.”

My face became even warmer and Maddie immediately sat up straighter.

“Oh?” Maddie raised an eyebrow.

“There is no ‘oh.’” I looked at Claire, “You’re impossible.”

Salvatore looked between all of us then sighed heavily, “I miss when family dinners involved fewer emotions.”

Claire nearly choked on her drink, “Fewer emotion?” she repeated.

“Yes.”

She stared at him for a full second, “Salvatore, your family isn’t emotionally stable enough to recognize what less emotion would even look like. And you throw bigger tantrums than all of your sons combined.”

“I am a reasonable man.”

Claire ignored him, “Honestly, the testosterone levels in that house are so aggressive that Alessia literally ran away and fell in love with a man whose greatest achievement was only producing one son.”

Maddie burst out laughing.

Claire shook her head dramatically, “One son, Salvatore,” she held up a single finger, “Do you understand how peaceful that must have sounded to her?”

Salvatore made a dark face, “Rino is not peaceful.”

“No,” Claire agreed, “But statistically he was still the safer option. That wasn’t romance, that was self preservation.”

Maddie crossed her arms over her chest, “Speaking of emotions, Salvatore cried during the performance.”

“I had something in my eye.”

Mom choked, “Both eyes?”

“It was aggressive dust.”

Everyone laughed and I couldn’t stop smiling. The food kept coming. The conversations kept shifting. For a little while everything felt normal and after everything that had happened lately, normal felt like a miracle.

At one point Mom reached across the table and squeezed my hand, no words, just a squeeze.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 524

I looked at her, and she smiled proudly, so incredibly proud. The same smile she used to give me after every recital and after every tiny childhood performance where I forgot half the choreography and made the rest up.

Tears threatened unexpectedly. I swallowed them back. Tonight wasn't for crying, tonight was for this... for Mom.

My phone buzzed in my bag and I dragged it out to see a string of messages from Raphael. My heart immediately swelled.

Raph: Something came up and I had to leave. I wasn't happy about it.

Raph: I stayed for the entire performance, though. You were extraordinary tonight.

Raph: I'm so proud of you, Gianna. I've spent my life around people who excel at impossible things, Gianna, and I've never been prouder of anyone than I was watching you onto that stage.

Raph: We'll talk when you get back.

Raph: Until then, stay close to Salvatore and stay with your security detail. I'm serious. I've already added more men in New York. Don't go anywhere alone. Don't take walks by yourself. Don't decide you're independent for five minutes and disappear. I don't have the patience for that right now.

Raph: If you want to go somewhere, take security.

Raph: If you want coffee, take security.

Raph: If you want to cross the street, take security.

Raph: Are these instructions clear?

Raph: Enjoy New York. Focus on your mother.

Raph: And don't you dare take off that necklace.

A smile pulled at my mouth before I could stop it. I reread the messages. Then reread them again.

The corners of my eyes burned unexpectedly, not from sadness, just from the strange warmth that always seemed to appear whenever Raphael forgot to be careful with his words.

I traced my thumb across the screen.

I'm so proud of you, Gianna

The sentence settled somewhere deep inside my chest. Across the table, Jules was arguing with Salvatore about New York pizza.

Apparently this was now a matter of life and death, "I'm telling you it's better."

Salvatore looked deeply offended, "Better than what?"

"Chicago pizza."

His face tightened immediately, "That is not pizza. It is a casserole calling itself pizza."

Jules poured, "Papa, you haven't even tried it."

Salvatore waved his hand dismissively, "I am Italian. I do not need to try crimes to identify them."

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"It's famous."

"So are several serial killers."

"Salvatore!" Mom gasped.

He lifted both hands, "I am simply saying fame is not evidence of quality."

Jules groaned dramatically, "It's art."

"No," Salvatore replied. "Italian pizza is art. This is bread with delusions of grandeur.""

"It's New York!"

"And?"

"It's New York pizza!"

Salvatore leaned back in his chair, "My little wolf, I come from the country that invented pizza. You cannot improve perfection by making the slices larger."

Jules poked her tongue out at him, “New York pizza is the love of my life.”

Salvatore closed his eyes briefly, the way people did when trying very hard not to commit a crime “One day,” he informed her, “I am taking you to Naples.”

Jules grinned, “And I’ll still like New York pizza better.”

Salvatore looked toward the ceiling, “Hazel,” he said, “Our daughter has been corrupted by this city.”

Claire was laughing so hard she nearly spilled her wine. Mom looked happier than I had seen her in weeks. Madeleine was trying and failing to mediate the argument.

For a moment, I simply sat there and watched them.

My family.

My people.

My heart felt full.

I lowered my phone and glanced up. The smile froze on my face, everything inside me went cold.

At first I thought I was imagining it.

A few tables away, partially hidden behind a group of diners, sat a man, watching me.

His posture was relaxed, one arm draped over the back of his chair. A glass resting loosely in his hand, dark eyes fixed directly on mine.

For one horrible second my brain refused to process what I was seeing. A slow smile spread across his face, like he’d been waiting for me to notice him.

My stomach dropped as he lifted his glass slightly, almost like a toast.

My fingers tightened around my phone.

No.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 525

Gianna | Age 16

The backyard echoed with Giovanni's laughter.

"That's cheating!" I accused.

"It's not cheating!" Giovanni shouted back immediately, "You're slow!"

"I'm injured!" I lifted both hands dramatically.

The thick white bandages wrapped around my palms made even the simplest things annoying. I couldn't properly grab anything. I couldn't climb. I couldn't even tie my own hair without wanting to throw something.

Giovanni my six-year-old brother laughed, "Excuses,"

I gasped, then lunged for him.

He squealed and bolted across the grass. He laughed so hard he nearly ran straight into a flower bush. I took off after him anyway.

We circled the garden twice before I finally cornered him beside the fountain. Giovanni collapsed onto the grass, laughing so hard his face had turned red.

I dropped beside him. For several seconds neither of us could breathe properly.

"You lost," he laughed.

"You cheated!" I told him.

From the shaded patio nearby, Perla watched us over the rim of her coffee cup. The smile on her face had been there for the last twenty minutes. The kind of smile that always appeared whenever she saw Giovanni and me together. Which wasn't often, dad usually made sure of that.

According to him, my illness was something Giovanni needed to be protected from. He spoke about it like it could spread through the air, like standing too close to me for too long might somehow infect his son.

So moments like this were rare.

Rare enough that Perla seemed determined to enjoy every second of them.

A few moments later Gio spotted something across the yard and immediately sprinted away to investigate it, neither of us bothered stopping him.

Perla moved from her chair and sat beside me on the grass instead.

“You know,” she said casually, “I was planning to go shopping this afternoon,” I groaned immediately and she laughed, “I haven’t even finished speaking.”

“Because I already know where this is going.”

“You should come.”

I looked toward the sky, “See?”

Perla nudged my shoulder lightly, “I’m serious.”

I shrugged, “I don’t really care about shopping.”

15 Born

“You never care about shopping.”

“Exactly.”

Perla sighed dramatically, “You are a sixteen-year-old girl.”

“And?”

“And that is concerning.”

I laughed, “How?”

“Because every girl your age should enjoy buying something occasionally.”

“I buy things.”

“When?”

I thought about it.

Perla waited.

“...Books.”

She stared, “That doesn’t count.”

She shook her head. For a moment she simply watched Giovanni chase butterflies near the flower beds.

Then her voice softened, “Gianna.”

I looked over, “Hm?”

Perla was still watching Giovanni, “You spend so much time thinking about school. You spend your mornings studying, then with your father, then more studying and then those horrible sessions with Vance, and then more studying.”

I frowned, “When you say it like that, it sounds bad.”

Perla turned toward me fully now, “The world is not going anywhere. School will still be there tomorrow. Your father’s business will still be there tomorrow.”

I picked at the edge of one of my bandages, “I know.”

Her hand found my knee, “You are allowed to be young, sweetheart.”

The words hit harder than they should have because she wasn’t wrong. I spent so much time planning the future that sometimes I forgot I was living in the present.

Perla smiled, “Come shopping with me.”

I made a face.

She rolled her eyes, “We’ll get lunch and coffee and maybe a dress.”

“I don’t need a dress.”

“Every woman needs a dress.”

“I have dresses.”

Across the lawn Giovanni tripped over absolutely nothing, recovered instantly, and continued running like it had never happened.

Perla sighed, “There is no hope for either of you.”

I leaned against her shoulder, “Probably not.”

Her arm wrapped around me immediately. For a few quiet seconds we sat there together watching Giovanni terrorize the garden. Then Perla kissed the top of my head.

And for that moment, with the afternoon sun warming my skin and my little brother laughing somewhere across the yard, everything felt simple and safe like it would stay that way forever.

“My feet hurt,” I groaned.

Perla didn’t even look up from the handbag she was inspecting, “You’ve spent most of the day sitting down while I shopped.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 526

“Emotional exhaustion is still exhaustion.”

Perla sighed. The saleswoman standing nearby immediately hid a smile.

I crossed my arms, “How many stores have we been in?”

Perla handed the handbag back, “I don’t know.”

I groaned.

Three whole hours.

Three hours of expensive dresses, shoes that cost more than cars, jewelry locked behind glass cases, and sales associates who somehow remembered Perla’s name everywhere we went.

I was exhausted but Perla looked energized. It was deeply unfair. The guards trailing us looked exhausted too and that made me feel slightly better.

“There,” I pointed toward the mall exit, “Home.”

“We’re not done.”

My soul left my body.

Twenty minutes later we entered another store.

Everything inside was bright white marble, gold trim, crystal chandeliers, and clothes so expensive I was afraid to touch them. The sales associates practically sprinted toward Perla.

I wandered after her, half listening, half dying. Perla browsed through several racks before casually glancing toward the security detail my father had assigned to us.

There were four of them, all armed, all watching, all loyal to Giovanni Torricelli, not to Perla, not to me.

Something shifted in Perla's expression then she smiled, "Gianna."

"Hm?"

"Come help me."

I followed her deeper into the store, toward the fitting rooms. One of the employees immediately stepped forward and opened a private suite.

Perla entered first and I followed. The door closed behind us. Then another woman appeared from a side door. She was not a sales associate.

Her eyes flicked toward me, then toward Perla, "It's ready," she said quietly.

My confusion doubled, "What is?"

The stranger handed Perla a thick envelope, then she left. The second door clicked shut behind her.

I frowned, "Perla?"

She turned toward me and suddenly she didn't look like she was shopping anymore. She looked terrified. She grabbed both of my shoulders hard, "Listen to me."

I froze.

Her voice was shaking. I had never heard her sound like that before, not once.

"Perla, what's wrong?"

"Listen."

My heart started pounding. She opened the envelope, pulled out cash, bus tickets, burner phone, food vouchers..

My brain immediately stopped working, "What is this?"

Perla's eyes filled with tears, "You're leaving."

I blinked, "What?"

"You're leaving today."

The words didn't register. My brain rejected them entirely, "What do you mean leaving?"

"You have to run.'

I laughed because obviously she wasn't serious. Then I saw her face, and the laugh died instantly, "Perla..."

She shoved the envelope into my hands.

My fingers closed around it automatically, "You need to get to Chicago."

Chicago?

That's where... that's where my mom...."What are you talking about?" I asked.

Perla squeezed my shoulders tighter, "Your mother has been trying to get you out for years."

Nothing made sense. I looked down at the tickets, "Perla... What is happening?"

Tears rolled down her cheeks, "Your father is never going to stop."

I took a step backward, "He loves me."

The words sounded weak even to my own ears.

Perla's expression broke, "Oh my sweet girl. You need to listen carefully. There's enough cash to get you

My head shook automatically, "No."

there."

The fitting room suddenly felt like it was closing around me.

The guards.

Dad..

Chicago.

Mom.

Nothing made sense.

Nothing.

“Your father has friends all over New York. Powerful friends. Men who owe him favors. Men who look the other way when he asks them to but Chicago is different. The Capones and the Costellos hate each other and we’re going to use that hate for ourselves.”

I frowned.

She kept going, “The bad blood between those families goes back years.

I knew that.

Everybody knew that.

The Capones were one of the biggest powers in Chicago. And my father’s allies in New York had spent years fighting with them.

Perla nodded once, “Your father is connected to New York Cosa Nostra. The Capone won’t allow him to operate freely in their territory.”

She pointed at the bus tickets because she knew I couldn’t read them properly.

“If you get into Chicago. If you make it into Capone territory. Your father can’t simply walk in and take you back. He’ll have to start a war to do it.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 527

My eyes burned, “Does my mom know?”

Perla hesitated, then shook her head, a tear rolled down her cheek, “No. Hazel doesn’t know but listen to me,” she continued quickly, grabbing both my hands, “I will get a message to her. Somehow. I don’t care how long it takes. The second I get an opportunity, I’ll tell her where you are. And your mother will find you.”

I looked down at the tickets again. The words blurred together. The numbers meant nothing. The destinations meant nothing. Everything looked like a mess of shapes and lines.

“I can’t do this,” I whispered, my breathing sped up, “I’ve never done anything alone. I don’t even go to school alone. I don’t go anywhere alone. There are always guards. Drivers. Somebody telling me where to stand and where to go,” my voice broke, “I don’t know how.”

Perla grabbed my shoulders hard enough to make me look at her, “Then learn.”

I blinked.

Her eyes were shining with tears, “You hear me? Learn. You don’t need guards. You don’t need your father. You don’t need Leone. The only person who has ever protected you is you. You survived that house. You survived every horrible thing that the so-called doctor did to you. And You walked back into that room every day and kept going.”

She pressed her forehead against mine.

“You’re stronger than you think, Gianna. So be brave now, just this once. You want to see your mother again, don’t you? Then go find her. Trust me, she loves you so much.”

I let out a broken sob, “But I love you too.”

Perla closed her eyes. For a second she looked like she might fall apart, then she smiled, a sad smile. The kind that hurt to look at, “I know, sweetheart,” her hand brushed my hair back, “And I love you too. That’s exactly why I’m doing this.”

My throat burned as she took a step backward.

“Run, don’t stop, don’t look back, and whatever happens, never come back here.”

The dressing room suddenly felt too small.

“What about Gio?” I asked, the thought hit me so hard I almost couldn’t breathe.

My little brother.

“And Dad?” I asked but I already knew the answer and fear crawled through my stomach, “He’ll kill you.”

Perla’s smile never disappeared, “I’ll deal with your father.”

“Perla-”

“The worst thing he can do is kill me.”

“No,” the word came out instantly, violently, “No.”

Perla reached for me again, “You need to leave.”

I grabbed her wrists, “Not until you promise me something. Promise me first.”

She looked exhausted, “What?”

“If he finds out…” I swallowed, “If he asks questions… You tell him I did it myself. You tell him I ran away. You tell him I betrayed him, not you.”

Her eyes filled completely, “Gianna…”

“Please,” the word barely came out, “You need to be alive or no one will take care of Gio… Please.”

For a long moment she said nothing, then she nodded slowly, “I promise.”

Relief hit me so hard my knees almost gave out.

“Now go.”

I didn’t move.

“Gianna!”

Still I couldn’t move.

The thought of leaving her behind felt impossible.

“Go,” she shoved a thick envelope against my chest, “I put the memory chip inside, the one from Hazel’s teddy bear.”

My eyes widened.

The broken bear.

The recordings.

The memories.

My fingers tightened around the envelope.

“Give it to your mother,” her voice softened, “Maybe she can save what’s on it.”

A fresh wave of tears hit me. I threw my arms around her immediately, desperately, “I love you.”

The words came out muffled against her shoulder. Her arms wrapped around me just as tightly. Holding me like she never wanted to let go, “I love you more.”

For one second I wanted to stay, to forget Chicago, forget buses, forget escape, forget everything and just stay here.

With her.

Then Perla pulled back, wiped her tears, straightened my jacket and pointed toward the hidden exit, “Go find your mother, sweetheart before it’s too late.”

Chicago looked nothing like Philadelphia or New York.

The first thing I noticed when I stepped off the bus was how loud everything felt, cars rushed past me, people moved in every direction, voices overlapped.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 528

Streetlights glowed against the dark evening sky.

And standing in the middle of it all, clutching my backpack against my chest, I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do next.

For a moment, I just stood there, the bus hissed behind me. A few passengers walked around me with annoyed expressions, someone bumped my shoulder, someone else muttered something under their breath.

The bus doors closed, then it pulled away and suddenly I was alone, completely alone. The realization hit harder than I expected.

I had no guards, no driver, no Leone, no father or Perla. Nobody, just me. My stomach twisted. I looked down at the wrinkled paper in my hands. The letters immediately started moving around the page.

I blinked hard and tried again, same thing. The words tangled together. My dyslexia always got worse when I was stressed, right now I felt like I was drowning.

A horn blared somewhere nearby, I flinched. I needed to focus. I folded the paper carefully and shoved it into my pocket before I could accidentally lose it.

Then I started walking.

I didn’t know where, just walking because standing still felt worse. Every few minutes I looked over my shoulder, every tall man became one of Daddy’s guards. Every black SUV made my heart stop, every voice behind me made me speed up, my shoes slapped against the sidewalk.

The memory refused to leave me.

The dressing room. Perla shoving the envelope into my hands. The hidden exit. Then shouting that came afterward when the guards realized I was gone.

The sound of running footsteps. I could still hear them. I could still hear myself breathing as I sprinted through those narrow alleyways.

Garbage bags, brick walls, puddles darkness and fear. At one point I had heard voices so close behind me that I was certain it was over.

Then Perla had appeared somewhere behind them, shouting, creating noise, drawing their attention, sending them the wrong direction.

If she hadn't done that... I would've been caught. The thought made my stomach hurt.

I stopped walking. A few tears burned behind my eyes.

No.

Don't think about it, just find Mom. That was the plan.

Find Hazel Sterling.

Everything else would work itself out afterward. At least that's what I kept telling myself. The problem was nobody seemed to know who Hazel Sterling was.

For hours I walked around the city, approaching strangers, excusing myself awkwardly, holding up the folded piece of paper, "Do you know Hazel Sterling?"

"No."

"Sorry."

"Never heard of her."

One man ignored me completely. A woman hurried away before I even finished speaking. An older lady gave me directions to somewhere completely different.

Nothing worked by sunset my feet hurt, by midnight my legs were shaking. I slept in a cheap motel that first night, the room smelled strange. The lock looked broken, I barely slept. Every noise woke me up, every sound made me think Daddy had found me.

The next morning I started again.

Looking at street signs I could barely read, getting lost, finding my way back, then getting lost again.

The second day was worse.

The money Perla had given me was disappearing fast. The food vouchers were almost gone. The city felt bigger, colder, less welcoming.

By afternoon I couldn’t stop thinking about home. About Perla and Giovanni.

I wondered if Daddy had already figured everything out. I wondered if Perla was safe. I wondered if she was alive.. That thought stayed with me the entire day.

The third day arrived, then disappeared just as fast, and still nothing. No Hazel Sterling, no address, no answers.

The envelope stayed tucked safely inside my backpack. The memory chip remained untouched. The money was gone.

By nightfall my stomach felt hollow, painfully hollow. The kind of hunger that made your body feel weak and heavy at the same time.

I wandered through unfamiliar streets until I found a small park. The city lights reflected off distant buildings, cars moved beyond the trees.

People walked by without looking at me. I sat down on a bench slowly. My legs didn’t want to work anymore. My backpack rested beside me. My hands folded over my stomach, trying to quiet the ache.

15 Bars

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 529

It didn’t help.

The cold crept through my clothes. I pulled my jacket tighter. For a while I watched people pass. Everyone seemed to know exactly where they were going. I didn’t.

Three days.

Three whole days.

And I was no closer to finding my mother than when I stepped off that bus.

A laugh almost escaped me, not because anything was funny because if I didn't laugh, I might cry.

My eyes drifted upward. The sky above Chicago glowed faintly orange from the city lights.

I thought about Mom. I wondered if she was looking at the same sky. I wondered if she knew I was here. If she was searching for me too.

My eyelids felt heavy, exhaustion wrapped around me like a blanket, just for a minute, just until I figured out what to do next, just until I rested my eyes.

I curled slightly against the bench. My cheek pressed against the cold metal armrest.

My stomach still hurt, my feet still hurt, everything hurt but eventually even hunger lost against exhaustion.

My eyes closed.

And alone in a city of millions of people, with nowhere to go and nobody to call, I fell asleep on a park bench beneath the Chicago night sky.

–

A hand touched my shoulder. I jerked awake so violently that I nearly fell off the bench.

For a second I had no idea where I was, there was darkness, cold air, streetlights.

The park.

Chicago.

My heart immediately began pounding.

A woman stood a few feet away with both hands raised, "Easy."

I scrambled backward anyway, clutching my backpack against my chest. Every horrible possibility rushed through my mind at once.

Daddy or one of his people. Someone sent to drag me back. The woman blinked, then her face softened.

"Oh, honey," her voice sounded genuinely concerned, "What are you doing out here?"

I didn't answer. My father taught me to never trust strangers, especially not kind ones.

The woman sighed softly, "Alright."

She lowered herself onto the opposite end of the bench, not too close, just enough to show she wasn't leaving.

"I'll go first then."

I remained completely silent. The woman looked like she was somewhere in her early fifties. A little round around the middle, soft face, soft eyes. The kind of face that looked like it smiled a lot.

Her dark coat looked expensive but worn. She reminded me a little of the teachers who used to sneak me extra cookies when they thought nobody was looking.

"My name is Denise," a small smile appeared, "Denise Walker."

I said nothing.

Denise looked up at the sky dramatically, "Well, this is awkward. I've been talking to girls like you for twenty years. Usually I can get at least one word."

I tightened my grip on my backpack. Her eyes dropped briefly to my clothes, the dirt, the exhaustion, the dark circles under my eyes and then her expression changed.

"You been out here long?"

I still said nothing.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?"

Still nothing.

"Do you have family?"

Nothing.

The questions kept coming. The answers stayed trapped inside my throat.

Eventually Denise sighed, "Okay."

She reached into the large canvas bag hanging from her shoulder. Immediately every muscle in my body tensed then she pulled out a wrapped sandwich and at the exact same moment my stomach betrayed me.

A loud growl echoed through the quiet park. My face immediately burned. Denise stared at me and then laughed, not meanly, not mockingly, just warmly.

I wanted the ground to open and swallow me.

Denise held out the sandwich, “Take it.”

I hesitated and my stomach growled again, louder this time.

Denise raised an eyebrow, “The stomach has voted.”

I smiled despite myself and she smiled too. Slowly, reluctantly, I accepted it. The second the food touched my hands I realized exactly how hungry I was.

The smell alone made my mouth water. I unwrapped it, took one bite, then another, then another. The sandwich disappeared so quickly it was honestly embarrassing.

Denise watched the entire thing, not saying a word, just letting me eat. By the time I swallowed the last bite 1 wanted another one and maybe ten more after that.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 530

Denise smiled softly, “Better?”

I looked down, not wanting to admit it. The warmth from the food settled painfully into my empty stomach.

For a while neither of us spoke. Cars passed in the distance, the wind moved through the trees, a sirer echoed somewhere far away.

Finally Denise leaned back against the bench, “You know... It’s not safe out here.”

I looked away. She wasn’t wrong. I had already noticed the men, a few sitting across the street. One pacing near the park entrance, another watching people walk by. None of them had done anything but they still made me nervous, especially alone and at night.

Especially now.

Denise followed my gaze. Her face darkened slightly, “Exactly.”

My stomach tightened. Denise stood, then offered her hand, “Come with me.”

I stared at her, immediately suspicious again.

She seemed to notice, “Little girl I have got fresh food, a warm bed, and a hot shower. And it’s just me and my girls.”

Girls.

Not men.

Girls.

Something inside me loosened slightly.

Denise nodded toward the street, “You don’t have to decide right now.”

I looked around again. The park suddenly felt different, less safe, colder. One of the strange men glanced in our direction. I immediately looked away.

Finally I stood slowly, still clutching my backpack.

Denise’s smile widened, “Good girl, you can trust me.”

I didn’t know if I should but I followed her anyway.

The drive took almost twenty minutes. I spent the entire ride tense, watching every street, every turn, every building, trying to memorize everything, just in case.

The city slowly changed around us, the roads became quieter, the houses became larger, trees appeared.

Then Denise turned into a beautiful neighborhood and finally stopped in front of the largest house I had seen since leaving New York.

The house looked beautiful, white walls, large windows, wide front porch and flowers. So many flowers. Roses covered almost everything, red, pink and white.

Even climbing roses wrapping around parts of the fence. The entire property smelled sweet.

Denise smiled at my reaction, “Welcome to Rose Garden.”

i

Rose Garden.

The name fit perfectly. For a second I forgot to be afraid then the fear returned because beautiful places could still be dangerous. My father had taught me that.

Denise opened the front door, warmth immediately spilled outside, along with laughter, female laughter.

My shoulders relaxed slightly then I stepped inside.

The house felt so alive, there were soft lamps, blankets, books, pictures and music playing somewhere upstairs. The smell of food drifted through the hall.

And every single person I could see was female.

A girl appeared first, she was around thirteen. She looked at me curiously, then smiled, “New girl?”

Denise smiled, “I found her alone in a park, but I think she might be mute.”

The girl immediately walked over, “Hi,” she said as she stuck out her hand, “I’m Morgan.”

Morgan couldn’t have been much younger than me but somehow her presence immediately made me feel safer like maybe I wasn’t walking into something dangerous after all.

Before I could answer, more girls appeared, one from the kitchen, one from the staircase and another from the living room.

The house suddenly felt crowded. Denise pointed around the room, “This one is Tasha, Jasmine, Emma, Brianna.”

Then Denise rested her hand gently on my shoulder.

“And this is...”

She paused, looking at me, waiting.

For the first time all night, I found my voice, “Gianna.”

The girls smiled immediately, “Nice to meet you, Gianna.”

For the first time since climbing onto that bus and leaving everything behind, the knot in my chest loosened. For the first time in three days, I wasn’t looking over my shoulder. For the first time in three days, I wasn’t wondering where I would sleep or how I would survive tomorrow.

For the first time in three days, I felt safe.

Janedoewritings Author

Swipe up for the next update

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 531

Raphael

One Week Earlier

The house looked like it was one bad winter away from collapsing.

I stood beside Vincenzo on the cracked sidewalk and looked at the small two-story building squeezed between wo equally miserable houses.

Paint peeled from the siding, one of the shutters hung crooked. The front steps dipped slightly in the middle. A rusted bicycle leaned against the porch railing, nothing about the place matched the number attached to the file in my hand.

Twenty-five million dollars.

I looked at the house again, then at the file, then back at the house. It still didn't make sense.

Beside me, Vincenzo lit a cigarette, "You sure this is it?"

"Yes."

He looked unimpressed, "So these women owe twenty-five million dollars and this is where they live?"

"They owe more than that."

Vincenzo glanced at me.

I opened the file, "Twenty-five point eight million."

His eyebrows rose slightly, "How?"

That was the same question I'd asked an hour ago. Fortunately, unlike most people, I had access to answers. I flipped through the pages.

"Denise Walker started an escort service twelve years ago. Nothing large. Twelve women, mostly private clients, wealthy businessmen, athletes, politicians. People willing to pay for discretion."

The business had actually been profitable, very profitable for several years. Then Denise got ambitious and ambition was expensive.

And stupidity was even more expensive.

“Four years ago she expanded. She brought a place called Rose Garden, new locations, additional employees, drivers and security.”

Vincenzo exhaled smoke, “And she borrowed money.”

“Repeatedly.”

Banks had refused, most legitimate lenders had refused. Cole Mercer hadn’t. Street gangs loved desperate people and desperate people signed anything. Especially when somebody promised easy money.

Denise borrowed five million first, then three more, then another four, then another six. Every time something

15 Bes went wrong she borrowed more money to fix it.

And every time she borrowed, the interest got worse, much worse.

I looked down at the numbers, “Then one of her locations got raided.”

“Why?”

“Human trafficking investigation.”

Vincenzo frowned, “Was she involved?”

I shook my head, “No. The poor woman hadn’t done anything close to human trafficking, someone intentionally targeted her and the investigation still destroyed her reputation. Clients disappeared, income dropped, employees left, then came lawsuits, former contractors, former clients, landlords, investors.”

Everybody wanted money, nobody wanted excuses. She borrowed more, then one of her managers stole nearly two million dollars and disappeared. Another borrowed against company assets without permission.

“Then Denise started gambling,” I added.

Vincenzo laughed once, not because it was funny, but because it was predictable. Everybody always thought they would win, nobody ever did.

“How much?”

“Enough.”

The casinos took several million, sports betting took more. Desperation created bad decisions. Bad decisions created bigger problems. Eventually she couldn’t keep up with the interest payments.

Debt was Cole Mercer’s business.

“At this point most of the debt isn’t even principal anymore.”

Vincenzo nodded, “Interest.”

“Mostly.”

The original loans were less than half the current amount. The rest came from penalties, late payments, missed payments, compounding interest. Additional loans taken to cover previous loans.

A financial death spiral.

The kind that never ended, the kind designed not to end because men like Cole Mercer never wanted repayment.

They wanted control.

I looked toward the house again. The curtains moved slightly. Somebody was watching us. My attention drifted back to the information I’d found on the women living here.

Denise.

Brianna was the oldest, Tasha, Jasmine and a handful of others remained by Denise’s side when everyone left.

And Gianna.

The difference between them bothered me. The others had made choices, bad choices, repeatedly for years. Every file I opened contained another terrible decision, another warning ignored, another shortcut taken.

158grus

Another disaster waiting to happen.

Then there was Gianna, nothing matched, nothing fit, no criminal record, no substance abuse. She was the daughter of a Don. She had grown up surrounded by money, security, and people willing to move mountains for her. And her mother wasn’t weak either.

Gianna should have been untouchable, instead, somehow, she had walked herself into the middle of a disaster that didn't belong to her.

She saw someone drowning and jumped into the water without asking whether the person wanted to be saved.

Gianna didn't belong anywhere near these women, especially when her mental health was already hanging together by a thread.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 532

The thought sat badly in my chest.

Because Gianna kept calling them friends and sisters. Maybe they were but friendship wasn't always healthy. Sometimes people dragged each other down. Sometimes loyalty became self-destruction.

And Gianna was already fragile enough.

She didn't need women drowning in twenty-five million dollars of debt hanging from her shoulders too.

She had enough weight to carry already.

Beside me, Vincenzo flicked ash onto the sidewalk. Then he walked up the cracked front steps and pressed the doorbell.

The door opened barely three inches. Denise Walker peeked through the gap. The moment she saw Vincenzo, all color drained from her face.

Then her eyes moved to me, then behind us. The line of black SUVS parked along the street. The men standing beside them, the guns. Fear appeared instantly.

She knew exactly who we were.

"Ms. Walker," Vincenzo said calmly.

The woman visibly swallowed, "Y-yes?"

"We need a few minutes of your time."

Denise's fingers tightened around the edge of the door. Her eyes kept moving between us, looking for an escape, finding none.

Finally she nodded, "O-okay."

The door opened wider. Vincenzo stepped inside first and I followed. Behind us came the soldiers, thirty men easily.

The small house immediately felt crowded. The living room wasn't built for that many people, neither was the hallway. Large men filled every corner, every doorway, every exit.

A coffee mug shattered somewhere in the room. I looked toward the sound. Five women sat frozen around a worn dining table and every single one of them had gone completely pale.

One of them looked seconds away from passing out. Another looked like she wanted to run.

Denise closed the front door with shaking hands. Vincenzo slowly removed his gloves then he looked around the room, "Sit, Ms. Walker."

Denise practically dropped into the nearest chair. The others remained exactly where they were. I stayed near the wall while Vincenzo walked toward the center of the room.

"I'll make this simple," he said, "You have a... friendship with Gianna Toricelli. Do you?"

Denise nodded immediately, "Yes."

Vincenzo studied her face, "That friendship ends today."

Shock flashed across Denise's face, then confusion, then fear again, "What?"

"You heard me."

Denise stared at him, "I don't understand."

"I know," Vincenzo folded his hands behind his back, "That's because you're thinking about what you want," his eyes hardened slightly, "I'm thinking about what's best for my sister."

Denise found enough courage to lift her chin, "Gianna is like a daughter to me."

Vincenzo looked completely unimpressed, "No. Gianna is my sister. I don't care if you love her. I don't care if she loves you. I don't care how long you've known her. The only thing I care about is keeping my family safe."

His gaze swept across the room.

“And Gianna deserves a bright future. College, a career. A life that doesn’t involve carrying twenty-five million dollars of somebody else’s failures on her back.”

Denise’s eyes filled with tears. I noticed. It should have mattered. Instead, my attention drifted somewhere else.

Back to Gianna, back to that skimpy outfit she wore. Back to the night at the void when I realized that the woman stripping for me is my own stepsister.

I remembered her standing in the room at the Void. I remembered the offer she’d made. The thought sat badly in my head, not because of what happened but because of what could have happened.

What if it hadn’t needed to be me? It could have been someone else, someone with fewer boundaries. Someone willing to take everything she was offering.

The longer I thought about it, the harder it became to look at Denise.

Whatever guilt I might have felt about this conversation disappeared.

Gianna should never have been put in that position in the first place.

Vincenzo stepped closer until Denise had no choice but to look up at him, “You will stop contacting her. You will stop answering her calls. You will stop replying to her messages. You will stop giving her reasons to come back here.”

Tears gathered in her eyes, “What if Gianna reaches out first?”

Vincenzo studied her for a moment, “Then you do what people who actually care about her should’ve done a long time ago. You close the door. You tell her to go home because every time she comes here, she carries a piece of your problems on her back. She is not your solution. She is not your lifeline. And she is definitely not responsible for saving any of you.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 533

Denise looked down.

Vincenzo wasn’t finished, “If she shows up, you send her away. And if she begs, you still send her away She belongs with people who can protect her, not with people who keep

giving her reasons to destroy herself Make her hate you if that's what it takes but make sure she never feels responsible for this place again."

Denise's face drained of color but she didn't say a word.

"And if you don't..." he looked around the room once before returning his attention to Denise, "Then the next time I come through that door, we won't be having a conversation. You'll hear a knock."

His jaw tightened, as he dragged out another cigarette, and lit it, blowing out the smoke.

"And then you'll hear a gunshot."

A sharp breath caught in someone's throat.

"Your debt is your problem. Your bad decisions are your problem but if any of you drag my sister into this mess again... I will make sure every single thing you've spent years building disappears. So choose carefully," he straightened his suit jacket, "Because I'm being polite today."

Three Days Earlier

The monitors covering the far wall continued displaying shipping routes, financial reports, security feeds, and enough information to run half the city.

My eyes remained fixed on the screen in front of me. I hadn't read a single word in nearly ten minutes.

Vincenzo's voice kept replaying in my head. The part that was currently irritating me... was "sweet little rabbit."

My jaw tightened because somehow Vincenzo had convinced himself that keeping my distance meant surrender.

That stepping back meant I was finished. That wasn't what happened, not even close.

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed a hand across my face. Gianna needed space right now to focus on herself So I gave her space.

That was it.

Fucking Simple.

Fucking Logical.

Fucking Reasonable.

The correct decision... at the time but every day that passed made that decision look worse.

As if there were scavengers hovering around something that didn't belong to them.

Waiting only worked when the thing you were waiting for stayed where it was. Gianna wasn't staying where she was.

People kept moving toward her.

Leone Caruso.

College.

Life.

The future.

Every day that passed created another opportunity for something to change. Another opportunity for somebody else to put themselves where I should have been.

The realization settled heavily in my chest like discovering a flaw in a security system. The longer you ignored it, the bigger the risk became.

I looked toward the city beyond the glass, then I stood. The decision arrived with surprising clarity.

I have had enough of waiting, enough of the distance. Enough pretending that I was somehow helping by staying away.

Because if I waited much longer, I might lose her and that was unacceptable.

I left the office and went straight home. I stepped inside my bedroom. Medusa lifted her head from inside her enclosure.

My attention was already on the far wall. Most people thought my safe was hidden behind a painting, or behind a bookshelf, or inside the floor.

Something stupid and predictable.

Mine wasn't visible at all. There wasn't a keypad, or a lock. There wasn't even a door, just a section of wall identical to every other section.

I crossed the room, placed my hand against the surface. The system immediately scanned my palm, heat signature, pressure points, heart rhythm.

A second scanner activated. Retinal verification, then voice confirmation.

Then another.

A tiny needle extended from the wall and collected a blood sample before retracting immediately. Five separate systems, three independent processors, no external network connection, no wireless access, no backup override.

Nobody on earth could open it except me.

The wall separated. A narrow compartment slid forward. Inside sat several items, Passports, encrypted drives, emergency cash, a gun, and a portion of my mother's jewelry that I had kept.

After her death, Vincenzo divided her belongings equally among all of us. He wanted each of us to carry a piece of her with us, always.

And one small velvet box that didn't belong to that part, it was simply mine, because she gave it to me herself.

My hand moved toward it automatically. I opened it. The necklace rested inside exactly where I'd left it.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 534

Gold and one diamond, simple and elegant like her. The small pendant caught the light immediately.

Ti amo.

I love you.

My mother used to trace those same words into my palm with her fingertip whenever I was little. Over and over until I laughed and pulled away.

This necklace was different, something permanent. Something she could leave behind. Something that would stay with me. My thumb brushed across the engraved letters, lingering there longer than necessary. /

A memory surfaced.

I was nine. Unable to explain why I never said certain things. Unable to understand why everybody else seemed capable of expressing emotions that felt trapped behind glass for me.

Vincenzo talked easily and Adriano talked more than he should but I couldn't. My mother never cared, she never pushed, she never asked me to become somebody else.

One day she'd simply removed the necklace from around her neck, then handed it to me with just a smile and a hug.

A way of saying something without forcing me to say it back. My fingers tightened slightly around the pendant.

Then my eyes narrowed, because Vincenzo knew this necklace. Every single member of the family knew this necklace.

Especially him.

The second he saw it around Gianna's neck, he would understand. The corner of my mouth twitched because the realization was satisfying.

Vincenzo thought I'd finally come to my senses, thought I'd moved on, thought I'd accepted reality.

I looked down at the necklace again.

No.

I hadn't given up, I hadn't stopped. I hadn't changed my mind. I'd simply waited. And waiting had officially become a terrible strategy.

The necklace disappeared into my pocket and the safe closed behind me. And for the first time in weeks, the path ahead looked simple.

Gianna Toricelli was mine.

The realization settled into my bones with a certainty that couldn't be argued with, negotiated with, or ignored.

She was it.

The only problem was that the first person who deserved to hear that truth wasn't standing in front of me.

It was Gianna herself.

And, thanks to my spectacular timing, she was currently somewhere between Chicago and New York, thirty thousand feet above the northeastern United States and completely out of reach.

THE PRESENT ren

I stood behind the curtain with my hands buried in my pockets and watched her.

I had watched Gianna dance before.

I had watched rehearsals.

I had watched her practicing alone when she thought nobody was paying attention.

None of it looked like this.

This was the real her.

The audience saw choreography. I saw Gianna. Every hesitation, every small movement. Every piece of herself she was leaving on that stage.

The first act made my chest feel tight.

The second made me want to find whoever had ever made her feel small and personally introduce them to several concrete walls.

But it was the third act that ruined me.

Because she was alone and suddenly she wasn't dancing anymore.

She was reaching.

I watched her extend her hand toward empty space, nobody was there. The movement lasted less than two seconds, my stomach twisted because I knew exactly what she was doing.

I saw me. I saw every conversation. Every time she had looked at me waiting for something I never gave her. Every time she had practically handed me her heart and I had stared at it like it was a problem..

A few weeks ago I would have stood here trying to calculate why my chest hurt, now I knew. Unfortunately that knowledge didn't make it hurt less.

It made it worse because I could finally understand what

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 535

She wasn’t dancing for an absence anymore. She knew. She knew I loved her. A strange warmth spread through my chest. The sensation felt unfamiliar. I still wasn’t entirely convinced my organs were functioning correctly.

But it was there.

For once, the feeling wasn’t confusing. It wasn’t overwhelming. It wasn’t some unidentified problem requiring medical intervention.

I knew exactly what it was.

And for the first time since Dr. Walker had practically beaten the truth into my skull, I stopped fighting it.

I stopped trying to explain it away, stopped trying to diagnose it, stopped trying to kill it before it had a name. I just stood there and watched her.

Gianna.

The bright stage lights caught against the diamond at her throat. Her movements were effortless, graceful, completely hers.

And something inside my chest settled not because she belonged to me because I belonged to her.

That was the part I had gotten wrong.

And now, there was someone whose happiness mattered more to me than my own. Someone I would burn cities for. Someone I would destroy men for. Someone I would choose... every single time.

My jaw tightened slightly.

Gianna Toricelli.

My best friend.

My favorite person.

The woman I loved.

Then my phone vibrated. The sound barely registered over the roar of the audience.

I ignored it, my eyes stayed on Gianna. The stage lights painted her gold. She was breathing hard.

The phone vibrated again.

My jaw tightened. Only a handful of people would interrupt me right now. None of them would do it for something unimportant. Without taking my eyes off the stage, I pulled the phone from my pocket.

A message.

Unknown number.

Video attachment.

The second I opened it, everything inside me went cold. The video shook slightly. Whoever filmed it had done quickly.

Ciro sat tied to a metal chair. His wrists were bound behind his back, blood covered half his face. One eye was swollen shut, his shirt was soaked red. He could barely hold his head upright but he was alive.

The video ended.

A single message appeared underneath.

“Does this belong to you, Capone?”

The applause disappeared, the audience disappeared, the theater disappeared. My heartbeat slowed. A strange calm settled over me. The kind that always arrived right before violence. ↑

I pressed call, the line connected immediately. Vincenzo answered before the first ring finished.

My grip tightened around the phone, “You received the video?”

“Yes,” he answered.

I looked back toward the stage. Gianna stood beneath the spotlight. The audience was already rising to their feet thousands of people, standing, celebrating her.

For one brief second, something in me softened. There she was, safe and beautiful.

Then the moment ended, the softness disappeared and it was replaced by something much colder, much darker because keeping Gianna safe was my responsibility.

Mine.

And somebody had just made the mistake of reminding me.

“I know who it is,” I said quietly, my eyes never left the stage.

“So do I,” he answered.

Neither of us needed to say the name.

Leone fucking Caruso.

The audience erupted again as Gianna bowed. I watched her smile, watched her place her hand over her heart, watched the necklace catch the light.

I stood there for another few seconds, memorizing the sight of her, just in case tonight became complicated, then

I turned. The warmth from before disappeared completely. The man who had stood backstage watching her dance was gone.

What remained was Raphael Capone.

And Raphael Capone had work to do.

By the time I pushed through the backstage exit and stepped into the cold New York night, I already had three phones in my hands.

One call to the pilots.

One call to my surveillance team.

One call to men whose job descriptions ended with the phrase solve problems permanently.

Leone Caruso wanted my attention.

Fine.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 536

Gianna

My eyes stayed locked on Leone and everything else faded. The smile on his face didn't move. It stayed exactly where it was, like he had all the time in the world.

A cold feeling slid down my spine, then I noticed movement, not from Leone, from every corner of the restaurant

Men in dark suits stepped out from every direction. My stomach dropped as the first one walked directly toward our table. The conversations around us continued normally.

The man stopped beside Salvatore and leaned down slightly, "Sir..."

Salvatore's expression changed immediately, not enough for most people to notice but I noticed. The amusement disappeared from his eyes, a hard stillness settled over him.

The soldier spoke quietly. I couldn't hear every word but I could hear a few.

"...need to leave..."

"...immediately..."

"...Don Capone's orders..."

Silence fell around our table. Mom's smile faded, Claire stopped laughing, Maddie slowly lowered her fork.

I watched Salvatore stand and every soldier in the room reacted instantly like a switch had been flipped.

Suddenly men were everywhere, everywhere. They appeared from hallways, from elevators, from corners I hadn't even noticed. Within seconds our table disappeared behind a wall of bodies.

One soldier stepped beside Mom's wheelchair another moved behind her. Two positioned themselves beside Jules. Seven more surrounded Claire and Madeleine.

People in nearby tables stared openly now. I couldn't blame them, half the restaurant seemed filled with Capone soldiers.

Salvatore glanced at us, "Stay close."

I looked toward Leone again, or tried to. I couldn't see him anymore. A wall of broad shoulders blocked everything. One of the soldiers shifted slightly, another moved into

place. Every angle disappeared, every sightline vanished like they were erasing everyone else from existence.

Mom looked up at Salvatore, “What happened?”

“We are leaving.”

Jules looked confused, “But dessert just came.”

Claire pointed at the growing army surrounding us, “Honey, I think we’re past dessert.”

The soldiers were already moving, one opened a path, another checked the hallway, two more stepped ahead. The formation shifted smoothly like they had practiced it a thousand times.

Salvatore bent down beside Mom. His hand rested briefly on her shoulder, “We need to go.”

She nodded, the soldiers began guiding us forward. I walked beside Mom’s wheelchair. The security detail surrounded us so tightly that I kept brushing against dark suit jackets.

Every few seconds another soldier appeared until I lost count.

One hand their hands resting near their jackets, another speaking quietly into an earpiece. The elevator doors opened before we reached them.

They placed us inside and the soldiers filled every available space. The elevator suddenly felt tiny, crowded and claustrophobic.

When the doors closed, I tried to catch one last glimpse of the restaurant, of Leone but the doors slid shut.

When the doors opened again, more soldiers were waiting. The hotel lobby looked completely locked down. Men stood near every entrance. The revolving doors spun once, then stopped. A soldier checked outside first, and another nodded.

Only then did we move.

Black SUVs lined the curb. So many that they stretched halfway down the street. Engines already running, doors already open.

I turned my head instinctively, trying to find Leone, trying to see if he had followed us, trying to see if he was still there but it was impossible. There were too many soldiers.

A soldier opened an SUV door. Mom’s wheelchair was already being loaded into another vehicle. Salvatore stood beside her calmly.

I climbed inside. The door slammed shut behind me and locked immediately. Thick bulletproof panels slid into place over the windows.

One after another, the SUVS began pulling away from the curb. The city vanished behind us. every red light turned to green as we passed. The SUVs moved through Manhattan like the city had simply stepped aside for them.

I kept thinking about Leone, and that smile. God, I should have never texted him, it was on me. I started it and now everyone was here because of me.

The SUVS rolled through a security gate already standing open. Floodlights illuminated the tarmac. The second our vehicles stopped, soldiers poured out first.

Men spread across the pavement and only after they were satisfied did my door open. Cold air rushed inside, I stepped out and froze.

A massive private jet sat waiting beneath the floodlights. Its engines were already running. The low rumble vibrated through the ground beneath my feet.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 537

Salvatore stood near the bottom of the stairs leading into the jet, one hand in his pocket, this was completely normal for him.

A soldier approached him, “Aircraft and perimeter secured and runway cleared.”

We climbed the stairs. Mom’s wheelchair was lifted smoothly by a specialized aircraft ramp that seemed to appear from nowhere.

The second I stepped inside, warm air wrapped around me as we settled in our seats for take off.

Mom reached for Salvatore’s hand and he took it immediately. Her fingers squeezed his, “I’m sorry.”

Salvatore looked confused, “For what?”

“The trip,” she answered, “We came all this way because of me and-”

“No,” his answer came so fast she blinked, “Do not apologize. We came for Gianna. We watched Gianna, that means the trip was successful.”

Mom's eyes filled with tears as she leaned forward then whispered something too quiet that was only for him and it made him smile.

I looked away before I embarrassed myself by crying.

I stared out at the darkness beyond the glass. Chicago waited on the other side of the night but for some reason I couldn't stop thinking about Leone sitting in that restaurant.

Watching me, smiling and somehow that felt worse than if he had threatened me because people only smiled like that when they knew something you didn't.

The cabin lights had been dimmed.

Mom had finally fallen asleep. Across the cabin, Jules had somehow managed to fall asleep curled up like a cat despite spending the last twenty minutes insisting she wasn't tired.

Claire moved to one of the private rooms in the back. Madeleine was reading something on her tablet.

I sat alone by the window, staring at my reflection in the glass. My fingers drifted to the necklace again, the diamond rested against my collarbone, warm from my skin, hidden under my dress. My thumb rubbed over it absentmindedly.

I closed my eyes briefly and that's when my phone vibrated. The sound startled me. I immediately looked down.

My heart jumped the second I saw his name.

Raphael.

The font he made for my phone helped. The letters didn't move around as much, and I could read the message without struggling through every word first.

Raph: You're safe.

I stared at the screen, and then second message appeared.

Raph: Always.

My throat tightened. For a moment I simply looked at the words, reading them and then reading them again.

It made me feel warm, which was honestly becoming a serious problem.

A smile pulled at my mouth immediately. I typed back before I could stop myself.

Me: We seriously need to talk.

Me: You're acting weird.

Me: Way too nice.

Me: And frankly, I don't trust it.

The reply came so fast it was almost insulting.

Raph: Weird how?

I stared at the screen.

Was he serious?

Me: You flew across the country.

Me: Handed me your mother's necklace.

Me: Told me the engraving basically translates to "I love you."

Me: Then vanished into thin air.

The little typing bubbles appeared. My heart immediately betrayed me and started beating faster. A few seconds later his message arrived.

Raph: In my defense, I was unexpectedly removed from the situation before I could continue confusing you.

I nearly laughed out loud.

Me: Raphael.

Raph: Gianna.

A new message appeared before I could respond.

Raph: Did you enjoy New York?

I glanced around the quiet cabin and to see if someone noticed me giggling like a little girl as a warmth settled in my chest.

Me: Yes... until I saw Leone at the restaurant.

Raph: I know. I took care of it.

Me: What do you mean “took care of it”?

Raph: It means you don’t need to think about him anymore.

My heart started beating faster.

Me: Raphael.

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Raph: Gianna.

Me: Did you hurt him?

Raph: No. I made sure he understood the situation.

Another message followed immediately after.

Raph: You are safe.

Raph: That is all that matters.

Me: Where are you?

Raph: Close enough.

I stared at the screen, annoyed and relieved at the same time, which made no sense and somehow made perfect sense when it came to him.

Raph: You should sleep and I will continue what I started.

My eyebrows pulled together.

Me: Which is?

Raph: Waiting.

Me: Waiting for what?

Raph: For you.

Me: Why?

Raph: Because I spent a long time convincing myself that staying away from you was the right decision.

I had done to her.

She continued dancing and for the first time in my life I understood symbolism and frankly I hated it.

Then something changed.

Her hand lifted and touched the necklace. The one currently resting against her skin. The one I had given her.

The one carrying two words that had nearly caused me to suffer a psychological breakdown.

Ti amo.

I love you.

Her fingertips lingered there, just for a second, then everything changed.

And a small smile appeared and the sight hit me harder than anything else that night, harder than the music, harder than the performance.

Because I knew why she was smiling.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 538

My heart legit stopped beating for a while.

Me: And?

Raph: And I've recently discovered that I was wrong.

For a solid five seconds, I just sat there blinking at my phone.

Was this Raphael?

The same Raphael who treated emotions like unexploded bombs?

The same Raphael who could discuss homicide, international business, and cyber security without blinking, bu looked personally offended whenever someone asked how he felt?

I looked at the message again, grinned, and then bit my lip to hide it from everyone.

Me: You can’t just say things like that.

Raph: Why not?

Me: Because they make my heart do weird things.

Several seconds passed without a reply from him.

Raph: Good.

My eyes widened.

Me: Good?

Raph: Mine has been doing weird things for months. It seems fair.

There was absolutely no way this conversation was real.

No way.

Not Raphael.

I stared at the message, then reread it and reread it again. Heat rushed into my face so fast I actually looked around the cabin to make sure nobody could somehow see my phone. My heart was beating so hard I could feel it in my throat.

Raphael Capone did not send messages like that.

Raphael Capone sent messages about security protocols and traffic routes. And reasons why I shouldn’t wander off by myself.

Not whatever this was.

Me: I think you hit your head.

The reply came almost immediately.

Raph: I did not.

Me: Are you sure?

Raph: Yes.

My stomach flipped.

This was actually happening.

For months I had imagined conversations like this, then convinced myself they would never happen, then imagined them again, then convinced myself I was being ridiculous.

And now Raphael was casually destroying my sanity through text messages while probably sitting somewhere looking completely calm.

Me: Did you just admit that I make you nervous?

Raph: No.

I smiled slightly.

Me: You literally did.

Raph: I said my heart behaves differently around you.

Me: That is the same thing.

Raph: It is not.

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks were already warm. I looked around the quiet cabin, making sure nobody could somehow see my expression.

Me: I'm starting to think somebody stole Raphael Capone's phone. The man I know would have replied with a five -page essay explaining why feelings are statistically inefficient.

Raph: That's an exaggeration.

Me: It's really not.

Me: Whatever happened to "You're my best friend, Gianna"?

The typing bubble appeared and I found myself staring at it way too hard.

Raph: I never stopped meaning that.

Raph: You're still my best friend.

My stomach sank a little before I could stop it.

Then another message arrived.

Raph: You're just not only my best friend.

Raph: And before you start panicking...

Raph: No, I am not elaborating further over text.

Me: Coward.

Raph: Correct.

Me: Since when?

Raph: Since every conversation with you became dangerous.

Raph: And I don't like feeling out of control.

Me: Do I make you feel out of control?

The response came almost immediately.

Raph: Constantly.

My heart did something ridiculous.

Me: You make me sound like a problem.

Raph: You are.

Me: Wow.

Raph: A significant one.

Me: Raphael!

The typing bubble appeared, then disappeared and then appeared again.

When the next message finally popped up, it was a solid block of text and it took longer for me to read and understand it.

Raph: But you are a problem I fully intend to own. You want proof of how real this is?

The typing bubble flashed for a fraction of a second, and then the next text came.

Raph: The next time I have you behind a locked door, I am going to pin your knees to your tits... that's it, that's all you're going to get from me.

I froze, completely froze. My eyes widened so much they actually hurt. I reread the message because sometimes letters moved around when I was tired. Sometimes my brain filled in words that weren't there.

What?

Where had that even come from?

I sat up a little straighter, staring at my phone. I mean... we had- Well. Not recently, not in a very long time, not since I had put an end to all of that.

And Raphael had respected it, painfully respected it.

He never pushed, never brought it up, never tried to argue. We hadn’t even properly held hands in months.

Months.

And now he was casually dropping messages like that into a conversation? My heart was beating so fast it was ridiculous. I looked at the text again because apparently I had lost all common sense.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 539

But no matter how many times I looked at it, the message stayed exactly the same. My face felt alarmingly hot before I could even recover, another notification appeared.

Raph: Use your impressive college education to calculate those odds.

Raph: Goodnight, ballerina.

Raph: Before I say something even less responsible.

Raphael

Me: Before I say something even less responsible.

I locked the screen and shoved the phone deep into my pocket, my fingers tightening into a hard fist to hide the twitch in my hand.

The blood was rushing straight to my groin even thinking about it. If I didn’t shut down, it will cause a highly visible hardware malfunction right in front of my brothers.

I had six screens running and bright light made the screens harder to read, numbers covered the walls, bank transfers, shipping routes, property records, corporate ownership structures, tax filings, insurance documents, port manifests, satellite images.

Vincenzo sat at the head of the table, one hand resting against his jaw. Adriano occupied the chair beside him. Luca was sprawled back with his boots on another chair.

They were looking at the same thing I was. A river of money, hundreds of millions all flowing in one direction.

I tapped a key, another graph appeared, “The numbers don’t make sense.”

Luca frowned, “It looks like they’re disappearing money.”

I pointed toward the graph, “Three years ago the Syndicate’s cash reserves began shrinking. The year after that, several legitimate businesses stopped expanding. The year after that, payroll costs increased. Torricelli is bleeding money. We don’t even need anything to destroy them, I could just fucking bankrupt them in a minute, they wouldn’t even know what had hit them.”

I switched screens, hundreds of layers appeared and eventually everything led to the same place.

A small island.

I enlarged the image, nothing but trees, docks and a few buildings, security fencing, private roads, but there was no public access, no permits, no digital records, no employee records.

Nothing.

Which was impossible, everything left records, “The money ends here.”

Vincenzo stared at the island, “What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Adriano frowned, “You don’t know?”

“No.”

That made everyone look at me because I usually knew or eventually found out.

I leaned back, “I traced every account I could access, the island exists, the trail money exists, the construction exists, the supply shipments exist, the fuel deliveries and security contracts exist but whatever happens there doesn’t.”

Vince frowned.

I looked at the satellite image, “I checked government databases, corporate databases. I checked healthcare records, I checked shipping declarations, customs, insurance filings. It is a fucking black hole.”

Vincenzo’s eyes narrowed, “Research?”

“Maybe.”

“Weapons?” Luca asked.

“Could be…”

Adriano raised an eyebrow, “Drugs?”

“More likely…” I shrugged, “The point is not what it is. The point is that Torricelli is spending a fortune keeping it alive even if it means, he lost everything.”

The money mattered the most in our world.

I tapped another key and the graph shifted, “Without the island his cash reserves become healthy again, without the island his expansion projects restart, without the island his political spending doubles, without the island he becomes significantly harder to pressure.”

Vincenzo lit a cigarette and watched the screen through the smoke, “So the island matters.”

I reached across the table, stole a cigarette from Luca’s pack, and lit it myself. The nicotine hit my bloodstream almost immediately, taking the sharpest edge off the irritation that had been building in my chest for the last hour.

I exhaled slowly and looked back at the island on the screen.

“It’s the most important thing Torricelli owns,” I said. “Which means it’s the most important thing we don’t understand.”

“If it matters that much,” he said, leaning back in his chair, “I’d love to blow it up.”

I took another drag from my cigarette, “No. We don’t destroy things we don’t understand.”

Adriano looked disappointed.

“Let’s assume we level the island tomorrow,” I pointed at the satellite image, “We don’t know what’s under those buildings. We don’t know what’s inside the storage facilities or what’s arriving on those cargo ships. We don’t know what’s leaving, what’s being

manufactured, what's being tested. For all we know, it's a private laboratory, could be a weapons facilities, an extremely expensive bunker or it could be something much worse."

Vincenzo folded his arms, "What are you worried about?"

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I looked at him, "The government. If we destroy an island and federal agencies suddenly discover classified materials, illegal research, toxic waste, chemical contamination, or anything else buried under those buildings... every investigator in the country starts asking questions."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 540

Vincenzo nodded, "Questions lead to records, records lead to money. Money leads to people and people lead to us."

Adriano's smile disappeared.

I gave him a sharp nod, "If there are hazardous materials stored there, blowing it up could contaminate the surrounding water, there are fishing routes nearby. We don't know what gets released, who gets hurt, what survives the explosion," I tapped ash into a tray, "The smartest move is not destroying it."

Luca frowned, "Then what?"

"We open it."

I looked at the image of the island and at the millions disappearing into the ocean every year.

Then I looked back at my brothers.

"If Torricelli is pouring that much money into a hole in the middle of nowhere, there are only two possibilities, either he's hiding something or he's building something."

I switched screens. A photograph appeared. Leone Caruso, and my jaw tightened immediately. I pointed toward the photograph projected across the wall.

"But this problem gets solved first. He has Ciro. And the bastard just made the biggest mistake of his life. He walked into that restaurant. Sat within breathing distance of our family. He knew exactly who was there. He knew we'd recognize him."

I glanced around the room.

“That wasn’t courage. It was a challenge,” my eyes moved across the intelligence report beside Leone’s profile, ” And he only has one reason for taking that kind of risk. That’s Gianna. Everything he’s doing comes back to her.”

Adriano leaned forward in his chair, “What do we actually have on him?”

I smiled and took another drag from my cigarette, “A lot,” smoke drifted toward the ceiling, “He knows we’re watching him. He knows we’ve identified him. He knows we’re digging into his operation. And instead of disappearing, instead of changing his routines, instead of running, he walked directly into the same room as the people he’s provoking.”

Leone’s entire life laid out across the wall, then I enlarged another image.

Ciro.

Vincenzo straightened slightly.

Blood mattered, but it wasn’t the only thing that mattered.

Sometimes family was built through years instead of birth. Through loyalty. Through showing up when nobody asked you to. Through taking punishment, accepting it, and staying anyway.

Ciro had done exactly that.

I had sent him to the docks after his mistake. Most men would’ve become bitter. Some would’ve run. Others would’ve started looking for a way out.

Ciro had done none of those things. He worked. He kept his head down. He proved himself every single day without complaining once. He took what was coming to him and then earned his way back.

That counted for something.

It counted for a lot.

And after everything he’d done for this family, after everything he’d endured to prove where his loyalty belonged, I wasn’t prepared to write him off as a loss.

Not even close.

“If we move against Leone now,” I said, “we risk losing Ciro. Leone knows he’s valuable. He knows Ciro is leverage. The second he feels real pressure, Ciro becomes a liability.”

Luca nodded slowly, “So we get him out first.”

“Exactly,” I pointed toward the map, “We somehow recover Ciro before things escalate.”

Luca folded his arms, “And then what about Torricelli? If we touch Leone, we’re not just touching some independent operator. He’s Torricelli’s underboss. Which means every move we make sends a message. And if that message is wrong?” Luca asked, “We end up with Philadelphia knocking on our door.”

Then Vincenzo continued, “And not just Philadelphia.”

I already knew where he was going.

Costello.

New York.

Cosa Nostra.

I nodded, “That’s the bigger problem.”

Philadelphia was one thing. New York was another entirely.

Torricelli and Costello had been allies for decades. Men like that didn’t need daily contact to remain loyal. You hit one, the other eventually noticed. Maybe not today. Maybe not next week. But sooner or later, questions would be asked.

And our truce didn’t just protect New York. It protected New York’s allies as well. That alone was enough to make this complicated.

Then there was Allegra in New York.

Claire here in Chicago.

If tensions started rising between the cities, both women could find themselves caught in the middle of something neither of them had any control over.

And that was a whole different set of problems waiting to happen.

“Our truce complicates everything,” I said, “It doesn’t just protect New York. It protects their allies.”

If New York believed we had violated the agreement, every relationship we’d spent years building could collapse overnight, business arrangements, political connections, shipping routes, protection agreements.

15 Borks

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 541

Everything.

Vincenzo stared out the window toward the city lights, “What else?”

I exhaled slowly, “More problems,” I said as I crushed the cigarette into the ashtray, “But I have a solution. We find a way to get Leone Caruso alone. Away from his people. Away from Philadelphia. Away from anyone who can immediately connect him back to Torricelli then he disappears.”

Adriano frowned, “We don’t know how that guy operates. That’s fucking risky.”

“Not if it’s done right,” I replied. “I can build an anonymous channel. Layers between us and the operation. Dead ends. False trails. Nobody ties it back to Chicago. We take Leone alive. We use him to make the trade. Ciro comes home. Leone Caruso stops being useful and dies.”

Vincenzo’s expression remained hard, “And Torricelli?”

“While the exchange is happening, we find out what he’s building. What he’s planning. Who he’s working with. Once we have the answers, we make it clear that whatever game he’s playing ends now. We threaten him into silence. And if he’s smart, he will keep his mouth shut and will stay in Philadelphia. And if he isn’t smart, we’ll deal with that problem too.”

The engine died beneath me as I rolled the motorcycle into the garage.

For a moment, I remained seated, helmet still on, hands resting on the handlebars. The meeting replayed itself inside my head. Leone. Torricelli. New York. Problems stacked on top of problems.

Eventually, I removed my helmet and climbed off the bike.

Most nights, I would’ve headed straight toward my wing, took a shower, work and sleep. Instead, I pulled out my phone. The security system opened immediately, just making sure everyone was where they were supposed to be.

My eyes landed on one of the interior cameras, the hallway outside Gianna’s bedroom, the tension between my shoulder blades loosened slightly. I didn’t know when that had started.

My feet carried me through the corridors of the mansion, past my own wing, past the turn that would've taken me to my room, toward my father's wing.

When I reached her bedroom door, I opened it carefully. There was no sound, no movement, just the faint glow of a bedside lamp.

Gianna lay curled beneath the blankets, facing away from me, headphones covered her ears.

A playlist, probably.

Or one of the ballet performances she watched over and over again.

The sight stopped me for a second, not because she was doing anything remarkable because she wasn't.

She was simply there, safe, warm and home.

Most people described emotions easily. I couldn't. My brain didn't work that way, it never had. The feelings existed. I knew they existed.

I couldn't always identify the emotion itself, but I was beginning to recognize its shape by what it did to my body...

just like the realization that seeing one person could make the entire day feel less exhausting.

I stared at her for another moment, then quietly crossed the room. The mattress shifted slightly beneath my weight as I climbed onto the bed behind her carefully, she was too engrossed in whatever she was doing on her tablet.

For a few seconds, I simply watched her, the rise and fall of her breathing, the loose strands of hair spilling across the pillow, the peaceful expression she only wore.

My hand brushed her waist then I leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss against the side of her neck.

Gianna jumped, the reaction was immediate. She ripped one side of the headphones away and spun around, wide eyes and startled.

For half a second she looked ready to fight whoever had invaded her room, then she saw me.

And the panic vanished.

I couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at my mouth. Halfway lying beside her now, I reached up and pushed a loose strand of hair away from her face. Her beautiful green eyes searched mine.

I lowered my voice, “Hey, ballerina.”

Janedoewritings

A very long chapter!

Enjoy!

Author

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 542

Gianna

1&1

15 8gus

My heart immediately betrayed me.

Because Raphael was almost lying on my bed.

On my bed.

Like it was the most normal thing in the world.

One second I had been completely lost in my music, and the next I had nearly launched my tablet across the room after finding a six-foot-four mobster behind me.

And now he was smiling, actually smiling. The sight alone should’ve been illegal.

His dark hair was slightly messy from the motorcycle helmet. His black t-shirt stretched across broad shoulders.

My face felt suspiciously warm. Raphael’s eyes stayed on mine like I was the only thing in the room worth looking

My stomach did a strange little flip.

Then I forced my mouth to work, “Hi.”

The word came out embarrassingly soft.

One corner of his mouth lifted, “Hi?”

Then his smile grew slightly. A few months ago Raphael smiling was a rare event that deserved international news coverage, now he kept doing it... at me.

My eyes drifted over his face, the sharp jaw, the eyes, the faint shadow of stubble. Then my brain finally remembered something important.

The text messages.

The necklace.

New York.

The things he’d been saying lately.

The things he’d been heavily implying.

The things he definitely wasn’t supposed to be saying if he wanted me to remain a functional human being.

Heat rushed straight into my cheeks, his eyes immediately noticed.

His gaze softened slightly, “You’re blushing.”

I instantly pulled the blanket higher, “I’m not.”

“You turned pink.”

I glared at him, “I did not.”

15 Borns

Raphael looked completely unbothered, then he reached over and tucked another loose strand of hair behind my ear. The simple gesture made my pulse jump, his hand lingered for a second before dropping.

My heart was beating so hard I was convinced he could hear it because for months I had imagined this, wondered about it, dreamed about it, convinced myself it would never happen.

Raphael Capone wasn’t supposed to be lying in my bed looking at me like this.

Raphael Capone was supposed to be emotionally unavailable, confusing, infuriating and oblivious instead he was here.

I looked away first because I was weak.

His voice came quietly, “What are you thinking about?”

I laughed nervously, “Nothing.”

His eyebrow lifted, ‘the liar eyebrow’, the one that meant he didn’t believe a word coming out of my mouth.

I groaned, “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“That look.”

“What look?”

“The one that says you’re analyzing me.”

“I am analyzing you.”

I dropped my head into the pillow, “See?”

His low chuckle filled the room, the sound rolled through my chest. When I looked back at him, he was still watching me, still impossibly close, still looking entirely too comfortable in my bed.

My heart gave another traitorous little flutter. Then his eyes drifted briefly to the necklace resting against my throat. The necklace he had given me, the one I hadn’t taken off once.

Something warm appeared in his expression, his fingers reached out and lightly brushed the pendant. The diamond caught the light, his gaze lifted back to mine and suddenly I couldn’t breathe properly because the way he was looking at me now felt different.

it was as if he’d finally made up his mind about everything.

Then Raphael’s thumb brushed softly against the pendant once more, “I see you followed instructions.”

My cheeks immediately became hotter. I hated him. I really, really did but a smile pulled at my mouth anyway, ” You gave me approximately fourteen warnings.”

“Twelve.”

“Fourteen.”

“Twelve.”

“It was fourteen.”

Then he seriously added, “I considered sending more.”

My laugh hadn’t even fully faded when his hand moved. His finger hooked lightly through the chain, the gold links slid against his skin, once, twice. The pendant swayed between us. Then he slowly wound the chain around his finger.

The necklace tightened slightly against the back of my neck, the pendant settling higher against my collarbone.

My smile immediately disappeared and Raphael watched me the entire time. The chain tightened another fraction. My body reacted before my brain could catch up. I straightened automatically, drawn closer to him. My heart began beating so hard it felt ridiculous.

I swallowed, “What?”

The word came out softer than I intended and raphael studied my face for a second.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 543

Finally, he spoke, “If I asked you to get dressed and come with me right now...would you?”

For a second I just stared at him because normal people would ask where, normal people would ask why, normal people would ask questions, apparently I wasn’t normal because the answer left my mouth immediately.

“Yes.”

Something shifted in his expression, “That was irresponsible. You could have asked where.”

“I trust you.”

I looked down briefly before meeting his eyes again.

His thumb brushed against the pendant hanging between us, the tiny diamond caught the light, “If I told you to pack a bag for a week.”

My pulse jumped, “I would.”

“If I told you to get on my motorcycle.”

“I would.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, “If I told you to get on a plane.”

“I would.”

A small silence followed, then I laughed nervously.

Then he leaned back slightly, finally releasing the chain. The necklace dropped back against my chest. I almost missed the contact but Raphael looked entirely too pleased with himself.

I narrowed my eyes, “Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“Looking smug.”

He shook his head with a low laugh, “Good.”

I frowned slightly, “Good what?”

His eyes held mine, “Good that the answer was yes,” he said and I blushed again. Then, after a long moment, he reached over and gripped my chin, “So,” he said quietly.

I somehow managed to breathe, “Yeah?”

One corner of his mouth lifted, “Go get dressed, ballerina.”

My stomach immediately dropped somewhere near my ankles, “Oh, okay. Wait.”

Raphael raised an eyebrow, “What?”

I suddenly became very aware that I was still sitting in pajamas, “What am I supposed to wear?”

He frowned like I had just asked him to solve a complicated math problem. For several seconds, he genuinely appeared to think about it then he looked at me, “What does a woman normally wear on a date?”

15 Barns

My brain completely stopped working.

A date.

Date.

The word echoed around my skull. I blinked, “A date?”

His expression remained calm, “Yes.”

“A date date?”

He stared at me, “I wasn’t aware there were multiple categories.”

My heart began trying to escape through my ribs, “Raphael.”

“Gianna.”

“We’re going on a date?”

The question sounded ridiculous the second it left my mouth because obviously we were but hearing him say it felt different.

Raphael leaned back, “I may not have extensive experience with this.”

I couldn’t believe those words were coming out of Raphael Capone’s mouth.

“But,” he continued, “I’m reasonably certain that taking you to dinner is the correct first step. Particularly before

I continue the conversation we were having over text.”

My entire soul left my body. My face became so hot it should’ve been medically concerning.

My knees to my tits…

Right.

Then I narrowed my eyes, “Just so we’re clear. I’m not the kind of girl who puts out on the first date.”

Raphael nodded once, “Understood.”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously, “Understood?”

His gaze traveled slowly across my face before returning to my eyes, “It means I will have to put more effort into the date,” then he added, “I prefer earning things anyway.”

It was two o’clock in the morning, two in the morning! Normal people were asleep. I was standing in front of my closet trying to pick an outfit for a date.

A date.

The word still didn’t feel real. Every time I thought about it, my stomach did a ridiculous little flip.

I pulled out three different dresses before finally settling on a white one scattered with tiny red flowers. The fabric hugged my waist before falling softly around my legs, ending just above my knees.

It felt pretty.

I changed so fast it was honestly embarrassing. If Claire ever found out how quickly I got ready, she would never let me live it down. I stood in front of the mirror and brushed my hair until it fell neatly over my shoulders Then I added a little makeup, just enough to brighten my eyes and add some color to my lips.

After that came the heels.

The very same heels I almost never wore because I valued my ability to walk without injury. Tonight, apparently, I had abandoned that philosophy completely. I slipped them on anyway, then I looked at myself in the mirror and immediately adjusted my hair, then adjusted it again and then adjusted it a third time.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 544

My hands smoothed down the front of the dress. My heart was beating way too fast. I checked the time.

Nineteen minutes.

Nineteen.

I had managed to shower, get dressed, do my hair, put on makeup, and pick shoes in less than twenty minutes

I was excited, painfully, embarrassingly, hopelessly excited.

Because after months of confusion, mixed signals, emotional breakdowns, necklaces engraved with I love you, and Raphael Capone slowly destroying my sanity... He was finally taking me on a date.

I looked at my reflection one more time, then immediately smiled at nothing.

God... I had it bad.

I paused halfway down the last flight of stairs and pressed my palm against my stomach.

This was ridiculous.

I had performed in front of thousands of people. I had stood on stages. I had danced through injuries. I had fucked Raphael's brains out but none of that had ever made me this nervous.

My heart wouldn't calm down. It just kept beating harder and harder the closer I got to the garage. Warm light spilled across polished floors and then I saw him.

I stopped walking.

Raphael stood beside a black car with his hands tucked into his pockets, freshly showered, freshly shaved, dressed

A crisp white dress shirt stretched across his shoulders. The sleeves were rolled neatly to his forearms. Dark slacks. Black shoes.

The kind of man who could walk into a room and somehow make every other man disappear.

For a second I just stared because Raphael always looked good, that wasn't new. What was new was knowing this was for me.

My stomach immediately flipped and his eyes lifted, found mine and stayed there.

Slowly his gaze traveled from my heels to my dress, then to my face, the look in his eyes made my pulse stumble.

Raphael wasn't obvious about anything but I was starting to learn him. And right now he was looking at me the same way he looked at things he considered important.

His jaw tightened slightly, then he pushed away from the car, "You're the most beautiful girl in the entire country..."

The words hit me so hard I nearly forgot how to breathe, my cheeks immediately warmed,

"Thank you."

He sighed, "I'm hoping the trend ends there."

I stared at him, "Why?"

He considered the question seriously, "Because if it becomes international, I'm going to have a very stressful year.

Then he seemed to remember he was supposed to be functioning as a normal human being. He walked around the car and opened the passenger door.

I blinked.

Raphael Capone.

Opening a car door.

For me.

"Thank you," I said softly as I slid into the passenger seat.

A second later he closed the door gently and walked around the front of the car. Moments later he settled into the driver's seat. The engine came alive beneath us. The gates opened before we even reached them and then we were gone.

The roads were almost empty this late at night, most people were asleep, the rest were drunk. Raphael drove with one hand resting loosely on the steering wheel.

Eventually I glanced over, "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

An hour later the city disappeared behind us, tall fences appeared, security gates, floodlights, then a large wooden sign.

Maddie's Sanctuary.

My eyes widened, the gates opened immediately. The car rolled forward and suddenly everything changed.

Trees, fields, large enclosed habitats, buildings spread across the property. The place looked enormous, even in the darkness I could tell it stretched for acres.

“What is this?” I whispered.

“Maddie’s sanctuary.”

I stared out the window, “She owns all of this?”

“Yeah.”

My mouth fell open. Raphael parked beside one of the larger buildings. The second we stepped outside, cool night air wrapped around us.

The sanctuary felt peaceful. The only sounds came from distant animals. A bird calling somewhere in the darkness, the rustle of leaves, the chirp of insects.

I looked around in amazement, “It’s beautiful.”

The front doors opened before we reached them. A sleepy employee immediately brightened, “Mr. Capone.”

Raphael nodded once, the employee smiled at me, then immediately unlocked another set of doors, “Everything is ready.”

I looked at Raphael suspiciously. The employee led us through several hallways, then stopped in front of a large building.

15 Barns

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 545

A sign hung above the entrance.

Reptile, Amphibian & Invertebrate Conservation House

Founded and funded by Raphael Capone.

Dedicated to the rescue, rehabilitation, and protection of misunderstood species.

Raphael opened the door, “Come inside.”

The room beyond was enormous. Rows of habitats stretched in every direction. Glass enclosures, terrariums, climate controlled rooms, aquatic displays.

My eyes widened, there were snakes, huge ones, and tiny ones. Lizards, frogs, toads, tarantulas, scorpions, beetles.

Creatures I would’ve immediately backed away from.

His slid his fingers between mine and started walking in the other direction. He stopped beside a large enclosure and inside sat the saddest looking lizard I had ever seen.

One eye, missing half its tail, scars across its body.

“What happened to him?”

Raphael’s expression changed, “He was used as bait in a dog fighting ring.

My stomach twisted as the little lizard blinked slowly.

Raphael crouched beside the glass, “He survived.”

The lizard immediately started moving toward him.

My eyes widened, “He knows you.”

“He knows I bring food.”

The lizard pressed against the glass.

Raphael touched the barrier lightly, “He wasn’t expected to live but he did.”

We continued walking, every enclosure had a story. A snake rescued from smugglers. A turtle abandoned by its owner. A blind frog. An injured gecko. A tarantula missing multiple legs.

Every single one had been unwanted, forgotten and thrown away but they were alive, safe and cared for.

I stopped beside a terrarium containing the ugliest toad I had ever seen. It looked permanently angry. One eye pointed slightly sideways. Its body resembled a potato.

Then Raphael spoke beside me, “His name is Winston.”

I looked at him, “You named him?”

“Maddie did.”

I nodded immediately, “That makes sense.”

Then Raphael stopped in front of another enclosure. Inside rested a large scarred snake. Its body carried old injuries. Part of its jaw looked slightly uneven. The snake lifted its head when Raphael approached.

Raphael opened the enclosure and my eyes widened, “Raphael.”

“It’s fine.”

“That thing could eat me.”

The snake slid forward, straight into his hands. The massive creature immediately relaxed. Its body draped across his arms. I watched him carefully supporting its weight. The gentleness nearly hurt to look at because this was the side of Raphael nobody saw.

His fingers moved lightly over old scars, “People are cruel to things they don’t understand. They see something different. Something strange. Something they don’t like.”

The snake rested comfortably against him, trusting him completely. Raphael looked down at it.

“They decide it’s easier to fear it.”

My chest tightened because suddenly I wasn’t sure he was talking about the animals anymore.

His eyes lifted, found mine then he looked back at the snake, “I’ve always preferred the things nobody else wanted,” his thumb brushed one of the snake’s scars, “I suppose I understand them... as much as a human can understand a reptile.”

I smiled.

Then he looked at me, “They spend their entire lives being judged before anyone gets close enough to know them. They get hurt because somebody decides they aren’t worth the effort.”

The room suddenly felt too quiet because I knew that feeling. I knew that feeling. My eyes drifted away from his, toward the glass enclosures, toward the creatures sleeping inside them. And suddenly I wasn’t seeing snakes or frogs, or insects.

I was seeing myself, crying myself to sleep, tortured for being different, convinced nobody was coming, convinced nobody wanted me, convinced I wasn’t worth staying for.

A lump formed in my throat so quickly it hurt. I swallowed hard. It didn't help. My vision blurred and I blinked rapidly.

No.

No.

Not here.

Not now.

But the memories kept coming, Dr. Vance, Daddy and Leone. And suddenly I understood why this place felt familiar because once upon a time...

I had been one of the unloved creatures too.

The realization hit so hard it nearly knocked the air from my lungs. I looked down quickly, trying to hide it unfortunately my eyes started burning.

A second later I felt Raphael watching me.

15 Bers

I laughed weakly, a terrible attempt at pretending I was fine, "I think... I think I might understand them too."

I stared at the floor, trying very hard not to cry in the reptile building at two o'clock in the morning.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 546

A truly humiliating experience.

Then I felt his hand, warm fingers slid beneath my chin. He lifted my face until I had no choice but to look at hin

Raphael's expression had gone completely soft, "I know," he said quietly as his thumb brushed lightly against my jaw, "I understand them too."

I swallowed hard.

His eyes never left mine, “Because not everything knows how to tell you when it’s hurting. And people rarely look closely when something appears strong enough to survive on its own. They assume that if something looks intimidating, it doesn’t get hurt but some things don’t know how to explain what’s wrong. They can’t always tell you what they’re feeling but that doesn’t make those feelings less real.”

Something in my chest cracked because he wasn’t really talking about reptiles anymore and we both knew it.

Raphael’s gaze softened further, “Just because something struggles to communicate doesn’t mean it deserves less care, or less patience, or less love.”

His voice dropped slightly, he pulled me closer with his grip on my chin.

“So I pay attention,” his eyes searched mine, “I learn their behavior. I learn what changes. I learn what hurts them.

I couldn’t breathe properly because suddenly I wasn’t thinking about the animals anymore either. I was thinking about him. About the man standing in front of me. The man who struggled more than anyone I knew to explain what he felt.

Raphael held my gaze.

And for the first time, I realized something that made my chest ache.

Maybe he loved unloved creatures because he had always been one himself too.

Then he exhaled quietly, “I need you to do the same thing with me, ballerina.”

The words caught me completely off guard.

His fingers tightened slightly against my cheek, “Be patient with me because I’m trying.”

There was no arrogance in his voice, no confidence, just honesty.

“I spent months convincing myself that staying away from you was the right thing to do,” A faint frown appeared between his brows, “It wasn’t. I thought I was protecting you. I was just making both of us miserable.”

The corner of my vision blurred, “Raphael…”

I could hear the effort underneath it, the effort it took for him to say any of this, “I am going to get things wrong. Statistically, I will get many things wrong. I don’t always know what I’m feeling until it’s already become a problem but I’m trying to learn. And I don’t want to lose you because I failed to say something important. I’m not easy, Gianna. I’m not simple and I’m definitely not normal.”

I smiled shakily.

And Raphael exhaled slowly, something vulnerable flickered across his face, rare enough that it almost startled

“I need you to do the same for me, ballerina,” his hand remained against my cheek, “Be patient with me I’m not perfect, Gianna. I don’t always know how to explain what’s happening inside my own head.”

A humorless smile touched his mouth.

“Half the time I need a therapist, three security reports, and a minor psychological crisis just to identify an emotion.”

A watery laugh escaped me.

Raphael’s eyes softened, “But I know this. I know that you matter to me more than anyone else.”

My heart stopped then started again twice as fast.

“I know that when something happens to you, it affects me. I know that seeing you happy makes my day better. And I know that every plan I make now... somehow ends with you in it.”

My eyes immediately burned.

“And if I occasionally fail to find the correct words...”

His forehead settled gently against mine. The movement was so soft it nearly broke my heart. The large snake remained wrapped around him, completely relaxed, but I wasn’t paying attention to it anymore.

“I am hoping you’ll be intelligent enough to judge me by everything else I do... because I am trying very hard to learn how to say the things you deserve to hear.”

And that felt even more intimate than hearing the words themselves.

Janedoewritings

Author

Guys, if anyone has concerns about the update schedule, I’ve already explained everything in detail in the disclaimer before the book even started. I always make sure to let my readers know these things in advance.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 547

Gianna

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For a second I couldn't say anything. My forehead stayed pressed against his. My chest hurt in the strangest way because nobody had ever spoken to me like this before.

Most people said beautiful things because they knew how.

Raphael said beautiful things by accident.

My eyes burned again. I hated crying. Especially in front of him. Especially while standing next to a giant snake.

My laugh came out shaky, "You realize this is a terrible strategy, right?" I sniffed and wiped beneath my eye," You bring me to a sanctuary full of abused animals. You compare yourself to them. You basically tell me you've been miserable without me."

He tilted his head to the side, "That was not the intended conclusion."

I let out a laugh, "It was absolutely the intended conclusion."

Then his thumb brushed beneath my eye, wiping away a tear, "I don't like when you cry."

I smiled weakly, "Then don't make me cry."

"I wasn't trying to..."

The snake shifted slightly around his shoulders. For some reason that made the entire situation even more ridiculous.

I pointed at it, "You know we're having an emotional moment while you're wearing a snake."

Raphael looked down, "The snake is not interfering."

"The snake is absolutely interfering."

“It has been very respectful of our space.”

I laughed so hard I had to cover my face. Raphael looked pleased with himself.

When had this happened?

When had he become funny?

That felt unfair.

After a minute my laughter faded as he put the snake back into its enclosure and suddenly something occurred to me, I didn’t want him to stop talking, not yet.

I looked up at him, “Raphael?”

“Yeah?”

I hesitated, “When did this happen?”

“When did what happen?”

I swallowed, “This.”

My hand moved vaguely between us.

Raphael became very still, his eyes shifted away from mine for a second, “I don’t know when it started but I know when I noticed it.”

My heart skipped, “When?”

His jaw tightened slightly, “After you kissed me on the cheek for the first time.”

My breath caught, “When did that happen?”

I remember kissing him on the cheek in the garage after I found out about Mom’s ALS and ended up hurting Raphael because of it.

Raphael looked away briefly, “It was after you helped me replant my mother’s roses and then we were studying together… That should not have affected me as much as it did.”

A smile tugged at my mouth, “But it did?”

His expression turned completely serious, “Catastrophically. I spent the next three days thinking about it.”

My jaw dropped, “You’re telling me you spent three entire days obsessing over a kiss on the cheek?”

Raphael gave me a nod, “Yes.”

I stared at him, then another realization hit me. My mouth slowly fell open, “Oh my God. Is that why you immediately disappeared afterward?”

A guilty look flickered across his face for half a second.

I gasped, “Raphael Capone. You left me sitting there wondering if I had completely crossed a line.”

His expression became even more serious, “I was conducting an internal investigation.”

I breathed out in amusement, “That’s not an investigation. That’s a crush. Oh my God, you had a crush on me!”

Then I laughed so hard I nearly doubled over.

Raphael simply waited for me to recover, then he added, “Call it whatever, that little touch altered my brain chemistry.”

I took a step closer, wrapping my arms around his neck, “Is that so?”

His hand settled against my waist immediately, pulling me closer, and when he spoke again his voice was so quiet I almost missed it.

“I think….” he frowned slightly, “I think somewhere along the way…” his thumb brushed softly against my side, ” You became my favorite thing.”

My heart was doing things that probably required medical attention. I stared at him and Raphael stared back completely calm. As if he hadn’t just casually destroyed my entire nervous system.

“Do you have any idea how unfair you are?” I asked.

A small crease appeared between his brows. His thumb brushed my side, “Explain.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 548

I laughed softly, “You spend months acting emotionally unavailable.”

“I was emotionally unavailable.”

“You gave me whiplash.”

His expression remained serious, “I did not do it intentionally.”

Raphael’s hand slid slightly higher against my waist.

“I know now.”

Raphael’s hand slid slightly higher against my waist.

“Do you know what the worst part was?”

His eyes searched mine, “What?”

I looked down briefly, because suddenly this felt terrifying, more terrifying than anything he had admitted tonight, “After all that, I couldn’t stop what I felt for you. Which was honestly very hard for me.”

His hand tightened slightly against my waist.

I swallowed, “There were so many reasons it was a terrible idea. You were intimidating. You barely talked about your feelings. You confused me constantly. Sometimes I genuinely thought you hated me.”

His eyebrows pulled together immediately, “I never hated you.”

“You did. You called me a gold digger.”

His expression flattened, “That was one time.”

“One time?” I repeated. “You looked at me like I was personally responsible for the collapse of western civilization.”

A faint grimace appeared on his face.

“You were horrible,” I added.

“I was suspicious.”

“You were rude.”

“I was conducting due diligence.”

“On me?”

“You were living in my house.”

I stared at him in disbelief, “See? This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

His hand tightened slightly at my waist, “For the record,” he said, completely serious, “I regretted that almost immediately.”

I blinked, “Immediately?”

A pause, “Within forty-eight hours.”

My mouth fell open, “Raphael!”

“What?”

“That is not immediately.”

“It is for me.”

I smiled, shaking my head and then I looked away for a second, toward the sleeping animals, anywhere except him because this part felt too exposed.

“When it first happened, I kept waiting for it to go away,” my voice had become quieter, “It didn’t.”

Raphael listened completely focused without interrupting, the way he always did.

“I told myself I was imagining things,” I laughed weakly, “Then you would do something ridiculous.”

His expression remained serious, “What qualifies as ridiculous?”

I looked up at him, my chest tightening. “It was a hundred little things, Raphael. The way you always seemed to know when I was struggling before anyone else did. The way you took care of me when I wasn’t even taking care of myself. The hunt you arranged for me. The app you built so reading wouldn’t feel like a battle every day. The way you helped me when I was hurting myself. The job you gave me when I had no confidence left, when I didn’t believe I was capable of anything. You made me feel useful. You made me feel proud of myself again. And you listened, really listened. Every small thing I told you mattered to you. You remembered things nobody else would’ve remembered.”

The lump in my throat returned.

“I kept trying to convince myself it didn’t mean anything because you didn’t... It never worked and I was scared to tell you.”

The confession came out barely above a whisper.

Raphael became very still, “Why?”

I laughed softly because the answer felt obvious, “Because you were Raphael.”

His forehead creased.

That only made me smile, “See? That’s exactly what I mean.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.”

My fingers lightly played with the collar of his shirt, “You were this impossible perfect man who looked like he could survive anything. You never seemed uncertain. You always looked so sure of yourself. So controlled and I wasn’t.”

The words hurt more than I expected.

“I was terrified. I thought if I told you the truth and you didn’t feel the same way...”

I couldn’t finish the sentence. I didn’t need to. Raphael understood, I could see it in his eyes.

Then his hand left my waist, only so he could cup my face. His thumb brushed softly across my cheek, “Gianna.”

I looked up at him.

15 Bors

He shook his head, “I wasn’t rejecting you. I was trying to understand what was happening to me. I wish I had figured it out sooner.”

“You figured it out eventually.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 549

“Yes.”

The words settled directly in my chest as we stared at one another for a few more moments.

“You know,” he said quietly, “I had an entire evening planned.”

I smiled, “What is next?”

Raphael glanced around the reptile house then back at me, “I was going to show you the rehabilitation center.”

“Mm-hm.”

“The veterinary wing.”

I nodded, “Okay.”

“The turtle pond.”

A laugh escaped me, “The turtle pond?”

Then Raphael looked down at me for a long moment, long enough that my stomach started flipping again.

His voice lowered, “But then you started looking at me like that.”

My heart skipped, “Like what?”

His hand tightened slightly at my waist, “Like you are now.’

I swallowed, “Oh.”

Raphael nodded once, “Which has significantly disrupted my schedule.”

I laughed softly, “Your schedule?”

“Yes,” he breathed out.

“What a tragedy.”

“It is.”

His face remained perfectly serious, “The turtle presentation has been delayed.”

I buried my face against his shoulder, laughing. And for the first time all night, I felt him laugh too. The sound wrapped itself around me and suddenly I realized I would do almost anything just to hear it again.

The second we left the sanctuary, Raphael reached into the back seat and put a blindfold over my eyes and suddenly I couldn't see anything.

The car moved through the darkness while I sat beside him trying to figure out where we were going.

Every few minutes I attempted to guess. Every few minutes I was wrong. Raphael refused to provide any useful information.

Eventually I crossed my arms, "I hate surprises."

The drive seemed to last forever, then finally the car slowed. A gate opened somewhere nearby. The vehicle rolled

forward before coming to a stop.

My heart immediately started beating faster. Raphael climbed out first, a second later my door opened, large hands settled gently around mine, "Careful."

I rolled my eyes beneath the blindfold, "I am perfectly capable of walking."

Slowly he guided me forward, cool air brushed against my skin, the smell hit me first, fresh water, clean air, trees and the faint scent of wood smoke.

My confusion deepened.

Then Raphael stopped behind me, his fingers brushed the knot, "Ready?"

The blindfold slipped away. I blinked and forgot how to breathe. The lake stretched endlessly in front of us. Moonlight shimmered across the dark water like scattered silver.

A pavilion sat near the shoreline, built from stone and dark wood. Warm lights glowed through large windows. Lanterns flickered softly outside. Nearby, a fire burned inside a stone fireplace, casting golden light across everything.

I turned slowly, "Raphael..."

His eyes stayed on me instead of the pavilion, "Do you like it?"

I looked back at the lake, then the lights, then him. I didn't know what to say because no one has done things like that for me before, "It's beautiful."

Inside the pavilion was even better. A long table sat near the windows overlooking the water, candles glowed softly, fresh flowers rested in small glass vases.

Everything looked elegant, then I looked at the food and immediately stopped.

My eyes widened, “Is that…”

A burger, and not just a burger. A ridiculously fancy burger, next to it sat truffle fries, a gourmet milkshake, mini tacos, mac and cheese and tiny desserts.

Every single thing on the table was something I loved. Every single thing looked like it belonged in a magazine.

I slowly turned toward him, “Raphael.”

He pulled out my chair.

I sat automatically, “Raphael.”

He took his own seat.

“Raphael.”

“What? How do you know all my favorite foods?”

His expression remained completely calm, “I possess eyes.”

I stared.

He rolled his eyes, “You order the same things repeatedly.”

“You memorized my takeout orders?”

“Obviously.”

My heart nearly exploded.

A man in a chef’s jacket appeared briefly, explained something about healthier ingredients and preparation methods, then disappeared again.

I barely heard him because I was still staring at Raphael, then something even more shocking happened. Raphael picked up a burger.

A burger.

An actual burger.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 550

He noticed immediately, “What?”

I pointed, “You.”

He looked down at the burger then back at me, “Yes.”

“You’re eating that.”

“That is generally how food works.”

I couldn’t believe this, “You eat healthier than anyone I’ve ever met. Every meal is carefully planned. Everything has protein, vegetables, vitamins, minerals, and whatever other things your body apparently requires to function at maximum efficiency.”

“I eat other things.”

“No you don’t.”

“I do.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Well, I ate your pussy quite a lot. Didn’t hear you complaining then…”

My jaw dropped. I stared at him and my left eye twitched. Did he just say what I think he just said?

Raphael calmly continued eating like he hadn’t just launched my soul directly into the sun.

He chewed calmly, swallowed, then lifted an eyebrow, “Are you having a medical emergency?”

That did it.

I grabbed the nearest napkin and threw it directly at his head.

For the rest of dinner, he continued making dry comments with a completely straight face, each one somehow worse than the last. Every time I recovered, he said something else and sent me right back into another fit of laughter.

At some point my cheeks started hurting, at another point I almost spilled my drink. Raphael looked entirely too pleased with himself. The worst part was that he never seemed to be trying.

He would simply say something outrageous in the calmest voice imaginable and then watch me fall apart.

By the time we finished eating, the plates had been cleared away and my stomach hurt from laughing almost as much as it hurt from the food.

The lake shimmered beyond the windows of the pavilion, silver moonlight dancing across the dark water.

I glanced outside and immediately made a decision, “I want to go down there.”

Raphael followed my gaze toward the shoreline, “The beach?”

I nodded.

“Right now?”

I nodded again.

A brief silence followed.

Then one corner of his mouth lifted, “You’re lucky I can’t say no to you.”

My heart did a small, embarrassing little flip.

And the moment we stepped outside, the cold air wrapped around us.

The lake stretched endlessly beside us, dark and silver beneath the moonlight. Gentle waves rolled onto the shore, washing over smooth stones before retreating again.

Without a word, Raphael draped his jacket over my shoulders.

We started walking. For a while, neither of us spoke. The silence felt easy, and comfortable. Our footsteps left shallow marks in the sand. The water glimmered beside us.

Then I looked sideways at him.

Raphael was staring out at the water, hands in his pockets, looking impossibly serious for someone who had just eaten a burger.

A burger.

I still wasn’t over it.

“What?” he asked.

I blinked, “Nothing.”

His eyes narrowed, “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“You are smiling.”

“I smile sometimes.”

“You smile like that when you’re about to become a problem.”

I gasped dramatically, “Raphael Capone, I am offended.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“I am a delight.”

“You are a menace when you are alone with me.”

I grinned, “See? That’s much nicer.”

He frowned, “It wasn’t intended as a compliment.”

“I accepted it as one.”

His sigh echoed across the shoreline, then another thought occurred to me. A terrible thought.

My favorite kind.

I glanced up at him, “Do you know what I learned tonight?”

“No.”

15 Bers

“You eat burgers,” I continued walking, “Regular people food. You chew.”

His eyes closed briefly, “You thought I didn’t chew?”

“I don’t know what you do.”

“I eat.”

“You consume carefully measured nutritional substances. I bet your breakfast has spreadsheets.”

“Gianna.”

“I bet your vegetables are organized alphabetically.”

“Gianna.”

“I bet-”

Then I kept going because I clearly valued my own survival very little.

“You probably read instruction manuals for fun.”

“I don’t.”

I smiled sweetly, “Do you organize your socks by color?”

There was silence.

My eyes widened, “Oh my God.”

Raphael looked away.

I gasped, “You organize your socks.”

“They are categorized efficiently.”

I doubled over laughing. Raphael looked completely pissed and unfortunately for him, that only made me laugh harder. Then for the next ten minutes I continued my campaign of harassment.