My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 51

Raphael

+15 Benus

She didn’t look at Vincenzo when she said it.

She looked straight at me. Her chin lifted just enough to make the point clear.

“I’m not a charity case.”

For a second nobody spoke.

Gianna stood there barefoot in the middle of Vincenzo’s study and every inch of her posture screamed the same thing.

I don’t need any of you.

Interesting.

Vincenzo let out a slow breath, the sound somewhere between tired and amused.

“We never said you were,” he replied calmly.

His tone stayed even, patient in that way men get when they’re explaining something obvious to a stubborn child.

“If it makes you feel any better,” he continued, “every woman in this house has the same arrangements,” he gestured lazily toward the sitting area, “My wife Claire. My sister-in-law Madeleine. Every woman under my roof. It is my responsibility to take care of the women and children in my family,” he said. “You’re not some special exception, Gianna.”

Her jaw tightened.

Vincenzo continued like the matter was already settled.

“Your mother’s accounts are already arranged,” he added, “Jules as well.”

That finally made Gianna blink in surprise.

“A trust has been set aside for her,” he said. “She’ll be leaving that public school soon and transferring to a proper private one. It’s the least I can do after your mother married my father.”

To anyone with sense, the conversation would have ended there.

But Gianna wasn’t anyone with sense.

I could see it in the way her fingers curled tighter at her sides. In the stubborn set of her shoulders. In the way her spine straightened instead of bending.

She didn’t look grateful.

She looked angry like someone had just insulted her.

The pride on that girl was unbelievable.

I leaned back slightly against the edge of the desk, crossing my arms while I watched her.

God.

Women like her were exhausting.

The irony almost made me laugh.

She lived in our house, walked on our floors and somehow still believed she was standing on her own two feet.

The arrogance of it was almost impressive.

She had that kind of pride that hadn’t been broken yet. The kind that thought it never would be. A slow, quiet thought slid through my head.

That spine would snap beautifully.

Not today, not in this room but eventually.

Everyone bent eventually.

People always did.

Especially people who were foolish enough to think they didn’t need anyone.

And Gianna looked exactly like the kind of woman who would fight it the whole way down.

Which, unfortunately for her...

...only made the process more entertaining.

Gianna's reaction came fast. The moment Vincenzo mentioned Jewel, something sharp flashed across her face. The anger that had been simmering in her eyes hardened into something colder.

Her head turned toward him immediately, "No."

Vincenzo's brows lifted slightly. Gianna took a step forward.

"You don't need to do anything for Jules," she added, "She's my little sister, not yours. You can set up whatever accounts you want for my mother," she added, her eyes flashing to her mother now, glaring at her, "She married into this family. She has the Capone name now. But Jules and I don't. She's not a Capone and neither am I."

My jaw tightened slightly where I leaned against the desk. Most people in this city would have killed for that name. She was pushing it away like it was something dirty.

"So don't make plans for her," she said. "Don't move her school. Don't set up a trust fund. That's my responsibility."

For a second Vincenzo studied her quietly, his fingers resting on the desk as he considered her words.

Dad rubbed his temple again like this entire conversation was giving him a migraine.

Adriano let out a slow, annoyed breath through his nose but I couldn't stop watching Gianna. She was ridiculous, irritating and strangely fascinating all at once.

+15 Benus

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"Gianna," he said slowly, "that girl lives under my

roof."

"She lives with me," Gianna shot back instantly, "And I've been taking care of Jules long before we stepped foot in this house."

I pushed myself off the desk before I even realized I was moving. The room was quiet enough that the sound of my shoes against the floor echoed slightly as I stepped closer.

No one talks to my older brother like that.

Gianna's eyes flicked toward me immediately. I stopped a few feet away from her, sliding one hand into my pocket as I studied her face.

"You really enjoy making things harder for yourself, don't you?" I said lazily.

Her eyes narrowed, "That's not what I'm doing."

I tilted my head slightly, "No?" my gaze flicked briefly toward Vincenzo before returning to her, "A man offers to secure your future," I continued calmly, "and instead of using the opportunity, you decide to start a speech about independence. Very dramatic."

Her jaw clenched, "I'm not interested in living off someone else's money."

"That's a charming fantasy," I said, "But reality tends to be less sentimental."

The color in her cheeks deepened, "I didn't ask for any of this," she snapped.

"No," I agreed smoothly, "You didn't but you're here anyway."

She glared at me like she wanted to throw something.

"Let me give you some advice," I said quietly, "Pride is only useful when you can afford it. And you," I finished coolly, "are in absolutely no position to be turning down help."

I held her gaze, unimpressed.

While her eyes were burning with the kind of anger that usually made people say things they regretted. Then her jaw loosened slightly and the tension in her shoulders shifted into something colder.

"I know you think this is about pride," she continued, "But it's not, Maybe you're used to people bending the moment you snap your fingers," she added calmly, "But I'm not one of them and don't worry, I'll take care of my sister."

Then Gianna gave a small, stiff nod toward Vincenzo.

"Thank you for the offer," she said evenly, "But I'm not taking it."

And just like that, she turned on her heel and walked out of the study.

Then Hazel shot up from the couch so quickly the movement startled even Dad beside her, “I’m so sorry,” she rushed out, her voice tight with embarrassment, “Vincenzo... everyone, I’m really sorry.”

Her hands twisted together in front of her, fingers knotting and unknotting like she didn’t know what to do with them.

Christ.

+15 Benys

That right there was exactly why I could never stand her family. She never had the spine to step into the place our mother left behind, and the daughters she raised weren’t built for this world either. None of them were meant to carry the weight that came with this name.

“Gianna is... she’s always been stubborn,” Hazel continued, “She doesn’t always understand when people are trying to help. She thinks she has to do everything herself. You’ve done so much for us already,” she said quickly, “More than enough. Jules and I, we’re incredibly grateful. Truly.”

She glanced toward the door Gianna had just walked through as if she expected her to come storming back any second.

“I’m very sorry for her behavior,” she finished quietly.

By then her hands were shaking badly, not the small nervous kind of shaking. It was so violent that Dad immediately reached for them, gently wrapping his hands around hers.

“Hey,” he murmured softly, squeezing her fingers, “It’s alright.”

The sight made something dark twist in my chest.

That same man had watched our mother slowly break under the weight of this family and never once held her hands like that. Never once spoke to her with that softness. Now suddenly he had all the patience in the world for the woman who came after her.

Vincenzo sighed softly, “Hazel, you don’t need to apologize for your daughter. She spoke her mind,” he continued. “I’ve heard worse.”

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A small, uneasy breath left Hazel's chest, but she still looked uncomfortable, "She didn't mean any disrespect," she said quickly. "She just... she's always been like this."

Dad's thumb rubbed slowly across the back of her shaking hand. Hazel looked down at their hands for a moment before continuing more quietly.

"Gianna has spent most of her life taking care of herself," she said, "And Jules. She learned very early that if she wanted something done, she had to do it herself. She doesn't like depending on anyone," Hazel added, "She's not ungrateful. She's just... proud."

Vincenzo nodded slowly, "I can see that. And for what it's worth," he added, "a young woman who is determined to stand on her own feet is not something I consider a problem."

Hazel's shoulders relaxed slightly at that.

Vincenzo glanced briefly toward the closed study door where Gianna had left, "She'll find her place here in her own time," he said.

"I hope you won't think badly of her," Hazel added gently. "She's been through a lot, and sometimes she forgets that not everyone is trying to take something from her. Thank you for everything you are doing for us. I'll go check on Gianna."

Then she turned and walked toward the door. Dad followed close behind her, one hand resting lightly against the middle of her back as if guiding her out.

My jaw tightened.

Where the hell had that man been when our mother needed it?

Once we were alone, Adriano pushed himself off the bookshelf with a quiet scoff, "That girl has a mouth on her."

Dante chuckled faintly under his breath, "Jesus," he muttered, "You try to give someone a free education and they act like you insulted their bloodline."

I leaned back against the desk, crossing my arms.

The image of her replayed in my head. That chin lifted. Those eyes locked on mine.

"I'm not a charity case."

My teeth pressed together slightly.

Adriano shook his head, "She doesn't understand where she is yet."

“No,” Dante agreed lazily. “She really doesn’t.”

Vincenzo opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a cigar, rolling it slowly between his fingers while he thought, “She will,” he said calmly.

“She’s stubborn,” Adriano added.

Stubborn wasn’t the word I would have chosen. Arrogant. Annoying. Defiant. Proud in a way that bordered on stupidity. She looked at men like us and saw something she could challenge. Something she could argue with. Something she could say no to.

That was the problem.

+158gnus

Capone men didn’t hear that word often.

And we certainly didn’t accept it.

Then Adriano glanced toward me, “You’re the lucky one who gets to deal with her.”

“She’ll learn,” I said quietly.

Dante raised an eyebrow, “Learn what?”

I pushed off the desk slowly, “That pride,” I replied calmly, “only works when the people around you allow it.”

Adriano let out a low breath through his nose, “You planning to break her?”

I shrugged once, “If she keeps standing in front of me like that,” I said coolly, “she’s going to break herself.” Dante leaned back again, amused, “That girl looked like she’d rather bite her tongue off than ask for help.”/

I slipped my hands into my pockets, “Yes.”

And the faintest smile touched my mouth.

“Which will make it far more satisfying,” I said quietly, “when she eventually does.”

“Raphael,” Vincenzo said my name as a warning, “She isn’t one of your hunts,” he continued evenly. “And she certainly isn’t prey. Gianna is our stepsister now.”

The meaning sat clearly between the words.

A boundary. A rule. A line drawn in the dirt that I wasn’t supposed to cross.

“Sister,” Vincenzo added, his gaze narrowing slightly, “you know what that word means, don’t you?”

I held his gaze for a second, then nodded once, “Of course.”

But as the conversation moved on and the others started talking about numbers and territory again, my eyes drifted back to the door she had slammed shut.

P

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 54

Sister.

The word felt wrong in my mouth. I didn’t see a sister when I looked at her. I saw a puzzle. I saw a wall that refused to fall.

For years, my life had been a straight line of easy wins. Every woman I wanted eventually fell into place. Every man I dealt with eventually folded. The world was a well-oiled machine that gave me exactly what Lasked for, and it was rotting my brain. I was bored. I was so goddamn bored of people saying yes before I even finished the

sentence.

But Gianna?

Gianna was a glitch. She looked at me and saw someone she could spit at.

A dark, hungry itch started under my skin.

All I saw was the first real challenge I’d had in a decade. I wanted to see what it would take to make her look at me without that fire in her eyes.

She had walked straight into the sight of the most bored hunter in the city.

The car door shut with a dull thud behind me.

I leaned one hand on the roof for a second, waiting for the ground to stop shifting under my feet. The driver stood quietly by the front gate, pretending not to notice.

Good man.

“Get some sleep, sir,” he said before climbing back into the car.

The engine rolled away down the driveway, leaving the estate quiet again.

It was five in the morning.

Whiskey. Too much of it. The party had stretched longer than it should have, and every glass after the fourth had stopped tasting like anything at all.

I rubbed a hand over my face and pushed the front door open. Carefully. Very carefully. If Claire heard me stumbling in at this hour, there would be questions. And Claire asked questions the way prosecutors built cases.

I slipped inside, easing the door shut behind me without letting the lock click too loud. The foyer lights were dim, the house half-asleep.

I loosened my collar slightly, trying to breathe and then I stopped.

Gianna.

She was halfway down the staircase.

Gym clothes. Black leggings. A loose gray hoodie, earbuds already in place, her hair was tied back in a messy ponytail, a few strands loose around her face. One hand held a water bottle. The other was adjusting the strap of whatever running band she had wrapped around her arm.

I stayed very still, not entirely by choice. The alcohol made my balance feel... negotiable.

She hadn’t noticed me yet.

Her eyes were down, focused on her phone as she scrolled through something. For a second I considered turning around and walking straight back outside. Sleeping in the car suddenly sounded like an excellent plan.

But then, Gianna’s head lifted.

Her eyes found me instantly.

There was a brief pause.

Her gaze moved slowly over me, my loosened collar, the jacket hanging off one shoulder, the fact that I was clearly swaying slightly where I stood.

And just like that, the morning became significantly worse.

“A bit early for a stroll, isn’t it?” I said.

“The air is better before everyone else starts breathing it,” she snapped.

She moved to step past me toward the front door. My brain was slower than usual, but my body wasn’t. I shifted once, just one long step and suddenly she had nowhere to go.

I leaned one hand against the doorframe beside her, blocking the exit without even trying very hard.

She stopped abd tilt her head back to glare at me.

God.

Even drunk I noticed it.

The angle of her neck. The sharp line of her jaw. The loose strands of hair falling out of that messy ponytail.

The hoodie hung open just enough that I could see the shape of her collarbone. The leggings hugged every inch of her hips and legs like they’d been designed specifically to torture men with bad judgment and too much alcohol in their bloodstream.

“It’s a big house,” I murmured, “Why the need to run outside?”

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“I’m not running,” she shot back. “I’m going for a walk. Please move, or are you about to give another speech about how you own the sidewalk too?”

A slow smirk dragged across my mouth, “Vincenzo told me to remember the rules,” I said, “He reminded me that you’re a sister now. He was very clear about the boundaries. I’m your brother.”

Her green eyes darkened.

Yeah.

She didn’t like that word either.

“Is that what this is?” she mocked, “Brotherly concern?”

“Maybe,” I leaned a little closer, “And as your brother,” I murmured near her ear, “I’d say it’s early, Gianna. The world’s still dark, not everything out there is as polite as I am. It’s full of things much meaner than me.”

“I’ve been dealing with mean things my whole life,” she shot back immediately, “I’m looking at one right now.”

I stared at her for a long moment. Even drunk, I appreciated the way she refused to blink.

The alcohol buzzed pleasantly behind my eyes. Slowly, I straightened and stepped back, just enough space for her to pass.

“Go on then,” I said, my voice flat with lazy amusement, “Take your walk.”

She moved quickly, trying to slip past me without touching but I leaned down slightly as she passed, my breath brushing the shell of her ear.

“Try not to get lost, little sister,” I drawled, “It’d be a shame if I had to come looking for you in the dark. I might forget my manners entirely.”

The alcohol made my thoughts reckless.

Made the line between irritation and something else blur.

And before my brain caught up with my hand-

My palm landed hard against the curve of her ass.

A sharp, stinging smack that echoed faintly in the quiet foyer.

Gianna went deathly still. Then, she spun on her heel with a speed I hadn’t expected. Before I could even blink, her fist connected squarely with the bridge of my nose.

It wasn’t a girl’s slap. It was a focused, knuckle-first strike.

Crunch.

A flash of white light exploded behind my eyes. I didn’t even raise my hand to touch it. I just stood there, my arms hanging loose at my sides. I felt the hot, thick rush of blood begin to pour out of my nostrils. It ran over my lips. It dripped off my chin. It splashed onto my white shirt, making big, dark red spots on the expensive fabric.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, looking down at the red smear, then back at her.

Her chest was heaving, her knuckles were reddening, and she looked like she wanted to do it again.

+15 Benus

“Don’t ever touch me,” she breathed, “I don’t care who you think you are in this city. I don’t care whose house this is. Touch me again, and I’ll make sure you don’t have a nose to bleed from.”

I didn’t say a word. I stood there, blood leaking from my nose and staining my mouth and chin, watching her, swaying slightly, the alcohol in my system making the whole moment feel slow and unreal.

And for the first time in years, the boredom was gone. Completely gone.

I let out a low, wet laugh, my teeth stained pink.

She turned, ripped the front door open, and vanished into the grey morning. The door slammed shut with a force that rattled the windows.

I leaned back against the cold stone wall of the foyer, staring at the blood on the floor. My older brother would probably have my head if he saw me like this.

But as I felt the sting of her punch, a dark, jagged smile pulled at the corners of my mouth.

Finally.

Something interesting.

Janedoewritings

Author

Comment, Like and then Swipe up for the next update

P

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 56

Gianna

14T

The meeting was in forty minutes.

Forty.

My stomach twisted.

I glanced at the printed notes beside the laptop. Three pages of bullet points that I had rewritten five times already.

Some sentences had arrows.

Some had entire words scratched out.

A few had phonetic notes scribbled beside them so I could remember how they sounded. My pen rested between my fingers as I read the first line again.

Explain behavioral pattern detection.

I whispered the sentence under my breath.

“The system monitors long-term spending habits… travel patterns… device login locations…”

My tongue stumbled slightly over locations.

I flipped to the second page.

My chest tightened when I saw the red pen marks.

Raphael’s handwriting. I stared at it for a second and my throat went dry.

Because the image of blood on his shirt flashed into my head. My fist hitting his face and that horrible crunch. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second.

God.

What had I done?

My knuckles still felt sore. I looked down at them resting on the desk. The skin across them had turned slightly pink.

I had punched Raphael Capone.

In the nose.

Inside his own house.

My stomach flipped so violently I had to grab the edge of the desk.

He was going to kill me, maybe not literally but he would destroy this internship. He could do it with one sentence.

My professor's voice echoed in my head.

"Internships in your senior year can influence your final academic standing."

I swallowed. If I lost this position, the department would know. Professor Adler would know. The entire class already knew where I worked.

I grabbed the paper again and forced my eyes to focus.

Focus.

The meeting.

Midland Trust Financial.

A bank.

Thirty million dollars lost last year to identity fraud.

They were here to decide if Orion Vector's system was worth millions and for some insane reason Raphael had decided that I should explain the model.

My hands trembled slightly as I scrolled through the presentation slides.

My stomach twisted again.

What if Raphael walked into the meeting room and decided this was the perfect moment to destroy me?

I could still see his face that morning, blood running over his mouth, dripping onto his white shirt.

And he had just... stared at me.

My heart started racing again.

I pushed the thought away and grabbed the notes harder, "You explain the prediction window," I whispered to myself.

You can do this.

I took a slow breath and straightened in the chair.

“Good morning,” I whispered, practicing the first line.

I cleared my throat.

“Good morning. I’m Gianna Toricelli. I worked on the predictive risk model you’ll see in this presentation.”

The words stumbled slightly.

I tried again.

“Good morning. I’m Gianna Toricelli…”

I didn’t notice how quiet the office had become until a soft knock sounded against the glass wall beside my desk.

My head snapped up so fast my neck hurt. For a second my brain thought it was Raphael and my stomach dropped straight to the floor.

But when I turned, it was Aileen standing there.

She had one hand resting lightly on the edge of the glass partition. She held a tablet against her chest like she always did when she was organizing Raphael’s schedule.

+15 Benus

“Gianna?” she said gently.

I pushed my chair back a little too fast and stood up, “Y-yes?”

Aileen gave me a small reassuring smile, “It’s time.”

The words made my stomach twist again. For a moment I just stood there, staring at her like my brain had forgotten what that meant.

Then the meaning landed.

The meeting.

My throat felt dry again.

“Oh,” I said quietly.

My hands immediately started gathering the papers on the desk. I stacked the printed notes together, then unstacked them again because they weren't straight. My fingers fumbled slightly as I slid them into the folder.

The laptop. I almost forgot the laptop. I grabbed it quickly and tucked it under my arm. Aileen watched me for a second, her expression thoughtful.

"You've prepared a lot," she said softly.

I looked down at the folder in my hands. The edges of the pages were bent from being flipped too many times.

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"I....I just wanted to make sure I understood everything," I murmured.

That wasn't exactly a lie. Understanding the system was the easy part. It was the talking that felt like walking across ice. Aileen nodded slightly, like she understood more than I had actually said.

"The Midland Trust team arrived about ten minutes ago," she explained, "They're setting up in Conference Room Three. Mr. Capone will be there in a moment."

My stomach flipped again, "Okay."

Aileen studied me quietly for a second, "You'll do fine," she said gently.

I nodded once, "I hope so."

She stepped aside slightly and gestured toward the hallway, "Come on. We shouldn't keep them waiting."

My shoes clicked softly against the polished floor as we walked. Aileen stopped beside the door and turned to me.

Her voice lowered slightly, "They're a little intense," she admitted quietly. "Bank executives usually are, just explain the model the way you showed it in the internal briefing," she said, "You know it better than anyone. Ready?"

Was I ready?

No.

Not even a little.

My stepbrother probably wanted to strangle me.

My professor expected me to survive this internship.

And a room full of bank executives were about to judge a system I had built.

My stomach churned but I straightened my shoulders slightly and nodded.

“Yes.”

Aileen opened the door. The conference room smelled faintly like coffee and polished wood.

A long glass table stretched across the center of the room. Screens glowed softly on the wall, waiting for the presentation to begin. Three men and a woman sat on the far side of the table, their laptops open, folders spread neatly in front of them.

Bank people.

Aileen stepped aside so I could walk in first. I placed my laptop on the table near the screen and opened it with fingers that tried very hard not to shake. The presentation file blinked to life. Blue graphs. Clean charts.

Numbers I understood, I forced myself to breathe slowly.

The door opened again behind me. I didn’t have to turn to know who it was.

The quiet conversations stopped when Raphael Capone entered a room.

I mustered up the courage to peek at him. His suit jacket was perfectly pressed, his tie straight, his posture calm but my eyes went straight to his nose.

A thin cut ran across the bridge, the skin around it had darkened slightly.

My stomach dropped.

My fist.

For a fleeting second, his gaze locked onto mine from across the table. It was a look that pulled a memory from the back of my mind... the night I had stripped for him, when he had watched me with that same focus. His eyes... like honey held up to a flame.

There was no anger on his face, no reaction at all. Which somehow made it worse. Then he looked away like nothing had happened and walked to the head of the table. He took his seat slowly, placing a folder in front of him.

“Good morning,” he said calmly.

The bank executives nodded, “Good morning, Mr. Capone.”

Raphael gestured slightly toward the screen, “My junior analyst worked on the predictive model you’ll be seeing today,” he said, “Ms. Torricelli.”

All eyes turned toward me.

“Good morning,” I said, “I’m Gianna Toricelli. I worked on the predictive fraud model Orion Vector developed for Midland Trust.”

The first slide appeared on the screen behind me.

Overview.

My eyes flicked to the notes on my laptop.

“The system monitors long-term customer behavior patterns,” I continued,’ forcing the words out slowly.” Spending habits, travel locations, and device login history.”

My voice steadied a little as I spoke.

“When behavior suddenly changes from the user’s normal pattern, the system increases the risk score.”

One of the men nodded slightly. I clicked to the next slide.

“This model focuses on predicting risk before the transaction happens,” I said.

My finger pointed lightly toward the graph.

“It detects deviations earlier than traditional fraud systems, which usually react after suspicious activity already occurs.”

So far so good.

The numbers made sense in my head. I could see the logic clearly. The woman across the table leaned forward slightly.

“How early are we talking about?” she asked.

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My brain paused, “How early?”

“Yes,” she said, “What’s the average prediction window?”

My eyes flicked to the graph. The answer was there in the numbers but the sentence tangled in my head.

“Approximately… uh… Approximately two hours… before… before the…”

The word slipped away.

Transaction.

Why couldn’t I grab it?

“Before transaction authorization,” Raphael said calmly.

“Yes,” I said quickly.

“Before transaction authorization.”

I clicked to the next slide too fast and another man leaned forward, “What behavioral indicators trigger the initial score increase?”

“Spending… location… and… device-”

The sentence collapsed halfway through, my eyes darted to the screen. The letters blurred together.

Raphael spoke again, “Primarily location deviation and unusual spending velocity,” he said.

The client nodded, “That makes sense.”

I tried to continue, “Yes, the system compares… compares…”

My fingers hovered over the keyboard like that would somehow help.

Another client spoke, “How does the model avoid false positives with frequent travelers?”

My mind went blank. Frequent travelers. I knew this. I had written the algorithm but the words wouldn't line up.

"It adjusts for... for... uh..."

Raphael stepped in again.

"The system builds a dynamic behavioral baseline," he explained smoothly. "So if a customer regularly travels, the algorithm adapts to that pattern."

The clients nodded again.

I could feel my chest tightening more with every second. I tried to continue the presentation but now the sentences tangled faster.

Words flipped.

My mouth started forming half thoughts that didn't land properly.

"The system... detects... behavior pattern... difference... before..."

I heard myself say it and knew it sounded wrong.

t:

15 8crus

The man at the end of the table frowned slightly, "I'm sorry," he said politely, "Could you clarify that?"

My stomach dropped. The letters on the screen looked like they were sliding around. I opened my mouth again. Nothing came out right.

And then Raphael stood.

"Allow me," he said calmly.

He stepped beside me and lightly took the presentation remote from my hand.

His fingers brushed mine for half a second and a sharp spark shot up my arm. My skin prickled where he touched me, a sudden jolt that made my breath hitch. I pulled my hand back, my heart hammering against my ribs.

Then he continued like the presentation had always been his.

“The model identifies behavioral deviations earlier by tracking multiple variables simultaneously,” he explained.

His voice was clear and confident. Every sentence landed perfectly and suddenly, he was everything I ever wanted to be.

“Location, device usage, spending velocity, and time patterns are processed together rather than individually.”

Raphael moved through the slides effortlessly.

“The advantage is predictive timing,” he continued. “Instead of reacting to fraud, the system predicts probability shifts.”

His hand gestured toward the graph.

“This gives your institution a window to intervene before the transaction completes.”

The clients exchanged impressed looks. The conversation shifted smoothly into technical discussion. Raphael answered every question without hesitation.

His voice never stumbled, never slowed, by the time the final slide appeared, the room felt calm again.

One of the executives nodded, “This is impressive work.”

Raphael inclined his head slightly, “We take fraud prevention seriously.”

Chairs moved as the clients stood. They shook hands, and they left the room a few minutes later. The door closed behind them.

Then there was nothing but silence in the room. Raphael didn’t sit down again.

He turned slowly toward me, “What the fuck was that?”

My throat tightened, I blinked nervously, “I- it was my first- I was just... nervous.”

The word sounded weak even to my own ears.

Raphael’s jaw tightened slightly, “Nervous?”

He looked around the room.

Several employees from engineering and analytics had been sitting along the side wall during the presentation. They all looked suddenly very interested in the table.

+15 Benus

Raphael’s voice cut through the room.

“If we’re presenting a predictive intelligence product to a financial institution, I expect clarity.”

No one spoke.

“This company does not sell nervousness,” he continued, “We sell precision.”

My hands clenched together behind my back.

“You made us look like idiots! You made it sound like we don’t even know how our own system works. Do you have any idea how much money was on that table? And you couldn’t even finish a basic sentence.”

P

GET I

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 59

The volume of his voice triggered something deep and dark inside me. The conference room started to blur.

Read it, Gianna! Read it, goddamn it!

His voice screamed in my head, overlapping with Raphael’s. I could almost feel the sting of the wooden ruler hovering over my knuckles, waiting for me to fail again.

“Look at the letters! Why are you so lazy? Just fucking read, it’s not that hard!”

“I... I knew the answer,” I whispered, but I wasn’t in the office anymore. I was seven years old, sitting in a dark room, staring at letters that were dancing and mocking me.

“Knowing it doesn’t matter if you can’t say it!” Raphael stated.

I gasped, my whole body jerking back.

ZAP.

I felt the current go through my body from my fingertips until I was screaming.

I squeezed my eyes shut, my hands shaking so hard I had to grip the back of my chair to stay upright.

“Gianna?” his voice dropped.

It wasn’t soft, but the screaming had stopped.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I just stood there, trapped in a memory of a man telling me I was broken until I

believed him.

The other employees were staring now, not at the table, but at me.

Raphael looked at the others, his jaw tight. “Everyone out,” he ordered.

They didn’t wait. They gathered their things and hurried out of the room, leaving me alone with the man who had just crushed what was left of my pride.

Raphael reached out. I expected the sting of a ruler or the bite of an electric shock. Instead, he cupped my face.

“Gianna?” he muttered, “Look at me.”

The touch was the spark that brought me back. I blinked, and the blurred spac sharpened into the face of the man who had just humiliated me in front of the entire department.

I gently pulled my face away from his touch, “What did I say about you touching me?” I hissed, “Especially not after you just stood there and called me an idiot in front of everyone I work with.”

The thin cut on his nose was a bright red reminder of why he shouldn’t be near me.

“I said you made us sound like idiots,” he corrected quietly, “There is a difference.”

“There isn’t a difference to me!” I snapped. I grabbed my laptop and my folder, clutching them to my chest.

His face hardened, turning back into the cold boss who didn’t take talk from anyone. He stepped back, straightening his suit jacket.

“In the real world, stepsister, you don’t get to fail a million-dollar meeting and then bark at the man who saved it. I should fire you right now. I should call your school and tell them you’re a liability. Most people would have

kicked

you out of the building before the clients even hit the elevator."

The fire in my chest died instantly. Cold fear rushed in to take its place.

I deflated. My shoulders dropped, and the grip I had on my laptop loosened. I looked down at my feet, feeling small and foolish. The reality of my situation hit me like a ton of bricks. I needed this. I needed to finish this internship for Jules, for my future, for everything.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, "It won't happen again. I... I promise. When I'm put on the spot like that... the words just stop coming. I'll work on it. I'll practice more. Just... please don't call the school."

I hated how weak I sounded. I hated that I had to beg but I couldn't lose this. My life depended on this job.

I knew when to stand tall, and I knew when I had to swallow my pride to survive.

Raphael watched me. He didn't say anything for a long time. He just stood there, tall and powerful, holding my entire life in his hands.

"Go back to your desk, Gianna. And don't ever make me do your job for you again because if you do, then consider yourself fired..."

"Thank you," I said softly. I didn't wait for him to change his mind. I turned and hurried out of the room, my heart still heavy with the shame of it all.

Janedoewritings Author

Drop a comment and let me know what you think

XOXOΣ

P

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 60

Gianna

I was bored.

Not the normal kind of bored where you scroll through your phone for a few minutes and it goes away. This was the annoying kind. The kind that sat on your chest and made the house feel smaller every hour.

Back home I used to leave whenever I felt like it. I'd walk to the corner store, sit at the park or get/coffee at midnight with my girls if I couldn't sleep.

Here, even stepping outside felt like asking permission. I stood by the window and looked down toward the gates.

Ten guards.

Always ten.

One leaning against the booth, the others pacing slowly across the driveway. The mansion was beautiful but it was also a cage.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and scrolled through my contacts until I found the name I wanted.

Ciro.

Texting was a nightmare so I just pressed the call button. The phone rang once then he picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me," I said.

There was a beat of silence.

Then-

"No way," I could practically hear the grin in his voice, "Gianna?"

"Yeah."

"Well I'll be damned," he laughed quietly. "I thought you forgot I existed."

I leaned my shoulder against the window frame, watching the guards shift positions near the gate.

"Not really," I said.

"So this is a friendly call?" he asked.

“More like a bored call.”

He chuckled, “Ah, so I’m the emergency contact for boredom now.”

“Pretty much.”

“Wow. I don’t know if I should feel insulted or honored.”

I smiled slightly, “Take it however you want.”

“Fair enough,” then there was a short pause on the line, “What are you doing right now?” he asked.

“Staring at the gate,” I said.

“That sounds exciting.”

“Thrilling.”

“You could go outside,” he said casually.

I snorted, “You know that’s not how this place works.”

“True.”

I watched one of the guards adjust his jacket near the driveway lights, “You guys treat the front yard like it’s a military zone.”

“Well,” Ciro said lightly, “technically it is.”

I rubbed the side of my neck, “I just want to go somewhere,” I muttered, “Anywhere.”

His voice changed slightly, “Actually…”

I frowned slightly, “What?”

“There’s a party tonight,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he continued. “Just some people. Music. Drinks. Come with me.”

I blinked, “What?”

“I’m serious,” he said. “I’m not on duty tonight anyway. If I sign you out, no one’s going to question it.”

I looked down at the guards again, “You can do that?”

“I work for the Capones,” he said simply, “Half my job is moving people around.”

I hesitated but the idea of getting out of this house, even for a few hours felt like fresh air in my lungs.

“When?” I asked.

“Late,” he said, “Starts around midnight.”

“Midnight?”

“Yeah. People show up around twelve, one... it runs until morning.”

I stayed quiet for a moment, staring at the gates.

“So?” he asked, “You want out of that mansion or not?”

I didn’t even need to think long, “...Yeah.”

“Yeah?” he repeated, surprised.

“Yeah.”

He laughed softly, “Damn. That was easier than I expected.”

“Don’t make me regret it.”

“Relax,” he said. “Worst case? You get music, drinks, and a few hours away from those walls.

I pushed away from the window, already feeling lighter, “What time are you picking me up?”

“I’ll swing by around one,” he said. “That way we’re not the first ones there.”

“Okay.”

“Get dressed up,” he added.

I rolled my eyes even though he couldn’t see me, “It’s a party, not a wedding.”

“Still,” he said. “You’ll thank me later.”

I smiled a little and ended the call. For a moment I just stood there with my phone in my hand, staring at my reflection in the dark window.

I turned away from the window and walked to my room. The closet doors slid open with a soft sound. My fingers ran across the hangers.

A small black top hung near the back. I pulled it out and held it up. It was cropped, the fabric soft and thin, with narrow straps that crossed over the back.

I tossed it over my arm, next came a pair of denim shorts, light blue, worn at the edges. I changed quickly.

The shorts hugged my hips just right and suddenly I got reminded of Raphael's slap against my skin, I shook the thought away. The top stopped a few inches above my waist, showing a strip of skin when I moved.

I walked to the mirror. My hair was still loose from earlier, falling past my shoulders. I ran a brush through it and let it stay natural, just a little volume at the ends.

I sat down at the vanity and opened my small makeup bag, foundation, a little concealer under my eyes and mascara and then I added a bit of gloss to my lips and pressed them together.

I grabbed a pair of white sneakers from the floor and slipped them on. My phone buzzed in my hand.

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