

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 7

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Gianna

+15 Bonus

“We’re moving in with Salvatore,” Mom said. She said it while pouring juice, like she was just talking

about the weather.

I froze, my fork hovering halfway to my mouth. I didn’t say anything at first, I just stared at her, the heat rising in my face until my skin felt tight.

“No, we’re not,” I snapped.

Mom sighed, a long, tired sound. She reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind Jules’ ear, her eyes squeezed shut for a second. “Yes, we are, Ginny. Sal will be here in a

few hours to pick us up. I need you to go upstairs and pack your essentials into boxes. I'll handle Jules and my own things."

I let out a harsh, dry laugh. My eyes felt hot, my vision blurring with frustrated tears I refused to let fall." No, Mom. You promised. You said we weren't moving into that place unless there was a ring on your finger. You aren't married yet."

Mom grabbed Jules' spoon and started feeding her cereal, bite by bite, as if Jules were three years old and not a grown girl.

She'd been doing that lately, smothering us, acting like we were helpless babies who couldn't survive a

walk to the mailbox.

"Change of plans," she said, her voice flat.

"It's a zoo, Mom! A zoo full of men!" I stood up, my chair screeching against the tile like a scream,. "There

are six brothers and their father. Seven men and just two women in that whole house. Did you see them at dinner? Did you see the way they looked at us? They didn't see guests, they saw targets. They hated that we were breathing their air. They hate us, Mom. They're mobsters!"

Mom looked up at me, her expression disturbingly calm, “We’ve lived around men like that our whole lives, Ginny. What’s the difference this time?”

“The difference?” I blinked, stunned that she even had to ask. “The difference is that I’m done living in a man’s shadow. I’m done. I don’t need a man to feel safe. I don’t need a man to feel loved. I don’t need

them for anything. I hate them, Mom. Every single one of them. They use us until we’re empty and then they throw us away. We should be doing the same to them. Use them, toss them, and never look back”

I slammed my hand onto the table, making the milk in Jules’ bowl ripple.

“I don’t understand you! Why do you feel the need to crawl into bed with Don fucking Salvatore Capone? Why do we have to be his property?”

Mom just wiped a drop of milk from Jules’ chin, “Keep your voice low,” she said softly, “And do not curse in front of your sister.”

I stared at her, feeling a cold, hard knot the itself in my chest. She was choosing a cage and she wan dragging us into it with her But I wasn’t a child anymore, and I wasn’t going to let her believe me mere helpless

I dropped to my knees in front of her, grabbing her hands to make her look at me. Ym taking care of us Mom We're doing just fine, I said, my voice filled with desperation, Tm getting my degree I'm going to get a good job, a real career, and we'll be set. I'll take care of you and Jules for the rest of our lives! promise

I squeezed her fingers, trying to make her feel the strength I was trying so hard to build

I love you You and Jules are enough for me, and I'm enough for both of you. We don't need a savior We don't need a man's protection or his blood money. We'll be fine, Mom. I swear, we'll be fine."

She didn't look hopeful. She didn't look proud. Instead, she let out a short, hollow laugh that felt like a slap to my face.

"You're going to take care of us?" she asked, her eyes finally meeting mine with a pity that made my stomach turn. "And who is going to take care of you, hm?"

She pulled her hands away to reach for the cereal box again, as if the conversation was already over stayed there on the floor, feeling the sting of her doubt. She didn't get it. She thought a woman was only as safe as the man standing in front of her. But I knew better. I knew that the men who protected you were usually the ones you needed protection from the most.

"You have it all backward, Ginny, Mom said, as she put the spoon down and turned her full attention to me, it is not your job to take care of us. It was never supposed to be your weight to carry

She reached out, cupping my face with a hand that felt too soft for the world we lived in

“I am the mother here I brought you and Jules into this life, which means you are my responsibility not the other way around. You’re talking about jobs and degrees like you have to be the man of the house. but I’m telling you to stop Stop acting like you’re the one in charge of our survival it’s unfair to you

I opened my mouth to argue but her gaze turned stern instantly, the kind of look she only used when she wasn’t going to budge

You need to be a daughter You need to be a student. You need to just live I’m making this choice so you don’t have to spend every second of your day worrying about where the next rent check is coming from or who is watching the door at night

“But I can do it started, my voice cracking

“No,’ she interrupted, her thumb brushing over my cheek, “You shouldn’t have to Salvatore provides something you can’t buy with a degree. Gianna He provides a name that people are afraid to touch He provides security in every possible way

I pulled away, the heat of her hand lingering on my skin. She thought she was giving me freedom, but all I could see were the bars of the cage she was locking us into

et & one laugh escape my throat How can you be so sure Mom? Really? Look at your track record

art work the first time and it definitely didnt work the second time. What makes you think you've

finally figured it out”

Gins stop t’ Jules said in a tiny voice her eyes filling with tears.

leaned over the table. Do you even listen to the stones people tell? Salvatore Capone is famous for killing his first wife. The mother of those six monsters he calls sons is in the ground because of him. And you want to be next? You want to move into her bedroom and wait for him to get bored of you, too?

Mor just looked at me with those soft watery eyes that always made me feel like I was the one being unreasonable. She reached out her fingers trembling slightly as she tried to touch my arm.

Garna please’ she whispered, her voice sweet and hurting all at once, “Don’t be mean just to prove a point. I know you’re scared, but you don’t have to say things like that. We are going to be a family.”

Family” spat the word out looking at her kind, hopeful face. She was so soft, so willing to believe the best in the worst men. It made me want to scream, “He’s a predator, Mom. The Capones are predators and we’re just the new bat

Gianna stop it” Mom whispered, her eyes widening.

I paced the kitchen, the words pouring out like venom. “We don’t need them. We don’t need any of them. Men are a waste of space, a burden we’re taught to carry just so we don’t have to be alone. I’d rather be alone forever than spend one night under the same roof as that old killer and his pack of rabid dogs. They’re all rotten, from the father down to the-

The words died in my throat. Mom’s face didn’t just go pale, it went grey. She looked like she was about

to faint

I felt a shadow fall behind me, blocking out the morning sun. I didn’t have to turn around to know the air in the room had changed.

is that so? A deep, smooth voice asked from behind me.

Ruby Walker