My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 601

“Because she’s street-level waste,” Vincenzo said, his voice flat, almost bored. “And she made a street-level decision.”

Dante released Cole, who crumpled to the floor, then swung the laptop around so we could see the screen, “I’ve got Mercer’s footage,” he said. “It lines up with his version. Cole bandaged Gianna’s head, went straight into the back alley, and called us.”

Gianna pushed herself off the mattress with unsteady legs. For a second, I thought she might collapse but instead, she walked toward me.

Each step was slow, as though her body had detached itself from her mind and was moving on instinct alone. I closed the distance before she had to take another.

The moment she reached me, I slipped an arm around her waist. She folded against my side without a word.

She wasn’t crying now, there were no desperate sobs, just an emptiness that made her feel frighteningly fragile in my arms.

She stared at the floor for several long seconds before speaking, “I…” her voice cracked so badly she had to swallow before trying again, “I want to go home.”

“Okay,” I said, tightening my hold on her just enough for her to know she didn’t have to keep herself standing anymore, “I’ll take you.”

She gave a faint nod, then slowly lifted her eyes to Vincenzo. The grief in them had burned itself into something colder.

“Vincenzo…” she whispered, “I don’t want anything to do with them anymore. I don’t want to hear another excuse. I don’t want another story,” she drew in a fractured breath, “They made their choice,” a tear escaped despite her efforts to stop it, “So they can live with it.”

She turned her face into my chest, as though looking at Denise for another second would hurt more than she could bear.

Adriano let out a quiet laugh, “Yeah,” he said. “We don’t do that here, Gianna.”

I felt her body go rigid against mine and the color drained from her face.

“No…” she whispered, shaking her head before looking at Vincenzo, “Please… Brianna, Emma… all the girls… they had nothing to do with this. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt. I just want to leave.”

I looked down at her, “They made you bleed.”

Her brows pulled together as she searched my face, “It’s over, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“They made you bleed,” I repeated evenly, “I’m not prepared to let that go.”

Her breathing caught, the fear in her eyes wasn’t for herself. It was for them.

The same people who had exploited her trust, sold her for profit, and abandoned her the moment it became convenient.

“No.” She shook her head harder, tears spilling freely now. “No, none of you are doing anything,” her fingers clutched at the front of my shirt, “If you all really consider me family… then leave them to deal with the consequences of what they’ve already done. Please,” she looked between each of us frantically, “You’ve already

+15 Br hurt Denise. She lost so much blood. It’s done. It’s over. We’re even.”

Nothing about this was over.

Vincenzo took a slow step toward Denise, a faint smile touching the corner of his mouth.

I felt Gianna lunge forward on instinct. My arm tightened around her waist before she’d taken more than half step.

She looked up at me, disbelief flooded her face, “No…” she whispered.

Vincenzo lowered himself into a crouch until he was eye level with Denise. He studied the blood pouring from the wound in her thigh with detached curiosity before meeting her eyes again.

“You know, Denise…” A slow smile spread across his face. “I’m perfectly comfortable killing women who hurt my family. The last woman I killed… I was fifteen. She thought she could disrespect my mother and keep breathing. She was wrong.”

Denise’s breathing turned shallow.

“The difference is…” Vincenzo continued, “I usually believe in efficiency. One bullet. Quick. Clean. I don’t waste time making women suffer,” his smile widened, “I’ve always considered that beneath me.”

A long pause settled between them.

“But then there are women who sell innocent girls. Women who smile while putting a price on my sister’s life,” he leaned closer to her, “For those women... I make an exception.”

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Chapter 602

“Vincenzo, no!” Gianna screamed, throwing herself forward. “Please! Don’t do this to her!”

She fought against my hold with everything she had.

“Relax, Gianna,” I said quietly, pulling her firmly against my chest as she struggled to break free.

Under any other circumstances, I would have loosened my grip the moment she resisted, but not now.

I wrapped both arms around her, holding her tightly enough that every desperate attempt to reach/Denise ended against me.

She pushed harder.

It made no difference.

For the first time since I’d known her, I used enough strength to make sure she couldn’t move.

Adriano stepped forward, smiling widely, his thumb resting flat against the hammer of his gun. His gaze drifted over the girls huddled together in the corner, all of them crying, begging, promising anything if we’d just let them

“They played a game with the Capone name,” Adriano stated, “In this city, when you play that game, you pay the tax. Every single person in this room who touched your hair or held the door is part of the debt.”

“I don’t want revenge!” Gianna cried, struggling harder against my arms. “I don’t want anything to do with them! I’m the one who bled! It should be my decision!”

I looked down at her, “Do you remember the men who put a cigarette out on your skin?”

She stared back at me, confusion and panic fighting for space in her eyes. Slowly, she shook her head, “Don’t…” she whispered.

I smiled, “I didn’t ask for your permission the last time someone hurt you. I’m not asking for it now.”

The words landed between us without emotion.

“They made you bleed. They stopped belonging to themselves the moment they did.”

Vincenzo exhaled softly, almost disappointed. He looked down at Denise as though deciding where to place a signature, “I don’t enjoy cruelty,” he said, “There’s no honor in tormenting a woman. A clean shot through the carotid. Fast. Efficient. You’ll lose consciousness before your body understands what’s happened. That’s more mercy than you’ve shown my sister.”

His eyes lifted to mine.

“Raphael.”

A faint smile touched my mouth, “My pleasure.”

“No!” Gianna screamed, twisting violently in my arms. “No! Are you all insane? What’s wrong with you? Leave them alone!”

“I’ll take our little sister,” Adriano said, stepping in without waiting for an answer.

He caught Gianna the instant she tried to break free, locking her against his chest. She fought him anyway.

Denise looked from one of us to the next before her eyes settled on Gianna. Whatever strength she had left abandoned her, “I’m so sorry, G…” she whispered through bloodstained lips. “Just… know that I did love you.”

I didn’t respond.

Words had no value anymore.

I drew the knife I’d used moments earlier to cut through Gianna’s restraints.

The blade drove into the side of Denise’s neck, finding the carotid before I withdrew it just as cleanly.

A wet, choking gasp escaped her.

Blood surged from the wound in bursts, painting the dirt beneath her as her hands instinctively clawed at her throat.

She lasted only seconds.

“NO!”

Gianna’s scream ripped through the basement as she threw herself against Adriano’s hold. He barely moved. After a quiet sigh, he looked down at her, “I think you’ve seen enough.”

Still she fought, twisting violently, sobbing so hard she could barely breathe.

Adriano caught my eye for half a second and I gave a single nod.

He shifted his hold, catching her as she struggled, then he applied pressure to the side of her neck, compressing the carotid sinus just below the angle of her jaw for a brief moment.

Gianna’s movement went limp almost immediately. Her eyelids fluttered, her body went slack as Adriano caught her before she could fall.

He adjusted her carefully against his chest, “She’ll come around.”

I worked way too hard on this chapter... so I genuinely hope you all had a wonderful time watching fictional people make terrible decisions and choose violence.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 603

Raphael

Adriano’s arms were capable, but they were not mine.

I stepped forward before his arms could even settle into a permanent hold. I took her from him, sliding my hands beneath her knees and behind her shoulders, careful not to disturb the bandage wrapped around her head.

I kept her head slightly elevated against my shoulder instead of letting it fall back. The blow she’d taken was still fresh. The last thing she needed was her neck rolling with every movement.

Her cheek rested against my chest, her damp lashes still clinging together from tears. Every few seconds, her breathing caught before settling again.

I watched it, it was regular, no choking, no sudden pause. Her pulse still fluttered quickly beneath the side of her neck, but it was steady enough.

I adjusted my grip another inch, making sure her injured side wasn't pressed against me. Even unconscious, her brows remained pinched together. As though whatever she'd seen hadn't let go.

My thumb brushed a loose strand of hair away from the edge of the dressing. Fresh blood hadn't spread any farther. She needed a trauma surgeon. A CT scan, an observation.

Preferably all within the next thirty minutes.

I didn't spare a single glance for the corpse cooling on the concrete. Denise was a closed file. Vincenzo and Adriano turned their attention towards where Mercer was trying to crawl away.

He was a pathetic sight. His hand was a ruined, pulpy mess from Dante's boot, and his face was swollen where he'd hit the concrete.

Cole turned, his face wet with snot and tears, his eyes darting between my brothers like a trapped rat.

"Please!" Cole sobbed, "I told you! I kept her safe! I didn't want this! I just wanted to make sure... I just wanted to make sure there was no heat on me!"

Vincenzo stood over him, his shadow swallowing Cole whole. He didn't look angry, only mildly inconvenienced, as though Cole had become a problem that had taken longer than expected to clean up.

"You keep talking about 'heat,' Mercer," Adriano laughed, "You think you're in a fucking sauna?"

"I swear!" Cole shrieked, pressing his forehead into the dirt. "I'm a businessman! I saw the situation, I saw the Capones, and I knew! I knew I had to be the one to call you!"

"Cole," Vincenzo said quietly, looking down at the man curled across the concrete, "you keep repeating the same sentence as if saying it enough times will change what happened."

Cole's whole body shook.

"I kept her safe!" he cried. "I did! I stopped the bleeding! I called you! I never wanted any of this! I just... I just didn't want the Capones coming after me!"

Vincenzo's expression didn't change, "You weren't protecting Gianna. You were protecting yourself."

Adriano let out a short laugh and rubbed a hand over his face, “Listen to this idiot,” he crouched beside Cole, resting an elbow on his knee, “So let me get this straight. A kidnapped Capone girl lands in your apartment. You decide not to throw her out immediately. You spend a few minutes thinking about your options and now you want a medal because you remembered we exist?”

Cole stared at him through tears, “I panicked.”

“No,” Adriano replied with a grin, “You were doing math,” he pointed toward Denise’s body, “Your first concern wasn’t the kidnapped girl. It was your own ass. You were trying to figure out whether the money was worth dying over.”

Cole shook his head, “That’s not-”

“And congratulations,” Adriano cut in. “You finally reached the correct answer,” Adriano stood, brushing imaginary dust from his sleeve, “I’ve met guard dogs with a stronger survival instinct.”

Dante snorted, looking Cole up and down with open disgust, “This pathetic bastard isn’t even smart enough to be a rat. He’s the chunk of cheese dumb enough to jump into the trap by himself.”

“I was just trying to fucking help!” he shouted, “I’m not your enemy.”

Adriano let out a dry, barking laugh, “Oh, you’re not our enemy, Cole?” he mocked, “That’s funny. See, I always thought the guy who holds the door open for his accomplice while they kidnap a Capone is the definition of an enemy.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 604

Banus

“No! She forced me! She-”

“She forced you to get a front-row seat to our sister’s blood?” Adriano laughed again, “You’re a real hero, Cole; Maybe we should put your face on a plaque. ‘Here lies Cole Mercer: He was too scared to be a criminal and too stupid to be a friend.’”

Cole started to sob, his entire body shuddering with every breath. “Please, just let me go. I’ll leave the city. You’ll never see me again.”

“I know we won’t,” Vincenzo said, “Because you’re going to stay exactly where you are until the last of the trash is cleared out. And then, we’re going to find out if your internal organs are as soft as your resolve.”

Cole gasped for oxygen, his chest pumping hard against the gray dirt, “Don Capone, listen to the exact sequence of events!” Cole shouted, “Look at the timing! The very second Denise brought the girl to me, she wanted to hide her in a basement across town. She wanted to lock her in a cage where you would never find the scent. I am the one who stood in her way! I am the one who told her no!”

He pressed his good palm into the floor, his body shaking from the effort to stay upright.

“If I wanted to hurt your family, I would have let her take Gianna,” Cole argued, “I would have let her split the ransom. But I didn’t. I forced Denise to keep the girl right here under my roof. Why? Because I knew my cameras were running in her house and here! I knew my servers were recording. I set the trap for Denise so I could hand her to you! I am the sole reason you didn’t have to search the entire state of Illinois for your sister. I gave you the exact address! I gave you the keys to my door! You are holding her in your arms right now because my phone call brought you here in under ten minutes!”

Without the specific coordinates provided by Cole Mercer’s cellular device, our arrival timeline would have been delayed by an estimated three to six hours.

In that window of time, with a severe cranial laceration and zero medical attention, Gianna’s risk of brain damage or death would have increased by forty percent.

Vincenzo stood perfectly still. His dark eyes tracked the sweat dripping off Cole’s jaw, “You’re right, your phone call is the only reason our perimeter team secured the building and that saved Gianna’s life. You gave us the location. For that specific favor... we are going to spare your life.”

A massive, shaking gasp of relief tore out of Cole’s throat. His eyes went wide, and his pale, bloody face instantly lit up. A huge, frantic smile broke across his lips.

“Thank you,” Cole choked out, as he began to nod his head over and over, looking up at Vincenzo like he was a god, “Thank you, Don Capone! You won’t regret this, I swear! I’ll do whatever you want, I’ll be your eyes on this street-”

Vincenzo didn’t let him finish the sentence.

With a twitch of his wrist, Vincenzo raised his black pistol. He didn’t aim for Cole’s head or his chest. He pointed the barrel straight down, directly between Cole’s legs, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet tore through the fabric of Cole’s pants, ripping through the flesh of his groin.

Cole’s smile didn’t just vanish, his entire face twisted into an expression of pure, ungodly shock.

For one second, he didn’t even make a sound as his brain tried to process the catastrophic nerve destruction. Then, the scream hit, “AAAAAHHHHH! MY GOD! NO! NO! NO!”

Cole let out a high, piercing shriek that sounded like an animal being skinned alive. He threw himself off the floor, jumping and thrashing around theatrically like a fish out of water.

He rolled onto his back, then onto his stomach, his legs kicking out wildly as he clutched his blood-soaked crotch with his one good hand.

Bright red blood sprayed out across the dirt with every frantic move he made. He was writhing, screaming, his body bouncing off the hard concrete as he wept.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 605

Adriano let out a laugh, he bent over, slapping his knee, his eyes bright with a dark, twisted amusement as he watched Cole flop around in the dirt.

“Oh, look at him go!” Adriano mocked, “He’s doing the dance! Look at the moves on him! Hey, Don Capone said he’d spare your life, Mercer! He didn’t say anything about your dick! You don’t need that thing to run a business anyway, right?”

“I said you’d live,” Vincenzo calmly lowered his pistol, “I never said you’d enjoy it.”

I stood perfectly still three feet away, my arms remaining locked securely around Gianna’s limp weight. I kept her head tucked firmly against my collarbone, my palm cupping the back of her neck to make sure the violent vibrations of the gunshots didn’t jar her injured skull.

My heart rate did not alter by a single beat as I watched Cole bleed and scream in the dirt. The destruction of his cock was a highly efficient message to the rest of the street.

I shifted my gaze away from Cole’s thrashing body and looked over at the far corner of the basement.

The girls-Gianna’s friends—were huddled together like a pack of frightened animals. Morgan was still sobbing, her jaw shaking as Alfonso slowly pulled the cold steel barrel of

his gun out of her mouth. They were all staring at the pool of blood around Denise's lifeless neck, and then at Cole screaming on the floor.

Their skin was completely white, their bodies shaking so hard their teeth were chattering in the cold air. They knew the Capone execution squad was still in the room, and their lives depended entirely on what we decided to do with the facts next.

Cole was still flopping on the concrete, his high, shrill screams turning into a wet, bubbly rattle as his body ran out of energy to fight the pain. The floor around his waist was a wide, dark lake of red.

"Alfonso," I stated and Alfonso immediately stepped away from the trembling girls, turning his face toward me, " Yes, Boss."

"Take his right arm," I ordered, "Cut it off at the elbow. He needs a permanent visual to remind him exactly who owns his life from this day forward. Every time he looks down at the empty sleeve, he will remember the Capone name."

"No! Please! No more!" Cole shrieked, his voice hitting a breaking point as he tried to drag his bloody body backward with his feet, "There has to be another way. I called you! I saved her!"

He looked from Vincenzo, to Adriano... to me.

"I did the right thing in the end!"

| Alfonso pulled a hunting knife from his belt and walked toward Cole. Adriano just smiled wider, leaning against the brick wall to watch the next phase of the correction.

Cole broke. He threw himself toward Vincenzo.

Guards caught him before he'd covered two feet. He screamed, begged, promised money, promised loyalty, promised anything.

None of it changed the room.

I turned my eyes away before Alfonso even touched him. I did not care about the man's pain-his screams meant nothing to me. I simply had a much more important asset to watch while Adriano laughed at the wet sounds of

Cole's meat tearing open.

Gianna's friends or whoever they were to her, they were clutching each other so tightly they looked like a single. shaking mass of limbs.

Their eyes were wide, completely blank with a level of horror that usually precedes a total psychological break They were watching Alfonso move toward Cole, knowing their turn could be next.

I looked at them, and my mind ran a predictive simulation of Gianna's response.

If those girls died tonight, Gianna would eventually learn about it. There was no scenario where she didn't.

know she will already blame herself for people she couldn't save. Adding three more names to that list would not protect her.

It would bury her.

She wouldn't separate Denise from the others. She wouldn't ask whether they had chosen to participate or whether they had been too frightened to refuse.

She would remember birthdays, conversations, shared meals, small acts of kindness.

That was how her mind worked.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 606

Mine didn't.

To me, guilt belonged to the individual responsible for the act.

To Gianna, guilt spread through grief until it touched everyone left standing.

Eventually...

It would reach me.

She wouldn't see a calculated investigation.

She would see the man who allowed her entire world to disappear in a single night.

I looked down at her sleeping face. The muscles around her eyes still hadn't relaxed. Even unconscious, she looked exhausted.

She had already lost enough.

Until I knew exactly what role those girls had played...

They remained an unresolved variable and I didn't eliminate variables without evidence.

I assessed them again.

Denise had already admitted she designed the entire operation. Cole had confirmed the sequence of events.

Everything after that became less certain.

The three girls... I didn't know whether they had participated willingly. I didn't know whether they had been threatened into cooperating. I didn't know whether they had simply no choice but to do what Denise told them.

Assumptions were a poor foundation for judgment.

They were ordinary women from a neighborhood where people with money preyed on people without it.

No powerful surname stood behind them. No convoy of armed men was coming to pull them out when they made the wrong decision. No one was teaching them how to survive.

People like Denise and Cole had been making those decisions for them.

I looked from one frightened face to the next.

To my brothers, they were loose ends, potential witnesses, potential accomplices, potential liabilities.

To Gianna...

They had names.

Memories.

Inside jokes.

Years of ordinary moments that couldn't be measured by evidence or probability.

If they disappeared tonight, she wouldn't see justice, she would see three more people she'd cared about vanish.

And she would remember exactly who had allowed it to happen.

If Vincenzo or Adriano killed them tonight, the consequences wouldn't end in this basement.

They would follow us home. They would be waiting when Gianna woke up.

Protecting Gianna wasn't limited to stopping bullets or closing wounds. Her mind had taken enough damage for one night. I wasn't going to let unnecessary deaths fracture it further. Not without proof they deserved the same judgment as Denise.

I had no personal investment in whether those three women lived or died. Their survival mattered because it affected hers.

Nothing more.

I turned toward Vincenzo, "They stay alive."

He looked at me and then finally at the girls, as if he had forgotten they were even in the room.

"They are not part of Denise's sentence. We leave them here," I added.

My tone made it clear I wasn't offering a suggestion. I was closing a line of discussion until evidence gave me a reason to reopen it.

Vincenzo didn't answer me immediately. His eyes remained on mine for another second before they shifted toward the three girls pressed against the wall.

Vincenzo walked across the room at an unhurried pace. The guards stepped aside before he reached them. The three girls shrank into one another the moment his shadow fell over them.

He stopped, then lowered himself into a crouch. Morgan was directly in front of him. She couldn't have weighed much more than Gianna. Her face was streaked with tears. Mascara had run down both cheeks. She was shaking so violently her teeth clicked together.

Vincenzo noticed, he closed his eyes for a brief second and let out a quiet sigh. When he opened them again, his voice remained calm, "Look at me."

Morgan tried but her eyes kept dropping to the floor.

"I said..." he waited, "...look at me.'

She finally managed it.

"How old are you?"

“E-eighteen,” her answer barely came out.

“Eighteen,” Vincenzo repeated the number to himself. He studied her face for another moment then slowly shook his head, “You’re a child. You shouldn’t be in places like this.”

His gaze moved to the other two girls.

“You,” he pointed toward the brunette, “And you,” then the blonde, “Did any of you wake up one morning and decide this was the life you wanted?”

The brunette immediately shook her head, “No...”

The blonde followed, “No, sir.”

Morgan was crying too hard to speak. She only managed a frantic shake of her head.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 607

Vincenzo watched them carefully, “You wanted this?”

“No.”

“You wanted to spend your nights around men like Cole?”

“No.”

“You wanted debt collectors, guns, blood, and basements?”

All three shook their heads harder, “No...”

“No, sir...”

“We never wanted this...”

For a long moment, Vincenzo simply looked at them, then he stood, “Dante, the cash.”

Without asking another question, Dante walked toward one of the steel cases stacked beside the desk. He unclipped the locks, lifted the lid and inside sat tightly wrapped bricks of cash. He picked up several bundles and carried them across the room.

Vincenzo accepted them without counting and he crouched again. This time he placed the stacks carefully onto the concrete in front of Morgan. The girls stared at the money as though it weren't real but none of them reached for it.

Vincenzo rested his forearms loosely across his knees, "I have rules. I don't lay hands on innocent women and I don't harm children."

He glanced at Morgan again.

"Eighteen doesn't make you grown. It only makes the law stop caring. My business was never with the three of you, it began..." He looked down at Denise, "...and ends with her."

"We're sorry," Morgan whispered, she wiped at her face with the back of her hand, only smearing the tears farther across her cheeks, "We never wanted Gianna to get hurt. She was always good to us."

Vincenzo regarded them without expression, "Apologies don't change what happened but they tell me you understand what happened. Some people earn mercy. Some people throw it away. Tonight... Denise threw hers away."

He nudged the money forward with two fingers.

"Take it."

The girls looked at one another, still frozen.

"Find decent work, rent a home, build a life that doesn't end with men pointing guns at you. I'm trying to give you a second chance, but don't mistake that for kindness. You didn't see this basement."

"We didn't..." the girls nodded immediately.

Then Vincenzo pointed toward Denise without looking, "You never knew that woman. If anyone asks... there was no Denise Walker. There was no Cole and there were no Capones. You forget every face you saw tonight."

The money remained untouched, as they looked at Vincenzo with fear.

"If I hear otherwise..." he straightened to his full height, "I'll forget the mercy I showed you."

Vincenzo turned away before they managed to whisper another thank you.

"Take the money," I ordered, "And go. Leave right now. The door is open. And don't waste the second chance Gianna earned for you."

Morgan finally reached forward with shaking hands and picked up the first bundle.

The other two followed.

None of them looked at Denise.

None of them looked at Cole.

They simply held the money against their chests as though they couldn't quite believe it was real.

Three hours.

That was how long I sat outside Trauma Room Three. Three hours of watching nurses move through automatic doors. Three hours of listening to monitors beep behind walls I couldn't see through. Three hours without moving farther than a few feet from the entrance.

A nurse had offered me coffee twice. I declined both times. The blood on my shirt had dried hours ago, most of it belonged to Gianna.

That bothered me more than the waiting.

The doors finally opened. A gray-haired doctor removed his gloves as he walked toward me. He already knew who

I was, everyone in this hospital did, they were on our payroll.

He stopped in front of me, "Mr. Capone."

I stood, "How is she?"

"The CT scan is clear. There is no bleeding inside her brain. She has a concussion."

He handed me a folder and I took it.

"The blow caused a moderate traumatic brain injury. The cut to her scalp required twelve stitches."

I looked at the report.

He pointed to the scan, "The scalp bleeds heavily. It looks worse than it is. What concerns me is the concussion. For the next several days she will probably have headaches, dizziness, nausea, sensitivity to light, sensitivity to noise, difficulty concentrating, fatigue."

He looked directly at me.

“She may become emotional very quickly. She might repeat questions. Forget conversations. Sleep much more than usual or struggle to sleep.”

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Chapter 608

I memorized every word, nodding.

“Make sure, there is no alcohol, no driving, no strenuous exercise. No situations where she could hit her head again.”

He tapped the folder.

“If she vomits repeatedly. If she becomes difficult to wake. If one pupil becomes larger than the other. If she becomes confused or starts speaking nonsense... bring her back immediately.”

“I understand.”

“The first forty-eight hours are the most important.”

He looked through the glass toward Gianna’s room.

“Someone needs to stay with her.”

“I will.”

“Keep conversations short, keep visitors limited, and no stress.”

That one almost made me laugh, nothing about our lives allowed for that.

Twenty minutes later, I carried her out of the hospital. She had woken long enough to answer the nurses’ questions, then she fell asleep again before we reached the elevator.

One of our black armored SUVS waited beneath the covered entrance. The driver opened the rear door before I reached him. I climbed inside without setting Gianna down.

Instead, I sat against the leather seat and kept her resting across me, supporting the back of her head with one hand exactly the way the doctor had shown me.

The driver pulled away from the hospital, streetlights drifted across the windows. My attention stayed on her.

The swelling around her temple had become more obvious. The fresh white bandage wrapped around her head disappeared beneath her hair.

There was dried blood near her ear. I brushed it away with my thumb. Her breathing stayed slow and even. I counted each rise of her chest without thinking.

One.

Two.

Three.

My fingers rested lightly against the inside of her wrist. Her pulse was strong. Every few minutes I checked again, the rhythm never changed.

I found myself staring at her face longer than I intended.

She looked smaller asleep, fragile. The image from the basement forced itself back into my mind.

Her hands bound, her mouth gagged, blood in her hair.

Looking at me...

A thought entered my mind with such clarity it surprised even me.

If she had died tonight...

There would have been very little left of me worth keeping alive.

I examined that conclusion the same way I examined everything else.

It wasn’t emotional exaggeration.

It was simply true.

If Gianna had died... I wouldn’t have wanted whatever remained of my own life. The realization didn’t frighten me, it irritated me.

It represented a level of dependence I would have once considered irrational yet denying it would have been intellectually dishonest.

Instinctively, I tightened my arm around her just enough to steady her head before relaxing again.

“We’re almost home,” I said.

The gates opened before the SUV reached them, lights filled the driveway. The front doors were already open.

That was unusual.

Before the vehicle stopped completely, I noticed movement on the front steps. Claire and Maddie, both were barefoot, both were crying.

My pulse accelerated.

I stepped out with Gianna still sleeping in my arms.

Claire looked at Gianna first, fresh tears spilled down her face, “Oh my God...”

Maddie covered her mouth with both hands, “Is she okay?”

“She’ll recover.”

Neither of them looked relieved. Something else had happened, I could feel it.

Claire tried to speak but nothing came out.

Maddie finally managed it, “H-Hazel...”

The name stopped me, “What happened?”

Claire broke into sobs, “She... she collapsed. She kept asking where Gianna was.”

Maddie nodded frantically, “When nobody could tell her... she started crying and then she grabbed her chest. She just... fell.”

My grip around Gianna tightened instinctively, “Where is she?”

“Salvatore took her to the hospital,” Claire wiped helplessly at her face, “The doctors are with her.”

Maddie’s lips trembled, “They think... They think she had a heart attack.”

The house suddenly felt much quieter than it had a minute before as I looked down at Gianna sleeping against my chest.

The timing couldn’t have been worse.

Gianna had barely survived one nightmare and another one was already waiting for her.

Thank you for reading another chapter. I know this one was heavy, but sometimes the hardest moments are the ones that change characters forever.

I’d love to hear your thoughts, theories, and favorite moments in the comments....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 609

Raphael

I sat beside Gianna’s bed, the lamp on her nightstand was turned down low, the curtains were closed. The room smelled faintly of antiseptic from the fresh dressing around her head.

She hadn’t moved in almost twenty minutes.

The doctor had said sleep was exactly what her brain needed.

I believed him.

Even so, I found myself watching the slow rise and fall of her chest.

My eyes moved to the white bandage wrapped around her head. The swelling around her temple had already become darker. Purple was beginning to creep beneath her skin. The stitches underneath would remain for around ten days if healing progressed normally.

I had already instructed one of our nurses to remain in the house through the night. Another would rotate in during the morning.

Someone would always be here.

Always.

Her hand rested outside the blanket. I reached over and touched two fingers lightly against her wrist. Her pulse was regular. I let my hand fall back into my lap.

The basement replayed itself again. The way she looked at me after Denise confessed. That expression stayed longer than everything else. As though someone had reached inside her and stolen a part of the world she’d believed in.

There was nothing I could do about that.

Broken trust wasn't something surgeons stitched together. It healed badly. If it healed at all.

I looked at her again, she was still asleep. Her face had finally relaxed,

I leaned forward slowly, lowered my head and pressed a light kiss against the center of her forehead, just above the dressing.

"You continue to make irrational decisions, and I continue to revolve my entire life around making sure they don't kill you," I whispered.

The words were more for me than they were for her.

I stood, pulled the blanket a little higher over her shoulder, checked the monitor our nurse had placed beside the bed and then I walked out.

Two guards stood outside Gianna's bedroom door under Vincenzo's direct orders.

She wouldn't understand why.

From his perspective, she had slipped through layers of Capone security without anyone knowing how. Until he understood exactly where that failure had happened, he no longer trusted her judgment to keep herself safe.

Chowder 600

I continued toward Dad's bedroom. It has become Hazel's room now. The doors stood partly open.

Medical equipment filled one corner, an oxygen concentrator hummed quietly beside the bed. Several medication pumps rested on a rolling stand. A heart monitor displayed slow green waves across its screen. Everything had been brought from the hospital within the hour. The doctors had agreed she was stable enough to come home.

Home was where she wanted to die-Hazel's words, not mine.

I stepped inside quietly. Hazel looked smaller than I remembered. The ALS had already taken so much from her. Her arms were little more than skin stretched over bone. The muscles in her legs had almost completely disappeared beneath the blanket.

The heart attack had stolen what little strength she still possessed. Thin oxygen tubing rested beneath her nose Each inhale came slowly. Each exhale lasted a little too long.

The doctor had explained that the heart attack had been small, under ordinary circumstances, recovery would have been expected.

Hazel no longer had ordinary circumstances.

Her heart was weaker now. Her body was weaker. Any serious emotional shock from this point forward carried a risk she might not survive.

She turned her head slightly toward the chair beside her bed.

Vincenzo was already there, “She’s home, Hazel and she is safe.”

Her eyes closed and for several seconds she simply breathed.

“I took care of Denise,” Vincenzo added and Hazel opened her eyes again, “She will never touch Gianna again. She will never come near your family again.”

Hazel blinked, “...Thank... you.”

He adjusted the blanket around her shoulder with surprising care, “You should rest.”

I remained by the doorway, watching. People feared Vincenzo because they only ever saw the man who buried enemies.

Very few ever witnessed this version.

He rose from the chair without another word. When he turned, his eyes landed on me. Whatever softness had been there a moment ago disappeared.

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He walked past me, “Study,” he said quietly, “Now.”

I fell in behind him. Neither of us spoke as we made our way downstairs. Guards stood at every entrance. Nobody looked relaxed anymore.

When Vincenzo pushed open the study doors, everyone was already inside. Dad, all of my brothers, even Maddle and Claire sat together on the sofa.

I slipped my hands into my pockets. I already knew what this meeting was about.

Gianna and I.

Vincenzo walked behind his desk but didn't sit. His eyes moved across the room before settling on me.

"How," he asked evenly, "did Gianna leave this house in the middle of the night without a single guard noticing."

I had spent the last three hours running that exact question through my head. I'd reviewed camera footage, checked guard rotations, reviewed entry logs but found nothing, not one broken lock, not one disabled camera, not one guard leaving his post.

I opened my mouth, "I checked-"

Vincenzo lifted one finger and I stopped talking.

Then he turned his head, "Silvio."

Every pair of eyes landed on my brother.

Silvio looked around at all of us before giving a small shrug, "Why are you looking at me?"

Vincenzo sighed, "Because if there's one person in this family who knows how to disappear from this house without leaving a footprint... it's you."

Silvio's expression stayed blank.

Vincenzo folded his arms, "So let's not waste each other's time. Gianna almost died tonight. If you know something... this is the moment to speak."

Silvio let out a slow breath, then rubbed the back of his neck, "Yeah. I showed her. I showed her one of the old service routes."

Claire's eyes widened, "You what?"

I already knew which one. The abandoned maintenance tunnel beneath the eastern wall. It hadn't appeared on modern security maps because nobody in the family still used it.

Except Silvio.

Silvio looked genuinely uncomfortable now, "I figured she'd use it if she ever wanted to sneak out for coffee or go shopping without dragging six SUVS behind her," he shook his head, "I didn't think—"

"No," Vincenzo cut him off, "You didn't. You watched yourself leave this estate. You're a trained killer. You've spent your whole life learning how to disappear. You carry knives and guns. You've been in more fights than most soldiers."

Silvio remained silent as Vincenzo stopped directly in front of him.

“You know how to spot surveillance. You know how to lose someone following you. You know how to survive. And somehow… it never crossed your mind that Gianna has none of those things.”

Silvio didn’t answer, he looked everywhere but at Vincenzo.

“She’s barely five-foot-six. She weighs next to nothing. She has no weapons, no combat training, no experience, no instinct for danger,” his voice hardened, “You taught her how to escape the safest place she’ll ever live… without stopping for one second to ask yourself whether she could survive what was waiting outside those walls.”

Silvio swallowed, “I honestly didn’t think she’d use it like that.”

“I know,” Vincenzo’s interruption was immediate, “You never thought. That’s the fucking problem, isn’t it, Silvio. That’s why people think of you as the easiest Capone to capture because you’re reckless.”

The room fell silent again. No one defended Silvio because there wasn’t a logical defense to offer.

Intent reduced blame. It didn’t erase consequences.

Gianna had almost died because one piece of information had been given to the wrong person. That alone made the mistake catastrophic.

Vincenzo laughed dryly, then he looked around the study, taking his time. His eyes landed on each of us one by one.

Dad.

Adriano.

Dante.

Sílvio.

Me.

Finally, Claire.

“Tell me something. So am I a fucking joke now?” he asked but nobody answered, “Because that’s what it feels like,” he spread one hand across the room, “I spend every hour making sure this family stays alive. I build security. I make alliances. I bury enemies

before they become problems. I think ten moves ahead so the rest of you don't have to. And what do I get back?"

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Fuck, this discussion wasn't ending anytime soon.

"You people keep creating disasters faster than I can clean them up," his eyes snapped back to Silvio, "You hard out escape routes," then to Adriano, "You encourage risks because they're entertaining," then to Luca, "You solve everything by reaching for violence before your brain," then to Dante, "You think every situation is a game."

Finally...

Me.

"And you."

His stare held mine.

"The most logical man in this family. The one I could turn to in every situation. The one who calculates every possible outcome before making a move. And somehow... you're sleeping with your stepsister."

Dad let out a sharp sound of disgust under his breath. I heard it and ignored it.

Vincenzo didn't even acknowledge him.

"I don't care what name either of you puts on that relationship. I care that the second your judgment started answering to your heart instead of your head..." another pause, "...you stopped being objective."

I held his gaze, "I didn't."

"No?" he took another step, "When she disappeared. You stopped thinking like Raphael Capone, instead, you started thinking like a man whose entire world had just vanished."

Claire quietly stood from the couch. She crossed the room without interrupting him. When she reached Vincenzo, she rested one gentle hand against his forearm. He didn't look at her but she squeezed his arm anyway.

"Vince..." she said softly. "Nobody here doubts why you do what you do. You carry this family on your shoulders every single day. We all know that."

She looked around the room before meeting his eyes again.

“But you can’t punish yourself every time something goes wrong. Mistakes are going to happen,” she continued, People are going to make bad decisions. Sometimes they’ll make them even after you’ve warned them not to. You can’t control every choice this family makes. The world isn’t perfect. And no matter how hard you fight for this family… it never will be.”

Only Claire could speak to Vincenzo that way and still have him listen.

She looked around the room, “We almost lost Hazel and Gianna tonight. I don’t think there’s a single person in this room who isn’t blaming themselves already.”

Vincenzo finally looked at her. His shoulders remained tense. Claire reached up and straightened the front of his jacket almost absentmindedly. It was such a small gesture, yet it slowed him.

“You don’t have to carry every mistake alone,” she said quietly.

“But I do.”

“No,” her hand slid from his jacket into his, “We do.”

For the first time since entering the study, some of the anger left his face, only some until he looked back at the rest of us, “My job isn’t to be liked. My job is making sure every one of you gets home safe. If doing that makes me an asshole…” he gave a small shrug, “…I’ll sleep just fine.”

Claire gently shook her head, “It doesn’t,” she looked from one brother to the next, “No one in this room thinks that, Vince.”

But Vincenzo wasn’t listening, he glared directly at each of us.

“I want you all to listen to me very fucking carefully. The next time any one of you decides to keep a secret…” his/ grip tightened around Claire’s hand, “…ask yourself one question. Is that secret worth burying someone I love?

No one answered.

Because no one could honestly say yes.

I kept my eyes on Vincenzo, “I know,” my own voice sounded flatter than I expected, “I blacked out. I’ve done it before and I know it shouldn’t happen, Vince.”

I wasn’t proud of it but it wasn’t something I ignored. Every time it happened, I went back over every second afterward, every decision, every action, every missing piece. I hated gaps in information.

“I’ve been working on it and I’ve already started trying to identify what triggers it.”

Vincenzo watched me carefully with narrowed eyes.

“I’ll get it under control. And I have realized that it only happens when Gianna is involved,” I didn’t bother lying, ‘ Every other situation remains... manageable.”

I searched for a better word but there wasn’t one.

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“When it’s her,” I frowned slightly, “...something changes.”

“I noticed,” Vincenzo replied, “And I don’t care how long it takes. Fix it.”

“I will.”

“I don’t want promises.”

“You’ll have results.”

That seemed to satisfy him just a little.

Then another voice cut across the room. Dad scoffed, “Oh, Jesus Christ!”

Every head turned toward Salvatore. He had remained quiet for most of the meeting but maybe he couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’ve heard enough,” his eyes landed on me, “Whatever this... thing is between you and Gianna... it ends. You hear me? It ends tonight.”

I looked at him, nothing inside me moved, but he kept talking.

“If you don’t end it yourself... I’ll end it for you.”

Something snapped inside of my head, it wasn’t the blackout. It was something simpler, hotter.

I took one step toward him before I even realized I'd moved, "You'll do what?"

Dad squared his shoulders, "I said-"

I cut him off, "I heard what you said but you don't get to make decisions for me."

"I am your father."

"No," I shook my head once, "You're Salvatore. You stopped feeling like my father a long time ago."

His face darkened, "You watch your mouth."

"Why?" I laughed once, "You never watched yours."

Claire quietly inhaled, "Raphael..."

I didn't stop, "You don't get to lecture me about who I love."

The last word surprised even me but it was already out in front of everyone.

"You lost that right the day you took the only person who ever understood me. She was the only person who made this make sense," I tapped two fingers lightly against my temple, "And you took her away. So, no, you're not my father."

"Raphael," Vincenzo's voice cut through the room.

I barely heard him.

"You want to tell me who I can and can't be with?" I stared straight at Salvatore, "Try."

His face turned red, "I'll throw you out of this family."

"You can't," the answer came immediately, "I earned my place here."

Dad scoffed, "You inherited it."

Dad looked ready to swing at me. I almost wished he would.

"Enough," Vincenzo didn't raise his voice but a single word from him stopped me.

His eyes moved from Salvatore... to me.

"Both of you, this discussion is over."

I never looked away from my father, “No. No, Vincenzo. This doesn’t end because he says it does/He doesn’t get to decide who I love. He doesn’t get to tell me who I’m allowed to build a life with. He already took the one person who mattered most to me. My mother should still be alive. If she’d been loved the way she deserved…” I shook my head once, “…she never would’ve ended up at the bottom of those stairs.”

The room fell silent, no one said a word, no one dared.

“And when she was gone…” I laughed once, “He didn’t stop. He destroyed Claire’s life next.

Claire’s face fell, and she looked away immediately.

“And he used me to do it. You used me to get to Tony Parker without telling me who he was or what he did. I have to live with what I did because of him. I’ll carry that for the rest of my life.””

My eyes flicked briefly toward Adriano before returning to Salvatore.

“The only reason Maddie was spared… was because you knew Adriano was crazy enough to put a bullet through your skull before you got close to her.”

I took one slow step toward my father.

“So if you think… that after everything you’ve already taken from me… you’re going to take Gianna too…”

I shook my head.

“You’ve finally found the one thing I’m willing to go to war with you over.”

Salvatore took half a step toward me, “So you’d threaten your own father?”

“I didn’t threaten you,” I held his stare, “I told you where the line is,”

Before either of us could close the distance, Claire moved. She stepped between us without hesitation. One hand pressed firmly against the center of my chest and the other rested lightly against Salvatore’s arm.

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She wasn’t strong enough to physically stop either of us.

“Raphael,” her voice came out stern, “Take one step back for me.”

I didn’t move.

She looked up at me, “I know. I know exactly why you’re angry.”

The pressure of her hand against my chest increased just enough to make me aware of it.

“I would’ve been angry too but this isn’t how your mother would’ve wanted you to defend yourself.”

Claire looked over her shoulder at Salvatore.

You don’t “And you…” there wasn’t an ounce of fear in her voice, “You’ve heard him. He isn’t a little boy anymore. have to agree with his choices but if you keep trying to force them out of him, this family is going to lose far more than an argument.”

Madeleine understood immediately. She stood from her chair and walked straight toward Salvatore. She rested a hand against his arm, “Come with me.”

“I’m not finished.”

“You are,” her voice stayed respectful, “Please. Hazel is upstairs. You really want her hearing this?” Maddie gently took hold of his sleeve, “Come on.”

Without another word, Maddie guided him toward the door and closed it on their way out.

Only then did Claire let go of my arm. She looked up at me, “You’scared me.”

I frowned, “I wasn’t going to hit him.”

“I know,” she smiled sadly, “I was afraid he was going to hit you.”

I glanced toward the closed door, “No, he wouldn’t. He knows better.”

Claire followed my gaze before looking back at me, “Maybe but I wasn’t willing to find out.”

A minute later, the study door opened again.

Madeleine stepped back inside and quietly closed it behind her. She looked around the room before speaking, “He is with Hazel. They’re talking. So…. we should finish this tonight.”

Vincenzo watched her carefully, “There’s nothing left to finish.”

“There is,” she glanced at me for only a second before looking back at him, “Raphael and Gianna love each other. I don’t think any of us have the right to decide they don’t.”

Claire blinked, then slowly turned toward Maddie, “…Wait. You knew?”

Maddie gave the smallest shrug, “I did.”

Claire stared, “For how long?”

“Months now, because Adriano accidentally told me,” she added.

Claire glared at her, “You knew….and you never told me?”

Madeleine smiled, “You didn’t tell me either.”

Silvio finally spoke from the sofa, “Can I just point something out?” he looked around the room, “So… apparently everyone knew except me.”

Dante snorted.

Silvio turned to him, “Don’t laugh. My own family held meetings without me.”

“We didn’t hold meetings,” Adriano said.

Silvio looked at him, “You all knew. Maddie and Claire knew. Adriano knew. Dante and Luca probably knew,” Silvio slowly turned toward Vincenzo, “…Did you know?”

Vincenzo answered without changing expression, “I suspected.”

Silvio stared at the ceiling, “So… I was the last idiot in this house.”

“You said it, not us,” Dante replied.

Even Vincenzo let out the smallest breath through his nose. Claire covered a laugh with her hand. Maddie leaned comfortably against Adriano’s shoulder.

“I honestly thought everyone had figured it out tonight,” Silvio gestured around the room again, “I clearly underestimated this family’s communication skills.”

Dante grinned, “No, you just underestimated how good you are at missing the obvious.”

The corner of my mouth moved, “I wasn’t exactly advertising it.”

Silvio looked at me, “You could’ve mentioned it.”

“I didn’t see the strategic value in telling you anything.”

Adriano laughed, “Only Raphael would treat falling in love like it’s classified information.”

“It was.”

Vincenzo had been watching all of us in silence. When the room finally settled, he pushed away from the desk, ” Alright. What exactly is the plan?”

I met his stare, “I’m staying with her.”

“I already assumed that,” he looked as though he’d been expecting that answer, “And Gianna?”

“I’ve never forced her into anything. Whatever we are... it’s her choice as much as mine.”

“I know and I’m not questioning that,” he was quiet for a few seconds before speaking again, “Raphael... I’m not having this conversation because I want control over either of you. I’m having it because I know you. You expect precision. You expect people to think before they act. You expect them to learn quickly. You expect them to improve. And when they don’t...”

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His expression hardened and I drew in a slow breath and looked away, because every point he made was rooted in observable fact.

“...you lose your patience. You don’t scream or throw things but you become cold. You cut people off. You expect people to meet the standard you’ve set in your own head. And when they don’t, you don’t always handle it well. That works when you’re running an empire. It doesn’t always work when you’re loving another human being.

His voice softened.

“Gianna isn’t you and you know that. She struggles with things that come naturally to you. She reads differently, writes differently. She’ll forget things. She’ll misunderstand things. She’ll make mistakes that aren’t her fault.

He kept measuring Gianna against me. That wasn’t how I’d ever measured her. She wasn’t valuable because she thought the way I did. She was valuable because she didn’t.

He took a deep breath, shaking his head, “You need someone who challenges you. Someone who thinks the way you think. Someone who can stand beside you without you having to carry them.”

Vincenzo's eyes drifted toward the ceiling. He stayed quiet for several seconds. It wasn't hesitation. He was deciding how much honesty I could take. When he looked back at me, his expression had hardened again.

"Gianna needs someone patient enough to build their life around her weaknesses," his eyes returned to me, " You're not patient, you're efficient. Those aren't the same thing."

I watched his face instead of reacting. His pupils hadn't changed. His breathing remained steady. He believed every word he was saying.

"What happens the day she disappoints the part of you that demands everything be done perfectly? What happens if one day you look at each other and realize love isn't enough? What happens if the two of you discover you're hurting each other instead of helping each other? You'll slow yourself down every single day just to keep her beside you. And one day... you'll resent it."

I immediately began looking for the flaw in his conclusion. There were several, actually. He was evaluating Gianna as though she were applying for a position in the organization. As though relationships were built on efficiency.

They weren't.

At least... ours wasn't.

"We've already lived through something like that. When Madeleine made a mistake... we chose Adriano."

A flicker of regret crossed his face.

"I still carry that..I won't pretend I don't. So answer me this. What happens if one day you and Gianna are standing on opposite sides of my office and both of you expect me to choose?"

He spread one hand helplessly.

"You're my brother, my blood and she is the family I chose. I gave her mother my word to protect her. I am responsible for both of you. So tell me... if the day ever comes when protecting one of you means hurting the other... What the hell am I supposed to do? Who am I supposed to choose? Who do I betray?"

I understood the dilemma.

From his perspective, it was a rational question.

He was assuming there would come a day when Gianna and I would become opposing variables.

That assumption was fundamentally incorrect.

He still viewed us as two separate people whose interests would eventually collide. He hadn't realized that my decisions had already begun accounting for her before myself.

Choosing between us was impossible.

There was no "me or Gianna" anymore.

Any outcome that destroyed her automatically destroyed me.

Different bodies.

Same consequence.

He thought he was asking which one of us I expected him to save. He didn't understand that, from where I was standing...

There was only one answer.

If Gianna lost...

So did I.

But he needed to hear that, so I smiled, "She is my... mess."

The entire room turned to look at me like I was speaking another language but I wasn't.

A small smile found its way onto my face, "She's my mess."

The room went completely silent. Every pair of eyes turned toward me. Silvio looked confused. Adriano blinked rapidly. Even Dante frowned, everyone made a face except for Luca.

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1 shook my head, "You all keep describing me like I'm some machine that never breaks. You're not wrong. I don't make many mistakes. I don't miss much. My life has always been built around preventing failure."

Then I looked back at Vincenzo.

“And it’s exhausting. You keep calling her imperfect. You keep listing everything she struggles with as though those things somehow make her less compatible with me,” I smiled again, “You’ve got it backwards.”

Vincenzo sighed, crossing his arms over his chest, “Explain...”

I looked down for a brief second before meeting his eyes again.

“You think she’ll never live up to my standards. She doesn’t even know what my standards are. She has never once tried to become someone else just to make me comfortable and I don’t want her to.”

My jaw tightened.

“You all spent my entire life looking at me and seeing the same thing. The reliable brother, the rational one, the robot... Nobody ever asked why.”

I looked around the room and suddenly everyone was frowning, just like Gianna did when she slowly got to know

“You all thought I was built differently. You admired it. You relied on it. But none of you stopped long enough to ask whether there was a reason I couldn’t feel what everyone else did.”

My eyes returned to Vincenzo.

“She did. For the first time in my life... someone looked at me and didn’t see perfection. She saw something missing. She looked at me like there was something deeply wrong with me and she was right. I have Alexithymia.”

I could feel everyone watching me. Normally, I wouldn’t have cared. Tonight, I found myself caring more than 1 should have.

“I don’t experience the world the way the rest of you do. I don’t understand emotions the way I’m supposed to. I spent years believing that was simply who I was. She was the first person who gave it a name.”

The memory surfaced with painful clarity, every time she looked at me like she wanted to kill me.

“She got frustrated with me,” a faint smile touched my mouth, “Not because I was cruel but because I couldn’t understand what she needed and that’s the part you’re missing. I never got frustrated with her after I learned she was dyslexic. She got frustrated with me, she yelled, she argued. She looked ready to throw something at my head more than once.”

The smallest smile crossed Adriano's face. I watched Vincenzo's expression change almost imperceptibly.

"She never treated me like I was perfect. She treated me like I was difficult and I needed that. She is the only person who has ever looked at me without seeing some impossible standard."

I felt my hands tighten in my pockets.

"You think she'll never complete me because we're too different," I slowly shook my head, "She's the reason I stopped feeling incomplete. She's impulsive, I'm methodical. "She feels everything, I barely know what I'm feeling until hours later. She runs toward people, I calculate the distance."

The equation had always made sense to me. It surprised me that nobody else had seen it.

"She is every piece of me that never developed and I'm every piece of her that keeps her safe. She is my mess. My recklessness. My impulse. My disorder. My chaos."

I held Vincenzo's gaze without blinking.

"My life before Gianna... worked. My life after Gianna... finally meant something."

For the first time in years, I didn't struggle to find the right words.

"She's the missing parts of me and I'm hoping... I'm the missing parts of her."

Janedoewritings

Author

And before anyone asks... yes, there is a lot to unpack after this.

Buckle up, because the drama is only getting started.

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Chapter 616

Gianna

1&1

Something was pulling me upward, not gently but slowly like I was trying to swim through thick, black water.

My eyelids felt too heavy.

My head...

My head hurt.

A deep, dull ache spread through my skull, pulsing behind my eyes. Every beat of my heart made the pain throb harder.

I frowned, the smell reached me first. It was something sharp and sterile. A hospital, maybe?

No...

The blanket beneath my fingers was too soft.

Home.

I opened my eyes a little, the room was blurry. Everything looked washed together, the ceiling melting into the walls.

I blinked hard twice and the room slowly came into focus. My bedroom. I stared at the ceiling, trying to understand why I was here. My mouth was dry. My body felt strangely light, almost like I wasn't fully inside it. Every thought came slowly like someone had wrapped my brain in thick cotton.

I swallowed, "...Raphael..."

The whisper barely left my lips and silence answered me. I turned my head. The movement sent a sharp stab of pain through the side of my skull.

I winced.

My fingers lifted on their own and touched something wrapped around my head. Bandages. Why did I... My hand froze.

A picture flashed inside my mind, blood, a basement and Mama D, riddled with blood and telling me she loved me. Then, a knife in her throat.

No...

Raphael... his hand, his blade driving into Denise's neck. The horrible wet sound and the blood pouring down her throat. Her eyes widened, the sound of her choking.

My stomach twisted violently.

I sucked in a shaky breath, “No...”

Then another memory came back, Morgan, Emma and Brianna. Their faces filled with fear, crying, terrified. Then Cole’s screaming and another gunshot ringing in my ears. Everything became tangled together until I couldn’t tell which memory came first.

houtive 610

I squeezed my eyes shut. It hurt. Thinking hurt and remembering hurt even more.

1 had to find Raphael.

He would explain it. He always explained things. He would tell me Morgan was okay, Emma too and Brianna... what if Vincenzo killed her for... Oh my God, what if he killed her for hitting me?

I pushed the blanket away. The room tilted, “Oh...”

I grabbed the edge of the mattress before I slipped. The floor seemed much farther away than it should have been

Carefully, I lowered one foot, then the other. The cold wood touched my bare feet, I stood and immediately regretted it.

The whole room leaned sideways. I blinked hard, shaking my head. It kept moving. I waited until the floor finally stopped swaying beneath me.

My legs felt soft, weak. I took one slow step, then another. Every movement made my head pound. I reached the bedroom door and rested my forehead against it for a second.

Why was everything so loud? Even my own breathing sounded too loud.

I opened the door, and two guards were standing outside. A woman wearing light blue scrubs sat in a chair nearby.

What? What was happening?

She looked up the second she saw me, “Oh!” she hurried to her feet. She reached me before I managed another step. Her hands gently caught my arm, “Miss Gianna, you shouldn’t be out of bed. You need to lie back down.”

“I...” My tongue felt too slow. “Need...”

The word wouldn’t come out right.

She smiled patiently, “What do you need?”

I looked around the hallway..Everything looked brighter than usual. The lights hurt my eyes.

“Raphael.”

The nurse nodded gently, “You want Mr. Capone?”

“Need...” I rubbed my forehead and it made the pain worse, “I need him.”

The guards exchanged a quick glance. One of them stepped forward, “Boss went downstairs with Don Vincenzo,”

My eyes slowly moved toward him.

“Study,” he added, “They’re still in the study.”

I nodded. Study. I needed to get there. Yes. Raphael. I had to see him.

I tried to walk. The nurse tightened her hold on my arm before I could lose my balance, “Easy.”

“I have to go.”

“You’ve had a serious concussion.”

“I know.”

Battery power 15% Charge your tablet or tap here to turn on Power saving m...

Except... I wasn’t sure I did. Everything felt strange like I knew what had happened but couldn’t hold onto the thoughts long enough to understand them.

“I have...” I frowned, trying to remember, “My head... I have to ask him something.”

She studied tny face for several long seconds. Whatever she saw there made her expression soften. She turned toward the guards, “I’ll stay with her.”

The guards looked uncertain.

“I won’t let her out of my sight,” the nurse promised quietly. “We’ll go downstairs and come right back.”

Chapter 617

Neither guard argued. The nurse slipped her hand into mine. Her fingers were warm, “Come on,” she whispered, We’ll walk slowly.”

I nodded because slowly sounded good. The hallway stretched in front of me, longer than I remembered. The stairs appeared. I stared at them.

There were…

Too many.

The nurse stayed beside me, “One at a time.”

I stepped onto the first stair, then another..I kept one hand tightly around the railing. Halfway down, I stopped. My breathing had become uneven.

The basement returned again.

Denise.

The knife.

Blood spraying across the floor.

Raphael’s face.

So calm.

Like he hadn’t just…

I squeezed my eyes shut.

No.

No…

Morgan.

Emma.

Brianna.

Were they alright?

Were they still there?

Did...

Did they come home?

The thoughts wouldn't stay in order. They kept crashing into each other.

I looked at the nurse, "I..."

She waited.

"I need..." My throat tightened, "I need to talk to her."

The nurse frowned slightly, "To who?"

I stared ahead, everything blurred again, "Morgan... I need... to talk to Morgan," a lump formed in my throat, "I have to..."

I couldn't remember why.

No.

I could.

Answers.

I needed answers about Emma, about Brianna, about what happened after I closed my eyes.

I swallowed hard, "I need to talk to her."

The nurse gently squeezed my hand, "We'll find Mr. Capone first."

I nodded slowly.

Yes.

Raphael. He would know. He always knew everything. He won't hurt me. One more step, then another.

Slowly, we continued toward the study, while the pounding inside my head grew louder with every heartbeat.

The closer I got to the study, the quieter the house became. The polished floor kept moving beneath my feet. I wasn't sure if I was walking straight anymore. The nurse never let go of my hand. Every few seconds, she glanced at me like she was worried I might suddenly fall over.

The voices reached us before the door did, they were deep and muffled, too many people talking at once.

I stopped.

The nurse almost walked another step before realizing I wasn't beside her anymore.

She looked back. "Miss Gianna?"

I barely heard her.

"...Gianna."

My heart stumbled. Someone inside the study had said my name. I looked toward the closed study door. Another voice answered. Raphael's.

I couldn't hear every word, the wood was too thick. The voices blurred together, rising and falling behind it.

The nurse gave my hand a gentle squeeze, "Do you want me to tell them you're here?"

I slowly shook my head, "No..."

Something inside my chest furled. I didn't know why. Maybe... Maybe they were talking about Morgan, or Emma, or Brianna. Maybe they were deciding what to do with them.

My stomach rolled.

No...

Please...

Please don't let me be too late.

1 leaned a little closer. The room spun..I reached for the wall with my free hand until my fingers found it.

I pressed my head against the wall beside the study and kept listening, "...and Gianna?"

That sounded like Vincenzo. My pulse jumped.

Me.

They were talking about me.

Raphael answered, “I’ve never…” the rest disappeared beneath another voice, “…her choice…”

Choice?

What choice?

My forehead wrinkled.

Nothing made sense.

The medicine made every sentence feel broken into little pieces that refused to fit together.

Then Vincenzo spoke again and I forced myself to listen better, to concentrate, to focus.

“I’m not questioning…”

“…you lose patience.”

My fingers tightened against the wall. Lose patience? With who? Raphael didn’t answer or maybe he did. Maybe I just couldn’t hear him.

The hallway tilted slightly to the left. I blinked hard. Everything doubled before slowly coming back together.

Vincenzo kept talking and I got closer to the door this time, “You become cold. You expect people to reach the standards you’ve already reached.”

“It doesn’t always work when you’re trying to love another person.”

My chest tightened.

Love.

He was talking about…

Us.

I barely realized I had stopped breathing.

Then came the sentence that made my stomach sink.

“Gianna isn’t like you.”

The words echoed inside my head, I could hear him clearly now through the wood, he wasn't exactly yelling but he was talking loud enough to hear when you get this close to the door.

"She struggles with things that come naturally to you."

I closed my eyes.

"...She reads differently."

A sharp ache spread through my chest.

What?

"...She writes differently."

I looked down at the floor.

"...She'll forget things."

My eyes burned. My fingers began trembling. My chest felt strangely hollow. He was talking about me. He had to be.

Who else read differently? Who else mixed letters together? Heat rushed into my face. I knew those things already. I lived with them every day. I didn't need to hear someone else list them out like flaws.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 618

I pressed my forehead harder against the door, because inside the study, they kept talking about me.

"You need someone who challenges you."

I waited for Raphael to say something, anything.

"You need someone who thinks the way you think."

The floor seemed to disappear beneath my feet.

"You need someone who can stand beside you without you having to carry them."

Something inside me cracked.

Carry them.

Carry...

Me.

Without meaning to, my eyes slowly dropped to the floor.

“Gianna needs someone patient enough to build his life around her weaknesses.”

Weaknesses.

The word hit harder than I expected.

Weaknesses, not dreams, not kindness, not love. Weaknesses.

I slowly closed my eyes.

Of course.

Of course.

I had always known. Raphael never said it. Claire never said it. Maddie never said it but everyone saw it.

Everyone.

The girl who couldn’t read fast enough. The girl who forgot things. The girl who needed help spelling simple words. The girl who cried too easily. The girl who trusted the wrong people. The girl who got kidnapped. The girl Raphael always had to save.

A small ache spread through my chest. Maybe they were right. My breathing became uneven.

I tried taking a slow breath.

It didn’t help.

“What happens the day she disappoints the part of you that demands everything be done perfectly?”

My heart seemed to stop.

Disappoint.

Raphael… disappointed in me.

Chapter Fin

I stared at the door without really seeing it anymore.

“What happens if one day you look at each other and realize love isn’t enough?”

Love…

Isn’t enough.

“Miss Gianna?” the nurse spoke but I raised my hand, telling her to shush by place a finger over my lips.

I needed to hear this.

“You’ll slow yourself down every single day just to keep her beside you.”

I felt something warm spill over my cheek. I hadn’t even realized I was crying.

I knew what it felt like to slow people down.

Teachers.

Classmates.

People waiting while I sounded out words. People pretending not to notice when I needed more time. People smiling while they secretly wished I would hurry up.

And now…

Raphael.

“And one day… you’ll resent it.”

Resent.

My stomach dropped.

No…

No…

Raphael wouldn’t…

Would he?

I remembered every time he'd patiently helped me sound out words. Every time he waited. Every time he explained something twice. Every time I got embarrassed. Every time he simply...

But what if Vincenzo knew him better?

He'd known Raphael his whole life.

I hadn't.

Maybe...

Maybe this was something everyone else already understood except me.

Another dizzy wave hit.

I leaned forward without realizing it.

I was hearing every teacher who sighed when I couldn't read fast enough. Every student who laughed. Every person who said, "It's easy." Every time I apologized for being slow.

Every time I whispered "I'm sorry" for needing a little more time.

Every time my dad looked at me with disappointment and called me worthless... slow... a disgrace.

Every time Dr. Vance lost his patience and snapped that I was the most difficult patient he'd ever treated, reminding me that other people learned to manage their dyslexia so much faster while I still struggled with things everyone else seemed to do without thinking.

Every time Leone laughed and reduced me to nothing more than a wife... a pretty face.... a body... never someone he believed could stand on her own.

The voices piled on top of each other until I couldn't tell whose words belonged to whom anymore. They all blended together. They all sounded the same.

And now the Capones too?

Maybe... Maybe everyone had always seen me this way.

Maybe Raphael was simply the only one kind enough not to say it.

That thought hurt more than Mama D's betrayal.

Because Denise had broken my trust.

This...

This broke my heart.

The voices inside the study faded, not because they had stopped talking but because I couldn't hear them anymore. My ears rang so loudly that it swallowed everything else.

I took one slow step backward, the floor shifted beneath my feet. The hallway stretched strangely, growing longer for a second before snapping back into place.

My stomach rolled.

I reached blindly for the wall, my fingertips scraping against the wallpaper before I finally caught myself.

I couldn't breathe.

It hurt.

God...

It hurt so much, not my head, not the stitches pulling every time I moved, not even the deep ache spreading through my skull.

It was my chest.

It felt like someone had reached inside me and squeezed until there was nothing left.

He needs someone who thinks the way he does....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 619

He'll have to carry her....

One day he'll resent it...

The words kept repeating.

Again.

Again.

Again.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

No...

No, no...

I didn't want Raphael to carry me.

I never wanted to be something heavy hanging around his neck.

I just...

I just wanted...

A small sound escaped my throat before I realized I was crying.

I pressed my hand against my mouth. The tears kept coming anyway. They slid down my cheeks faster than I could wipe them away.

"Miss Gianna?" A gentle hand settled carefully against my elbow.

I flinched so hard my knees almost gave out.

"It's alright," the nurse whispered immediately, "It's only me."

I looked at her, and for a few seconds... I couldn't remember who she was, and why was she with me? Everything else floated around inside my head like puzzle pieces that wouldn't fit together.

"I..." My voice cracked.

She crouched a little so her eyes were level with mine.

"You shouldn't be standing," she said softly, "Let's get you back to bed."

Bed.

I shook my head, "No."

"Your concussion-"

“I don’t…” My throat closed but I tried again, “I don’t want my room,” fresh tears spilled over,

“I…”

The words wouldn’t come out properly. Everything felt slow like my brain couldn’t catch up to my mouth.

“I need…” I swallowed hard, “I need my mommy.”

The last word came out so quietly I almost didn’t hear it myself.

“I need…” My lips trembled violently. “Please…”

My fingers wrapped around the sleeve of her uniform without thinking.

“Can you… can you take me to her?” another tear rolled down my cheek, “I just…” My breathing hitched. “I really need my mom.”

The nurse’s whole face softened, she gently covered my hand with hers, “Oh, Of course. Lean on me.”

I did, without even thinking because my legs felt strange and weak. We walked quietly through the hallway. The house was almost completely silent. Every light had been dimmed. Somewhere downstairs, a clock ticked and each sound echoed inside my aching head.

The nurse slowed whenever I slowed. She never rushed me. When I stumbled, her grip tightened just enough to keep me steady.

“We’re almost there,” she whispered.

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure if I believed her. Everything felt so far away. Finally, we reached the hallway where my mom was.

The door stood slightly open. A warm light spilled across the floor. Someone was standing beside the doorway.

Salvatore.

He must have heard our footsteps because he lifted his head. The moment he saw me, his whole body straightened.

Shock crossed his face, “Gianna?”

His eyes immediately moved to the bandage wrapped around my head.

His jaw tightened.

The nurse stopped beside him, “She woke up confused,” she explained quietly, “She asked for her mother.”

Salvatore looked at me again. His eyes lingered on the dried tear tracks on my cheeks. On the way my hands were shaking. On the way I was leaning so heavily against the nurse just to stay standing.

He drew in one slow breath, “I’ve got her,” he said quietly.

The nurse hesitated, “Sir, she’s still very unsteady.”

“I know. I’ll take care of her.”

The nurse looked between us, then she gently squeezed my hand, “I’ll be outside of Miss Gianna’s bedroom, if either of you needs me.”

I barely managed a tiny nod. She slowly let go of me. For one frightening second I swayed before I could lose my balance, Salvatore stepped forward.

His hand settled carefully against my arm, simply making sure I stayed on my feet.

Salvatore didn’t take me into Mom’s room, he kept staring toward the door and then, his shoulders slowly straightened. When he turned toward me again, his face wasn’t the same.

His eyes had become cold, “So,” he said quietly, “I trusted you.”

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I blinked, “W-what… I…?”

“You what?” he cut in sharply, “I almost lost Hazel tonight because of you.’

The words hit harder than the pounding inside my head. My lips parted, “…Mom? What happened to Mom?”

His laugh was bitter, “Now you care?”

The hallway spun, “I-I don’t…”

“You didn’t seem very concerned about Hazel while you were sleeping with my son.”

The air disappeared from my lungs, “N-no…”

“Don’t,” he snapped in a low voice, “Don’t pretend in front of me! I thought of you as my daughter. I opened my home to you. I protected you. I treated you like family and all this time...”

He shook his head slowly.

“...this is what you’ve been doing behind my back.”

My mouth opened, but nothing came out, “I...”

His eyes burned into mine, “You thought nobody would find out?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 620

My knees felt weak, “I didn’t...”

“You didn’t think?” his voice sharpened, “That seems to be your specialty lately. I almost buried Hazel tonight because of you! Do you understand that?”

My voice shook so badly I barely heard it, “What happened?”

He stared at me for several seconds, “When nobody could find you... she broke. She had a heart attack.

I felt something inside my chest crack, the hallway tilted again, “No...” I whispered, “No...”

Every horrible sentence I’d heard through that study door came rushing back all at once.

“...Gianna needs someone patient enough...”

“...You’ll slow yourself down...”

“...One day you’ll resent it...”

My stomach twisted so violently I thought I would be sick.

Salvatore took another step closer, “You’ve turned this family upside down in one night.”

My throat burned, “I never meant...’

“I don’t care what you meant but Hazel doesn’t need this right now!”

Tears rolled down my face.

“What do you want me to do? You want me to go in there and say, ‘Hazel, the daughter you loved more than anything was too busy sneaking around with my son to think about what her disappearance would do to you?””

“No…” I shook my head, “I didn’t know…”

“You never do.”

His answer came immediately.

“You never think about anyone except what you want.”

My chest hurt.

There wasn’t a single bit of warmth left in his voice.

“What exactly do you think people call a woman who sleeps with her stepbrother behind her mother’s back?”

The word came next, softly, almost cruelly.

“A whore.”

I flinched so hard my shoulder hit the wall, “No…”

“You want to be known as my respectable daughter or is being his bed warmer enough for you?”

My ears rang, tears fell faster, “I didn’t mean…”

He leaned closer to me, “If Hazel finds out…..she won’t survive it.”

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I stared at him, “No…”

“The doctors already told us her heart is weak. One more serious shock…” he looked toward her bedroom, “And it could kill her. You want that?” he asked it so calmly, “You want your mother to die knowing the daughter she raised was sleeping with her own stepbrother?”

I couldn’t breathe, “N-No…”

“I treated you like my own daughter, Gianna.” His disappointinent cut deeper than shouting ever could. “And this is what you’ve been doing behind our backs?”

Tears spilled faster, “I’m sorry…”

“So tell me…” he said quietly, “Was Raphael worth it?”

I broke, “I’m sorry…” I sobbed. “I didn’t… I never wanted…”

He stepped forward before I could finish and wrapped his arms around me. The hug should’ve felt safe instead, it made me feel even smaller. He rested a hand against the back of my head, careful of the bandage.

“I know,” he murmured. “I know you didn’t think this through,” he whispered and I cried harder into his jacket, I love you, Gianna. I always have. You’re my daughter in every way that matters,” his hand rubbed slowly across my back, “So listen to me. Okay?”

I nodded against him, “…Okay…”

“You end this,” my stomach twisted as he added, “You stay away from Raphael.”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Because your mother…” his voice became even quieter, “Your mother deserves to spend whatever time she has left believing she raised a daughter she can be proud of.”

I felt my knees weaken.

“If Hazel finds out…” he whispered, “…she won’t survive it.”

Something inside me finally shattered. I covered my mouth to stop the sound that tried to escape. It didn’t work. A broken sob forced its way through my fingers.

Mama D.

Morgan.

Emma.

Brianna.

Raphael.

Mom.

Their names crashed together until I couldn’t tell where one pain ended and another began.

Everything hurt.

Everything.

The hallway blurred until the walls melted into streaks of light, maybe it was the concussion, maybe it was the hapter 20 medication, maybe it was because my heart couldn’t carry any more.

1 didn’t know anymore.

I only knew one thing.

Everyone I loved...

Ended up bleeding.

Ended up crying.

Ended up breaking.

Ended up settling for less than they deserved.

Because somewhere along the way... I had walked into their lives.

And for the first time, I wondered if the kindest thing I could ever do for the people I loved.

...was disappear from theirs.

Janedoewritings

Author

I hope you enjoyed today’s update.

Let me know what you think, I can’t wait to read your reactions.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 621

Gianna

I&T

Warmth.

That was the first thing I noticed, not the headache, not the dull ache behind my eyes.

Just... warmth.

Something soft rested beneath my cheek. A familiar scent wrapped around me, gentle and comforting. Lavender. The same lotion Mom had used for as long as I could remember.

My body refused to move right away. I stayed where I was, my eyes still closed, listening.

A quiet machine hummed somewhere nearby. Another let out a slow beep.

I took a careful breath, even that made my head throb. The pain wasn't sharp anymore. It was deep like a bruise inside my skull.

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

The ceiling melted together with the morning light spilling through the curtains. I blinked twice, and the room slowly came into focus.

Mom's bedroom.

For a second I couldn't remember why I was here, then I felt something lightly resting against my shoulder.

An arm... carefully draped around me.

I turned my head, mom was already awake. She was looking at me, the smallest smile curved across her lips.

It wasn't a big smile anymore.

ALS had taken too much from her face for that.

But her eyes... her eyes still smiled exactly the same. They always had.

"Morning..." she whispered.

Her voice came out rough, barely louder than the machines around us.

My throat tightened, the word almost broke me, "Mom..."

The oxygen tubing rested beneath her nose. Dark circles sat beneath her eyes. She looked even smaller than yesterday.

Her fingers twitched against my shoulder, she couldn't lift her hand anymore, not properly. Instead, she slowly brushed the tips of her fingers against my arm. It still made my eyes sting.

"You..." she whispered slowly, stopping to catch her breath. "...slept... on me..."

I frowned, "I did?"

She gave the tiniest nod, "You... cried."

My heart dropped. Fragments of last night flashed through my mind.

The hallway.

The study door.

Vincenzo's voice.

Salvatore.

Everything after that blurred together.

I remembered asking for Mom. I remembered crying, then... nothing.

"I don't remember coming in here."

Mom's smile softened, "You... fell asleep," she paused for another breath, "...holding my hand."

I looked down. My fingers were still wrapped loosely around hers. I hadn't even realized.

A lump formed in my throat, "I'm sorry."

She frowned immediately, "No....No... sorry."

I blinked quickly, "I didn't mean to wake you."

She smiled again, "You... never..." another breath, "...have to... apologize... for needing... me."

My eyes filled before I could stop them. I carefully moved closer, terrified of hurting her. She was so fragile now. Every movement mattered.

I rested my forehead lightly against her shoulder, “I thought…” My voice shook. “I thought I dreamed you.”

Her fingers twitched again. She brushed a loose strand of hair away from my face. The movement was clumsy now. Years ago she could have done it without thinking. Now it took almost all the strength she had.

“I’ll… always…” she whispered, and then she stopped to breathe again, “…be here.”

A tear slid down my cheek. I closed my eyes. For just a few seconds… I let myself pretend everything was normal.

That I wasn’t injured, that Mom wasn’t sick, that nobody had died, that nobody was missing. That the world outside this room didn’t exist.

Just me.

And her.

A quiet cough pulled my attention toward the other side of the room.

I looked up.

Salvatore was asleep on the couch, still wearing yesterday’s clothes, one arm hung over the edge. A blanket had slipped halfway onto the floor sometime during the night.

He looked uncomfortable, like he hadn’t slept much at all. An untouched cup of coffee rested on the table beside him. The dark surface inside had long since gone cold.

I watched him for only a second, then… last night came rushing back.

no

“You end this.”

My stomach clenched.

“Stay away from Raphael.”

I lowered my eyes before I even realized I was doing it.

“What exactly do you think people call a woman who sleeps with her stepbrother behind her mother’s back? A whore.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 622

The words wrapped around my chest all over again.

“If your mother finds out…”

My fingers tightened around Mom’s hand.

“She won’t survive another heartbreak.”

My throat burned. I looked at Mom lying beside me. She was watching me with soft, sleepy eyes, completely unaware of the storm inside my head.

A lump formed in my throat. If there was even the smallest chance Salvatore was right…

If there was even the smallest chance that knowing the truth would hurt her…

Then I couldn’t be the reason, not after everything her body had already endured, not after watching machines breathe beside her all night, not after hearing that her heart had almost stopped.

Another memory forced itself forward.

Vincenzo’s voice.

“…Raphael will spend his life slowing himself down…”

“…One day he’ll resent it…”

I squeezed my eyes shut.

No!

I didn’t want to think about it anymore but my head wouldn’t listen. Every sentence kept finding me. Every word found the place where I already doubted myself.

The little girl who couldn’t read fast enough.

The teenager who always needed extra help.

The woman who kept making mistakes she never meant to make.

Maybe...

Maybe everyone else had seen it before I did. Maybe I really was too much to carry. A burden wrapped in good intentions. I swallowed hard and forced my eyes back to Mom.

She smiled the moment our eyes met, the same gentle smile she had always given me. It hurt so much that I almost cried again.

So instead...

I smiled back, the smallest smile I could manage because if she looked at me and saw I was breaking...

She would ask why.

And I didn't know how to answer without destroying everything.

I cleared my throat. It felt dry, "I..." My voice came out small. "I think I should go wash up."

Mom looked at me. I glanced down at myself. The oversized shirt I had been changed into was clean, but there were still faint brown stains along my wrist where dried blood had been missed.

I rubbed at them without thinking, "I still smell it. The blood."

Just saying the word made the basement flash through my mind.

Concrete.

The knife.

Denise.

Raphael.

I quickly pushed the memory away.

Mom watched me quietly, then she spoke, "Gianna..." I looked back at her, her eyes were full of love and fear, "No more..." She paused to catch her breath, "...Denise."

She closed her eyes for a second before opening them again.

"Please. I..." She swallowed carefully. "I can't..." Another breath. "...keep losing... you."

The words were barely louder than a whisper.

“I won’t…” she stopped again, fighting for air. “…always be here.”

My heart squeezed painfully.

“I know, Mom.”

She shook her head as much as her weak body allowed.

“No,” her fingers searched for mine, when they found them, she held on with surprising determination, “Listen…

I nodded immediately.

“No more…” she whispered. “…being difficult. No more… breaking… your own heart… trying to fix… everyone else’s. My time… with you… is getting… shorter, baby. I need… to know… you’ll be okay.”

Another slow breath.

“No more Denise.”

A lump rose into my throat.

No more Denise.

There couldn’t be. Denise was gone. I had seen Raphael’s hand. I had seen the knife. The blood spilling down Denise’s neck.

Her eyes.

Then…

Nothing.

She was dead.

There was nowhere left for me to run back to. No one left to forgive. No one left to chase after.

“No more Denise,” I whispered.

The promise felt strangely empty because it wasn’t something I was choosing anymore. It was already over.

Mom smiled and rested for several long seconds before speaking again, “Gianna…”

“Hm?”

“You’ve… been given… good people.”

My eyes drifted toward the doorway without thinking.

“They’ve…” Another breath. “…done so much,” her eyes became glassy, “They didn’t… have to.”

I stayed quiet.

“They helped… me. They helped… Jules. They helped… you,” a tear rolled slowly down her cheek, “I’ve watched… them love… us… in their own… strange way.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 623

I couldn’t help the tiny smile that touched my own lips.

“Life has… a funny way… of bringing… people home. Maybe… you’ve already… found yours… if the stars.. are smiling… on you.”

The words settled gently between us.

“Work with them,” her voice remained soft, “Don’t… fight… every hand… trying… to help.”

She looked into my eyes so carefully that I felt like she could see every secret I was trying to hide.

“Life…” she whispered. “…gets heavy. It becomes… lighter… when you stop… pulling… against… everyone… who loves you.”

My eyes filled with tears again.

She smiled, “Be gentle… be patient,” her thumb barely moved across my knuckles, “Try… to understand… before… you become angry.’

I nodded because she wasn’t scolding me. She was teaching me. The same way she always had.

“When someone… good… comes into… your life…” she paused for several seconds, “…don’t… keep looking… over your shoulder. Hold on… to him… with… both hands. Good men… don’t come… often in our… world.”

My heart broke all over again. Raphael’s face filled my mind. His hands, his voice telling me we were almost home, his lips brushing my forehead.

Then… I lowered my eyes before Mom could read anything on my face, “I’ll try,” I whispered.

She gave the smallest shake of her head, “No… promise me…”

I swallowed, “I promise. I won’t make life harder for the Capones anymore. I’ll listen. I’ll work with them instead of against them. I don’t want to be another problem they have to solve.”

Mom’s smile grew just a little, “There… My girl.”

I leaned forward as carefully as I could and rested my cheek against her chest, “I love you.”

“I love,” she whispered, “…you more…”

I stayed beside Mom for another minute, just listening to her breathe, listening to the quiet hum of the machines that had somehow become part of our lives.

Then I kissed her forehead, “I’ll go shower.”

She smiled, “Okay…”

I carefully untangled myself from the blankets and stood, the room swayed, not enough to make me fall, just enough to remind me my brain still wasn’t working the way it normally did.

I waited and then I reached the door before looking back. Mom was still smiling at me. I smiled back, then I stepped into the hallway.

The door clicked softly behind me and two guards immediately straightened. So did the nurse standing beside them.

Who are they?

The nurse smiled first, “Good morning, Miss Gianna.”

I gave a small nod, “Morning.”

My head ached behind my eyes. Every bright light made me squint. Even the soft hallway lamps felt too bright this morning.

I started walking slowly. My feet barely made a sound against the floor, after a few steps... I heard footsteps.

I frowned but the footsteps stayed behind me in the same distance and at the same pace. I stopped, they stopped. I turned around. The guards stood a few feet away. The nurse stood between them.

All three looked back at me without saying a word.

I blinked, “What are you doing?”

The nurse answered gently, “Staying with you.”

“...Why?”

One of the guards lowered his head respectfully, “Don Vincenzo’s orders, Miss.”

I stared at them, “I was just walking.”

“Yes, Miss.”

“... Inside the house where I live.”

“Yes, Miss.”

I looked from one face to the next. They all looked completely serious.

My patience started slipping, “You don’t have to follow me everywhere.”

The nurse took one careful step closer, “We do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“It’s for your safety.”

I let out a slow breath, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“We know.”

“Then why are you following me?”

She offered me an apologetic smile, “Because Don Vincenzo instructed us that you are not to be alone anywhere in the house unless you’re with family.”

I stared at her, “Not even inside the house?”

She shook her head softly, “No.”

Something inside me immediately pushed back, “I’m not a prisoner.”

“No,” the nurse answered quickly, “You’re recovering from a concussion.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 624

I could feel myself getting frustrated. The words started climbing into my throat before I could stop them, “This is ridiculous.”

The headache behind my eyes pulsed harder. My heart beat faster. I almost kept going.

Then...

Mom’s voice quietly found me.

Work with them.

Don’t fight every hand trying to help.

Promise me.

I closed my eyes. I swallowed everything else I wanted to say. When I opened my eyes again, I gave the smallest nod, “...Okay.”

Relief crossed the nurse’s face, “Thank you.”

I didn’t answer. I simply turned around and continued toward my bedroom. The footsteps followed again. This time... I didn’t tell them to stop.

The door to my room stood open. I walked inside slowly. Everything looked exactly the way I’d left it.

A small black box rested neatly on the blanket. A brand-new phone sat inside, still wrapped in its protective film beside it rested a folded piece of paper.

My heartbeat quickened.

I already knew whose handwriting I was about to see. I picked it up carefully, even unfolding the note made my head ache. The paper carried only a few lines.

“This phone belongs to you. It cannot be tracked by anyone outside my system. Nobody will read your messages. Nobody will listen to your calls. You don’t need to worry about using it.”

My fingers slowly traced the last line. A tiny smile tried to reach my lips before disappearing almost as quickly as it came. I sat carefully on the edge of the bed, holding the phone in one hand and the note in the other.

He’ll spend his whole life slowing himself down... for me.

I looked down at the phone resting in my hands. Even after everything... Raphael was still making my life easier.

And I didn’t know if I was doing anything except making his harder.

I turned the phone over in my hands. It was already on. He hadn’t simply bought me another phone. He had rebuilt mine, everything was exactly the same.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn’t understand how one night could tear my whole world apart. Twenty-four hours ago, I would’ve thrown myself into his arms without thinking.

Now...

Now I didn’t even know if they were still the place I was meant to be.

“I need a shower,” I whispered.

I chose the bathtub, the hot water poured in, sending soft clouds across the mirror until my reflection disappeared.

1 slipped into the water carefully. The heat wrapped around my sore muscles almost immediately. I let out a shaky breath.

I leaned back, closed my eyes and for the first time since the basement... the world became quiet.

Then...

My thoughts came back.

Morgan.

Emma.

Brianna.

Were they really safe?

Denise.

Her eyes.

Raphael's hand.

The knife.

Then...

Vincenzo.

"She deserves someone patient."

"He'll spend his whole life carrying her."

"One day he'll resent it."

Then...

Salvatore.

"The doctors already told us her heart is weak. One more serious shock... And it could kill her. You want that? You want your mother to die knowing the daughter she raised was sleeping with her own stepbrother?"

"You end this. You stay away from Raphael."

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Stop.

Please...

Stop.

I slid lower into the water until it reached my chin because the thoughts were coming back, the same bad thoughts that always told me I was useless, but this time they were louder.

They screamed inside my head.

I looked at my hands floating in the soapy water. Why was I even here? Everyone I loved either hurt me, sold me, or had to bleed to keep me alive. I was just a burden. A broken girl who couldn't even read a page without the letters turning upside down. I was slow. I was flawed.

To Denise, I was just a price tag. To the Capones, I was a constant problem they had to use maximum violence to protect.

If you weren't here, nobody would have to bleed, someone whispered in my mind. If you just stopped breathing, the danger would stop. The pain would stop. Everyone would be free. My mother would join me up there somewhere, if there's an afterlife.

GET T

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 625

The warmth muffled the sounds around me. I went a little lower. The water touched my lips. Everything became quieter and then I let myself sink beneath the surface.

The water folded over my ears and I heard the real silence. I kept my eyes closed. The water pressed gently around me. My lungs slowly began asking for air.

Just...

One more second.

Another heartbeat.

Another.

Just let go. Just stay here forever. It's better this way. It's easier for everyone if you don't come back up.

I ruin everything. I make everyone's life harder. If I wasn't alive, Denise wouldn't have become a monster.

Vincenzo wouldn't have to bleed people in dark basements. Raphael wouldn't have to waste his perfect, beautiful mind taking care of a girl who is completely defective.

Strong hands suddenly caught beneath my arms. The water exploded around me. I gasped as I was pulled upright. Air slammed into my lungs and I coughed hard as water ran down my face and hair.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I blinked through the water.

Raphael.

His shirt was soaked across the front. His sleeves clung to his arms, both of his hands were gripping my shoulders so tightly I could feel them trembling.

His breathing was fast, too fast. He searched my face over and over, his eyes moving from my pupils to the bandage around my head.

“I...” I coughed again, “I was just-”

“No,” his answer came immediately, “You have a concussion. You are taking medication that slows your reactions,” his hands slid to either side of my face, “What if you had blacked out? What if you hadn’t come back up?”

I stared at him and he looked... terrified.

He swallowed hard, “You were completely underwater. You weren’t moving.”

My heart twisted, “I wasn’t...”

Before I understood what he was doing... he pulled me against his chest carefully. Protecting my injured head with one hand. His other arm wrapped around my back. His heartbeat was pounding so hard I could feel it through his soaked shirt.

“You don’t get to do this to me!” His voice was rough, loud, “So don’t ever do that again.”

I slowly wrapped my arms around him, “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” his hand slid gently into my damp hair, stopping well before the bandage, “I know you’re hurting but if everything becomes too loud... come find me.”

He closed his eyes, “Don’t disappear beneath the water. Disappear into me instead.”

For several long seconds... neither of us let go. The water around us slowly became still again.

Raphael was the first to move. He leaned back just enough to look at me. He reached for the large towel hanging beside the bathtub and opened it before holding it around my shoulders.

“Stand up.”

I nodded. The medication still left my head feeling heavy. I slipped my hand into his because I wasn't sure I was strong enough to let him go. I loved him too much to walk away.

Maybe that made me selfish but he was mine.

Mine.

He tightened his grip just enough to steady me as I carefully stepped out of the tub. My knees almost buckled.

He caught me immediately, "I've got you."

I looked down, embarrassed, "I'm okay."

His answer came without hesitation, "You're also dizzy."

There wasn't any judgment in his voice. He wrapped the towel around me completely, we walked out to the bedroom before he turned his head toward the nurse, "A fresh dressing."

"Yes, Mr. Capone."

The nurse hurried to the cabinet while Raphael guided me to the small chair in front of the mirror.

"Sit."

I obeyed, the room still swayed every few seconds.

Raphael crouched in front of me, "Look at me."

I lifted my eyes. His fingers carefully found the edge of the bandage, "Tell me if anything hurts."

The nurse returned carrying fresh gauze, tape, antiseptic, and gloves.

Raphael accepted everything from her, "I'll do it."

She hesitated, "...Sir?"

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 626

“I’ll do it.”

She quietly stepped back. Raphael peeled away the old bandage. The cool air brushed across the stitches and I winced. The antiseptic stung and my fingers curled against the towel.

His eyes stayed on the wound. He finished cleaning the stitches before placing fresh gauze over them. His fingertips smoothed the tape into place.

He leaned back slightly, studying his work, “The swelling hasn’t increased.”

He stood and reached for the clothes the nurse had laid across the counter, soft gray sweatpants and an oversized white T-shirt.

He handed them to me, “I’ll wait outside.”

Before he reached the door, I caught his wrist. He stopped. I couldn’t explain why I didn’t want him to leave.

My fingers slowly loosened, “...Stay?”

He looked at me for several quiet seconds, then he nodded once. I changed slowly but he helped me with it, pulling the shirt over my head made the room spin again. By the time I finished dressing, I was breathing harder than I should have been.

A sharp ringtone broke the silence, both of us looked toward the bedside table.

My new phone.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

I frowned. Raphael picked it up first. His eyes moved across the display, “Area code,” he looked back at me, Chicago Police Department.”

My stomach tightened.

Why...

Why would the police be calling me?

Raphael answered and put it on speaker. A woman’s professional voice came through.

“Good morning, Am I speaking to Miss Gianna Toricelli?”

He handed me the phone. My fingers suddenly felt cold, “Hello?”

“Miss Toricelli?”

“...Yes.”

“My name is Detective Laura Bennett with the Chicago Police Department. We’re very sorry to contact you under these circumstances. We have your name listed as the emergency contact for three young women.”

I couldn’t breathe, everything inside of me went still.

The detective continued gently, “Would you please confirm whether you know a Morgan Lee, Emma Carter, and Brianna Hayes?”

My knees weakened. Raphael’s hand immediately found the small of my back before I could lose my balance, “..

Yes. I... I know them.”

There was a brief pause on the other end, “I’m very sorry, Miss Toricelli. Earlier this morning, officers responded to a scene where three deceased females were located. We believe those women are Morgan Lee, Emma Carter, and Brianna Hayes.”

No.

No.

No.

“We have not yet completed formal identification, but your contact information was listed as the primary emergency contact for each of them.”

I stared straight ahead, nothing moved, nothing existed.

“We understand this is extremely distressing news,” the detective waited, “Miss Toricelli... are you still with me?”

My lips moved, no sound came out. Raphael gently took the phone from my shaking hand.

The detective continued professionally, “Miss Toricelli, we’ll need you-or another appropriate family representative-to come to the Medical Examiner’s Office later today to assist with identification if you’re medically able. If you aren’t, we can make alternative arrangements.’

Raphael looked at me. I wasn’t crying. I wasn’t blinking. I wasn’t even breathing properly.

“Good morning, Detective Bennett. Raphael Capone speaking. I’m Gianna Torricelli’s partner. Gianna is currently recovering from a head injury under her physician’s care. I’ll contact you as soon as her doctor confirms she’s medically fit to travel,” he answered for me.

“Of course, sir. I’ll leave my direct number with you. Again… we’re very sorry.”

The call ended, my eyes stayed fixed on the floor.

The tiny, stubborn piece of hope I’d been carrying since the basement…

The part that kept whispering, Maybe they’re alive. Maybe Raphael spared them.

It shattered.

Gone.

Just…

Gone.

And with them…

Went another piece of me.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 627

Gianna

Every time I looked out the window, the world kept moving as if nothing had happened. Cars stopped at red lights. People crossed the streets carrying coffee. Someone laughed outside a bakery. Someone walked a dog.

I watched all of it through the passenger window…

How could everything still be normal?

My head ached behind my eyes. The medication left everything feeling slower, softer, almost like I wasn’t fully awake.

Raphael drove with both hands on the steering wheel. The only sounds inside the car were the quiet engine and the occasional click of the turn signal.

Neither of us seemed to know what to say or maybe there was simply nothing left to say.

I folded my hands together in my lap. My fingers wouldn't stop trembling. I kept seeing Morgan's smile. Emma laughing so hard she snorted. Brianna rolling her eyes every time Morgan started another argument over something stupid.

I remembered the first time all of us had eaten instant noodles because none of us had enough money for anything else.

It had been my first time eating instant noodles. They laughed when I admitted I'd never tried them before. After that, they made it their personal mission to introduce me to every kind of junk food my father had always forbidden, convinced it would "slow my brain."

They bought me colorful jelly cups, candy, chips, chocolate bars, sugary drinks, and all the little treats I'd spent my whole life being told to avoid. Every time I tried something new, they watched my reaction like it was the most entertaining thing in the world, laughing whenever I ended up loving it

The memories hurt so much that I squeezed my eyes shut.

No.

Don't think about it.

The phone call had to be wrong.

It had to.

Maybe the police had made a mistake. Maybe they'd identified the wrong people. Raphael had told me Vincenzo let them go. He said they'd been given enough money to start over somewhere safe. A suitcase with two million dollars. Enough to buy a house in a good neighborhood. Enough to disappear and build a new life.

They were supposed to be alive.

They were supposed to be free.

So this...

This couldn't be true.

But what if he lied? I watched him kill Mama D with my own eyes. I'd completely fallen apart afterward and then conveniently everything went black.

They told me I'd lost consciousness, but what if they knocked me out because they knew I would never forgive them for what I'd seen?

What if they didn’t want me asking questions?

What if they didn’t want me seeing what happened next?

The car slowed to a red light. Silence settled between us again. Without looking away from the windshield, Raphael slowly lifted one hand from the steering wheel.

His fingers reached toward mine and that simple movement would’ve been enough. I would’ve woven my fingers through his without thinking.

Today...

Something inside me froze.

Images flashed through my head and before his fingertips could reach me... I pulled my hand back so quickly my elbow struck the door.

Raphael’s hand stopped in the air. The traffic light turned green. Cars behind us began moving.

Very slowly, he lowered his hand back onto the steering wheel, “...Sorry,” he said quietly.

The single word made my chest hurt. I wanted to tell him it wasn’t him. I wanted to tell him I didn’t understand what I believed anymore.

He had told me he hadn’t touched them. And as far as I knew, Raphael had never looked me in the eyes and lied to me but he had hidden the truth before.

He’d kept my mother’s ALS from me, not by lying but by saying nothing.

What if this was the same?

What if he hadn’t killed them... but one of his brothers had? What if he was protecting them the same way he’d tried to protect me?

I hated myself for thinking it. I hated myself even more because I couldn’t stop.

The car stopped, and the building wasn’t what I’d imagined. It looked almost ordinary. People walked in and out carrying folders and coffee cups.

Raphael parked close to the entrance, the engine went quiet, neither of us reached for the door.

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Chapter 628

“I can go in alone,” I whispered.

He looked at me, “No.”

“I don’t want you to have to-”

“I’m coming.”

I looked away, “...Okay.”

He walked around the front of the car before opening my door. One hand rested lightly against my elbow while climbed out. He was not holding me, he was simply making sure I didn’t lose my balance.

The bright daylight made my head pound. Inside, the air smelled faintly of disinfectant and coffee. The reception area was quiet. A television mounted on the wall played the morning news with the volume turned low.

A woman behind the desk offered a small, sympathetic smile, “Good morning.”

Raphael spoke before I could, “We’re here to meet Detective Bennett.”

The receptionist nodded gently, “Of course.”

She asked for my name. I answered automatically. She typed something into her computer before picking up the phone, “They’re expecting you.”

A few minutes later, a woman wearing a navy blazer stepped into the waiting room. She looked to be in her forties, “Miss Toricelli?”

I faced her, “Yes...”

“I’m Detective Laura Bennett.”

She offered her hand. I looked at it for a second before shaking it.

“I’m very sorry we’re meeting under these circumstances.”

I nodded because I couldn’t make words work.

“If you’re both ready, we’ll go somewhere a little more private first.”

She led us through a quiet hallway into a small office. There were tissues on the desk, a box of bottled water, three chairs.

Detective Bennett waited until we sat down, “I’m going to explain what will happen before we continue. You are not required to view the entire room. We’ll uncover one person at a time. If at any point you need to stop, we stop. You do not have to continue if it becomes too overwhelming.”

I nodded once.

She continued gently, “We’re asking you to tell us whether you recognize each individual.”

My throat felt dry, “...Okay.”

“If you’re uncertain, that’s alright. Formal identification will still be completed through fingerprints and dental records,” she slid a clipboard toward me, “I’ll need your signature confirming that you’ve been informed of the process.”

The paper was placed in front of me. The letters refused to stay still. They blurred together, sliding across the page until the words no longer looked like words at all. I blinked hard, then again, waiting for them to settle.

They didn’t.

Raphael quietly turned the clipboard until it was facing the way my brain found easier to read and then he simply stood beside me and waited, giving me all the time I needed.

I tightened my grip on the pen and, after a long moment, slowly managed to write my name.

The detective accepted it without looking at how uneven the handwriting had become; “Thank you, whenever you’re ready.”

I wasn’t ready.

I didn’t think I ever would be.

Still...

I stood and followed her. The detective stopped outside a large metal door.

She looked at me again, “You can stay here if you’ve changed your mind.”

“I need to know.”

She gave a small nod before opening the door, the room beyond was brightly lit. Far brighter than I expected. Everything looked clean.

Three covered tables stood several feet apart, covered with white sheets and nothing else.

My stomach tightened. The detective walked toward the first table. She paused, then folded back only the upper portion of the sheet.

“You can take your time.”

My feet wouldn’t move.

Raphael stayed beside me. He hadn’t tried to touch me after I had recoiled from his touch but he stayed close enough that I knew he was there.

Somehow...

That gave me enough strength to walk forward.

I looked...

Morgan.

Her freckles were still scattered across her nose. Her hair had been brushed neatly away from her face.

She looked... asleep, too still, far too still. I waited, any second now she would complain that hospitals smelled weird.

She would laugh. She would open her eyes but she didn’t. Instead, her face was frozen in the last moments of her fight. Three dark bullet wounds marked her chest.

Detective Bennett waited quietly, “Do you recognize her?”

“...Morgan.”

The detective made a small note, and she covered Morgan again.

The second table was Emma.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 629

Her little silver stud earring was still in her left ear. I remembered helping her pick it out because she’d been too scared to get anything bigger. I remembered holding her hand while she got it pierced. She’d cried afterward, and then pretended she hadn’t.

“...Emma.”

My voice barely existed anymore.

The detective nodded. Then, there was the last table and before she uncovered it... I already knew. Raphael shifted a little closer as the sheets folded back.

Brianna.

Her blonde curls rested against the pillow beneath her head.

Her face was covered in bruises. Of the three of them, it looked as though she had endured the most before she died.

Something in my chest, simply... collapsed, “...Bri.”

The nickname slipped out before I could stop it, nobody answered, nobody smiled, nobody rolled their eyes.

I stared at all three covered tables.

This morning... they’d still been possibilities. Now, they were real.

The detective’s voice came softly from somewhere beside me, “Miss Toricelli?”

My knees gave out. The room tilted so suddenly that I forgot how to breathe. Before I could hit the floor, Raphael caught my arm.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Brianna.

No, this wasn’t Brianna. Brianna complained whenever she broke a nail. She hated hospitals. This... this couldn’t be her.

“Miss Toricelli?” Detective Bennett’s voice sounded far away, “...Can you confirm her identity?”

I stared at the small scar near her eyebrow. I remembered exactly how she’d gotten it. The night I turned eighteen, we were riding our bikes. She had insisted she could ride downhill without using the brakes. She couldn’t and crashed straight into a mailbox.

The memory hit me so hard my chest hurt, “...Brianna.”

Detective Bennett lowered her eyes and made a quiet note on her clipboard, “I’m very sorry.”

A staff member gently pulled the sheet back into place. I watched Brianna disappear beneath the white fabric. I stood there long after everyone else had stopped moving.

Raphael stayed beside me without saying a word.

Detective Bennett gave me a few more moments before speaking, “We’ll take care of everything from here. Once the formal identification is complete, we’ll remain in contact regarding the investigation.”

Investigation.

The word echoed inside my head. Someone had done this. Someone had taken them away. I nodded because I couldn’t trust my voice.

Raphael rested a hand lightly against the middle of my back, “We can go whenever you’re ready.”

I turned toward the door. When I crossed the threshold, I looked back one final time.

Three covered tables, three white sheets.

That was all anyone else would have seen.

I saw sleepovers.

Birthdays.

Late-night study sessions.

Secrets.

Promises about growing old together.

Detective Bennett guided me into a small office where she spoke gently, explaining that the formal identification had been completed and that the Medical Examiner would now continue with the autopsies before releasing their bodies to their families.

And since they had no families, I decided to take their bodies and respectfully lay them to rest.

She asked me a few quiet questions about each of them, their full names, dates of birth, distinguishing features, and whether I knew how to reach any immediate relatives.

Another officer handed Raphael a folder containing the detective’s direct number, a victim services brochure, and information about grief counseling, explaining that a victim advocate would also contact the families over the coming days.

I told her there were no immediate family members to claim Morgan, Emma, or Brianna, “I’ll take responsibility for them,” I whispered. “They deserve to be laid to rest with dignity.”

Detective Bennett gave me a sympathetic nod and explained the legal steps that would need to be completed before their remains could be released into my care.

They told me I might be asked to answer more questions later if the investigation uncovered anything that required clarification, but for now, I was free to leave. Detective Bennett offered her condolences one last time before opening the office door for us.

I don’t remember thanking her. I don’t remember walking through the building. My feet kept moving anyway.

Raphael stayed beside me without speaking. He never tried to rush me. Never reached for me. He simply matched every slow step I took until the automatic glass doors slid open.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 630

I blinked against the afternoon light. The parking lot stretched quietly ahead of us.

Then I heard a broken sob. My head turned before I realized I was moving. Near the entrance, beside two uniformed officers, stood two familiar figures.

One had her face buried in her hands.

The other kept shaking her head over and over as though refusing to believe what she’d been told.

My heart stopped, “Tasha…”

The second girl looked up at the sound of my voice. Her swollen red eyes found mine, “…Gianna?”

Jasmine.

Raphael stopped walking the moment he heard their voices and immediately followed me as I took a step towards them.

I looked at him. My throat felt tight, “…Can you give us a minute?”

His eyes moved from me to the two girls standing across the parking lot.

“They’re my friends.”

His jaw tightened almost invisibly, “I know.”

“They need this,” I whispered, “I need this. They’re all I have left.”

For a long second, he simply looked at me, then he gave a single,nod, “I’ll be right here.”

He stepped back toward the car, far enough to give us privacy but close enough that I knew he could reach me if I stumbled.

I waited until he stopped moving before turning around.

Then Jasmine broke. She ran first and I met her halfway. Her arms wrapped around me so hard my ribs hurt. I held onto her just as tightly.

She was shaking, and not just shaking. She was falling apart. Tasha reached us a second later. The three of us crashed into one another, arms tangled, shoulders pressed together as though letting go would mean losing someone else.

A sob ripped out of her chest, “They’re gone…”

I sobbed harder, “I know…”

“They’re really gone…”

“I know.”

Tasha’s breathing hitched, “Morgan, Brianna, Mama D and Emma… all of them.”

It felt impossible that only yesterday all six of us had still existed in the same world. Now… half of us were gone.

Tasha wiped at her face with the sleeve of her jacket, “We tried to stop it.”

Jasmine buried her face against my neck, “I’m so sorry…” her words dissolved into sobs, “I’m so… so sorry…”

I couldn’t answer. My own tears had already started falling.

Tasha wrapped one arm around both of us, “We tried…” she cried. “God, Gianna… we tried.”

The words made me lift my head. She looked broken, her eyes were swollen, “We told them to stop,” she whispered between shaky breaths, “We begged them.”

Jasmine nodded so hard it almost looked painful, “We kept saying it was stupid. They wouldn’t listen. They said nobody would get hurt.”

My stomach twisted.

Tasha wiped at her face with trembling fingers, “They kept saying your family had money, that they’d ask for a ransom. That once they got paid…” She closed her eyes, “…they’d let you go.”

I felt sick all over again.

“Mama D thought it would solve everything. They thought one job would fix their lives.”

Jasmine let out a broken laugh that sounded nothing like laughter, “They were idiots. They kept talking about fresh starts, new apartments, paying debts. Emma was already looking at furniture online.”

Morgan.

Emma.

Brianna.

Their names echoed inside my head.

“They wouldn’t listen to us,” Tasha whispered, “We fought with them, Gianna, we really did, we were on your side. We promised to never hurt each other. We screamed. I told Morgan she was making the biggest mistake of her life.”

“They wouldn’t listen,” Jasmine added. “Every time we argued, Mama D shut us down.”

Tasha looked at the ground, “We even walked out one night after another fight. We thought… maybe if enough people refused, she’d give up. She never did.”

Jasmine nodded, “I told Brianna to stop it, that how could they hurt you? She said… She said it would all be over in one day.”

“They’re gone now,” Tasha whispered, “All of them. None of us imagined it would end like that.”

I looked down at my hands. If I had never gone to see Mama D last night… would they still be alive?

The thought came so quickly that I almost believed it.

No.

Stop.

Raphael had warned me. The concussion, my thoughts weren't safe right now but they kept coming anyway.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 631

If I wasn't there... nobody would've needed saving, nobody would've died. I squeezed my eyes shut.

No.

Don't do this.

Don't start blaming yourself again, if you blame yourself, you'll end up harming yourself and you promised mom to never do it again.

I forced myself to breathe. When I opened my eyes again, they drifted across the parking lot.

Raphael.

He was exactly where he'd promised he'd be, standing beside the car, watching us from a distance. One hand rested at his side, a pistol hanging loosely from his fingers.

I swallowed, then I looked back at the girls, "...Do you have any idea who might have done this?"

Neither of them answered immediately.

Then Tasha's expression hardened, "I think you already know."

I frowned, "I don't."

"The Capones."

I shook my head before I even thought about it, "No, they didn't."

Both of them stared at me and Jasmine frowned, “What do you mean they didn’t?”

“They…” my voice came out quieter than I expected, “I was there, the Capones… they only hurt Mama D. Raphael said Morgan, Emma, and Brianna weren’t touched. They let them go, trust me.”

Tasha let out a slow breath, “Gianna…” she spoke so gently it almost hurt, “You really believe that?”

Jasmine looked toward Raphael, “He was in that basement, wasn’t he?”!

“I… Y-Yes.”

“He belongs to the family that controls half this city. They don’t exactly file police reports every time they solve a problem.”

“Tasha…” I whispered.

She didn’t seem angry, or suspicious. She looked frightened, “We grew up here too. We’ve heard stories our whole lives. People disappear, witnesses disappear, evidence disappears.”

Jasmine folded her arms around herself, “And the people who survive… They usually survive because somebody powerful decided they should.”

My stomach tightened.

“They’re saying someone executed the girls, they were found together, not scattered, not hidden in different places. That doesn’t sound like panic or a fight, It sounds so…” She searched for the word, “…clean.”

I looked back toward Raphael again.

My throat tightened, “They killed Denise,” I said quietly. “I know that but Raphael told me they never laid a hand on the others. He told me they don’t kill young women or children just because they’re caught in someone else’s mess. They even gave them money to start over. I know how this sounds… but Raphael doesn’t lie to me.”

Jasmine’s eyes filled with fresh tears. She shook her head so quickly that loose strands of hair stuck to her wet cheeks.

“But did you actually see it?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Did you see them walk away? Did you see anyone hand them that money? Or are you believing what someone told you?”

Tasha stepped closer, her breathing uneven, “Gianna... please. You can’t trust anyone anymore. We trusted Mama D with our lives. She was the one person we thought would never hurt us.” A sob escaped her, “Look where that got us.”

Jasmine pointed toward the building behind us with a shaking hand, “Emma is dead. Brianna is dead,” she struggled to say the last name, “...Morgan is dead.”

She grabbed my hands so tightly they almost hurt.

“The three of us were supposed to grow old together. Now it’s just us. We’re all each other has left. We have to protect one another now.”

A part of me-the part that loved Raphael more than I loved my own life-refused to believe it. I’d lived with the Capones for months. I’d laughed with them. Eaten with them. Come to love them in ways I never thought I could.

I swallowed hard, “... Maybe it was Cole.”

They simply looked at one another, not surprised but almost... uncomfortable.

A cold feeling settled low in my stomach, “What?”

Jasmine bit the inside of her cheek, “You really don’t know?”

I frowned, “Know what?”

She hesitated, glancing toward the officers standing several yards away before lowering her voice, “We’ve been hearing things since this morning. Nobody’s seen Cole since last night.”

I blinked, “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” She took a shaky breath. “He’s gone.”

“Gone where?”

She shook her head, “No one knows.”

\ Jasmine rubbed both hands over her face, “Some of the girls who worked for Cole started talking after the police showed up. And they told us Cole disappeared after the Capones took over the Basement.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 632

My heartbeat became louder.

“They were saying…” Jasmine stopped, clearly wishing she didn’t have to repeat it, “…that the Capones made an example out of him.”

“They said…” Tasha continued carefully, “…they mutilated him. They wanted everyone there to understand what happens when someone touches what’s theirs.”

Images flashed through my mind. Raphael standing in front of me. Blood and then darkness. I remembered collapsing. I remembered nothing after that.

“I don’t know what happened after I passed out.”

Jasmine looked down at the pavement, “The stories keep getting worse every time someone tells them. They’re saying he lost an arm. They’re saying, they threw part of him to the estate dogs.”

“They could all be rumors,” Tasha said quickly. “People always exaggerate after something like this. But… Nobody has seen him, not even his men.”

She looked back toward the Medical Examiner’s building.

“If someone killed Morgan, Emma, and Brianna after you passed out…” she paused, “…who had control of that place?”

My mouth opened but nothing came out.

“The Capones,” Tasha whispered, “They were the only ones left and we’re scared, Gianna, please, we’re so scared. I know, I know that you shouldn’t even talk to us after what happened but Jas and I have no one in our corner. We’re next, Gianna… they are going to kill us. We’re next.”

My chest tightened.

Raphael’s voice echoed through my mind, “I never touched them.”

I could still hear him saying it without any hesitation. I squeezed my eyes shut. He hadn’t looked like he was lying. He had looked… hurt. As though it mattered that I believed him.

I opened my eyes again, “…Raph told me they didn’t.”

Tasha spoke gently, “I’m not saying Raphael pulled the trigger. But people like him…” she searched for the right words, “They don’t always do everything themselves.”

Raphael had promised me the girls weren't hurt by his family.

I believed he believed that but... Had he actually seen them leave alive or had someone simply reported back to him?

Across the parking lot, Raphael looked up.

My heart wanted to walk to him but my thoughts stayed rooted where I stood.

I realized the hardest part wasn't figuring out who I could trust.

It was accepting that I no longer knew what was true... or how much I had never known to begin with.

Tasha reached for me, her arms wrapped around me again, like if she let go for even a second, I'd disappear too.

Jasmine stepped in right after, pressing herself against my other side until the three of us stood there in the middle of the parking lot, clinging to one another again.

The. I felt Tasha's lips brushed my ear, her voice so quiet I almost didn't hear it, "Please... please save us. I don't know what we're supposed to do anymore."

I slowly lifted my arms around them both, "Tasha..."

Her fingers dug painfully into the back of my shirt, "But, please don't ask the Capones for help," the desperation in her whisper stole the air from my lungs, "Please... don't."

Jasmine nodded so quickly her forehead bumped against my shoulder, "We don't want to die, G, we don't want to die. They'll kill us if they find out."

I stared at them, my mind refusing to make sense of what I was hearing, "Tasha..."

She shook her head violently before I could finish.

"No," she pleaded. "Promise us. Promise you won't tell them. They're powerful, Gianna. Too powerful. We can't survive getting caught between people like that. Mama D and Cole didn't..."

Jasmine nodded frantically, "We're begging you."

I closed my eyes and the promise left my mouth before I knew whether I could keep it.

"I won't let anything happen to you," I whispered, holding them tighter, "I promise, I'll protect you."

Their fear felt real.

So did everything Raphael had done to protect me.

The two truths crashed together inside my head until I couldn’t tell which one hurt more.

Well...

Gianna is in a terrible place mentally right now.

>

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 633

Gianna

I sat as close to the passenger door as I could without pressing myself against the glass. My hands rested in my lap, twisting together so tightly my knuckles had turned white.

I could still feel Tasha clinging to me.

Please save us.

Then Jasmine’s voice.

Don’t tell the Capones.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Mom’s promise.

Tasha’s promise.

Raphael’s promise.

Every promise pulled me in a different direction until I couldn’t tell which one would break first.

The pain behind my eyes pulsed with every heartbeat.

The medication made everything slower, heavier. Thoughts that normally would've passed through my mind quietly now stayed. They circled. They repeated themselves until they became impossible to ignore.

Beside me, Raphael drove without saying a word. His eyes never left the road, both hands rested loosely on the steering wheel. He wasn't tense. He wasn't defensive. He simply... drove.

I looked at him for only a second before turning back toward the window.

Minutes passed before Raphael finally spoke, his voice was quiet, "If you're wondering whether we killed your friends..."

My head turned toward him.

He still hadn't looked at me, "We didn't."

I blinked, opened my mouth to say something but didn't know what so I closed it. I didn't answer.

He nodded once to himself, "I figured that's what they're telling you."

My stomach dropped. He had watched us from across the parking lot. He hadn't heard the words but he had seen enough.

"I've spent the last twenty minutes wondering whether I should explain myself," he said quietly, "Then I realized something."

His eyes finally flickered toward me before returning to the road.

"If I stay silent... you'll mistake silence for guilt, We don't deny murders, Gianna. If my family had ordered their deaths," he inhaled slowly, "...I would tell you. I would tell you exactly who gave the order and I'd tell you why."

The honesty in his voice hurt almost as much as the doubt inside mine.

"We're not proud of everything we do," he continued, "But we don't rewrite history to make ourselves look cleaner in front of our family," his fingers tightened around the steering wheel, "My grandfather always said that if you're willing to spill blood, you should at least have the spine to admit whose blood it was."

The car rolled through another green light.

"I've watched Vincenzo forgive people most organizations would've buried. Young women, teenagers, people manipulated into making terrible choices, he glanced toward me, "Because sometimes fear makes people stupid."

He looked back at the road.

“And Vince has never believed ignorance deserves the same punishment as cruelty. Your friends were given enough money to disappear and start over somewhere safe. He doesn’t take pride in hurting young women.” His jaw tightened slightly. “He calls it a failure of a man’s strength when he has to prove his power by preying on someone weaker than himself.”

He let out a slow breath.

“Your friends grew up under Denise. They didn’t choose the adults who raised them. They didn’t choose the lives they inherited.

They certainly didn’t control Denise. So no, we didn’t kill them.”

I trusted him, I really did bu

Emma.

Brianina.

Morgan’s face kept appearing beneath that white sheet.

Raphael spoke again before I could ask the question trapped inside my throat, “And Gianna, if my family had done it,” he gave the smallest shake of his head, “The police never would’ve found them.”

I frowned, “What do you mean?”

“The bodies,” he slowed for another intersection, “They would’ve never reached a morgue.”

A strange look crossed his face, “I designed our disposal system six years ago. It’s a controlled high-temperature thermal destruction chamber.”

The words sounded almost unreal, like he was speaking another language.

“The primary chamber operates between 1,500 and 1,700 degrees Celsius. That’s significantly hotter than a normal crematorium. The chamber is lined with refractory ceramic designed to retain heat with almost no fluctuation.”

He paused and looked right into my eyes.

ENJOYING THEK?

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 634

“Soft tissue vaporizes rapidly Bone survives longer. So the remains pass through a secondary calcination cycle.”

He said it as calmly as if he were explaining how an engine worked. My fingers tightened around the edge of the seat.

That was the terrifying thing about Raphael. His violence was never loud. It was quiet, precise and absolute.

He could decide someone no longer existed, and the world would keep turning as though they’d never been there at all.

“The remaining calcium phosphate becomes brittle. After cooling, the residue enters a sealed industrial milling unit. It reduces everything that’s left...” He searched briefly for simpler words, “...into an extremely fine mineral powder.”

“Wh-what does that mean?” I asked.

He smiled, “It means that there are no recognizable fragments, No teeth, bone and definitely no DNA worth recovering. I designed it that way.”

I swallowed hard.

He was right.

If the Capones left their victims behind for the police to find, the city morgues would’ve been overflowing by now. Every hunt.

Every war. Every betrayal. There would’ve been bodies everywhere.

Instead...

There almost never were.

He continued, “The powder is chemically stabilized, blended with ordinary construction-grade mineral aggregate, then incorporated into concrete batches produced through one of our subsidiaries.”

He looked at me.

“Once it cures...” his voice stayed almost gentle, “It becomes part of foundations, retaining walls, bridge supports. It is impossible to separate afterward without destroying the entire structure.”

The realization settled over me slowly.

No grave.

No body.

Nothing.

“If my family had killed your friends. You never would’ve been asked to identify them. There would’ve been nothing left to identify. Just like no one will ever know what became of Denise Walker... or where she disappeared to.”

Raphael reached across the center console and took my hand, his fingers closing around it with a firm grip, almost as though he’d been fighting the urge to touch me ever since I’d pulled away.

“So believe me or don’t but don’t torture yourself imagining something that never happened,” His thumb brushed slowly across my knuckles, “I would never lie to you about something like this.”

My vision blurred, the pressure inside my chest became unbearable. I couldn’t breathe,

“Raphael...”

He immediately looked over, “What is it?”

My voice came out strangled, “...Stop the car.”

Concern flashed across his face, “What?”

My heartbeat slammed painfully against my ribs, “Stop the car.”

He frowned, “Gianna-”

“Stop the car!”

The words tore out of me so loudly they echoed inside the car. Without another question, he flicked on the hazard lights and guided the car onto the shoulder.

The tires rolled to a stop before he could even shift into park... I had already unbuckled my seat belt.

He turned toward me, “Gia-”

I climbed over the center console so quickly I nearly lost my balance. My knees landed on either side of his lap.

His eyes widened, one hand came up automatically to keep me from falling, “Gianna?”

I grabbed his face with both hands then I kissed him hard, desperately like I was trying to breathe through him.

He froze for the briefest second before kissing me back just as fiercely.

My fingers buried themselves in his hair. My lips trembled. The kiss lasted only seconds before it completely fell apart.

A broken sob escaped me. My forehead dropped against his, “I miss them...” the words shattered as they left my mouth, “I miss them so much. They’re gone... and it’s all because of me. I should’ve stayed away. I should’ve known I didn’t belong in their world. Mom tried to warn me over and over...” I squeezed my eyes shut. “They were so alive, Raphael. They had dreams... they had plans... and now they’re dead because of me.”

Raphael didn’t speak. He simply wrapped both arms around me. One arm supported my back. The other protected my injured head the way it always did.

I buried my face against his neck. My tears soaked into the collar of his shirt, “I couldn’t save them... I couldn’t save any of them...”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 635

He held me tighter.

“They were supposed to live. They were supposed to get another chance...”

His hand slowly moved through my hair, stopping before it reached the bandage, “I know,” he whispered. “Grieve, cry, do whatever, I’m right here,” his thumb brushed away another tear, “And I promise you... I’ll find whoever did this to your friends. Then I’ll bring them to you... and you can decide what happens next.”

I cried until my chest hurt, until my throat burned, until there were no words left, only grief, loss and the quiet sound of Raphael’s heartbeat beneath my ear as he held me together while everything inside me fell apart.

I sat on one side of Mom's bed and Jules sat on the other, neither of us spoke for a long time. The machines did enough talking for everyone.

Mom lay beneath the blankets, her body so small now that it hardly looked like it belonged to the woman who used to carry both of us in her arms.

Her cheeks had become hollow. The bones beneath her skin stood out more every day.

The muscles in her hands had wasted away until her wedding ring had to be tied in place with a thin piece of ribbon so it wouldn't slip off.

Her breathing looked exhausting. Every breath seemed like something she had to fight for.

The machine beside her did part of the work now, pushing air into lungs that no longer wanted to listen.

Even sleeping looked difficult.

A strand of hair rested across her forehead. I reached over and gently tucked it behind her ear.

I reached across the bed and found Jules' hand. She immediately squeezed mine hard. I looked at her. She had been crying again.

I could tell because her eyelids were swollen, even though she'd clearly washed her face before coming in here.

Without thinking, I opened one arm. She climbed onto the edge of my chair and leaned against me. I wrapped both arms around her. She fit there so easily.

"I hate this," she whispered, "I want Mom back."

"So do I."

She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her hoodie.

"I don't like the machines."

"I don't either."

"I don't like hospitals."

"We're not in one."

"It feels like one."

I couldn't argue with that. The room smelled like disinfectant and medicine instead of lavender candles and fresh flowers. Mom's bedroom had slowly stopped feeling like her bedroom.

Jules rested her head against my shoulder, "You scared me too," she murmured, "When I woke up, you were already back home. Everyone kept whispering about what happened, and Claire kept trying to send me away," she made a face, "So... I listened from the hallway instead."

Guilt settled heavily in my stomach, "I'm sorry"

She pulled away just enough to look at me, "Mom already told me."

"Told you what?"

"She told me..." Jules looked toward Mom before lowering her voice....that after she's gone... She said I'll have to look after you."

I stared at her, "...What?"

She nodded seriously, "She said you're smart... but sometimes you don't know how to be kind to yourself and you hurt yourself."

My throat tightened, "Jules..."

"And she said..." Jules continued, "...that when you get scared, you make decisions with your heart instead of your head."

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

"So..." she lifted one shoulder. "...I'm supposed to take care of you."

Despite everything, I almost smiled, "You?"

"Yes."

"You're ten."

"I'll turn eleven in a week."

"You can't take care of me."

"I can try."

"No," I shook my head, "I'm your big sister. I'll protect you. I'll look after you. You don't need to worry about me."

Jules gave me a look so much like Mom's that it caught me completely off guard, "Gianna."

"What?"

"You got kidnapped," she tilted her head, "I think maybe, you need a little supervision."

I let out the smallest laugh, "I can't believe you're lecturing me."

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Chapter 636

"I'm being a responsible eleven years old!" she laughed.

That made me laugh properly too, only for a second, only a tiny one but it was enough. The sound seemed so strange inside this room that both of us looked toward Mom at the same time.

She was still asleep.

A soft knock came from the doorway. I turned to see Salvatore standing there and I paled. His eyes moved to Mom first, then to Jules and finally... to me.

"Gianna," he gave me a nod, "Can I borrow you for a few minutes?"

I looked at Jules.

She nodded, "I'll stay with Mom."

I brushed a kiss across the top of her head before standing, "I'll be right back."

Salvatore led me into the sitting room next door, the door clicked shut behind us. Bookshelves lined one wall, the fireplace hadn't been lit.

He gestured toward the sofa, "Sit."

I obeyed.

A second later, he sat beside me. He rubbed both hands together once before resting his elbows on his knees, "I owe you an apology."

I looked at him.

"The other night..." his eyes stayed on the floor, "I was angry."

I remembered every word.

Every single one.

“I shouldn’t have spoken to you the way I did. I wanted to protect Hazel. But... I wasn’t wrong.”

I didn’t answer, I just squeezed my eyes shut.

He sighed quietly, “I’ve loved your mother for a long time. I’ve loved you girls almost as long. You may not have my name, r Gianna, but you’ve always had my concern.”

He leaned back against the sofa.

“So when I look at you, I don’t see a grown woman first. I see a little girl. I’ve been in your life since you were sixteen. I watched you learn how to smile again. I watched you stop jumping every time someone walked behind you. I watched you become my wife’s daughter again.”

His throat moved.

“And somewhere along the way... you became mine too.”

My eyes stung.

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees, “And when I look at Raphael, I don’t see a man, I just see my boy,” he sighed, “Can you understand why every instinct inside me rejects the idea?”

I stayed quiet.

Chapter Ba

He gave a tired smile, “That’s the part that makes this so damn difficult. My boy, and the little girl I chose to be my daughter, those two things cannot exist together inside my head.”

He looked toward the wall that separated us from Mom’s room. His voice had grown quieter.

“If you were anyone else’s daughter... or if Raphael were anyone else’s son... this conversation would’ve been very different but life rarely gives us the easy version of anything

He rubbed his hands all over his face, staring up at the ceiling and then back at me, “And maybe that makes me old-fashioned. Maybe it makes me stubborn but if I stopped feeling that way... I wouldn’t be the man your mother married.”

A long silence settled between us because I didn’t know what to say, how to react to it. Everything was too much for me.

“If I sounded cruel that night...” his shoulders dropped slightly, “It was because fear has an ugly way of choosing our words for us. I’m losing my wife, the woman I loved more than I have ever loved anyone and the thought of losing the daughter I’ve spent years helping raise...” he stopped, “I don’t think I could survive that too. So whether you agree with me or not, please don’t mistake my fear for a lack of love. I’ve never stopped thinking of you as my daughter.”

Salvatore sat quietly for a long moment. His eyes settled on the floor before lifting back to mine.

“When your mother is gone... I want you to move out of our home.”

I frowned, “What?”

“The apartment. The one I bought you for your birthday. I want you to live there. Away from this house. Away from Raphael.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 637

My heartbeat slowed, “I can

He sighed, “You can.”

“I don’t want to.”

His answer came so gently that somehow it hurt more, “I know you don’t but sometimes the hardest decisions are the ones we make because they’re right, not because they make us happy.”

Something twisted painfully inside my chest.

Why was everyone asking me to let him go?

Did everyone see something I couldn’t? Or... was I the only person selfish enough to keep holding on?

I shook my head, “I love him. I’ve never loved anyone the way I love him. You think this is just some childish crush? It’s not.”

His eyes searched mine, “Love doesn’t erase reality.”

I frowned, “What reality?”

He rested both hands on his knees, “Raphael wasn’t raised to simply live. He was raised to carry. And that kind of life... doesn’t allow weakness.”

Weakness.

I hated that word. I had spent my whole life trying to prove I wasn’t. Something inside me flinched.

He noticed, “I don’t mean weakness of character. I’ve never questioned your heart. You are kind. You love people who don’t deserve it. You would give away your last piece of bread if someone looked hungry. Those are beautiful qualities but not what this family needs.”

“You think I can’t handle his life,” I asked incredously, “I was raised in a house like this-”

“I know you better than you think I do, Gianna,” he cut me off, “I know about the self-harm.”

I froze.

“I know you’ve been cutting yourself. Burning yourself. Hurting your own body whenever your mind convinces you you’ve failed.

My throat tightened.

“And I’m not talking about Dyslexia and Disgraphia I know your doctors diagnosed you with Major Depressive Disorder. I know they prescribed antidepressants, and I know you rarely take them because once you feel a little better, you convince yourself you don’t need them anymore.”

I couldn’t look at him, shame filled me.

“I know you’ve spent years living in survival mode. Years of abuse. Years of neglect. Years of believing pain is something you’re supposed to carry alone.”

I looked down at my hands. The scars hidden beneath my sleeves suddenly felt like they were burning.

“And I hate saying that because none of it is your fault but Raphael is carrying a different kind of weight. He is the backbone of that family. If he falls, so does everyone standing behind him.”

His eyes met mine again.

“I don’t believe you’re ready to carry that weight with him.”

I squeezed my eyes shut “So that’s it?”

He nodded once, “When your mother is gone. You will move out. Build your own life. Draw a line between yourself and the Capones. You may forgive me one day or you may hate me until the day I die.”

He swallowed.

“But I will never stand in front of your mother’s grave knowing I stayed silent while I watched the daughter she trusted me with walk into a life I believe will destroy her.”

My hands slowly curled into fists. At first, I thought I was going to cry. Instead, something hot spread through my chest.

Anger.

Not at him but at fate, at whatever cruel force kept deciding what I was allowed to love.

I looked up, “You know what hurts the most? You all keep telling me what I’m not, you tell me I’m too weak, too slow but none of you ever ask Raphael what he wants. You’ve all decided for him and you call that protecting him.”

My breathing broke.

“But he keeps choosing me and if the man carrying the weight of your whole family still looks at me,” my voice became almost a whisper, “Why can’t any of you?”

He leaned forward, something harsh flashed into his eyes, “If Raphael came to me tomorrow and told me he wanted to walk into a burning building with no way out...” his eyes stayed locked on mine, “I’d try to stop him.”

I breathed out in disbelief, “That’s not the same.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 638

“No,” he admitted, “It isn’t but from where I’m standing, it feels frighteningly close.”

I wanted to argue. I wanted to tell him my love wasn’t a burning building. That Raphael wasn’t trapped with me. That every single day he woke up and chose me anyway.

But before either of us could speak...

The door flew open so hard it slammed against the wall.

Mom’s nurse stumbled inside, her face completely drained of color, “Mr. Capone!”

Salvatore was on his feet before she finished speaking, “What happened?”

“Mrs. Capone...” her breathing came in short, panicked bursts, “She’s having another cardiac event. Her heart rate dropped suddenly. Her oxygen levels are falling. We’ve called an ambulance, but they want her transferred to the hospital immediately.”

My heart stopped.

For one endless second, my brain refused to understand the words.

Another cardiac event.

No.

Not Mom.

Not again.

I ran.

My bare feet slapped against the floor as Salvatore reached the bedroom first. I was only a step behind him.

The room had changed completely, the peaceful quiet from earlier was gone.

One of the nurses was already lowering the head of Mom’s bed while another adjusted the oxygen flowing through the tubing beneath her nose.

The heart monitor screamed, not beeped, it screamed. A sharp, continuous alarm filled the room.

Mom’s chest rose in short, uneven jerks. Every breath looked like work. Her lips had lost their color, turning pale with a faint blue tint around the edges.

The numbers on the monitor kept changing so quickly I couldn’t keep up.

One of the nurses clipped another sensor onto her finger, “Blood pressure dropping. I can’t get a good oxygen reading.”

“Increase the oxygen,” another shouted.

“I already have,”

Mom’s eyes were half open, they weren’t looking at anyone. They stared somewhere above us.

“Mom…” my voice disappeared beneath the alarms. I hurried to her bedside, reaching for her hand. It felt colder than it had only a few minutes ago, “Mom.”

Nothing. Her fingers didn’t squeeze mine. They didn’t move at all. Jules threw herself toward the bed before Claire caught her around the waist.

“No!” Jules screamed, fighting against her. “Let me go! I want my mama!”

Claire’s own face was wet with tears, “I’m sorry… sweetheart… please…”

“I want my mama!”

Salvatore stepped beside the bed, “Hazel. Hazel, look at me.”

For the briefest second, her eyes moved. They found him. She tried to say something, nothing came out, only a weak breath escaped her lips.

The nurse leaned over the monitor, “Pulse is becoming irregular.”

The alarm changed again, the rhythm became uneven fast. Then several beats came so close together they almost sounded like one.

My stomach turned.

Another nurse hurried through the door carrying an emergency bag, “The ambulance is two minutes out.”

Salvatore nodded once, “Keep her stable until they get here.”

Stable… the word sounded impossible.

Mom’s chest barely moved now. Each breath seemed smaller than the one before.

I kept rubbing my thumb across her hand, “I’m here. I’m right here.”

Please hear me.

Her eyelids fluttered, then closed again. The distant wail of sirens grew louder until it stopped directly outside the house.

Everything happened at once. Paramedics rushed into the room pushing a stretcher loaded with equipment. One immediately introduced himself while another moved beside the bed.

“What happened?”

The nurse answered quickly, “Advanced ALS. Previous cardiac arrest. Another acute cardiac event approximately five minutes ago. Oxygen saturation falling despite supplemental oxygen.”

The paramedic nodded, “Let’s move.”

They worked with frightening speed. Electrodes were replaced. Fresh monitors were connected. A blood pressure cuff tightened around Mom’s arm.

One paramedic listened to her chest while another checked her pupils with a small light, “She’s barely maintaining a pulse.”

“We’re losing pressure.”

“Get her onto the stretcher.”

They lifted Mom carefully, protecting every tube and wire before settling her onto the ambulance stretcher. Straps were secured across her body. An oxygen mask replaced the nasal tubing.

A paramedic squeezed a bag attached to the mask, helping force air into her lungs between her own weak breaths.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 639

Jules screamed, “Mommy!”

She broke free from Claire and reached the stretcher before Salvatore caught her.

“No!” she sobbed so hard she could barely breathe, “Please don’t take her!”

My body still wouldn’t move. I simply watched. It felt like I had stepped outside myself. The stretcher rolled past me. Morn’s hand slipped from mine.

I didn’t even remember letting go or following them and then suddenly I was inside the ambulance with them.

The ambulance doors slammed shut behind us. I sat on the narrow bench beside the stretcher. Jules sat pressed against me, crying into my shoulder so hard her whole body shook.

I wrapped an arm around her automatically. It felt mechanical like someone else was moving my body for me.

A paramedic remained beside Mom throughout the drive. He watched the cardiac monitor without taking his eyes off it. Another checked her blood pressure again.

“Pressure’s falling.”

He adjusted the oxygen, then checked her pulse. The ambulance sped through traffic, the siren echoing around us.

I stared at Mom. Her chest rose only because the paramedic kept helping her breathe. The monitor continued its uneven rhythm. Every few seconds another alarm sounded.

The ambulance stopped beneath the emergency entrance of the Capones’ private hospital.

The rear doors opened immediately. Doctors and nurses were already waiting. Someone had called ahead. The stretcher rolled straight through the emergency doors without stopping.

A doctor walked beside it, reading the report while another examined Mom, “Transfer to resuscitation.”

“Cardiology has been paged.”.

“Notify ICU.”

The doors swung closed.

We weren’t allowed to follow.

They disappeared, just like that.

The waiting room felt too bright, Jules sat beside me with both hands covering her face. Every few minutes another sob escaped her.

Salvatore stood near the window, staring outside without seeing anything.

Claire sat beside me after a while. She didn't say anything. She simply slipped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me gently against her.

I knew she was trying to comfort me.

I knew she loved me.

I felt... nothing.

My eyes stayed fixed on the emergency doors. People walked past, doctors, nurses. Someone laughed down the hallway. Someone else cried. Time stopped making sense. Minutes stretched into hours or maybe it was only one hour.

I couldn't tell anymore.

Then, the doors opened. A doctor stepped into the waiting room. His surgical cap was still on. There were faint marks across the bridge of his nose from his mask. His eyes searched the roorn until they found us. Every single person stood.

Salvatore took one step forward, "Doctor?"

The man removed his glasses slowly. His shoulders dropped almost imperceptibly, "We did everything we could. Her heart suffered another massive event shortly after arrival. We were able to restore circulation briefly, but her heart was simply too weak to recover," the doctor lowered his eyes, "I'm very sorry."

His voice became quieter but it echoed all around the hospital.

"Mrs. Hazel Capone passed away."

The world stopped. Jules let out a scream unlike anything I had ever heard. It wasn't crying. It was the sound of someone's heart breaking. She collapsed into Claire's arms, sobbing so violently she couldn't stay on her feet.

Salvatore closed his eyes, one hand covered his mouth. His entire body seemed to fold inward, but no tears came.

I remained standing. I looked at the doctor. Then at the closed doors behind him. He was still talking, explaining something, words about paperwork, about spending time with her, about taking as much time as we needed.

I couldn't hear any of it.

Because all I could think was, this morning, she smiled at me. She told me she loved me more than anyone in this world.

I hadn’t known…

Those would be the last words my mother would ever say to me.

Janedoewritings

Author

I know the story feels a little slower and heavier right now, but these chapters are laying the foundation for everything that’s coming next. Some major events had to happen before we could move into the next phase of the story.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 640

Gianna

The estate had never been this quiet.

Hundreds of people had come.

Men in black suits stood outside beneath the gray morning sky. Expensive cars continued arriving through the front gates one after another. They were all part of the Outfit. Men and women who had known Mom. People who had known the family she was born into, long before death had taken almost all of them. Fresh white flowers covered almost every corner of the ballroom until the soft scent of lilies and roses filled the air.

Priests spoke quietly near the front.

People whispered, someone cried, someone prayed, someone hugged Salvatore.

Maddie held Jules every time she looked like she was about to collapse again.

I heard all of it.

None of it reached me.

I stood beside Mom’s casket without moving. The lid had been left open. She looked… peaceful. Healthier than she had looked in months.

The funeral home had done everything they could. Her cheeks had a little color now. Her hair had been brushed exactly the way she liked it.

She wore the pale blue dress she had once joked she wanted to wear because, according to her, “If people are going to stare at me one last time, I might as well look pretty.”

Someone had folded her hands neatly over her stomach. Her wedding ring rested where it belonged. She looked asleep.

Except...

Mom had never been this still. Even when ALS had stolen almost everything else, she had always found little ways to move. A blink, a smile, a squeeze of my fingers. Now... there was nothing.

I waited, without realizing I was waiting. Maybe if I stood here long enough. She would wake up. She would tell everyone this had been one terrible misunderstanding. She would ask why everyone looked so sad. She would ask Jules to stop crying.

Instead...

She stayed exactly the same. My eyes burned but no tears came. I frowned slightly.

Why?

Jules had cried until she made herself sick.

Last night, she’d cried so hard and breathed so fast that she became dizzy. The nurses had checked her twice after she briefly lost consciousness. They’d explained that the combination of exhaustion, not eating, dehydration, and hyperventilating had caused her blood pressure to drop for a short time.

Claire and Maddie hadn’t left her side since.

Everyone had cried.

Everyone.

Except me.

Was something wrong with me?

Did I not love her enough?

No...

That wasn’t true.

I loved Mom more than anyone.

So...

Why couldn't I cry?

My fingers slowly reached toward the edge of the casket. The polished wood felt cold beneath my fingertips.

"Mom..."

The word barely existed but nothing happened. A familiar warmth settled behind me. I didn't need to turn around.

I knew.

Raphael stopped behind me. He didn't interrupt the silence. He simply stood there, looking down at her with me.

After a long time, he spoke

"You have her eyes and her smile."

He slipped one hand into the pocket of his trousers while the other slowly circled my waist, coming to rest low against my stomach. His touch was light, almost cautious, as though he wasn't trying to pull me closer, only to remind me that if my knees gave out... he was already there.

"I've spent most of my life believing every problem could be solved. If I couldn't solve it myself... I built something that could," a quiet breath left him, "I couldn't solve this."

Neither could I.

"I don't know how to make this easier for you but I do know something. I know you're not carrying it alone. If your legs stop working, I'll carry you. If you stop eating, I'll feed you with my own hands. If you wake up at three in the morning and reach for your mother before remembering she's gone... you'll find me awake beside you."

I let my weight rest against his chest for the first time that day, allowing the warmth of him to hold me up.

"You don't have to survive this by yourself anymore," he murmured. His thumb moved slowly over my stomach through the black fabric of my dress, "I loved you before today. I love you now. I'll still love you when this grief finally reaches you."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 641

There wasn't a single dramatic word, no speech, no grand declaration, just simple facts that Raphael believed more than feelings.

I continued to stare at Mom, "...I can't cry. I want to but nothing is happening. Everyone else cried. I just... I stand here. I keep waiting for it. I keep thinking maybe the next second... and then nothing."

Raphael answered after thinking for a while, "Your brain knows she's gone. I don't think the rest of you has accepted it yet."

I frowned slightly.

"When something hurts enough... the mind sometimes slows everything down. It lets you function first, breathe first, stand first. The feelings usually arrive later. They don't disappear. They wait."

I listened carefully.

"You aren't failing to grieve. You simply haven't reached it yet."

"

I wanted to believe him. I really did but another thought slipped into my head. I looked up at him.

"You told me that when your mother died, you never cried. You still haven't."

He nodded once.

I searched his face, "Then, how do I know I'm not becoming like you? How do I know I'll ever cry?"

His eyes lowered to Mom, then he looked back at me, "You don't but you aren't me. You feel everything, sometimes too much. I usually understand my emotions after I've already made decisions. You understand yours while they're happening."

He looked down at me carefully, pulling me closer if that was possible.

"I don't think your tears are gone. I think they're still trying to find their way through everything else."

I looked back down at Mom.

Her hands were folded exactly the way she'd always folded mine whenever I fell asleep as a little girl.

I waited for the tears, for the pain, for anything but nothing came. I simply stood there beside my mother, staring at the woman who had loved me first.

And wondering why my heart felt so unbearably full...

Yet my eyes remained completely dry.

Footsteps approached behind us. Salvatore stopped beside me. For a few seconds, he simply looked at Mom. His shoulders seemed lower than they had ever been. There were dark circles beneath his eyes.

Very carefully, he rested one hand against my upper arm.

The touch was gentle, fatherly. Only yesterday... I would've leaned into it without thinking. Now... his words came back so clearly that they almost drowned out everything else.

You aren't ready to carry his life.

Move into your apartment.

9 7 4 4 4 4 4

pl

Draw a line between yourself and Raphael.

He needs someone stronger than you.

You're not enough for the weight he carries.

Something inside my chest tightened. I didn't pull away. I didn't lean closer either. I simply stood there.

Salvatore looked down at Hazel for a long moment before speaking, "You should sit down for a while. You've been standing here for hours."

I didn't answer because every word he had spoken yesterday kept circling inside my head.

He deserves someone stronger.

Not you.

Was he looking at me now and thinking the same thing?

That I was standing here with his son because I wasn't strong enough?

His hand squeezed my arm softly, "I'm here for you."

The words should've comforted me. Instead, they only reminded me of yesterday. Yesterday Mom had still been alive. Yesterday he had asked me to leave Raphael.

Yesterday still existed.

Today...

Mom didn't.

Salvatore finally looked toward Raphael, "People are watching," he said quietly. "You shouldn't be standing this close to her. Not today." His eyes flickered toward me before returning to Raphael. "Stay with the guests for a while. I'll stay with Gianna. Her and Jules are my responsibility now."

For the first time since he'd walked over. Raphael moved. He calmly reached up and wrapped his fingers around Salvatore's wrist, lifted Salvatore's hand away from my arm. When he let go, Salvatore's hand fell back to his own side.

Raphael stepped half a pace closer to me, "I've got Gianna. You should be with your guests. I don't care who watches us."

Salvatore's jaw hardened, "I'm trying to help. This isn't the place to make... whatever this is... obvious."

"It already is," Raphael replied without hesitation, "People can think whatever they like. It has never influenced a single decision I've made."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 642

Pepple continued walking through the ballroom. Someone greeted Vincenzo across the room. A priest quietly spoke with Claire. Nobody seemed to notice what was happening beside Mom's casket.

Raphael's eyes never left Salvatore's, "I know what she needs. And if she needs something I can't anticipate... she'll tell me."

His hand found mine. Our fingers slipped togeth naturally, almost automatically.

Salvatore held Raphael's gaze for several long seconds, then a quiet breath left his nose, "Not everything has to become a fight."

"It isn't."

"It looks like one."

"It only looks that way because you keep trying to stand where I've already made my place."

The words were spoken so evenly that they barely sounded like a challenge.

Salvatore glanced at me. I didn't move. I didn't speak. I simply kept looking at Mom.

Raphael continued, "And because today's about Hazel... I'm choosing to end this conversation before it becomes disrespectful to her."

Something shifted in Salvatore's face, "I care about Gianna."

"So do I."

"I've cared about her long before—"

"I know," Raphael cut him off without a hint of impatience, "And you'll continue to. I have no intention of changing that but wher

Gianna stands... isn't a decision either of us gets to make for her "intention of

I could feel Salvatore watching me, waiting for me to choose a side.

My eyes stayed on Mom, on her beautiful hands. I remembered those hands brushing my hair away from my face. Holding mine when I struggled to read, holding me after every nightmare.

Now...

They would never move again.

I slowly slipped my hand out of Raphael's, not because I wanted to leave him, not because I agreed with Salvatore.

I simply reached forward and gently placed my fingers over Mom's folded hands.

They were cold, far colder than they should have been. I stared at them for a long time, then, without looking at either man, I spoke.

“I’m tired,” my voice sounded so distant to my own ears, “So… so tired.”

Neither of them answered. I wasn’t sure either of them understood because I wasn’t talking about today. I wasn’t talking about Mom.

I was tired of everything.

I lowered my head, “I just want my mom.”

I didn’t hear Jules walk over. I only felt a small hand slip into mine, so much smaller than Mom’s.

I looked down.

Jules stood beside me in a simple black dress. Maddie had braided her hair this morning, but several loose strands had already escaped. Her eyes were swollen almost shut from crying. There were faint purple shadows beneath them.

She looked exhausted, not the kind of tired sleep could fix. The kind that settled somewhere much deeper. Without saying anything, she laced her fingers through mine. She held on tightly like she was afraid one more person might disappear if she let go.

Raphael looked down at her. His expression softened in the quiet way only I ever seemed to notice. He bent slightly until he was level with her.

He grabbed her hand and without saying a word first, he pressed a gentle kiss on the back of her hand. It lasted only a second.

When he straightened again, his voice stayed low, “I’ll give you both some time with your mom.”

Jules nodded without looking away from the casket, “Okay.”

Raphael’s eyes lingered on me for a brief moment, then he looked at Salvatore.

A small tilt of his head, “Walk with me.”

Salvatore remained still for a second before giving one slow nod.

Raphael glanced at me again, “I’ll be nearby.”

Neither Jules nor I answered. The two men quietly walked away together, disappearing into the crowd of mourners.

Jules moved closer until she was pressed against me. We simply looked at Mom, she was beautiful, and she looked free.

Free from the machines, free from the pain. Free from the disease that had slowly taken pieces of her until there had been almost nothing left to steal.

Jules suddenly let go of my hand before I could ask why, she wrapped both arms tightly around my waist. Her face pressed into my stomach. I immediately folded my arms around her.

She fit against me so naturally that my body held her before my mind even caught up.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 643

She trembled, not with loud sobs anymore, just tiny shakes that never seemed to stop.

I rested my cheek against the top of her head, “I’ve got you.”

Her fingers tightened in the back of my dress, “I know.”

A few more seconds passed, then her quiet voice reached me, “No matter what happens now... we still have each. other,” she pulled back just enough to look up at me, “Right?”

I cupped both sides of her face, “You will never wake up one day and wonder if you’re alone, not while I’m breathing. I don’t care where life takes us. I don’t care how old you get. You could be ten or fifty. You will always me.”

Her lip began to tremble, “I’ll annoy you forever?”

A tiny smile touched my mouth, “You already do.”

She gave the smallest, weakest laugh. I smiled a little more. And then she simply clung to me with everything she had left.

“I miss her,” she whispered.

“I know.”

“I want Mom.”

“Me too.”

“I don’t know how to live without her.”

I held her tighter, “You don’t have to know today.”

I kissed the top of her head exactly the way Mom used to kiss ours.

“We’ll figure out…”

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Someone touched my elbow, very gently, “Gianna…”

I turned.

Claire gave me a small nod toward the front of the room, “It’s time.”

For a second, I simply looked at her. I nodded and my feet carried me forward before my mind agreed to move. Every face in the room turned toward me.

Family.

Friends.

Business associates.

People Mom had known.

People she hadn’t.

The wooden podium stood only a few steps away from her casket. I rested both hands on its edges. The paper someone had prepared for me lay on top. I didn’t look at it. I looked at Mom instead.

I swallowed, “When I was little, I thought my mom could do anything. I was convinced she knew everything. If ! lost something, she found it. If I got sick, she made it better. If I was scared, she somehow always knew before i told her.”

I looked down for a moment.

“She wasn’t perfect. No one is. She was stubborn. If she thought she was right,” I shook my head slightly, “There was no changing her mind. She could scold you with one ook and somehow, five minutes later, she’d be making your favorite meal because she couldn’t stay angry forever.”

The smile disappeared from my face.

I looked toward Jules. She was crying quietly into Claire’s shoulder.

“My sister and I never had to wonder whether we were loved. We knew every single day. Sometimes through hugs Sometimes through lectures,” I smiled again, “And sometimes by hearing our full names when we’d done something incredibly stupid.”

A few soft laughs echoed through the room.

“My mom didn’t leave us riches. She didn’t leave us power. What she left us is much harder to build. She left us our values. She taught us to respect ourselves. To protect the people we love. To apologize when we’re wrong. To stand back up after life knocks us down.”

My fingers tightened slightly around the edge of the podium.

Alump settled in my throat, “And life has found countless ways to knock me down. Sometimes harder than I thought I could survive. But every single time... she reminded me that intelligence means nothing if you use it to make people feel small. That strength isn’t measured by how much pain you can cause but by how much pain you can carry without becoming cruel.”

The room stayed completely silent.

“My whole childhood that I spent away from her, I thought something inside me was broken. And then she got my custody and I remember sitting on the kitchen floor because I couldn’t make the words stay still. I was crying. I told her I wished I had someone else’s brain.”

A tiny smile touched my lips.

“She sat down beside me, brushed my tears away, and said, ‘If I changed your brain, I’d lose the very thing that makes you... you. I don’t want someone else’s daughter. I want mine. Exactly as she is.'”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 644

I closed my eyes for a second.

“She never asked me to become someone else. She simply loved the daughter she already had. I don’t know how to live in a world that doesn’t have her in it. I don’t know how to live in a world where I can’t call her. I don’t know how to celebrate birthdays without hearing her sing off-key. I don’t know how to stop reaching for someone who’s always been there.”

I drew in a slow breath.

“But I do know this,” I looked directly at Mom, “If love could have saved you, you would’ve lived forever.”

The room became completely silent.

“I hope,” my voice softened, “Wherever you are now, your body doesn’t hurt anymore. I hope you can breathe. I hope you can dance again. I hope you finally get to rest.”

No tears came. I wanted them to. I wanted to scream until my throat gave out. I wanted to fall apart the way everyone else had.

But I couldn’t.

It felt as though something inside me had simply… gone quiet, like someone had reached into my chest and switched off the part of me that knew how to break.

I looked toward Jules.

She was crying so hard in Claire’s arms that now Vincenzo was holding her as well.

“I don’t know how to be both a daughter who lost her mother and a sister who now has to help raise someone else’s whole world.”

For the first time, my voice almost broke.

“But I’ll try. I’ll try because that’s what you would’ve wanted me to do. I’ll love Jules the way you loved us.”

A long silence settled over the room.

Then I smiled, the smallest smile, “My mother wasn’t famous. She didn’t want to be. She never cared about being remembered by the world. She only cared about being remembered by the people she loved.”

I placed one hand over my heart.

“And Mom,” I looked directly at her, “You succeeded. I will spend the rest of my life missing you and loving you. Thank you for being my mom.”

I stepped away from the podium.

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The cemetery overlooked the far eastern gardens of the Capone estate. The afternoon sky had turned pale gray. A soft breeze carried the scent of damp earth and roses.

Every headstone in the cemetery bore the Capone name. Every one marked a life that had belonged to this family.

Marcella Capone.

Vittorio Capone.

A little farther ahead, surrounded by more red roses than any other grave, rested Isabella Capone.

And now...

Only a few feet away from her...

There was a new name carved into white marble.

Hazel Capone.

The coffin rested above the open grave, surrounded by white roses, and white lilies. The priest's voice drifted through the breeze. I heard the words. I didn't really listen to them.

Everything felt distant, muted. As though I were watching someone else's life.

The ropes tightened and then slowly, the coffin began to descend. Wood disappeared inch by inch beneath the earth.

Jules broke beside me.

Claire held her tightly while she cried into her shoulder as if she was Claire's daughter.

Salvatore stood perfectly still. One hand covered his wedding ring. His head remained bowed.

Raphael stood beside me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his shoulder. He didn't touch me. He simply stayed.

The coffin disappeared deeper, until only the polished lid remained visible. Then... even that was gone.

Someone placed a single white rose into my hand. I looked at it for a long time. Mom loved flowers. She always said flowers were beautiful because they never pretended to be anything other than what they were.

I walked forward, the freshly opened earth waited below.

For a moment...

I simply stood there, looking down. Trying to understand how an entire life could fit beneath a patch of ground.

My fingers loosened, the rose slipped from my hand. It fell through the quiet air, landing softly against the top of Mom's coffin.

A single white flower, resting on polished wood. I watched it for a long time.

"Bye, Mom," my voice barely reached my own ears.

I waited.

I thought maybe now... now something inside me would finally give way. Maybe now I'd cry. Maybe now I'd feel something other than this strange, empty ache sitting inside my chest.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 645

Nothing happened.

No tears.

'No sob.

No scream.

Only silence.

I kept staring into the grave, wondering why my heart hurt so much when my eyes refused to.

The white rose I had dropped rested on top of Mom's coffin. It looked so small, so terribly alone.

A quiet movement beside me made me turn, Jules stepped forward first. Her hands shook so badly she nearly dropped the rose she was holding.

She crouched slowly at the edge of the grave.

“I love you, Mommy,” she whispered, her voice breaking into pieces. “I’ll try to be brave… just like you told me.”

She let go.

The rose drifted through the air before landing beside mine. The moment it touched the coffin, Jules broke again. Claire caught her before she could fall.

Claire’s own cheeks were wet with tears. She kissed the top of Jules’ head before walking to the edge herself.

She looked down for a long moment, “You gave me sisters when I never expected to have one,” she said quietly. Thank you… for trusting me with your girls.’

She placed her rose beside the others.

Maddie followed. She wiped her face with the back of her hand before giving a helpless little laugh.

“I didn’t expect to find a friend when you came into this family but somehow… I did. I’m going to miss our morning coffee. Our little talks before everyone else woke up. You had this way of making the whole house feel calmer just by sitting in the gardens. You were only with us for a few months and somehow you left a space bigger than people who’d lived here for years.”

She gently released the rose.

It floated down, coming to rest beside the others.

“I’ll miss you, Hazel.”

Then stepped away.

Salvatore was the last. He stood completely still, holding a single rose between his fingers.

His wedding ring caught the afternoon light as he turned the flower slowly in his hand, “I loved you,” he said so quietly that I almost didn’t hear him, “There hasn’t been a single day these last ten months that I didn’t thank God for giving me the chance to call you my wife,” his voice cracked, “I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.”

He bent down and laid the rose on top of the others instead of throwing it. His fingertips rested against the polished wood for one brief second.

Then he stood, he closed his eyes, “I’ll look after our girls.”

The wind carried the scent of roses across the cemetery. Somewhere in the distance, birds sang as though today were no different from yesterday.

Then...

A voice.

A very familiar voice called me,

“Gianna...”

Every muscle in my body froze. I knew that voice. My heart stumbled painfully inside my chest.

Slowly... I turned around.

A man stood several feet away, dressed entirely in black. A long coat, dark gloves, a wide-brimmed hat, his silver hair showed at the temples.

He reached up, removed his hat and held it against his chest.

His eyes found mine immediately. They looked tired, older than I remembered, filled with a sadness so deep it almost swallowed him whole.

Then, he smiled, “Principessa mia.”

My little princess.

The words finally shattered something inside me. I stared at him.

No.

It couldn’t

“Daddy?”

My voice came out as nothing more than a whisper.

His smile trembled, “I’m here.”

The first sob tore out of my chest before I even realized I was moving, “Daddy...’

I ran.

I didn’t think. I didn’t breathe. I simply ran. The world disappeared. The cemetery. The mourners. The flowers.

Everything blurred together.

crashed into him so hard he stumbled back a step. His arms wrapped around me instantly, tightly, completely like he'd been waiting years to hold me again.

I buried my face against his chest.

And finally...

I cried.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 646

Raphael

Gianna ran, not toward me, but toward the man standing at the edge of the cemetery.

"...Daddy."

The word carried across the graves. I looked at him properly. Black overcoat, no unnecessary movement, no bodyguard standing shoulder to shoulder with him. And the way he carried himself told me exactly who he was before my brain even finished putting the pieces together.

Don Giovanni Toricelli.

Head of the Toricelli Syndicate.

Every instinct inside me sharpened. My pulse didn't rise, it slowed. My training always did that.

I watched Gianna throw herself into his arms. He caught her immediately. One arm wrapped around her shoulders. The other protected the back of her head. He closed his eyes as though holding her was the only thing in the world that mattered.

Then...

Everything around us changed. I saw it before I heard it. Vincenzo calmly lifted two fingers to the earpiece beneath his collar.

That was all it took.

The metallic clicks of safety catches echoed quietly through the cemetery.

Our men.

Every Capone guard surrounding the cemetery moved at the same time with a single look from Vincenzo. Rifles and pistols were raised within seconds, nearly two dozen guns were aimed at one man.

Nobody fired, but every finger rested exactly where it needed to be.

Ready.

I wasn't the only one who had recognized him. Adriano took one step forward. Dante mirrored him from the opposite side. Silvio's eyes swept across the tree line instead of Giovanni.

How?

The question hit me almost immediately.

How did he get inside?

The Capone estate wasn't somewhere a man accidentally wandered into. The cemetery was worse, every entrance was monitored, every vehicle logged, every visitor cleared. No exceptions, especially not today.

Hazel's funeral had doubled security, motion sensors, thermal cameras, facial recognition, outer patrols, inner patrols, root teams.

I set the security measures myself.

So how had Giovanni Toricelli crossed every layer without a single alarmn reaching me?

Someone let him through or someone failed. Neither answer was acceptable. One of our captains spoke into his earpiece without taking his eyes off Giovanni.

"Target identified."

Another voice answered through several radios at once.

"Awaiting orders."

Gianna still clung to her father. Giovanni never reached for a weapon. He didn't even look at the guns. His entire attention remained on Gianna. His gloved hand moved slowly through her hair, carefully of the bandages.

My jaw tightened. He whispered something in Italian against the top of her head and she cried harder.

I had never seen her cry like that, not after the kidnapping, not after identifying her friends, not even in the hospital after Hazel died.

She had broken only now... with her father.

Adriano looked toward the outer gate, "Who cleared him?"

Dante's expression darkened, "He didn't climb a wall."

"No," I said quietly, "He walked through a gate."

Which meant someone had opened it. Someone had watched Don Giovanni Toricelli enter Capone territory and allowed him to keep walking straight to our home.

"I authorized it."

All of us turned at the same time. Luca walked toward us with his usual unhurried pace. His expression was as unreadable as ever, as though he were discussing tomorrow's weather instead of explaining why another Don was standing inside our cemetery.

Adriano's eyes narrowed, "You did what?"

"I cleared him."

Dante stared at him, "You let Don Giovanni Toricelli walk through our gates?"

"I did."

Adriano let out a short, humorless laugh, "Have you lost your mind?"

Luca sighed, "If I had, I wouldn't have told you."

His eyes shifted toward Giovanni, who still hadn't looked away from Gianna.

"He didn't come here making demands. He didn't come here to negotiate. He didn't come here to challenge us. He didn't even know Hazel died yesterday. He came here for one reason only... to see his daughter. And he came respectfully, considering we're not at war with him."

“Not yet,” I said quietly.

Luca continued, “And before any of you ask...” His eyes settled on Vincenzo. “He didn’t arrive empty-handed.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 647

Vincenzo finally spoke, “What did he bring?”

“Ciro.”

Dante frowned, “Ciro?”

Luca nodded once, “Giovanni handed him over alive as a gesture of good faith. Apparently, when he discovered Ciro was one of ours watching his territory, he wanted answers. That conversation eventually led him to Gianna. Ciro brought him here.”

My jaw tightened, “Ciro brought him into our home?” I said, as I looked toward the estate, “I’m going to kill that bastard.”

“Giovanni didn’t ask for anything in return. He handed Ciro over to me, then asked if he could see his daughter. That was all.”

My eyes found Giovanni again. He still hadn’t looked at a single one of us. His entire attention remained on Gianna and Gianna still hadn’t let go of him.

Adriano’s jaw hardened, “You trusted him?”

“No,” Luca answered without a second’s hesitation, “I respected the moment.”

His eyes drifted toward Hazel’s freshly covered grave.

“We buried a woman less than five minutes ago. There will be another day to remind Don Toricelli whose land he’s standing on. Another day to settle debts. Another day to test each other’s strength. Today isn’t that day. Gianna has lost more in the last forty- eight hours than most people lose in a lifetime.”

Luca shook his head once.

“I wasn’t going to deny her the only parent she has left because of a rivalry that can wait another hour. We’re Capones. We choose when wars begin and today, we chose not to.”

Luca rarely wasted words. When he spoke this much. He had already thought through every possible argument.

Finally, Luca nodded toward the guards surrounding the cemetery.

“Keep your weapons ready. Keep your eyes open. Watch every tree. Watch every entrance. Trust no one but unless Giovanni gives us a reason, this funeral ends as a funeral,” he paused, “Don’t make today about us.”

No one argued with him.

The funeral was over.

Most of the guests had already left.

Black cars disappeared through the gates one after another until only our own security remained.

Vincenzo sat behind his desk, fingers loosely linked together, looking as though he had all the time in the world.

Adriano leaned against the bookshelf with his arms folded. Dante stood beside the fireplace. Luca hadn’t spoken in nearly ten minutes and neither had I.

A knock came at the door, three short taps. One of our soldiers stepped inside first, “Boss.”

Vincenzo looked up.

“Toricelli is here.”

Vincenzo gave one slow nod, “Bring him in.”

The soldier stepped aside. A second later, Giovanni Toticelli walked into the study.

Two of our men entered with him, one on either side, not touching him, but close enough that every movement of his hands would be noticed.

It wasn’t an escort.

It was a reminder.

He was inside Capone territory.

Giovanni acknowledged it without complaint.

He removed his gloves first, then his hat, handing both to one of his own men waiting outside before crossing the threshold.

Vincenzo rose from his chair, “Toricelli.”

Giovanni stopped a few feet from the desk, “Capone.”

Vincenzo gestured toward the chair opposite his desk, “Please.”

Giovanni inclined his head once. He sat without hesitation. Vincenzo sat as well.

I remained exactly where I was, watching him, measuring him, trying to reconcile the man sitting in front of me with the father

Gianna had described over the past ten months.

She had never sat me down and told me her entire childhood. Pieces had escaped over time, usually by accident.

Sometimes she’d stop reading halfway through a sentence and quietly say her father used to tell her she wasn’t trying hard enough.

Another time she’d mention her little brother, then go quiet because she hadn’t seen him in years.

Once, in the middle of the night, she’d admitted she spent years believing there was something wrong with her.

Broken.

That had been the word she used.

Broken.

I remembered asking who, but she never answered.

Another night she’d told me about standing outside a gate, hoping to see her mother. She’d laughed when she said it. The kind of laugh people used when the memory still hurt.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 648

She'd waited for hours. Hazel had never come, only later did she discover Hazel was gone, and her father had her sole custody.

I knew enough facts to reach a conclusion.

A child doesn't grow into an adult convinced she's defective without someone teaching her that lesson first.

My eyes settled on Giovanni again. He looked composed, nothing about him resembled the monster children imagine.

That meant very little.

The most dangerous men I'd ever met rarely looked dangerous. They looked reasonable. And reasonable men justified almost anything.

I didn't know the full extent of what Giovanni had done to Gianna. Logic demanded I acknowledge incomplete information but logic also demanded something else.

Trauma leaves patterns.

Gianna's patterns hadn't appeared on their own.

Someone had written them into her long before I met her.

Whether the man sitting across from Vincenzo had been responsible or whether he'd simply failed to stop it. I hadn't decided yet and until I did, I trusted neither his reputation, nor his smile.

Vincenzo folded his hands on the desk, "Why are you here?"

Giovanni met his eyes without hesitation, "My daughter."

Vincenzo's expression didn't change, "Why now?"

Giovanni let out a slow breath, "I never stopped looking for her. She was hidden... well. What I stopped finding... were reliable answers. I knew she was alive somewhere, I knew she had escaped. I suspected she'd been with Hazel," his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, "What I didn't know was that she was living under your roof."

My eyes narrowed. He sounded convincing. Convincing wasn't evidence.

Vincenzo tapped one finger against the desk, "So you expect me to believe that a man with your resources couldn't find his own daughter?"

Giovanni didn't seem offended, "No," he said evenly. "I expect you to believe that people lie. For years, then came to me claiming they'd found my daughter. They took my money, fed me hope, then disappeared. Every lead was false. Every promise was bought. By the time I realized they were only profiting from a father's desperation... Gianna had vanished without a trace."

His eyes lowered briefly. I watched him carefully. His breathing hadn't changed. His pulse, at least from what I could observe in his neck, remained steady.

Either he believed every word or he'd rehearsed this conversation long before today.

Vincenzo leaned back, "You have no issue with my family?"

"No, why would I? I have never met you. I have never done business with you," A faint smile touched Giovanni's face, "The closest I've come is through mutual allies. Nikolai Costello."

Vincenzo gave a slow nod, "Nikolai and I have built a great deal together over the years. Profitable businesses. Valuable assets. A partnership that has served us both well."

Giovanni nodded, "I have no interest in damaging that relationship. He is one of my strongest allies. And if I create unnecessary conflict with the Capones... I damage far more than pride."

Chaptecla

His answer was practical, financial, and calculated. Exactly how a Don should think. He wasn't talking about honor. He was talking about stability.

That made sense.

Vincenzo's eyes sharpened, "Then explain Ciro."

Giovanni nodded once, "My men caught him watching one of our warehouses. He was good but not good enough. My Underboss questioned him... perhaps with more force than the situation ultimately required. I imagine your men would've done exactly the same had one of mine been found watching your property.

His eyes lowered for the first time.

"When I learned who he belonged to, the questioning ended immediately. I had Ciro treated, fed, untied and returned."

Vincenzo watched him, "You could've killed him."

"I could have but dead soldiers start wars. I wasn't looking for one."

“Then what were you looking for?”

“As I said, I was looking for my daughter and while going through the situation, I came across a series of messages between my Underboss... and Gianna.”

My jaw locked.

Leone Caruso.

I remembered every message Gianna had shown me, the relentless calls, the manipulation, the threats disguised as love. The refusal to leave her alone.

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Giovanni continued before anyone interrupted, “Only then did I understand why one of your soldiers had crossed into my territory. The messages explained everything. I understood your concern. I understood why your family responded the way it did,” he paused briefly.

“And I also understood that my daughter was living under Capone protection.”

Something cold settled inside my chest. He’d done his fucking homework.

Vincenzo spoke again, “Leone Caruso threatened a member of my family. Gianna is my family.”

For the first time, Giovanni went completely still. A faint hardness entered his eyes as he held Vincenzo’s gaze, “My Underboss, Leone. He was also my daughter’s fiancé.”

I corrected him immediately, “Former fiancé.”

His eyes shifted toward me, he looked me up and down and then he inclined his head, “Former. Leone has loved Gianna since they were children. He allowed emotion to outweigh judgment. That is not an excuse. It is simply an explanation of what happened. I’ve already dealt with him. He understands that my daughter is never to be contacted against her wishes again.”

Vincenzo tilted his head, “And if he ignores you?”

“He won’t,” the certainty in Giovanni’s voice left no room for debate, “If he values breathing.”

I studied him again. Everything he said followed a logical structure. Every answer addressed the question without wandering.

Vincenzo finally spoke, “So after all of this, what exactly do you want from us?”

Giovanni held Vincenzo’s stare, “I simply want my daughter.”

The answer was simple but it made Vincenzo laugh. He leaned back in his chair, the low sound filling the room. It wasn’t amused. It was the kind of laugh that made experienced men think twice.

For the first time since he’d arrived, I saw a flicker of caution cross Giovanni’s face.

Vincenzo’s smile faded, “Hazel entrusted Gianna to my family before she died. You know exactly what that means... especially to a man who leads a family of his own.”

Giovanni shrugged, “I’m not asking you to hand her over. I’m not asking her to leave. I’m not asking for loyalty. I’ve already lost too many years,” he drew one slow breath, “I won’t lose whatever remains because of pride.”

Vincenzo’s eyes narrowed, “And if she doesn’t want a relationship with you?”

Giovanni answered without a moment’s delay, “Then I’ll accept her decision but I’d like the opportunity to hear it from her. And after the way my little girl held onto me today... I think it’s fair to say she needs her father now more than anyone else.”

My stomach tightened because his words left me with nothing to challenge. Which was almost more frustrating than if he’d lied because every instinct inside me remained protective.

I loved Gianna.

And love had a way of making every new variable feel like a threat.

For months, she’d only had us.

Now...

Her father had walked back into her life.

I didn’t know what happened next. I didn’t know where I fit inside whatever came after today.

Vincenzo gave a nod, “I’ll consider what you’ve asked but until I make a decision, you’re not free to move around my city You and your Underboss will stay at one of our secured

properties. You'll be treated with respect, but you'll remain under surveillance until you leave Chicago,"

A small smile crossed Giovanni's face and she stood and adjusted his coat, "I expected nothing less. Thank you for hearing me."

Vincenzo gestured to the soldier and they opened the study doors. Four armed Capone guards quietly fell into position around Giovanni before escorting him from the room.

Nobody spoke until the footsteps disappeared down the hallway.

Then...

Vincenzo's expression changed. He looked toward Adriano, "Adriano, get Ciro. I want every minute of the last seventy-two hours reconstructed. Question him! Compare every word with what Giovanni just told us. If one detail doesn't match, I want to know why."

Adriano nodded once, "And afterward?"

"He dies," Vincenzo ordered, "Ciro exposed one of our secure locations. He led another Don to our front gate. I don't care whether it happened through stupidity, panic or misplaced judgment. The outcome is the same. A soldier who compromises this family puts every Capone at risk and this isn't his first mistake."

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His eyes hardened, as he looked at me.

"He already failed once when he took Gianna out of this estate and delivered her into a sex hunt. You gave him the chance to redeem himself. He won't be getting a third."

I nodded, "I understand."

Vincenzo turned his attention to Luca, "Luca. You made today's decision alone. You allowed another head of a criminal organization onto Capone land without consulting me."

"I did."

"You understand what could have happened."

"I do."

Vincenzo stood from behind his desk and slowly walked around it until he was standing directly in front of Luca.

“You acted with compassion for Gianna, I don’t punish compassion. I punish breaking procedure because procedures exist to protect this family. For the next thirty days, you’ll personally oversee every security rotation on every Capone property. No delegation. No handing it to your captains. You’ll inspect every checkpoint yourself. Every gate. Every camera. Every guard. You’ll sleep after everyone else does and you’ll wake before they do.”

Luca didn’t seem bothered, “I understand.”

“It isn’t a humiliation,” Vincenzo’s voice softened only slightly, “It’s a reminder. You’ve spent years teaching our soldiers that discipline keeps them alive. You don’t get to forget your own lessons.”

Luca accepted it without argument, “You won’t have to remind me twice.”

I had been standing against the bedroom wall for nearly twenty minutes. She hadn’t noticed or maybe she had. I couldn’t tell anymore.

Gianna sat at her desk with her back to me. The lamp beside her cast a warm circle of light across the wood. A notebook lay open in front of her.

The page was almost full, not with sentences but with lines. She kept drawing the same short line over and over again. A straight stroke, then another beside it and then another.

Γ When she reached the bottom of the page, she quietly turned it over and started again. There wasn’t any purpose behind it that I could understand. It looked less like writing and more like her hand had forgotten how to be still.

I watched her fingers tighten around the pen. She was holding it too hard, hard enough that her knuckles had turned white. She didn’t seem to notice.

She had been like that ever since we came home from the cemetery. Claire had tried speaking to her. Jules had curled up beside her for almost an hour before finally falling asleep from complete exhaustion.

Even then...

Gianna had never looked away from the notebook.

She wasn’t reading.

She wasn’t writing.

She was simply… moving.

My eyes drifted toward the wastebasket. It was overflowing with torti pages. Every one covered with the same meaningless marks. She had filled them, ripped them out, started again.

I knew what severe grief looked like. I'd seen men lose wives, children, brothers. I'd watched soldiers stare at walls for days.

But Gianna felt like she had stepped somewhere my voice couldn't reach. Somewhere no one else's could either. I pushed myself away from the wall. My footsteps were quiet against the floor.

I stopped beside her chair. She continued drawing another line. Her eyes never moved from the page. I looked down. She wasn't even looking at what she was doing anymore. Her eyes were open but they weren't focusing.

They simply rested somewhere beyond the paper.

I swallowed.

This wasn't my Gianna.

My Gianna talked with her hands. She frowned whenever words refused to cooperate. She laughed at jokes she hadn't even finished telling.

This girl didn't seem to belong inside her own body. It was as though her mind had quietly disconnected from the world and left only habit behind.

I reached toward the notebook. My hand rested over hers, the pen stopped moving. For a second, I thought I'd finally reached her.

Then, without looking at me, she gently pulled another blank sheet closer and tried to continue.

The pen couldn't move because my hand was still resting over hers, only then did she stop, not because she'd noticed me but because something was physically in the way.