My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 551

I accused him of scheduling recreational activities.

I accused him of having spreadsheets for his spreadsheets.

I accused him of researching optimal sleeping positions.

His expression became increasingly flat while mine became increasingly delighted.

Eventually I stepped backward in front of him, walking while facing him, “Tell me something.”

He shook his head, “No.”

“Do you alphabetize things?”

He sighed, “No.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Books?”

He frowned, “No.”

I pointed at him, “Liar.”

His eyes narrowed.

I pointed harder, “You’re absolutely an alphabetizer.”

“Gianna.”

“Raphael.”

“Stop it.”

I smiled, “No.”

That was apparently the wrong answer because suddenly his hand shot out. Before I could react, his fingers closed around the neckline of my dress. A startled sound escaped me, one sharp tug as the world tilted and suddenly I was directly against him.

My breath caught.

Raphael's hand left my neckline and settled firmly at my ass, holding me in place before I could stumble.

The teasing smile immediately disappeared from my face, his dark eyes locked onto mine, the wind lifted a few strands of my hair.

"Finished?" he asked quietly.

My heart completely forgot how to function, "No."

A dangerous look appeared in his eyes. The same look he gave me when I broke up with him... Oh, that's what this was.

I swallowed.

Very suddenly, continuing to annoy him felt significantly harder.

His hand squeezed my ass and pulled my body even closer to his if that was possible.

The waves rolled onto the shore behind us, the moonlight reflected across the lake.

And for one long moment, neither of us seemed interested in looking anywhere except at each other.

Raphael's gaze dropped briefly to my mouth before returning to my eyes.

"Oh no," I whispered.

One of his eyebrows lifted, "Oh no?" he repeated.

I blinked, "That face."

"What face?"

"The one you get before you do something crazy..."

A slow understanding appeared in his expression as he simply looked at me.

Studying.

Thinking.

Planning.

Which, unfortunately, were all things Raphael Capone was exceptionally good at.

Then he spoke, very calmly, “I’ve spent months exercising restraint. I don’t think you fully appreciate how difficult that was.”

My heart skipped, “Raphael…”

A corner of his mouth lifted, it didn’t seem like a normal smile, more of a predator’s smile, “Every time you touched me, I exercised restraint.”

My pulse stumbled.

“Every time you smiled at me from across the room, I exercised restraint.”

I stared at him, because he sounded genuinely offended by the experience.

“Every time you called me your friend, I exercised restraint.”

“As if that was my fault,” I muttered.

“It was your fault.”

I laughed nervously, Raphael didn’t.

“I was planning to take this slowly but unfortunately for you, ballerina… I’ve finally stopped pretending I don’t want you.”

I forgot how to breathe.

Completely.

Forgot.

And before I could recover enough to form a coherent response, Raphael reached up, gripped my face, his fingers clamped tightly around my jaw, his thumb digging into my cheek until my lips were forced open.

15 Bars

“Listen carefully,” his voice dropped into something rough enough to make my stomach tighten, “I respect you. I need you to remember that because in a few minutes, you’re not going to feel respected.”

I should have been overwhelmed by the darkness in his eyes. Instead, I found myself drawn closer.

Because beneath all that danger was the one thing I trusted most.

Him.

“Remember that I cherish you, little sister,” he hissed into my skin, “while I drag you by your hair and force ever single inch of my bare cock into your tight, wet pussy until you finally take all of me.”.

Well, that took a dark turn.

For approximately seven seconds, we were having a touching emotional moment.

Then Raphael grabbed that moment by the throat and threw it down a flight of stairs.

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy...

Now tell me, who’s ready for some serious spicy smut?

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 552

Gianna

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15 Be

The world tilted.

One second I was standing on the beach arguing with Raphael.

The next, I was over his shoulder.

“Raphael!”

His hand settled firmly against the back of my thigh as he carried me across the sand like I weighed absolutely nothing.

The private beach stretched behind us. Gentle waves rolled against the shore. The lights from the lake house glowed warmly ahead.

“Put me down.”

“No.”

The stone pathway appeared beneath us as he carried me toward the house. The closer we got, the more details became visible. Floor-to-ceiling windows reflected the moonlight. Warm golden light spilled across the patio.

It looked less like a house and more like something from an architecture magazine.

Unfortunately, I was too busy worrying about Raphael to properly appreciate it.

That felt unfair.

A few hours ago we had been talking about turtles, now he was carrying me into a secluded lake house in the middle of nowhere after informing me he had spent months exercising restraint.

My nervous system was having a difficult time processing these developments.

The front door opened and the interior was enormous. Dark wood, stone walls, high ceilings and massive windows overlooking the lake.

Raphael finally carried me into the center of the living room before setting me carefully on my feet.

The second my shoes touched the floor, I turned toward him, “What is this place?”

Raphael kicked off his shoes, socks and then started to loosen the sleeves of his shirt, “It’s mine.”

I looked around again. The entire back wall was glass. Beyond it, moonlight shimmered across Lake Michigan. A large stone fireplace dominated one side of the room.

He slipped his hands into his pockets, as he looked at me with that scary look in his eyes again, “The estate sits on about forty acres.”

I blinked, “Forty?”

He nodded, “There are guest cottages farther back, a marina, a pavilion near the beach, a boathouse and a helipad.

His mouth twitched slightly as he walked toward the windows overlooking the lake.

“The trees block most of the property from view.”

1 joined him, the shoreline stretched endlessly into the darkness.

“No neighbors?”

“Not close enough to matter, there are security checkpoints at the entrance.”

I looked outside again, the moonlight danced across the water, the realization settled heavily in my chest.

Just us.

Raphael glanced down at me, “We’re alone here.”

My stomach immediately tightened.

He noticed and one of his dark eyebrows lifted, “You look nervous.”

“I am not nervous.”

“You’ve twisted your necklace around your finger six times in the last minute.”

I immediately dropped the necklace.

Raphael’s expression became suspicious, “Why are you nervous?”

Heat rushed into my face, “I am not nervous.”

His eyes narrowed but he was right. I was nervous because somehow this felt different.

That was the problem.

Nothing between us had ever felt uncertain before. Before, there had always been walls, rules, and distance.

Now there weren’t.

Now I knew exactly how he felt and he knew exactly how I felt.

My pulse sped up when Raphael stepped closer. His gaze softened slightly, “You know,” he said quietly, “for someone who spent months threatening my peace, you’re surprisingly shy now.”

I covered my face with both hands, “Oh my God.”

A low laugh escaped him. The sound immediately made my heart betray me. Raphael gently pulled my hands away from my face.

His thumb brushed across my knuckles, “Relax, ballerina. It’s just me…”

My pulse somehow got worse.

The weight of his jacket-the one he had wrapped around my shoulders earlier-suddenly felt heavy and hot against my skin.

Raphael didn’t wait for my pulse to slow down. His hands moved to the lapels of the coat, sliding it slowly off my shoulders. He let the expensive fabric drop right onto the floor, discarding it like it meant absolutely nothing.

Without the jacket, the cool air hit my bare arms, making a row of goosebumps erupt across my skin but the chill didn’t last.

Raphael stepped even closer, completely invading my space until the scent of his skin swallowed me whole.

15 Bes

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 553

His hands rose to my face. His long, calloused fingers traced my jawline, his thumb pressing lightly against my chin to tilt my face upward.

My chest rose and fell in short, shallow breaths as his fingers moved down my neck. He traced the sensitive line of my throat.

His hand drifted lower, trailing over my collarbone, his knuckles grazing the skin. Every point of contact felt hyper -sensitive, my nerve endings firing rapidly under his control.

The fabric of the dress felt thin, almost nonexistent, as his palms slid down, skimming over the curves of my breasts. A tight, heavy knot coiled deep in my stomach when his thumbs brushed the peaks through the cotton fabric, making me let out a soft, shaky gasp.

His dark eyes tracking the movement of my throat as I swallowed hard.

His hands kept moving, sliding down the narrow curve of my waist, his palms gripping my hips securely, then, his grip shifted. He turned me around, facing me away from him, toward the massive glass windows.

The dark, endless expanse of Lake Michigan stretched out in front of me, but all I could focus on was the his chest pressing against my back.

His fingers found the metal pull of the zipper at the top of my dress.

The sound of the zipper moving down the tracks was incredibly loud in the quiet room. Inch by inch, the cool air hit the bare skin of my spine, followed instantly by the searing heat of his knuckles tracing my spine.

The dress loosened, the straps slipping off my shoulders, pooling down my arms until the fabric slid past my hips and fell to the floor in a heap around my ankles.

I stood there in the center of his secluded living room, completely stripped down to my white lace bra and matching panties.

He took the dress from the floor and placed it gently on a nearby chair, “Turn around,” he ordered softly.

My muscles obeyed before my brain could even process the order. I turned back to face him and Raphael looked down at me, his eyes sweeping over the pale lace, the curve of my waist, the flush on my cheeks, with a darkness that made my breath hitch.

He stepped back into my space, his chest nearly touching mine.

“Your turn,” he whispered, “Undress me.”

My fingers were shaking so badly I could barely grab the top button of his crisp white shirt. Raphael stood perfectly still watching my clumsy movements with those eyes.

I popped the first button, then the second. Slowly, inch by inch, his broad chest became visible. The smooth tattooed skin, the hard muscle underneath, the heat radiating from him-it all hit my senses at once.

My face burned hotter. I pulled the fabric apart, sliding the sleeves down his massive arms and tossing the shirt onto the floor.

Next was the belt. The buckle made a sharp click as I undone it, my hands slipped to the button of his trousers, popping it open before slowly sliding the zipper down.

I pushed the dark pants down his hips, watching the fabric pool around his ankles. Raphael lifted one foot, then

the other, stepping completely out of them until he was standing in front of me in nothing but his black boxers

His body was unfairly perfect. Then again, that wasn’t exactly surprising. Raphael treated his health like a full time job. Every inch of him was hard muscle, sharp lines, old scars, and the kind of quiet strength that made him look dangerous even when he was standing completely still.

Instead of reaching for me, Raphael turned away. He walked over to the sleek mini bar in the corner. He grabbed a dark glass bottle of whiskey, not bothering with a glass, and walked over to the long couch in the center of the room. He sat down, leaning his back against the cushions, completely relaxed, completely in control.

He reached over to the side of the coffee table and pressed a button.

A mechanical hum vibrated through the floorboards. In the exact center of the large coffee table, a circular metal piece slid open. A long silver pole began to rise from the wood, lifting higher and higher until it locked securely into the high ceiling above.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 554

I stared at it, my mouth opening slightly.

Raphael tilted his head back against the couch. He took a slow swallow straight from the whiskey bottle, his throat moving as he gulped the liquor. He set the bottle down, his dark eyes locking onto mine with an intense, wicked focus.

“Recreate the first night we met,” he said, his voice dropping into a rough growl that made my thighs instantly press together, “Dance for me, ballerina. And this time, I don’t want it to stop at the dance.”

He reached for a small remote on the table and clicked a button.

Suddenly, a deep bass line filled the room, echoing from the speakers in the walls. The slow music started to pulse through the dimly lit space. My heart stopped, then gave a violent, frantic thud.

It was the exact same song.

The same beat that had been playing the night everything started.

The night a cold-eyed stranger had looked across a crowded room and changed the direction of my life.

The shyness that had been paralyzing me just a second ago suddenly melted. I felt a wicked spark flare up deep in my belly.

Looking at him sitting there made me want to show him exactly what he had been missing during all those months of restraint.

The music rolled through the room. For a few seconds, I was aware of everything, the dark lake outside, the vast glass walls, and Raphael watching me from the couch.

Then the dark beat settled deep into my bones, and everything else faded away. That was the thing people never understood about dancing. It wasn't about the crowd. It wasn't about attention. It was about disappearing.

I walked up to the coffee table, stepped onto the smooth wood, and wrapped one hand around the cold silver pole. I let my body move with the slow and seductive movement. A turn. A slow, heavy slide of my hips.

My muscles remembered the movement before my mind did. But this time, it wasn't a clean ballet routine. The white lace of my bra and panties felt tight against my heated skin as I arched my back, letting my hair fall behind

I slid my free hand down my own ribs, over the curve of my waist, tracing my own body while keeping my eyes locked straight onto his.

Raphael hadn't moved a single inch. The whiskey bottle sat completely untouched beside him now. His gaze was burning hot, tracking the way my breasts lifted with every breath, the way the thin lace hugged my hips. The dark lust in his eyes sent a melting rush of heat straight between my thighs.

It didn't make me nervous anymore. It made me confident. It made me smile because I could see exactly what I was doing to him.

I spun slowly around the pole, wrapping my leg high around the metal, rubbing my inner thigh against the smooth surface.

As I turned back to face the couch, I saw his hand move down. Right there, through the thin black fabric of his boxers, a massive bulge had formed. He gripped himself, squeezing his hard length tightly, his knuckles turning white as he watched me move.

The sight of his hand on himself made my chest heave. A wicked thrill shot through my veins. I wanted to drive him completely insane.

The music began building toward its loudest, heaviest notes. I was completely lost inside the heat of the room now. My hand slid higher along the pole, my grip tight and secure. Years of hard training took over before I could even think about the danger.

I pushed off the table. The world tilted, and gravity simply disappeared.

I swung my body upward, hooking my legs securely around the silver metal as I dropped upside down. My long dark hair spilled across the surface of the coffee table like silk. I held the difficult position easily, my body perfectly balanced, one arm stretching

gracefully toward the floor while my back arched deeply, exposing every inch of my bare stomach and the small white lace panties covering me.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 555

Before I could even think about sliding down, Raphael stood up.

He took two slow steps forward until he was standing right over the coffee table, towering above my upside-down body.

He stepped right into my space, his bare thighs framing my head. Because I was hanging inverted, his groin was directly in front of my eyes.

The thick, rigid shape of his cock was stretching the black fabric of his boxers to their absolute limit, just inches from my nose. The sheer size of him made my breath catch in my throat.

Raphael tilted his head down, his dark eyes staring directly into my inverted gaze, his chest rising and falling in ragged breaths.

“Remember something?” he asked, his voice incredibly dark and rough.

I slowly unhooked my legs from the metal, letting my body slide down the smooth silver pole. My knees hit the smooth wood of the coffee table.

I didn’t stand up. I stayed right there on my knees, looking up at him. The heat pooling between my thighs was an ache now. I slid my knees apart, parting my thighs as wide as they could go, completely opening myself up to him. Sitting back on my heels, I looked up at him, my breathing uneven.

Raphael held my gaze for one long second before his hand closed around my face. The movement was sudden as he pulled me toward him without a word.

I followed immediately.

The moment my heels hit the floor, he leaned back onto the couch, taking me with him. I landed against him with a surprised breath, the cushions sinking beneath our combined weight.

I shifted until I was comfortable, settling over him with one knee on either side of his hips. Raphael’s hands found my waist immediately. His grip tightened just enough to steady me.

Our faces were only inches apart.

His dark eyes searched mine with the same impossible focus that always made the rest of the world disappear.

Raphael leaned his forehead against mine, “I don’t know what people are supposed to say in moments like this but I know this…” I let out a breath, “No matter where I am… if you’re there… I’m home.”

Then he smiled, the smallest smile ever… and the words landed somewhere so deep inside me that they didn’t feel heard.

They felt woven into me.

“I love you, Gianna. I love the life I have when you’re in it. I love the woman that you are… And if I have any say in it… you will never have to wonder where you belong again because as far as I’m concerned… You belong with me.”

My eyes closed.

That was it. That was the thing that broke me, not because they were perfect words but because they were his words.

I let out the smallest, shakiest laugh, “You realize,” I whispered, my voice trembling, “that you accidentally say the most beautiful things.”

One corner of his mouth lifted, “I don’t believe they’re accidental.”

And that made me love him even more.

I leaned down and slammed my mouth against his.

I slid my tongue straight into his mouth, tasting the bitter bite of the whiskey on his breath, tangling my tongne with his as he groaned deep in his chest.

Raphael’s hands reacted instantly. One of his palms flew up to the back of my head, his fingers tangling roughly in my hair to hold my mouth locked against his, while his other hand clamped hard around my breast. He squeezed the soft flesh tightly, his thumb rubbing hard over my stiff nipple through the thin white lace of my bra, crushing me against his palm until a soft gasp escaped my throat.

I couldn’t stay still. The ache between my thighs was burning, an empty throb that demanded to be answered. I pressed my hips firmly against his lap, grinding my crotch directly down against the thick, rigid length of his cook hidden behind his boxers.

“Mmm.”

A rough sound tore from his throat into my mouth as I grinded on him, sliding my hips forward and back over his hardness. Every slide of my body against his thick ridge sent a violent spike of electricity straight up my spine.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 556

Our teeth clicked as the kiss grew wilder, hungrier. I moved my hips faster, rubbing myself hard against him, completely desperate to get closer to the steel beneath his underwear.

He squeezed my breast harder, bruising the soft skin, as I rode the thick ridge of his length until my breath came in desperate pants against his lips.

I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, all I knew was that the thin layers of lace and cotton keeping our skin apart felt like a prison.

I reached down with shaking hands, my fingers hooking into the waistband of his black boxers.

At the same time, Raphael’s hands gripped the edges of my white lace panties. We moved in a frantic, messy blur of motion. I lifted my hips just enough for him to rip the lace down my thighs, kicking them off my feet as they flew somewhere across the room.

I shoved his boxers down his thighs, my knuckles brushing against his thick, rigid length. He kicked the fabric away, his bare legs tangling with mine.

Next was my bra. Raphael’s fingers fumbled with the clasp at my back, popping it open with a sharp tug. He peeled the white lace off my skin and threw it aside, leaving me completely bare on top of him. The cool air hit my naked breasts for a fraction of a second before I leaned down, burying my bare chest against his hard pectoral muscles.

Our mouths crashed together again, even hungrier than before.

My hand slid down between our bodies. My fingers closed around the thick base of his cock. It was hot, fully erect, and throbbing wildly with veins under my palm.

I gripped him tight, my skin slicking against his, and began to stroke him. I slid my hand up and down his entire length, from the heavy base to the wet tip, feeling the rigidity of him stretch against my fingers.

Raphael let out a dark, guttural growl straight into my mouth, his hips jerking up instinctively into my hand.

His hand flew up from my waist, his fingers fisting deep into my hair near the roots. Then suddenly, he ripped my mouth away from his and yanked my head back..

Before I could even blink, his hands clamped onto my waist and lifted my entire body off his lap. He shoved me down, forcing me off the couch until my knees hit the hard floor right between his wide, parted legs. I sat back on my heels, my bare breasts heaving, my face leveling right with his thick, wet length.

The cold floor felt strange against my bare skin, and I instinctively reached down toward my feet, my fingers touching the straps of my shoes.

“No,” Raphael ordered, his hand came down on top of my head, his fingers tangling back into my dark hair, locking me in place, “Leave the heels on.”

He tilted his pelvis forward, rubbing the wet, heavy tip of his cock against my bottom lip.

“Open your mouth, ballerina,” he ordered, “Leave the shoes on and suck my cock.”

Raphael’s grip tightened at the crown of my head, his fingers fisting deep into my dark hair until my scalp stung. He yanked my head back, tilting my face completely upward, exposing my neck.

He gripped the base of his cock with his free hand and with a flick of his wrist, he slapped his length hard against my left cheek.

Smack.

Before I could gasp, he swung it the other way, slapping it across my right cheek. He dragged the wet tip directly over my parted lips, smearing his pre-cum across my mouth before pressing the entire shaft right down the center of my face.

The position was suffocating. His balls rested right against my chin and bottom lip, while the thick, rigid length of his shaft stretched upward, covering my nose, flattening against my forehead, and reaching past my hairline. I could barely draw air through my nose.

He held me there for a long second, then let out a low laugh that vibrated right against my mouth. He loosened his grip on my hair just enough to let my head tilt back a fraction of an inch, his eyes looking down at me with a teasing glint.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 557

“Look at that,” he taunted, “It’s bigger than your entire face, ballerina. How are you going to take all of this when you’re so small?”

The taunt sent a sharp wave of heat straight to my belly and I took it as a challenge.

I leaned my head forward, opening my mouth, dragged my tongue out, tracing the tight, sensitive skin before opening my lips and sucking one of his balls completely into my warm mouth.

Raphael's entire body went completely rigid. A sharp, violent gasp cut through his throat.

While I sucked on his balls in slow, my hand reached up. I wrapped my fingers tightly around his cock, squeezing him. I began to stroke him, sliding my palm up and down the wet length, creating a tight, sliding friction that synchronized with my mouth.

His fingers fisted even tighter into my hair, as he pinned me closer. His hips jerked forward instinctively, his breath turning completely ragged and shallow above me.

"Fuck," Raphael hissed out, and leaned his head back against the couch, his chest heaving as he stared down at me with dark praise, "You are the fucking woman of my dreams."

Hearing his rough, broken praise sent a delicious rush of power straight through my veins. The wet heat pooling between my thighs turned into an ache, and I swallowed him deeper, completely lost in it.

I loved the control I had over him in this moment. I loved hearing this dangerous, powerful man reduced to breathless curses because of my mouth and my hands.

I accelerated the pace, stroking his thick shaft faster while my tongue swirled around his balls. Every time I sucked down, I could feel his hips twitching, his hard muscles trembling against my cheeks.

I let out a soft, muffled whimper against his skin, a sound of pure pleasure, letting him know exactly how much I enjoyed having him completely at my mercy.

I switched my focus. I slid my mouth off his balls and let my hand drop down, my fingers wrapping around the sac to squeeze them.

At the same time, I opened my mouth wide and took the thick head of his cock straight inside. I pushed forward, sliding my lips down his rigid shaft, taking as much of his massive width as my throat could handle.

The sheer size of him stretched my lips to their absolute limit. I sucked down hard, my tongue swirling around the thick ridge while my hand kept massaging his balls below.

The deep friction was too much to contain, excess saliva pool around the corners of my mouth, and a thick line of drool began to run down my chin, dripping slowly down the front of my neck and onto my bare, heaving chest.

He kept his one hand into my hair while the other reached down to my chest. His rough fingers found my breast, clamping around it before his thumb and index finger locked onto my stiff, wet nipple. He pinched the peak tightly, rolling it hard between his fingers.

The rough, pinching friction on my chest made me suck him even harder, my throat clamping around his wet length as he jerked his hips upward into my face.

He stopped suddenly, his dark eyes burning with heat as his face came closer to mine.

“What did I say about respect, Gianna?” he asked, “You remember?”

Janedoewritings

Author

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 558

Gianna

14T

“What did I say about respect, Gianna?” he asked, “You remember?”

I couldn’t speak. I could only nod my head quickly, my eyes wide, watered and locked onto his, showing him that I understood every single word.

Raphael stood up. He towered over me like a giant wall of muscle, his thighs framing my head as I stayed down on the hard floor. He gripped the top of my head, locking my skull in place.

He didn’t wait. He used my face like a toy, shoving the head of his cock straight past my lips.

He began to fuck my mouth. He pushed his hips forward, forcing his massive length deep down my throat before pulling back to the tip. My head bounced against his hard shaft again and again as he drove himself into me without mercy.

Gag.

A choked sound left my throat, but I didn't pull away. I reached out with both hands, my fingers clawing into the hard, thick muscles of his bare thighs, gripping him tightly, digging my nails in until his skin broke.

Raphael held my hair tight, using his strength to control the angle as he thrust his pelvis forward, burying his entire length deep inside my mouth over and over again.

Raphael's hips jerked faster, his thrusts turning short, hard, and violent. The muscles in his thighs turned to stone under my fingers. He let out a low, broken roar that rattled deep in his chest.

He shoved his hips forward one last time, pinning my face hard against his groin.

Then, he blew.

A wave of cum shot straight down the back of my throat. It shot out in violent pulses, filling my mouth instantly. He held my head locked tight against his pelvis, forcing his cock deep inside so I couldn't move, couldn't back away, and couldn't swallow fast enough.

Air trapped in my lungs, and my chest seized up. I couldn't draw a single breath. My eyes went wide, watering as my fingers clawed desperately into his thighs, my legs trembling in my high heels.

He kept his cock jammed down my throat, pulsing and dumping every last drop of his wet heat inside me until my vision blurred and my chest heaved for oxygen.

Raphael tore his fingers out of my hair and pulled his cock back, dragging the length out from between my lips.

He stumbled back a step, his chest heaving like a winded animal. His mouth hung open as he sucked in huge, desperate lungfuls of air, his bare skin gleaming with sweat.

The moment his weight left my mouth, my throat convulsed.

I swallowed hard, my throat muscles working in deep gulps to force down the cum filling my mouth. I coughed once, a line of wet saliva and white fluid spilling over my bottom lip, but I didn't take my eyes off him.

I stayed right there on my knees, my body trembling, looking up at him through my eyelashes as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

Raphael didn't give me a second to recover. His hands reached down, wrapping under my armpits. With one pull, he hoisted my body completely off the floor.

Oh, fuck...

He moved backward, falling heavily onto the deep cushions of the couch. In the same motion, he dragged me right along with him, pulling my hips up until I was straddling his head.

He guided my body down until the throbbing heat of iny pussy was pressed flat against his mouth and nose.

The moment my wet skin met his face, Raphael went wild.

He opened his mouth wide and buried his face entirely into my softness. His tongue darted out and slammed straight against my sensitive clit. He began to lick me with a speed that made me lose my senses for a little while.

A sharp, violent jolt of pleasure shot straight up my spine, making my back arch instantly.

“Ah!” A loud, breathless cry tore from my throat.

His hands flew to my ass, holding me harder against his mouth as he sucked my clit into his mouth, his tongue swirling and stabbing inside me over and over again.

Then, his grip on my thighs tightened until it bruised. He pulled his mouth away for a fraction of a second, his dark eyes looking up at me from beneath my hips, wild and completely blown out with lust. The skin around his mouth was slick and shining with my wetness.

“Don’t just sit there,” Raphael ordered, “Ride my tongue, babe, ride my fucking face.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 559

1 gripped the back of the couch for balance, my knuckles turning white. I began to grind against him. I slithered my hips forward and back in circles, rubbing my clit directly over his tongue. Every time I pushed down, his tongue dug deeper inside me.

A wild, unhinged wave of pleasure crashed over my body, “Ah! Oh god, Raph!” I screamed out.

I couldn’t stay still. My hips jerked and thrashed against his face, slamming my wetness down onto his mouth as he kept thrusting his tongue deep into my entrance.

Long, breathless moans spilled from my lips, turning into high, desperate whimpers as the friction on my clit grew too intense to bear.

My hands flew to my own chest. I clamped my fingers hard around my bare breasts, squeezing the softness, crushing them together. I caught my stiff nipples between my fingers, pinching and rolling them roughly just like he did.

Raphael let out a heavy grunt and tore his face away from my wetness, his hands gripped my waist and flipped my entire body over.

He threw me flat onto my back against the deep cushions of the couch.

My head hit the pillows, and my breath left me in a sharp gasp. Raphael crawled over me like a shadow, his muscular chest hovering right above mine. He reached down and grabbed my legs, lifting them high into the air and then he threw my thighs over his broad shoulders.

My knees bent near his ears, opening me up completely, leaving me totally exposed. My high heels dangled behind his back.

He lunged forward, burying his face right back into my pussy.

He opened his jaws wide and began to devour me again, his nose and chin rubbing hard against my folds. He lapped up the wetness running down my thighs, and then he bit and sucked on my clit, driving me right back to the edge.

The moment his teeth caught my clit, the tight knot in my belly finally snapped. A violent, blinding explosion of pleasure ripped through my entire body.

“Oh God!” I shrieked, the sound tearing raw from my throat as my hips convulsed off the couch cushions.

The orgasm hit me so hard my head slammed back. My eyes rolled back into my head, the lids fluttering shut as my vision went completely white.

Every single muscle in my body locked tight. My back arched high off the cushion, and behind his broad shoulders, my toes curled tightly inside my high heels, my feet shaking with the force of the release, the heels digging into his back.

Raphael didn’t stop. Even as I screamed and trembled, he kept his face buried deep in my wetness, holding my legs firmly over his shoulders and drinking down every single drop of my climax as my body shook violently beneath him.

Raphael pulled his face away with a sucking sound. The skin around his mouth and chin was shining brightly. He looked down at me, his dark eyes fixed on my dazed, shaking face, and his lips curved into a wicked smile.

“Remember my text, Gianna?” he rumbled, “Yeah. Now is the fucking time.”

The next moment, his hands gripped my ankles. And pushed both of my legs forward, pressing them straight down onto my own upper body.

The weight of his chest forced my knees down until they dug hard into my own breasts, pinning them tight. I gasped as the air left my lungs, my body crushed into a tight, helpless ball beneath him.

To keep me locked there, Raphael slid his forearm right over the back of my knees, leaning all of his body weight forward to drive my legs even harder into my chest.

I couldn't move an inch. I was totally split open for him, Raphael reached down with his other hand, his fingers slick with my wetness. He took his index and middle fingers and thrust them straight inside my tight hole.

"Ah!" I cried out.

The two fingers stretched my sensitive skin, sliding deep while his forearm kept pushing my legs down, crushing me into the couch.

He didn't wait for me to adjust to the stretch. He hooked his large fingers inside me and began to fuck me.

He drove his two fingers deep into me, pulling them almost all the way out before slamming them back inside, over and over again.

The wet sounds of his fingers echoed loudly through the room, "Ah! Raphael, please!" I cried out, my voice vibrating against my own knees which were still pinned hard against my chest.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 560

He increased the pace, his forearm pressing down even heavier on the back of my legs to keep me folded wide open. His fingers curved upward inside me, hooking roughly against the sensitive walls.

Every hard shove of his hand sent electric shocks straight to my core, turning my inside walls into pure liquid fire.

The lightning-fast friction of his fingers hooking deep inside me pushed my body past its absolute limit. The heat in my core built into a massive, swelling tidal wave that I couldn't hold back.

"Raphael! I'm-ah! I'm gonna-"

I couldn't even finish the word. My inside walls clamped down around his moving fingers in tight, violent spasins.

A blinding, white-hot explosion ripped through my lower belly, and my eyes rolled back as hot fluid erupted from my core, squirting straight out across his hand.

Raphael tore his fingers out and brought his palm down. He slapped his open hand harshly right against my sensitive core.

The burning pain of the blow mixed instantly with the pleasure of the orgasm, sending a violent shockwave straight up my spine.

"I suspected your body was capable of that," he said, "It's useful to have confirmation."

My chest rose and fell in uneven breaths, "I... can't..." I whispered. "I need... a minute."

Twice.

He had pushed me over the edge twice in barely ten minutes, and my body felt completely overwhelmed.

One corner of his mouth lifted.

"Your cardiovascular endurance requires improvement," he observed with complete seriousness. "Your dietary habits have been suboptimal for quite some time."

I stared at him.

His thumb brushed absently over my hip.

"We'll correct that," he continued, "Better nutrition. Better recovery. Better conditioning."

I frowned, still not sure if I was on earth or in heaven, "What the fuck?!"

He held my gaze, "I intend to keep you for the rest of my life, ballerina. I have every intention of making sure your body can keep up with me."

Raphael shifted his weight, sitting back against the couch cushions. His hand dropped down to his crotch, wrapping his fingers around his cock. He began to stroke himself, his dark eyes locked onto mine as he watched my chest heave.

"Now," he started, his voice raspy as he pumped his length, "Are you ready for my cock?"

He reached over to the low wooden coffee table next to the couch. He pressed a small, hidden button on the side of the panel. A secret drawer clicked and slid open with a soft hiss. Raphael reached inside and pulled out a tall, clear bottle of lube.

My brows snapped together, a deep frown wrinkling my forehead as I looked from the bottle back to his face.

“I’m wet enough,” I argued, “Look at me. What more do you want?”

Raphael looked down at me, then looked straight back into my eyes, his smirk turning wicked, “Not wet enough for all of me,” he murmured, “I’m going to stretch you wide open, and I want every single inch to slide in smooth

Raphael poured lube into his palm. He rubbed his hands together and then coated his length. He moved over me, his heavy chest pinning me down against the cushions. He gripped my thighs, pushing them wide apart until was completely open beneath him. The tip of his cock pressed against my tight entrance.

“Stay still, babe,” he whispered, his breath hot against my neck.

He began to push. He went slow, incredibly slow, letting the head of his cock part my sensitive skin.

Even with the lube, the sheer thickness of him felt massive. I let out a gasp as my walls began to stretch. He had never been fully inside of me before, his size too much for anyone to take, and I could feel the tight weight of him testing my limits.

“Raphael-“I choked out, my fingers clawing into his shoulders.

“Shh. Take it,” he whispered, his jaw tight, sweat beading on his forehead as he controlled his own strength.

He pushed a little deeper. A tight, stinging burn bloomed deep inside my core. It felt like an iron rod was slowly splitting me open from the inside out.

My inside walls bunched up, the slick lube clicked and squelched between our bodies, but the intense stretch only grew wider and tighter with every millimeter he gained.

I tossed my head back, my eyes squeezing shut as a tiny whimper left my throat. The fullness was overwhelming.

It felt like he was taking up every single inch of space inside my body, stretching my flesh to its absolute breaking point.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 561

Raphael let out a low, pained grunt, his own muscles shaking with the effort of holding back. He kept his movements slow, grinding his hips forward by fractions of an inch.

Inch by inch.

The burning heat spread, turning into an ache that filled my entire lower belly. My hips twitched, trying to pull away from the pressure, but his hands locked onto my waist, holding me perfectly still as he drove his length further into me.

Finally, with one last hard thrust that caught me by surprise, his pubic bone slammed flat against mine.

He was all the way in.

Every single inch of his cock was buried deep inside my body, stretching me open so completely that I couldn't even close my legs. I lay there frozen, my chest heaving, feeling the massive, throbbing weight of him filled to the absolute brim inside me.

Raphael let out a long, ragged exhale and collapsed his heavy upper body directly over mine. He didn't drop his full weight, he braced himself on his forearms but his chest and shoulders trapped me completely against the cushions.

He didn't move. He didn't thrust. He just stayed perfectly still, buried deep to the hilt inside my body.

I opened my eyes, my vision blurry with tears from the intense stretch. I looked up at his face, just inches away from mine.

His jaw was clenched so tight the muscles bunched in hard knots under his stubble. His eyes were squeezed shut, his dark lashes wet, and his nose was flared as he dragged breaths into his lungs.

He looked like a man who had finally found water after years in a desert.

A rumble started in his chest and vibrated straight into my own ribs. It was a sound of pure pleasure. Every single muscle in his back and shoulders stayed locked tight.

He was just feeling me... feeling how perfectly his thick shaft filled every empty inch inside me, holding him tight.

I stayed completely still beneath him, my hands resting weakly on his shoulders as my chest tightened.

How had I become so lucky?

I lifted one hand and gently brushed my fingers through his hair. His eyes opened immediately, finding mine and there he was.

My Raphael.

My impossible, complicated, frustrating, beautiful man.

A smile touched my lips, “I don’t think you understand,” I whispered.

His brow creased slightly, “What?”

I licked my lower lip, “I love every version of you.”

His expression softened immediately and he blinked slowly like he couldn’t believe those words had left my mouth.

“The serious one, the grumpy one, the one who pretends he’s made of stone,” I smiled and he quietly huffed a laugh.

And then for a moment, he simply looked at me.

“I love you,” I said, my voice shaking with the truth of it, as tears welled up in my eyes, “More than I know how to explain. So if I don’t always understand what you’re trying to tell me…”

I smiled through another tear.

“…please remember that every time I look at you, every time I reach for your hand, every time I smile because hear your voice… I’m trying to tell you the same thing.”

I blinked and tears clung to my lashes but I smiled widely.

“I love you, Raphael. I love your mind. I love your ridiculous planning. I love the way you pretend you’re impossible to embarrass. I love the man everyone thinks they know…”

My smile softened.

“…but even more, I love the man only I get to be with. And if I get the rest of my life with you…

A quiet, happy laugh escaped me.

“…I think I’ll be the luckiest woman in the world.”

Raphael held my gaze without looking away, “Keep talking like that,” he whispered softly, “and you won’t be doing any walking for the next three days.”

The shameless threat made a small, helpless smile tug at the corners of my lips.

Before the smile could even fade, Raphael's hands gripped my hips, and he began to move.

Raphael pulled his cock almost all the way out, leaving just the blunt tip inside me. Then, with a slow lean of his upper body, he sank all the way back into me.

"Ah!" I gasped, placing a hand over his chest as the sudden, massive fullness hitting me right in the gut.

He didn't slam into me. He kept his movements slow and soft, his grip on my hips controlling every single inch of the slide.

My hands flew to his back, my nails scraping the skin. The feeling was completely overwhelming. Every time he pushed deep, it felt like he was touching the very top of my stomach, a dull pressure that made my breath catch. It was a mix of intense heat, a slight stinging friction, and a deep, pulsing ache that filled my entire lower body.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 562

I forced my eyes open, my vision swimming. His face was flushed, sweat dripping from his jawline but he didn't speed up.

Every time my body twitched or a small whimpering cry left my lips, his grip on my waist would tighten, slowing his thrusts down to an agonizingly careful pace until he felt my muscles relax around him again.

Even though it hurt a little, the constant friction against my walls was starting to build a new kind of tight, throbbing heat deep inside my belly.

The slow, careful thrust began to change as my body softened around him and then he started to thrust harder.

He pulled back until he was nearly gone, then drove his length all the way in. The sound of his skin slapping against mine filled the room. He didn't rush, but the force of each deep plunge made my entire body slide back against the couch cushions.

"Raphael... oh god," I gasped, my head tossing from side to side.

The stretching friction inside me grew hotter and more intense with every single stroke. He pinned my legs higher, driving his pelvis flat against mine, burying himself so deep it felt like he was claiming every single part of me.

His eyes grew darker as he watched my face twist with pleasure. He reached one hand down between our bodies, his thumb finding my clit.

He pressed down and began to rub it in fast, tight circles right as he slammed his hips forward.

The double hit of pleasure was too much. The hard, fast friction on the outside mixed with the stretching on the inside, and my brain completely short-circuited.

“Ah! Raphael! Raphael!” I shrieked.

My arms wrapped around his neck, and my hands flew to his back. As he drove deep inside me again, my fingers curled into tight claws. I dug my nails deep into his skin and dragged them straight down his spine, leaving long, red scratch marks.

He didn’t care. He let out a feral grunt at the sting of my nails, the pain only making him drive his hips harder and rub his thumb faster, sending me flying straight toward the edge. The tight coil in my lower belly snapped into a thousand pieces.

“Raphael!” I screamed, my voice tearing raw from my throat.

A blinding explosion of pleasure ripped through my entire body. My inside walls clamped down around his invading length in tight, desperate spasms. My head slammed back into the cushions, my eyes rolling shut as my vision went completely white.

My back arched high off the couch, every muscle locking tight as the intense release took over. My nails dug even deeper into the scratches on his back, my fingers trembling against his skin.

My core flooded him with a fresh, hot rush of moisture. Raphael let out a low groan as my pulsing walls squeezed his cock, but he didn’t stop. He kept rubbing, kept driving his hips forward, pinning me down and riding out the waves of my third climax.

His jaw locked so hard the veins in his neck popped out, and a deep rumble shook his chest.

He didn’t pull back. He drove his hips forward one last time, burying himself as deep as it could possibly go,

+15 BRA pinning my pelvis flat against the couch.

“Gianna-” he choked out, his voice completely broken.

He froze inside me, his entire body locking up. Then, with a loud grunt that vibrated right into my bones, his cock throbbed violently against my inside walls. He shot into me again and again, his muscles shaking with the sheer force of his release.

He collapsed his upper body over mine, burying his face into the crook of my neck. He dragged long, breaths into his lungs, his chest heaving hard against my bare breasts.

As the pulsing inside me slowly began to quiet down, his large, rough hand came up to wrap around the back of my neck. He pressed his lips hard against my wet skin, his breath hot and shaking.

“You’re mine,” he whispered roughly, his grip tightening just enough to hold me perfectly still against him, “My everything, my mess, my ballerina. My forever.”

Janedoewritings Author

Well...

I hope you all enjoyed the spice.

...

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 563

Gianna

The first thing I noticed was the sound.

Small waves rolled onto the sand. Somewhere farther down the shoreline, gulls called to one another as the sky slowly shifted from deep blue to pale gold.

I stayed exactly where I was, named, wrapped inside a thick blanket, wrapped around Raphael or maybe it was the other way around.

His arms were around my waist, holding me against his chest while we sat on a mountain of blankets and oversized cushions someone had arranged during the night. The fire pit nearby had burned down to glowing coals, leaving only a gentle warmth in the cool morning air.

The beach was empty. Nothing happened here unless Raphael wanted it to.

Dense trees surrounded the shoreline, hiding the property from every direction. Beyond them were security checkpoints, the marina, the guest houses, and the rest of his estate.

Out here... It felt like the entire world had disappeared.

I shifted slightly and a quiet groan escaped before I could stop it. A warm hand immediately settled against my waist, “You shouldn’t move that quickly,” Raphael said calmly.

His other hand stayed beneath the blanket, holding a cold pack carefully against my lower back, the cool pressure felt amazing.

When I had quietly admitted an hour earlier that my back was sore, he hadn’t simply nodded. He had disappeared for less than two minutes, and then he had returned with the cold pack, and pain medicine.

Raphael’s hand tightened around my waist, “Pain level?”

I thought about it seriously, “Mostly sore.”

“One to ten.”

I laughed, “You actually want a number?”

“It helps.”

I pretended to think harder, “…Four.”

He nodded once, “Acceptable.”

My eyes widened, “Acceptable?”

“I anticipated worse.”

I turned my head enough to look at him, “You anticipated it?”

“I planned for it.”

That sounded so normal coming from him that I couldn’t help smiling.

He had also insisted I drink two full bottles of water before leaving the bedroom. He had walked me to the bathroom despite me telling him I could manage perfectly well on my own.

He had quietly reminded me that emptying my bladder afterward would lower the chance of getting a urinary tract infection. Then, after checking the time on his watch, he had handed me emergency contraception and a glass of water.

As if taking care of me wasn’t a favor, it was simply his responsibility.

….he had somehow managed to turn aftercare into a perfectly organized operation.

It was the most Raphael thing imaginable.

He had even checked the temperature inside the house because he thought I'd sleep better if the room was slightly cooler.

Normal people lit candles.

Raphael monitored hydration.

I rested my head against his shoulder, "You know..."

"Hm?"

"I don't think anyone has ever taken care of me the way you do."

He was quiet for a long moment and then whispered, "I should hope not. I've invested a significant amount of time learning you.'

I smiled, "I know."

That was the beautiful part. He wasn't trying to impress me. He wasn't trying to be romantic. This was simply how his mind worked.

If something mattered, he made a plan and luckily... I mattered.

The sunrise spilled across Lake Michigan, turning the water into liquid gold. Gentle light reflected in Raphael's eyes as he watched the horizon.

I slipped my fingers between his. He immediately laced them together.

"I have a question," I said, "How many checklists did last night involve?"

His shoulders moved with the smallest laugh, "...Five."

I turned to stare at him, "Five?"

"There were contingencies."

I laughed into his shoulder and I looked out across the lake again. The sun finally climbed above the horizon. It painted everything gold.

The beach.

The waves.

The blanket around us.

His profile.

15 Beras

I realized then that I wasn't thinking about yesterday anymore, or New York, or Leone, or fear.

For the first time in a very long time... I was simply watching the sunrise with the man I loved.

The sun continued to climb higher over the lake. And while I was wrapped safely inside his arms, listening to the waves and the beat of his heart, I realized something.

Home had never been a place.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 564

It had quietly become the man holding me while making sure the ice pack stayed exactly where it needed to be

Then Raphael suddenly broke the silence, "...I have a question."

I lifted my head and looked back at him, "Okay?"

His gaze drifted toward the water, his jaw tightened and his thumb stopped moving against my side, "I've been thinking about something you told me a long time ago."

I frowned, "What did I say?"

His eyes stayed fixed on the horizon, "You said..." He paused, choosing each word carefully, "That when you love someone... you love them for life."

I froze, blinking up at him.

"You also said..." he swallowed almost imperceptibly, "If someone truly falls in love again, then perhaps what they felt the first time wasn't love at all."

The morning suddenly felt very quiet.

Raphael let out a slow breath, "I've spent an unreasonable amount of time analyzing that statement. This..." he gestured vaguely between us, "This is unfamiliar territory for me. You are my first in more ways than I know how to explain."

Something tightened in my chest, a certain weight that I didn't know how to lift off.

"If I started listing them," he said quietly, "we would still be sitting here this evening."

I smiled softly.

Then his expression became serious again, "I don't know how this works. I don't know whether people carry pieces of previous relationships with them forever. I don't know if love... changes shape."

He looked at me then and for the first time since I'd known Raphael Capone...

I saw uncertainty.

"So I need you to tell me something. When you look at me..." he hesitated, "...is it only me? Or..." He looked away for the briefest second, "Is there still a part of your heart that belongs to your ex?"

The question hung quietly between us.

Then he shook his head, "I can live with many things, Gianna," he said, his eyes returning to mine, "Uncertainty simply isn't one of them."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. My brows pulled together as I searched for words that actually felt big enough.

Seeing me struggle to answer, Raphael spoke again, "I know you cared about him. I'm not questioning that. You loved him. You spent years with him. You believed he was your future.

His jaw tightened as I tried to keep the storm in my chest inside of me.

He gave his head a shake again, "You didn't say it casually. You believed it. You meant them. I don't think you lied. I think you genuinely believed them."

I opened my mouth, "Raphael-"

He raised a finger, "Please. I need to finish."

I closed my mouth immediately and he took a slow breath.

"I've spent months trying to understand something. If love lasts forever..." he said quietly, "...then where does it go? Does it divide? Does it fade? Does it stay exactly the same while another love grows beside it? I don't know, Gianna, I have never been here before. I've never had to compete with someone's memories."

His expression remained calm, but I knew him well enough now to see what sat underneath it. He was hurt just thinking about it.

“If there is still part of your heart that belongs to him...” his jaw flexed, “...tell me. I won’t be angry. I won’t punish you for telling me the truth but I need the truth. Because if you loved him the way you told me you did...” he hesitated, “...then I don’t know how I became enough.”

I shifted beneath the blanket until I was facing him completely. The blanket slipped around us, trapping the warmth between our bodies while the cool morning air brushed against the top of my head. The ice pack stayed tucked against my lower back, one of Raphael’s hands still holding it in place without him even thinking about it.

I looked at him for a long moment. His face was calm and patient. Months ago, I would’ve called it unreadable. Cold, even, now I knew better.

Now I could see the tiny things hidden beneath it.

The slight tightening of his jaw. The almost invisible crease between his brows. The way his breathing slowed. The way his shoulders weren’t fully relaxed anymore.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 565

They were such small changes that most people would never notice them but I did. Somewhere along the way, I had learned how to read the man everyone else thought had no expressions at all.

Slowly, I lifted my hand and rested it over the left side of his chest, right over his heart. It beat steadily beneath my palm.

“Raphael...” my voice came out softer than I expected, “Before everything...” I shook my head a little, “My idea of love was... broken. Distorted. And I’m not just talking about romantic love. I mean every kind of love.”

I looked into his eyes. The waves rolled gently onto the shore behind us.

My chin trembled, “I thought love was something you earned. I thought you had to deserve it every single day. If you made a mistake...” I looked toward the lake, “...people loved you less. If you disappointed them, they walked away. If you weren’t useful anymore, they stopped choosing you.”

I took a slow breath, the lake was suddenly blurring in my vision but I couldn’t gather the strength to look at him

“I thought that was normal. I thought families were supposed to hurt each other. I thought parents were supposed to make you feel guilty for existing,” my throat tightened, “And with Leone, I thought someone choosing me was enough.”

I finally looked into his eyes and noticed the frown that appeared when he saw the tears in my eyes.

“I didn’t ask whether he made me feel safe. I didn’t ask whether he made me feel seen. I didn’t even ask whether I could be completely myself around him,” I laughed quietly, “I was just grateful somebody wanted me.”

My thumb brushed absentmindedly over Raphael’s chest.

“That’s how low the bar was. That’s what I thought love was.”

I glanced down at the blanket, a small smile finding its way onto my face.

“Then, when I was sixteen... my mom got custody of me,” I laughed softly, though it caught in my throat, “And she just... loved me.”

I blinked hard.

“It didn’t matter how many years we had lost. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t perfect. She never made me earn it. She was just... my mom.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, and I sniffled.

“Did you know I have a little half-brother? Giovanni,” I smiled sadly, “Most of the time, I forgot I even did. Our dad kept us apart. I saw him once... maybe twice every six months if I was lucky. So I never really got the chance to be his big sister.”

A tear slipped down my cheek, and I looked towards the sky to keep them in.

“Then I came here and I met Jules. She didn’t know me. All she knew was that I was her older sister. And somehow... that was enough for her. She loved me anyway.”

I looked down at my hand resting against Raphael’s chest, tracing the beautiful tattoo there.

“For a while, I thought that was all I needed. My mom, Jules and me. Our tiny little family. I held onto them so tightly because I kept waiting for someone to take them away. I honestly believed I didn’t deserve them. So every time something good happened... I was already preparing myself to lose it.”

I let out a shaky breath.

“And then Mom accepted Salvatore’s proposal,” I closed my eyes for a second, “My first thought wasn’t that she had found someone who loved her. It was...” my voice cracked, “...someone is taking my mom away from me. And I was so angry, and so protective of them.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. I leaned forward until my forehead rested against Raphael’s chest. His heartbeat echoed steadily beneath my palm.

I closed my eyes, “And then I met your family. You all confused me. I watched your brothers argue over the dumbest things then stand shoulder to shoulder the second one of them needed the others. I watched the women in your family tease each other without mercy... then become completely impossible to get past if someone from the outside crossed a line.”

I smiled through my tears, clinging to him.

“I watched your father look at all of you with so much pride. I had never seen anything like that before. I didn’t know families could stay together after fights. I didn’t know love didn’t disappear when people got angry. I didn’t know you could disappoint someone and they would still choose you the next morning.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 566

I slowly slipped both of my arms around his waist and leaned against him, resting my cheek over his heart. The steady beat beneath my ear somehow made everything feel a little easier to say.

When I looked back up at him, his brows drew together immediately.

His hand came up without him even thinking about it, his thumb brushing beneath my eye as another tear escaped.

“So when you ask me about Leone...” I said quietly, “you’re asking the wrong question because the girl who loved Leone, she didn’t even know what love was.”

My fingers tightened slightly against his back, brushing over the raised marks my nails had left on his skin a few hours ago.

“She thought love meant holding on so tightly that you forgot about yourself. She thought love meant accepting whatever someone gave you because you were scared they’d stop choosing you. She thought love was something you had to earn.”

A small smile found my lips.

“Then you loved me,” I felt his heartbeat stumble beneath my cheek, “And you changed every single thing I believed. You showed me that love is patient, safe, and it can stay. It doesn’t disappear the first time someone gets scared or makes a mistake.”

I reached up and cupped his face.

“So no…” I smiled through my tears, “You and Leone aren’t even part of the same story,” I held his face a little tighter, “So if you’re asking whether there’s still a place in my heart for him… There isn’t. There hasn’t been for a very long time.”

I moved closer until our foreheads were almost touching. Then I kissed him softly. My lips lingered against his for a moment before I gently caught his lower lip between mine, giving it the smallest tug before letting him go.

When I looked back into his eyes, my smile had softened, “My heart found its home,” I whispered, “It found you and I would lose everything before I’d willingly lose what we have.”

His eyes moved slowly over my face, studying every tiny change in my expression as if he were checking each word against the truth.

Then he asked, his voice calm enough to make the question even worse, “So… If removing Leone from the equation wouldn’t hurt you then you wouldn’t object if I killed him.”

The words landed so quietly they almost didn’t register.

I pulled back so fast the blanket slipped from my shoulder, “What?”

Raphael didn’t react to my shock. His arms stayed around me beneath the blanket. His eyes never left mine.

“I wasn’t planning to tell you this,” he said quietly. “But if we’re going to have this conversation, you deserve the full picture.”

I waited.

“After he relentlessly called you, I didn’t assume he would simply disappear. I assigned Ciro to watch him.”

My brows pulled together.

T

“Ciro wasn’t there to provoke him. He wasn’t there to attack him. His only job was to make sure Leone didn’t decide to arrive in Chicago without warning.”

The wind carried the sound of the waves onto the shore.

“Then the evening of your showcase...” he continued, “...Ciro stopped checking in.”

Something cold settled in my stomach.

Raphael’s voice stayed level, “Three hours later, every one of my brothers received the same video. He had found, Ciro, he restrained him, tortured him, then he sent it to us.”

It felt suddenly everything had turned upside down, “What?”

“He wanted us to watch, Gianna. He wanted us angry. And then he walked into that restaurant. He wanted us to see him. He wanted us to understand that he could reach our family wherever he wanted. And he wanted us to understand that he knew exactly where you were.”

Silence settled between us. Rapahel shook his head, the look in his eyes was riddled with darkness.

“He crossed a line that doesn’t exist in my world, Gianna. He laid hands on one of my men. He challenged my family and he deliberately inserted himself into a dinner where you were present,” a slow breath left him, “He made it personal.”

His thumb brushed absently over my side.

“So before I dealt with it,” his gaze searched mine, “I needed to know whether removing him from this world would also hurt you.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 567

I shook my head immediately, “Raph...” my hand found his cheek to calm him, “No. I meant everything I just told you. I don’t love him. I don’t want him. I don’t want a future with him but...” I swallowed, “that doesn’t automatically mean I want him dead.”

Raphael watched me carefully and I took both of his hands into mine.

“Ciro is still alive, right?” I asked.

He nodded once, “Yes.”

“Then we can bring him home,” hope slipped into my voice before I could stop it, “Leone wants me.”

Raphael's expression hardened instantly and I squeezed his hands.

"Listen to me, he isn't doing this because of Ciro, he's doing this because of me. If I speak to him, if he sees me... can make him understand. I can make him let Ciro go."

For a long moment, Raphael didn't say a single word. He simply looked at me. Then a small, tired smile touched his lips. He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

"You worry about Hazel," he said quietly. "Stay with your mother. Give her all of your attention."

His hand gently tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"I'll take care of everything else."

"But, Raph-"

He shook his head once, "No," his voice stayed calm, but it left no room for argument, "We're done discussing this."

By the time I finished getting ready, I had reached one very important conclusion, walking was a scam. Every single step reminded me of last night.

I paused in front of the bedroom mirror one last time. The girl looking back at me looked... normal enough.

A fitted red sweetheart neckline top, blue denim jeans, and white sneakers. My hair fell in loose waves over my shoulders.

The makeup had taken much longer than usual, not because I wanted to look pretty but because someone had left enough evidence to make that a full-time job.

I leaned closer to the mirror, checking the concealer one last time. The faint marks along my neck were hidden. The small bruise near my collarbone had disappeared beneath foundation. Even the tiny bite on my shoulder was covered.

I tilted my head from one side to the other.

Good enough, nobody would notice, probably.

I grabbed my phone and slowly headed downstairs very slowly. Halfway down the staircase I regretted every decision I had made over the last twenty-four hours.

My legs still felt heavy, my hips protested with every step, even my lower back reminded me that Raphael Capone

+15 BE A was an animal.

I couldn’t even be angry.

Mostly because every time I tried, another memory from last night would appear out of nowhere.

His voice, his laugh, the way he had looked at me. Heat immediately climbed into my cheeks.

No.

We were absolutely not thinking about that while walking into breakfast.

I took a deep breath before pushing open the dining room doors. The familiar sound of conversation wrapped around me immediately. Almost everyone was already there except for Salvatore, he insisted on having breakfast alone with mom in the back gardens everyday.

Then I remembered our conversation on the beach.

Leone.

Ciro.

That quiet question.

So it won’t hurt you if I kill him, right?

The warmth inside my chest faded. Raphael had promised to let me focus on Mom, to leave everything else to him.

For some reason, that didn’t comfort me anymore. It made me nervous because Raphael never made promises he couldn’t keep.

“Hey, good morning!” Claire smiled widely.

Every head turned. My eyes lifted almost by instinct, straight across the table. Raphael was looking at me.

I noticed the tiny lift of one eyebrow. The brief glance that traveled over my face, checking if I looked tired, checking if I looked uncomfortable, checking if I was alright.

The smallest smile tugged at the corner of my mouth before I looked away. I wasn’t ready to hold his gaze for too long in front of everyone, not after everything that had happened between us.

I cleared my throat, “Good morning, everyone.”

A chorus of greetings answered me from around the table. I walked toward the empty chair between Maddie and Claire.

The chair had never seemed so far away. I lowered myself carefully. Very... very carefully. The moment I finally sat down, I nearly sighed with relief.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 568

Claire glanced sideways at me, “You okay?”

I nodded a little too quickly, “Fine.”

Maddie immediately looked at me, “You do look a little stiff.”

I reached for the orange juice before either of them could look at me any longer.

“I think everything finally caught up with me,” I said with a small smile. “The showcase, all the rehearsals, the flight back... I’m definitely feeling it today.”

Which...

Technically wasn’t a lie, just not the whole truth.

Across the table, I caught Raphael lowering his coffee cup. His lips twitched barely. If I hadn’t spent months learning his face, I would’ve missed it.

I narrowed my eyes at him for exactly one second. His expression returned to complete seriousness so quickly it almost made me laugh.

Instead, I picked up my glass of orange juice and took the biggest sip of my life.

Then I felt that strange feeling that told you someone was watching.

I slowly lowered the glass, fully expecting it to be Raphael but across the table, Vincenzo was looking directly at me. His eyes were fixed on me with a level of focus that made my stomach tighten.

I frowned slightly, “Is... everything okay?”

Vincenzo’s gaze never left me, “Where did you get that?”

I blinked, “What?”

He nodded once toward my chest and my hand moved on instinct. My fingertips found the familiar pendant resting against my skin.

My heart stumbled.

Oh.

I wrapped my fingers around it without thinking, The gold felt warm beneath my fingertips. My stomach tightened even more. Of course he recognized it.

It had belonged to his mother.

“A... friend gave it to me. I...” I swallowed, “...she gave it to me.”

Vincenzo’s eyebrows lowered, “A friend?”

The two words were calm but they weren’t calm, if that makes sense. Then without another word, he turned his head and his eyes landed on Raphael.

Raphael looked up from his coffee, their eyes met across the length of the table. Raphael didn’t look surprised or nervous, If anything... one corner of his mouth lifted confidently. He held Vincenzo’s stare without the slightest hesitation, almost as if he had been waiting for this moment all along.

15 B

Claire looked from her husband to Raphael then back again.

“Oh!” she said brightly, a little too brightly, “Has anyone tried the cinnamon rolls? They’re really good today. I mean, they’re still not as good as Alessia’s but they’re getting dangerously close.”

The second the words left her mouth, Dante reached across the table, grabbed two cinnamon rolls and dropped both of them onto his plate.

“Well,” he said seriously, “if we’re approaching Alessia-level quality, I should probably verify that personally

Adriano cleared his throat, “If Dante keeps eating like this, he’ll bankrupt the kitchen before Christmas.”

Dante looked offended, “I am supporting local businesses.”

“You live here.”

“So?”

Adriano raised an eyebrow mockingly, “You are the business.”

“I still support it.”

Claire immediately joined in, “I think we should all appreciate Dante’s sacrifice.”

Dante smiled, “I am incredibly generous.”

“You are incredibly expensive,” Adriano added.

“I prefer ‘high maintenance.’”

The laughter grew a little louder but it never reached the two men sitting across from one another.

Vincenzo’s jaw remained tight.

Raphael calmly took another sip of his coffee.

Neither one had forgotten the conversation happening without words.

I looked down at the necklace still trapped between my fingers.

Bzzz.

My phone vibrated beside my plate. The sound felt unusually loud. Grateful for the distraction, I picked it up. A small smile immediately touched my face.

Mama D: Sweetheart, if you’re free... would you come see me tonight? I’ve been thinking about the way we left things, and I’d like the chance to make it right.

Janedoewritings Author

Enjoy...

Just a quick heads-up: there won’t be an update tomorrow because I’ll be out all day and won’t be home at all....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 569

Gianna

I smiled before I even looked.

Raphael: Don’t worry about breakfast.

Another message appeared almost immediately.

Raphael: I’ll handle Vincenzo.

I stared at the screen for a few seconds before a quiet laugh escaped me.

Of course he would.

He always did, and not because he thought I was incapable but because somewhere along the way, protecting my peace had quietly become one of his favorite jobs.

My smile refused to disappear.

Everything around me felt... lighter.

Even though every muscle in my body reminded me that I had barely slept, I couldn’t stop smiling. My legs still felt tired, my lower back ached whenever I moved too quickly, and I knew I was walking just a little slower than usual.

I didn’t mind, not even a little because in what felt like forever... My heart was quiet.

Another vibration pulled me from my thoughts and I opened the conversation.

Bri: Still coming tonight?

My fingers moved before I could think.

Me: Absolutely.

Me: I’ll probably be a little late though.

Me: I have to sneak past about a hundred bodyguards first.

The back gardens were almost empty. The fountain spilled clear water into the stone basin, the sound soft enough to cover everything else.

Mom sat beside it in her wheelchair with her face turned toward the flowers. The breeze gently lifted a few loose strands of her hair.

I walked over, sat beside her and we simply listened to the fountain. She reached over and rested her hand on mine. Her fingers had grown thinner over the past year.

I hated noticing it.

She looked up at me, her lips taking a moment to form the words. Every syllable came slowly, quietly, as though simply speaking demanded more strength than she had left.

"...You..." She paused to catch her breath, swallowing with visible effort. "...look... happy... today."

Even that short sentence left her chest rising a little faster.

Her hands rested motionless in her lap. She no longer had the strength to press the controls on her wheelchair, so whenever she wanted to move, one of us had to push her. Even the smallest movements a finger, a hand, a simple reach had become impossible.

But her eyes still noticed everything.

I looked down at our hands, then I leaned over and kissed her fingers once and then again, "That's because I'm here with you."

Her smile softened, "You've been... smiling even before you... sat down."

I just couldn't stop.

She studied my face for another moment, "It... suits you," she whispered, "Who is... taking such good care... of my girl?"

I laughed softly and shook my head, "No one."

Mom gave me a look that only mothers seemed capable of giving, "Gianna."

I smiled innocently, "I'm serious."

"So... am I."

She kept watching me with that calm little smile, "I've known you... your entire life," she said. "You can... fool a lot of... people, Ginny."

I raised an eyebrow, "...Not you?"

She smiled, "Never... me."

I looked away, suddenly finding the fountain incredibly interesting, "I don't know what you're talking about."

“Oh?”

Her eyes lingered on my face, warm and full of love.

I leaned closer without thinking, lowering myself until my cheek rested lightly against the back of her weak hand where it lay in her lap.

Her fingers couldn’t lift to brush my hair anymore, but I felt the faintest twitch beneath my skin, the small movement she still had left.

It was enough.

I smiled and turned my face into her hand a little more, letting her know I understood exactly what she had been trying to do.

Then one eyebrow lifted, “That’s… interesting.”

My stomach dropped, “…What?”

Her eyes drifted to the side of my neck. She studied it for a second before looking back at me.

“…Your makeup…” She paused to gather another breath. “…missed… a spot.”

Instinctively, my hand flew to the side of my neck. Heat rushed into my face so fast it almost hurt, “Oh my God.”

15 BOL

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 570

Mom let out the softest laugh, the sound quiet and breathy.

“…I was… wondering…” she paused to catch her breath. “…why… so much… foundation.”

I covered my face with both hands, “Please don’t.”

Another tiny laugh escaped her, “…I… didn’t… say… anything.”

I groaned into my hands, “Mama…”

I wrapped both of my hands around hers where they rested in her lap.

Her eyes crinkled with amusement, “...My... little girl...” She drew another careful breath. “...isn’t... so... little... anymore.”

I peeked at her through my fingers, “You are enjoying this far too much.”

Her smile softened as she looked at me for a long moment, “...You...” She paused, gathering enough breath to finish. “...haven’t smiled... like this... in... a long... time. Whoever... did... this... I hope... they spend... the rest... of... their life... protecting... that smile.”

I laughed softly, “He tries.”

As if the universe had been listening, footsteps echoed across the stone path..I smiled before I even turned my head. I already knew who it was. I always did. There was something about him I couldn’t explain. I could feel him before I saw him, as though my heart had learned the sound of his presence long before my ears ever could.

Raphael came into view carrying a small insulated medical case in one hand and a folder tucked beneath his arm.

He stopped beside us, “Good afternoon, Hazel.”

Mom smiled, “Raphael.”

He crouched beside her wheelchair before opening the case, “I spoke with your neurologist this morning. There was a delay with one of your prescriptions,” he removed a neatly labeled medication box, “It won’t be delayed anymore.”

He placed it carefully into the storage pouch attached to the back of her wheelchair as he continued checking the medication list.

“I updated the schedule,” he held up a laminated page, and glanced at me, “The font is larger and I added color coding.”

I smiled immediately.

He had done that because of me because he knew I usually helped Mom keep track of everything.

“It should be easier to follow now.”

Mom looked between the two of us then she smiled, “You think... of... everything.”

Raphael frowned slightly, “I try to reduce avoidable problems.”

That was such a Raphael answer that I had to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing. He sat beside me on the stone bench, not close enough to touch, just... close. His shoulder rested only a few inches from mine. I could feel the warmth coming from him anyway. The clean scent of cedar and cologne drifted toward me with the breeze.

It was ridiculous.

He wasn't even looking at me. He was explaining medication times to my mother with complete focus.

Yet somehow...

He was all I could think about.

I watched the way his hands moved while he talked. The calm way he explained everything, the patience in his voice, the care not because anyone expected it because this was simply who he was.

Without thinking, my eyes drifted to his mouth.

I wanted to kiss him, right here, in the middle of the gardens, in front of my mother. The realization made my cheeks grow warm. I quickly looked away.

I looked at Mom. She looked peaceful and happy. There was color in her cheeks today. She was sitting beside the man who had gone out of his way to make her life a little easier, completely unaware that somewhere along the way...

I'd fallen in love with him.

I wanted to tell her. I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to tell her that Raphael was gentle in all the ways that mattered, that he noticed things nobody else noticed, that he remembered every tiny detail about me.

That he made me feel safe.

That every day, somehow, he found another quiet way to love me. I wanted to tell her that I was happy, truly happy, maybe happier than I'd ever been, because she was here and he was right beside us.

+15 89ns 8mus

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 571

But the words stayed trapped behind my teeth because every time I imagined saying them... I imagined something else too. Mom's smile disappearing. The happiness she'd found with Salvatore cracking apart because of me.

I couldn't do that to her, not after everything she'd survived with my father. If keeping quiet meant she got to spend whatever time she had left believing she'd found happiness....

Then I'd keep quiet.

I looked down at my hands.

Sometimes...

I caught myself wondering what would have happened if life had taken one tiny turn somewhere.

If Mom had never married Salvatore. If our families had stayed separate. If Raphael had simply walked into my life exactly the same way he already had...

Only without the impossible label hanging over us.

A small smile slipped onto my face before I could stop it. Mom would've adored him. She already liked him without knowing the truth.

I could almost picture it.

Raphael showing up to dinner exactly on time. Bringing flowers because he'd researched her favorite ones weeks beforehand. Helping her with her medication schedule. Listening more than he spoke.

Mom would probably spend every conversation telling me not to let him get away. The thought made warmth spread across my cheeks.

Oh...

She would've loved having him as a son-in-law, heat flooded my face so quickly I almost groaned.

Beside me, Raphael closed the folder and set it on the bench, "You look warm."

I looked up, "What?"

"You've become noticeably red."

I looked at my mom and then back at him, "I think it's the sun."

He looked toward the sky, “We’re sitting in the shade.”

‘...Maybe I’m sick.”

His eyebrows pulled together, “I find that unlikely.”

I laughed despite myself. His eyes softened in that quiet way they only ever seemed to around me. Without realizing it, I smiled. His mouth answered with the smallest smile I’d ever seen but it was enough to make my heart do something stupid.

My hand moved in the space between us before I even realized it was only a few inches, toward his. His fingers shifted too, just enough that if either of us moved another inch... we’d be touching.

“Gianna,” mom’s voice cut cleanly through the silence.

Bom

I blinked. My head snapped toward her so fast my neck almost hurt. She was looking at us, and she was definitely not smiling anymore, not frowning either.

Just... watching carefully. Her eyes moved from my face to Raphael’s and then slowly back to mine. Every single ounce of color drained from my face.

Then Raphael stood, buttoning his suit jacket with the same calm movements he always had, “I should leave,” he said, looking toward mom, “I have a meeting waiting for me at the office.”

Mom smiled warmly, “Don’t... work... too hard.”

“I’ll try,” he picked up the medical folder from the bench before looking at me, “I’ll check on you later, Hazel.”

“I’ll be... here,” she smiled.

A small smile appeared on his face, “I assumed as much.”

I stood too, “I’ll walk you out.”

His eyes found mine for the briefest second. Mom looked between us again. That same thoughtful expression returned to her face. I suddenly became very interested in the fountain.

“Back in a minute,” I told her.

She nodded slowly, “I’ll be... waiting.”

We started walking side by side through the gardens. The stone path curved between tall hedges and flowering trees. The sounds from the fountain grew quieter behind us until all I could hear were our footsteps and the wind moving through the leaves.

Only when we rounded another corner did Raphael glance over his shoulder.

The gardens behind us were empty, no guards, no family.

His hand suddenly found my neck before I could even blink, he guided me backward. My shoulders met the warm stone wall beside the pathway.

A startled laugh barely escaped me before he leaned down. His mouth found mine. The kiss was quick and deep, but it stole every coherent thought from my head.

But the words stayed trapped behind my teeth because every time I imagined saying them... I imagined something else too. Mom's smile disappearing. The happiness she'd found with Salvatore cracking apart because of me.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 572

His fingers remained warm against my neck while my hands instinctively caught the front of his jacket.

I kissed him back without thinking, without caring that someone could walk around the corner at any second.

When he finally pulled away, neither of us moved very far. Our foreheads almost touched. I looked up at him and looked back at me. For one long moment... we simply smiled.

My fingers straightened the lapel of his jacket even though it didn’t need straightening, “You’ll be late.”

His thumb brushed lightly against the side of my neck before he let his hand fall away, “I’ll come by tonight.”

My heartbeat immediately sped up, “You will?”

He nodded once, “After everyone’s asleep.”

For another second, neither of us moved. Then Raphael stepped back, gave me one last look, and turned toward the estate.

Raphael had barely taken three steps before another voice cut through the quiet garden, “Excuse me.”

The two of us turned at the same time. Jules stood a few feet away with both arms folded tightly across her chest. Her foot tapped against the stone path.

She looked between both of us suspiciously, “I have a question.”

Raphael stopped politely, “Go ahead, Jewel.”

She narrowed her eyes and then turned to me, “I thought we hated him.”

I froze, “Oh…”

Raphael slowly turned his head toward me. His eyebrows pulled together, “You hate me?” there wasn’t any accusation in his voice, only genuine confusion, “…Why?”

“Oh, no.” I grabbed his arm immediately. “No, that’s not-”

Jules pointed dramatically at him, “You broke her heart.”

Raphael blinked, “I did?”

“Yes, you did!” Jules snapped.

He looked back at me, looking even more confused than before, “When?”

I let out the most embarrassed groan of my life, “It was after…” I rubbed my forehead. “…after we ended the arrangement.”

His expression stayed blank.

I sighed, “That night.”

Realization slowly crossed his face, “But you broke up with me…”

I nodded, “Because I already loved you by then.”

His eyes softened immediately.

C

“So…” I continued, avoiding Jules’ glare, “I might have cried a little.”

“A little?” Jules repeated loudly, “You cried for days.”

“I did not. I cried for…” I paused, “…less.”

Jules looked at Raphael again, “So naturally, I hated you.”

Raphael stared at her thoughtfully for a second. Then, he reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

My eyes widened, “Oh no.”

He pulled out his wallet. Jules watched him suspiciously. Raphael removed a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill and held it out to her, “My apologies, Jewel.”

Jules looked at the money then at him, “…No.”

Raphael looked mildly surprised, he quietly added another hundred.

She remained completely unimpressed, “No.”

He added another bill.

Jules yawned dramatically, “I’ve seen bigger.”

Raphael looked almost… challenged, without another word, he added a fourth bill.

Jules tilted her head, “My loyalty to Gianna costs considerably more than that.”

Raphael stared at her for two long seconds, then… he calmly reached into his wallet one last time. He held the small stack between two fingers, “Final offer.”

Jules looked at it, then at me and then looked back at Raphael, “My sister cried.”

“I know,” I stated.

“You made her miserable.”

He nodded once, “I know.”

“You were public enemy number one.”

“I’ve gathered that.”

I couldn’t help it anymore. I slipped both hands around Raphael’s arm, hugging it against my chest, “Jules...”

She looked at me.

“I promise everything’s okay now,” I added as a smile kept trying to escape, and I couldn’t stop it, “He didn’t know.”

Raphael glanced down at me, “Yes, he really didn’t,” he told her, nodding.

I looked back at Jules, “And he made up for it.”

Jules studied us. Her eyes dropped to the way I was holding Raphael’s arm, then to the way Raphael hadn’t moved away and then back to my face.

A long silence followed, finally, she sighed dramatically, “Fine.”

Raphael lifted one eyebrow, “You forgive me?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 573

She held out her hand, “I forgive you.”

The second Raphael placed the money into her palm. She snatched it so fast it practically disappeared. She folded the bills twice and then tucked them into her back pocket with complete satisfaction, “I still like her more.”

Raphael nodded, “I’ve liked her more than myself for quite a while now.”

Jules smiled for the first time, “I knew there was a reason I decided not to hate you forever,” she pointed a warning finger at him, “But if you make my sister cry again...”

Raphael answered before she could finish, “I’ll have earned another five hundred dollar payment.”

Jules smirked, “So you do learn.”

Raphael looked at me, “I adapt.”

I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt, watching the two of them stand there, quietly negotiating my emotional well- being with cash.

Jules looked down at the money one more time before nodding to herself, “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Raphael gave a small nod, “The feeling is mutual.”

She turned to me, “I’m leaving before he changes his mind.”

I laughed as she walked away, humming happily to herself. The moment she disappeared around the hedge, the gardens became quiet again.

Raphael looked down at me, “So…’

“So?”

“I’ve officially been forgiven.”

I smiled, still holding onto his arm, “I think she actually likes you.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“You bought her loyalty.”

He looked thoughtful, “I rented it.”

That made me laugh again. The morning sun had climbed higher now, warming the stone path beneath our feet. Somewhere farther into the gardens, birds chirped softly between the trees.

Raphael’s eyes stayed on mine. He lifted one hand and brushed his thumb beneath my eye, “I have to go.”

He leaned down again and instead of kissing my lips, he pressed a slow, lingering kiss against my forehead. His lips stayed there for just a second longer than they needed to.

When he pulled back, his forehead rested lightly against mine, “Take care of yourself today, ballerina.”

I smiled, “I will.”

“Eat.”

I rolled my eyes, “I will.”

+15 Bartus

“Drink water.”

I laughed, “I will.”

“And if anything happens, anything at all…”

“I’ll call you.”

“Immediately.”

I nodded, “I promise.”

Only then did he seem satisfied. He stepped back, though his fingers brushed mine until the very last second, “‘ll see you tonight.”

A smile spread across my face before I could stop it, “I’ll be waiting.”

One corner of his mouth lifted, “I know.”

He turned and started walking toward the long driveway. I stood exactly where I was, watching him go, halfway to his car, he stopped, turned around, our eyes met across the gardens.

He gave me the smallest nod and then disappeared around the corner.

The smile on my face refused to leave. My lips still tingled from his kiss. My forehead still felt warm where he had kissed me goodbye. I shook my head to myself with a quiet laugh before turning back toward the fountain.

And as I got back, Jules was standing beside Mama’s wheelchair, bent down slightly so she could speak quietly into her ear.

I couldn’t hear everything, only broken pieces carried across the garden with the breeze.

“…Gianna…”

“…I wasn’t supposed to…”

“…don’t tell…”

My name.

I frowned.

Mama’s eyes stayed on Jules, calm but focused, she had always been good at pulling the truth out of people, especially Jules and I. She only had to look at both of us long enough and we’d spill everything.

I slowed without meaning to, Jules noticed me first. Her eyes flicked over my shoulder before widening just a little, “Mom...” she whispered.

Mom turned her eyes toward me. The moment she saw me, whatever had been sitting behind her eyes disappeared beneath a gentle smile.

Jules straightened so quickly it almost looked guilty. Did she tell her? About me and Raphael?

I looked from one face to the other, “... Did I interrupt something?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 574

Jules shook her head fast, “No.”

Mom’s gaze slid toward Jules, “We’ll... talk... later.”

Jules immediately understood, she nodded, “Yeah.”

She leaned down, kissed Mom gently on the forehead, then glanced at me with a smile that looked just a little too innocent.

I turned back to Mom, “Was she telling you something about me?”

Mom’s smile only deepened, “No...”

A hundred questions crowded my mind. Had Jules told her about Raphael? I wanted to ask. I almost did but something inside me stopped.

If Mom wanted me to know, she’d tell me.

If Jules wanted me to know, she’d tell me too.

So I swallowed my curiosity and stepped behind the wheelchair, resting my hands lightly on the handles, “Come on,” I murmured, leaning down to kiss the top of her head, “We’ve got a beautiful day ahead of us.”

I read Raphael’s message one more time.

Raph: Running late. I’ll be home around 3:00 a.m. Don’t wait up if you’re tired.

A small smile found my lips before I could stop it. He knew I would wait anyway. I typed back quickly.

Me: Drive safe.

A second later, the little “Seen” appeared. That was enough. I lowered my phone and glanced at the digital clock on my nightstand.

I still had hours, enough time to visit Mama D, enough time to get back before Raphael returned, enough time for nobody to know I’d ever left.

I stood up from the edge of the bed and walked toward the mirror. For a moment, my eyes drifted to the necklace resting against my collarbone.

Mrs. Capone’s necklace.

Raphael’s mother’s necklace.

My fingers closed around it automatically. The diamond felt cool beneath my fingertips..It was beautiful, too valuable.

And tonight, I was going into one of the roughest neighborhoods in Chicago without security.

If something happened, if someone tried to rob me, if this necklace disappeared, I didn’t even want to imagine Raphael’s face.

“No,” I whispered to myself, “You’re staying here.”

Carefully, I reached behind my neck and unclasped it, the weight disappeared from my skin. For a second, I simply looked down at it lying in my palm. It wasn’t just expensive jewelry anymore. It had become something much more to me.

It was our love.

I opened the third drawer of my dresser.

I placed the necklace gently into a velvet jewelry box before closing the lid, then I locked the drawer Only after checking it twice did I finally let out a small breath, “Much better.”

I changed quickly, jeans, a black T-shirt and comfortable sneakers. I tied my hair into a low ponytail and slipped my phone, cash, keys, and a small can of pepper spray into the bag.

I quietly opened my bedroom door. The hallway stretched in both directions, lit only by small wall lamps. I closed the door without making a sound.

My heart began beating faster with every step, not because I was scared because getting caught would be impossible to explain after I had already promised my mother that I would never see those “women” again.

I moved down the back staircase instead of the main one, careful to avoid the areas where the night staff usually worked. Outside one of the windows, I could see two guards walking slowly across the gardens. I waited until they disappeared around the corner before slipping through the rear corridor.

I got to the service entrance, pulled the heavy metal rack aside. I crouched down and lifted it. I switched on the flashlight on my phone, the narrow tunnel looked just as miserable as it had the first time.

I smiled to myself.

Silvio’s voice echoed perfectly inside my head, “Don’t take the left turn unless you’re interested in negotiating with raccoons.”

“Right turn,” I whispered.

I lowered myself inside and pulled the hatch shut above me. I crawled forward on my hands and knees. My muscles complained immediately. Every movement reminded me of last night. My thighs, my hips and especially my lower back.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 575

I couldn’t help smiling. Raphael had apologized at least ten times today, then he’d replaced every apology by asking if I needed another ice pack.

At the very end was the red lever. I grabbed it, pulled and a loud metallic click echoed around me. The panel above shifted open. I climbed through and landed on top of several plastic-covered suits inside the dry cleaner’s storage room.

I brushed my jeans off before slipping out through the back door into the alley. I started walking toward the nearest bus stop. A few minutes later, an old city bus hissed to a stop beside the curb.

The doors folded open. I climbed aboard, paid my fare, and chose a seat beside the window.

As the bus rolled farther from the wealthy neighborhoods and deeper into the south side, the city slowly changed around me.

The old bus hissed to a stop three streets away. I stepped off into the cold night. The neighborhood looked exactly the same as always, broken streetlights, cracked sidewalks. Small houses squeezed shoulder to shoulder. Some windows glowed with warm yellow light while others stayed completely dark.

I checked the time.

I still had enough time. I hurried down the familiar street, my sneakers slapping quietly against the pavement. Every few seconds I looked over my shoulder out of habit, making sure nobody had followed me from the estate.

The tiny brick house appeared at the end of the block. The porch light was on, I almost laughed with relief. I climbed the steps two at a time and knocked.

“Mama D?” I called through the door with a grin. “It’s me. I’m here!”

A few seconds passed before locks clicked from the other side, the door opened and Morgan stood there.

The second she saw me, her eyes widened, “Gianna.”

A relieved laugh escaped me, “There you are.”

Before she could say another word, I threw my arms around her. She froze for half a heartbeat before hugging me back.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, “I missed you. I have so much to tell you.”

She squeezed me once, but it felt... different, too stiff, too quick. I pulled away without thinking much of it and stepped inside. I kicked the door shut behind me.

“Mama D?” I called, already smiling, “Where are you?”

My voice echoed softly through the little house. Then I saw her. She stood in the doorway leading toward living room.

The second our eyes met, the smile spread across my face, “There you”

Something crashed into the back of my head.

A sharp, blinding explosion of pain burst through my skull. My entire body lurched forward.

+15 Agus

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The second our eyes met, the smile spread across my face, “There you — ”

Something crashed into the back of my head.

A sharp, blinding explosion of pain burst through my skull. My entire body lurched forward.

For one frozen second, I couldn’t even understand what had happened.

Warm liquid immediately began running down the back of my neck... blood. It was blood. The room spun violently and knees slammed into the wooden floor.

The impact rattled through my bones, “What-”

My vision blurred instantly, the walls tilted sideways. The warm light above me stretched into long streaks.

Somewhere nearby, someone shouted, Brianna or Emma, maybe, then one of them said, “Take her phone. Anything that can be traced, get rid of it.”

There were footsteps.

I tried to push myself up but my arms refused to listen, another wave of darkness crashed over me. The taste of blood filled my mouth.

My cheek hit the floorboards, everything sounded far away now like I was underwater.

The last thing I saw before my vision disappeared completely was Mama D taking one frantic step toward me.

Then...

Nothing.

Janedoewritings

Author

Well... I certainly made some choices this chapter.

XOXO

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 576

Raphael

15 Bor

The silence in my office had become irritating.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the six monitors covering one wall while another encrypted file loaded.

Nothing... again.

I opened another report, another satellite image, cloud cover, another financial record, and scrubbed clean. I dragged a hand down my face before typing another search string into the secure database.

That fucking Island.

There was nothing about it, coordinates, shipping manifests, property records, fucking nothing. It was as if the damn island didn't exist.

I leaned forward again, my jaw tightening. That was impossible, everything left a trail, money, fuel, electricity, food deliveries, satellite heat signatures, communications. People always made mistakes.

Yet every lead I chased simply... ended.

I hit Enter harder than necessary, another empty screen, "For fuck's sake."

I pushed away from the desk so abruptly my chair rolled backward across the floor.

I folded my arms across my chest, staring through the office windows without actually seeing the Chicago skyline.

I hated not knowing, I hated blind spots. If something existed, I needed to understand it. If I couldn't understand it... I couldn't predict it. And if I couldn't predict it... I couldn't protect her from it.

That thought alone tightened every muscle in my body.

A quiet knock sounded against the already open office door. I didn't look up, "Come in."

I knew who it was before he spoke, “You gave her Mom’s necklace.”

Luca.

I finally lifted my eyes.

He stood in the doorway exactly the way he always did. Hands in his pockets, dark clothes, expression cold.

“What gave it away?” I asked dryly.

“The necklace.”

I huffed a quiet laugh. He walked farther into the office, stopping beside my desk. His eyes drifted over the scattered files before returning to me.

“You didn’t tell me,” he said.

“I didn’t,” I answered.

“You tell me everything else.”

I sighed, “Almost everything.”

One of his eyebrows rose, “Almost?”

Silence settled between us. That was how conversations with Luca usually worked.

“You trust me,” he finally said.

“I do.”

“Then why keep this from me?”

I looked back toward the monitor, “I wasn’t hiding her.” I paused. “But she’s our stepsister.”

He waited, “So what?”

My fingers rested on the keyboard without moving, “I don’t know… she isn’t something I wanted to pass around the family dinner table. She isn’t a topic,” I looked down for a second before meeting his eyes again, “She’s… personal.”

Luca studied me for several long seconds, there was no judgment on his face like Vincenzo, just observation, “I’ve never heard you describe anyone like that.”

“Because there hasn’t been anyone like that.”

Then he asked the question I had expected, “Hazel?”

I nodded once, “It definitely complicates things.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine, “You’ve thought about it.”

“Every day.”

“And?”

I leaned back in my chair, “We wait.”

“Until?”

I took a slow breath, “Until Hazel is gone,” the words tasted fucking bitter, because Hazel didn’t deserve this, “I won’t take whatever peace she has left.”

Luca gave a small nod, “I thought you’d say that.”

“I owe her that much.”

He looked toward the office window, “For Gianna?”

“For both of them.”

I turned back to the computer, reopening another encrypted report. I clicked through another useless file.

“I like her,” he said suddenly.

That made me look at him again, “You do?”

“I do.”

Coming from Luca... that carried weight. He disliked almost everyone, he tolerated most and he genuinely liked almost nobody.

“Why?” I asked.

He shrugged one shoulder, “She’s kind, she’s beautiful and she has self-respect.”

His eyes met mine.

“She turned down Vincenzo without caring who he was or what saying no might cost her. Most people would’ve folded the second they heard his last name. She didn’t,” he gave a small nod, “That’s the kind of pride I respect. And…”

I raised an eyebrow, “And?”

He looked at me for a long moment, “…she looks good with you.”

15 Bartus

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 577

I blinked.

Of all the things I expected him to say, that wasn’t one of them.

A quiet laugh escaped me, “I wasn’t aware we were being judged aesthetically.”

“You are.”

“And?”

“You improve each other.”

I leaned back in my chair, folding my arms, “That’s surprisingly sentimental.”

“I have one sentimental observation every five years.”

“I’ll mark today’s date.”

The tightness in my chest eased only a little. The files on Toricelli Island were still empty. Leone was still breathing. Ciro was still missing.

And the only thing that kept me sane was that Gianna was still waiting for me at home.

The office door slammed open hard enough to rattle the glass wall behind me.

Vincenzo.

He walked in without waiting to be invited, his face carved from stone, his shoulders rigid. Adriano followed a step behind him, one hand shoved into his pocket, looking far less concerned than the man leading the charge.

Luca quietly moved away from my desk, giving Vincenzo room without saying a word.

Vincenzo walked straight toward my desk. He planted both hands on my desk and looked directly at me, “Are you challenging me? Is that what breakfast was?” he asked. “Some kind of statement?”

I sighed, “No.”

His jaw flexed, “Because that’s exactly how it looked.”

I folded my hands together on my desk, “It wasn’t intended that way.”

His laugh held no humor, “Intentions don’t mean much when everyone at the table watches you hand our mother’s necklace to Salvatore’s stepdaughter.”

Silence.

Adriano looked between both of us.

Vincenzo never took his eyes off me, “You think Claire is going to protect you?”

I frowned slightly, “I never asked her to.”

“No,” he said sharply. “You didn’t have to. She knows. I know my wife and I know when she’s hiding something,” he exhaled sharply through his nose, “My wife has never met a reckless idea she didn’t immediately volunteer to help with.”

Adriano let out a laugh, “That’s actually true.”

T

Vincenzo shot him a glare, “I’m talking and I wasn’t asking for commentary.”

Adriano shrugged, “I’m providing emotional support.”

Luca sighed, “You’ve never supported anyone emotionally in your life.”

“I disagree,” Adriano looked at Luca, “I once told you your hair looked nice.”

Luca blinked once, “You never did that.”

“I thought it.”

Vincenzo’s attention returned to me, “End it. Take the necklace back.”

I looked at him calmly, “I can’t do that.”

“You can.”

“You’re right, I can but I won’t.”

His jaw tightened, “That wasn’t a suggestion, that’s an order.”

“I know.”

“Then act accordingly.”

I held his gaze, “I respect you more than anyone in this family, Vince. You’ve earned that. But this isn’t a decision anyone else gets to make for me. I won’t take the necklace back,” I said calmly, “And I won’t end something that neither she nor I want to end. If that’s considered disobeying an order…” I met his eyes without looking away,” then this will be the first one I refuse.”

Vincenzo stared at me for several seconds, “You’re done filling that girl’s head with promises. You stop pretending this has a future. The only way Gianna becomes a Capone… is by signing adoption papers. She’s becoming our sister.”

My answer came before he finished speaking, “You don’t get to decide that.”

“I’ve already decided,” his expression darkened, “And you should be fucking ashamed of yourself. You found a young woman who was vulnerable because she moved into a new home. You’re smart, Raphael, I fucking know that by now you’ve figured out about her disabilities. You knew her mother is dying. You knew she was desperate for something solid to hold onto. And instead of protecting her as family…” he glared straight into my eyes, “…you blurred every fucking line between the two of you.”

I stayed quiet.

“You gave her hope. You gave her our mother’s necklace. You let her believe there was a future where none exists, “his jaw tightened, as he shook his head, “You are older than her. You are smarter than her. You know exactly what emotional dependency looks like. That’s beneath you, Raphael.”

GEFIT

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 578

158cmus

For the first time since he'd entered the room... I stood, not to challenge him, simply because I wanted him to hear me as an equal, "I respect you, Vince, I always will but you're wrong."

His face didn't change.

"You think this started because Gianna was vulnerable?"

He tilted his head, "Didn't it?"

I held his stare, "I fought it for months. I ended it. I pushed her away. I stayed away. I convinced myself she deserved someone with a simpler life. It didn't work. You think she's leaning on me because she's grieving. No, I'm leaning on her."

That finally made him pause.

I shook my head once, "She isn't dependent on me. If anything... I've become dependent on her. You once told me to go fix my head. I did," I released a breath, "Her."

One word.

Nothing more.

My voice never rose.

I looked him straight in the eyes, "So deal with that however you think you need to but I'm not taking that necklace back."

Vincenzo never looked away. His expression didn't shift in the slightest. I knew that look. I wasn't changing his mind today, maybe not tomorrow either. He had already made his decision, and once my oldest brother decided something, he held onto it with both hands.

"And I won't pretend she means less to me than she does simply because the timing is inconvenient."

Vincenzo exhaled slowly through his nose, "So, you've made your decision."

"I have."

Vincenzo made a mocking face, "And you expect my blessing."

"I hope for your understanding."

"You won't get either because when this falls apart...'

"It won't."

He laughed, “You don’t know that.”

“I know her.”

Vincenzo mockingly raised both of his eyebrows, “You know the version of her that’s in love with you.”

“I know all of her.”

His voice sharpened, “You know the version that exists today. What happens when Hazel dies? When the grief arrives? What happens when she wakes up one morning and realizes she mistook gratitude… dependence… safety… for love? You don’t get to gamble with her life because you believe your feelings are different.”

When I finally spoke, my voice was calm, “If that day ever comes… I’ll let her go. If Gianna ever looks me in the eyes and tells me she doesn’t love me… I’ll walk away. I won’t beg. I won’t forcefully marry her. I won’t manipulate her. I won’t guilt her into staying because I have never tried to manipulate her heart.”

For the first time since he’d entered my office, the hard lines around Vincenzo’s jaw eased just enough to notice.

“The day she stops choosing me…” I swallowed, “…is the day I stop asking.”

He stepped closer until we were almost shoulder to shoulder.

When he spoke again, his voice was quieter, “I believe that you love her. I even believe you think you’ll never hurt her but belief doesn’t change consequences,” he looked directly into my eyes, “I promised Hazel that I’d look after her daughters. I gave my word. And until the day I die…” his jaw locked, “…that promise comes before your feelings.”

He took a slow step back and rubbed a hand over his face, shaking his head as though he still couldn’t believe we were having this conversation.

“So no. I will not allow this, not because I doubt you but because if this goes wrong…” he looked toward the window for only a second before facing me once more, “She’ll be the one who bleeds and as long as I’m responsible for her well-being… I won’t stand aside and watch that happen.”

The roads were almost empty by the time I drove back through the gates of the estate.

The headlights swept across the long driveway before disappearing as the engine fell silent.

For a few seconds, I stayed where I was, both hands resting on the steering wheel. Vincenzo’s words refused to leave my head. He wasn’t wrong.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 579

And that was the inconvenient part.

He had looked at the situation exactly the way he looked at every problem, remove emotion, identify the risk, eliminate the threat before it became bigger.

Normally, I would've reached the same conclusion.

I built my entire life on that principle, reduce variables, control outcomes, prepare for failure before success. It had kept me alive. It had made me wealthy. It had made me dangerous.

It had also completely failed me the moment Gianna walked into my life.

I stared through the windshield.

There had to be a solution. There always was. The mistake most people made was believing they only had two choices.

They rarely did.

Vincenzo believed the answer was simple.

Make Gianna my sister. Bury everything that had happened between us and never look back. I couldn't.

I believed there had to be another way. A way where I didn't have to choose. A way where she became my family without costing me the one I already had.

Neither of us was willing to give up what mattered most.

I wasn't sacrificing either-not the family I shared blood with and I was certainly not losing Gianna.

Which meant this wasn't a choice between two people. It was a problem that hadn't been solved yet. And if there was one thing I trusted myself to do...

It was to find the solution everyone else had missed.

My fingers tapped the steering wheel once. There would be one. There always was. I just hadn't found it yet. I climbed out of the car and locked it behind me.

I unlocked my phone as I walked through the front door.

Me: Awake?

I hit send before slipping the phone into my pocket as I walked upstairs. I pushed open my bedroom door.

The first thing I did wasn't take off my watch. It wasn't loosen my tie. It wasn't even sit down. I walked straight toward the large glass enclosure near the windows. Medusa lifted her head the moment she sensed the vibration of my footsteps.

"There you are."

She slid lazily over the branch inside the enclosure. I checked the temperature, humidity, water. Everything exactly where it belonged.

My fingertips brushed lightly over the glass, "Good."

Only then did I leave for the bathroom. The shower was hot enough to loosen the stiffness in my shoulders. Water

+15 Bertus ran over the scratches covering my back.

Gianna.

A faint smile found its way onto my face. I stood there another minute before shutting the water off.

By the time I walked back into the bedroom, wearing nothing but a pair of black sweatpants and a towel around my neck, the room had filled with the cool air from the vents.

No matter what Vincenzo believed, no matter how logical his concerns were...

One fact remained.

Gianna wasn't mine because I wanted her to be. She was mine because she had chosen me. The only person capable of changing that... was Gianna.

If one day she looked at me and told me to leave... I would. Until then, I wasn't going anywhere.

My phone lay exactly where I'd left it on the bed. I picked it up and found nothing. No reply from her.

My brow pulled together. That was unusual. She normally answered within seconds, even if it was only a heart or one of her ridiculous emojis.

I checked the time.

A quiet breath left me. She'd probably fallen asleep. After last night... I almost expected her to.

The thought made the corner of my mouth lift. I slipped the phone into my pocket and walked into the hallway. I knew exactly which section of the corridor stayed outside the security camera's angle.

I stopped outside her door, a small smile remained on my face as I reached for the handle, "Asleep already, ballerina?"

I opened the door, and found darkness. Moonlight spilled through the windows and the bed was perfectly made.

My smile disappeared as I stepped inside because the room seemed empty.

+15 Bonus +158gnus

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 580

"Gianna?"

She'd fallen asleep in strange places before. Her closet. The room in the Void. Once on the couch in the living room with a book over her face.

Maybe she was in the bathroom.

I crossed the room and pushed the bathroom door open. It was empty, the light was off, the towels were untouched.

I checked the walk-in closet, nothing. The balcony, nothing. My eyes swept over every corner of the room again

I pulled my phone from my pocket and opened the tracking application. The necklace. A blinking green dot appeared almost immediately.

It was in this bedroom.

I frowned. That didn't make sense. I looked around the room. The dot remained perfectly still, right here.

My thumb zoomed in.

Exactly here.

My breathing changed, one breath, then another. My chest expanded harder than before. I lifted my head and slowly turned in a circle, following the signal.

The application pointed toward the dresser.

No.

She wouldn't... I walked over and opened the top drawer, second drawer. The tracker continued pointing downward.

My movements became quicker, in the third drawer, I found her jewelry. I dropped to one knee and pulled it the whole thing open.

There.

Resting neatly in a velvet casing... was my mother's necklace.

I stared at it. For several seconds, my brain refused to process what I was looking at, then I picked it up, popped open the tiny compartment behind the diamond.

The tiny tracker blinked softly beneath the clasp. She had taken it off.

My fingers tightened around the chain, "Gianna..."

A strange pressure spread through my chest. It was not pain, not exactly. It felt as if every muscle around my ribs had tightened at the same time. My pulse became loud, much louder than it should have been.

I looked around the room again. A thought crossed my mind. A ridiculous one,
"Ballerina..." my voice came out quieter than I expected, "If this is one of your games..."

I opened the closet again, looked behind the hanging dresses. I checked beneath the bed.

"You've got about five seconds before I stop finding this funny."

Something wasn't fitting together. Gianna never ignored me. If she wanted space, she told me. If she wanted to leave, she'd text me. If she borrowed something, she put it back exactly where she'd found it.

She was organized in her own strange little ways.

Taking off the necklace and leaving without replying to me... didn't belong anywhere in the pattern I knew.

The pressure in my chest tightened again. I stopped walking. I didn't have a word for what I was feeling.

I only knew my breathing had become shallow, my hands felt colder. My thoughts, usually arranged in straight lines, began colliding into one another. Every possibility arrived at once.

Accident.

Injury.

Someone followed her.

Someone took her.

"No..."

The word escaped before I realized I'd spoken. I looked back toward her empty bedroom. The necklace was still in my hand.

For the first time in longer than I could remember... I wasn't planning, I wasn't calculating, I wasn't thinking three moves ahead.

I was simply trying to convince myself that the worst possibility wasn't already true.

No.

Think.

Gianna wouldn't disappear. She had to be somewhere inside the estate. One possibility came to me immediately.

Hazel... maybe she'd fallen asleep beside her mother again. She'd done it before.

I turned and broke into a run. My bare feet hit the hardwood floor hard enough to echo through the hallway.

By the time I reached my father's wing, my lungs were already working harder than they should have been.

I didn’t knock politely. I pounded my fist against the door. The door flew open after a minute. My father stood there in a dark robe, still tying the belt around his waist.

His eyes immediately narrowed, “Raphael?”

I didn’t answer. I stepped around him so quickly that his shoulder bumped mine.

“Raphael-”

I was already inside. My eyes swept across the bedroom.

15 Bertus

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 581

Hazel was awake, sitting up against the pillows. The bedside lamp cast a warm glow over her face as she looked between me and my father in confusion.

She blinked, “Raphael?”

I walked straight toward her, “Where’s Gianna?”

Hazel frowned, “...Asleep?”

I shook my head, “No.”

Her expression changed, “What do... you mean, no?”

I looked around the room one more time even though I already knew she wasn’t there.

My breathing became heavier. Without another word, I turned and walked back out.

“Raphael!” Dad called after me. “What’s going on?”

I didn’t answer. As I hurried down the hallway toward Vincenzo’s wing, I stopped outside Jules’ bedroom. I pushed the door open just enough to look inside.

She was curled beneath her blankets, her favorite nightlight casting a soft glow across the room. Sound asleep.

Not with Gianna.

I closed the door as quietly as I'd opened it and kept moving. I didn't stop. I couldn't. My feet carried me straight toward Vincenzo's wing, another door, another hard series of knocks.

The handle turned almost immediately.

Claire opened the door wearing one of Vincenzo's oversized shirts. Her hair was messy, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

She looked at my face, whatever she saw made her smile disappear, "Raphael?"

"Is Gianna here?"

She frowned, "What?"

"Has she been here tonight?"

Claire stared at me for a second, then slowly shook her head, "No... She went to bed hours ago."

I nodded once, turned and walked away.

"Raphael?" she called after me, "What's going on?"

I turned and broke into another run, taking the stairs two at a time before cutting across the hallway toward Adriano's wing.

Maddie.

Maybe she'd seen her.

I pounded on the door hard enough to shake the frame. A few seconds later, it swung open. Adriano stood in the doorway, shirtless and clearly half asleep.

+15 Bertus

Madeleine appeared just behind him, pulling her robe tighter around herself. The second her eyes landed on my face, every trace of sleep disappeared.

Adriano's hair looked like he'd fought a tornado, "What psycho knocks like- Raphael?"

"Is Gianna here?"

Adriano frowned, "What?"

Maddie shook her head, “No, she said goodnight after dinner. I thought she went straight to bed... Why?”

I looked at both of them and then I heard it. Something inside, my heartbeat had become a violent pounding in my ears. It was too loud, too fast.

Every breath felt shorter than the last.

I finally forced the words out, “...She’s gone.”

I ran outside, already checking tracking her phone. Behind me I heard more footsteps. Then Hazel’s wheelchair. I turned instinctively.

Hazel looked frightened, more frightened than I’d ever seen her. She searched every face around her, “Where is... my daughter?”

Vincenzo looked at me, “Track her phone.”

Adriano rubbed a hand over his face, “When did anyone last actually see her?”

Claire answered first, “Dinner.”

“Yes,” Maddie said quietly.

Dad looked toward me, “Raphael?”

I met his eyes, “I texted her before I came home. She didn’t answer, she always answers me. She took off the necklace, it had a tracker and I- I can’t. She took it off. I cannot... Fuck!”

Hazel’s breathing became uneven, “Can someone, please, tell... me...” her voice shook, “...where my... daughter is.”

I stared at the tracking application automatically.

Come on.

Come on.

The screen loaded.

No live location.

A cold message filled the screen. Device offline. No signal. No location. Nothing...

I stared at the words without blinking. My thumb hit the screen.

Refresh.

The same message.

Again.

Refresh.

Nothing.

Again.

Nothing.

The world around me started to disappear. Voices were moving somewhere behind me. Feet were running across the marble floor. Someone said my name.

None of it reached me.

The only thing that existed was the screen in my hand.

Offline.

Offline.

Offline.

My thumb kept pressing the display long after I knew it wouldn’t change. Somewhere in the distance, someone grabbed my shoulders but I didn’t react, my wouldn’t listen.

x

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 582

The room had gone strangely quiet because my mind had stopped letting anything in.

The air.

The people.

The lights.

Everything faded into a dull blur.

There was only one thought left.

She’s gone.

The words repeated over and over until they drowned out everything else.

Someone grabbed the back of my neck hard, “Raphael.”

Nothing.

A sharp shake rattled my body, “Raphael.”

My eyes stayed locked on the phone.

“Raphael!”

My head finally lifted.

Vincenzo.

His hands were locked around the back of my neck, forcing me to look at him.

His mouth was moving, for a second I couldn’t hear a single word. Then the sound rushed back all at once.

“...focus.”

My breathing came back in one rough pull.

“I’ve got you,” he said, “Listen to me. If you stay in your head, you lose time,” his grip tightened, “And every second matters.”

The words hit something, not my emotions.

My training.

I shut my eyes for one long breath, stopped, started thinking hard.

No.

Analyzing.

When I opened my eyes again, I forced my thumb away from the refresh button. Refreshing the same screen wasn’t solving anything.

It was wasting time.

Time was something Gianna didn't have.

Neither did I.

Phone dead and no live signal. That didn't mean there wasn't data. I opened another application instead, not the tracker, the carrier logs, the emergency location cache.

A hidden diagnostic menu I'd built years ago because I hated relying on software other people designed.

My fingers moved on their own, password, authentication, system access. A stream of information flooded the screen.

Connection history, cell towers, signal strength, battery status.

My breathing slowly evened out.

Logic.

Stay with logic.

The phone couldn't tell me where she was now but it could tell me where it had last been alive.

Loading...

Loading...

The screen refreshed, one line appeared. My entire body went still.

Vincenzo watched my face, "What?"

I didn't answer. My eyes kept reading the same line.

Time, location, signal lost.

"Raphael," his voice came, "What did you find?"

I looked up, "The phone..." My voice came out rough. "...it stopped transmitting."

"When?"

I looked back down, "Eleven fifty-one."

“Where?”

My fingers tightened around the phone, “...Denise’s house.”

I enlarged the log, cross-checked it against the tower history. The Wi-Fi handshake, the GPS cache. Everything matched.

I took another breath, “The battery didn’t gradually die. It disconnected suddenly.”

Dad’s face hardened, “As if...”

I finished the thought for him, “As if somebody made sure it stopped transmitting.”

The only sound was Hazel’s uneven breathing behind me. I lifted my eyes from the screen.

Every instinct I had spent years building reached the same conclusion at the exact same time.

This wasn’t an accident.

Someone had taken her.

My grip tightened around the phone until the glass creaked beneath my fingers.

Whoever had touched her had just made the last mistake of their life.

Dad’s phone rang. Every head turned toward him. He looked down at the unfamiliar number for only a second before answering.

He immediately tapped the speaker button when Vincenzo gestured to him.

A man’s voice filled the quiet hallway, “Is this Salvatore Capone, sir?”

“Yes.”

A brief pause followed, “My name is Cole Mercer. I’m afraid...” he said slowly, “...I have your stepdaughter, Gianna... ”

My fingers curled into fists.

Dad’s expression didn’t change, “What do you mean... you have my daughter?”

His voice wasn’t mocking, it wasn’t arrogant, it was neutral, “She was unconscious when she was brought to me. She’s injured, but she’s alive and I know who did this to her.”

Author

I hope you enjoy today's update!

A little reminder, though, please take a moment to read the disclaimer at the beginning of the book before asking about the update schedule. I update as often as I realistically can, and rig

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 583

IMPORTANT:

15 Bah

Before everyone continues reading this chapter, I'm going to say it one more time: please read the disclaimer.

I've already explained the update schedule from the very beginning of this book. I usually only take 3-4 days off each month, and I even keep calendars documenting my updates if anyone thinks otherwise.

So please don't complain about the update schedule when it's something that was clearly communicated before you chose to read the book. I work very hard to keep my updates consistent, and all I ask is that you respect the schedule that's already been shared.

Thank you, and enjoy the chapter.

Gianna | Age 16

Six months had a strange way of changing people, not all at once, not enough to erase old scars.

Just enough that one morning you realized you no longer jumped every time the front door opened.

Rose Garden had become familiar.

Gianna knew which floorboard outside the kitchen squeaked. She knew Morgan always stole strawberries while Denise pretended not to notice. She knew Jasmine sang terribly whenever she cleaned, and Brianna insisted she sounded amazing despite everyone else's protests.

For the first time in years, she lived in a house where laughter happened almost every day.

She still searched for Hazel.

Every morning.

Every afternoon.

Every evening.

She visited churches, hospitals, libraries, and community centers whenever she could. She asked questions. She showed old photographs. She followed every tiny lead.

Nothing.

It hurt.

But Rose Garden always gave her somewhere to return to.

That afternoon music drifted through the living room, loud and happy music.

Gianna followed the sound with a curious smile. The large room had been transformed into complete chaos. Garment bags lay open across the couches. High heels covered half the rug. Feathers, sequins, glitter, and colorful fabrics were scattered over nearly every chair.

Morgan held up a sparkling blue outfit, “What do we think?” she asked dramatically.

Jasmine looked up once, “It needs more sparkle.”

Emma appeared carrying another handful of costumes. Denise sat in the middle of it all with a cup of coffee, watching the argument like a proud mother watching children fight over crayons.

Gianna stopped in the doorway, “...What happened in here?”

Morgan grinned, “Perfect timing.”

Gianna looked around the room, “Did someone explode?”

Denise laughed so hard coffee nearly came out of her nose, “It certainly looks like it.”

Jasmine tossed another outfit across the couch, “We’ve got a themed event tonight.”

Brianna held two dresses against herself, “I can’t decide.”

“You never can,” Emma answered.

“You’ve changed clothes four times,” Morgan added.

“That is called exploring options.”

Gianna laughed quietly.

She liked watching them.

The girls moved around each other with ease, helping zip dresses, fixing straps, teasing one another over shoes.

There was no tension, no fear, just women enjoying each other’s company.

Emma caught Gianna smiling, “What?”

Gianna shrugged, “I don’t know…”

“What?”

“You all just…” she searched for the words, “You make everything look fun.”

Denise’s grin softened. Gianna stepped farther into the room. One of the dresses caught her eye.

It was dark red and covered in tiny crystals that reflected sunlight across the walls.

“It really is beautiful,” she whispered.

Emma noticed immediately and disappeared behind a clothing rack before returning with another costume.

This one was black, tiny crystals shimmered across the fabric.

Gianna’s eyes widened, “Oh…”

“You like this one.”

“It’s beautiful.”

Brianna smiled, “You know… I’ve never actually seen you dance.”

Gianna blinked, “I don’t dance anymore.”

Emma looked over, “Anymore?”

Gianna shook her head, “I used to.”

“When?” her fingers brushed lightly across the black fabric, “When I was little,” a small smile appeared without her realizing it, “My mom used to take me to Ballet classes every Tuesday. I started ballet when I was really young. My mom sat in the studio every lesson. She always clapped even during practice...”

The mernory warmed her chest.

“If I landed one turn, she clapped. If I remembered one routine, she clapped. If I completely fell over..” a tiny laugh escaped her, “...she still clapped.”

The room had gone completely still.

Gianna looked down, “Then... she left. I haven’t danced since.”

No one spoke for several seconds. Then Jasmine crossed the room, “That’s stupid.”

Gianna blinked, “What?”

“You stopped doing something you loved because life was cruel.”

Brianna nodded, “I hate that.”

Emma folded her arms, “I vote we fix it.”

Gianna laughed nervously, “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

C +15 agrius

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 584

Before she could react, Morgan gently pressed the black costume into her arms, “Wear it.”

Gianna stared, “...No.”

“Yes!” they all shouted in unison.

Denise hid another smile behind her coffee. Glanna looked toward her for help, “Mama D?”

Denise lifted both hands, “I’ve learned not to argue when they all agree.”

“They’re ganging up on me.”

“We are,” Brianna admitted cheerfully.

Emma pointed toward the hallway, “Go.”

“I don’t know…”

Morgan nudged her shoulder, “Please?”

Gianna lowered her eyes to the outfit again. It really was beautiful. The black fabric shimmered whenever it caught the light, and the tiny crystals made it look almost magical.

But it was… revealing.

Far more revealing than anything she had ever worn in front of other people. A memory crept into her mind before she could stop it.

Leone had bought outfits like this before.

He would leave expensive boxes on her bed with neat little notes telling her to try them on. She had. Only because he was supposed to become her husband one day.

Only because it had always been just the two of them, behind a locked bedroom door where no one else could see.

She had never walked out wearing something like this, never stood in front of a room full of people, never let strangers look at her this way.

“I’ve never worn anything like this.”

“So?”

“It doesn’t even look like me.”

Jasmine smiled gently, “Maybe it’s time you met a different version of yourself.”

Something about those words settled quietly inside her. Without another argument, Gianna disappeared toward the bathroom. The girls immediately burst into excited whispers.

“Oh, she’s going to look adorable.”

“I know.”

“I picked the right color.”

A few minutes later the bathroom door opened again. Gianna stepped out slowly and the room went completely silent.

The black costume was incredibly small. The soft fabric fit very tight against her body. The skirt was so short it barely covered her hips, leaving her thighs completely bare. From behind, the bottom of her butt peeked out, that meant if she bent over even a little bit, it would show everything.

The top was barely there at all. It was just a tiny bra made of thin spaghetti straps that tied behind her back. Only a small strip of black cloth, covered in tiny shiny crystals, hid her nipples. Every time she moved, the little crystals caught the bright afternoon light, drawing all the attention to how naked she really was.

She immediately crossed her arms, “Don’t look.”

Tasha’s jaw dropped, “Oh, my God.”

Emma clutched her own chest dramatically, “She’s gorgeous.”

Brianna pointed, “I knew it.”

Gianna’s cheeks turned bright red, “I look ridiculous.”

“You look sexy.”

Everyone laughed. Denise stood and walked over. She gently fixed one loose strap before stepping back and then she smiled.

“There you are.”

Gianna frowned, “What?”

“I was wondering where that young woman had been hiding.”

Something tightened in Gianna’s throat. Morgan walked over to the speaker and music filled the room again.

Morgan held out both hands, “Dance.”

Gianna stared, “I can’t, ballet isn’t supposed to look like this.”

Emma shrugged, “Then make it.”

“I’ll mess up.”

“So?”

Gianna looked around the room. Every face smiled back at her, no judgment, no pressure, just encouragement.

Slowly... she stepped into the middle of the room. For several long seconds she simply stood there, then instinct took over.

One foot slid backward, her arms lifted, her shoulders settled. She rose carefully onto the balls of her feet. The position felt so familiar it almost hurt.

Then the room disappeared and the music carried her. One careful turn became another. Her arms floated through the air with quiet grace.

She moved more cautiously than she once had, but every step remembered something her mind thought it had forgotten.

Emma whispered, “...She’s incredible.”

Gianna never heard them because she wasn’t thinking about Giovanni Torricelli, she wasn’t thinking about fear or running or searching or surviving.

For one beautiful minute...

She was simply a girl dancing again.

And when the music ended, the room erupted into applause. Every single one of them was clapping, just like Hazel always had.

The applause refused to die down. Morgan was still whistling. Emma was clapping so hard her palms had already turned pink.

“You’ve been hiding that?” Jasmine laughed.

Gianna’s cheeks burned, “I told you I used to dance.”

“You neglected to mention you dance like that,” Brianna said.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 585

Gianna laughed, suddenly shy beneath all the attention, “It wasn’t perfect.”

“Oh, listen to Miss Perfection.”

Denise pointed toward the chrome pole standing near the corner of the room, “What about that?”

Gianna followed her finger, “The pole?”

Tasha nodded, “You think you can climb it?”

Gianna looked at it for a moment before shrugging, “I don’t know.”

“Only one way to find out,” Denise added.

The girls stepped back, clearing a space around it. Gianna walked over slowly, studying it the way she would have studied a new piece of equipment in a ballet studio.

She wrapped one hand around the cool metal, then the other. Without thinking too much about it, she pushed off the floor, her body lifted smoothly.

A small gasp rippled through the room.

Her core tightened instinctively as she lifted herself higher. One leg hooked around the pole while the other stretched outward, toes perfectly pointed. Every movement came from years of ballet training, balance, control, and careful lines.

She spun once, gracefully and then again and again, her hair flying behind her. The crystals on her costume scattered little flashes of light around the room.

Morgan’s mouth fell open, “Okay…”

Emma blinked, “…That was unfair. I think ballet cheated.”

Gianna laughed as she slid back to the floor.

“No,” Jasmine said, shaking her head, “Ballet prepared her.”

The girls surrounded her again, talking over one another until Denise finally laughed, “Alright. Give the poor girl a chance to breathe,” Denise held out both arms, “Come here, sweetheart.”

Gianna smiled and wandered over.

Without hesitation, Denise guided her down until she was sitting sideways on her lap. She gently brushed a loose curl away from Gianna’s face before gently adjusting the tiny patch of cloth covering Gianna’s breast, pulling the fabric straight so it sat perfectly, “There.”

Gianna smiled, “Thank you.”

Denise looked at her for a long moment, “You’ve become part of this house.”

Gianna’s expression softened, “It feels like home.”

Denise nodded, “It could stay that way.”

Gianna looked up.

Denise smiled warmly, “You don’t always have to keep running.”

Gianna lowered her eyes, “I still have to find my mom.”

“I know.”

“I promised myself I wouldn’t stop.”

Denise smiled warmly, “And I hope you never stop looking,” her thumb brushed gently across the back of Gianna’s hand, “But while you’re searching… life keeps moving.”

Gianna listened quietly.

“You’ve spent years surviving other people’s choices. You deserve a life where your own talents take care of you,” she nodded toward the center of the room, “You have something special.”

Gianna frowned, “My ballet?”

Denise smiled, “A girl who moves the way you do, a girl with a face like yours… you are a goldmine. Honey… do you have any idea what people would pay to watch someone move like that? You light up a room without even trying.”

Gianna looked embarrassed, “I don’t think that’s true.”

Denise rolled her eyes, “I’ve been around performers for a long time. You have grace those girls can’t be taught. Most people can learn steps. They can’t learn that. I know when someone has something that can’t be taught.”

She looked Gianna in the eye.

“If you ever decided to make a career out of performing, you’d do well.”

Gianna blinked, “I’ve never really thought about that.”

“I figured,” Denise chuckled, “You’ve spent your whole life letting other people decide who you should be. Your father. That fiancé. Everyone.”

Gianna nodded slowly.

“There are many ways to build an independent life,” Denise continued, “Whatever path you choose, don’t let anyone convince you that your gifts should stay hidden because they’re afraid of them.”

She gently brushed a strand of hair behind Gianna’s ear.

“Here, the girls earn their own money. Nobody tells them when they can eat, where they can go, or what they can buy. They pay their own bills. They take care of each other.”

Gianna thought about those words, about never asking anyone for permission again, about earning enough to stand on her own, about finding her mother and, one day, bringing her somewhere safe.

Maybe...

Maybe there really was a future waiting for her.

“I’ll think about it,” she said quietly.

Denise smiled, “That’s all I’m asking,” then she nodded toward the pole with a playful grin, “In the meantime...” she pointed across the room, “Go see if you can make that piece of steel look elegant again.”

Gianna burst into laughter, “I think I can manage that.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 586

She slipped off Denise’s lap and crossed the room, wrapping one arm around the pole, she pushed lightly from the floor.

Her body rose in one smooth motion.

She curled around the pole like a ribbon caught in the wind, every movement precise, every line unmistakably shaped by years of ballet.

For a moment, she wasn’t a frightened young woman searching an unfamiliar city.

She was simply Gianna.

And everyone in the room smiled as they watched her fly.

Hazel stood beside the floor-to-ceiling window with both arms folded so tightly across her chest.

Chicago stretched below her.

Six months.

Six endless months.

Every lead had disappeared. Every promise had turned into another dead end. The photograph in her hand had become soft around the edges from how many times she had unfolded it.

Gianna.

Six months ago, someone had sent a message that Gianna had arrived in Chicago. That message had become the only thing keeping her moving.

Every morning she woke believing she would find her. Every night she went to bed having failed again.

Behind her, the office door clicked shut. Salvatore walked in without saying a word.

He stopped a few feet behind her. After a long moment, he slowly reached toward her shoulder.

The instant his hand brushed her sleeve, Hazel stepped away as though his touch had burned her.

“I don’t need comforting,” her voice was quiet but stern, “I need my daughter.”

Salvatore lowered his hand, “Hazel-”

She finally turned around. Her eyes were swollen from crying, but there wasn’t a trace of weakness left in them, only anger.

“You told me once that you owed me a life,” she snapped, “My father died saving yours,” she continued, “You looked me in the eye and said you would spend the rest of your life repaying that debt.”

“I remember.”

Her laugh was hollow, “Do you?” she lifted the photograph, “Because the only life I ever asked you to give back to me was hers. You told me we’d find her.”

“We will.”

15 But

“You said that six months ago.”

“Hazel-”

“You said it last month,” she took another step toward him, “You said it last week. And I’m still waking up every morning without knowing if my little girl is hungry, or cold, or frightened,” she looked down at the photograph,” I don’t even know if sotneone is being kind to her.”

Salvatore’s jaw tightened, “We’ve searched every neighborhood.”

“Then search again.”

“We’ve spoken to everyone who-”

“Speak to more people.”

“Hazel.”

Tears rolled silently down her face, “You don’t get to tell me to be patient.”

Salvatore exhaled slowly, “I wasn’t going to.”

Another silence settled between them, then, a hesitant knock sounded against the office door.

Salvatore looked over, “Come in.”

The door opened only halfway, one of his soldiers stepped inside. He looked uncomfortable and almost nervous.

“What is it?” Salvatore asked.

The man shifted his weight, “I… I’m not sure if this means anything.”

Hazel’s head lifted immediately, every muscle in her body went rigid, “What?”

The soldier glanced between them, “I need to tell you something.”

Salvatore frowned, “Then say it.”

The man swallowed hard, his eyes flicking toward Hazel before dropping to the floor. Telling Salvatore was one thing. Telling Hazel was another. She belonged to one of the Outfit’s oldest, most respected families. Admitting where he had spent his evening wasn’t something he was eager to do,

“A few nights ago...” he hesitated again, “I was... at a place.”

Salvatore’s eyes narrowed, “What place?”

The soldier looked thoroughly embarrassed, “A brothel. I was leaving,” the man continued carefully, “and I saw a young woman there.”

Hazel took one step forward, “How young?”

“Around fifteen, brown hair, and green eyes.”

Hazel’s fingers tightened around the photograph.

The soldier looked at her, “She looked...” he searched for the right words, “...she looked almost exactly like the description you’ve had us carrying.”

His eyes flicked toward Hazel again.

“And...” he hesitated, “She looked a lot like you.”

Salvatore spoke first, “Why the hell would Gianna be in a brothel?”

The soldier shook his head immediately, “I don’t know, Boss. I didn’t touch her, maybe I was wrong,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “But I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. It could be nothing but I thought it was worth telling you.”

Hazel was already moving. She grabbed her coat from the chair so quickly it nearly fell to the floor.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 587

Salvatore watched her, “Hazel.”

She didn’t stop, “If there’s even the smallest chance my daughter is there...” her hands shook as she pulled on ber coat, “...then she’s not spending another minute in that place.”

She was halfway to the door before Salvatore caught up beside her.

“Hazel, we don’t know if it’s her.”

She yanked the door open, “Then we’ll find out.”

There wasn’t a trace of hesitation left in her voice. Only a mother who had finally been given something she hadn’t had in months.

Hope.

No matter how small it was and Hazel Sterling intended to chase it before it disappeared again.

Salvatore’s SUV rolled to a stop across the street. He looked through the windshield. A wooden sign hung above the entrance.

ROSE GARDEN.

Flowers climbed the fence, warm light spilled through the windows. From outside, it looked like any other large family home.

Salvatore’s expression hardened, he opened the door.

Within seconds, black SUVs lined both sides of the street. Armed men stepped out in silence, spreading across the property with precision.

Salvatore scanned the building once, “Nobody leaves.”

His soldiers immediately moved, two covered the back entrance, others climbed the side fence, more surrounded the front porch, weapons remained lowered but ready.

Salvatore looked toward one of his captain, “Every exit.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“If anyone runs…”

The captain nodded once, “They won’t.”

Salvatore’s eyes returned to the house, “Everyone inside stays exactly where they are until I say otherwise.”

The front door was reached in seconds, one soldier nodded, “Clear.”

Salvatore stepped forward. Behind him, Hazel was already climbing the porch steps. She didn't wait. She shoved the front door open herself.

The sound echoed through the house, laughter stopped, music cut off mid-song.

For one suspended second... everything became completely silent.

Hazel crossed the doorway and froze. Her lungs forgot how to work. Across the large living room stood a dance pole.

A young woman was halfway around it, laughing.

Brown hair.

Green eyes.

Her daughter.

Gianna.

The world seemed to stop moving, then the armed men poured into the room, "Nobody fucking move!"

Several rifles came up, the girls screamed. Gianna's head snapped toward the entrance, her smile vanished as pure instinct took over.

She slid down the pole so quickly that her bare feet hit the floor with a sharp slap, both arms immediately flew over her head. She crouched low, making herself as small as possible.

Around her, the other young women rushed together, huddling near one wall.

Someone started crying, someone else grabbed another girl's hand, nobody moved, nobody dared to, but Hazel couldn't hear any of them.

She only saw Gianna.

And she saw... what she was wearing. The black outfit barely covered her. Thin straps crossed her shoulders. The skirt was heartbreakingly short.

Hazel's eyes moved slowly across the room, the pole, the glitter, the discarded costumes, the makeup mirrors, the feathers and underwears scattered across the furniture.

Each detail struck like another blow.

Her stomach lurched.

No.

No...

Her gaze returned to Gianna.

Her little girl.

The child she used to dress in tiny ballet slippers. The little girl who used to run into her arms after every recital.

Hazel felt something inside her crack, her hands began shaking with rage.

A cold, terrible rage.

Not at Gianna, never at Gianna.

At whoever had allowed this.

Whoever had looked at a frightened young girl, alone in a strange city, and seen an opportunity instead of a child who needed protecting.

Hazel's breathing grew uneven.

For six months...

Her daughter had been missing.

For six months she had imagined every terrible possibility. She had prayed Gianna had found kind people. She had prayed someone had given her food, a bed... safety.

Instead...

Hazel looked around the room again, a performance pole, revealing costumes. Young women barely older than Gianna.

Her heart twisted so violently it hurt. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

She whispered, almost to herself, "...My baby."

Gianna slowly lowered one arm from above her head. Her eyes searched the room in confusion, then they landed on Hazel.

Everything else disappeared, "...Mom?" the word was barely audible.

Hazel's knees almost gave out. That one word shattered the last piece of control she had been holding onto. She crossed the room without thinking.

Gianna stood so quickly she nearly stumbled, "Mom..."

Hazel reached her first. She wrapped both arms around her daughter with such force that Gianna lost her balance.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 588

Hazel held her tightly, too tightly. As though letting go for even a second might mean losing her all over again. She buried her face against Gianna's hair.

"You found me..." Gianna whispered through tears.

Hazel couldn't answer. She only held her closer. Then, over Gianna's shoulder, Hazel lifted her head. Her tear- filled eyes swept across the room until they settled on Denise.

The warmth was gone.

Only a mother's fury remained.

"Who runs this house?"

Denise stood up, "I do..."

Hazel forced herself to loosen her grip. Only enough to look at her daughter again. Her eyes moved over Gianna's face, searching every inch as if trying to convince herself she was real.

Then they drifted lower.

The tiny black costume.

The almost bare chest.

The impossibly short skirt.

Hazel's expression changed.

Without saying a word, she slipped her own wool coat from her shoulders and wrapped it around Gianna.

The heavy fabric swallowed the small costume almost completely.

Hazel pulled the lapels together herself, covering every bit of exposed skin she could.

Gianna blinked, “Mom...”

Hazel tucked a loose strand of hair behind her daughter’s ear, “You’ve been cold for long enough.”

Then she turned slowly. Her eyes settled on Denise. The warmth she had shown Gianna disappeared.

“Do you have any idea,” Hazel asked quietly, “what have you done?”

Denise stood where she was, “I can explain.”

“You most certainly will.”

Denise took one careful step forward, “Ms. Hazel, she had nowhere to-”

“That doesn’t mean you can put my daughter in that!” she shouted.

Denise glanced at Gianna, “It wasn’t like-”

“My daughter is sixteen years old.”

Hazel’s voice echoed through the room.

“Sixteen, but you already know that, didn’t you?! A child who arrived in this city alone, terrified, hungry, and

+15 Bas looking for her mother and you looked at that child... and this is what you thought she needed?”

Denise shook her head immediately, “No.”

“You expect me to believe that?!”

Denise shook her head, afraid of all the guns pointing at her, “I found her at the park bench-”

“So you brought her here?!”

“I gave her a bed,” Denise added, forcing a little power into her voice.

Hazel cut her off, “A brothel.”

“I gave her food.”

“A brothel.”

“I kept her safe.”

“A fucking brothel!”

Hazel’s breathing had become uneven again.

Denise stepped forward, “I don’t know what you are implying here but I never asked her to sell herself. I never forced her onto a stage. I never put a man in her room. I fed her. I clothed her. I gave her somewhere warm to sleep. I gave her a family when she had none.”

Hazel’s jaw tightened, “My daughter already had a family.”

Gianna stepped forward, “Mom…”

Hazel immediately reached back, keeping one arm protectively in front of her.

“No.”

“But-”

“No!”

Gianna looked between them, “Mama D didn’t-”

Hazel turned, “I said no.”

Gianna took another hesitant step, “Please just listen. They’re my friends. They took care of me.”

Hazel closed her eyes for one brief second.

“I was sleeping in parks before they found me,” her voice trembled, “If Denise hadn’t found me…. I don’t know what would’ve happened.”

Hazel’s face softened for the smallest moment, then she looked around the room again, at the pole, the costumes, the heels.

Her expression hardened once more.

Gianna hurried on, “She is not lying, she never made me dance for anyone. She never asked me to do what happens here, not once. She only made sure I wasn’t hungry, that I had a bed, that I was warm and safe.”

Tears rolled down Gianna’s face as she reached for Hazel’s hand.

“So please... please don’t hurt them.”

Hazel looked at her daughter for a very long time. Then she slowly squeezed Gianna’s fingers.

She then looked directly at Salvatore, “I want every person in this house identified.”

Gianna’s head snapped up, “Mom-”

Hazel didn’t stop, “I want to know exactly what happens inside these walls. If anyone exploited frightened young women... they will answer for it.”

Gianna stepped in front of Denise instinctively, “They didn’t exploit me.”

Hazel gently moved her daughter behind her again, “You don’t have to protect anyone anymore.”

“I’m not protecting-”

“Yes, you are!” Hazel’s voice hardened, “You are my daughter, Gianna. You do not belong in a house like this. You do not belong among women who sell themselves to strangers.”

Her eyes shifted to Denise, filling with open disgust.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 589

“That woman...” she pointed at her without a shred of hesitation, “...should be ashamed of herself. If she wanted to help you, there were other ways. A decent woman would have taken you anywhere but here. Instead she surrounded you with this filth and expected you to believe it was a home.”

Denise spoke carefully, “I understand why you hate what this place is.”

Hazel looked at her, glaring.

“But your daughter is alive because someone opened this door. I won’t apologize for feeding a hungry girl.”

Hazel held her gaze then let out a quiet laugh, “You want credit for feeding her? I will always be grateful that my daughter didn’t starve. I mean that.”

Then her expression hardened again.

“But don’t mistake gratitude for forgiveness.”

The room fell silent. Hazel looked once more at the the women standing silently together.

“You’ve had her for six months. Six months. My daughter didn’t know this city. She struggled to read. She was probably frightened, alone, and desperately looking for me. She didn’t know where to begin but you did.”

Denise scoffed, “It’s not that simple!”

“You are an adult! You’ve lived here for years. You know how this city works! You know hospitals, churches, social workers, police. You know newspapers could publish missing-person notices. You know there were organizations that reunite missing families.”

Hazel eyes burned with rage.

“And most importantly, you knew my daughter was looking for her mother. You knew my name. So tell me, how is it that a frightened dyslexic sixteen-year-old searched for me every single day... while the grown woman who took her in never found a single way to let me know my daughter was alive?”

Denise opened her mouth, “I-”

“No,” Hazel cut her off, “Don’t tell me it was impossible because I have spent the last six months searching every hospital, every shelter, every church, every neighborhood anyone suggested. If one phone call had been made... My daughter would have been in my arms months ago.”

“I never stopped her from looking,” Denise replied quietly.

“No,” Hazel agreed. “You simply made sure she stopped looking anywhere that might actually find me.”

Denise’s expression hardened slightly, “That isn’t what happened.”

Hazel’s eyes flashed with anger, “Oh, I know exactly what happened. You gave her a bed to sleep in, clothes to wear, people to laugh with, a place to belong. You built an entirely

new life around my daughter. And somehow, with all your connections, all your knowledge of this city, finding her mother was the one thing you couldn't manage?"

Denise opened her mouth.

Hazel cut her off, "Don't insult my intelligence. I know exactly how vulnerable young women disappear. Day by day, the old life becomes more distant, the searching slows, the hope fades and eventually..."

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She glanced toward the dance pole.

"...the new life begins to feel normal."

Gianna frowned, "Mom, that's not what happened."

Hazel turned immediately, "You don't know what almost happened."

Gianna blinked, gasping, suddenly afraid of her mom.

Denise spoke again, "How many times do I have to say I never forced her."

"That is exactly what frightens me," Hazel answered, "You didn't have to force her. You only had to make staying feel easier than leaving. One more week. One more month. One more excuse to stop searching. You may have kept her alive and I will always be grateful for that."

A pause.

"But do not ask me to believe you were leading her back to me... when every road in this house led somewhere else.

Hazel pulled her gently behind her, placing herself between Gianna and the room.

Whether the danger was real or only in her mind no longer mattered.

Every instinct she possessed screamed the same thing.

Her daughter had been gone for six months and she had found her inside a brothel.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to stop Hazel from making certain Gianna never came close to that world again.

"Salvatore," Hazel voiced.

He looked at her immediately, “Yes?”

Hazel didn’t take her eyes off Denise, “See that she’s paid for every dollar she spent keeping my daughter alive. After that... I don’t ever want this woman anywhere near Gianna again.”

She tightened her arm around her daughter.

“Our debt ends today.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy this one for now! I’ll be back with another update for you all in a few hours.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 590

Gianna

Pain.

That was the first thing I felt. It was a deep, heavy ache that pulsed through the back of my head. It throbbed with every heartbeat, every breath, every tiny movement.

A quiet whimper escaped me before I even opened my eyes.

The world slowly came into focus.

The ceiling above me was stained with water marks. One of the fluorescent lights flickered every few seconds, buzzing loudly enough to make my headache worse.

I blinked, everything swam. For a moment, I couldn’t remember where I was. Why was I lying on the floor? Why couldn’t I move?

I tried to lift a hand and suddenly panic shot through me. I jerked harder. My wrists burned.

Rope.

My hands were tied tightly behind my back.

I gasped against something stuffed inside my mouth.

A gag.

My breathing immediately became uneven.

No...

No...

I kicked my legs. My ankles were bound together too. The movement sent another wave of pain through my skull.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Think.

Think.

What happened?

Mama D...

Morgan opened the door...

I saw Mama D...

Then-

Something slammed into the back of my head.

Everything after that disappeared.

My eyes flew open again. The memory hit so suddenly that my stomach twisted. The room finally stopped spinning enough for me to look around.

I was lying on an old mattress in the corner of what looked like a dirty basement. There were windows all around the top of the wall, connected to the ceiling, but they were covered. The air smelled of dust, old wood and cigarette smoke.

Someone had wrapped a bandage around my head.

Poorly.

I could feel dried blood beneath it.

A few feet away stood Mama D and Morgan was beside her and across from them stood Cole Mercer.

“...The Capones will pay,” he said calmly.

Morgan swallowed hard, “I don’t think you understand who they are.”

“I understand them perfectly,” his voice never changed, “They care about Gianna, the bitch said so herself,” he nodded toward me without even looking, “They’ll spend millions if that’s what it takes.”

Millions.

The word echoed inside my head.

My stomach dropped.

No.

No.

I jerked violently against the ropes, “Mmmph!”

Every pair of eyes turned toward me. Fear crashed into me so hard I couldn’t breathe.

I shook my head desperately, “Mmph! Mm!”

Mama D hurried over. She dropped to her knees beside me, “Oh, sweetheart...” her hands trembled as she brushed my hair away from my face, “I’m so sorry. I’m so... so sorry.”

I stared at her, none of this made sense. She reached for the gag and that’s when Cole spoke behind her, “Leave it.”

She froze.

Her hand slowly fell away.

“I know...” she whispered to me, “I know you’re scared.”

I shook my head harder, “Mmph!”

She looked over her shoulder at Cole before lowering her voice.

“I love you,” she whispered, as fresh tears rolled down my face, “I will always love you. But... we have to do this and it’s all your fault.”

I stared at her, confused, hurt.

“Why would you tell him something like that?” she whispered, her voice shaking. “That the Capones would do anything for you... He latched onto those words. After you left, that’s all he could think about.”

I shook my head so hard another sharp wave of pain shot through the back of my skull.

No...

She saw the fear on my face and hurried on. “He backed us into a corner. He’d been putting this together for days. Ever since Vincenzo and Raphael came here and warned us to stay away from you...” Her voice cracked, “That’s why I kept pushing you away. I wasn’t trying to hurt you. But after they came... Cole realized just how important you were to them, and he wouldn’t let it go.”

Another tear slid down my face.

“He held a gun to Morgan’s head.”

My heart seemed to stop beating.

Mama D gave the smallest nod, tears spilling down her cheeks, “He said if we didn’t do exactly what he told us.... he’d kill all of us.” Her voice trembled. “We tried to talk him out of it. We argued. We begged him to stop. We told him it would only make things worse...” She closed her eyes for a moment. “...but he’d already made up his mind. Everything had already been planned.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 591

I looked at Cole again. He wasn’t even watching us. He was checking his phone.

Rage exploded inside me, “MMPH!”

I lunged forward as far as the ropes allowed.

“If she keeps doing that,” he said calmly, “she’ll reopen the wound.”

I wanted to claw his face apart. I wanted to scream. Instead, another muffled cry came.through the gag.

My eyes searched the room, then I saw them. All the girls were here, they sat against the opposite wall. All of them looked exhausted, terrified.

It wasn’t Mama D. It wasn’t Morgan. It wasn’t any of them.

It was him.

Cole Mercer.

Hatred settled inside me so quickly it almost burned.

He finally looked over, our eyes met and he smiled. As though everything had gone exactly the way he’d planned.

I wanted to spit at him.

I wanted to tell him Raphael would never entertain his petty little threats. That Vincenzo would tear Chicago apart. That Salvatore would never leave me here.

Instead, tears kept falling.

Raphael...

My chest tightened so hard it hurt. He would know by now. He’d gone to my room. He would’ve realized I wasn’t there.

He’d be looking for me.

The thought should have comforted me.

Instead... It made me feel sick.

I closed my eyes. I should’ve told him. I should’ve listened. He never kept things from me even when the truth was difficult, even when it hurt.

He always told me.

And I... I slipped out of the estate without a word, I snuck away.

My throat tightened behind the gag.

Then suddenly the room fell into a strange silence, Cole stopped and slowly looked up towards the ceiling.

I heard it too, heavy footsteps, fast and not just one person, dozens of them. The sound echoed above us, shaking dust from the ceiling. Every head in the room lifted toward the ceiling.

Cole’s eyes narrowed, “What was that?”

Another series of heavy thuds rolled across the floor above us, they got closer, and closer and then, a deafening crash came and the glass exploded inward.

I flinched so hard as a man dropped through the small basement window, then another, then another.

Black unifortns, body armor, rifles already raised.

Before my brain caught up, three more followed through another window, landing on the concrete.

Every single weapon pointed forward before their boots even touched the floor.

Morgan screamed, emma grabbed Brianna's arm. Mama D stumbled backward.

Cole spun toward the windows, "What the-"

The basement door upstairs burst open, more boots thundered down the stairs, not five, not ten. So many I couldn't count them.

The narrow staircase filled with men. Every one of them carried enough weapons to make the tiny basement suddenly feel impossibly small.

Within seconds they spread through the room, one by one, wall by wall, exit by exit. Every corner was covered, every angle, every person.

The girls shrank together against the wall, shaking. Mama D raised both trembling hands before anyone even spoke.

I stared at the men and my heart lurched.

Capone.

They found me.

Relief hit so suddenly my eyes filled with tears. More footsteps came down the stairs. The first one I saw was Vincenzo. His eyes swept across the basement once before settling on me.

Dante appeared beside him, all traces of his usual grin gone. For the first time since I'd met him... he looked deadly serious.

A heartbeat later, Adriano came down after them. His eyes landed on me for the briefest second before moving through the room again, measuring everything.

Then...

Raphael.

The second I saw him, my chest cracked open. His hair was still damp, as though he'd left the house without caring what he looked like and his face held no expression at all.

But I knew him.

I knew that terrifying stillness, that he wasn't calm. He was holding himself together one breath at a time.

His eyes found me immediately.

They stopped on the bandage wrapped around my head, then the ropes around my wrists, then my ankles, then the tears on my face.

The entire basement seemed to stop breathing.

Capone guards stood shoulder to shoulder around the room, weapons remained raised, not one barrel wavered.

Some were trained on Cole, others covered every person standing near him. The only sound left was the old basement light humming overhead and the uneven breathing of frightened people.

ge it

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 592

"Move!"

Capone guards surged forward with frightening speed.

Cole's men reached for their weapons but they never got the chance.

One guard twisted a man's arm behind his back before he had even cleared his waistband. Another kicked a pistol across the concrete floor. Boots thundered in every direction as commands echoed through the room.

"Hands!"

"Down!"

“Don’t move!”

Within seconds, every weapon in the basement had been stripped away.

Cole took one step backward and that was all Raphael allowed him.

Raphael crossed the distance so quickly I barely saw him move, one moment he was standing beside the stairs. The next, his hand had closed around the front of Cole’s jacket.

The impact against the brick wall echoed through the basement. Dust drifted from the ceiling.

Cole let out a choked, wet wheeze, his eyes widening in pure horror as his legs dangled in the air.

Raphael didn’t say a word but he didn’t look like himself anymore. And the next moment, he shoved the barrel of his black Glock straight between Cole’s teeth.

He pushed it in deep, forcing the iron against the back of Cole’s throat until Cole’s jaw stretched open to its breaking point. Cole’s hands flew up, grabbing frantically at Raphael’s thick wrist, but Raphael’s arm didn’t even shake.

“One,” Raphael whispered, “Give me just one reason why I shouldn’t blow your fucking brains all over this wall right now.”

Raphael held him there without a word, his eyes locked onto Cole’s as though he were committing every detail of his face to memory.

Around them, the guards continued moving.

All the girls were forced onto their knees, while Mama D stood trembling, tears streaming down her face. A guard guided her aside as another searched the room for anything that could be used as a weapon.

The room was completely under Capone control within seconds.

Vincenzo stepped into the center of the basement.

The guards made space for him without being asked.

One by one, everyone involved was brought into the open where he could see them. The basement, moments earlier filled with panic and confusion, had become eerily quiet.

I looked at Raphael again.

He still hadn't looked away from Cole, then, almost as if something inside him finally remembered why he'd come...

His eyes found mine.

Everything else in the room disappeared. It was only the two of us. His expression didn't soften but I saw the relief. It flashed through his eyes so quickly I almost thought I'd imagined it.

He had found me.

Raphael turned back towards Cole. He didn't pull the gun out, he just tilted his wrist by a fraction of an inch, allowing Cole enough room to catch a whistling breath around the cold steel barrel.

Cole's entire body was shaking against the bricks. The slick, arrogant look he had on his face just moments ago was completely gone, replaced by pure terror. His fingers stopped clawing at Raphael's skin and instead lifted into the air, palms open, trembling violently.

"Don Capone-" Cole choked out, the words thick because of the iron pressed against his tongue. He didn't look at Raphael anymore, he pushed his eyes sideways, desperate to find Vincenzo standing in the center of the room, Listen to me! I called you! I gave you the location myself!"

"Shut the fuck up," Raphael hissed, his thumb clicking the hammer of the Glock back. The sound was tiny, but in the basement, it sounded like a bomb going off.

"No, please! Look at the facts!" Cole screamed around the gun, tears of fear finally leaking out of his eyes and running into his ears. "I have no bad intentions for the girl! If I wanted to hurt Gianna, if I wanted to hide her, I never would have called you here! I wouldn't have brought you straight to my door!"

He swallowed hard.

"If I wanted your sister dead..." his eyes flickered toward me before returning to Raphael and Vincenzo, "...why would I tell you exactly where she was?"

What? What was he doing? What was he playing at?

"It was her," Cole gasped, "It was Denise! It was all her from the very start!"

My head started to spin. No. No, no, no.

"She brought the girl to me!" Cole yelled louder, "She showed up at my place with Gianna already knocked out cold! She handed her over to me like a piece of meat! She told me the Capones were soft for her. She said you guys had millions, that you would empty your

vaults if we held her for ransom! She wanted the money, Don Capone! She wanted to blackmail you!”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 593

Cole’s chest heaved, his eyes turned frantic, like a rat looking for a hole in the wall.

“I know how Chicago works. You don’t survive in this city by picking a fight with the Capones,” he slowly shook his head, “I’m not suicidal.”

My stomach twisted.

No.

He was lying.

I made a desperate sound behind the gag.

Raphael’s eyes flicked toward me for the briefest second before returning to Cole.

I thrashed against the ropes on my wrists. I wanted to scream. I wanted to tell Raphael that Cole was rewriting the entire night, that he was a monster, that he was twisting everything because he knew how dangerous the Capones were.

No.

No!

Mama D looked up so quickly she almost lost her balance.

“Cole-”

He spoke over her, “She walked through my front door with her girls asking for protection.”

My heartbeat became deafening.

“No...”

The word disappeared behind the gag.

Cole continued, “The second she brought Gianna into this room unconscious, I panicked. I knew what your family would do to this city if she went missing. So I played along with Denise just long enough to get her to stay still, and then I called you immediately! I gave you the address! I saved her from them!”

My breathing turned frantic.

No.

Please.

Stop.

“She thought I had enough people to hold the girl until payment arrived,” he gave another short shake of his head, “I told her she was insane.”

He laughed once.

It was a nervous laugh.

“The Capones?” he looked around the basement, “No amount of money is worth making enemies out of your family.”

“No...” a muffled, broken cry left my lips, turning into a pathetic squeak against the thick cloth gag in my mouth.

I looked at Mama D, waiting for her to yell back. Waiting for her to tell Vincenzo that Cole had a gun to Morgan’s head. Waiting for her to explain that they were forced into this nightmare.

But Mama D didn’t look up. She didn’t scream. She just huddled into a tiny ball at Vincenzo’s feet, her shoulders shaking so hard her bonies looked like they were snapping, her face buried entirely in her hands as she let out a low, guilty, horrible weep. She looked completely broken by the lie, or completely trapped by it.

Cole saw the silence and pressed harder, a sick, desperate smile almost touching the corners of his lips as he realized the Capones were listening. “Look at them! They won’t even deny it! I’m the one who saved your sister, Don Capone!”

Raphael didn’t look back at Vincenzo for permission. His eyes remained locked on Cole’s face. Every sentence sounded reasonable. Every sentence fit together too well. My breathing became faster.

No.

No.

No.

He was changing everything, turning it upside down, making himself look like the man who had saved me, making Mama D look like a monster.

I twisted so hard against the ropes that they bit into my wrists.

“I warned you,” Cole continued quietly to Mama D, “I told you this would end badly.”

My eyes burned.

He was doing it.

He was rewriting everything.

Every lie came out calmly, patiently as if he had practiced them a hundred times.

Mama D shook her head over and over.

Fresh tears rolled down my face. I looked desperately toward Raphael.

Please...

Please don’t believe him.

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t pull the gag from my mouth. All I could do was shake my head as hard as I could.

Because I knew Mama D, she wasn’t perfect, she’d made mistakes, she’d lied, she’d hidden things but she would never...

Never...

Hand me over for money.

Cole had forced this.

Mama D finally spoke, but her voice came out small and broken, she was scared, “He was in on it! He helped plan it! He wanted every single dollar just as bad as—”

“I have proof!” Cole cut her off, “Don Capone, look at the computer on my desk! Look at the drive! I have security cameras covering the back alley and the entrance and at her place... where she took Gianna! I recorded every single second! I only played along to get you here just to keep Gianna alive.”

Mama D froze. Her jaw dropped open, her eyes going completely wide. Her lips trembled, but no sound came out. She didn't try to defend herself. She didn't say she didn't do it. She just stared at Cole in total, crushing shock.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 594

No, no!

"I wasn't even there when they hurt the girl!" Cole yelled, "They brought her to me already bleeding! Brianna was the one who hit her in the head! She used a heavy wooden club from the garage! They carried her in here like a sack of rocks, and I was the one who washed the blood off her face and wrapped that white bandage around her forehead! Check the footage! It's all on the tape!"

A cold wave of pure horror washed over me. No. No, this isn't right.

My eyes darted to Brianna. She was just staring at the floor, her shoulders hunched up as if she were trying to disappear into her own skin. Emma was next to her, weeping silently, her hands covering her face, refusing to look at any of us.

He forced them to do it. He held a gun to Morgan's heads, what was Mama D supposed to do, let her die? Mama D loves me. She loves all of us. She wouldn't hurt me for money. She's a good person. He's the monster who set this whole trap up.

I thrashed again, my muffled screams turning into a whine against the thick cloth gag. I looked at Raphael, begging him with my eyes to pull the trigger, to stop listening to the snake on the wall.

Mama D didn't say she was innocent, but she didn't say she was guilty either. She just sat there on her knees, looking between Cole and the Capones.

A broken sound escaped my throat. It wasn't even a word but it was just enough for Raphael's head to turn.

His eyes found mine again, and my eyes begged him to come to me and he, somehow, understood because the next second, he let go of Cole.

Cole fell down, coughing violently, but Raphael didn't even look back at him,

He was already walking toward me. His face had gone completely blank as he stopped in front of me and crouched.

His gaze swept over me once.

The bandage, the dried blood in my hair, the bruises around my wrists, the ropes around my ankles.

“Line them up,” Adriano ordered, while checking bullets in his gun.

My heart dropped. Within seconds, the guards moved. They forced everyone onto the floor. Mama D and the girl, Cole and his men. They were all pushed down until they were lying face-first on the cold concrete.

The guards stood over them, raising their guns. The barrels settled against the backs of their heads.

I struggled against Raphael’s hold, panic crashing through me so hard I could barely breathe.

Raphael fingers moved to the knot behind my head. He pulled the gag free. The second it fell away, I sucked in a desperate breath.

“Raphael-“My voice broke, “He’s lying.”

The words rushed out so fast they stumbled over one another.

“He’s lying, please- Denise would never—”

He reached up carefully, brushing a strand of hair away from the bandage. His fingertips never touched the wound, “Easy.”

15 Bau

“But-”

“Easy.”

His voice stayed level, almost gentle. My breathing wouldn’t slow down.

“No, listen to me.” Tears blurred my vision. “Mama D wouldn’t do this. He made them. He’s lying. You have to believe me.”

Raphael didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, his hand slipped beneath my bound wrists, checking how tightly the rope had been tied.

His eyes narrowed, “I’ll get these off.”

“Raphael!”

He finally looked into my eyes, “I heard you.”

“No, you didn’t,” my voice cracked, “They’re innocent. We have to help them. Please.”

He held my gaze, then, very quietly, like he hadn’t even listened to a single word that came out of my mouth, he said, “You are bleeding.”

I stared at him, “What?”

“You have a head injury,” his thumb hovered near the edge of the bandage without disturbing it. His eyes moved to the rope marks around my wrists, “They tied you tightly enough to break skin.”

I shook my head desperately, “I’m fine.”

“No,” is answer came immediately, “You are not.”

“I don’t care about me!”

“I do.”

The words landed with so much certainty that my chest tightened.

I looked past Raphael’s shoulder just as Adriano planted the sole of his boot directly onto the back of the one of Cole’s soldier’s skull.

Before the man could even swallow his own spit, Adriano slammed his full weight down, stomping through the skull with a sickening crunch that snapped the man’s neck like a dry twig. The body dropped flat, twitching once before going entirely still in the dirt.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 595

Adriano slowly lifted his boot, letting the blood drip off the leather onto the concrete as his stare swept across the rest.

“Now,” he whispered, a terrifying smile finally touching the corners of his lips, “Who else feels like telling me a story?”

Morgan started sobbing violently.

I shook my head frantically but it hurt so much to move, “Raphael, Raph, please, you need you to listen,” I leaned toward him, “Cole is trying to make them look guilty. He’s turning everything around. Please…”

Raphael’s expression never changed, “I heard every word.”

“Then help them! Please, don’t hurt them”

For a moment, he simply looked at me. When he finally spoke, his voice was completely calm, “So first…” his hand rested lightly against my shoulder, “…I’m getting you out of these ropes.”

“Raphael-”

“Then I’m taking you to a doctor.”

“I don’t need-”

“You do.”

“I need you to listen!”

“I am listening.”

“No, you’re not!”

“I am,” his eyes stayed locked on mine, as he untied the rope from my wrists, “But right now….the only thing that matters to me…”

His fingers carefully lifted one of my hands, studying the angry red marks circling my wrists.

“…is that somebody put their hands on you.”

I looked into his eyes. There was no panic there. No rage that anyone else would recognize, just absolute focus. The kind that always appeared when he was solving a problem.

“I care that someone struck you hard enough to leave you unconscious.”

His eyes dropped briefly to the blood staining the side of my shirt.

“I care that you woke up restrained. I care that you were left bleeding. The rest…”

For the first time, his eyes shifted away from me, only briefly, toward the room behind us, toward everyone else.

When he looked back, his face was empty again, “...will be sorted out.”

Behind me, another gunshot echoed through the basement. I flinched so hard my whole body jerked.

A terrified sob escaped one of the girls. They were all trembling so violently that two of them completely lost control of their bladders.

“No!” My vision swam, “Please, please, you don’t understand-”

“Can you move your fingers?”

I blinked, the shadows in the room dancing as I tried to focus on his face. “What?”

“Can you move your fingers?” he repeated.

Slowly, aching, I curled my fingers into my palms.

“Raph, they’re innocent, please...” I begged, the words catching in my scraped throat. “You have to believe me

He gave his head a short, dismissive shake. “I don’t know that.”

“I do,” I choked out, a fresh wave of tears blurring my vision.

“I know you believe that,” he stated.

The utter lack of warmth in his eyes made my chest tighten until I could barely breathe. “You think I’m wrong?”

“I think you have a head injury,” he replied coldly, his thumb testing the swelling on my temple, “Which makes your judgment entirely unreliable.”

Before I could even try to argue, a scream shattered the basement air.

Vincenzo had drawn his gun and pointed it straight at Mama D’s leg while Dante held her up and then the bullet tore straight through her thigh, shattering the bone.

Mama D let out a piercing scream that bounced off the brick walls as blood sprayed across the gray floor.

Vincenzo slowly lowered the smoking barrel, his face carved from ice as he looked down at her thrashing on the ground, “I guess that will make you tell me the fucking truth.”

Janedoewritings

Author

This chapter is mostly unedited because I had to write it very quickly. I'm not sure if it'll hit the same, but I gave it everything I had. I hope you guys enjoy it anyway.

+158che

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 596

Important: Before you read, remember that they're called The Chicago Outfit for a reason.

This is the mafia. These characters are criminals. They aren't meant to be soft, moral, or sympathetic toward everyone, and I'm not going to write them that way.

So, read at your own risk... and if they do something morally questionable, just remember, you were warned.

Raphael

The gunshot cracked through the basement.

Gianna jerked so hard against me that I nearly lost my grip on her.

"No!"

She twisted toward the people on the floor, tears spilling down her face faster than she could wipe them away. Her ankles were still bound, making her stumble before she caught herself against my arm.

"Please... please, stop!"

She pushed at my chest with both hands.

I barely moved.

Every part of my attention stayed on her.

The bandage around her head was already stained. A thin line of dried blood disappeared beneath her hair. Her breathing was too fast. Her pupils weren't tracking evenly.

Her freed hands flew to my face, her palms wet with tears and sweat, slapping against my jaw as she tried to force me to look at her, “Raphael! Stop him! Please, God, stop him!” she shrieked.

She tried to throw her weight forward toward Denise, but her ankles were still locked tight in the ropes.

“They’re going to kill her! Raph, please! Look at me! Tell him to stop! She’s going to bleed to death!”

My arms went around her waist, locking her against my chest so she couldn’t move a single inch. I could feel the wet heat of her tears soaking into the collar of my shirt, but it didn’t stir a single thing inside me. Denise’s screaming was just background noise.

A minor distraction.

She was crying so hard she could barely breathe. Her heart was racing, her balance was gone and her judgment was compromised.

I didn’t need anyone to tell me that.

I could see it.

“Look at me,” I told her.

She refused, her eyes stayed fixed on Denise, “Mama D...”

She tried to pull away again.

1 caught both of her wrists before she could stumble, “Gianna.”

She finally looked up.

Her cheeks were soaked with tears, “Make them stop.”

“I can’t.”

“You can!” She shook her head so hard she winced, “You have to.”

I glanced at the rope still around her ankles, “You’re trying to protect people while you’re still in shock.”

“I know them.”

“You know the version you’ve been allowed to know.”

She looked at me as if I'd slapped her, "They love me."

"They may."

"And you don't care?"

My answer came without hesitation, "The only person in this room I'm concerned about is you."

Her face crumpled, "What about everyone else?"

I looked at the people lined up across the basement.

Cole Mercer and his crew.

Some girls.

And Denise clutching her leg.

None of these people meant shit to me.

Then I looked back at Gianna, "I'll determine everyone's involvement."

She grabbed the front of my shirt, "They're scared."

I slowly pulled her hair away from her face, "So are you."

"They're innocent," she shrieked.

"I don't know that."

"I do!" she shrieked and fresh tears spilled down her cheeks, "Don't you trust me, Raph?"

"I do."

"Then trust me now."

I reached up carefully and rested two fingers beneath her chin. Something inside me shifted again. Every instinct I'd spent years mastering kept pushing toward the same conclusion.

Someone had crossed a line they could never uncross.

Gianna clutched my shirt tighter, "Raphael..." her voice had become almost too quiet to hear, "Please."

I lowered my forehead until it almost touched hers, “I’m going to find out exactly what happened, but…’

She searched my face desperately, “But?”

I looked into her eyes, “But I’m not making decisions because people are crying.”

Another sob escaped her, “I don’t want them to get hurt.”

For a moment, her body sagged against mine, “I believe that you want to save everyone.”

My hand settled gently against the side of her face, careful to avoid the bandage.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 597

“But right now… my only job is to make sure nobody ever hurts you again.”

I couldn’t help her while she was pulling against the ropes still wrapped around her ankles.

“Stay still.”

She didn’t, “Raphael, please—”

“I said stay still.”

I crouched in front of her and pulled the knife from my belt. One clean cut. The rope around her ankles fell apart.

She didn’t even wait.

The moment her legs were free, she threw herself toward me. Her hands grabbed my face, both of them. Her palms were cold. They trembled so badly I could feel every shake against my skin.

She forced me to look at her, “Please…” she cried, “Look at me. Look into my eyes.”

I already was.

Tears streamed down her face, mixing with the dried blood on her cheeks.

“Please believe me.”

My eyes moved over the dressing automatically. The bandage had slipped, there was dried blood beneath it. The edges were stained a darker red. Whoever had wrapped it hadn't done a very good job.

My jaw tightened, "You need stitches."

She shook her head so quickly that she winced, "No!" she cried. "Raphael, listen to me!" She pulled my face back toward hers with surprising strength, "If you love me..."

The words stopped me.

"...please. Give Mama D one chance. I know her. I know she isn't telling the whole story because she's scared," her fingers tightened against my jaw, "Please... let her explain."

For several long seconds, I simply looked at her.

Logic told me not to.

Emotion-whatever broken version of it existed inside me-was standing right in front of me with blood in her hair and tears running down her face.

She trusted that woman.

I trusted her.

I released a slow breath, "Fine. One chance. Only because I can't seem to tell you no."

A weak, tearful laugh escaped her before another sob replaced it. I stood and helped her sit back down on the thin mattress.

The moment she tried to rise again, I placed one hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Stay."

"But-"

"You've taken a blow to the head."

She fell quiet.

"You stand up too quickly. You'll get dizzy. Your pupils are still uneven." I nodded toward the mattress. "If you fall again and hit your head a second time, you'll make this worse."

She looked frustrated.

“I need you conscious. So stay seated because after I’m done with these people, you’re next.”

She hesitated only a moment before giving me a small nod, “...Okay.”

I turned away from her. The warmth left with her.

By the time I reached the center of the basement, every guard had stepped back just enough to give me room.

Denise Walker was still on the floor, clutching her injured leg, blood soaked through her fingers. She looked up at me and then at my brothers.

“I’m giving you one opportunity, not because you’ve earned it,” I glanced once toward Gianna and she nodded, ” Because she asked me to.”

“I don’t give opportunities to people who lay a hand on my family, so, use this wisely, Denise,” Vincenzo stepped up beside me, his voice as cold as ever, “And don’t insult us by pretending any of you are innocent.”

I turned my head slowly, pointing my finger toward the women lying face first against the cold concrete, “Which one of these means the most to you?” I asked Denise.

“Morgan,” Cole answered immediately from his place on the floor, “She’d do anything for the youngest one, Morgan. She is the one in the green dress.”

The words had barely left his mouth when Dante stomped down on the back of Cole’s head. The impact slammed Cole’s face into the concrete, not hard enough to crack his skull and kill him, but hard enough to make him rethink his choices.

“You speak when you’re spoken to, asshole,” Dante growled down at him.

I didn’t look at Cole as he groaned in the dirt. My face remained perfectly empty as I fixed my eyes on the girl in green.

“Alfonso,” I ordered, “Grab the girl and shove a gun down her throat.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 598

Alfonso moved instantly. He lunged forward, grabbing Morgan and jerking her head back until her neck strained. He jammed the barrel of his pistol into her mouth. She let out a muffled, terrified sob, her hands shaking in the air as she choked around the gun.

My eyes returned to Denise, locking onto her pale, sweating face, “This is the only chance you’re getting,” I said, ” I want the truth. No stories, no protecting people, no convenient omissions. Every word that comes out of your mouth needs to be true.”

I held her gaze, my eyes completely unblinking as I stared down at her.

“If you lie… I will know. And when I find out… you’ll spend the rest of your life wishing I’d ended it quickly. One single lie, and all your girls will be dead in a second.”

She stared up at me for several seconds, her wide, bloodshot eyes moving slowly from my blank face to Vincenzo then to Adriano, then to Dante, before finally settling on Morgan choking around the steel barrel of Alfonso’s gun.

Her shoulders dropped. Her bloody fingers loosened their tight grip around her torn thigh. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, letting out a long, shuddering breath before opening them again.

Her voice came out small, ruined, and shaking with the realization that she had zero cards left to play, “My girls are my everything… if you kill them, I’ll have nothing. So, I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you everything.”

“Dante, get all the footage from Mercer,” Vincenzo ordered, “I want every version of their stories.”

Dante grabbed Cole off the concrete by his jacket, dragging his body across the floor toward a glowing laptop on the desk. He clamped his hand over the back of Cole’s neck, pushing his face down toward the screen while jamming the barrel of his gun hard against the base of his skull.

Denise’s eyes flicked to Morgan choking on the gun, then back to us, her face turning gray, “Please, don’t hurt them… please don’t hurt my girls. It was me. Cole isn’t lying, I planned it.”

Then I heard a broken, breathless “no” coming from Gianna’s direction. The sound was small, but it hit my ears instantly, and it took an immense amount of neural control not to shift my eyes away from Denise to check on her.

Denise squeezed her eyes shut, a loud wheeze tearing out of her chest as she rocked back and forth on the bloody concrete. The pain in her thigh from Vincenzo’s bullet was turning her skin a sick, pasty color, but our stares forced her to open her mouth again.

“I planned it,” she sobbed, “I planned the whole thing from the very start. Every single bit of it was my idea.”

“No, stop saying that!” Gianna screamed from the mattress where she sat, her voice ripping through the basement.

Denise broke.

“Cole didn’t know,” she choked, struggling to breathe as her trembling hands pressed against the torn flesh of her thigh, “He didn’t know anything about the plan until after I brought Gianna here. I knocked her out at the house... brought her straight to him in the middle of the night. I was just...” A sob ripped through her chest. “I was so tired of drowning in debt. Every day, someone came looking for what I owed. The numbers never stopped. The money never stopped. I just wanted it to end. I wanted to be free.”

“So you threw my sister to the wolves because you wanted to be free?” Vincenzo stated, his voice flat.

I didn’t need to look at him to know the verdict had already been delivered.

Denise wasn’t leaving this basement alive.

The monster in my brother had surfaced completely. His hand was locked around his gun so tightly his knuckles had gone bone-white, his gaze fixed on Denise.

To him, this wasn’t about debt anymore.

A street-level gambler had dared to lay a hand on our family.

That wasn’t a mistake.

It was an offense that demanded to be erased in blood.

“Mama D, please!” Gianna’s voice shattered behind me from the mattress. “Tell them the truth! It’s okay! Tell them Cole forced you! They’ll understand, Mama D! Just tell them what he really did!”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 599

Denise collapsed into herself, a broken, animalistic wail tearing from her throat as her head hung so low her forehead nearly touched the blood pooling beneath her.

“That is the truth, Gianna!” she cried. “I was just so tired. You don’t know what it’s like to have people threatening to kill you every single night because your pockets are empty. I never wanted to hurt you, I swear to God, I never wanted to cause you pain… but I had no choice. I had no choice left.”

“Yes, you did,” Gianna’s voice broke, “All you had to do was ask!” she sobbed, each word forcing itself out so violently she nearly choked on it. She folded over herself, she clutched at her stomach as if the ache inside her had become physical, “All you had to do was ask me, Mama D! I would’ve given you anything! I would’ve helped you!”

“Asking never gets you what you want, Gianna,” Denise rasped, “It never does. In this world, the moment you ask for help, people wrap a chain around your neck. So I made a plan. I didn’t want to hurt you. I love you so much, Gianna… I love you as if you were my own daughter… but the Capones have millions. To them, it was nothing.”

A ragged breath escaped her.

“To me… it was my life.”

I shut my eyes for a second, not because Denise’s confession affected me but because I had already calculated what it would do to Gianna.

People survive torture. They survive broken bones, bullets, starvation.

Betrayal is different.

It rewrites every memory that came before it. I knew the exact moment her heart would fracture. It wasn’t when Denise admitted what she’d done.

It was when Gianna realized the woman she trusted had weighed her life against a debt… and decided the debt was worth more.

Denise paused, her breath hitching violently as a sharp spike of agony shot through her shattered bone. She clutched her thigh harder, her fingers sinking deep into the dark red wound.

Denise dragged in a shaky breath before turning her head toward the corner where Dante held Cole upright by the back of his neck.

“And Cole…” she hissed, “Cole was on board the second I showed him what I’d brought. He saw Gianna, and he got greedy. He wanted every dollar just as badly as I did.”

Her lip curled.

“But then he betrayed me. He got scared of the Capone name. He realized what you people would do to him, so he stole my plan. He called you behind my back so he could play the hero... and leave me to take the fall.”

My eyes shifted to Cole.

The accusation fit the sequence of events more cleanly than the version we’d been given. Cole Mercer didn’t strike me as loyal.

Self-preserving? Yes.

Intelligent? Marginally.

The type of man who would sacrifice his accomplice to buy himself a few more breaths?

Whether Denise was telling the whole truth remained uncertain but one conclusion was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

Neither of them had betrayed the other.

They had simply reached the point where survival mattered more than loyalty.

Cole dragged in a ragged breath, his chest heaving beneath Dante’s grip, “Don Capone, listen to what she’s saying! “he shouted. “I’ve been telling you the truth from the start! The second she walked through my door carrying Gianna unconscious, I knew she was a dead woman walking. I only went along with her insane plan because I needed to keep her there. I needed her to stay put long enough to hand her over to you on a silver platter.”

Dante answered by grinding his boot harder into Cole’s hand, his bone shifted. Cole bit through the pain without taking his eyes off Vincenzo.

“Think about it!” he yelled. “If I wanted Capone money-if I wanted to ransom Gianna-I had months to do it. She walked around this neighborhood every day. I knew where she studied. I knew her routine. I could’ve grabbed her off the street whenever I wanted. But I didn’t. Not once. Because I’m not a fucking idiot.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 600

He straightened as much as Dante’s grip allowed, fixing his attention entirely on my brother.

“I know what the Capone name means. You don’t poke a sleeping tiger unless you’re looking to get eaten alive... Everything I did tonight was to prove my loyalty.”

It was convincing and logically structured.

Truth lives in patterns.

People rarely reveal themselves through a single decision. They reveal themselves through consistency.

Cole's version explained why he contacted us. Denise's version explained why he waited as long as he had. Both narratives accounted for the evidence.

"Don't..." Gianna whispered behind me, "Please don't listen to him... Please... don't listen to him, Raph..."

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Her plea wasn't directed at my logic. It was directed at the part of me she'd always believed would choose her over reason.

The inconvenient reality was that, for her...

I already had and she wasn't going to like it.

Cole met Gianna's tear-filled eyes for a moment before looking directly at me, "We'd never even met before tonight. I don't owe your family a damn thing. But the second that crazy bitch dragged an unconscious Capone into my building, I didn't hide her. I didn't ask for a ransom. I kept Denise away from her, wrapped the wound on her head, and called you immediately. I brought the entire Capone empire to my own doorstep. Does that sound like a man trying to steal your millions.... or a man trying to stay alive by doing right by your family?"

Every decision he described aligned with self-preservation. A man planning to extort us wouldn't summon the people most capable of killing him before making a single demand.

The reasoning held.

My opinion of him didn't change.

Whether he'd acted out of loyalty, fear, or calculated self-interest was almost irrelevant. He had still inserted himself into a situation involving Gianna.

That alone guaranteed consequences.

Vincenzo regarded Cole with the kind of stillness that usually came just before violence. Adriano's fingers tightened around his Glock until the frame gave a faint metallic click.

Dante needed no instruction, he leaned his weight onto Cole's hand. A muted pop echoed through the basement. Cole's jaw locked, but he swallowed the scream.

"So..." Vincenzo said quietly, the single word enough to make the guards raise their rifles another inch. "You accept that you planned this entire operation? You accept that you made the decision to hurt Gianna for money?"

Denise folded completely. A strangled sob tore from her throat as she lay with her cheek pressed into the dirt, blood continuing to spread beneath her thigh.

"Yes," she cried. "Yes! I've told you everything! The whole truth! It was me... I did it."

She lifted her head just enough to look at Vincenzo.

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"Please... just take your Gianna and let my girls go. Look at them... they're terrified. My girls are innocent, Don Capone. Please... have mercy on them."

Then I heard a sound so small most people would've missed it.

I turned.

Gianna had folded into herself on the mattress, her fingers gripping the denim over her knees so tightly her knuckles had lost their color. Every muscle in her body trembled as though she were trying to hold herself together by force alone.

I understood what was happening. The woman she'd trusted had confessed without hesitation and she made no final attempt to protect the image Gianna had carried of her.

Just the truth or enough of it to destroy her.

My chest tightened with a sensation I had no interest in naming. I kept my eyes forward. If I looked at her now, I wouldn't be able to hold myself away from her.

"Mama D..." Gianna sobbed, "I... wasn't I one of your girls too?"

Denise flinched as if Gianna had struck her across the face. Her jaw stayed open, a thin string of bloody spit hanging from her lower lip, but no words came out.

My eyes stayed fixed on the side of Gianna's face, "Gianna," I said, "You heard her."

"Mama D, answer me!" Gianna shrieked, "How do you just... how do you put a price tag on a person? How do you look at me and see dollars?"