My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 651

The realization settled heavily inside my chest.

I had never felt so... unnecessary, not until now. I understood machines better than people. Machines followed rules. Damage could be measured, repaired, replaced.

People didn’t.

Especially not the woman sitting beside me.

In less than two days, she had lost four friends. She learned one woman she trusted with her life had betrayed her, then she went on to identify three more bodies and then she watched her mother die, buried he

No system kept functioning after taking damage like that, not even the strongest one.

I crouched beside her chair until I was level with her.

“Gianna?”

She gave me nothing, not even a blink.

I didn’t know how to fix this. That thought disturbed me more than I expected. So how was I supposed to solve it?

I studied her face. There were dark circles beneath her eyes. She hadn’t eaten enough today. She hadn’t drunk enough water either.

I knew because I’d been counting. She’d taken three small sips since morning, nothing more. I reached up carefully and brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She didn’t lean into my hand the way she always did. She didn’t pull away either.

There was simply... nothing.

The absence of a response hit my chest more than rejection ever could because rejection meant she still felt something.

This...

Felt like standing beside someone drifting farther away while having no way to swim after them.

I rested my forehead lightly against the side of her head, “I’m here. I’ll stay. I’ll stay until you remember how to come back.”

I gently took both of her hands, slipped my fingers between hers and carefully pulled her to her feet. She stood because I guided her to, not because she chose to.

“Come here.”

I turned her toward the bed. She walked beside me in slow, quiet steps. When we reached the mattress, I rested my hands on her shoulders.

“Sit.”

She did. I knelt in front of her and untied her shoes before sliding them off one at a time. She never looked down. Her eyes stayed fixed somewhere beyond me. I helped her lift her legs onto the mattress, then I pulled the blanket back.

“Lie down.”

Again, she obeyed without speaking. She curled onto her side automatically, facing the wall.

I stood for a moment, looking at her.

Then I reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head before letting it fall onto the chair nearby. I stepped out of my trousers, leaving only my boxers.

Nothing about tonight felt romantic, nothing about it was desire. I just couldn’t leave her alone, not like this.

I slid beneath the blanket behind her. The mattress dipped beneath my weight. Slowly, I moved closer until my chest rested lightly against her back. One arm slipped around her waist. The other settled beneath the pillow. I drew her into me carefully. her body felt cold.

I rested my chin lightly against the top of her head.

Then, she moved. So slightly I almost thought I’d imagined it. Her fingers found my forearm. They rested there.

A few seconds later, she turned until she was facing me.

I brushed my thumb beneath her eye, “Hi, Ballerina...”

Her lips parted, nothing came out. Instead, she leaned forward. Her lips found mine in the gentlest kiss. She lingered only a heartbeat before pulling back.

I searched her face.

She didn’t say anything. She simply kissed me again. A little longer this time. Her fingers slowly closed around the front of my shoulder.

I kissed her back just as gently, careful not to rush her, careful not to ask anything of her she couldn’t give.

When she pulled away, I rested my forehead against hers, “Gia...”

She silenced me with another kiss. This time she didn’t wait for me to respond. Her hand slid to the back of my neck. Her fingers tightened. She pulled me closer.

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The kiss deepened, not with tenderness alone, but with urgency almost anger, almost panic. As though she was trying to outrun something chasing her.

I frowned slightly against her lips.

This wasn’t like her.

She was leading every movement now.

Every time I tried to slow the pace, she closed the distance again, holding me there as though letting go would mean losing the last solid thing left in her world.

Confusion settled quietly inside me, not because she was kissing me but because I recognized what this wasn’t.

It wasn’t joy.

It wasn’t passion.

It wasn’t peace.

It felt like someone drowning, reaching for the nearest piece of land before the water pulled them under again.

I cupped her face between both hands and finally, gently, broke the kiss.

Our foreheads touched.

I looked into her eyes, they were still empty, still distant.

“Gianna...”

Before I could say anything else, she suddenly pressed her hand firmly over my mouth and climbed into my lap, catching me completely off guard.

I instinctively reached for her wrists, trying to slow her down, trying to understand what was happening, but she wouldn’t let me. She moved with a desperate urgency that had nothing to do with me.

I didn’t fight her.

I didn’t want to frighten her.

I didn’t want her to think I was pushing her away.

So I stayed still, letting her take control while my mind struggled to understand what I was seeing.

Her hand remained firmly over my mouth the entire time, her grip tightening whenever I tried to speak.

She reached down, her fingers gripping the elastic of my boxers with force, and ripped the fabric down and out of her way.

She grabbed me with a tight, rough grip. She began to stroke me, moving her hand up and down hard and fast, forcing my body to get hard beneath her fingers. There was no soft touching. There was no hesitation. She was acting like a machine, just doing it to feel something else.

She didn’t look for permission. She simply aligned her weight and lowered herself onto me. There was no tenderness in her movements, no searching for me. It felt automatic, almost frantic, as though she were trying to outrun something inside her own head.

I don’t know how long she kept moving on top of me, then, just as suddenly as it had begun...

It was over.

She quietly climbed off me.

Without looking at my face, she settled back onto her side of the bed, turned away, and lay completely still.

I remained where I was, staring at the ceiling above us.

Whatever had just happened...

It hadn't been about me. It hadn't even felt like she'd truly been with me at all.

It had felt like grief had taken hold of her body, and all I had been was the person standing closest when it happened.

A strange heaviness settled in my chest.

For the first time in years, I couldn't think several steps ahead. I couldn't find a pattern. I couldn't explain what had just happened.

I just lay there, stunned, listening to the sound of her breathing beside me, feeling as though I'd witnessed something I was never meant to understand.

Janedoewritings

Author

Please swipe up and take a moment to read the little message I left for you.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 653

Guys, throughout this entire story, Gianna has never been in a healthy state of mind. I've pointed it out countless times because everything has been building toward this moment, where she finally reaches her breaking point.

A gentle reminder, both as a medical student and as a fellow human being: please don't call someone who is struggling with severe mental health issues "stupid," "an idiot," "weak," or "annoying." Those words can do far more damage than people realize.

This isn't just about Gianna. It's about real people, too. If someone in your life is going through a difficult time, try to respond with patience instead of harshness. Judgment, ridicule, and aggression can push people into even darker places. Then, when something tragic happens, or that same person commits suicide, people often wonder why they didn't see the signs or why that person never asked for help.

The truth is, people battling serious mental health challenges don't make perfect or healthy decisions. Their minds are fighting battles you may never see. Compassion won't solve everything, but it can make the difference between someone feeling completely alone and someone feeling understood.

So please, be kind. You never know what someone is carrying behind a smile.

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Chapter 654

Raphael

I didn’t move for what felt like a very long time. Only our breathing filled the darkness. My heartbeat had finally begun to slow, but my mind hadn’t.

It kept returning to the same few minutes over and over again, examining them from different angles, searching for something I had missed.

Nothing fit.

I sat up slowly. The mattress shifted beneath me. Gianna didn’t react. She had already turned onto her side, facing the wall.

Her eyes were closed now. Whether she was asleep or simply exhausted enough to stop moving, I couldn’t tell.

Quietly, I adjusted my boxers before reaching for the blanket that had slipped down around her waist. I pulled it higher carefully until it rested beneath her chin.

A few strands of hair had fallen across her face. I tucked them behind her ear. She didn’t stir or react to my touch. I rested my hand lightly against her forehead, checking her body temperature.

I remained beside the bed for another twenty minutes, watching, counting every breath without realizing I was doing it.

When the rhythm never changed, I finally accepted that she had fallen asleep.

Only then did I stand.

I picked up my shirt from the chair and pulled it over my head before stepping into my trousers. My eyes drifted back to the bed one last time. She looked impossibly small beneath the blanket as though grief itself had hollowed her out.

I switched off the bedside lamp.

The room disappeared into darkness except for the faint moonlight spilling through the curtains.

Without making a sound, I slipped out of her bedroom and quietly closed the door behind me.

The hallway felt colder. The estate, which normally never truly rested, had grown unusually quiet after the funeral. Even the guards spoke in lower voices tonight.

I walked to my room almost automatically.

The moment I stepped inside, a familiar shape shifted inside the large enclosure near the window.

Medusa.

She slowly lifted her head, her tongue flicking once before disappearing again. I walked over and rested my hand lightly against the glass. She watched me for a few seconds before coiling back into herself beneath the heat lamp.

I crossed the room and opened the top drawer of my desk. Inside sat a black metal cigarette case. It had been there for months, almost untouched. I wasn't a big smoker, but only on nights when my mind refused to become quiet.

Tonight qualified.

I took one cigarette from the pack and then took another. I looked at the second one for a moment before placing it back inside and shutting the drawer.

One was enough.

The balcony doors slid open with barely a sound. Cool night air met my face immediately. The gardens below were almost invisible beneath the darkness. Only the security lights along the walls broke the shadows.

I lit the cigarette, the end glowed orange. Smoke drifted upward before disappearing into the night./

I leaned both forearms against the stone railing. The first drag burned slightly. I thought about what had happened and why it had happened.

There was a difference.

She hadn't looked at me the way she normally did. There had been no warmth in her eyes, no embarrassment. There wasn't even hesitation. Nothing that made it feel like she had truly been present with me.

It was as though her body had been moving while the rest of her remained trapped somewhere else entirely.

That disturbed me.

Because I had seen people shut down before.

Men after torture, victims after kidnappings. People whose minds protected them by pulling away from reality when reality became too much.

Gianna had lost too much in too little time and then her father had appeared only hours after the funeral.

Every certainty she'd had about her life had collapsed in less than two days.

I closed my eyes, smoke escaped slowly from my lungs.

I wasn't afraid of losing control.

I wasn't afraid of another family.

I wasn't even afraid of another war.

I was afraid that, while I was standing right beside her... I was already losing Gianna.

I never went to bed.

The cigarette burned itself down between my fingers until only the filter remained. I crushed it on the balcony and stayed where I was.

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Chapter 655

Somewhere below, one of our guards changed shifts. I heard quiet footsteps across the courtyard before everything settled again.

Every few minutes my thoughts wandered back to Gianna. Then I deliberately pulled them away again, I had already replayed the night enough times. Doing it another hundred wouldn't change what had happened.

The sky slowly began to change. Black became dark blue. Dark blue became grey. Birds started appearing in the gardens. Sprinklers hissed softly across the lawns.

The estate woke before anyone inside it did.

I glanced at the clock on my bedside table.

Two minutes.

I waited.

When the digital numbers changed to 07:00. I walked into the bathroom. I turned the shower on and waited until the water grew hot before stepping beneath it.

The heat struck my shoulders. I closed my eyes. Afterward I dried off, brushed my teeth, shaved, and dressed without giving any of it conscious thought. Fresh white shirt, dark charcoal suit, black tie, watch, wallet and phone.

When I looked into the mirror... I looked exactly as I always did. Only I knew how little that reflected what was happening inside my head.

I picked up my car keys and left my room. The kitchen staff moved quietly through the hallways now, security teams exchanged reports. A few soldiers nodded respectfully as I passed. I acknowledged each one before walking outside.

I slid behind the wheel of my car. The gates opened before I reached them. I drove out onto the empty road. Chicago slowly came alive around me. Traffic thickened the closer I moved toward her neighborhood.

I hadn't spoken properly to Aunt Alessia yesterday. There hadn't been an opportunity. The funeral had been full of people, condolences, business, security and Gianna.

Alessia...

If anyone could help me understand how to bring Gianna back, It was probably her. The navigation turned me onto a quiet private road lined with century-old oak trees.

At the end stood the Lombardi estate.

The property occupied several acres. Stone walls surrounded the entire estate. Security cameras covered every angle. Steel gates stood closed across the entrance.

Two armed Lombardi soldiers stepped forward before my car had completely stopped. Both rested their hands close enough to their weapons that the message didn't require words.

One leaned slightly toward my open window, "Morning."

"Morning," his eyes moved briefly over the car before returning to me, "State your business."

"I'm here to see my aunt. Mrs. Alessia Cap- Lombardi."

Recognition flickered across his face, but procedure mattered more than familiarity, "One moment."

He stepped back and spoke quietly into the radio clipped beneath his jacket. I watched him from the driver's seat. The second guard never took his eyes off me.

Finally the first guard pressed a hand to his earpiece again. He listened, then nodded once and then he returned to my window.

"Mrs. Lombardi will see you.'

I inclined my head, "Thank you."

I eased the car through the gates.

The driveway curved through perfectly maintained gardens before opening into a wide circular courtyard. Several more Lombardi soldiers stood positioned around the grounds.

I parked beside the front steps, then I opened the door, stepped out into the cool morning air, adjusted the cuff of my jacket, and walked toward the entrance, already wondering whether Alessia would see what I couldn't.

I climbed the front steps. I barely reached the top when I stopped.

Remo Lombardi stood near one of the stone columns, completely unaware that anyone had arrived.

Three-month-old Isabella rested securely in one arm against his chest.

She was wrapped in a pale blanket, one tiny fist gripping the front of his black shirt.

Remo looked down at her with an expression I had never seen on his face before.

The man who usually looked ready to start a fight with the nearest living thing was gently rocking from one foot to the other.

"You think you're very important, don't you?" he muttered, his voice so absurdly soft I almost questioned whether I'd heard him correctly, "Little princess hasn't even learned to sit up and she's already ordering everyone around."

Isabella made a tiny sound.

Remo's mouth twitched, "Oh, was that your opinion?" he asked in the same quiet voice. "You're right. They're all idiots. You're the only smart one in this house."

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Chapter 656

She waved her tiny hand through the air.

He caught it immediately, “There it is…” he murmured. “Who’s my little menace, huh? You are.”

He lightly bumped his forehead against hers.

“My spoiled little terror.”

I didn’t move.

I simply watched.

This…

Was not the Remo Lombardi I knew.

I’d watched him insult people with enough creativity to make grown men question their existence.

Respect and politeness had never seemed to exist anywhere inside him.

Yet here he was… speaking to a baby as though she owned the world.

Isabella yawned.

Remo smiled.

The sight was disturbing enough that I almost wondered whether I’d hit my head on the way over.

Then his eyes lifted, and they landed on me. The smile disappeared instantly. His face returned to its usual level of irritation, “What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked flatly.

“I came to see my aunt. So if you could avoid shooting me before breakfast, I’d appreciate it.”

He rolled his eyes, “I was having a perfectly peaceful morning until you showed up.”

I glanced at Isabella, who had started chewing determinedly on the sleeve of his shirt, “I won’t tell anyone.”

Remo frowned, “Tell anyone what?”

“That you speak fluent baby,” I added, “You seem remarkably persuasive when negotiating with someone who weighs less than a bag of flour.”

He looked at Isabella, then back at me, “I can still shoot you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I nodded once toward the baby, “But I’d rather preserve your reputation. You’ve spent years convincing Chicago you’re impossible to reason with. It would be unfortunate if word spread that you also conduct diplomatic discussions about milk.”

Remo stared at me for three long seconds, then his eye twitched in irritation, “Fucking Capone Bastard.”

I looked at him evenly, “The fact that bastard is still the sharpest insult in your vocabulary explains why Isabella has already contributed more to this conversation than you have.”

Before either of us spoke again, the front door swung open.

“Raph?” Aunt Alessia stepped outside, the moment she saw me, her entire face lit up. She crossed the distance before I had time to react.

One second I was standing still. The next, she had both arms wrapped around me.

“My beautiful boy,” she said, pulling me into a hug so tight it nearly bent my tie. She cupped my face with both hands, “When did you get so handsome?”

“I’ve looked like this for years.”

“I know,” she smiled warmly. “I simply enjoy reminding you,” she kissed my forehead, “My baby.”

I closed my eyes for the briefest moment, “I am not a baby.”

“You’ll still be my baby when you’re eighty.”

Behind us, Remo barked out a laugh.

“Don’t let my soldiers hear that,” he said with obvious satisfaction, “The terrifying Capone just got called ‘my baby’ on the front steps.”

Alessia didn’t even glance at him. She slipped her arm through mine instead, “And he always will be.”

Remo smirked, “This is the best thing I’ve seen all week.”

I looked at him evenly, “Enjoy it while you can.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“In a few months, your little sister will start talking... and you’ll spend the rest of your life answering to whatever nickname she gives you.”

Aunt Alessia kept her arm linked through mine as we walked inside. The house smelled faintly of fresh coffee, baked bread and lemon polish. Morning sunlight poured through the tall windows, warming the marble floors until they almost glowed.

It felt... as though every corner of the house carried Alessia’s warmth. A warmth that had long since disappeared from our own home.

A blur of movement came rushing down the hallway.

Adelina.

She nearly reached us before stopping so suddenly that her slippers squeaked against the floor. Her eyes immediately looked past me, then toward the open front door and then back to me.

“Oh,” she blinked, “You came alone?”

I frowned, “Yes.”

She looked behind me one more time, “No other Capone brothers?”

“No.”

Her shoulders visibly dropped, “That’s... disappointing. I’ll go back to my breakfast.”

She turned around without another word and walked back down the hallway. I watched her disappear.

“...Was she hoping for someone else?”

Alessia laughed, “I’ll let you figure that one out.”

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I decided I didn’t particularly want to. Instead I looked at my aunt, “Can we talk somewhere private?”

Her smile faded immediately. She studied my face for only a second before nodding, “Of course.”

She didn’t ask questions. She simply led me through the house until we reached her sunroom. Glass walls surrounded the entire room, morning light poured in from every direction. Flowers filled nearly every corner.

It smelled clean and exactly like Alessia.

She motioned toward one of the chairs, “Sit. I was making breakfast,” she said, “You look like someone who forgot food exists.”

She smiled sadly before speaking to one of the house staff waiting outside.

“Breakfast for two, please.”

Within minutes, plates were brought in. Everything was arranged before us before the staff disappeared again, leaving us completely alone. I really didn’t feel like eating anything.

She folded her hands together on the table, “Raphael. What happened?”

I wasn’t avoiding the answer. I was arranging it. There was a difference.

Finally, I managed to tell her the most important part, “I love someone.”

Alessia’s entire face softened. “Oh…” She reached across the table and took my hand before I could pull it away. know. And I know it’s Gianna. I’ve been waiting for the day you’d tell me yourself.” A fond smile touched her lips. ” Truthfully… I’ve known since that breakfast when you very seriously informed me your ‘girlfriend’ had broken up with you.”

I looked at her, “How did you know?”

She smiled, “My darling. I’ve known you since the day you were born. You think people can’t read you because your face rarely changes. They’re right. But I’ve never needed your face. I know your silences.”

I looked down at the untouched coffee, “I thought I hid it well.”

“You did, she smiled, “From everyone except the woman who changed your diapers.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

She waited, “So… what happened?”

I stared through the glass walls toward the gardens outside.

“I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“Then help me understand.”

“I’ll try.”

I drew in a slow breath and told her everything.

About meeting Gianna before our parents got married. About Denise and the girls. About her dyslexia and how she’d spent years believing it made her broken. About the scars she hid beneath her sleeves. About our arrangement. About my therapist. About the kidnapping. About Hazel.

I didn’t leave anything out, not from her.

I continued, “Since Hazel died, Gianna has changed.”

I struggled to find words that were precise enough.

“She’s physically present but cognitively,” I frowned, “She isn’t engaging with her surroundings the way she normally does.”

Alessia stayed silent.

“She responds when necessary. She eats if someone reminds her. She walks. She sits but it feels as though she’s performing those actions rather than choosing them.”

I rubbed my thumb against the edge of the coffee cup.

“I stood in her room yesterday. She never acknowledged I was there. I could’ve been furniture.”

Alessia listened without interrupting.

“I tried speaking to her. I stayed beside her. I waited,” my jaw tightened slightly, “Then...”

I stopped, because words refused to come easily.

Alessia noticed immediately, “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

And then I told her about the last part. What happened between us. There had been physical closeness... but there hadn’t been anything intimate about it.

“I don’t know how to help her. I like to think I can predict human behavior with reasonable accuracy but I can’t reach the woman I love. I’ve never felt this...”

I stopped again.

I searched for the correct word.

“...powerless.”

She looked at me for a long moment then she slowly reached for her coffee, took one sip, then set the cup back down, “Raphael. I’m going to ask you something. When Gianna was kidnapped, what did you do?”

The answer came automatically, “I found her.”

“No.”

She shook her head gently, “What did you do while you were looking for her?”

I thought back, “I worked, I searched, I planned, I eliminated possibilities, I solved problems.”

She nodded, “And why?”

“Because action produces results.”

“Exactly. You were grieving before you even knew whether she’d survived.”

I frowned slightly, “I wasn’t grieving.”

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Chapter 658

“You were,” she smiled softly, “You simply expressed it differently. You didn’t cry but you became productive. After Isabella died, you buried yourself in books. You stopped playing. You barely spoke unless someone spoke to you first. You kept trying to understand something that had no answer, as though if you thought hard enough, the pain would eventually make sense.”

She leaned back in her chair.

“Raphael, people like to imagine grief looks the same for everyone. It doesn’t,” She continued, “And Gianna... isn’t grieving one person. Five losses in two days. And every one of those losses attacked a different part of her.

I felt my jaw tighten.

Alessia noticed, “And Hazel was her safety. You keep trying to understand Gianna using logic.”

“I am.”

“I know and normally that serves you well,” she smiled sadly, “But trauma doesn’t always behave logically. It behaves protectively.”

I listened.

“It’s called emotional numbing. The brain doesn’t decide to do it. It simply does. The alternative might overwhelm the person completely.”

I thought back to Gianna standing beside Hazel’s coffin.

“I thought she wasn’t processing it.”

“Oh, she’s processing every second, trust me, but her mind is conserving energy. It has gone into survival.”

I looked at her again, “Then why… why couldn’t she reach me?”

Alessia’s expression softened, “She did.”

I frowned, “No. I was there but she wasn’t.”

“You said she climbed into your arms. She kissed you. She stayed beside you until she slept,” she squeezed my hand, “Those aren’t the actions of someone who doesn’t trust you. They’re the actions of someone whose thinking brain has stopped working properly and whose nervous system only knows one thing. Find safety.”

The words settled heavily inside me.

Alessia continued, “You weren’t speaking to Gianna’s thoughts last night. You were speaking to her survival instincts. And those instincts… still chose you.”

I looked away. For reasons I couldn’t entirely explain… That hurt. Because it also meant something else.

“I couldn’t help her.”

“You already were.”

“I didn’t fix anything.”

She laughed quietly, “Oh, Raphael. Don’t ask yourself how to make Gianna stop hurting. You can’t. Her mother died, she should hurt. You don’t want to erase that. You want to survive it with her.”

I looked back at her, “So, what do I do?”

Her answer came without hesitation, “Nothing. Do nothing. There isn’t a sentence you can say that will take this pain away,” she continued quietly. “There isn’t a gesture big enough to fix it. There isn’t a problem here for you to solve. Gianna has to find her way back to herself. And no one-not you, not me, not even time itself can force that process.”

Alessia’s eyes glistened.

“When that happens. She won’t need someone intelligent. She’ll need the man who’s willing to hold her while she falls apart.”

She smiled warmly.

“And from everything you’ve just told me, you’ve already been that man.”

I loosened my tie as I climbed the stairs, already turning toward Gianna’s room. It had become a habit. Every night, before I did anything else, I checked on her.

Sometimes she was asleep. Sometimes she was sitting in the dark. Sometimes she was simply staring out of the window. She never really acknowledged me anymore but I checked anyway.

I pushed her bedroom door open, the bed was empty. For a second, my brain refused to process what I was seeing.

The blankets were folded back. The lamp beside her bed was still on. Her shoes were gone.

My pulse climbed.

The cemetery.

Nowadays, she spent most of her time at the cemetery.

The back doors of the estate slammed behind me as I crossed the gardens. Gravel crunched beneath my shoes. Cold night air burned my lungs.

The Capone cemetery stood behind the estate, hidden behind iron gates and old trees.

The gate was open. The security lights washed the rows of marble in pale white.

Every grave stood untouched. Except one. Fresh soil had been thrown across the grass. The shovel lay several feet away.

And in the middle of it...

Gianna.

She was on her knees beside Hazel's grave. Both of her hands were buried in the dirt. She wasn't digging carefully. She was clawing at the earth. Her fingers were caked with mud. She kept pulling handful after handful of soil away as though she could reach the coffin if she just worked fast enough.

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Chapter 659

My entire body went cold, "Gianna."

She didn't answer, she didn't even look at me. She kept digging. I reached her in seconds.

I caught both of her wrists and pulled her backward, "Stop."

She fought me immediately. She twisted violently, trying to throw herself back toward the grave.

"No!"

I wrapped both arms around her from behind. She kicked, struggled and tried to pull free with surprising strength.

"Gianna!"

"I have to get to her!"

"No!"

"You don't understand!"

"I understand enough."

She threw her head back against my shoulder, "Let me go!"

"No."

“I said let me go!”

She shoved at my chest with both hands. I tightened my hold before she could throw herself back into the open dirt.

“Stop this.”

Her breathing became ragged. She looked nothing like the quiet woman who had spent days staring into nothing. Her eyes were wild, “I have to see him!”

The words hit me so suddenly that my grip loosened for the smallest fraction of a second, “What?”

“My daddy!” she tried to pull away again, “I want to see my daddy!”‘

I stared at her.

She hit my chest with both fists, “Vincenzo wouldn’t let me!” another shove, “I just want my daddy!” her voice cracked so violently it barely sounded human, “I want to go home!”

Every word echoed through the cemetery.

“I don’t want to stay here anymore!” she pushed against me again, “I don’t want this house! I don’t want any of this! I want my family!”

She collapsed against me before she could hit the ground.

I caught her.

She grabbed handfuls of my shirt with shaking fingers, “I want my mom. I want my daddy. I want Jules. I don’t want to live here. I don’t want to be a Capone. You people stole my mother from me.”

Her fingers clutched my shirt harder.

“I hate this house and I hate all of you.”

She pushed away from me, looking down at Hazel’s grave.

“I wanted my father. You all said no. I wanted my mother. She died. I wanted my friends. They’re gone.”

She shook her head slowly.

“I keep reaching for people and they keep disappearing because of you people!”

The night suddenly felt colder.

She looked at me for a long time.

“I don’t recognize my life anymore. I don’t recognize myself. And... When I look at you, I don’t know if I see the man I fell in love with...”

She simply stared at the disturbed earth covering Hazel’s grave.

“I’m tired. I’m tired of trying to fit into a life that was never built for me.”

The words came slowly, as though each one had to force its way out.

“I’m tired of trying to be enough.”

I felt something tighten inside my chest, “You are enough.”

She laughed, “I don’t want this anymore. I don’t want to spend every day wondering whether I’m smart enough. Strong enough. Good enough. I don’t want to stand beside someone who’s always ten steps ahead of me.”

I felt my heartbeat slow, not because I was calm but because I was trying to understand every word before responding.

“Gianna-”

“I don’t want your perfect life,” she cut me off. “I’m exhausted.”

I stood motionless.

Every instinct inside me wanted to deny it. To tell her she was wrong but she wasn’t speaking from reason. She was speaking from grief.

“And I’m tired,” she whispered, “I don’t want anything to do with your perfect world anymore. I just,” she closed her eyes, “...I just want to go home.”

I felt something inside me fracture.

Fear.

A fear so unfamiliar that I couldn’t immediately identify it.

Until I did.

She wasn’t asking to leave the cemetery.

She wasn’t asking to leave the estate.

She was asking to leave me.

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy... or don’t. I guess that depends on how you survive this chapter.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 660

Raphael

X8

I stood at the far end of the loading floor, hands resting behind my back as I watched my men complete the final security sweep.

Every entrance had been covered, every rooftop had a sniper, every camera was live. Every radio channel had been tested twice. No one entered this building without my family knowing exactly where they stood.

And I didn’t want any surprises today.

Two black sedan rolled through the gate, they stopped precisely where I’d ordered them to. The engines died.

One of my soldiers stepped forward, opened the rear door, and Don Giovanni Toricelli climbed out.

His Underboss, Leone Caruso, stepped out of the second car before one of my guards immediately raised a hand.

“Only the Don.”

Leone’s jaw tightened.

Giovanni stopped him with the smallest shake of his head, “I’ll go alone.”

Leone stepped back. Giovanni walked toward me without rushing. His eyes moved once across the warehouse.

He stopped several feet away, neither of us offered a handshake, “You asked for a meeting,” he said evenly.

“I did.”

“I’m here.”

“If you’re expecting this to become a negotiation, it won’t.”

He gave me a nod, “I expected as much.”

“You want to see Gianna.”

“I do.”

“You will… but,” I continued, “you’ll see her on our terms.”

He gave one slow nod, “I’m listening.”

I stepped closer, “The meeting takes place at the cemetery. You don’t bring additional men. You don’t change the time. You don’t attempt to remove her from this property.”

He gave his head a shake, “I won’t…”

I looked directly into his eyes, “I don’t trust you… I don’t trust you because everything I know about Gianna tells me trust is something very few people have earned from her. You weren’t there when she needed you.”

His jaw tightened, “I know.”

“So, if tomorrow’s meeting causes her more pain than comfort there won’t be another one.”

His eyes never left mine, “I didn’t come here to cause my daughter more pain.”

I studied him for a long moment, “No man ever says he did.”

His jaw tightened, “I’ve made mistakes.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“I can’t change the years I lost.”

“No,” I took another step toward him, “But you can decide what kind of man she meets tomorrow.”

His eyes searched mine, “I intend to meet her as her father.”

“Good. But if Don Toricelli walks into that cemetery instead…” I let the silence finish the sentence.

“I understand the difference.”

My voice stayed level, “If she chooses to know you, I’ll respect that. If she chooses to walk away from you, you’ll respect that.”

He answered without hesitation, “I will.”

“You won’t pressure her. You won’t guilt her. You won’t use blood, family, or obligation to force your way into her life.”

His reply came just as quickly, “I won’t.”

I held his stare another few seconds, “I’m going to believe you.”

He seemed mildly surprised by that, “You are?”

I gave a single nod, “Because if you’re lying… you’ll only get one chance to disappoint her.”

His brow lowered slightly, “And after that?”

“After that… you stop being Gianna’s father in my eyes. I don’t care what name you carry. I don’t care how many men answer to you. I don’t care how much territory belongs to you. I’ll make sure you’re buried. The Capones don’t fear war, Don Toricelli. We were raised in it. If protecting Gianna costs us another one,” I gave a single, almost imperceptible nod, “…then we’ll be the ones deciding how it ends.”

“I get that,” he said with a single nod, “But if she decides she wants to spend a few days in Philadelphia with me?”

“We’ll discuss the arrangements.”

“And if she asks to stay longer?”

I answered without hesitation, “Then that decision will be hers.”

He studied my face, “You’d let her leave Chicago?”

“I’ll respect whatever decision Gianna makes but she won’t travel unprotected.”

His brow lifted slightly.

I continued, “If Gianna is under your roof, my men will still be watching. They won’t interfere with your time together, but they’ll be close enough to reach her before anyone else does.”

Giovanni’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“It’s not negotiable. Because if Gianna chooses to rebuild a relationship with you, I’ll respect it but understand the difference between respect... and permission.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 661

I glanced over my shoulder. Luca stood several feet away, watching us without interrupting. His expression gave nothing away.

I looked back at Giovanni, “You’ll have the opportunity to earn her trust. You won’t have the opportunity to abuse it.”

Giovanni let out a slow breath, “You’ve already decided I’m going to disappoint her.”

I didn’t answer immediately. I studied him instead. Everything about him told me he was disciplined, and dangerous. Everything about my instincts told me not to trust him.

Not yet.

Maybe not ever.

There was something about him that kept every instinct inside me alert but this wasn’t about me. It was about Gianna. And if seeing her father was something she needed...

I’d make sure she had that chance.

Even if every instinct I had told me to keep him as far away from her as possible.

“I think grief makes people reach for things they’ve wanted their entire lives and right now, she’s grieving. So until she can think clearly again, everyone around her answers to me. Even you.”

Giovanni couldn’t hide the faint smile that touched the corner of his mouth, “You’re more protective of her than I expected.”

Пet out a dry laugh, “Hazel trusted us and I simply understand that broken people are easiest to influence. I’m making sure no one-not even her father-mistakes her grief for permission.”

I stepped aside, creating just enough space for him to walk past me.

“This meeting is over.”

He didn’t move immediately, “So I wait.”

“Yes, Don Capone will contact you within the next few hours. And tomorrow, if my brother is satisfied with the arrangements… you’ll see your daughter.”

He accepted that without argument, “And if he isn’t?”

“Then tomorrow doesn’t happen.”

For the first time since he’d arrived, Giovanni looked almost disappointed, “I’ve waited years.”

“You can wait a few more hours.”

Defeatedly, he inclined his head, “I’ll answer Don Capone’s call.”

I turned toward the warehouse doors, “My men will escort you back to your cars. They’ll also escort you to the city limits if you decide to ignore the route we’ve assigned.”

A faint smile crossed Giovanni’s face, “You Capones don’t leave much to chance.”

“We don’t survive by leaving things to chance.”

He gave one last nod, “I’ll wait for the call.”

Without another word, he turned and walked toward the exit. The warehouse doors rolled open. His guards straightened the moment they saw him. Mine never lowered their weapons until both sedans disappeared beyond the gates.

Only after the steel doors closed again did Luca walk over. He stopped beside me, his eyes still on the empty entrance, “You know why I let him into the cemetery. I wasn’t thinking about Toricelli. I was thinking about Gianna and… you. I thought she’d appreciate it.”

“I think you made the right call.”

Luca raised an eyebrow, “You do?”

I gave a single nod, “She asked to see him again. She wouldn’t have done that if seeing him had brought her nothing.”

I stayed where I was for another moment, watching the now-empty loading bay.

“There was something else. We didn’t get a chance to talk yesterday but I went to see Aunt Alessia.”

Luca looked at me, “How is she?”

I smiled, “Glowing, happy... the same.” I reached into the inside pocket of my suit jacket, “There is... one thing.”

I pulled out a black envelope. It was expensive paper, perfectly sealed. The only thing ruining its otherwise elegant appearance was the bright red lipstick mark pressed onto the back.

I held it out to him, “Adelina gave me this.”

Luca didn’t move. His eyes dropped to the envelope.

“Before she handed it to me...” I continued in the same flat voice, “...she reapplied her lipstick,” I looked at the lipstick print, “Then she kissed the envelope.”

Luca stared at it as though I was holding a live grenade. After several long seconds, he sighed through his nose and finally took it between two fingers.

He held it as far away from himself as physically possible.

“I suppose,” I said quietly, “you don’t tell me everything either.”

His head turned toward me immediately, “What does that mean?”

I looked at the envelope, “It means, I wasn’t aware you had correspondence.”

His jaw tightened, “I don’t.”

Chapter noz

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 662

I looked down at the lipstick stain again, “It appears someone disagrees.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, “For the love of God... Do you have any idea how insane that girl is?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“We don’t even talk,” he held up the envelope, “She talks, I leave. She follows, I leave faster.”

I stared at him, I couldn’t even imagine Luca in that situation.

He grumbled something under his breath and then said, “She once sent flowers to my warehouse.”

I blinked, “What?”

“Then she somehow got into the training building.”

I frowned, “Security failed?”

“They didn’t fail,” Luca rubbed a hand over his face, “She baked cookies for every guard until they started letting her through the front gate.”

I was quiet, “That’s… effective.”

He looked down at the envelope again as though it had personally offended him, “She’s strange.”

He let out another slow breath before slipping the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket with obvious reluctance.

“I’m not opening it here.”

“I assumed you wouldn’t. If that envelope contains glitter,” I tilted my head, “…then I wish you luck.”

For the first time all day, Luca looked genuinely pissed off, “I hate that you find this amusing. I haven’t even opened the last three.”

“You kept them.”

His eyes narrowed, “I kept them as evidence.”

“Evidence of what?”

“That she’s completely unhinged.”

I nodded once, “Of course.”

He shot me a flat look, “You don’t believe me.”

I slipped both hands into my pockets, “I do, but if Dante ever finds out about this…”

Before I could finish, Luca grabbed the front of my suit jacket and pulled me half a step toward him, “He won’t.”

I looked down at the hand fisted in my collar, then back at him, “I wouldn’t be so confident.”

He narrowed his eyes, “Raphael.”

I paused just long enough to make him wait “She might decide to send the next letter through Dante instead.”

For a second, Luca simply stared at me. Then he released my collar with a look that suggested he was shopter e.

reconsidering whether we were actually brothers.

Gianna

I sat at my desk. I knew I had walked here. I remembered pulling out the chair. I remembered opening the notebook.

Everything after that felt… missing.

The page in front of me was white. My hand rested around the pen. At some point, it started moving. A straight line, another straight line.

Again.

Again.

Again.

I watched my hand the way I would’ve watched someone else’s. It didn’t feel connected to me. It simply… moved.

Down.

Lift.

Across.

Down.

Lift.

Across.

Time stretched strangely. A minute felt like an hour..An hour felt like a minute..I couldn't tell which one was true. My eyes stayed on the paper. The black ink appeared one line at a time.

I watched it happen without deciding to do it.

My hand already knew what came next, another line, then another, then another.

Mom was dead.

The thought drifted through my head without feeling like mine.

I tried to picture her face.

Instead, I saw the coffin.

Then dirt.

Then roses.

Then nothing.

Everything faded before it became real.

It was as if my mind kept closing a door every time something tried to enter. I couldn't remember what crying felt like. I knew I wanted to. I thought I wanted to. Maybe. I wasn't even sure about that anymore.

I looked down, another page was completely covered. I didn't remember filling it. I turned to the next one. The pen touched the paper again.

A chair beside me scraped softly against the wooden floor. The sound reached me slowly, as though it had traveled through water.

I didn't look. I knew someone had sat down. I know it must be him or maybe he was only in my head.

The notebook stayed exactly where it was. My hand kept moving. A shadow settled over part of the page.

"Gianna."

Salvatore's voice.

I stared at the paper. The pen stopped for a second, so it wasn't him. Then I started again.

“I’ve been trying to talk to you. I know you’re listening.”

Was I?

I wasn’t sure.

His words reached me whether they stayed was another question.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 663

“I said things, I shouldn’t have. I told you that you’d have to leave because I was angry. I was grieving. I wasn’t thinking like myself. I never meant you weren’t family.”

Family.

The word sounded strange.

“I made Hazel a promise. I promised her I’d look after both of her girls.”

My fingers tightened around the pen, the line I drew became darker, longer. It cut almost to the bottom of the page.

“I intend to keep that promise. I don’t care what happens. I don’t care who disagrees. Even if Raphael stands in front of me one day. I won’t walk away from the promise I made to your mother.”

My hand finally stopped, not because of his words, but because I’d reached the bottom of the page. I stared at the black line. It looked exactly like the others.

I turned the page. The paper made a soft sound beneath my fingers. The pen touched it again.

Salvatore watched me for a long time, “You don’t have to answer me. I only needed you to hear me.”

Hear him.

I wondered if I had.

His face sat somewhere at the edge of my vision. I knew he was there. I knew he was speaking but he didn't feel real.

Nothing did.

It felt as though there were thick glass between me and the rest of the world.

I blinked, the page was almost full again. I didn't remember drawing half of it.

"I can't let you see Giovanni."

The pen slowed.

"I loved your mother too much to stand by and let that happen. You don't understand everything yet but I made Hazel a promise. I'm trying to keep it. I'm trying to protect you, Gianna, even if you don't see it right now."

The pen stopped.

For the first time in what felt like forever.

Giovanni.

My dad.

Hazel.

My mom.

The words echoed slowly inside my head. Something inside me shifted, small but enough.

Who does he think he is?

My fingers tightened around the pen.

"You need to talk to Vincenzo," Salvatore continued softly. "Tell him you don't want to see Giovanni again. He's not your father, Gianna. He never will be."

The fog around me didn't disappear but it cracked just enough for something hot and sharp to push through the numbness.

Annoyance.

No...

Anger.

Salvatore must have noticed the way my hand had stopped. He leaned forward a little, “Gianna... I know more than you think I do. I know what that man put you through. I know he kept you away from your mother. I know he let years pass without bringing you home. I know enough to understand why Hazel spent so many nights crying over you.”

His voice grew softer, he shook his head and then blew out a breath.

I stared at the page.

The lines blurred together.

“She blamed herself every single day. I watched that woman break herself trying to find a way back to you. And when she finally got you back,” A tired smile crossed his face, “She finally started breathing again.”

I blinked, suddenly my skin started to feel... hotter, like I couldn’t breathe.

“I can’t pretend none of that happened. I can’t watch you walk back toward the man who caused so much damage and tell myself I’m honoring Hazel.”

My fingers curled tighter around the pen.

Damage.

“Maybe he’s changed,” Salvatore shrugged weakly, “Maybe he regrets every decision he ever made. I don’t know. What I do know is that I’ve seen what those years did to you.”

He looked at the notebook.

At the endless straight lines.

He swallowed, “And I can’t convince myself that the man who let all of that happen deserves another chance.”

Raphael had told me grief made people reach for what they’d been missing their whole lives.

Salvatore was telling me to let go of it.

To let go of...

Daddy.

My chest tightened, I tried to remember, I tried to remember the bad things. I found flashes, a locked door, crying, being alone.

Then...

A pair of hands lifting me when I was little. Someone carrying me on his shoulders. A deep laugh. A warm coat wrapped around me when it snowed.

The memories crashed into each other until I couldn't tell which ones were real anymore.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 664

My breathing became uneven. My pen snapped. The top half rolled across the desk. The bottom half stayed clenched in my fist. I looked down at the ink spreading over my fingers.

It took me several seconds to realize my hand was shaking.

Salvatore stayed quiet after the pen snapped. He didn't reach for me. He didn't try to take the broken piece from my hand. Raphael would, he would immediately, gently, take it all away from me but he wasn't here right now, Salvatore was.

Salvatore simply watched me for a while before speaking again, "I've been thinking. I've had a lot of time to think since Hazel..." he looked down at the floor for a moment, "I was wrong about one thing. I kept telling myself that you and Raphael shouldn't happen. But the more I think about it, the more I realize keeping you inside this family may have been the safest place for you."

The words drifted through the fog.

Safe.

I stared at the ink staining my fingers.

"I don't stand against the two of you anymore. But..."

But...

There is always a but.

"That doesn't mean I stopped worrying. Your situation isn't... ordinary. Neither is Raphael's. Raphael has been blessed in ways very few people are. He has a brilliant mind. The kind of qualities families spend generations trying to build," his voice remained matter-of-fact, "I've always wanted those qualities to continue."

He wasn't trying to be cruel, that was the frightening part. He was speaking his truth, and he believed every word.

"I wanted my grandchildren to inherit that. I wanted them to have the best chance possible," he rubbed a hand over his jaw, "And I was afraid. I was afraid that if Raphael chose..." he cut himself off, "...our family would carry struggles that could have been avoided."

His eyes dropped to the notebook. Then to the broken pen in my hand.

"I've watched how hard your life has been. You've fought battles most people will never understand. You've had to work twice as hard just to keep up," his voice softened, "I wouldn't wish that on a child."

Something inside my chest tightened.

Painfully.

"I don't want my grandchildren growing up fighting the same battles. I don't want them waking up every day feeling... different. I don't want them struggling the way you struggled. That isn't because I think less of you. It's because I've watched what it's cost you."

The words echoed against memories I hadn't asked for.

I was seven again.

"Why can't you read this?"

I was ten.

"You're smarter than this."

I was thirteen.

"Something isn't right with you."

My fingers curled tighter around the broken pen until the plastic dug into my palin.

He kept talking, "I know Raphael loves you. I can see it and I know you love him. I just don't want love to make either of you forget that children don't choose what they inherit."

The room disappeared again. His voice became distant and muffled like someone speaking from the other side of thick glass.

My eyes stayed fixed on the ink covering my fingers.

Wrong woman.

The words repeated themselves.

Over.

And over.

And over.

Something inside me, already cracked from everything I'd lost, splintered a little further. The broken pen slipped from my hand. It hit the desk with a quiet click.

I kept staring at the black ink on my skin. For one moment, I couldn't tell whether it was ink or whether my mind had started bleeding again.

The room was so quiet that I could hear the clock on the wall.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

My voice came out flat, "I want to see my dad."

Salvatore closed his eyes for a brief moment, "Gianna—"

"I want to see him," I finally lifted my head. My eyes met his for the first time since he'd walked into the room, There isn't anyone who gets to decide otherwise. The only person whose opinion mattered... is gone."

The words burned as they left me.

"If Mom didn't want me to go to him, then maybe she shouldn't have left. I wouldn't be standing here trying to figure everything out by myself."

Salvatore stared at me. Pain crossed his face so quickly it almost disappeared again, "Don't say that. I'm here with you, for you."

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 665

“I don’t want you, I want my dad...” I whispered.

He exhaled slowly and rubbed both hands over his face before letting them fall, “Then you’re leaving me with no choice. If you’re determined to see Giovanni, I’m going to tell Vincenzo. I’m going to tell Raphael too. Everything. Everything your father put you through.”

My fingers twitched.

“Hazel begged me never to bring it up. She believed forcing those memories back on you would only hurt you again but if you’ve forgotten enough to think walking back into his life is safe then maybe you deserve to know exactly why your mother spent years trying to keep him away from you.”

For a second, I couldn’t hear anything. Then I turned my head toward him completely.

“If you do that... I’ll tell Raphael everything.”

Salvatore frowned, “And what would that be?”

“I’ll tell him what you said to me,” his expression changed immediately, “I’ll tell him you threatened me. I’ll tell him you told me to stay away from him. I’ll tell him you called me his bed warmer. I’ll tell him you called me a whore.”

His face lost its color.

“And I’ll tell him that the day my mother died,” I leaned forward slightly, “You told me to leave this house.”

“Gianna-”

“No,” I cut him off, “You wanted honesty, so let’s be honest.”

His mouth opened but he didn’t know what to say, his frown deepened.

“I know Raphael. You know he doesn’t trust you. You know he still carries his mother’s death with him every single day.”

Salvatore’s shoulders stiffened.

I didn’t stop, “And you know how protective he is of me,” my voice stayed frighteningly even, “So ask yourself something. If he hears your version and then he hears mine... If it came down to you standing on one side and me on the other, who do you think Raphael would choose to believe?”

Salvatore looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he leaned back in his chair, “I never wanted us to become enemies.”

I let out a breath, “We’re not but we’re not family either.”

His face fell, “I’ve failed you.”

I looked back at the notebook. The ink on my fingers had started to dry.

He rubbed his forehead, “You think this is easy for me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I buried my wife last week,” his shoulders sagged, “I loved Hazel. I still love her. Everything I’m doing is because

Poplar 665 of her.”

That made me look at him again, “No, it’s because of you.”

He stared at me, confused.

“You know I never liked you. I never wanted Mom to marry you,” I swallowed, “I told her you got your first wife killed... and one day you’d get her killed too.”

His face went pale.

“She refused to believe me and now she’s dead. So tell me... who is the bigger monster?”

I paused.

“My father... the man who let my mother go or you, the man who leaves death behind every woman he touch touches?”

“That’s not fair,” Salvatore said, his voice tightening, “Isabella’s death was an accident. Hazel was already sick.”

“Maybe, but Raphael doesn’t see it that way. You remember what happened at the funeral? You remember what Raphael did when you put your hand on me.”

The memory passed between us without either of us saying it.

“That was before he knew anything. Imagine what happens when he learns the truth. He’ll never look at you the same way again.”

I could see it in his face.

He knew I wasn’t wrong.

“Every choice you’ve made has led us here. If you want any chance of keeping your family together, then stop trying to control my life.”

I stepped away from the desk.

“And stay out of my way.”

He simply stood there, staring at me, as though he had finally realized the frightened girl he’d expected to persuade was no longer standing in front of him.

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy the update! I know we’ve been in our grieving era for a little while now, but I promise we won’t be staying here much longer. We’ll be moving into the next phase of the story very soon.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 666

Gianna

Everyone had gone to bed hours ago.

I stood alone in the kitchen, one hand resting against the cold marble countertop. The lights above the island were the only ones still on.

I stared at the knife block.

I didn’t move. I just... stared. My fingers slowly curled against the edge of the counter until my knuckles turned white.

Mom’s voice drifted into my head, “Promise me.”

The memory was so clear it almost hurt. She had held my face between her hands. Her eyes had been wet.

“No matter how hard life gets... promise me you won’t hurt yourself again.”

I had promised, not because she forced me but because she'd looked terrified. Terrified of what might happen to me if she wasn't there anymore. I hadn't realized how much she had held me together simply by being beside me.

Now that she was gone...

I finally understood that her presence had been the one thing keeping my mind from falling apart.

I squeezed my eyes shut, "I promised..."

The words barely left my mouth. Everything inside me wanted the noise in my head to stop, just for a minute, just long enough to breathe.

I dug my nails into my palm instead.

"No..." I whispered to myself, "You promised."

The words sounded weak and far away. I opened my eyes again. The knife block was still there.

My breathing became uneven. My hand lifted almost without me realizing it.

"What are you doing?"

The voice hit me like cold water. I flinched so hard my heart slammed against my ribs. I turned around immediately. Jules stood in the doorway. Claire stood beside her, one hand resting gently on Jules' shoulder.

I forced my face into something that almost looked like a smile, "Nothing," my voice sounded so strange, "I... couldn't sleep," I looked toward the refrigerator, "I thought I'd find something to eat!"

Claire studied me for a second, then she smiled softly, as if choosing not to push, "Perfect timing," she looked down at Jules, "This little one couldn't sleep either."

Jules nodded, "My stomach is awake."

Claire laughed quietly, "So is mine."

She walked into the kitchen and, without any effort at all, lifted Jules onto the countertop.

Jules giggled even though her eyes were swollen, "You're so strong!"

Claire playfully flexed her small, slender arm, "I've worked hard for these muscles.'

Jules' eyes grew wide, "Really?"

"Mhm. I learned how to fight. I train. I lift heavy weights and sometimes I carry little sisters who think they're too big to be carried."

"I'm not little," Jules protested, laughing.

Claire smiled, "Of course not, but you'll always be light enough for me."

Jules wrapped her arms around Claire's neck for a quick hug before letting go. Watching them like this felt strange

Jules was smiling widely.

Her shoulders weren't shaking. She looked... safe. She looked cared for.

Mom would have liked that.

Claire reached for the bread, then paused. She walked over to me instead. Before I could step back, both of her hands gently cupped my face. Her palms were warm. She searched my eyes for a long moment.

"Can I make you something too?"

I shook my head, "I'm okay."

She smiled sadly, "I know but that's not what I asked."

I looked away, "I'm not hungry."

Claire didn't remove her hands, "Please don't disappear into that bedroom again, Gianna. You don't have to carry all of this by yourself."

I swallowed.

She brushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear, "Grief needs air. If you lock it away, it doesn't disappear. It waits. And one day it comes back all at once."

Her thumb gently brushed my cheek. Behind her, Jules looked between us quietly.

Claire finally lowered her hands, "I won't force you to stay here right now but when you're ready... come sit with us. You don't even have to talk. You can just... be."

Claire went back to making a sandwich for Jules. Jules was swinging her legs against the cabinet, chattering away the same way she used to with Mom.

Claire laughed softly and for a moment... It sounded just like the kind of laugh Mom used to fill the kitchen with.

I watched them for a long time.

It felt like I was standing outside a window, looking into someone else's life.

A home.

A family.

Something warm.

Something I couldn't seem to step back into.

Claire caught me looking, and she smiled again. The smile hurt more than if she had looked away because everyone kept reaching for me. Everyone kept trying but I couldn't seem to reach back.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 667

Why?

Why was she being kind to me?

I hadn't earned it.

The thought settled into my chest so naturally that it didn't even feel like a thought anymore.

It felt like a fact.

Mom was gone.

Mama D was gone.

Brianna.

Emma.

Morgan.

One after another.

Everyone I loved either left or disappeared. Maybe... Maybe people weren't supposed to stay with me. Maybe that was the pattern.

Maybe I was-no. I stopped the thought before it finished but another one took its place.

Raphael.

He deserved someone who wasn't broken. Someone who didn't carry grief like it had become another organ inside her body.

Claire reached for another slice of bread, "You sure you don't want one?"

I shook my head, "I'm sure."

She didn't argue. She simply nodded and that almost made it worse for me because she wasn't angry, she wasn't impatient, she wasn't asking for anything back.

She was just... being kind.

Kindness always felt borrowed.

Like eventually someone would remember they had given it to the wrong person and come back to take it away.

Mom never had. She had loved me without asking me to earn it.

The memory hit so suddenly that I had to grip the edge of the counter.

She was the only one.

And now...

She was gone.

A heaviness settled over me. It wasn't the kind that made you cry. It was the kind that convinced you the world would be better if you stopped asking it for anything.

No comfort.

No love.

No patience.

No second chances.

Because people like me... people like me were exhausting. Eventually everyone figured that out.

I looked at Jules again.

She laughed when Claire cut her sandwich into little triangles. Mom used to do that. Claire didn't know. She had simply done it.

Jules smiled so brightly that something inside me tightened. She was safe. She was being cared for and that mattered more than anything else.

Maybe...

Maybe that was enough.

Maybe Jules deserved the warmth that had disappeared from my life.

Maybe Claire deserved to be appreciated.

Maybe Raphael deserved peace.

Maybe everyone deserved something good.

Everyone...

Except me.

The thought slipped into my mind so quietly that I almost didn't notice it.

Then Claire looked up. Our eyes met again. She didn't say anything, but she simply opened one of the kitchen chairs with her foot.

An empty seat.

Waiting.

For reasons I couldn't understand. She still believed I belonged there.

I heard footsteps before I saw anyone. A second later, Vincenzo walked into the kitchen.

Aurelia rested comfortably on one of his arms, her tiny arms wrapped around his neck. Killian slept against his other shoulder, one small fist curled around the fabric of Vincenzo's shirt.

His eyes searched the room. The moment they landed on Claire, the hard edge that usually lived on his face softened, "There you are."

He walked straight to her. Without a word, he leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss against her forehead.

“I turned around for two minutes and you disappeared,” he murmured. “Next time, tell me before you leave the room.”

Claire smiled apologetically, “Jules couldn’t sleep. She said she was hungry.”

He looked at her for another second, “I was worried because I didn’t know where you were.”

Claire reached up, smiling, “I’m sorry.”

He kissed her forehead one more time before carefully lowering Aurelia onto the countertop beside Jules.

Aurelia immediately scooted closer to her, “Jules!”

Jules laughed, “You woke up!”

“I wasn’t sleepy anymore.”

The two little girls immediately began whispering to each other about something only they understood.

Vincenzo shifted Killian higher against his shoulder before reaching over and gently pinching Jules’ cheek.

“So…” a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, “You were hungry enough to wake the whole house?

Jules giggled, “My tummy was.”

“I see,” he nodded thoughtfully, “So it’s your stomach’s fault.”

She nodded, “Yes.”

“I’ll have to speak to it later.”

Jules burst into another fit of laughter and it almost felt like nothing terrible had happened.

Then Vincenzo’s eyes found me, his smile became gentler, “I’m glad to see you out of that bedroom, piccolina.”

The nickname settled somewhere deep inside me. Mom used to smile whenever he called me that. He adjusted Killian with one arm and walked closer.

“How are you doing?”

I didn’t answer. He didn’t seem bothered by it, instead, he rested one hand lightly against the edge of the counter beside me.

“Do you need anything? Anything at all?” He asked and waited. When I still didn’t say a word, his eyes searched my face, “If you need to leave this house for a while, I’ll take you... for fresh air. You only have to ask.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 668

Claire watched us without speaking. Jules handed Aurelia half of her sandwich as if sharing it were the most important thing in the world.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. Vincenzo didn’t push. He simply nodded once, as though silence was an answer too.

“We’re here whenever you’re ready.”

I couldn’t stay in that kitchen any longer. It was too much. I slipped out quietly before anyone could stop me.

I climbed the stairs without looking back. I heard someone call my name. The sound faded behind me until all I could hear were my own footsteps against the wooden floor.

I reached my bedroom door. My hand rested on the handle for a few seconds before I pushed it open.

The room was dim, only the bedside lamp was on. Raphael sat at the edge of my bed, one ankle resting over the opposite knee, his phone in one hand. His jacket was folded neatly beside him. His tie had been loosened but everything else about him was still precise.

I stopped in the doorway. He looked up the moment he heard the door. Our eyes met and he stood up immediately. He slipped his phone into his pocket without taking his eyes off me.

The lamp behind him cast a warm light around his shoulders. His shirt was still perfectly pressed despite the long day. His hair had fallen slightly over his forehead. Even exhausted, he looked like someone who belonged in a world that had never been touched by chaos.

I didn’t.

I looked down at my own hands. There was still dried ink beneath my fingernails. A faint smear of dirt from Mom’s grave stained the cuff of my sweater. My hair hadn’t been brushed. I couldn’t even remember changing my clothes.

The distance between us suddenly felt enormous.

Raphael took one careful step toward me, just enough to close a little of the space, “Gianna…”

He lifted his hand and my heart tightened. My body froze. A strange panic spread through my chest. I looked at him and everything about him seemed…

Right.

Perfect.

Salvatore’s voice echoed inside my head.

“Raphael has been blessed in ways very few people are. He has a brilliant mind. The kind of qualities families spend generations trying to build. I’ve always wanted those qualities to continue.”

The words wrapped themselves around my thoughts like vines. Raphael deserved someone who didn’t have to fight herself every single day.

I couldn’t let him touch me, not like this, not when all I could think about was everything I wasn’t.

I took one small step backward. It wasn’t much barely half a step but Raphael saw it. His hand stopped in the air. His eyes searched my face.

Then very slowly, he lowered his hand back to his side. He didn’t ask why. He didn’t move closer again. He simply stood there, leaving the space between us exactly as I’d created it.

His jaw tightened almost invisibly. I knew that look. He was thinking, trying to solve something that didn’t make sense, trying to understand a problem with no pattern.

And I hoped he wouldn’t because if he looked closely enough… He might finally see what I’d started believing.

That I wasn’t someone worth reaching for anymore.

Every part of me wanted to lean into him, to let him hold me, to pretend everything inside me wasn’t falling apart. I wanted him close more than anything.

I just couldn’t understand why someone like him would still want someone like me.

He stood where he was.

Giving me space.

Giving me a choice.

Because that was who Raphael was.

He would rather stand there breaking quietly than force me to take one step I wasn’t ready to take.

And watching him lower his hand felt like watching another piece of my heart fall to the floor.

Raphael nodded to himself, “I have something to tell you. I spoke to Vincenzo... and I also spoke to your father.”

My heart stumbled, “What?”

“I arranged a meeting.”

For a second, I thought I had heard him wrong, “You,” my voice barely worked, “...you did?”

He gave one slow nod, “You wanted to see him.”

I stared at him, “You convinced Vincenzo?”

“It wasn’t easy but it happened.”

I couldn’t make sense of it. Vincenzo had refused. He’d looked me straight in the eyes and said, “If Hazel had trusted Giovanni, she would’ve left you in his care instead of mine. I trust Hazel’s judgment more than yours, and she wanted you here. You’re not going anywhere.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 669

Yet...

Raphael had gone to them anyway.

He watched me carefully, “There are conditions.”

I nodded almost immediately.

“The meeting will take place in the Capone cemetery.”

I blinked, “The cemetery?”

He nodded, “Your mother will be there. I wanted the first meeting to happen where Hazel rests. So if, after seeing your father,” he paused, “You decide you want to leave Chicago, you’ll make that choice knowing exactly what you’re leaving behind. Hazel, your family here and Jules.”

I opened my mouth to say something but his expression became serious again and that shit me up.

“Jules stays in Chicago. She won’t be meeting Giovanni ever in her life. She won’t be traveling to Philadelphia. That isn’t open for discussion.”

My chest tightened, for one brief, painful moment, I wondered if I could really live without my little sister but it would only be temporary...

He gave his head a shake, “No one is forcing you to stay but no one is forcing you to leave either. If, after tomorrow, you still want to go to Philadelphia,” he drew a slow breath, “...that decision will be yours.”

He took one careful step closer. This time he stopped before I felt the need to step back.

“But there is something I need from you first.”

I looked up, “What?”

“The truth.”

A knot formed in my stomach.

His eyes searched mine, “Why did Hazel spend so many years keeping you away from Giovanni?”

I felt my pulse in my throat.

“What happened?” he asked it softly, “What did he do? To your mother or to you?”

My fingers curled tightly into the sleeves of my sweater, “Nothing.”

His expression hardened. For a moment, the gentle man in front of me disappeared, leaving only the Capone Made Man.

His eyes sharpened as though he were questioning someone tied to a chair instead of the woman he loved, “I don’t believe you.”

I swallowed, “My parents’ marriage was arranged,” my voice sounded distant, “It happened before the Chicago- Cosa Nostra war. My mom was five. My dad was seven at the time. They were promised to each other before either of them understood what marriage even meant,” I lowered my eyes, “It didn’t last. When they divorced, they fought over me. My mother wanted full custody. My father refused to give me up. Co-parenting was out of the question because of the war. They spent years trying to keep me. My mom believed I belonged with her. My dad believed I belonged with him,” I forced myself to meet his eyes, “That’s all.”

Raphael stayed silent long enough to make me uncomfortable, “That’s all?”

I nodded, “Yes.”

He studied me. There wasn’t accusation in his eyes, only doubt, “I don’t believe that’s the whole story.”

My stomach twisted, “It is.”

He shook his head ever so slightly, “Every time Giovanni’s name comes up, something changes. You stop looking at me. You stop breathing normally. You answer too quickly.”

I felt my heartbeat climbing, “There isn’t anything else.”

He held my gaze, “I’ve never lied to you, Gianna. I’ve told you things about myself that I’ve never told anyone. I trusted you with them. Now, I’m asking for the same trust. Please, tell me the truth.”

I looked down at the floor, the lie tasted bitter, “It is the truth.”

When I looked back up, Raphael was still watching me. He was waiting for me to change my mind.

But I couldn’t, not yet.

So I held his gaze and lied to the only person I had never wanted to lie to.

Raphael was quiet for several more seconds, then he gave a slow nod, “You’re lying. I can’t prove it today but I will one way or another.”

I sucked in a sharp breath.

He held my gaze, “I’m letting this go for now but I want you to understand something. I’ve never been afraid of the truth. I don’t care how ugly it is. I don’t care who it hurts. I can deal with the truth,” His jaw tightened, “What I can’t deal with... is being lied to by the one person I chose to trust without hesitation. I gave you that trust willingly. I expected you to give me the same.”

Shame settled heavily in my chest. He deserved the truth. He deserved better than this... better than me.

He drew a slow breath, “And whether you realize it or not, you’re breaking my heart,” his expression barely changed when he said those words, “I don’t think you even understand how much.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 670

I did.

I understood exactly what I was doing.

I just didn’t know how to stop.

ver

I saw him before he saw me.

He was sitting alone on one of the stone benches at the edge of the Capone cemetery. His black coat blended into the gray afternoon. His hat rested beside him.

His hands were folded over the top of his cane, though I knew he didn’t need it. He had always carried one when he met other Dons. It was part of the image.

Part of being Don Giovanni Toricelli.

Two Capone soldiers stood several yards behind him.

My feet started moving. Halfway there... I stopped.

Mom.

Her grave was only a few feet away. Fresh flowers still covered the stone. The soil hadn’t even settled yet.

I walked over to her instead. For a long moment, I simply stared at her name carved into the marble.

Hazel Capone.

Beloved Wife. Devoted Mother.

Loved Beyond Death.

It still didn't feel real. I slowly crouched down. My fingertips brushed one of the white roses, "I'm sorry, Mom. I know you would've hated me for reaching out to him but I have to. I'm sorry."

The words barely escaped my lips. I closed my eyes.

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing," a lump settled in my throat. "I just... I need to know if I've been believing the wrong story all these years."

The wind stirred softly through the cemetery. I stood again, looked at her one last time. Then turned toward the man waiting for me.

My father.

Six years.

It had been six years.

When I finally stopped in front of him, he looked up. His eyes searched my face so carefully that it almost felt like he was afraid I would disappear if he blinked.

Then, a small, tired smile appeared. He slowly stood, "Madonna mia..." (My God...) He shook his head once, "Non riesco ancora a crederci." (I still can't believe it.) "Sei davvero tu..." (It's really you...)

My eyes burned, not with tears, just with something too complicated to name.

He gestured toward the empty space beside him, "Siediti con me, piccola mia." (Sit with me, my little girl.)

I hesitated at first, then I sat down. Neither of us knew what to do with our hands or our eyes or six years of silence.

"So," my voice sounded unfamiliar, "How have you been?"

His smile softened, "I've been better."

A quiet breath escaped me, “How’s Gio and Perla?”

Something flickered across his face but it was gone almost as quickly as it appeared, “They’re well. They’re both doing well.”

I nodded, “I’m glad.”

He looked down at his hands, as he spoke, “I looked for you for years. I never stopped. I hired investigators. I paid people who promised they knew where you were. I chased leads across three states.”

He rubbed one hand across his face. He looked toward the Capone estate in the distance.

“If I’d known the Capones were protecting you. I would’ve come years ago. I wasn’t staying away because I didn’t want you. I was staying away because I couldn’t find you. I want you to know that.”

His expression carried something I had never seen before, not authority, not the confidence of a Don. Just my daddy...

He looked older. There were lines around his eyes that hadn’t been there six years ago. His beard carried a little gray.

“I’ve imagined this moment thousands of times. I always thought I’d know what to say. I even imagined I’d spend the first five minutes scolding you for running away,” he let out a quiet breath and shook his head, “But the second I saw you none of those words mattered anymore.”

Without saying anything else, he gently took one of my hands between both of his palms. My fingers were ice cold. He rubbed his thumb across the back of my hand, trying to warm it.

He turned toward me fully, “You’re my daughter. You always have been and I’ve spent six years living with an empty seat at my table. I’ve buried men. I’ve lost friends. I’ve made enemies but none of it,” he shook his head, “. none of it came close to losing you.”

Something inside my chest shifted.

“I never wanted to send you away,” his jaw tightened, “I never wanted another city raising my little girl. You were always supposed to stand beside me. You belong to me. My name. My family. My legacy.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 671

He looked toward the cemetery for a brief moment before looking back at me.

“One day all of it was meant to become yours.”

I blinked.

“You were raised to understand this life,” he siniled faintly, “When Gio Junior was born. I listened to tradition My advisers. The old men who think a son must always inherit before a daughter,” his jaw flexed, “So named him my heir and that was my mistake.”

I couldn’t stop staring at him. This wasn’t the father I remembered leaving behind. The years had changed him It looked as though living without me had worn him down in ways no war ever could.

“He isn’t you.”

The words were blunt.

Matter-of-fact.

“The way you handled everything I threw at you. He isn’t strong like you. He doesn’t carry responsibility the way you did. I don’t need another son. I already have one. I want my brave little girl back.”

The cemetery disappeared.

I thought about Salvatore, about him sitting in my room, talking about Raphael, talking about children, talking about bloodlines about protecting his son.

Raphael deserved better.

Raphael deserved perfection.

Raphael deserved someone who wasn’t...

Me.

Salvatore had never said I wasn’t worth loving but somehow, that was all I’d heard.

Now my father sat beside me, looking at me as though losing me had been the greatest mistake of his life, not because of what I could give him, not because of my last name.

Because I was his daughter.

The thought hurt. It hurt because I wanted to believe him. More than anything. But somewhere along the way... I’d stopped believing good things about myself.

My lips trembled, “I…” the word broke apart before it could become a sentence, “I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t think… I ever did.”

His grip around my hand tightened.

I shook my head, “I’m not the brave girl you remember. I’m not the daughter you think you’re getting back.”

I laughed once. It sounded so empty.

“Mom lied to me,” the words slipped out before I could stop them.

His entire body stilled, “What?”

“She lied. She kept telling me I was enough. She kept saying I didn’t have to change. That I was perfect exactly the way I was,” I squeezed my eyes shut, “But she was wrong.”

The sentence shattered somewhere in the middle.

“I’m not enough. I’ve never been enough. I keep trying. I try so hard. I study harder. I work harder. I try to be… better but it never feels like enough.”

In one gentle pull, my father drew me toward him. I didn’t fight him. The moment his arm settled around my shoulders, everything inside me broke. I buried my face against his chest. A sob escaped before I could swallow it back.

His hand moved slowly over my hair, not rushing me, not trying to stop the tears, just, holding me.

“Gianna…” his voice was barely above a whisper, “What are you saying?”

I clutched the front of his coat, “I want you to fix me, Daddy,” the words came out between sobs, “Please…” I shook against him, “Please fix me.”

His hand stopped moving. I pulled back just enough to look at him. My vision blurred with tears.

“You have so many people,” Hope mixed with desperation, “Please tell me you found something. Please tell me there’s a cure. I don’t want to be like this anymore. I want to be enough.”

I struggled to breathe.

“I just… I want to be enough,” I lowered my head again, “…for someone.”

I didn’t say Raphael’s name but inside my own head… I knew exactly who I meant.

“I want... him to look at me and not feel like he’s settling.”

Then there was silence. The color drained from my father’s face. His jaw was locked so tightly I could hear a muscle tick.

I clung to him a little tighter.

“Daddy,” another sob escaped me, “Please...”

I searched his face one last time, still hoping for an answer that would change everything.

“Please fix me.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Fun fact: the only reason I kept Salvatore alive all this time was because I already knew Raphael would eventually get his own step-siblings romance... and well...

Here we are.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 672

Gentle Note: This chapter contains a few moments of dark humor that reference neurodevelopmental conditions. The jokes come from the characters’ personalities and the way this fictional family teases one another, not from a place of ridicule or disrespect. They are never meant to diminish or mock anyone living with these conditions. Please read with care if this is a sensitive topic for you.

Raphael

I stood a few feet away, my hands resting in my pockets as I watched the scene unfold without saying a word.

Ciro was strapped upright against one of the reinforced support columns. Heavy chains wrapped around his wrists and chest, keeping him from moving more than a few inches.

His shirt was stained with sweat.

There was dried blood at the corner of his mouth from where Adriano had already hit him once, not to punish him, but to remind him that this wasn’t a conversation.

It was an interrogation.

Vincenzo stood near the center of the warehouse floor. His expression gave away nothing.

Beside him stood Luca. His arms were folded across his chest, his face carved from stone as he watched Ciro without the smallest hint of sympathy.

“I didn’t tell them! Fuck! You think I would do that?! I’m not an idiot! I swear on everything I have-I didn’t.”

Adriano tilted his head, “You expect that to be enough?”

“No,” Ciro swallowed, “But it’s the truth.”

His eyes moved toward Vincenzo.

“Don Vincenzo…” his voice cracked, “I would never give away one of our safe locations. You all know me. I was raised in this family. I’ve been taught since I was a kid what happens to men who talk,” he shook his head, “I’m not stupid. I’m not a traitor.”

Adriano didn’t react, “Leone Caruso had you.”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

Ciro drew a slow breath, “He questioned me. When I refused to answer, his men got rough.”

He looked down for a moment before lifting his head again.

“They wanted names, locations, safe houses. They wanted anything connected to the Capones.”

Adriano nodded, “And?”

“I gave them nothing. I’m trained for this, Don Vincenzo, you trained me for this,” Ciro’s eyes hardened,” You think I’d crack because someone hit me? I know what my job is. I know what silence costs.”

Luca remained perfectly still.

Adriano continued, “Then explain how Giovanni Toricelli arrived at our gates.”

“I don’t know. I really fucking don’t.”

I let out a slow breath. He wasn't lying. At least, not about this. Which meant Giovanni Toricelli had fed us exactly what he wanted us to believe.

I looked directly at Ciro, "Clear your head. We're starting over. From the first moment they took you. Leave nothing out."

Ciro nodded, "When they couldn't get anything out of me, Caruso kept me locked in one of their underground cells for several days," he frowned as he searched his memory, "Nothing happened, no questions, no torture, no pressure. It was almost like they were waiting for someone to make a decision."

He swallowed.

"Then Don Giovanni showed up. I heard him talking to Leone before they reached my cell."

Ciro looked at me.

"Caruso told him he'd seen Gianna."

My attention sharpened, "Where?"

"In New York," he added, "At a restaurant. And he told him that Salvatore Capone was with her. There was Capone security around them that's why he couldn't get to her. I think..." He hesitated, "I think that was the moment Giovanni realized Gianna was under Capone protection."

I took one slow step toward him, "What happened next?"

"Giovanni came to my cell himself."

"How long after that conversation?"

"Minutes."

I raised an eyebrow, "Five? Ten?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Guess."

"Five."

I nodded once, "He came in alone?"

"No."

“Who was with him?”

“Two soldiers stayed outside.”

“Inside.”

“Yes.”

“What did he do first?”

Ciro frowned, “He told them to take the chains off.”

I kept my eyes on him, “Did you ask why?”

“No.”

“Were you afraid?”

Ciro seemed unfazed, “No”

“What happened after they removed the chains?”

“They helped me stand. They took me upstairs to a room. They brought in a doctor who treated me and then they left me there again,” he explained.

“When did you see him again?”

“That evening.”

“And?”

“They brought me food.”

I didn’t react, “You ate?”

“I thought it might be poisoned but then Giovanni himself took a bite out of everything and I was starving. So I ate.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 673

I nodded slowly, “They never locked you back in the cell?”

“No,” he looked between all of us, “Then he started asking about Gianna.”

My attention sharpened.

“What exactly did he ask?” Vincenzo spoke for the first time.

Ciro looked toward him immediately, “He wanted to know whether she was safe. If she’d been treated well. If she was happy. I told him nothing. I didn’t even confirm she was alive. He kept asking. I kept refusing.”

Adriano crossed his arms, “Then?”

“They knocked me unconscious,” his brows pulled together, “When I woke up, I was already in Chicago. I don’t know where they kept me. I don’t know how long I was asleep. I only know we were here. They were already in Chicago three days before Ms. Hazel died.”

I nodded, “Go on.”

His breathing became heavier, “During those three days, Giovanni kept trying. He offered money. He offered protection. He told me no one would ever know,” a bitter laugh escaped Ciro, “As if I’d sell out my family. I refused every single time. I never gave him an address. I never pointed at a map. I never described the estate. I never said a word.”

Vincenzo sighed, “You want me to believe that?”

“I’m asking you to trust the man your family trained me to be, Don Capone. I never knew where they were taking me. Every time they moved me, they blindfolded me. I couldn’t have led anyone back here even if

I’d wanted to.”

Adriano stepped closer, “Then how did he find us?”

“I don’t know!” Ciro’s breathing became ragged, “I’ve asked myself that same question every hour since!”

He looked desperately toward Vincenzo.

“One minute, he was still trying to convince me. The next, he stopped asking. He looked at me like he’d already figured it out.”

“And when did he stop?” I asked

“Two nights before he showed up here,” Ciro frowned at the memory, “I remember thinking... Why did he stop? He didn’t need me anymore. I don’t know how. I don’t know when but somehow, he already knew.”

Ciro’s shoulders sagged. He looked directly at Vincenzo, his eyes pleading.

“I’ve worn the Capone name my entire life,” His voice shook, but his eyes never left Vincenzo, “I’ve spilled blood for this famiglia. I’ve buried brothers for this famiglia. And I’d gladly spill my own before I ever betrayed it.”

He drew a hard breath.

“Our home... that’s where little Aurelia sleeps,” His jaw tightened, “You know what she means to me. She thinks of me as one of her uncles. I would rather have my tongue cut out than speak a single word that could put her-or anyone in this family-in danger.”

He shook his head.

“I would never betray the Capones. I would never dishonor my oath. I swore Omertà before God and before this famiglia and I intend to die keeping that oath. You can question my judgment. You can question my decisions. You can question the fact that I stupidly got caught but please... don’t question my loyalty.”

Vincenzo simply continued watching him.

People assumed lies came from words. They didn’t. Words were easy. Bodies were honest. Ciro had repeated the same timeline four different times, not once had he changed the order, not once had he tried to improve his story after hearing our questions.

When people lied, they usually filled silence. They explained too much. They added details no one had asked for because they were trying to make the lie stronger.

Ciro hadn’t done that. Every answer had been short. Every missing piece had stayed missing. He admitted when he didn’t know something instead of inventing it.

His pulse had only jumped when we questioned his loyalty, not when we questioned his story.

Fear of dying...

I expected.

Fear of being called a traitor...

That was different.

I looked at Vincenzo, “Ciro believes every word he’s saying. Which means either he’s the best liar I’ve ever questioned or Giovanni Toricelli found our doorstep without a single word from him.”

I already knew which answer my mind believed.

And that made Giovanni far more dangerous than I’d first assumed.

1&1

Gianna

1&1

The children’s museum had been closed to the public for the day.

TLY

Only the Capone family was inside.

The sound of children’s laughter echoed through the building as Aurelia raced toward an indoor climbing castle with Jules close behind. Killian and Nero sat in their strollers, Killian was happily chewing on a rubber giraffe that Nero tried to take it from him while Claire and Maddie followed after the children.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 674

Capone soldiers were everywhere.

No one would get anywhere near the family.

It was impossible.

I stayed a few steps behind everyone else. They had gotten used to me wandering off. As long as I stayed inside the secured building, nobody seemed worried.

My eyes wandered across the lobby until they stopped on the phone sitting behind the front desk.

My heart began beating faster. I knew the number. He gave it to me the other day before he left. I had repeated it to myself every night until I no longer needed to think about it.

Dad’s number.

I glanced over my shoulder.

Claire was helping Aurelia onto a small carousel. The guards were watching the entrances as I slipped down the hallway.

When I reached the phone, my fingers trembled as I lifted the receiver, then hurriedly, I dialed the number

I had memorized.

“Pronto?” his voice came through the receiver. (Hello?)

My throat closed, “Daddy.”

There was silence at first, then I heard him breathe, “Gianna...”

I closed my eyes and I wasn’t standing in the middle of a lobby anymore.

I was fifteen again.

“Why did you do that? I asked you to help me,” my voice came out sharper than I meant it to, “I was begging you. I was crying. I needed my dad...” I swallowed hard, “And you turned around and walked away.”

His breathing grew heavier on the other end of the line, “I didn’t walk away from you.”

“You did.”

“I chose not to give you what you were asking for.”

A bitter laugh escaped me, “Wow... now you care?!”

The line went silent again and when he finally spoke, his voice was lower, “I’ve been thinking of our conversation more times than I can count and I know what it cost me.”

“You don’t,” I laughed bitterly.

“It cost you, Gianna. It cost me everything,” he added, “I kept waiting for you to come back. I kept thinking maybe tomorrow or the next day or the next. You never did.”

My grip on the receiver tightened until my knuckles turned white.

“So don’t ask me why I left. I cannot give you what you ask of me.”

“Why?” I snapped.

On the other end of the line, I heard him exhale, “Because I need you now, more than ever. Gio can’t be the head of the family. He was never meant for this. I have already told you that I need my daughter back. I need you to come home and take your place beside me,” He paused before adding quietly, “And you can’t become the woman this family needs while asking me to put you through the very thing that took you away from me.”

I squeezed the receiver tighter, “But I can’t. I can’t be that person until I get past this. I wake up every day feeling like I died with mom. I don’t even know who I am anymore. How am I supposed to come back and lead anything when I can’t even keep my own head together?”

Dad sighed, “I need you here. Come back to Philadelphia. We’ll figure everything else out together. We’ll find the right doctors. We’ll make appointments. We’ll take this one step at a time. But first, I need my daughter beside me. I don’t want you carrying this alone while you’re surrounded by people who aren’t your family.”

I looked down at the floor, “But they are my family.”

He was silent for a heartbeat, “They’ve cared for you. I won’t deny that but you’re still my daughter and I want you back.”

The receiver felt heavier in my hand. I swallowed, “How badly?”

There wasn’t even a second of hesitation, “More than you’ll ever understand.”

I looked back at them, watching Aurelia and Jules run across the play area while Claire laughed behind them. Maddie was busy juggling Nero and Killian.

“Then...” I swallowed, “...let’s put that to the test, shall we?”

“Name it. I’d do anything.”

I took a slow breath, “I have friends. My best friends. Tasha Brooks and Jasmine Reed.”

I recited their names carefully, then gave him the address of the run-down apartment building where they were hiding now.

“They might be in danger. I want them somewhere safe. I want you to give them new identities. I want them to have a real chance at life. A place to live. Good jobs. I need to know you will look after them.”

Chapter 675

“Done.”

Just one word, no bargaining, no conditions. He didn’t even ask questions.

“I’ll see to it personally. They’ll be safe. You have my word.”

I could hear people laughing somewhere behind me. Children were shouting over a game. It sounded so normal that it almost felt unreal.

“When I do this for you... You will come with me.”

I nodded although he couldn’t see me, “I told you I’d come.”

“I need to hear you say it again.”

I closed my eyes, “I’ll come but only for a little while. I can’t stay forever. My life is here too,” I drew in a slow breath, “Jules is here.”

Raphael is here...

The thought alone tightened my chest.

“She already lost Mom. I’m not going to disappear on her.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to abandon your sister,” he answered, his voice was softer than before, “If she needs you, you’ll go back. I can accept that.”

I frowned, “Just like that?”

He let out a tired chuckle, “I’ve spent six years with nothing. If all I get is a little time with my daughter, I’ll take it.”

My throat tightened, “I need you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“No games, no trying to convince me to stay after I’ve made up my mind. I’ve had enough of people deciding what’s best for me. I need you to hear me when I say no,” I snapped.

His answer came quietly, “I can do that.”

A tight knot in my chest loosened just enough for me to breathe, “Good, then we understand each other.”

“We do.”

For the first time since the call began, it didn’t feel like we were standing on opposite sides. It felt like we were trying, however awkwardly, to build a bridge neither of us knew how to cross.

Raphael

The garage door rolled shut behind me. The quiet ticking of my motorcycle engine cooling beneath me filled the space.

I killed the engine, swung my leg over the bike and pulled off my helmet. The cool air hit my face. I ran a hand through my hair then I saw her.

Gianna.

She was sitting on the hood of my black Aston Martin, her legs hanging over the edge. She had been waiting... for me?

She watched me quietly. I looked at her once then walked past her. I set my helmet on the workbench without saying a word.

“I was waiting for you,” her voice was soft.

I kept walking, “I can see that.”

She climbed off the car, “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“As you can see, I’m fine.”

She followed me, “You’ve been working late every day.”

“Yes.”

“I was worried.”

“I’m fine.”

“I thought maybe...”

I opened one of the storage cabinets, and put my gloves inside, “Maybe what?”

She stopped talking. I could feel her standing behind me, trying to find the right words. I closed the cabinet, and turned to see her swollen eyes. There were dark circles beneath them.

Part of me wanted to pull her into my arms but instead, I walked around her.

She caught up again, “You’re upset with me.”

“Yes.”

She swallowed, “Because you think I lied.”

I stopped beside my workbench. Slowly folded the cleaning cloth I had picked up. Placed it back where it belonged.

She took another careful step, “I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you treating me like this?”

I finally looked at her because if I didn’t, I’d keep pretending I wasn’t angry, “You disappeared.”

Her eyebrows knitted together but I didn’t give her a chance to answer.

“You shut everyone out. Fine. I understand that but you shut me out too. I’ve spent weeks watching you stand a few feet away from me like I don’t exist. You look at me like I’m a stranger. You lie to my face. You walk away the moment I come near you. You told me you hated me.”

My jaw tightened.

“And you turned something that should’ve meant something into… whatever that was. You treated me like I was nothing more than a body when you needed one. And somehow I’m supposed to act like none of it happened.”

She lowered her head, “My mom died.”

“I know. I know exactly what losing a parent feels like but I also know what it feels like to lose someone who’s still standing right in front of me. I don’t even recognize the woman looking back at me anymore. You’re not my Gianna…”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 676

Her fingers reached for my hand. They barely brushed my sleeve before I stepped back.

She froze, “I’m sorry,” her voice cracked, “I’m really-”

“No.” I shook my head once, “No.”

She stared at me, her hand still hanging between us.

“This…” I motioned quietly between the two of us, “This is what always happens.”

She frowned, “What are you talking about?”

“When something hurts you. You bring it to me. When you’re angry. I’m the one you hit. When you’re drowning. You reach for me in whatever way you can. Sometimes you shove me away. Sometimes you pull me into your bed. And when it’s over, you wake up the next morning hoping everything resets. As if none of it happened.”

Her face drained of color, “It wasn’t like-”

“Then you come looking for me. You apologize. You stand there looking at me with those eyes and I fold. Every. Single. Time.”

She shook her head desperately, “I never wanted to use you.”

“I believe you but I also believe intent doesn’t erase what happened.”

Her lips trembled, “I just want you.”

I closed my eyes for the briefest moment. When I opened them again, the anger was still there, “I wanted you too. I wanted the woman who told me the truth. The woman who looked me in the eye. The woman who trusted me enough to let me carry some of her pain. I don’t know who you’ve become these past few weeks. And I don’t recognize whatever is standing between us.”

My jaw tightened.

“I keep telling myself to be patient. That grief changes people. That loving someone means standing beside them through the worst parts of their life, not just the best.”

I shook my head.

“But this doesn’t feel like grief anymore. It feels like I’m talking to someone who borrowed your face. And every day that goes by… I recognize you a little less.”

She wiped quickly at her eyes, “No, don’t be like that. I’ll do better. I’ll try.”

I nodded once, “I hope you do but I’m not doing this again. I’m not going to let an apology become a shortcut back to normal, not this time.”

I stepped around her.

“This doesn’t get fixed because you said you’re sorry. It gets fixed when I can trust you again.”

She rubbed at her eyes, “I don’t know how to fix this.”

“I didn’t ask you to. I asked you to trust me.”

She looked up, “I do trust you.”

“No. If you trusted me, you would’ve told me the truth.”

She opened her mouth, closed it again. I already knew why because she still wasn’t going to tell me.

“I need to do this,” her voice was barely above a whisper, “I need to finish something before we can find our way back to each other.”

A dry laugh escaped me, “Back to each other? Gianna, we’re not separated. I’m standing right here. I’ve been here this entire time. The only person keeping us apart,” I held her gaze, “...is you. So tell me. What exactly are you waiting for?”

Her chin quivered and she looked away, “I can’t tell you,” she swallowed hard before forcing herself to meet my eyes again, “I’m sorry.”

She stepped closer, close enough that I could smell her shampoo, close enough that all I had to do was move my hand a few inches.

Instead, I kept both hands at my sides.

“I miss you,” she whispered, “I miss us. I don’t want us to be like this.”

Neither did I.

But wanting something had never been enough.

Slowly, she rose onto her toes, leaning toward me, trying to kiss me.

I turned my head.

Her lips brushed nothing but the corner of my jaw before she froze and simply stood there for a moment, then she lowered herself back onto her feet.

I stepped away, “I’ll be in my room. If you ever decide I’m worth the truth, you know where to find me. But until then,” my voice turned cold, “Find someone else’s body to hide inside. I’m done letting you use mine as a place to bury everything you refuse to say.”

I walked past her.

This time...

She didn’t follow.

Gianna

The box was already open by the time it reached my room.

There was fresh tape across the lid. A small white sticker had been placed on the corner.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 677

INSPECTED. CLEARED.

The Capone guards had gone through every single thing inside before allowing it anywhere near me.

If there had been a phone. It would’ve been taken. If there had been a tracking device. It would’ve disappeared. If there had been anything dangerous. I never would’ve seen this box.

I carried it to my desk then I slowly lifted the lid. The smell of fresh paper drifted out, a stack of photographs tied together with a thin black ribbon.

My fingers trembled as I untied it. The first picture stole my breath. Tasha and Jasmine were standing beside Dad.

Both of them were smiling. Behind them stood a modest apartment building with clean brick walls, flower boxes beneath the windows, and trees lining the sidewalk.

The next picture showed the inside. A bright living room, a kitchen, two bedrooms. A dining table already set up, another photograph.

Tasha was holding a ring of keys. Jasmine had one arm around her shoulders. They looked safe. Behind the picture there was a full address of the apartment in Philly.

Beneath the photographs was a folder. Inside were copies of lease documents. Both of their names were printed across the top.

The apartment belonged to them.

The next page made me stop breathing. There were bank statements, new accounts, enough money had already been deposited for them to pay rent, buy furniture, and live comfortably while they found jobs.

I read the numbers twice, then a third time. Dad hadn't done half of what I'd asked. He'd done all of it.

At the very bottom of the box rested a single envelope.

I opened it carefully and inside was one handwritten note.

The handwriting was unmistakably my father's...

Figlia mia,

A promise made is a debt already paid. Your friends are safe because they matter to you. As for you... don't mistake this for me trying to buy your trust. Trust isn't purchased, it is earned, one choice at a time.

When you're ready, come home. A place beside me has remained empty for six years. I have no intention of letting it stay that way.

-Dad

I read it again, then folded the letter with shaking hands and finally decided to join everyone for dinner after a month.

A whole month since Mom...

The smell of dinner drifted through the house before I even reached the dining room. Fresh bread, roasted chicken, garlic, rosemary.

The world hadn't stopped just because mine had. I rested my hand on the doorframe and looked inside. Conversations filled the room. Claire was cutting Aurelia's food into tiny pieces while Jules explained something that had happened earlier that day in school.

Killian and Nero sat in their highchairs, completely entertained by banging their little spoons against the trays while laughing at the noise they were making.

Vincenzo sat at one end of the table. Salvatore occupied the other. Beside Salvatore, Mom's chair remained empty. So did mine between Claire and Maddie.

One by one, every head turned as I walked inside.

Silvio recovered first. He leaned back in his chair and looked around dramatically, “Someone pinch Dante.

Dante frowned, “Why me?”

“Because if I pinch myself and this turns out to be a dream, I’ll be furious.”

A small smile tugged at Claire’s lips. She immediately patted the empty chair beside her, “Come here.”

Maddie smiled, “Finally!”

Vincenzo looked up at me, “We’ve been waiting.”

Salvatore didn’t smile. He simply watched me for a moment before giving one quiet nod.

Raphael looked at me too, only for a second then he looked back down at his plate like I hadn’t walked into the room at all.

I pulled out the chair, sat down and nobody made a big deal out of it. Claire passed me a basket of bread as naturally as if I’d been here yesterday.

Silvio immediately pointed at my plate, “Somebody write today’s date down.”

Dante snorted, “I already did.”

Adriano reached for his glass, “I told you she’d eventually remember this family gives out free food.”

Silvio gasped, “So that’s the secret? I thought it was our sparkling personalities.”

Dante looked around the table, “What personalities? We’re all terrible people.”

“Speak for yourself,” Silvio replied, “I happen to be delightful.”

“You threatened a waiter yesterday.”

Silvio frowned, “He brought me sparkling water. I asked for still.”

Adriano sighed dramatically, “See? This is what I deal with,” then he glanced toward Raphael, “And him. He hasn’t smiled in three geological eras.”

Chapter 678

Raphael didn't even look up, "I smiled last Tuesday."

Adriano blinked, "You scheduled it?"

"It happened."

"When?"

"Killian ripped Vincenzo's watch off his wrist, tried to chew on it, decided it wasn't edible, then launched it across the room," the corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly, "It shattered. And Vincenzo just stood there. He couldn't even be angry."

Vincenzo let out a long, tired sigh, "Do you have any idea what that watch cost?"

Silvio grinned, "No."

Adriano snorted, "I was hoping you'd tell us so I could laugh harder."

"It was a one-of-one piece," Vincenzo rubbed his forehead, "The Crown Prince of Dubai had it commissioned for me through a Swiss watchmaker as a personal gift."

Dante leaned back in his chair, "That's our nephew. Already destroying foreign relations."

"Man, look at this table now," Adriano scoffed, his voice loud and full of amusement. "We've got the whole collection back together. Honestly, Vincenzo, it's beautiful how charitable you are. You've got Raphael and Gianna sitting right here like our own little special needs children."

Dante let out a barking laugh, nearly choking on his food. "Holy shit, he's right. One can't read a map to save her life, and the other doesn't even know what a smile is."

"Hey, don't laugh, it's a full-time job keeping them alive," Adriano continued, entirely unbothered by how mean it sounded. "We should get state funding for this."

Raphael didn't stop cutting his food. His knife moved through the meat but he never looked up, "Your classification is scientifically inaccurate, Adriano. Gianna has dyslexia and dysgraphia. I have severe alexithymia. Neither diagnosis qualifies either of us as intellectually impaired."

He placed another piece of food onto his fork.

"In simple terms, her brain processes language differently," he looked up at Adriano, "My brain processes emotions differently. Both are medically recognized neurodevelopmental differences. Your condition, unfortunately, appears to be voluntary."

Raphael calmly took a bite before adding,

“The difference between us is that our brains were built this way,” his eyes settled on Adriano with perfect indifference, “You’ve simply spent decades refusing to use yours.”

The table stayed quiet for exactly one second. Then Silvio burst into laughter, slamming his hand against the table, “He just wrote your obituary using medical terminology.”

Dante leaned back in his chair, grinning,.”I don’t even know what half of that meant but somehow I still know you lost.”

Adriano stared at Raphael, “You know, I liked you better when you were just quietly judging me.”

Raphael swallowed his food, “I was never quiet. You simply lacked the processing speed to notice.”

“Give up, Adriano, it’s over,” Silvio laughed.

“Shut up, Silvio,” Adriano laughed, shaking his head. “He’s just mad because he can’t feel the joy of a good joke.”

I stared down at my plate, their words of simply faded into the background as I gathered every single ounce of courage left in my body.

I cleared my throat. It was a small sound, but the moment I straightened my spine, Vincenzo noticed. He raised his hand slightly, and his brothers instantly shut their mouths.

“I have something to ask,” I said, my voice shaking just a little bit, but clear enough for everyone to hear.

Vincenzo tilted his head to the side, “Ask. If it’s reasonable, I’ll do everything I can to make it happen.”

I swallowed the dry lump in my throat. I didn’t look at Raphael. I kept my eyes locked straight onto Vincenzo so I wouldn’t lose my nerve, “I’ve decided to spend some time in Philadelphia. I want to go there with my father... just for a few days.”

The room fell completely silent.

Janedoewritings

Author

Just a quick note: the chapter splitting is completely automatic and handled by GoodNovel, including how the chapters are divided and their pricing. I don’t have any control over that, it’s part of the platform’s system and policies.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 679

Raphael

“I’ve decided to spend some time in Philadelphia. I want to go there with my father... just for a few days.”

My attention narrowed until all I could hear was the echo of her words.

Philadelphia.

Her father.

For a few days.

The pieces came together with uncomfortable precision. The package, the photographs, the apartment.

She hadn’t come to me.

She hadn’t trusted me.

When something truly mattered to her, she hadn’t walked into my room. She hadn’t asked for my help. She had gone to Giovanni Toricelli.

Which meant there had never been a moment where she believed me. She still carried that doubt. She still believed that somewhere inside me was a man capable of murdering those girls because I killed Denise.

Otherwise...

Why ask him?

Why not me?

I would’ve moved heaven and earth to protect the people she cared about.

She knew that or maybe... she didn't anymore. I looked at her across the table. She wouldn't come to me with her fears anymore. She wouldn't come to me with her plans anymore. She wouldn't even tell me the truth.

But when she was drowning, when she needed someone to hold her. She came to me.

My body.

Not my mind.

Not my trust.

Not my heart.

Just...

Me.

And for weeks I'd been trying to convince myself that it hadn't felt one-sided, that it had meant something to her too.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I loved her, enough to wait, enough to forgive, enough to keep standing exactly where she'd left me, hoping she'd

Chaptero

+15 Bchus eventually turn around but I couldn't go back to being the place she escaped to while her father became the person she relied on.

I wanted all of her.

Her truth.

Her trust.

Her worst days.

Her impossible decisions, not just the empty pieces she couldn't carry by herself because what we had wasn't measured by who you reached for when you were lonely. It was measured by who you trusted when everything was falling apart.

And she hadn't chosen me.

Vincenzo simply smiled, "No. I won't allow it."

Gianna didn't seem pissed, she met his eyes with a calmness I hadn't seen from her in weeks, "I'm not asking for permission. I'm telling you what I've decided. I'm an adult, Vincenzo. I never signed the adoption papers. Legally, I'm still Giovanni Toricelli's daughter. I wanted you all to know before I left."

Something changed in Vincenzo's face. He rested both forearms on the table and looked directly at her.

His eyes never left Gianna, "Your mother sat in front of me before she died. She didn't ask me for money. She didn't ask me to save her or anything else. She asked me to protect you and Jules. I gave Hazel my word and I don't break my word."

Gianna paled and then swallowed, "I just want to see my little brother. And... Perla. They're my family too."

"They can come here," Vincenzo answered immediately, "I'll arrange everything. They'll have protection from the moment they land until the moment they leave. But you..." he slowly shook his head, "You're not going anywhere. I've already buried one Capone this year, I'm not gambling with another."

Gianna looked away from him and her eyes landed on Salvatore.

She hadn't looked at me once, not once, since this conversation started. She looked past me as though my opinion no longer mattered. As though I wasn't part of this conversation. As though she'd already decided where she belonged.

"Well, say something!" She snapped at Dad.

Dad simply shrugged, "I stopped making decisions in this house a long time ago," he leaned back comfortably," My son runs this family now. He's the head of this house. I've learned something over the years. My life gets considerably easier when I agree with him. And the annoying part is that he's usually right."

Gianna scoffed, her shoulders slumped, "You can't keep me here forever."

Vincenzo tilted his head, his expression remained almost thoughtful, "Can't I? I've got a large estate. A security team that doesn't sleep. And an entire organization whose job is making impossible things possible. You think I'm above locking the gates? I already almost lost you once. I'm not interested in testing fate a second time."

Then...

He glanced toward me.

"And after everything that's happened between you and Raphael," his eyes returned to Gianna, "...you're

Chopper 75 mistaken if you think I’m simply going to step aside.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 680

My fingers tightened beneath the table. I already knew where this was going.

“One way or another, you’re going to remain a Capone,” he looked at me, “Isn’t that right, Raphael?”

Every eye in the root shifted toward me. I didn’t answer. My heartbeat stayed perfectly even. My face/stayed blank but inside, everything stopped.

I looked at Gianna and she finally dooked back at me. For the first time since she’d spoken, her eyes/searched mine, waiting, hoping, and afraid.

A month ago...

I would’ve answered without thinking.

I would’ve told Vincenzo that she deserved time, space, choice but now, none of those answers came easily because love without trust wasn’t stable. It was dependency.

And I refused to build a future on that.

I still loved her enough that saying the wrong thing now could destroy whatever was left between us, enough that saying the right thing hurt even more.

So I kept looking at her, trying to find the woman who used to tell me everything, trying to understand whether she was still standing somewhere behind the silence she’d built between us.

I wanted to help her, that hadn’t changed. What had changed... was how.

I slowly shifted my attention back to Vincenzo, “I don’t believe people should be kept somewhere against their will. But...” I leaned back in my chair, fixing my glasses, “I also don’t believe someone in her current state should be making life-changing decisions.”

Gianna’s expression immediately tightened, “I’m perfectly capable of deciding where I want to go.

I looked at her, “No,” the word came out calm, “You aren’t.”

A flash of hurt crossed her face.

But that didn't stop me from telling her the truth, "You're grieving. You isolated yourself for nearly a month. You've withdrawn from everyone. You've made decisions based almost entirely on that. None of those things make you weak. They do make your judgment unreliable."

She stared at me, "So now you think I'm crazy?"

"I didn't say that."

She glared at me, "You implied it."

"I didn't... imply anything. I simply said you're emotionally compromised right now. My opinion would be exactly the same if this were Vincenzo, Adriano, Dante, or myself."

Grief wasn't something you negotiated with. It changed how people saw the world.

"I don't make permanent decisions while I'm bleeding," I held her eyes, "And right now, you're still bleeding."

Her jaw clenched, "You don't get to decide that."

"No, I don't but I can recognize it."

She looked away first, "I've already decided."

"So have I," her head snapped back toward me, "I don't support you leaving Chicago. I don't support it because your reasons don't make sense."

She frowned, "They make perfect sense."

"They don't," I shook my head once, "You wanted to meet your father. You did. You wanted your friends protected without telling us, they are," I leaned back slightly, "So logically, why leave?"

Her breathing slowed. "You don't understand."

"No," I replied, my voice calm despite the frustration building inside me. "I don't. And I won't... not until you stop keeping me in the dark and tell me what's really going on."

She looked like she wanted to argue, instead, nothing came out.

Vincenzo spoke again, "You heard him."

Gianna didn’t even acknowledge him. She kept looking at me, “I thought… I thought you’d understand.”

“I understand more than you think,” I paused, “But understanding doesn’t require agreement.”

She blinked rapidly, “So that’s it? You’ve decided for me too?”

“I haven’t decided anything. I told you exactly what I think. And if you leave,” I stopped, the next words sat heavily in my chest, “…leave because it’s what you truly want, not because grief convinced you that running away will fix it.”

Her eyes widened, she was about to say something again but Vincenzo raised his hand, “The conversation is over. We’ll revisit this after everyone has had time to think,” he looked directly at Gianna, “But until then, you’re staying exactly where I can see you.”

Nobody challenged him, not even her. She simply sat there, staring down at her untouched plate.

Gianna

1&1

The cemetery was even quieter than the last time, only this time, there were more guns.

Capone soldiers stood along every pathway, near every entrance, and between almost every row of graves. Some watched the tree line. Others watched my father. A few watched me.

Nobody trusted anybody.

Dad sat beside me on the cold stone bench, his black cane resting between his knees. He hadn’t said much since we arrived.

Neither had I.

For a long time, all we listened to was the wind moving through the trees.

I broke the silence, “They’re never going to let me leave.”

Dad turned his head toward me, “We’ll find a way.”

I gave a small shake of my head, “No,” I laughed quietly, but there wasn’t any humor in it, “You don’t understand. Vincenzo. He’s too powerful. He already said no. And when Vincenzo says no,” I stared at the grass beneath my shoes, “People stop arguing.”

Dad watched me without interrupting, he simply leaned back against the bench.

“He gave Mom his word. He won’t change his mind. There isn’t a man alive who can’t change his mind,” I looked at him, “You haven’t met the real Vincenzo.”

The corner of his mouth moved ever so slightly, “I have.”

Before I could answer, Dad reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a silver cigarette case. He opened it, took one cigarette, then a lighter. The flame had barely flickered to life.

“Don’t,” the voice cut across the cemetery.

Dad didn’t even look up.

One of the Capone guards had already stepped forward. His pistol was raised, “Smoking isn’t permitted anywhere inside the Capone cemetery.”

Dad looked at the burning lighter in his hand before calmly lifting his eyes to the guard, “And if I decide otherwise?”

The guard smiled, “If a single piece of ash touches this ground, I’ll make you pick it up with your mouth. You’ll clean this cemetery yourself.”

Then Dad slowly closed the lighter, and he slipped the unlit cigarette back into the case, “As you wish.”

The guard lowered his weapon. Without another word, he returned to his position several yards away.

Dad watched him go. Only after the guard’s back was turned did Dad let out a quiet breath through his nose.

“Did you see that?” he asked.

I frowned, “What?”

“The walk,” he tilted his head ever so slightly, “He walks like someone shoved a steel rod down the back of his shirt. If I told him to relax, he’d probably ask for written authorization from Don Capone first.”

A small laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

Dad looked at me out of the corner of his eye, his expression softened for the briefest moment, “Madonna Santa, I

+158gh haven’t heard your laugh in years.” (Holy Mother)

The smile faded from my face almost immediately. I looked back toward the rows of guards, “I wasn’t joking, Daddy. They’re not going to let me leave.”

Dad rested both hands on the top of his cane, “You’ve spent too much time surrounded by Capones.””

I frowned, “What does that mean?”

“It means you’ve forgotten who your father is,” he smiled, “Vincenzo Capone is powerful. I’ve never denied that He commands an empire. He has loyal men. He has influence,” he turned toward me, “So do I.”

His hazel eyes settled on mine.

“I’m not some businessman asking for a favor. I’m Giovanni Toricelli. When a door closes, I don’t stand outside waiting for someone to unlock it. I build another door.”

I shook my head, “There’s no changing his mind without a war.”

His jaw tightened slightly, “There has never been a city I couldn’t enter. There has never been a negotiation I couldn’t finish. And there has never been a problem that didn’t eventually present a solution.”

I searched his face, “You really think you’ll find one?”

“I don’t think,” he answered immediately, “I prepare. Principessa, I have no interest in starting a war with the Capones.”

He tapped the handle of his cane once against the stone.

“If Vincenzo believes this is finished, he’s making the same mistake many men have made before him.”

A knot formed in my stomach, “What are you planning?”

His gaze settled on me, “I haven’t decided yet but…”

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eyes

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Shop 87

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Janedoewritings

Author

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 681

Nobody trusted anybody.

Dad sat beside me on the cold stone bench, his black cane resting between his knees. He hadn't said much since we arrived.

Neither had I.

For a long time, all we listened to was the wind moving through the trees.

I broke the silence, "They're never going to let me leave."

Dad turned his head toward me, "We'll find a way."

I gave a small shake of my head, "No," I laughed quietly, but there wasn't any humor in it, "You don't understand. Vincenzo. He's too powerful. He already said no. And when Vincenzo says no," I stared at the grass beneath my shoes, "People stop arguing."

Dad watched me without interrupting, he simply leaned back against the bench.

"He gave Mom his word. He won't change his mind. There isn't a man alive who can't change his mind," I looked at him, "You haven't met the real Vincenzo."

The corner of his mouth moved ever so slightly, "I have."

Before I could answer, Dad reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a silver cigarette case. He opened it, took one cigarette, then a lighter. The flame had barely flickered to life.

"Don't," the voice cut across the cemetery.

Dad didn't even look up.

One of the Capone guards had already stepped forward. His pistol was raised, "Smoking isn't permitted anywhere inside the

Capone cemetery."

Dad looked at the burning lighter in his hand before calmly lifting his eyes to the guard, "And if I decide otherwise?"

The guard smiled, “If a single piece of ash touches this ground, I’ll make you pick it up with your mouth. You’ll clean this. cemetery yourself.”

Then Dad slowly closed the lighter, and he slipped the unlit cigarette back into the case, “As you wish.”

The guard lowered his weapon. Without another word, he returned to his position several yards away.

(*

Dad watched him go. Only after the guard’s back was turned did Dad let out a quiet breath through his nose.

“Did you see that?” he asked.

I frowned, “What?”

“The walk,” he tilted his head ever so slightly, “He walks like someone shoved a steel rod down the back of his shirt. If I told him to relax, he’d probably ask for written authorization from Don Capone first.”

A small laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

Dad looked at me out of the corner of his eye, his expression softened for the briefest moment, “Madonna Santa, I haven’t heard your laugh in years.” (Holy Mother)

The smile faded from my face almost immediately. I looked back toward the rows of guards, “I wasn’t joking, Daddy. They’re not going to let me leave.”

Dad rested both hands on the top of his cane, “You’ve spent too much time surrounded by Capones.”

I frowned, “What does that mean?”

“It means you’ve forgotten who your father is, he smiled, “Vincenzo Capone is powerful. I’ve never denied that. He commands an empire. He has loyal men He has influence,” he turned toward me, “So do I.”

His hazel eyes settled on mine.

“I’m not some businessman asking for a favor. I’m Giovanni Toricelli. When a door closes, I don’t stand outside waiting for someone to unlock it. I build another door.”

I shook my head, “There’s no changing his mind without a war.”

His jaw tightened slightly, “There has never been a city I couldn’t enter. There has never been a negotiation I couldn’t finish. And there has never been a problem that didn’t eventually present a solution.”

I searched his face, “You really think you’ll find one?”

“I don’t think,” he answered immediately, “I prepare. Principessa, I have no interest in starting a war with the Capones.”

He tapped the handle of his cane once against the stone.

“If Vincenzo believes this is finished, he’s making the same mistake many men have made before him.”

A knot formed in my stomach, “What are you planning?”

His gaze settled on me, “I haven’t decided yet but...”

I leaned forward, “Daddy, if even one Capone gets hurt because of this. If you touch any of them. I’ll never forgive you. I mean it. If one drop of Capone blood is spilled because you’re trying to get me back. I’ll never look at you the same way again. I’ll never come to Philadelphia and you will never see me again.”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 682

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“So am I.”

“You are,” I swallowed, “But loving you doesn’t mean I have to stop loving thern.”

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Chapter BOT

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 683

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 684

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Janedoewritings

Author

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 685

Raphael

“Raphael!”

I heard Vincenzo call after me. I didn’t answer. The hallway blurred around ine. Guards stepped aside the moment they saw my face.

I knew exactly where he was.

Dad hadn’t left the estate since Hazel’s funeral. He spent most of his time in the library. The room had become his prison.

I pushed the heavy door open. It crashed against the wall. Salvatore looked up from the armchair near the fireplace. An untouched cup of coffee rested beside him.

He barely had time to stand as I crossed the room in seconds. The front of his sweater twisted in my fist as I slartimed him backward against the bookshelf.

The shelves rattled, several books toppled onto the floor, “What the hell-”

“Tell me.”

He grabbed my wrist, trying to pry my hand away, “Raphael, let go.”

“What did Hazel tell you?”

His face changed, confusion came first and then came the surprise, “What are you talking about?”

I shoved him harder into the shelf. Wood groaned behind him, “Don’t waste my time.”

His jaw tightened, “I don’t know what this is about.”

“You do,” my grip only tightened, “You lived with her. You watched her. You knew her better than anyone after she left Giovanni.”

His breathing became heavier, “Raphael-”

“What did she tell you? Why did she refuse to let Gianna anywhere near hir?”

“What happened?”

Footsteps thundered into the hallway behind me, “Raphael!”

Vincenzo.

A second later Adriano burst through the doorway with him. They stopped for only a heartbeat before rushing forward.

“The hell are you doing?” Adriano barked.

Strong hands grabbed my shoulders but I didn’t move.

Vincenzo caught my arm, “Enough.”

“No,” my eyes never left Salvatore’s, “He knows something.”

“Raphael.”

“He knows.”

Salvatore finally shoved against my chest hard enough to create a few inches of space.

His face had turned red, “You’ve lost your damın mind.”

“What did Hazel tell you?

“I said I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And you are fucking lying.”

His eyes flashed, “I’ve buried my wife and now my own son barges in here acting like I’m the enemy? I don’t have time for this.”

“You’ll make time,” I stepped forward again.

Vincenzo caught me around the arm before I could reach him, “Raphael, control yourself.”

“No,” I pulled against his grip, “If Giovanni gets in front of the Council before we know the truth, and we’re already fucking behind.”

Adriano moved between Salvatore and me. Salvatore straightened his sweater, glaring at me, “You don’t get to walk in here throwing accusations.”

“I’ll ask one more time,” I took another step, “What was Hazel afraid of?”

Salvatore's anger didn't disappear but something flickered behind it. He looked away, toward the fireplace.

His shoulders dropped slightly, "I..."

He stopped and I caught it immediately, "Why the fuck would you hesitate?"

He looked back at me, "I hesitated because I miss my wife."

"No," I shook my head, "You hesitated because you remembered something."

Adriano looked between us, "Dad..."

"If you know something," Vincenzo said quietly, "now is the time."

Salvatore let out a long breath through his nose, "You boys think life works like one of your meetings but it doesn't. People don't always explain their fears."

I remained silent.

"Hazel..." his voice softened, "She wasn't a woman who liked talking about the past."

"She must have said something!" I snapped.

He stared at me for several long seconds, then he slowly sat back down in the armchair. His hands rubbed over his tired face.

"There were nights she'd wake up screaming. I'd ask what happened. She'd always tell me it was just a nightmare."

He swallowed.

"If Gianna was asleep in her room, Hazel would still check on her a few times in a single night, and walk through the whole house."

His eyes drifted toward the floor. A bitter smile appeared for less than a second.

I felt my heartbeat slow. This was what I needed, "What else?"

Salvatore closed his eyes, "If an unfamiliar car stayed outside the house for too long, she'd pull Gianna away from the windows. She'd close the curtains."

"What exactly was she afraid he'd do?"

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 686

Salvatore slowly shook his head, “I asked her that question more times than I can count.”

“And?”

“She’d only ever give me one answer,” e looked directly into my eyes, “If he ever finds us... he’ll never stop until he takes her.””

I waited, “That’s all?” I asked.

Salvatore swallowed hard, his voice growing rough, “No. There was one thing she admitted.’

His eyes drifted toward the fireplace, as though he could still see Hazel sitting there.

“She told me Giovanni didn’t just hurt Gianna. He broke her.”

Every muscle in my body went rigid, and cold.

Salvatore looked back at me, “The things he did to that little girl. They weren’t moments of anger. They happened over and over again. Hazel never gave me every detail. She couldn’t. Every time she tried, she’d fall apart but she made one thing very clear. He abused Gianna. And not just once or twice, he did it for years. He kept hurting her until it changed who she was. She used to tell me that Giovanni didn’t just leave scars on Gianna’s body..He left them in her mind. The girl she could have become, he stole that from her.”

The room disappeared, my brain simply stopped registering it. Everything became distant.

Only one sentence remained.

He abused Gianna.

I didn’t blink, I didn’t move. People expected horror to look loud. They were wrong. The louder the storm inside my head became, the quieter my body grew.

Someone said my name.

I couldn’t tell who.

My thoughts had narrowed until there was only one image.

Gianna.

She was a child when she came to Chicago. Children learned from repetition. If someone hurt them enough, their minds adapted, their bodies adapted. Their entire view of the world adapted.

The pieces I had spent months trying to understand suddenly began sliding into place.

The way she apologized after she had done anything wrong.

The way she watched people's faces before speaking.

The way she expected me to slap her back for the smallest mistake.

None of it had appeared from nowhere.

Someone had built it, year after year. I slowly closed my eyes.

A child wasn't born believing she deserved pain. Someone taught her that. My jaw locked so tightly I could hear my own teeth grind.

When I opened my eyes again, the room had returned.

Vincenzo was watching me carefully. No one spoke. They were waiting.

Chapter dee

Hooked at Salvatore, "Everything. I want everything Hazel ever left behind."

He frowned.

"Letters, journals, old phones, photographs, medical files. Anything she kept. I don't care how small it seems. If she hid it, I want it."

Salvatore hesitated, "There are boxes."

"Where?"

"The attic. I never opened most of them."

I nodded once, "We're opening them tonight."

This wasn't about revenge. Revenge was emotional. This was about evidence and the truth.

Because if Giovanni Toricelli had spent years breaking the little girl who would one day become the woman I loved, then I wasn't walking into that Council chamber with opinions.

I was walking in with facts.

And facts were infinitely more dangerous than anger.

Vincenzo slowly rubbed a hand over his face before looking at Salvatore, "What you've told us matters," he said quietly. "But we don't rule on belief. We rule on proof."

Dad took one step closer, and placed a hand over my shoulder, "Hazel told me, years ago, that she'd tried to collect evidence."

My eyes lifted, "Tried?"

He nodded, "She documented everything she could. She thought if she kept enough records, one day she'd be able to protect Gianna but Giovanni found out. He got to it before she could use it. Whatever she had, it disappeared. He destroyed it."

Vincenzo cursed under his breath, "Damn it," he turned away for a moment before looking back at me, "Then we may have to rely on Gianna too."

My eyes narrowed, "What do you mean?"

"If she tells the Council herself," he stopped, choosing his words carefully, "They'll have to listen."

I stared at him, "You want her to relive it."

"No," his answer came immediately, "I don't. I don't want that girl to remember a single second of it but if Giovanni stands in front of the Council pretending to be a father who deserves another chance, she may be the only person who can tell them why he doesn't."

Chaptert

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 687

His gaze softened in a way thad only seen a handful of times.

"Raphael, if anyone can convince her to speak, it's you."

I looked away, the words never reached my mouth because another thought had already taken their place.

Scars.

My breathing slowed by instinct. Images surfaced one after another. The first time I had seen the marks beneath her feet. Some were new, some were old, layered over one another.

The faint lines on the inside of her thighs, barely visible unless the light caught them at the right angle.

I remembered tracing them with my eyes, wondering how someone could hurt themselves in a place they worked so hard to hide.

She had brushed it off.

Another memory followed, one that had never made sense. My fingers moving through her hair, and then I felt it, there had been tiny ridges against her scalp. Hidden beneath thick strands where no one would ever notice them unless they were searching.

I remembered asking if she'd bumped her head as a child. She'd gone quiet, then changed the subject.

At the time, I hadn't questioned it. Now, I wished I had. Then another image surfaced. The narrow marks scattered across her back, just pale lines that crossed her skin.

I remembered standing behind her, trying to make sense of them. Their placement had bothered me. Some sat so high that she could never have reached them herself. Others rested near the center of her back, awkward places, impossible angles.

I had assumed they came from her own hands. A punishment she had invented for herself.

But now...

I wasn't so certain anymore.

Every memory I had carefully filed away under self-inflicted suddenly refused to stay there, not because I knew what had happened but because I no longer knew.

I opened my eyes and looked at Vincenzo,

"If there are answers, they need to come from evidence first. When we speak to Gianna, it will be because we have something concrete."

That night, I broke a promise I had made to myself. I swore I would never reduce her to a piece of paper, and would get to know about her only when she told me herself but I didn’t have that kind of time.

I sat alone in my office while the building emptied around me. One file became ten, ten became fifty and by midnight, my desk had disappeared beneath the folders.

Every page carried her name, every page held another piece of her life.

I began at the beginning. Her birth records contained nothing unusual. Routine hospital visits, vaccinations, yearly checkups, childhood illnesses, broken fevers, growth charts. Everything looked painfully ordinary. The reports described a healthy little girl whose life should have followed the same simple path as every other child. Yet I already knew that somewhere beyond those pages, everything had changed. The records showed me her body. They told me nothing about her life.

The next folders belonged to her schools. Attendance sheets. Teacher evaluations. Standardized test scores. Handwritten notes from counselors. I read each page carefully, looking for anything that had been overlooked years ago.

One psychological assessment caught my attention. It had been completed when she was still very young. I opened it and slowly read through every page.

The report diagnosed dyslexia and dysgraphia. Yet every section measuring logical reasoning, mathematics, visual patterns, and abstract thinking scored far above average.

I found myself thinking about every report she had nervously handed to me at work. Every email she apologized for before I had even opened it. Every meeting where she solved problems that senior analysts couldn’t see, only to become embarrassed over a single spelling mistake. Those school records didn’t teach me something new about Gianna.

As the years passed through the files, the comments from her teachers began repeating themselves. Quiet. Respectful. Keeps to herself. Rarely asks for help. Performs exceptionally well in mathematics but struggles with written assignments. There were no disciplinary reports. No fights. No complaints about bad behavior. Only a little girl who slowly learned that silence attracted less attention than asking for help

Another folder carried the logo of a ballet academy. I opened it, expecting little more than attendance records, but instead I found years of performance evaluations and competition reports.

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Chapter 688

One picture made my hand stop. Gianna couldn't have been older than ten. Her hair was tied neatly into a bun, every other child smiling proudly toward the camera. Gianna wasn't looking at the photographer. She was staring somewhere beyond the frame, her expression distant, almost watchful, as though she were waiting for something that never came.

On the next page, I found another instructor's note.

"Technically gifted."

"Learns routines faster than most students."

"Student continues practicing despite bleeding feet. Must be forced to rest."

I read the sentence twice, then a third time. My eyes remained on that sentence.

Until her feet bleed.

Another page.

A recommendation for rest after repeated injuries.

I continued through hospital records stretching across several years. Sprained ankles. High fevers. A fractured wrist. A mild concussion. Every injury came with an explanation that sounded reasonable on paper.

Every doctor treated what they saw in front of them and sent her home. Yet after reading dozens of reports together, a pattern began forming. She visited hospitals more often than most children. None of the doctors questioned it. None of them connected one injury to another. Individually, they were ordinary.

Together, they left me with an uncomfortable rage.

I reviewed every second of the security footage from six years ago, watching Gianna wander through the streets of Chicago day after day. She searched for Hazel, yet no matter how far she walked, she never seemed able to leave the neighborhood surrounding Rose Garden. It was as though that small corner of the city was the only place she knew.

Morning light slowly crept through my office windows as I closed the final folder. School. Ballet. Hospitals. Jobs. Security footage. Addresses. Assessments. Thousands of pages. Thousands of details. Yet the one thing I needed most wasn't there.

There was no report describing what Giovanni had done. No witness statement. No police file. No photograph. No medical document that named him. It was as though someone had reached into her childhood and removed every trace before anyone else could find it.

I leaned back in my chair and slowly closed my eyes. The records hadn't given me the proof I had been searching for. Instead, they gave me something far more disturbing.

For the first time, I wasn't just looking at Gianna's past, I was beginning to understand the countless invisible pieces that had shaped the woman she had become.

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Every answer I had found had created two more questions.

I climbed the staircase slowly, my hand resting lightly against the cold wooden railing. My body moved on instinct while my mind wandered somewhere else entirely. It replayed every sentence Dad had spoken. Every page I had read. Every missing piece that refused to reveal itself.

By the time I reached the second floor, my feet had already chosen a direction, left, toward Salvatore's wing, toward Gianna.

I took three steps before stopping so suddenly that the silence around me seemed to deepen.

I looked down at my own feet. I hadn't made that decision consciously. My body had.

Aslow breath left my lungs.

As much as every instinct inside me wanted to walk down that hallway, open her bedroom door, and simply make sure she was asleep, I turned away.

She deserved one night without another problem demanding something from her. I forced myself toward my own bedroom instead.

When I finally reached my door, I loosened my tie with one hand while reaching for the handle with the other.

The room beyond was dark except for the warm glow of a single bedside lamp. I stepped inside, closed the door behind me, then stopped.

Gianna was sitting in the middle of my bed. She wasn't asleep. She was waiting.

A soft silver satin nightdress caught the warm light from the bedside lamp, giving it a faint glow against her skin. It wasn't extravagant or designed to demand attention. It simply looked... gentle and elegant like her. The pale color made her seem almost unreal against the dark sheets.

Her hair had been brushed loose, falling over her shoulders in soft waves. A touch of makeup highlighted features that had looked exhausted for days. It wasn't heavy enough

to hide the sadness lingering in her eyes, but it brought a little warmth back to her face. For the first time since Hazel's funeral, she looked as though she had made an effort for herself.

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Chapter 689

Or...

For me.

She smiled. It wasn't the bright, carefree smile she wore during her rare moments of happiness. This one was smaller, almost shy. As though she wasn't entirely certain how I would react to finding her here.

I simply stood there with one hand still resting on the doorknob, staring at the woman who had somehow silenced every thought that had consumed me during the entire drive home.

Hours.

I had spent hours buried inside her past, searching for the child she used to be, trying to understand the life that had shaped her.

And now, there she was.

My chest felt strangely lighter.

Not because my questions had disappeared, they hadn't. If anything, there were more of them now. But every file I had opened that night had reminded me of one thing, that the girl in those records had survived long enough to become the woman sitting in front of me.

That mattered more than any report ever could. Her smile widened just enough to reach her eyes.

"You look exhausted," she said softly.

Only then did I realize I was still standing by the door, still staring at her. As though my mind hadn't quite accepted that she was actually here.

The room had become impossibly quiet. The ticking clock on the far wall seemed louder than usual. She sat in the middle of my bed with her hands folded neatly in her lap, her.

There was nothing loud about the way she looked, yet somehow she had completely undone the controlled state of mind I had carried home with me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked quietly.

The corners of her lips lifted, “I was waiting for you.”

“You should be resting.”

“I tried,” she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear before looking back at me, “It didn’t work.”

I finally stepped away from the door, though my movements felt strangely slow. She watched me the entire time, her smile softening as I drew closer.

“I got tired of sleeping without you.’

She glanced up at me through her lashes.

“I don’t like it when we fight,” she said after a long silence. “I keep telling myself I’ll give you space, that I’ll let you cool down but I always end up here.”

A small laugh escaped her, though there wasn’t any real happiness behind it.

“I know…” She lowered her eyes to her hands. “I know I’m very good at making a mess but I’m your mess…”

I said nothing.

She continued speaking, almost as if she were afraid that if she stopped, she would lose the courage to finish.

“I don’t do it because I enjoy hurting you. I hate that I do it,” her fingers tightened together, “Sometimes I think I’m getting

Choplet.6pe better, then something happens and…” She shook her head. “I fall back into the same patterns. I know that’s not fair. I know it isn’t healthy. I know I keep repeating the same thing,” her voice grew quieter, “I wish I knew how to stop.”

She took a slow breath before continuing.

“I’m trying. I really am. I’m trying to become better. Every day. I know I still have a long way to go, but I don’t want to stay like this forever.”

Her eyes searched mine, uncertain, vulnerable.

“I want to become someone who deserves to stand beside you.”

The words struck harder than they should have.

Deserves.

My mind didn’t hear the rest. It had already gone somewhere else.

A little girl struggling to read words on a classroom page while everyone else moved ahead.

A child practicing ballet until her feet bled.

An sixteen-year-old standing in the rain with nowhere else to go.

A frightened young woman forcing herself to smile beneath cheap nightclub lights because she needed money.

The quiet apologies.

“...and I know it isn’t your responsibility to fix me. It never was. I just... I don’t want you to give up on me before I learn how to-

I crossed the remaining distance between us. Her words disappeared. One hand gently cupped her face. The other rested against the side of her neck.

Then I kissed her, not because I wanted to silence her, but because I couldn’t bear another second of hearing her speak as though she were something broken that needed to earn the right to be loved.

Chapter B

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 690

She froze for the briefest moment.

Then her fingers found the front of my shirt, holding onto the fabric as though she were afraid I might disappear if she let go.

Her soft gasp died in her throat as my mouth pressed into hers. The small hesitation in her body melted away, turned into a fire that pulled us both in.

She didn’t back away. Her hands slid up my chest and dug to my dark hair, gripping tight, tugging me down as if she hated the tiny space between us.

The kiss changed in a single second. The dark need that had been building inside me all night. The control I held onto every day just broke. I deepened the kiss, pressing my mouth to hers with a force that left no room for doubt.

Gianna let out a low sound against my lips and fell back onto the soft bed, dragging me down with her. Her fingers grabbed the fabric of my shirt, pulling hard until my full weight came down right on top of her.

She shifted beneath me, her legs opening to make room, and I settled right between her thighs. My hands came up to frame her face, holding her right where I wanted her.

I pressed my body hard against hers. My arms strained as I held myself over her, the deep heat of her skin burning right through the thin silver nightgown. My tongue pushed past her lips.

I kissed her until her lungs needed air, until her hands were shaking against my back, until all I could feel was the loud, fast thud of our hearts hitting each other.

Gianna lifted her hips up toward mine, her fingers digging hard into my shoulders, holding on tight.

Slowly, she pulled back just enough for our foreheads to rest together. She searched my face for several quiet seconds, then she took a small breath, “Raph, please...” she hesitated, as though even asking the question hurt, “Please let me go to Philadelphia for a few days.”

The warmth disappeared from my chest so quickly it almost hurt.

She wanted to leave.

After everything I had just found out, after learning how unsafe the world was for her, she wanted to step right out of my sight.

Before I even realized I had moved, my hands were already on her. My fingers closed firmly around her waist as I turned her on her stomach. She landed against the mattress with a startled gasp, the dark sheets twisting beneath her.

My body pressed against hers, not out of calculation, but instinct. She tried to turn her head toward me, but I had already gathered the curtain of her soft hair into my hand, drawing it over one shoulder. The pale curve of her neck came into view beneath the warm bedroom light.

I couldn’t find the words.

My condition had always robbed me of them when they mattered most.

The anger.

The fear.

The unbearable need to keep her close.

They all arrived at once until they became impossible to separate.

Instead of speaking, I lowered my head and buried my face against the side of her neck. My lips found her skin in a desperate kiss as though some irrational part of me wanted the entire world to know she was under my protection.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 691

Gianna

My breath hitched into a sharp gasp as my chest was pressed flat against the mattress.

The dark sheets felt cool against my face, but the body pinned over mine was burning hot.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even shift my hips. Raphael had completely trapped me beneath him, his weight crushing any remaining space between us until I couldn’t tell where my own heartbeat ended and his began.

I felt the sudden tug at the back of my head as he gathered my hair into his palm. He pulled it to the side, exposing the curve of my neck, for only a second before his mouth came down against my skin.

Hard.

A small, quiet sound escaped my throat.

His lips pressed deep into the side of my neck. My eyes closed involuntarily, my fingers digging into the dark sheets.

I knew that look in his eyes right before he flipped me over. It wasn’t just anger. It was something far darker.

His mouth moved higher along my skin, biting down just enough to send a shiver straight down my spine. The pain was small, but the mark he was leaving behind felt permanent.

“Raph...” I whispered, my voice muffled against the pillow.

His hand tightened in my hair, holding my head still as his lips dragged down to the hollow of my shoulder.

I tried to move my hand, reaching blindly behind me to touch his face. I wanted to feel his jaw, to calm the storm raging inside him.

Before my fingers could even touch his skin, his hand shot out and caught my wrist. He pulled my arm back, then grabbed my other wrist just as fast. With one hard push, he pinned both of my hands flat against the bed on either side of my head.

The air left my lungs in a small, shaky gasp. He was out of control. It was like my simple words about leaving for Philadelphia had completely broken something inside his head.

He pressed his lips hard into the skin of my neck, kissing me rough and deep. He bit down just enough to leave another mark, a sharp sting that sent a hot shiver straight down my spine, before licking the sore spot to soothe it.

“Raph...” I breathed out against the dark pillow, my voice small and trembling.

He didn’t answer, he only held my wrists down tighter, his fingers biting into my skin like he was afraid that if he let go for even one second, I would vanish into thin air.

He shifted his weight above me, his body hot and solid as he pressed himself hard against my back. His mouth moved down my shoulder, burning through the thin silver fabric of my nightgown, taking total control of my body.

I felt the heavy length of him growing hard against my back, every line of his body tense and straining.

“Stay down,” he growled into my ear, his voice barely a whisper.

The grip on my wrists released, but I couldn’t move. Raphael shifted his weight, hovering over the back of my thighs, pinning me in place with his knees.

Slowly, his hands moved down my lower back, slipping over the smooth fabric of my silver nightdress.

His fingers dug in, kneading the flesh of my ass through the thin silk with a force that made my breath catch in my throat. I couldn’t stop the quiet gasp that left my lips as his palms squeezed hard, pulling me tighter against his lap.

Then, without a second of warning, his hand came down hard.

The sharp slap echoed through the bedroom, a sudden, burning shock that stung right through the silk fabric. My hips buckled into the mattress, sharp pain bloomed across my skin, stealing the breath from my lungs as a startled cry escaped me.

Before I could recover, his fingers buried themselves in my hair, forcing my head back until I was looking at him over my shoulder.

His eyes weren't merely angry.

They looked betrayed.

"What do you take me for, Gianna?" His voice was low, uneven, every word sounding like it had been dragged out of him. "Who the fuck do you think I am?"

Choprox 692

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 692

He let out a humorless laugh.

"Do you think I don't see what you're doing?" His fingers flexed against my waist, "You tell me you love me... and in the same breath you ask to leave."

He shook his head slowly.

"You think because I give you space... because I listen... because I don't lock every damn door in this house... that I'll just smile and watch you walk away?"

His jaw clenched until the muscle beneath his skin pulsed. His eyes became so dark they were almost impossible to read, and goosebumps rose across my skin at the sight of them.

"Tell me, Gianna," his voice dropped even lower. "Is that what you think I am? Some weak bastard who'll thank you for leaving him?"

He leaned closer until his words brushed against my ear.

"I've spent every day trying to build a life where no one could ever hurt you again. Making sure you're happy, comfortable... that you never have to be afraid," a bitter smile crossed his face, "And now you're asking me to hand you over myself."

His face became dark, almost unrecognizable.

“No. You’ve gotten far too comfortable testing me. You think loving you makes me weak? It doesn’t. It makes me fucking violent.”

His hand locked around my waist possessively.

“You think I’m Leone Caruso?” he spat the name, “You think I’m the kind of man who shrugs his shoulders and watches the woman he loves walk away? Then you don’t know me at all.”

His forehead rested briefly against the back of my head before he spoke again, quieter this time, but infinitely more frightening.

“Because once you’re mine, you don’t get to decide you’re not anymore. You can hate me for that if you want but you’re not walking away from me.”

My eyes stung with tears as I slowly turned my head, straining against his grip just to catch a glimpse of his face. I needed him to look at me, to see me through whatever fear had taken hold of him.

It wasn’t the fury burning in his dark eyes that unsettled me. It was the desperation beneath it.

The terror of losing me, buried so deep beneath his anger that he couldn’t even give it a name.

“Raph... You think I’m trying to leave you?”

He didn’t say anything else. He just kept breathing against the side of my head. Slowly, I reached down with one trembling hand and gently placed it over his where it was still holding tightly onto my waist. He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t relax either. His hand stayed tense beneath mine, every muscle tight as if he were still holding himself together.

“I asked to go to Philadelphia,” I whispered, my chest rising and falling fast against the dark mattress, “I never asked to leave you.”

His jaw flexed hard, a bitter, humorless sound leaving his throat, “Is there a difference?”

“Yes,” I breathed out, fighting against the awkward angle of my body to keep my eyes on his face, “A huge one. You are my home, Raph. I don’t have another one.”

He acted as though he hadn’t heard a single word I’d said. He settled over the backs of my thighs again, keeping me pinned beneath him.

As I tried to speak, his free hand slowly traced the length of my spine, his warm palm gliding over the thin silk of – my nightdress.

I loved the way he touched me. I always had. I wanted him close, and needed the warmth of him around me. But the sudden intensity behind every movement, the storm he was trying so hard to keep inside, left me completely shaken.

“I’ve spent my whole life losing everything, Raphael,” I pleaded, tears finally spilling over my lashes and dropping down on the bed, “My little brother, my mother, my home, my childhood, my sense of who I was.”

I shook my head, my voice breaking.

“And then... you happened,” my fingers tightened around his hand, “Do you really think I’m that foolish?” I whispered. “Do you honestly believe I would throw away the only man I’ve ever loved more than I love myself? The only man who’s ever made me feel safe? The only person I’ve ever wanted to spend the rest of my life with?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 693

He didn’t say a word.

My body was pinned tight under his. I was flat on my stomach, my elbows propping me up just enough to look back at him over my shoulder. My feet were stretched out behind me, my toes curled tight against the cool sheets.

Raphael stayed hovering right over the back of my thighs, his knees resting on either side of mine, trapping me completely.

His hand moved over the curve of my hip, squeezing hard through the smooth silk of my dress. Then his long fingers moved lower, gripping my hipbone and digging into my lower belly, holding me still.

He pulled my hips up and back, leaving my ass lifted just a little in the air, pressed tight and flush against the hard length of him.

The heat of his body burned through my clothes. I could feel every line of his muscles strained.

“Raph...” I whispered, my voice shaking as I held onto the mattress with both hands.

His fingers dug deeper into my skin, holding me right against him, refusing to give me even an inch of space. He was taking control of my whole body, showing me without any words that he was never going to let me go.

“I’m not trying to run from you,” I whispered, “I only asked for a few days because... I can’t breathe in this house right now. Everywhere I look, I see her. Every room reminds me she’s gone.”

I swallowed hard, struggling to hold back another wave of tears.

“But even then...” My fingers tightened into the sheets, “I was always coming back. I always come back to you, Raphael.”

A shaky breath left my lips.

“I don’t have anyone else. You’re the only place I’ve ever truly belonged and even if the whole world wanted me...” I shook my head. “I wouldn’t choose them. I would choose you. Every single time.”

He pulled the thin silver strap of my nightdress down my arms from both sides. I turned my face further into the pillow, praying that the truth in my words would break through the dark wall he had built up around himself tonight.

My voice dropped, breaking in my throat.

“I would never just throw you away. You are everything to me. If I walk away for a few days, it’s only to try and find my feet... not because I want another path. There is no other path. There is only you. There will only ever be you.”

While I talked, his hands slid down my legs, gathering the thin silver fabric of my nightdress and pushing it up past my hips, leaving my skin bare to the cool room air.

I could even catch my breath, his fingers hooked into the thin bands of my panties. With a hard pull, the fabric ripped right off my body, tossed somewhere into the dark sheets.

I heard the sound of his belt buckle clinking, followed by the slow drag of his zipper coming down. The weight of his body came back down over mine, pinning me flat.

“I love you,” I whispered, “I love you so much that leaving you has never even entered my mind. And if you still don’t believe me, then spend the rest of our lives letting me prove it to you.”

He reached down, grabbing one of my arms and pulling it back behind me, pinning my wrist flat against the small of my back. His other hand buried itself deep into my hair, his long fingers wrapping tight around the roots to hold my head locked in place.

I was held down, my chest pressed low toward the dark mattress, my hips lifted up into the air to meet him.

The head of his hardness pressed hot against my bare entrance and then, he drove straight into me, filling me as much as he could in a single hard slide.

A sharp, loud gasp tore from my throat as my eyes flew open. My body stretched around his thick length, every muscle inside me gripping him tight as the deep heat flooded through me.

“Raph...” I choked out against the sheets.

His grip in my hair tightened, holding me still while he stayed buried deep inside me for a long second.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 694

My fingers clawed at the dark sheets as he started moving, my breath coming in broken gasps as he held my arm trapped behind my lower back and his fist locked tight in my hair.

Then, his head dropped down near my ear, his breath hot and ragged against my skin, “I love you too, his voice sounded like it was torn straight out of his chest. He slammed into me harder, taking every last bit of space left between us, “I love you so much that I can’t let you leave.”

Another hard, deep push made my back arch, a sharp cry catching in my throat.

“And no matter what happens, you’re not going to Philadelphia,” he snapped, “I can’t let you leave with that abusive bastard.”

In a single fraction of a second, the world stopped moving.

My entire body went dead still beneath him. The heat in the room seemed to freeze into solid ice.

Abusive bastard.

The words echoed inside my head, drowning out the sound of my own hammering heart.

My free hand froze against the mattress. My lungs locked up, refusing to take in air.

What?

My mind scrambled, trying to make sense of the words he had just spoken into my ear.

He knew.

How could he know?

I had never told him. I had never told anyone. I had buried those horrors so deep inside myself that I thought no one in the world would ever find them.

But... that wasn't abuse.

Raphael didn't understand. How could he? That's why I had never told anyone. They would hear it and think the worst, and maybe they would hate him for it, but they wouldn't understand what it felt like from inside my head.

He wasn't trying to hurt me. He was trying to make me feel better. And the strange part was that it had been working.

I just couldn't handle it then. I was a child, overwhelmed by feelings I didn't have the words for, frightened by how intense everything felt. So I ran from it and buried it until I convinced myself it had never happened.

But I'm not that little girl anymore.

I'm not helpless anymore.

And a small part of me kept whispering that maybe, if he touched me the same way now, I wouldn't panic. Maybe this time I could stay.

Maybe this time it would feel the way it was always supposed to feel.

Raphael kept pounding into me, his hips crashing against mine with a force that sent a violent shockwave through my whole body.

With every single hard stroke, the strength of his body drove me forward across the bed. My free hand slipped against the sheets, unable to hold me back.

My face was pushed straight into the soft headboard.

His hand stayed locked in my hair, holding my head close to the padded headboard, while his other hand kept my arm pinned behind my lower back. Every time he drove himself deep inside me, the thrust lifted my hips and slammed my face forward into the headboard again and again.

The soft fabric cushioned the impact, but the constant, hard hitting rattled my head, dazing me as the dark heat between us burned higher and hotter.

My gasps turned into breathy moans, trapped between the headboard and him. He was taking every last inch of me, filling me so completely and so hard that my thoughts vanished.

The pleasure started blooming deep inside my body so loud, so hot, it drowned out the dull sting. He pulled back and slammed into me once more, his hips crashing against mine with harsh force.

A broken moan escaped my lips, echoing into the dark bedroom. My free hand gripped the soft material of the headboard, my fingers digging in for dear life while he kept my left arm pinned hard behind my back and his fist locked tight in my hair.

“I love you...” I whispered into the headboard, my breath coming fast, “I love you, Raph...”

He drove into me even harder, “You are never leaving me.”

He slammed into me again, taking every bit of space, making my hips buckle as another helpless, sweet moan was ripped from my throat.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 695

“We are going to stand in front of the Council in two days,” his hand tightening in my hair, holding my head still against the headboard, “And if you love me... if you really love me like you say you do... you’re going to stand there and tell every single one of them the truth.”

Another hard, deep pushi made my back arch, my toes curling tight into the sheets as the intense pleasure swept over my mind.

“You’re going to tell them that your father abused you until you almost died,” he ordered, “You’re going to tell them you are never going back to him. Ever again.”

He pulled back and drove deep into me one last heavy time, his hips locked flush against mine, holding me completely still while my body shook beneath him.

“And if you don’t do that,” he whispered, “this will be the very last night we are ever together.”

The threat hung in the air, but the pleasure building inside of me was too hot to hold back.

He finally let go of my arm and hair, and took my waist in both of his big hands instead, gripping my hips so tight his fingers dug deep into my skin. He pulled me back hard against him and slammed deep into me one last, furious time.

That final stroke broke everything inside us.

A loud, broken moan ripped out of my throat at the exact same second a low, rough groan tore from his chest.

The heat exploded deep inside me. My eyes squeezed shut as my whole body went rigid.

The intense pleasure hit me like a wave, making my mind go blank and my breath catch in my chest. He held me pinned flush against his hips as he came inside me, hot, hard, and fast, filling me completely with long pulses.

My body began to shake out of control.

Every single muscle in my legs and back twitched and trembled from the sheer force of the orgasm. My toes curled tight into the sheets, my hips shuddering against him as small, helpless gasps kept leaving my lips.

Raphael held me tight against his body, his head resting heavily against my back now, his chest rising and falling fast as our hearts slammed wildly against each other in the dark room.

Raphael's forehead rested against the back of my shoulder for a long moment before he finally spoke, "Look at me.

I turned slowly until our eyes met. His expression had changed again..The anger was still there and so was the fear but now there was something else... resolve.

"You understand what's at stake."

I nodded faintly, "I do."

His jaw tightened, "If Giovanni asks for you. If he stands there pretending he was a father of the fucking year," his eyes searched mine, "Are you going to tell them the truth?"

The question stole the air from my lungs. I looked away. My silence answered him before I ever could.

Raphael took a slow, deep breath, "Gianna."

I closed my eyes, "I can't..I can't stand there and say those things that aren't even true."

"They're true."

"You don't know that, you weren't there."

His brows pulled together, "What?"

I forced myself to look at him, “My father never abused me.”

Raphael stared at me.

Disbelief slowly replaced every other emotion on his face.

“He was hard on me,” I swallowed, “He pushed me. He expected more from me than other fathers did but he wasn’t trying to destroy me. I won’t lie to the Council. I won’t make up a story just because everyone else believes it.”

“Gianna.”

“I won’t,” tears blurred my vision, “I won’t make promises I can’t keep.”

Raphael laughed once, the sound was so harsh, there wasn’t a trace of humor in it, “I finally understand that you don’t trust me.”

“That’s not -”

“No,” he shook his head, “You trust the man who left scars all over your body but you don’t trust me.”

I shook my head, “He didn’t leave any scars, I did all that to myself and I do! I do trust you.”

“Then stand beside me.”

“I can’t.”

His eyes closed, when they opened again, they were empty, “So that’s your answer.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 696

My chest tightened, “Raphael...”

He pulled away from me and quietly fixed himself. I immediately turned onto my back, sitting up against the headboard as I straightened my dress with unsteady hands.

That was when I noticed he hadn’t even taken off his tie. It hung loosely around his collar, slightly undone, like he had been too lost in everything happening between us to even think about it.

He pointed toward the bedroom door, “Leave.”

I stared at him, “Please…”

“Leave,” his voice echoed through the room.

“I don’t want to.”

“I wasn’t asking,” he snapped and then claimed himself, “You said you loved me.”

“I do.”

“Then prove it.”

“I am.”

“No,” he shook his head, “If you loved me, you wouldn’t ask me to stand there and watch you protect the man who, I believe, stole your childhood.”

“L…”

“You would fight beside me.”

My lips trembled, “I can’t.”

His face twisted with heartbreak, “Then I can’t do this.”

The words barely reached me, “What?”

His breathing grew uneven, “I can’t love someone who keeps choosing the man who broke her over the people trying to save her.”

I felt something inside me shatter, “I never chose him.”

“You just did,” he looked toward the door instead of at me, “Get out.”

“Raphael…”

“Get.”

His voice hardened.

“Out.”

I had never seen him cry. He still wasn’t but his eyes were red, his hands were shaking. He looked so close to breaking. So close to finally letting the pain out.

“Please.”

The word left my mouth before I could stop it.

He kept his back turned toward me, his shoulders stiff, his hands clenched at his sides as if he was holding himself back from saying something worse.

“Raph...” I got off the bed and stepped closer, “Please, don’t do this to me, not you. I love you so much

For a moment, something flickered across his face but then it disappeared, “Don’t.”

My heart sank, “Don’t what?”

“Don’t make this about our love because this isn’t just about us anymore.”

I frowned, “What?”

He looked toward the door, “You’re not only walking away from me. You’re walking away from them too. Jules and Hazel. Jules is a Capone now. She’s part of this family. She has a claim on you. She has people who will protect her, who will stand beside her. And Hazel. She spent years trying to protect you.”

Tears filled my eyes, “Don’t use them against me.”

He continued, “She wanted you safe.”

“I know.”

“Do you? Because right now, it looks like you’re willing to stand alone again.”

“I am not alone.”

“Then stop acting like you are!” he almost shouted.

I flinched. His expression changed immediately, regret flashing across his face but he forced it down.

“I don’t want to say something I’ll regret and I don’t want you to hear something from me that you can never forget.”

I swallowed, “Raph...”

“Leave.”

My heart broke, “No.”

His eyes closed, “Gianna.”

“Please,” I moved closer, “Please don’t do this.”

His hands curled into fists, “Leave my room before I say something cruel.”

I shook my head, “I don’t care if you’re angry.”

“I do,” the answer came instantly, “I care. I care too much and I don’t know if I’m fighting for you or fighting against you right now. And I need you to understand something. I can fight enemies…I can fight the Council. I can fight Giovanni but I can’t fight the person I love while she’s standing on the other side.”

A sob caught in my throat, “You’re really asking me to leave?”

His face tightened, “Yes.”

I stood there, unable to move.

Unable to accept that the same man who had always pulled me closer was now the one pushing me away.

“Raphael…”

“Gianna,” he whispered, his eyes met mine, “Please, leave, before I regret loving you.”

The words stayed with me as I slowly stepped out of his room.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 697

Choptar 50%

Raphael

Claire cut through the tape on another box with a small knife while Maddie knelt beside a second stack, already sorting everything into neat piles.

I dropped to one knee in front of the first box and pulled the lid away. There were clothes, neatly folded sweaters, scarves, and winter gloves. The faint smell of lavender still clung to the fabric.

I searched every pocket, every seam before reaching for the next box. Photo albums, birthday cards, school drawings.

Claire looked up, “Anything?”

I shook my head once.

She opened another album. Maddie worked through a small suitcase filled with old notebooks, “They’re blank,” she murmured after flipping through several pages.

I reached for another box. Everything passed through my hands, but nothing, not a single sentence about Giovanni, not one photograph, not one letter.

Then I grabbed another box, old electronics, camcorders, chargers, three USB drives.

My attention sharpened. I picked up the smallest drive before pulling the adapter from my pocket.

Claire looked over, “You think that’s it?”

“I don’t know.”

The adapter clicked into my phone, a second later the storage opened. Videos, only videos. I opened the first one and the screen lit up.

Hazel laughed behind the camera, “Gianna, slow down!”

Gianna, probably seventeen, ran through a garden with flowers clutched in both hands. Jules chased after her on unsteady little legs.

Hazel laughed again, “There they are, my beautiful babies.”

The video ended.

I opened another, Christmas. Hazel sat on the floor helping Jules tear wrapping paper while Gianna carefully folded every piece into a neat pile beside her.

Another video.

A ballet practice.

This recording was older. Gianna couldn’t have been more than seven. Hazel stood behind the camera, cheering for her with pride.

My attention wasn’t on the dancing for long but on Gianna’s hands, both of them were wrapped in white medical tape

I paused the video, rewound it, then played it again. The tape covered several of her fingers and part of both palms.

My eyes stayed fixed on her hands.

The video ended, I looked through everything, a birthday, a picnic. Jules asleep across Hazel's lap while Gianna quietly tried read beside them, while Hazel helped her through it.

There were memories, and that one video with injured hands wasn't enough proof. The recordings showed ordinary days. A mother who adored her daughters. Two girls growing up together. The kind of life Hazel had fought so hard to build.

Claire sighed behind me, "I've gone through everything in this pile."

Maddie closed another storage box, "So have I."

Neither of them had found anything. Neither had I. I removed the USB and plugged in the second one, but just more home videos, years of them.

I leaned back against one of the storage shelves. For the first time in hours, I closed my eyes.

The silence pressed against my ears. I had spent the entire night chasing ghosts. Every answer dissolved the moment I reached for it. My fingers rubbed slowly across my forehead.

Think.

There had to be something.

Hazel had been careful, she wouldn't simply give up, she wouldn't stop protecting Gianna.

So where had she hidden it?

Unless, my eyes opened... unless she'd hidden it somewhere no one would ever think to search. Somewhere else, maybe a safety deposit box, a lawyer, a trusted friend.

I stood.

"So?" Claire asked quietly.

I looked around the attic, picked up the last USB and slipped it into my pocket, "Maybe, we're looking in the wrong place."

Neither Claire nor Maddie spoke. I looked toward the attic window. Somewhere downstairs, Gianna was waking up. And we are supposed to leave for Sicily in an hour.

The thought settled heavily in my chest. I couldn't explain the feeling. I rarely could. It wasn't panic. It wasn't anger. It wasn't fear.

It was simply... pressure.

A constant weight that refused to leave because I was running out of time.

Gianna

I sat near the back beside Salvatore, my hands folded tightly in my lap. The soft cream-colored leather seat was more comfortable than anything, yet I couldn't seem to relax against it.

The cabin was large enough that everyone had their own space.

Vincenzo sat across from Claire, Killian was sleeping peacefully against his mother's shoulder. And Aurelia lay stretched across Vincenzo's lap, one hand wrapped around her father's finger while she slept without a care in the world.

A few seats ahead, Maddie smiled as Nero babbled happily, reaching for one of the colorful toys scattered across the table. Adriano pretended to lose a game of peekaboo just to hear his son laugh again.

On the other side of the plane, Dante sat with Jules perched comfortably on his lap. A game console rested in her small hands.

"No, no," Dante laughed, gently moving one of her thumbs. "Jump first... then attack."

Chapter Ba

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 698

"I did!" Jules protested.

"You walked straight into the wall, Jule-for-Brains."

She gasped dramatically before swatting his arm, "Because you distracted me."

Silvio chuckled from the seat beside them, "You've created a monster."

“I know,” Dante answered proudly.

I watched them quietly. Jules laughed so easily around them now. She belonged here. She looked safe, loved and protected.

A small ache settled inside my chest. I was happy for her. I truly was. But I couldn’t stop wondering if she looked at me differently now.

If she believed I had chosen Giovanni over all of them.

My eyes drifted through the cabin.

Raphael sat near one of the windows. A file rested open on the table in front of him. He hadn’t looked at me once since we boarded. His attention never left the papers in front of him.

The distance between us wasn’t measured in seats. It felt measured in miles. I lowered my eyes to my hands.

“I’ve never seen him like this,” Salvatore’s quiet voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I looked towards him, “Me neither…”

Salvatore sighed softly before folding his hands together, “I shouldn’t have told them.”

My head lifted, “What?”

He stared down at the polished wooden table between us, “I told my sons everything Hazel ever told me about you and Giovanni. I couldn’t keep it from them. I couldn’t watch my sons walk into that Council meeting blind.”

I lowered my eyes.

So that was it.

That was why Raphael had looked at me the way he had. Why he’d held me so tightly. Why did he say my father’s name as though it belonged to a monster.

“He doesn’t understand,” I whispered.

Salvatore studied my face for several seconds, “Neither do you.’

I looked up sharply, “My father loved me. He took care of me in every way he could.”

Salvatore’s shoulders sank, “Gianna…”

“He did!”

“He also hurt you.

I shook my head, “No.”

“You were a child.”

“He was teaching me. It was everyone else…” I swallowed, “He never laid a hand on me… not even when he believed I’d betrayed him.”

Salvatore closed his eyes for a brief moment. When he looked at me again, the sadness in them was almost too much to bear.

“Hazel trusted me with everything,” he said quietly. “In her final moments, she told me she could leave this world in peace because she knew you and Jules would be safe with us. And now… I can’t help feeling like I’ve failed her.”

I felt my heartbeat begin to race.

A tired smile crossed Salvatore’s face, “When my time comes, I’ll have to face Isabella again… and now you have added Hazel to that list too. And when they ask me if I kept the children they entrusted to me safe…”

His throat tightened. He looked back at me, heartbreak filling his eyes.

“I won’t know how to answer them because I couldn’t protect any of you the way I promised I would. Not my boys, and not you.”

The words settled over me and suddenly I couldn’t breathe.

Salvatore reached over and gently covered my tightly clasped hands with one of his own, “I know you love Raphael.

Tears burned behind my eyes, “I do.”

“And I know my son,” a faint smile crossed his face, “He has his mother’s heart.”

I glanced toward Raphael and he still hadn’t looked up.

Salvatore continued quietly, “He may lose his temper. He may even convince himself he never wants to see you again but that won’t be the end. The Capones fight.”

His smile grew a little sadder and I looked back at him.

“We argue louder than anyone. We hold grudges. We say things they don’t mean.”

I thought about the night before.

Raphael's red eyes, his shaking hands. The way he'd refused to look at me.

Salvatore gently squeezed my hand, "But when the anger burns itself out. We always find our way back to one another."

A sob caught in my throat, "I really don't know how to make you all understand me."

"You start by telling the truth."

Truth.

Everyone kept asking me for it. Everyone spoke as though it was simple. As though it was sitting right in front of me, waiting to be picked up but what if the truth wasn't as simple as they believed?

"What truth?" I held his gaze, "Yours? Mine? Or the one everyone else has already decided belongs to me?"

His brows drew together.

I continued before he could answer, "You told me yourself that I wasn't enough for Raphael. You said I'd ruin his future."

"I was wrong."

"Were you? Or do you simply regret saying it now? You believed every word when you said it. You can't expect me to forget that overnight."

I placed my hands together in my lap, keeping them still even though my chest felt tight.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 699

They all looked at me as though the answer had been sitting in front of me my whole life and I was simply refusing to see it.

Maybe they were right.

Maybe they weren't.

That was the problem.

No one seemed willing to accept that I was the only person who had actually lived those years.

“I may not have all the right answers for you but I know what Hazel told me,” his voice was gentle, “I know what she was afraid of.”

“My mother isn’t here anymore,” the words left my mouth before I realized how cold they sounded, “She can’t explain what she meant.”

“Hazel spent years trying to get you away from him,” Salvatore said quietly, “She gave up everything to keep you safe. And now you’re walking back to the very man she spent years protecting you from. You’re choosing him, Gianna. You’re choosing him over the family that has stood beside you. Over the people who love you. Over us. And he hasn’t done a single thing to deserve that choice.”

My chest tightened, everyone seems to think that I was choosing Dad over them. If only it were that simple.

Maybe they thought they were protecting me and they really were but none of them lived inside my mind.

None of them knew what it felt like to carry the same questions year after year until they became part of you.

Questions that refused to stay buried.

Questions that followed you into every room.

Questions that whispered to you every time you failed.

Every time you hesitated.

Every time you looked at yourself and wondered whether you could have been... different.

Some promises refused to die, no matter how old they became. Some questions refused to stop asking for answers. I had spent years trying to silence them.

They always came back.

“You think this is about loyalty,” I spoke quietly, “You think this is about choosing one family over another.”

“It isn’t?”

“No,” my fingers laced together, “It’s about finishing something that was never finished.”

He looked at me for a long time, “And if finishing it costs you... us?”

The question landed harder than I expected, so I looked toward the front of the cabin again. Raphael still hadn’t looked at me. A dull ache settled in my chest.

I loved him.

With everything I had

Enough to let him hate me if it meant reaching the end of this road.

Because I couldn’t spend the rest of my life wondering.

Wondering if there had been an answer.

Wondering if one conversation could have changed everything.

Wondering if I was truly worthy of Raphael and the love he gave me so freely.

Wondering if he was quietly holding himself back for my sake, settling for less than he deserved because he loved

Wondering if we could ever build a life together without the shadow of my doubts following us.

Wondering if I should have faced all of this before making choices that would bind our lives together forever,

Those questions would never leave me.

They would follow me for the rest of my life.

And I wasn’t sure I could live with that.

But there was one thing I knew with absolute certainty.

I would never let Raphael spend the rest of his life carrying a burden that belonged to me.

He deserved better than that.

If there was something about me that could be changed, I had to face it myself. I wasn’t going to hide behind his love and pretend everything was fine.

And I wasn’t weak enough to run from it anymore.

Raphael

Our convoy rolled through the old iron gates one car at a time before stopping in front of a sprawling Sicilian estate built centuries ago.

The mansion sat high above the cliffs, carved from pale stone that had weathered hundreds of years of storms without ever bowing to them.

Olive trees stretched across the hills. Ancient cypress trees lined the long drive. Beyond them, the Mediterranean crashed against the rocks below.

Exactly the sort of place where men decided who would keep breathing.

I stepped out of the car, the sea breeze carried the scent of salt and old earth.

Men in dark suits stood every few meters, their eyes hidden behind sunglasses despite the fading afternoon sun.

Every person here already understood the rules.

No weapons inside.

No blood spilled on Sicilian ground.

No matter how much hatred existed between families.

Until the Council reached its decision.

Vincenzo stepped out beside me, adjusting the front of his black jacket. Behind us came Adriano, Luca, Dante and. Silvio.

Claire helped Aurelia from the car while Vincenzo lifted Killian into his arms. Maddie climbed out carrying little Nero against her shoulder. Jules stayed close beside Claire, unusually quiet for once.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 700

Then, Gianna.

She climbed from the last vehicle without looking in my direction. She kept her eyes on the ground and I forced myself to look away.

If I looked any longer...

I wasn't sure I'd remember why I was angry.

"Capone."

I turned, the front doors of the estate opened. A man in his late sixties stepped outside wearing a perfectly tailored suit.

Silver hair, sharp blue eyes. A scar running beneath one ear.

Don Cesare Orsini.

The man responsible for arranging every Council gathering held on Sicilian soil.

He smiled politely, "Welcome home."

He shook Vincenzo's hand before greeting the rest of us.

"You've all been given rooms," his eyes swept across every member of our family, "The Council begins tomorrow evening."

He stepped aside, the enormous wooden doors opened completely.

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Inside, the entrance hall stretched upward nearly three stories. Marble pillars supported a ceiling painted centuries ago with scenes of saints, kings and battles long forgotten. Crystal chandeliers hung overhead. The marble floor reflected every step. Servants moved silently through the corridors carrying luggage toward the family wings. Every hallway held another armed guard.

No one trusted anyone enough to leave security to someone else.

As we entered the grand hall, I immediately recognized the first family.

The Costellos.

Every conversation in the room seemed quieter around them. At the center stood Nikolai Costello.

Capo dei Capi.

The man every boss answered to when the Crime Families failed to reach peace themselves.

He wasn't the oldest man in the room. He wasn't even close, yet everyone watched him. Power didn't always arrive with age. Sometimes, it simply walked into the room and expected the world to move aside.

Nikolai wore a perfectly fitted black three-piece suit without a single crease. No jewelry, no unnecessary display. He didn't need one, the confidence in the way he stood was enough.

Beside him stood his wife, Evangeline.

Their son, Massimo, stood with pride on his face beside his father. His small suit matched Nikolai's almost perfectly

His daughter, Anastasia, hid behind her mother's hand before peeking curiously around her toward the arriving families.

Nikolai noticed us and a slow smile crossed his face, "Capones."

Vincenzo stepped forward first. The two men shook hands briefly before stepping apart.

"It's been too long, Vincenzo." Nikolai's voice carried the kind of calm that only came from years of standing on opposite sides of the same battles.

Vincenzo's mouth curved into a humorless smile, "Not long enough, Nikolai."

A few men nearby went quiet, watching the exchange.

Nikolai only gave a low chuckle, lifting his glass slightly, "Still carrying that temper of yours."

"And you're still carrying that arrogance."

The two men stared at each other for a moment.

There was no false friendship.

Only the understanding between two men who had spent years competing, disagreeing, and challenging each other's power.

Then Nikolai nodded, "Good to see you alive."

Vincenzo smiled, "Same to you. I was hoping age would make you easier to deal with."

A faint smile touched Nikolai's lips, "And I was hoping fatherhood would make you softer. But this is better, I would have been disappointed if the Capone boss arrived in Sicily suddenly knowing humility."

Vincenzo's eyes narrowed, "And I would have been disappointed if the Costello boss stopped believing he owned every room he entered."

"I actually do own every room I enter..." he laughed and then, Nikolai's attention shifted toward Gianna for only a brief second before politely looking away.

Another convoy arrived outside. The front doors opened again.

The Visconti Family

Headed by Leonardo Visconti.

A man whose family had ruled the ports of southern Italy for generations. If something illegal crossed the sea... The Visconti Family knew about it first.

Behind them came the Falcones.

Their leader, Valentino Falcone, towered above nearly everyone else in the room.

The final family arrived.

The Deverecci Consortium.

Old European money. Their wealth stretched across banks, pharmaceutical companies and international shipping routes

Their patriarch, Luciano Deverecci, carried himself less like a criminal, more like an emperor visiting subjects.

Every family in this room had survived nearly four hundred years to be here. We didn't survive through luck. We survived because everyone else died first.

Within minutes...

Five great families stood beneath one roof.

Costello.

Capone.

Visconti.

Falcone.

Deverecci.

Enough wealth to purchase countries. Enough soldiers to start wars. Enough influence to end governments.

And yet…

Tomorrow…

Everything would revolve around one young woman standing quietly near the back of the room.

Gianna still hadn’t looked at me, neither had I allowed myself to look at her again.

Because if I did…

I might remember the woman I loved…

Instead of the witness I needed.