My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 701

Gianna

If someone dropped a bomb on this place right now. Every mob boss in the house would be gone and the world would probably sleep a little easier tonight.

Jesus.

That wasn't just an intrusive thought. That was a full-on villain origin thought.

I rubbed my face.

Yeah.

I definitely wasn't okay.

I shook the thought from my head and let my eyes wander around the grand hall. Small groups had already formed, the different crime families greeting one another, exchanging quiet words, handshakes, and polite smiles that never quite reached their eyes.

Servants moved silently between groups, offering drinks no one seemed interested in. Expensive shoes clicked against marble before fading into the low hum of careful conversations. Crystal chandeliers cast warm light across the room, making the gold details on the walls shine.

Everything looked beautiful but everything felt cold.

I stood beside Claire, my hands folded tightly in front of me. I tried to keep them still, but my fingers kept twisting together without me noticing.

My eyes drifted across the room.

They found Raphael.

Again...

I'd already lost count of how many times I'd looked for him.

He stood with his brothers, one hand resting in the pocket of his black trousers while the other held a glass he hadn't touched. Vincenzo was saying something to him. Dante answered with a shrug. Silvio rolled his eyes.

Raphael didn’t react. He simply stared ahead, his face carved from stone. Not once... Not once since leaving for Sicily had he looked at me.

The space between us wasn’t very large, maybe twenty feet. It felt like another country.

A dull ache settled inside my chest. I wanted him to look at me. Even if he looked at me with anger. Even if he hated me. Anything was better than this. Anything was better than pretending I wasn’t even there.

A movement near the entrance pulled my attention away.

The heavy wooden doors opened once more. Every conversation nearby seemed to soften. People looked up and so did I.

Daddy walked in first.

His back was straight, his expression calm, his dark suit fitting him perfectly. There wasn’t a single wrinkle on his jacket.

Behind him came the rest of the Toricelli family, uncles, cousins. Men I had grown up calling family. Faces I hadn’t seen in years.

For a second, I counted them without thinking. My eyes searched the group again. Then a small line appeared between my brows.

Where was Gio?

The Council had ordered every direct member of every crime family to attend.

That was the whole point.

No one was supposed to be missing.

My eyes searched again, he wasn’t there, then I looked for Perla. She wasn’t there either.

That didn’t make sense.

Daddy rarely attended important gatherings without her beside him.

My stomach tightened.

Were they coming later?

Had something happened?

Or...

Were they deliberately kept away?

Questions piled on top of one another so quickly that my head started to hurt.

I barely noticed someone stepping closer beside Daddy until my eyes lifted.

Leone.

His hair was combed neatly away from his face. His suit looked expensive enough to buy a house. He hadn't changed much. The same sharp jaw. The same easy confidence. The same smile.

His eyes found mine almost immediately.

For one brief second, we simply looked at each other across the room.

Then

He smiled It wasn't a smile you'd give your ex after seeing them after years, it was a smile that felt like we shared a secret. A quick wink followed that smug smile.

My stomach turned so violently I thought I might actually be sick. Heat rushed through my chest.

I had spent years believing I would marry that man.

The thought alone made me want to puke. I looked away so quickly my neck almost hurt. My heart pounded against my ribs. How had I ever stood beside him? How had I ever convinced myself that was what my future was supposed to look like?

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 702

It wasn't that Leone was a bad man. It was that somewhere along the way... I'd fallen in love with Raphael Capone.

And after loving a man like him, no one else could ever compare.

Then another feeling settled over the disgust... anger. He still thought he had the right to look at me that way... as though nothing had changed.

As though I still belonged anywhere near him.

Absolutely fucking not.

Without thinking, my eyes went to Raphael again.

His head had turned, his gaze wasn't on me. It was locked on Leone. The look on Raphael's face made the air feel colder. His jaw was clenched so tightly I could see the muscle moving beneath his skin.

His eyes...

I'd seen storms over Lake Michigan that looked calmer.

There wasn't a trace of jealousy in them, only something dark and cold. The kind of look that promised violence without a single word being spoken.

Leone noticed it too, his smile slipped for the smallest moment.

And then, he finally turned his head and looked in my direction, not because he wanted to see me but because someone else had.

My heart squeezed painfully.

Raphael...

Please.

I didn't even realize I had taken half a step forward until he took a step back. Everything around me disappeared. The conversations, the footsteps, the music drifting quietly through the hall.

It all faded into nothing.

My eyebrows pulled together as I looked at him.

Please.

I didn't need words. I only needed him to understand that I wasn't his enemy. That I wasn't standing here because I wanted to hurt him.

That I still loved him more than anyone here and I would do anything for him but his expression never changed.

His jaw tightened.

Then, almost too slowly to notice, he gave one small shake of his head.

No.

The single movement hit harder than if he had shouted at me. He turned away, just like that. As though looking at me for one second had already been too much.

The tightness in my chest spread until it felt difficult to breathe.

“Cindy!” the bright unfamiliar voice echoed through the hall.

Claire’s face lit up immediately. She laughed as several women crossed the room together. Evangeline reached Claire first. We’d met once before at Claire’s gallery opening, so although we weren’t close, none of us were strangers anymore.

I grew up attending Cosa Nostra gatherings, but I hadn’t been to one since Don Nikolai married Evangeline. She wrapped Claire in a warm hug before they kissed each other’s cheeks.

“It’s about time we saw your face again,” Evangeline said warmly.

Claire smiled, “I could say the same.”

Behind her came Allegra, wrapping Claire in another hug.

Then Bianca Costello swept Claire into such an enthusiastic hug that she nearly lifted her off the floor.

“If I’d known this Council meeting was actually happening,” she groaned dramatically, smoothing a hand over her dress, “I would’ve packed better outfits. I seriously thought everyone was joking about some surprise family vacation.”

Claire laughed, “God, I missed you!”

Delilah rolled her eyes as she reached them next, “You own more dresses than half of Milan.”

“I still never have the right one.”

Laughter spread through the group. Lilianna stepped forward next, hugging Claire just as tightly. Viviane arrived last, elegant as always in a deep emerald dress that somehow looked effortless on her, the color making her copper-red hair stand out even more.

She smiled before embracing Claire, “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.”

For a few moments, the room felt... normal, like none of them belonged to some of the most dangerous families in the world, like they were simply women catching up after too much time apart.

Then Evangeline frowned, “What happened? Why does everyone look like they’re attending a funeral?”

Claire sighed, “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.”

Claire hesitated for a moment, then she reached for my wrist, before I knew what she was doing, she gently pulled me to stand beside her, “This,” Claire said quietly, “is the reason.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 703

Every pair of eyes landed on me, none of them looked judgmental, only concerned.

Claire wrapped an arm around my shoulders, “She’s family. Our family,” and then she glanced across the room toward my Dad before looking back at them, “Unfortunately, her father doesn’t seem to agree.”

Evangeline turned to me, “So you’re the woman turning this entire mob network upside down.”

Heat rushed into my cheeks, “I wasn’t exactly trying to.”

“I know,” she reached over and gently squeezed my hand, “You look terrified.”

“I think I am.”

She nodded as though that made perfect sense, then a mischievous smile spread across her face, “If it helps...” she leaned in slightly, “I can always influence tomorrow’s vote.”

She waved a hand like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“Nikolai’s been trying to get back into my good graces all week after he pissed me off.”

I blinked.

She leaned closer, lowering her voice, “Trust me. If I smile at that man for more than three seconds, he’ll start looking at me like he’d gladly get down on his knees just to make me happy.”

Allegra let out a laugh. “She’s not exaggerating either.”

Bianca rolled her eyes, still smiling, “He’ll deny it later, of course.”

“He always does,” Delilah added with a quiet laugh, “Then he’ll spend the next week proving everyone wrong by doing exactly what she said he would.”

Lilianna folded her arms. “Last month he canceled three meetings because Evangeline had a headache.”

Evangeline sighed with exaggerated disappointment, “It’s exhausting being this adored.”

“You poor thing,” Allegra said with a completely serious face.

“I suffer daily.”

Delilah patted her shoulder, “We’re praying for your recovery.”

Claire smiled, her eyes moving over the women before she shook her head, “I see some things never change.”

Allegra’s smile softened as she looked at me, “Claire told us enough to know something serious is happening.”

“Not everything,” Claire added quietly. “The details stay inside the family.”

Evangeline nodded, “I respect that.”

Allegra glanced around the crowded hall before lowering her voice. “If anyone gives you trouble tomorrow… just point them out.”

Delilah smiled sweetly. “People always underestimate the wives.”

“They see the dresses,” Viviane added, a mischievous smile tugging at her lips, “and forget we’re the women our husbands come home to.”

Evangeline folded her arms, “Which means we know exactly how to ruin their week.”

Lilianna nodded with complete seriousness, “Or their month.”

Allegra sighed dramatically, “We’ve got years of practice.”

A small laugh escaped me before I could stop it. “I don’t think this is something five women can solve.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Evangeline said, grinning. “You’d be surprised what five stubborn women can accomplish.”

“And husbands who panic the second we’re upset,” Delilah added.

Lilianna smiled, “That’s our greatest weapon.”

Viviane gave a lazy shrug. “You don’t win every battle by pulling a trigger.”

“You just make the right man miserable,” Allegra finished.

Evangeline beamed. “Works every single time.”

Without meaning to, my eyes searched the crowded hall until they found him.

Raphael.

As though he could feel me watching, his head turned. Our eyes met across the room. My heart stumbled. I gave him the smallest smile I could manage. A quiet, hopeful smile that asked for nothing... except for him to remember us.

Viviane stepped closer, “You know, I’ve been hoping we’d meet again. You caught my attention last time.”

For reasons I couldn’t explain, my stomach tightened. She was beautiful, confident and brilliant. Everything I sometimes feared Raphael deserved and being in her presence made me feel... strange.

I stared at her for a second before quietly answering, “I... really?”

“Of course,” she frowned like the answer should have been obvious, “Do you have any idea how rare it is to see men like ours forget the rest of the room?”

I blinked, “Men like ours?”

Viviane let out a small laugh, “The idiots. The impossible ones. The ones who treat emotions like a business expense. The emotionally constipated ones.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 704

I opened my mouth, then closed it again, “I… don’t think I understand.”

Viviane let out a laugh, “The men who’d negotiate with the devil before admitting they’re in love.”

A small smile found its way onto my face. I remembered how impossible Raphael had been in the beginning. How he’d insisted he didn’t want me while looking at me like I was driving him insane.

The man had fought his feelings with the same determination he fought everyone else. Looking back now, it was almost funny.

“When a man like that spends an entire evening looking at one woman instead of everything else…” she said with a knowing smile, “…trust me, every woman in the room notices.”

My brows slowly pulled together.

I had always thought…

I had been so sure…

He’d been watching her.

Viviane tilted her head, studying me for a moment, “What?”

I looked down at my hands, “It’s just…” I hesitated before forcing the words out, “He’s… remarkable.”

She waited.

“He’s one of those people who seems good at everything,” a small smile touched my lips despite the ache in my chest, “He’s smart. Disciplined. He notices things no one else does.”

I swallowed.

“Sometimes I think…” My fingers tightened together. “Sometimes I think a man like him deserves someone who can keep up with him.”

Viviane’s brows lifted.

“…Someone like you,” I finished.

For one long second, she simply stared at me. Then she reached over and gently squeezed my forearm,” Is that what you’ve been thinking?”

Heat crept into my cheeks the moment I realized I'd said far more than I meant to. My lips parted, "I..."

She shook her head, still smiling, "Raphael and I have had exactly three conversations. Two of them were about cybersecurity. The third conversation," she continued, "was him asking whether I thought a certain encryption system could be broken."

"And?"

"I told him yes."

"And then?"

"He nodded... and walked away."

I blinked, "That was it?"

Viviane laughed, "That was the entire conversation. Honestly, if people hadn't introduced us, I don't think either of us would even know the other's last name. Every time we speak, it's because he's trying to come up with some impossible cybersecurity scenario to prove he could stop someone like me before they outsmarted him."

She sighed dramatically.

"I think he's still personally offended that I managed to beat Alessandro once," her shoulders lifted in a small shrug, "The poor man treats it like an unsolved crime. I keep telling him I didn't beat Alessandro because he's stupid. I beat him because I got lucky and found one tiny weakness before he found mine.

He refuses to believe me."

That earned another laugh from me, the sound faded almost as quickly as it came, "I always thought..." I admitted quietly, "He... admired you."

Viviane stared at me for a second before letting out an incredulous laugh, "Admired me?" she looked genuinely horrified by the idea, "Gianna, that man has one life goal whenever we're in the same room... to prove he's smarter than I am. Every time I win one of his imaginary cybersecurity battles, he looks at me like he's rewriting the laws of physics just so he can prove me wrong."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. That's the reason I wanted to know you. You seemed like his weak link," she leaned in as if she were about to share a state secret. "I've been hoping we'd become friends."

I blinked, “Me?”

She nodded, “Yeah, because if we’re seen whispering together often enough, he’ll eventually convince himself I’ve recruited you.”

I stared at her.

She was serious... or at least serious enough to commit to the joke.

“Imagine his face,” she continued, trying not to laugh. “He’ll spend weeks wondering if you’ve secretly become my undercover agent. We’ll nod at each other across rooms for absolutely no reason. Maybe exchange mysterious envelopes. Obviously, the envelopes will be empty and he will find nothing. He’ll lose sleep trying to figure out what was inside.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 705

A laugh escaped me because, I could actually picture Raphael completely losing his mind trying to uncover a conspiracy that didn’t exist.

I used to love getting under his skin. I used to love watching that tiny crease appear between his brows whenever I annoyed him.

But somewhere along the way... I’d stopped feeling like the girl who laughed so easily.

The smile faded from my face, my eyes found him again.

Raphael stood exactly where he’d been before. Straight-backed, expression hard, speaking to Vincenzo without a single glance in my direction.

Viviane followed my gaze, “Brilliant men are strange creatures.”

I looked back at her.

“They’ll solve problems worth billions before breakfast.” She smiled. “But put the woman they love in front of them, and suddenly they forget how to function. So, if I’m ever going to destroy Raphael’s oversized ego, I’m going to need your help. I have a weakness for watching brilliant, arrogant men completely lose their composure. It’s one of my favorite hobbies.”

A weak smile found my lips, “I don’t think Raphael forgets how to function.”

Viviane laughed softly, “No?”

I shook my head, “He’s always in control.”

She gave me a look that almost made me laugh again, “Gianna…” she said gently. “If he’s anything like my husband, he only looks in control.”

Even from across the room, I could see how stiff his shoulders were. How tightly his jaw was set. How his hands never quite relaxed.

And I wondered if he was holding himself together just as desperately as I was… that realization made me love him even more.

3 oo –

Sleep refused to come.

I’d been lying in bed for what felt like hours, staring at the carved ceiling above me while moonlight spilled through the open curtains. Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was tomorrow.

The Council.

Daddy.

Raphael.

One decision.

One sentence.

One life changing forever.

I rolled onto my side, pulling the blanket tighter around myself.

I swallowed hard.

Tomorrow, I might walk out of this house beside my father. Tomorrow, I might never see Raphael again. The thought settled inside my chest like ice. My fingers tightened around the blanket.

No.

I couldn’t think like that.

I couldn’t.

Because if tomorrow went wrong. If everything fell apart, then what had any of it been for?

Every bruise. Every sleepless night. Every tear I'd cried asking for my mom. Every time I'd convinced myself I deserved what was happening to me. Every scar Dr. Vance had left where no one could see. Every piece of myself I'd spent years trying to glue back together.

It couldn't all be for nothing.

It had to mean something.

It had to become something bigger than me. Something that could save someone, even if it was only myself.

Otherwise...

What was the point?

What was the point of surviving if surviving changed nothing?

A shaky breath escaped me.

No.

I wouldn't let everything I'd survived become meaningless. Every scar. Every nightmare. Every piece of myself that had been broken... It had to mean something.

I'd heal. I'd become better.

For Raphael.

And if anyone tried to destroy that future. I'd kill them or die trying.

I pushed the blanket away before I could lose my courage. The cold marble floor met my bare feet. I slipped a cardigan over my nightdress before quietly opening my bedroom door.

The hallway beyond was almost completely dark, I could hear Don Cesare guards outside. Every tiny sound suddenly seemed too loud. My breathing, my heartbeat. I closed the door as gently as I could, then looked up.

His room, directly across from mine. I stood there for several seconds. Maybe he wouldn't open the door. Maybe he'd tell me to leave.

Maybe...

He wouldn’t even look at me.

The thought hurt enough that I almost turned back but tomorrow wasn’t promised.

Tonight was.

I crossed the hallway before I could change my mind. My hand lifted then I knocked. The sound echoed far louder than I expected.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 706

My heartbeat climbed into my throat. The handle turned, the door opened and Raphael stood there.

His dark hair was slightly messy, like he’d been running his hands through it. He wore nothing except a pair of black boxers hanging low on his hips.

For one ridiculous second, my brain forgot how to work. His eyes landed on me, every trace of surprise disappeared almost instantly. Then his hand tightened around the edge of the door and the door started moving.

He was going to close it.

Panic shot through me. Without thinking, I stepped forward, slipping through the narrow opening before he could shut it completely.

The door bumped lightly against my shoulder and Raphael froze. His brows drew together, “What are you doing?”

His voice stayed low, like he was afraid someone might hear us. I didn’t answer immediately. Instead, I turned and quietly pushed the door closed behind me.

Moonlight spilled through the tall windows, painting silver lines across the wooden floor. He stayed near the door. I stayed pressed against the door.

The distance between us suddenly felt unbearable. I looked at him and noticed the dark circles beneath his eyes, the tension in his shoulders. The way he stood as though every muscle in his body expected another fight.

My chest tightened.

I’d done that.

I'd put that look on his face.

My eyes burned, "I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow," I whispered, "I don't know what the Council will decide. I don't know if... if this is the last night I'll ever get to be this close to you."

His jaw flexed and I took one slow step toward him.

"I've spent the whole evening thinking about tomorrow," weak laugh escaped me, "I hate tomorrow. I can't leave tonight wondering what it would've felt like to simply... be with you."

I stopped in front of him. My fingers twisted together nervously.

"I don't want anything complicated. I don't want to argue. I don't want to explain. I don't want to spend another night crying in a room across the hallway while you're only a few steps away."

I lifted my eyes until they met his.

"I just..." the words caught in my throat but I forced them out, "I just want to fall asleep in your arms tonight."

Raphael raised an eyebrow, "Are you really fucking insane,? Have you really lost your fucking mind. You're actually standing here telling me this might be the last time we'll ever see each other? Have you gone completely crazy?"

A bitter smile tugged at my lips, "You don't know-"

"No. I do know," his eyes held mine, "I know exactly how tomorrow can end and it doesn't end with you walking away from me."

I swallowed, "Raphael..."

His hands opened and closed at his sides as though he was fighting the urge to reach for me, Everything that happens tomorrow can still be stopped. You already know how. You tell them the truth. You stand in front of that Council and tell them what Giovanni did to you. You tell them why Hazel took you away. You tell them he abused you. That's all."

His eyes searched mine desperately.

"That's all you have to do and you refuse to do it," his shoulders rose with a deep breath before falling again, "So don't stand here telling me tomorrow is taking you away from me. It isn't the Council separating us, Gianna. It's you."

My body moved before my mind could. I closed the small distance between us. My forehead rested carefully against his chest. His heartbeat was strong beneath my cheek.

Safety.

Familiar.

Home.

My arms slowly slipped around his waist, “I love you,” I whispered into his chest, “So much.” My fingers. tightened against his back, “So... so much. I don’t think you’ll ever understand how much.”

Then I felt his chin rest lightly against the top of my head, “Then please. Please tell them. Tell the Council. Tell them what he did.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 707

I could hear his heart beating beneath my ear.

My lips parted, “Raphael. Do you want me to lie? My dad never touched me.”

I felt him go completely still.

“The only times he ever did... were when he hugged me or when he knelt to tie my shoes because I kept doing them wrong.”

A sad smile touched my lips before disappearing.

“When we’d go out... he’d hold my hand so I wouldn’t wander off. He’d kiss my forehead before school. He never hit me, no matter how mad he was, he never hit me.”

I lifted my head to look at him, confusion spread across Raphael’s face. His brows pulled together. He searched my eyes as though trying to find the lie.

“But...”

“I know what everyone thinks. I know what it sounds like but he never raised a hand to me, not once.”

Raphael stared at me for so long that my chest began to ache, “I don’t understand,” he whispered.

“Neither do I,” my eyes burned, “I wish I did.”

He ran a hand through his hair, frustration flashing across his face.

His jaw clenched, “If you don’t tell the Council the truth-whatever that truth is-they’re going to make a decision based on whatever story they believe.”

“I know,” I whispered.

His expression didn’t soften. If anything, it hardened, “And if you walk into that chamber tomorrow and choose him over us... If you protect the man whose name alone had Hazel slapping you across the face... instead of protecting the people who’ve bled for you without asking for anything in return...”

He took a slow step back, putting space between us.

“Then we’re done, Gianna.”

My heart stopped.

“I mean it. There won’t be another conversation after that. No second chances. No fixing it later. You will lose me.”

I stared at him, my vision beginning to blur.

“Raphael...”

“I’m done fighting for someone who won’t fight for herself.” His eyes never left mine. “So tomorrow, you make your choice. And you live with it. It’s him or us.”

The air left my lungs. My fingers had gone numb.

No...

No, he couldn’t say that.

Anything but that.

I felt my heart crack somewhere inside my chest. My legs carried me toward him before I even realized I was moving.

When I reached him, my trembling hands rose to his face, cupping his cheeks as though I was terrified he’d disappear if I let go.

My thumbs brushed lightly over his skin, “Don’t...” my voice broke. “Please don’t say that.”

My eyes filled so quickly I could barely see him.

“I can’t lose you. I’ve already lost so much. I can survive anything else but not you. I can’t survive losing you too.”

His jaw tightened, “I also want you to remember this is the last time you will see Jules Capone.”

The color drained from my face. It felt as though every drop of blood had turned to ice inside my veins.

I searched his face, desperate to find even the smallest sign that he didn’t mean it. There was nothing. He was serious. He really meant every word.

I wanted to be better.

Better for him.

Better for Jules.

I wanted to become someone worthy of the family that had loved me when I hadn’t even known how to love myself.

I didn’t want to lose them.

I couldn’t.

“If…” I whispered, my voice shaking so badly I barely recognized it, “… if that’s what you need from me. If you truly believe that’s the only way we’ll still have a future after tomorrow…”

My fingers tightened against his face.

“I’ll do it. I’ll stand in front of every person in that chamber… and I’ll say whatever you need me to say…”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 708

Raphael

“Is Gianna ready?” Vincenzo asked, his eyes settling on me. “Will she tell the Council what needs to be said?”

gave a single nod. My mind drifted back to the night before. To Gianna trembling in my arms, her tears soaking into my skin, to the way she'd clung to me as though letting go meant losing me forever.

Please don't leave me...

She'd whispered it over and over until exhaustion finally pulled her to sleep.

I'd held her the entire night, "She will," I said quietly. "I trust her."

Adriano exhaled slowly, his gaze moving toward the closed chamber doors, "We have no fucking proof. We're fucking weak. Everything comes down to her word... and the scars. You said she had scars."

I nodded again, "She does."

Just then, the doors opened. The council guards outside stepped aside, and one by one, we entered the chamber.

The room was built for intimidation.

A long table of dark wood stretched across the center, polished so perfectly that the lights above reflected across its surface. Heavy curtains covered the tall windows, blocking out the Sicilian evening.

There were no distractions, no outside world, only the people inside.

Five families.

And the Philadelphia Syndicate.

Adriano and I walked beside Vincenzo, behind us came Dante, Luca, and Silvio.

Claire and Maddie stayed with the other women outside the chamber. The Council allowed family heads and selected representatives inside.

Gianna was not supposed to be in here yet but everyone knew why we were here. Everyone knew whose name would eventually be spoken. I took my seat beside my brothers.

Across from us sat the Costellos.

Nikolai sat at the head of the table. To his right sat Scott Mancini, Lorenzo Vitelli, and his closest cousins Alessandro and Marco Costello and to his left were the representatives of the other families. Visconti. Falcone. Deverecci.

All old names.

Then the doors opened again. I didn't need to look. I already knew. Giovanni Toricelli entered the room. My hand tightened against the armrest because beside him walked Leone Caruso.

My jaw locked.

The man who had once been promised to Gianna. The man who had looked at her today like she was something he could claim.

Leone smiled politely as he greeted the room and I wanted to wipe that smile off his face.

Instead, I stayed still.

That was what men like us did.

We sat.

We watched.

We waited.

Giovanni took his seat. His eyes moved around the room before stopping on us.

A small smile touched his lips, "Capone."

Nikolai looked between us, "Is everyone here?"

"Yes..." Cesare answered.

Nikolai leaned forward slightly, "You all know why you're here," his eyes moved from Giovanni to Vincenzo, "There's a dispute between the Toricellis and the Capones. By the end of today, this Council will decide who walks out in the right."

My eyes stayed forward.

Dispute.

It was a clean word, a little too clean for what it actually was.

"This hearing concerns the guardianship, protection, and succession rights regarding Gianna Toricelli.

Giovanni leaned back in his chair, one hand resting on the table, "This shouldn't even be a discussion Gianna is my blood. My daughter. The future of my family."

He spread his hands.

“Years ago, she was taken from me. The Capones kept her after my former wife, Hazel married Salvatore Capone and now they’ve decided she belongs to them. She doesn’t. She’s a Toricelli. She carries my name. My blood. My legacy. No matter how many years she’s spent under your roof, that doesn’t change. I’m here to take my daughter home.”

He paused, giving the room time to absorb every word.

“My ex-wife chose to leave our marriage. That was her decision, and I did not stand in her way. The courts granted me full custody of my daughter because Hazel was deemed mentally unfit. Instead of respecting that judgment, Hazel chose to interfere. She filled Gianna’s head with lies, turned her against her own father, and persuaded a sixteen-year-old child to run away from home.”

His jaw tightened just enough to make the anger seem restrained.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 709

“My daughter disappeared across state lines without informing me. She was a minor. Alone. Vulnerable. I spent months searching for her while Hazel vanished. During that time, Gianna was hidden inside a brothel. A fucking whore house.”

A few men around the table shifted in their seats.

“A Toricelli daughter. My daughter,” his lip curled with disgust, “And before anyone thinks I’m here spinning stories, I brought two of the women from that place. They lived under the same roof as Gianna. They’ll tell you exactly what they saw,” he looked directly at the men around the table, “While I was burning through men and money trying to bring my little girl home... Hazel left her in a place no daughter of ours should’ve ever laid eyes on.”

A legitimate mafia princess hidden inside a brothel. To men like these, it wasn’t just a tragedy.

It was an insult.

A stain on blood, on family, on everything this world claimed to protect. Every man in this room was imagining his own daughter there. Every one of them knew they would’ve burned cities to the ground before allowing it.

Giovanni knew exactly which nerve he was pressing.

“Hazel failed my daughter. Whatever her intentions may have been, intentions do not erase responsibility.

He looked toward Vincenzo.

“And they certainly do not erase a father’s rights. Since Hazel’s death, the Capones have continued to shelter Gianna and have repeatedly refused my requests to return my daughter to her blood.”

He spread one hand across the table.

“I’m not here begging anyone for a favor,” He looked around the table, meeting the eyes of every Don in the room, “I’m here because every man sitting at this table knows one thing. Blood is blood.”

His gaze shifted to Vincenzo.

“Another family doesn’t get to keep my daughter just because they decided they know what’s best for her. If that’s how things work now... then none of our blood is safe.”

I caught several of the older Council members exchanging thoughtful glances. Giovanni wasn’t trying to win sympathy. He was trying to win precedent.

If the Council ruled that another family could keep a living heir away from her blood without clear legal cause...

Then every father sitting at this table would leave wondering whether one day someone could do the same to his own children.

It was a far stronger argument than emotion.

And Giovanni knew it.

Nikolai leaned back slightly in his chair, his fingers tapped the wood once before his eyes settled on Vincenzo, “Capone.”

Vincenzo lifted his chin, “Giovanni presented this as a dispute over blood. It isn’t. It’s a dispute over safety.”

Giovanni’s jaw tightened.

Vincenzo continued without looking away, “No one here denies Gianna’s blood. She is Giovanni Toricelli’s biological daughter. That has never been our argument. Our concern is whether returning her places her in danger.”

Giovanni let out a quiet breath through his nose, “Danger?”

Vincenzo let out a scoff, “Yeah. A sixteen-year-old girl doesn’t run from a palace to a brothel because she’s happy. She doesn’t leave money, security, her name, and her future behind unless she’s running from something worse. You want us to believe your daughter woke up one morning and decided sleeping beside whores and pimps sounded better than sleeping in her own bed?” His lip curled, “I don’t buy it. Nobody at this table should.”

Giovanni leaned forward, “My daughter was manipulated.”

“No. She was desperate to get away from you.”

A muscle jumped in Giovanni’s jaw, “Careful.”

“I’m being very careful,” Vincenzo smiled, “Hazel told me everything before she died.”

Giovanni scoffed, “The words of a crazy woman who kidnapped my child?”

“Careful how you talk about my father’s late wife,” Vincenzo sneered, “She didn’t steal her. She brought her to the only place she believed Gianna would survive. You should thank whatever God you pray to that Hazel’s final request wasn’t vengeance. All she asked of me was to keep Gianna alive. Hazel placed Gianna in my hands because she trusted mine more than yours.”

Giovanni laughed, “Hazel had no right. She can’t hand over what isn’t hers. That girl was my blood. My daughter. She took her from me, then passed her around like she had the right to decide where she belonged. She didn’t. Everything Hazel did after she took Gianna means nothing to me,” his gaze swept around the room, “And it shouldn’t mean a damn thing to this Council either.”

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Chapter 710

Several older men exchanged another look.

Giovanni saw it, so, he pressed harder, “If a thief steals a painting, does that thief suddenly gain the right to gift it to someone else? The same goes for Hazel. She had no right. So her attempt to hand my daughter to another family means absolutely nothing.”

Vincenzo nodded once, “You’re right, but don’t stand there and insult this Council by pretending a title excuses a beating. Our world respects fathers. It also expects fathers to protect what belongs to them. If a father becomes the danger... then blood alone is no longer enough. We are not asking this Council to ignore Giovanni’s rights. We’re asking this Council to recognize Gianna’s. She isn’t sixteen anymore. She isn’t a child. She won’t be standing before this Council because the we chained her to our home.”

His eyes drifted toward the closed doors.

“If she wanted to leave us, she could have done so months ago.”

Giovanni smiled again, “A frightened victim often stays with the people who influence them.”

Vincenzo didn’t even react, “Perhaps. Which is exactly why she should be heard. Not through me or Giovanni. Through Gianna herself. Let the woman at the center of this dispute tell us why she ran.”

He looked at Giovanni.

“If your version is true, then you have nothing to fear from her testimony.”

Then Giovanni spoke, “No.”

Nikolai’s eyes lifted, “No?”

“My daughter will not testify.”

A faint crease appeared between Vincenzo’s brows, “And why exactly not?”

Giovanni reached for the leather briefcase resting beside his chair, the metal clasp clicked open. He withdrew a thick folder and laid it carefully on the table.

“I expected this request.”

His fingers rested on the cover for a moment before he slid the file toward Nikolai.

“This is my daughter’s complete medical history. From the age of three until she disappeared at sixteen. So before anyone starts swallowing the bullshit coming out of his mouth, read it.”

Nikolai opened the file, while the rest of us were given copies of it. It was medical evaluations, hospital reports, psychiatric assessments, school records, recommendations. One by one, the folders were passed around the table.

I watched Scott Mancini’s expression tighten.

Across the table, Leonardo Visconti adjusted his glasses before continuing.

Valentino Falcone’s jaw hardened.

Even Luciano Deverecci slowed as he reached the psychiatric evaluations.

Giovanni let out a quiet scoff before finally speaking, “Vincenzo Capone want to hang me based on the word of a girl whose head’s been a mess since she was a kid? My daughter’s been dragged through psychiatrists, specialists, and doctors half her life.”

He ticked them off with his fingers.

“Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Anxiety, Depression. Enough diagnoses to fill a damn book.”

He looked back at the men around the table.

“And that’s Vincenzo’s star witness?” A cold laugh escaped him, “You’re telling me the future of my family is going to rest on the memories of a confused, emotionally unstable girl who’s spent years in and out of psychiatric offices?” he spread his hands, “Come on. You men are smarter than that.”

I felt my jaw tighten.

Giovanni kept fucking pushing, “My daughter’s never been wired right. She’s struggled her whole damn life. She can’t read worth a shit. Writing’s a fight. The second pressure hits, her head starts spinning and she falls apart.”

His eyes moved across the Council.

“I know that because I raised her. I know exactly how she thinks. Girls like her don’t chase the truth. They chase whoever makes them feel safe. They grab onto the first person who tells them they’re loved... and then they start believing whatever the hell they’re fed.”

His gaze drifted toward the Capones.

“They’ve had months. Months to fill her head. Months to twist every memory she’s got. And now I’m supposed to believe the frightened little girl standing over there suddenly woke up with perfect judgment?” he scoffed, “I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“That’s enough,” I stated, and every head turned toward me.

“Raphael,” Nikolai warned.

I barely heard him, “She is not incapable. There is nothing wrong with her.”

Giovanni’s eyes met mine, “You’ve known my daughter for how long? Months? I’ve spent her entire childhood years taking her to specialists.”

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Chapter 711

I scoffed, “Having dyslexia doesn’t make someone incapable of telling the truth. Dysgraphia doesn’t erase someone’s judgment. Depression doesn’t make someone incompetent,” I looked around the chamber, “She understands exactly what she’s saying. Exactly what she’s choosing.”

Giovanni sighed, “Does she? After Hazel died, my daughter suffered a severe mental health crisis. She experienced a complete psychological collapse. She required emergency psychiatric intervention.”

Giovanni looked around the table.

“And what did these geniuses do? They made her into their house and played happy family while she was falling apart. If I hadn’t stepped in, you’d be discussing a funeral instead of a hearing. And now, they are asking this Council to place the future of an empire in the hands of a young woman whose medical history documents years of serious psychiatric illness,” he looked directly at Nikolai, “I cannot allow that.”

The first voice came from the opposite end of the table.

Leonardo Visconti.

He shut the medical file with a dull thud, “A girl who’s spent half her life bouncing between doctors, shrinks, and breakdowns isn’t exactly the kind of witness I’d bet a fucking empire on.”

Valentino Falcone grunted his agreement, “He’s right. A witness has to stand on her own two feet,” his eyes narrowed, “These records paint a different picture. They paint a scared kid who’s been easy to push around her whole life.”

Luciano Deverecci rested both hands on the table, “I don’t give a fuck whether she’s clever. The question is simple. Are those words coming out of her mouth or out of somebody else’s?”

The balance had shifted.

I could feel it.

Giovanni hadn’t attacked Gianna. He’d done something far more dangerous. He questioned whether she could speak for herself and judging by the faces around the table...

Too many of them were beginning to believe him.

The heads of the families looked toward him. The decision belonged to the Council, not to a single man.

Leonardo Visconti spoke again, “I’m with Toricelli on this one. The paperwork’s there. The custody order’s there. Whether Giovanni was a good father or a shitty one isn’t the point.”

Valentino Falcone gave a slow grunt, “The Capones kept the girl alive. I’ll give them that but keeping somebody breathing doesn’t suddenly make them yours. Blood’s still blood.”

Luciano Deverecci nodded once, “And if we start pretending otherwise then every family in this room better start worrying. Because the day we ignore blood and precedent is the day every greedy son of a bitch starts claiming somebody else’s heirs belong to him.”

One by one, heads around the table began to nod, and I felt my stomach grow heavier with each one. Giovanni didn’t react. It was as if he’d already known this was exactly how the room would turn.

Without rushing, he called forward two of Gianna’s friends. They confirmed the dates, identified photographs, home videos, and old messages, each one backed by timestamps.

Then he showed records, building the timeline piece by piece until there were no obvious gaps left to attack. Only after everything was laid out did he look around the Council with a cold, contemptuous smirk.

Nikolai finally turned his attention to Vincenzo, “Capone. I don’t doubt why you did it. I know you took the girl in because you thought you were doing right by her but good intentions don’t mean a fucking thing if they tear the foundations out from under this life.”

He glanced around the Council.

“We run this world on rules. If I let one boss keep another boss’s rightful heir because he thinks he has the better reason, then every power-hungry son of a bitch in this life will start snatching each other’s children and calling it protection. That’s how wars start. And I don’t bury generations of men just because somebody thinks his reasons are nobler than the rules.”

His eyes narrowed.

“So don’t mistake this for me siding with Toricelli. I’m siding with order. Because the day this Council stops enforcing it, is the day this whole thing turns into a pack of rabid dogs tearing each other apart.”

I felt my hands curl into fists beneath the table.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 712

Nikolai drew a slow breath before looking around the table, “We’ve heard both sides. One side showed paperwork. Custody orders. Medical records. Bloodline. Succession. Everything this life has always been built on.”

His eyes shifted toward us.

“The other side brought accusations. Ugly accusations, maybe even true but ‘maybe’ doesn’t mean a fucking thing in this room. I don’t strip a man of his rights because another man tells me to. I strip them when somebody puts proof on the table that we can’t ignore. And right now,” he looked directly at Vincenzo, “...that proof isn’t here.”

His gaze swept across the Council one last time.

“So this Council recognizes Giovanni Toricelli as the lawful head of his bloodline and the lawful guardian of his daughter. The Capones will hand Miss Toricelli back to the Toricellis. No games, no delays, no clever bullshit. You’ll surrender her without interference.”

His eyes lingered on Vincenzo.

“That’s the ruling. And any bastard who thinks about breaking it, better be ready to answer to every family sitting at this table.”

Nikolai’s voice stayed flat.

“This ruling carries the weight of every boss sitting at this table. Any family stupid enough to spit on it, spits on all of us. And when you declare war on the Council,” a cold smile touched his mouth, “Don’t come crying when the Council declares war on you.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“We’ll choke off your money. You lose your deals. You lose every ally you’ve got. No backing. No seat at this table. And from that moment on, if somebody decides to kick your door in, burn your businesses to the ground, or put a bullet in the back of your skull, don’t expect this Council to lift a fucking finger. You’ll be on your own.”

One by one, the other bosses gave slow nods. Everyone in this room understood exactly what Nikolai had just said.

Isolation.

Complete isolation.

My eyes moved to Vincenzo. He just sat there. His shoulders were still square. His chin remained high. His face gave nothing away. To anyone else. He still looked like Don Vincenzo Capone.

But I had known him my entire life.

He had lost.

Vincenzo had always won.

Always.

When he promised someone would come home. They came home.

When he said he would protect this family. He did.

For the first time in my life. I was watching my brother lose because of me.

A strange thought entered my head.

I might have just lost her.

The realization didn't hit all at once. It spread slowly like ice crawling through my veins.

If the Council's order stood. She would leave with Giovanni. She would walk out those doors under another family's protection. I wouldn't be allowed to follow. I wouldn't be allowed to touch her. To speak to her. To bring her home.

The law we all lived by. The law I had defended my entire life. Had just placed the woman I loved into the hands of the man I wanted dead.

My mind produced nothing because every path ended the same way.

Failure.

I heard someone speaking. I didn't know who. The words became meaningless noise..My entire world had narrowed to one person.

If she walked out of this estate with Giovanni.

I didn't know if I'd ever get her back.

Gianna

“Whatever’s happening inside your head,” Maddie said softly, “We’ll figure it out together. We’ll get your answers.”

I swallowed, “It’s not that easy…”

Claire nodded beside her, “They’re in there fighting for you, Gianna. Every single one of them,” She reached for my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “So if there’s something you’re scared to say or something you haven’t told us… tell us now. We’ll deal with it together. We always do.”

I looked from Claire to Maddie.

My throat tightened, “I…” I looked down at our joined hands before slowly lifting my eyes again. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not walking away from Raphael or Jules.” My voice shook a little, “Or any of you.”

Claire’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 713

“I know everything looks horrible right now,” I continued, “but this…” I glanced toward the closed Council doors, “This wasn’t supposed to happen. I wanted to speak to my dad. Have a relationship with my little brother and stepmother again. Maybe, work on… myself. I wanted answers. I never wanted a Council. I never wanted all of you standing on opposite sides because of me.”

My eyes burned as I shook my head.

“I didn’t want anyone choosing between families, I simply wanted… both. And I never wanted Raphael to have to choose between loving me and standing with his brothers. I know what it looks like,” I whispered, “I know everyone thinks I chose my father over the Capones.”

I looked toward the doors behind which the Council was deciding all of our lives. A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it. I wiped it away with the back of my hand, “I swear to you…” I looked at both of them. “I’m not leaving Raphael in there to fight this by himself. And I’m not leaving this family either.”

Claire stepped forward without saying a word and wrapped her arms around me. Maddie joined us a second later.

The doors opened and I prepared myself to go in there and say whatever Raphael wanted me to say but the deep murmur of voices stopped all at once.

My stomach dropped.

Something was wrong.

Before I could take a single step, movement exploded around me. Men closed in from every direction.

A few council guards. One appeared on my left, another on my right, then behind me. Within seconds, I couldn't even see Maddie or Claire anymore.

I looked around, confused, "What happened?"

Daddy stepped through the circle of guards. He stopped in front of me, "We're leaving."

I stared at him, "What?"

"We're done here," his hand closed firmly around my wrist, "Come."

I didn't move, "Dad," confusion turned into panic, "What happened?"

"Leone," Daddy called, without taking his eyes off of me, "Get the convoy ready."

Leone gave one sharp nod to my cousins, "Move."

They immediately came alive, as they spread through the entrance hall.

The sudden urgency made my pulse race, as he started pulling me toward the doors.

"Dad..." I planted my feet, "No. What happened?"

He pulled harder, "We're leaving."

"No!" I tried to pull my wrist free, "Dad, stop! What happened in there?"

He simply kept walking. Panic climbed higher into my chest. I twisted again, trying to free myself. His grip didn't loosen. The hallway blurred as guards surrounded us on every side.

I couldn't see anyone. I turned my head desperately, searching through the wall of black suits, then I found him, standing exactly where he'd come out of the Council chamber.

He wasn't moving. His shoulders had dropped. His hands hung at his sides. He looked defeated.

Our eyes met across the crowded hall. I stopped fighting for one second. I had never seen Raphael look like that. It looked like someone had reached inside him and taken away the part that kept him standing.

“Raphael…”

I whispered his name, though I knew he couldn’t hear me.

He didn’t come toward me. The Council guards had already stepped between our families.

A heavy hand landed against my back, “Move.”

One of the Toricelli guards shoved me forward. I stumbled through the doorway into the Sicilian air. The massive wooden doors began to swing shut behind me.

The last thing I saw was Raphael, still standing exactly where I’d left him, watching me disappear.

Then the doors closed between us.

Janedoewritings

Author

I can already feel all of you glaring at me and Gianna through your screens.

Hehe.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 714

Gianna

The moment the car doors slammed shut, the convoy moved. One vehicle after another. The gates disappeared behind us.

I twisted in my seat, trying to look through the rear window. The estate was already growing smaller, the doors, the courtyard. The place where I’d left Jules, Raphael and the rest of my family.

“Dad…” my voice came out small, “What happened?”

Dad sat beside me in the back seat. His eyes never left my face. His hand reached up slowly. His fingers brushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear like nothing ever happened. Then he leaned down and kissed my forehead three times.

Long, lingering kisses.

His hand cupped the side of my face as though he couldn't quite believe I was real.

A shaky breath left him, "I finally got you back," he whispered, followed by another kiss rested against my hair, "I finally brought you home."

I stared at him.

He looked... happy. And it wasn't even the polite smile he wore in front of other people, nor the small, approving nod he gave when I managed to do something right.

He looked genuinely happy.

The sight caught me off guard because for as long as I could remember, most of my memories of him were filled with disappointment, lectures, impossible expectations, or the quiet look that told me I'd failed him again.

I'd spent years chasing a version of this moment and now that it was finally here, seeing him look at me like simply having me beside him was enough.

It reached into a place inside my chest I hadn't realized was still broken and, for one fragile moment, made it feel a little healed.

"Dad, what happened in there?" I asked.

He smiled, "You don't have to think about that anymore."

"I do," my heartbeat sped up, "What did they decide?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he wrapped one arm around my shoulders and gently pulled me against his side.

I stiffened, "Dad..."

I tried looking past him toward the rear window. The Capones were out of my sight, the estate was out of my sight.

"Where are we going?"

His hand stroked my hair, "You've had a difficult few days."

"Dad, please, tell me!" my voice cracked, "What happened?"

Leone remained silent behind the wheel. His eyes stayed on the road. The only sound inside the car was the steady hum of the engine.

"Dad..." I tried sitting up again.

His arm tightened around me, “Just rest.”

“I don’t want to rest,” I pushed lightly against his chest, “I want you to tell me what happened.”

For a brief second, something changed in his expression, “I’m sorry.”

I frowned, “Sorry for wh-”

Something sharp pricked the side of my upper arm.

I gasped, “What-”

I looked down. A tiny syringe disappeared into my father’s hand before he slipped it out of sight.

Fear shot through me, “Dad…” I grabbed my arm, “What was that? Dad!”

I tried pulling away from him. The movement already felt strangely slow. My fingers wouldn’t cooperate. The inside of my head suddenly felt… heavy.

“Dad…” I managed to say as my tongue started getting heavier instantly, panic climbed into my throat,” What did you do?”

He caught me before I could lean away. His arms folded around me, holding me carefully against his chest. I struggled or at least, I tried to. My body wasn’t listening the way it should. My eyelids felt heavier with every passing second.

“No…” I forced myself to stay awake, “Dad… don’t…”

He rested his cheek lightly against my hair, “It’s alright. Soften those shoulders, principessa,” his hand continued stroking my hair, “I know you’re frightened.”

I tried lifting my head, the movement felt impossible. The world blurred around the edges.

Leone’s voice sounded far away, “We’re almost at the private airstrip.”

Dad nodded without looking up, “Good.”

I forced my eyes open again, “I… don’t…”

The words slurred together.

He kissed the top of my head again. His voice sounded distant now, “When you wake up…” another gentle stroke through my hair, “…I’ll explain everything.”

My breathing grew slower, “No…” I whispered, “I have to…”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 715

Raphael.

The name never reached my lips. My thoughts scattered before I could hold onto them.

Dad held me closer, “Go to sleep, my darling,” his hand never stopped moving through my hair, “Daddy’s got you.”

The last thing I saw was the Sicilian coastline passing beyond the window.

Then everything dissolved into darkness.

Raphael

No one spoke after the jet left the ground. The engines hummed beneath my feet, I sat beside the window, staring out at the endless stretch of clouds.

My hands were empty. They weren’t wrapped around Gianna. I could still feel the warmth of her fingers. The softness of her hair. The way she’d looked at me before those doors closed between us.

I failed.

The thought repeated over and over until it became the only thing I could hear.

Across from me, Vincenzo sat alone. His elbows rested on his knees, his hands clasped loosely together. His head was lowered. He hadn’t moved since we took off.

I had never seen him like this. He had stood in front of the four most powerful men in our world and lost, not because he wasn’t prepared, not because he wasn’t intelligent enough, but because the council law had been against him from the beginning.

Gianna wasn’t our blood, we had no claim over her.

I watched him in silence. He carried this family every single day. He made impossible decisions so the rest of us never had to. He protected us. He even fought for Gianna like she had been born a Capone.

And what had he received for it?

Failure.

Vincenzo Capone had lost.

The guilt settled deep inside my chest because I knew exactly where part of that loss belonged.

With me.

If I had never fallen in love with Gianna... if I had never told her not to sign the adoption papers... Hazel's plan might have been completed months ago.

Gianna would have been legally ours, not by blood, but by law. The Council would have had far less room to strip her away from us.

Instead...

I had asked her not to do it again and again. Vincenzo hadn't failed because he lacked the ability to win.

He lost because of choices I had made.

Because I loved her.

Jules was curled tightly against Claire's chest, crying so hard her whole body shook.

Claire rubbed slow circles over her back, "It's okay, my love."

"It doesn't feel okay," Jules cried.

Maddie moved beside them, brushing damp hair away from Jules's face, "You've still got us."

Jules shook her head so hard her hair flew everywhere, "No! Everyone leaves me!" another sob tore out of her, "My dad died. My mom died. Now Gianna's gone too!" she buried her face against Claire's shoulder, "I don't have anybody."

Claire hugged her tighter, "You do. We're here. And we're not going anywhere."

Maddie knelt in front of her, she gently wiped the tears from Jules's cheeks, "You are stuck with us. For a very, very long time."

"No..." she sobbed, her words breaking apart, "Everyone always leaves me. Mom's gone... Gianna's gone... I make everyone leave," Another sob tore out of her, "I don't want anyone else..." she cried. "I just want my sister back."

The words reached somewhere inside me I didn’t know still existed, “Jules.”

She looked over through blurry eyes.

I held out my hand, “Come here.”

She hesitated for only a second before climbing off Claire’s lap. The moment she reached me, I lifted her into mine. She curled against my chest automatically. I wrapped one arm around her small body. My other hand rested carefully against the back of her head.

I wasn’t good at comforting people, especially children.

I never had been.

But this, this much I could do.

“I want Gianna, please, bring her back,” she sobbed.

I looked down at the little girl clinging to my shirt, “We’re bringing her home,” I spoke more firmly, “I will bring her back home. I promise you.”

She lifted her head just enough to look at me, “You promise?”

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

She simply searched my face for a moment, then she threw both arms around my neck. Her tiny body pressed against mine as she cried into my shoulder.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 716

I closed my eyes.

Another promise.

Another person depending on me.

Another person I couldn’t fail.

Very quietly, almost too quietly to hear, Jules whispered, “Mom knew.”

My eyes opened immediately, “What?”

She pulled back just enough to look at me, “Mom knew about you.”

My heart stopped, “What did you say?”

She sniffled, “She knew.”

My brows pulled together, “Knew... what?”

She looked confused that I didn’t understand, “You and Gianna.”

I stared at her.

Hazel...

Knew?

For a moment, I couldn’t hear the engines anymore.

“Jules,” my voice came out lower than usual, “She told you that?”

Jules nodded, “She told me she wasn’t scared anymore. She said...” Jules rubbed her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater. “...that she trusted you.”

The cabin disappeared around me.

“The night before she-” Jules swallowed hard, “Before she died. She said that if anything ever happened. to her, I should trust you.”

I felt my throat tighten.

“She said she knew you’d keep Gianna safe,” my throat tightened painfully, “She knew you loved her,” Another tear rolled down Jules’ cheek, “Because she knew you’d spend the rest of your life making sure Gianna smiled.”

I couldn’t make sense of the words.

Hazel had known.

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All this time and she’d never confronted me, never warned me away from her daughter, never looked at me differently. Instead, she had trusted me.

A sharp ache spread through my chest. I had broken the one promise she believed I could keep before I could answer...

Strong arms reached down and lifted Jules right out of my lap. She gave a surprised little squeak. Dante balanced her easily against himself, “Alright,” he nudged the side of her head with his own, “That’s enough crying.”

She let out a weak protest, “I don’t want to.”

“Tough,” he looked at her with exaggerated disappointment, “Where’s my little menace? The tiny terrorist who keeps stealing my money? The gremlin who hides frogs in my shoes. The criminal mastermind who convinced Aurelia that crayons taste better than vegetables. The world’s biggest pain in my ass.”

Jules tried not to smile, “I am not.”

“You absolutely are,” he made her stand before him, “What happened to my partner in crime? I leave you alone for one afternoon and suddenly you’re crying. What kind of terrible customer service is this?”

A tiny laugh slipped through her tears.

“There,” Dante said softly, “I was wondering where she’d gone. Come on, troublemaker. I’m pretty sure this plane has enough snacks to bankrupt a small country.”

Jules rubbed her eyes, “Can I have two?”

He shook his head, “Two? I raised you better than that.”

She frowned, “Three?”

“Now you’re thinking like a Capone.”

Before Dante walked away with her, she looked back at me, “You’ll bring her back?”

I held her gaze, there wasn’t a single part of me that doubted my answer, “Yes. I’ll bring your sister home.”

Gianna

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My eyelids felt strangely heavy. I frowned and forced them open. The ceiling above me came into focus first.

My heartbeat slowed for one confused second.

I turned my head, cream-colored curtains, the old white bookshelf. The faded watercolor painting Mom had hung above my desk when I was seven. The small rocking chair in the corner.

My chest tightened. I pushed myself upright too quickly. A dull ache exploded behind my eyes and I squeezed them shut until the dizziness eased.

When I opened them again, nothing had changed. I was still here. My old bedroom. The bedroom I had left six years ago.

I stared around the room, unable to move. Everything looked exactly the same. The stuffed rabbit Mom had won for me at a carnival still sat on the shelf like the last six years had never happened.

My breathing grew uneven, then, everything came rushing back.

The Council.

Raphael.

The guards surrounding me.

Dad grabbing my arm.

The car.

The needle.

“Go to sleep, darling.”

My hands clenched into fists, “What the hell...”

The words came out as a whisper before anger hit me so hard I threw the blanket off my legs.

“He drugged me,” I swung my legs over the side of the bed, “He actually drugged me.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 717

My bare feet hit the floor. A sharp sting shot through my arm. I looked down. A tiny red mark sat near the inside of my elbow.

My jaw tightened, “I cannot believe he did that.”

I rubbed the spot harder than necessary before looking around the room.

My handbag. Where was my handbag? Panic rose so quickly it almost stole my breath. My eyes darted across every surface. The desk, the chair, the wardrobe.

Then...

The nightstand.

My handbag sat there neatly, I immediately rummaged through it to see if anything had been taken but everything was there, my phone, my wallet, my necklace.

I grabbed my phone so quickly it almost slipped from my fingers. The screen lit up and there was nothing.

No missed calls.

No unread messages.

No texts.

No voicemail.

I stared at the screen. Maybe, they were still in the air, but Raphael can- maybe there wasn’t any signal this time.

I refreshed my messages, but still nothing. My thumb opened Raphael’s conversation. The last message was still mine. No reply. Something inside my chest quietly folded in on itself.

For one stupid second, I’d thought he would have sent my hundreds of messages.

I’m coming.

Wait for me.

Don’t panic.

Anything. Instead, there was complete silence. He meant it, right? He meant it when he said things between us were over if I left with Dad.

I swallowed. It hurt far more than I wanted it to. No. I shook my head once. I wouldn’t let him. He can’t leave me. He was probably trying to figure out a way to get me back. He

wasn’t someone who gave up. I held the phone against my chest for one brief second, I needed to know what happened.

I pulled my bedroom door open, the hallway looked untouched. The same framed family photographs lined the walls.

Me missing my two front teeth.

Giovanni asleep against Perla’s shoulder.

Dad and us.

My feet carried me toward the staircase almost on their own. The estate stretched around me like a memory I had spent years trying to bury.

The hallway where Daddy had taught me how to ride my first bicycle indoors because it had been raining outside.

The window where Mom used to wave every morning before school.

The memories came too easily.

Good ones and the bad ones.

They were tangled together so tightly I couldn’t separate them anymore. The front hall came into view. The marble floors gleamed beneath the morning light. Fresh flowers sat in the same crystal vase. The grandfather clock still ticked. It sounded exactly the same like time had been waiting for me to come home.

I reached the bottom step and everything was too quiet. No Giovanni racing through the halls pretending he was a superhero. No Perla reminding the staff to slow down before someone broke something. No. Dad barking orders over the phone.

I turned slowly, scanning the enormous entrance hall, “Dad?”

My voice echoed through the house.

I frowned, “Perla?”

Nothing.

My stomach tightened, “Gio?”

Then I heard something, I immediately followed the sound of quiet voices until they led me to the formal living room.

The doors stood half open and I stopped in the doorway.

Dad sat in his usual chair with several thick files spread neatly across the coffee table. Leone occupied the sofa opposite him, reading through another stack of papers while making notes with a fountain pen.

The moment Dad looked up, a smile crossed his face, “You’re awake.”

My hand tightened around my phone, “Dad...” I said quietly, “you really knocked me out.”

Neither man answered.

I took another step into the room, “What was that? Why would you do that?!”

Dad simply watched me.

“The Council...” I continued, “What happened?” my heart started beating faster, “Why won’t anyone answer me? What the hell is going on?”

Dad calmly closed the file in front of him before placing both hands on top of it, “You came home. That’s what happened. I brought my daughter back.”

“I asked you what happened at the Council,” I snapped, the words leaving my mouth before I could soften them.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 718

Six years ago, I would’ve never dared speak to him like that.

But the girl who used to lower her head and apologize for everything...

She hadn’t walked back into this house.

He leaned back in his chair, “You came back where you belong. You’re a Toricelli, Gianna. You always have been. This is your home.”

“I have another home in Chicago, I want you to remember that!”

“No,” he answered, “Chicago was where you were being kept.”

I blinked, “What?”

“The Council saw exactly what it was. You were taken from your family. The Capones convinced you otherwise.”

I shook my head, “No...”

“They manipulated a confused young woman who didn’t know better. I corrected that mistake. And now, they can’t get to you even if they try.”

My breathing became uneven, “Dad...”

“They don’t decide where you live. I do,” he added.

I took a step forward, “I decide where I want to live!”

Dad smiled, “The Council disagreed.”

Anger rushed through me so suddenly I could barely think, “The Capones are my family. They took care of me. They loved me,” my throat tightened, “They still have Jules. They’re part of my life. They’re my family.”

Leone finally looked up from his papers, “Not anymore.”

I slowly turned my head toward him. I looked him straight in the eyes, “I’m sorry,” my voice stayed frighteningly calm, “Was I talking to you?”

Leone blinked, “No, but-”

I cut him off, “I don’t remember asking for your opinion. I’m talking to my father.”

Leone closed his file, and he stood slowly, “Yeah, you weren’t talking to me.”

He adjusted the sleeve of his jacket before meeting my stare.

“But as Underboss of the Toricelli Syndicate, you are my responsibility.”

I felt my jaw tighten.

“And that reminds me,” his eyes dropped to the phone still clutched in my hand, “I’ll be taking that.”

My fingers instinctively curled tighter around it, “Excuse me?”

“We’ve already prepared another phone for you.”

“I don’t want another phone,” I snapped.

“This one stays with us,” he extended his hand, waiting and I held his stare.

“Gianna,” Dad sighed softly, “Give him the phone.”

I looked back at him in disbelief, “You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

I felt something cold settle in my stomach.

Leone sighed, “According to the Council’s ruling, there will be no further contact between you and the Capone family.”

I stared at him and he continued like he was discussing tomorrow’s weather.

“No calls, no messages, no emails, no letters, no third-party communication. The Council made its position perfectly clear or else the Capones will face the consequences. They lost, Gianna. They walked out of that chamber with their heads down and their tails tucked between their legs. That’s the end of it.”

He held out his hand again.

“So,” his eyes settled on my phone, “Give it to me.”

I looked from Leone to Dad, then back again. Something inside me snapped like a thread that had been pulled too tight for far too long.

I laughed once. It didn’t sound like me, “You’ve both lost your minds.”

My grip tightened around my phone until the edges dug into my palm.

It wasn’t just a phone.

It held my mother’s voice notes.

Pictures of Jules asleep on my shoulder.

It held Raphael’s messages. The special font he had installed so words stopped blurring together. The app he had built just for my dyslexic brain. Every photo, every voice note, every stupid conversation we’d ever had.

A hundred little pieces of a life I’d built after running from this house.

And now they expected me to hand all of that over like it meant nothing.

My chest rose sharply, “No.”

Leone rolled his eyes, “Gianna-”

“I said no, didn’t you hear me?!”

Dad sighed, “This isn’t negotiable.”

I looked at him, “Really?”

His expression softened, “You’ll understand with time.”

“No,” I shook my head, “You don’t get to tell me what I’ll understand. You still want me to inherit everything?”

Dad frowned slightly, “Of course I do. You’re my daughter. Everything I’ve built belongs to you one day.”

I held his gaze, confirming his words, “I’m still your heir?”

P x

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 719

“Yes,” he gave a nod, “Nothing has changed.”

I looked at Leone before turning back to Dad. “If I’m your heir…” I kept my low, “then the only person above me in this house is you. Which means he doesn’t get to give me orders unless you let him.”

Dad hesitated, “In principle… yes, but-”

I didn’t let him finish, “No. No ‘but.’ If I’m really the person you’re trusting with this family one day… then don’t stand there and let your Underboss treat me like I’m one of his soldiers.”

I pointed toward Leone without taking my eyes off Dad. Leone’s jaw tightened almost invisibly.

“I will not hand over my phone.”

Dad opened his mouth, “The council-”

“I don’t give a fuck what the Council ordered. That wasn’t the deal. The deal was between you and me! Not you, me, and the Council. You chose to bring them into this. You answer to their ruling. I answer to the promise you made me.”

He nodded, “Gianna, things aren’t as they-”

I shook my head harder, “You made me a promise. You told me I could speak to Jules whenever I wanted. You told me I could call the Capones. You told me I could go back to Chicago whenever I wanted. You said coming here wasn’t a prison. You said I would choose.”

My voice rose.

“So don’t stand there and start taking back every promise the second I walk through that door.”

Dad stood slowly, “I’m trying to protect you. You don’t understand what state you’re in.”

My eyes burned, “No, ” I whispered, “You don’t understand the state I’m in…”

My fingers shook around the phone.

“You keep talking to me like I’m the same girl who left this house six years ago. I’m not. You have no idea what losing Mom did to me.”

The words came out rough but I held back tears.

“You weren’t there. You didn’t watch it. You didn’t watch her disappear one piece at a time. You didn’t watch me become…” my voice cracked. “…whatever I became afterward.”

Dad’s expression finally changed. He reached one hand toward me, “My darling-”

I backed away again, “Don’t come closer.”

His hand stopped in midair.

“If you keep pushing me,” I looked between him and Leone, “If you both keep taking things away from It’ll make me worse.”

Dad suddenly looked shaken now, “Gianna…” 1

“You still don’t understand. My head isn’t okay. I know that. I’ve been trying so hard to hold myself together. I’ve been trying to stay functional but don’t mistake that for being compliant. You corner me, you trap me, you keep taking away the people keeping me alive…”

I shook my head.

“You’re not going to like who you’re left with.”

Dad looked at me and then at Leone as if he couldn’t recognize me.

“If you keep breaking your word, if you keep trying to cut me off from Jules, from the only family I’ve had for the last year,” my voice became frighteningly quiet, “Someone is going to get hurt.”

Dad scoffed, “Don’t say that.”

“I’m not threatening you,” I swallowed hard, “I don’t trust my own mind right now. I don’t know what I’ll become if you take away the only people keeping me even a little grounded.”

I pressed my phone tightly against my chest, like I could somehow protect everything inside it.

“So don’t.”

I looked directly at Dad.

“You promised me this choice. I decide what my relationship with you or the Capones looks like. Not you. Not the Council. And definitely not your Underboss.”

Leone’s expression hardened, “You’re seriously overestimating your-”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, shut up,” the words came out so fast they even surprised me.

Silence crashed over the room. Dad and Leone both stared at me, neither of them saying a word.

I looked straight at Leone, “If you still think I’m the same frightened girl who ran to you after everything,” I took one slow step toward him. “...then you haven’t been paying attention.”

I took another step forward.

“You don’t get to force me into anything,” my voice stayed frighteningly calm. For one second... I sounded like Raphael. The realization made me proud, “Because the second someone tries...” I shrugged. “I kill the person forcing me.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 720

I looked him up and down.

“If that’s you… then it’s you.”

My eyes shifted to Dad.

“And if I can’t get to the person trying to control me, I’ll kill the only person I know I can reach… Myself.”

Dad’s face lost all its color, “Gianna, stop it!”

“Try to lock me in this house. Try to order me around. Try to cut me off from the people I love. The only thing you’ll end up controlling is my dead body. And then what?”

My laugh was empty.

“You called an entire Council to get me back. You made sure the Capones couldn’t come near me. So tell me…”

I tilted my head.

“What do you think happens when they find out I died after you dragged me back here?”

Dad’s breathing stopped, “Don’t be ridiculous-”

“The Capones will burn this fucking world to the ground,” I looked between both of them, “And that Council you’re so proud of?”

My voice dropped to a whisper.

“They’ll get fucked right alongside you. Don’t mistake this for a threat. It’s the only outcome I can see if you keep trying to own me instead of listening to me.”

I stared at him for one long second.

His face had gone pale.

The confidence he had when I walked into this room with was gone. In its place was something I’d never seen directed at me before.

Fear.

“Gianna…” Dad took one careful step toward me, his hands open like he thought I might bolt. “Listen to me.”

“I have been listening!” My voice cracked. “That’s the problem. Everyone keeps talking, I keep listening. But nobody fucking listens to me.”

“I hear you.”

Leone shifted where he stood but, for once, didn’t interrupt.

Dad rubbed a hand over his face, looking older than he had a minute ago, “I know you’re angry.”

“I’m beyond angry.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know anything.”

He let the words hit him, “I’ll give you time.”

“I don’t want time.”

He sighed, finally giving up, “I’ll make sure no one touches your phone.”

I looked at him without saying anything, and smiled.

“I gave you my word,” he continued quietly. “I’m not taking it away. I just…” His voice softened. “I need you to calm down.”

“No,” the word came out flat, “I don’t want to calm down. I need air and food. I’m starving.”

I hadn’t eaten since… I couldn’t even remember.

Dad immediately nodded, “I’ll have something brought-”

“I don’t want food in this room,” I walked past both of them, “I need to get out of this house for five minutes before I lose my mind.”

Neither of them tried to stop me. Maybe because they were afraid I meant every word I’d just said. Maybe because they finally understood they couldn’t force me into anything.

Or maybe…

They simply didn’t know what to do with me anymore.

I pushed open the enormous front door. Warm Philadelphia air rushed over my face. The estate stretched out before me, exactly as I remembered.

It was beautiful.

It always had been.

Then I saw Perla. She was several yards away, walking along one of the garden paths. A smile found my face before I could stop it and the next second, my smile disappeared.

Someone was beside her.

A wheelchair.

A boy sat quietly in it.

No, not just any boy.

Giovanni.

My little brother.

Sixteen years old.

His dark hair had grown longer than I remembered. He looked taller too, older somehow, but far too thin.

Perla's hands rested gently on the wheelchair handles as she pushed him through the garden at a slow pace.

I stared.

He wasn't standing.

He wasn't walking.

He wasn't running ahead of Perla the way he always used to.

He was sitting.

Completely still.

My lips parted, "...Gio?"

Janedoewritings

Author

This is always my favorite part to write, the moment the FMC hits absolute rock bottom.

Because after the breaking point comes my favorite thing of all.....

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 721

Gianna

My little brother never sat still.

He climbed everything, ran everywhere..He couldn't stay in one place for longer than five minutes without getting bored.

"...Gio?"

The word barely escaped me when Perla finally looked up. The moment her eyes landed on me, she froze. Her entire body went completely still.

For one long moment, she simply stared, "Gianna?"

I looked from her, to back to Giovanni, then to the wheelchair again, nothing made sense.

I started walking toward them, "What... What happened?"

Neither of them answered. Perla's eyes filled with tears almost instantly. She stepped toward me, lifting one trembling hand before gently placing it against my arm.

It was such a small touch, "You're really here."

My own hand moved without thinking. I wrapped my fingers around hers, "I'm here."

The words had barely left my mouth when she suddenly pulled her hand away, not because she didn't want me to touch her but because she looked terrified.

She looked past me toward the house, then back at me, "What are you doing here?"

"I-I just-"

She cut me off by grabbing both my shoulders, "Gianna... why are you back? What the hell is going on?"

I blinked at her, "Dad... Dad brought me back."

Her entire expression changed, "He... brought you back?"

I nodded.

Perla shook her head immediately, “No. No, Hazel would never- How did Hazel let you leave with him?

Everything inside me stopped, the air refused to reach my lungs. Her fingers slowly slipped from my shoulders as I took one step backward. The tears I’d been holding back, I couldn’t stop them anymore.

My voice came out as nothing more than a whisper, “She couldn’t.”

Perla frowned, “What?”

I shook my head, “She... She’s gone.”

Perla stared at me, “Gone?”

I nodded once, my vision blurred, “She left me. And... she’s never coming back.”

Perla’s brows pulled together, “Gianna...”

I looked at her through blurred eyes, “She’s dead.”

The words echoed between us but it was as if Perla’s mind refused to understand them, “No...”

She staggered back a step before catching herself on the wheelchair handles.

I looked at Gio again, really looked at him closely. His face had become older and there were dark circles beneath his eyes as if he hadn’t been sleeping. He looked so exhausted, nothing about him looked like the lile boy I left six years ago.

I dropped to my knees in front of him, “Gio...”

My voice shook so badly I barely recognized it. I wrapped my arms around him carefully, terrified I might somehow hurt him. He hugged me back immediately. His arms felt so much bigger than I remembered.

I buried my face against his shoulder, “What happened? What happened to you?” my eyes squeezed shut, “How... how did this happen?”

“Because he was careless.”

The voice came from behind me. The deep, cold voice I’d know anywhere, and I stood back up like it was instinct.

“And weak.”

Every muscle in my body stiffened. I turned my head. Dad walked down the stone path with the same pace he always had, one hand tucked into the pocket of his trousers. In the other, he carried a glass of orange juice.

I looked back at Giovanni and the change in him was immediate. His smile disappeared, every bit of color drained from his face. His shoulders curled inward. His fingers tightened so hard around the blanket.

Then, his body started trembling, not violently, just enough for me to notice. Enough that I couldn’t ignore it. No, he wasn’t just trembling. He was bracing like he already knew what was coming. Something inside my stomach twisted painfully. I knew that look.

I’d worn it.

Dad stopped beside us. His hand settled gently against the middle of my back. His touch was warm, affectionate like it always was when he touched me.

He rubbed slow circles between my shoulder blades the way he used to whenever he thought I was overwhelmed.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 722

“You said you were starving Lofdered the kitchen make everything you used to love,” he said, holding the glass out to me, ” Orange juice.”

My favorite.

Or at least... it used to be.

Now, my mind went straight to Mom’s strawberry milk. She always blended fresh strawberries with cold milk, a little honey, and just enough vanilla to make it taste like home.

I accepted it automatically. My fingers wrapped around the cold glass without thinking,

Dad sighed softly, “Your little brother was in a car accident six months ago,” his voice stayed even. He glanced briefly toward the wheelchair, “This is what happens when people refuse to listen. He thought he knew better. He didn’t.”

I slowly turned back toward Gio. He still hadn't looked at Dad, not once. His eyes stayed fixed on the gravel beneath his wheelchair. His breathing was shallow. His shoulders were still shaking.

It wasn't the wheelchair that made my heart break.

It was him.

The fear, the desperate need to become invisible, to be anywhere else. I knew exactly what that felt like.

Because six years ago...

That had been me.

Sitting at the dinner table, terrified to lift my head, terrified of saying the wrong thing, terrified of disappointing him.

Always chasing one sentence.

Good job, Gianna.

I'm proud of you.

You did well.

I had spent my entire childhood trying to earn words that never came.

But that had only happened because I was me. Gio would've never been treated that way. He was perfect. I was the daughter who always needed fixing.

My eyes lifted slowly. Dad wasn't looking at me anymore. He was looking at Giovanni. There wasn't anger on his face. That would've been easier to understand.

This was worse.

Disappointment and disgust.

Then, just as quickly, Dad smiled again as he turned toward me, "Your stepmother looks worried."

A hint of amusement crept into his voice. My eyes flicked to Perla. She was staring at Dad, her jaw tight, her glare sharp. Dad never looked at her. His attention stayed on me.

"Do you remember how convinced she always was that I'd choose her son over you?"

Perla's head snapped toward me, "Giovanni-"

He ignored her completely, cutting her off, "She spent years believing I'd change my mind," his smile widened just enough to

Chapter make my stomach turn, "Looks like she's still playing the same game."

Perla took a slow step forward, "That's enough"

Dad didn't even acknowledge she'd spoken.

He kept looking at me, his hand pulling me closer to him, "Stay close to me and stay away from her," he nodded toward Perla, " She's never forgiven you."

My brows pulled together, "What?"

"She's never forgiven you for outsmarting her all those years ago," he laughed quietly, "Running away. I don't blame you for that. I blame the people who were supposed to be watching you," his eyes finally settled on Perla, "Incompetence has consequences."

I stared at him, then, I looked at Perla. She hadn't said a word. She simply stood behind Giovanni's wheelchair, her hands gripping the handles so tightly I thought they might break.

And all at once...

A memory came rushing back.

Perla standing in front of me, her own eyes full of tears. She had fixed my jacket, smoothed my hair, then cupped my face with both hands.

"You're stronger than you think, Gianna, so be brave now."

"I love you too... that's exactly why I'm doing this."

That woman...

The woman standing in front of me now with tears filling her eyes. Had been the reason I'd found the courage to run.

Dad was lying.

I didn't know why but I knew he was lying about something and I found myself wondering...

How many other lies had I grown up believing?

And that thought made me look down at the glass in my hand. Bright orange, with tiny drops of condensation slid slowly down the side.

Chooter

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 723

For a long moment, I simply stared at it. Six years ago. I would've thanked him. I would've smiled. I would've drunk it without a second thought because Dad had handed it to me.

Now...

All I could think about was the sting in my arm, the heaviness in my eyelids, the way I'd fought to stay awake while he held me against his chest.

"Go to sleep, my darling."

My fingers tightened around the glass. Slowly, I lifted my eyes to him, then I held the glass back toward him, "Take a sip."

Dad blinked, he looked genuinely caught off guard, "Excuse me?"

"The juice," I kept my hand exactly where it was, "Drink it."

His brows slowly drew together, "And why," he asked carefully, "would I do that?"

"Because I need to know it's safe."

His expression hardened, "What exactly are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," I shrugged, "I'm making a new rule."

His jaw clenched, "What rule?"

"Anything you give me to eat," I lifted the glass slightly, "Anything you ask me to drink. You'll have it first."

Dad let out a short, disbelieving laugh, "You honestly think I'd poison my own daughter?"

"No," my answer came immediately, "I think you already proved you're comfortable putting drugs into my body without asking me."

His smile disappeared, “I had to sedate you.”

“You drugged me.”

His voice sharpened, “Gianna.”

“So now…” I looked down at the juice before looking back at him, “Every single thing that comes from this house goes through you first.”

His eyes narrowed, “You’ve lost your mind.”

“Maybe,” I nodded once, “But after waking up in my childhood bedroom because my own father stuck a needle in me,” I pushed the glass toward him again, “I’d say my trust issues are pretty justified.”

His nostrils flared, “You are being ridiculous.”

“And you’re wasting time,” I gave the glass another small shake, “Drink.”

His patience finally snapped, “I am your father.”

“I know.”

“You will not speak to me like-”

“Dad…” the word came out flat, “Please. I really don’t have the energy for a lecture today.”

His mouth opened.

1 didn’t let him speak, “Either drink the juice or I’ll assume there’s a reason you won’t.”

Dad stared at me and I stared right back. Neither of us moved, finally, with a sharp exhale through his nose, he snatched the glass from my hand, “You’ve become impossible.”

He lifted it, held my gaze, then deliberately took a long drink. He swallowed then thrust the glass back toward me, “There. Happy?”

I accepted it without a word, watched him for another couple of seconds, then I took a drink myself. I swallowed the rest before handing the glass back to him, “Thank you.”

He looked at the glass, then at me. His jaw remained tight as he took it back. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed movement.

Perla hadn’t taken her eyes off me, shock was written all over her face. As if she couldn’t quite believe the conversation she’d just witnessed.

I looked toward Gio. He was staring at me too. His lips had parted slightly. His eyes moved from me to Dad, then back to me again. He looked completely stunned like he'd just watched someone stand in front of a hurricane... and tell it to calm down.

For a moment...

I understood why.

Six years ago...

I would've apologized before Dad even had the chance to raise his voice. Today, I'd interrupted him, questioned him, made him prove the drink was safe before I touched it.

The old Gianna would've spent the rest of the day crying over disappointing him.

This version of me didn't have that kind of energy left. I'd been broken too many times. I was too tired, too angry, too fucked up, and too heartbroken to carry guilt for things that weren't mine anymore. There wasn't enough of the old me left for guilt to cling to.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 724

I rested my hand lightly on Gig's shoulder. He looked up at me, his eyes uncertain,

I kept my gaze on Dad, "Is that why you came looking for me?"

One of his brows lifted, "What are you talking about?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat, "Did you only remember you had a daughter because Gio stopped being the perfect heir?"

Dad expression changed so fast I almost missed it. The amusement disappeared and the irritation followed, "You really believe that. I've been looking for you for six years. I never stopped."

I kept looking at him to pick up on the lie.

"I had men searching every city we thought you might've crossed. Every airport. Every border. Every contact that owed me a favor was asked one question."

His eyes locked onto mine.

“Where’s my daughter? I paid people. I threatened people. I buried people who lied to me. Every lead that reached my desk, I followed it.”

He shook his head once.

“There wasn’t a single day, not one fucking day that I woke up and didn’t wonder if you were alive.”

My fingers curled against my palm.

He suddenly turned toward Perla, “Tell her.”

Perla didn’t move, “Giovanni-”

“No. Tell her. Tell my daughter that I never stopped looking for her. I want her to hear it from someone who watched me. Tell her I didn’t stop for a day.”

Perla swallowed, “He... searched.”

“Louder.”

She turned to me, “He searched for you.”

“Every day.”

She nodded slowly, “Every day.”

Dad looked back at me, “And tell her the rest.”

Perla’s face went pale.

His smile was small, “Tell Gianna whose idea it was from the beginning to make you leave so your son would inherit-

“Dad-”

“Tell her that you wanted her gone.”

Perla stared at him in disbelief.

”

“You looked the other way while my daughter disappeared. You failed her. You were supposed to protect her and you let her get lost.”

My brows pulled together, “No, I didn’t get lost. I ran away. I knew exactly what I was doing. You didn’t lose me,” I pointed at myself, “I left.”

His throat worked and the look on his face looked like I’d actually hurt him.

“You were a child,” he said quietly, “You didn’t understand what you were doing.”

“I did.”

“Hazel poisoned your mind.”

“No,” a sudden protectiveness washed over me, “No, she didn’t.”

His jaw tightened, “She turned you against your family.”

“You never even let her talk to me,” I snapped, “You kept us apart. How was she supposed to poison me when I barely knew her? You spent my entire childhood making sure she stayed away from me. So don’t blame her for choices I made on my own.”

The wind stirred the flowers around us. Dad rubbed a hand across his jaw slowly then he sighed, “Maybe... maybe I pushed too hard. Maybe I expected too much. Maybe I made you run.”

I searched his face. He wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was looking at the ground. For just a second, I wanted to believe him. I wanted those words to mean something but something inside me refused.

I took one slow step closer, “Dad, do you actually believe that or are you just saying what you think I need to hear?”

His eyes searched mine, “I only ever wanted what was best for you. I wanted you strong. I wanted you capable. I wanted you to survive this world,” he spread one hand slightly, “If that makes me the villain in your story then I’ll carry that. I still want my children to be the best version of themselves and I will not apologize for that.”

I just looked at him. He still hadn’t answered my question. He’d walked around it. He’d defended himself. He’d explained his reasons but he never said the only words I’d been hoping to hear.

I was wrong.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 725

A strange ache settled in my chest.

To him...

I still wasn't enough.

Not as I was, not with my dyslexia, not with my scars, not with the parts of me that still fell apart when life became too heavy.

He still saw someone who needed fixing before she could finally deserve to be chosen.

And the cruelest part was, I wasn't sure I disagreed with him.

My fingers tightened around my phone.

After mom died, I'd been telling myself that if I could just find the answers... if could prove all those years of therapy, treatment, and impossible expectations had accomplished something, maybe I'd finally become someone worth keeping.

Someone who could stand beside Raphael without slowing him down. Someone he would never have to carry. Someone who wouldn't embarrass him.

Someone... enough.

I swallowed against the lump in my throat. That was why I was here, not because I wanted my father, not because I wanted this house but because some part of me still needed someone to tell me that everything I'd survived had meant something.

That I hadn't suffered for nothing.

That I was finally... enough.

And until someone did, I wasn't sure I'd ever believe it myself.

"We're done with this conversation now," Dad's voice returned to its usual tone, "You've had a long day. Go eat something then freshen up," he continued, "Later, I'm taking you to my office."

A strange feeling settled in my stomach, "Office?" I repeated.

He gave one short nod, "If you're going to inherit this family one day, then it's time you started understanding what you're inheriting. We have wasted so many years already, Gianna."

He turned and started walking back toward the house. Leone fell into step beside him without saying a word, I didn't even know when he had followed us here.

The garden became strangely quiet. Only the breeze moved through the trees, carrying the scent of roses and freshly cut grass.

I stood where I was, watching Dad's back. My mind refused to slow down.

His office.

His empire.

His heir.

The words kept crashing into one another until I couldn't separate them anymore. I didn't want any of it. I wanted answers.

I wanted Dr. Vance.

And to get to Dr. Vance, I need to listen to Daddy. The thought made my chest ache. I took a step toward the house when something wrapped gently around my wrist.

I stopped and looked down.

Gia

His fingers were trembling against my hand. He was finally looking up at me with the most beautiful blue eyes ever. His eyes darted toward the house before returning to mine.

He leaned forward the smallest amount. His voice was so quiet I almost didn't catch it. His fingers tightened around mine, " Please..." his throat bobbed, "Leave."

I frowned, "What?"

His eyes filled with panic, "You shouldn't have come back. Please, leave while you still can."

The world seemed to stop.

I stared at him, "What are you talking about?"

His grip tightened again, "You have to-"

"Gianna," Dad's voice cut cleanly through the garden.

Gio flinched so hard his entire body jerked. His hand disappeared from mine immediately.

I turned to see Dad was walking back toward us. His eyes flicked from me to Gio and then to our hands.

A smile appeared on his face. He stopped beside me. Without asking, his fingers closed around my wrist. He gently pulled me away from Gio, “I believe I told you to eat.”

I looked back at my little brother. He had already lowered his head again. His hands rested in his lap like he’d never touched me at all.

Dad gave my wrist another gentle tug, “Come on. I have too much to show you.”

I couldn’t stop looking at Gio. He still wouldn’t lift his head, not even as Dad led me farther away. Only when we reached the steps leading back into the house did I risk one last glance over my shoulder.

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 726

Perla and Gio were watching me quietly, the same expression settling over both of their faces.

The pantsuit fit perfectly.

The charcoal fabric hugged my shoulders without feeling tight. The jacket was sharp, tailored, almost military. The trousers fell neatly over black heels.

When I caught my reflection before leaving my room. I almost didn’t recognize myself. Dad was already waiting outside.

The moment he saw me, a slow smile spread across his face. His eyes traveled over the suit before he nodded once.

“It suits you.”

I wasn’t sure whether he meant the clothes or the role he wanted me to play. Neither of us spoke as we walked through the estate. Guards nodded respectfully the moment they saw him.

Some glanced at me, others openly stared. They already knew. The missing daughter had come home.

The thought made my stomach twist.

We entered a different building connected to the mansion.

Dad pushed open a pair of heavy doors, “This,” he said quietly, “is where the real work happens.”

The room beyond looked nothing like I’d expected. One entire wall was covered with maps.

Colored pins marked different neighborhoods. Thin strings connected warehouses to shipping routes. Another wall held photographs. Faces, names, ranks, captains, crew leaders, business owners, judges, politicians, police commanders.

Everything was organized. Everything had a place. In the center of the room stood a long table covered with folders.

Dad walked around it slowly, “Our legitimate companies,” he slid folders toward me, one after other, “Construction, shipping, waste management, private security.”

I looked down at the first page. The words immediately started moving, letters switched places, paragraphs blurred together.

I sighed in frustration, not now, please, not now. Without saying anything reached into my pocket and unlocked my phone.

Raphael’s app opened.

And it showed me everything exactly the way my brain needed it. The paragraph instantly changed. The spacing widened. The font became easier to separate. Important numbers highlighted themselves. Long sentences broke into smaller ones.

I breathed.

Then I started reading.

Dad kept talking, “This company owns six warehouses.”

I looked down, then back up, “No.”

He looked at me, “What?”

“It owns eight,” I turned the phone toward the document, “The two in South Jersey were transferred eighteen months ago.”

His brows drew together. He picked up the folder, turned one page, then another. His eyes stopped and then he turned my phone screen towards himself, “You’re right.”

He stared at me and I kept reading, “This route doesn’t make sense either.”

His frown deepened as he looked between me and the file, “Explain.”

I zoomed in on the map attached to the report and he leaned in to look at my screen with me, “If this warehouse already receives shipments through Camden,” I traced another line, “Why are you paying twice for transportation here?” I looked up at him,” Wouldn’t it be cheaper to merge both routes?”

The room became very quiet. Dad didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he walked around the table, stopped beside me, looked down at my phone, then back at the papers and then at me again, “What…” his voice was slower now, “…are you using?”

I looked down at the screen.

A small smile appeared before I could stop it, “This? It’s an app…” I gently brushed my thumb across it, “My stepbrother, Raphael made it.”

Dad’s expression turned harder, “Raphael?”

I nodded, “He built it… specifically for me. It changes text into something my brain can actually process,” I smiled faintly, “It breaks long paragraphs apart. It fixes spacing. It highlights important information. It reads things aloud if I need it to.”

I shrugged, my gaze fixed on the screen. For a moment, it almost felt like Raphael was standing beside me.

“He kept adding to it every few weeks,” I continued. “All I had to do was tell him what was frustrating me, and he’d disappear for a while. The next time I saw him, he’d fixed it. Not me…” I whispered the last words, “He fixed everything around me.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 727

Dad stared at the phone.

I exhaled, “It helped me study. It helped me pass my finals.”

Dad’s brows slowly rose, “You went to university?”

I looked at him, “Yes.”

His face showed genuine surprise, “You graduated?”

Another nod, “I have a Bachelor of Science in Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning. I remembered that you wanted me to handle the computer with Gio.”

He simply kept staring at me like the words didn't fit the daughter he'd remembered.

"You... graduated?"

"It took a lot longer to study than everyone else," I smiled sadly, "But I finished."

His eyes remained fixed on me, "When was your graduation?"

The smile disappeared. I looked back down at my phone, "Three months ago. I didn't go. Mom was getting weaker," just saying it made my throat tighten, "She couldn't walk much anymore. I knew I only had so much time left with her. I could always d*** ***d pictures of a graduation. I couldn't make more time with my mom."

Dad didn't speak. He kept looking at me like he was trying to figure out who I'd become while I was gone.

And all I could think was, none of this would have happened if I had stayed here. The degree, the confidence, the app in my hand.

Every single piece of me standing here today had been built by the people he kept calling my captors. Mom gave me love. Raphael gave me the tools to live with my mind instead of fighting it. Jules gave me a reason to keep going. They made me into someone I could finally bear to be.

Now I just had to prove they hadn't believed in the wrong person. I had to become someone they could be proud of. Someone worthy of standing beside them.

Dad's voice pulled me back, "He built all of this for you."

A sharp knock broke the silence. Dad looked toward the door, "Come in."

Leone stepped inside, "We've got a problem."

Dad's expression hardened immediately, "What happened?"

Leone walked inside, "The shipment that landed at Pier Twelve."

Dad's face changed, "The Customs contact?"

Leone nodded once, "He stopped answering his phone twenty minutes ago."

Dad's eyes narrowed, "And?"

"Our men spotted federal vehicles less than two blocks away. If it's only a routine inspection, we still have time but if somebody talked..."

Dad cursed under his breath, “When did this happen?”

“Five minutes ago.”

Dad grabbed his suit jacket from the back of the chair, “I’ll handle it.”

Leone stepped aside without another word. Dad started toward the door but stopped and rested his hand briefly on my shoulder, “I won’t be long.”

I gave a small nod, “Okay.”

His hand squeezed my shoulder once before he walked out. I watched him disappear into the hallway. Several guards immediately fell into step behind him.

I slipped my phone into my pocket and froze when the door closed, and the lock clicked into the place.

I turned around, Leone was still standing inside the office. One hand rested on the doorknob. The door was now closed behind him.

“What are you doing?”

He slowly lifted his eyes to meet mine and something dark flashed across his expression. Something that made every instinct inside me scream.

“I’ve been wanting a word with you…” he said quietly, “But your father kept getting in the way.”

He let go of the doorknob, the lock remained in place. I glanced toward the door, then back at him.

His lips curved into a slow, unsettling smile, “Welcome back,” he murmured, “I’ve missed my wife.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Enjoy!

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 728

Gianna

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His lips curved into a slow, unsettling smile, “Welcome back,” he murmured, “I’ve missed my wife.”

The lock echoed in my head far louder than it should have. Leone stood between me and the only exit, his broad shoulders blocking the door completely. He looked exactly the same as I remembered.

Six years ago, hearing him call me “his wife” would’ve made my heart race.

Now, I felt nothing, only exhaustion and distance. I folded my arms across my chest, “What do you want, Leone?”

He tilted his head slightly, almost confused by my tone, “What happened to you?” His eyes moved over my face as though searching for the girl he’d once known, “Why are you looking at me like I’m the enemy? I’m still the same man you left behind. Have you forgotten everything we were?”

A bitter smile pulled at my lips, “No. I remember every single thing. I have just... I have outgrown it.”

His smile faltered, “You’re still angry... because of that day,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “The session with Dr. Vance. And the thing with that bear. I didn’t have a choice, Gianna. Your father’s orders come first. I followed orders.”

I blinked and suddenly Leone disappeared, and I was looking at Raphael, standing in front of Vincenzo in the Void.

His brother had ordered him aside. Raphael hadn’t moved. Then... I’d watched him slam the man he respected most in this world against a wall because he had frightened me.

Back then...

Raphael and I hadn’t even admitted we loved each other.

He still chose me over Vincenzo’s order without hesitation. Without thinking what it would cost him.

The memory settled something inside me, when I looked back at Leone, he seemed even more insignificant than before.

“You did have a choice,” I shrugged, “You chose to stand there. You chose to watch. You chose to give him that bear. You chose obedience over me,” I shook my head slowly, “So

don’t tell me you were powerless. You weren’t. You simply decided I wasn’t worth disobeying my father.”

“That’s not-”

I cut him off, “My head isn’t full of excuses for you anymore, Leone. I’m here because I chose to come. I’ll leave because I choose to leave. And whatever happens to me while I’m in this house,” I looked him straight in the eye, “...will happen on my terms. And those terms doesn’t include anymore.” 1

Hurt flickered across his face, his shoulders dropped slightly, “Is that really how little I mean to you now? We spent years together. I loved you. I love you. Does none of that matter anymore?”

I nodded once, “It did and I did love you,” the words came easier than I expected, “I loved you for years. I waited for you. I defended you. Even after I ran away...” I laughed softly, but there wasn’t any humor in it, I never looked at another man. I couldn’t. I thought loving you meant there’d never be room in my heart for anyone else.”

His eyes brightened for the smallest second.

Then I finished speaking, “I was wrong.”

The light disappeared, his jaw tightened, “What changed? What happened to make you hate me this much?”

I smiled, “Someone happened.”

Leone stayed silent.

“When he looked at the scars on my body for the first time,” my throat tightened, “he didn’t look away, he wasn’t disgusted. He just saw me as the most desirable woman in the world. And that changed me a little.”

My fingers brushed the phone in my pocket without thinking.

“Then he always spoke the truth, even when it hurt, even when it was the last thing I wanted to hear, and that changed me a little more. He challenged me instead of making decisions for me. He argued with me, listened to me, and treated my opinions like they mattered, and that changed me a little more.”

I let out a laugh.

“Every single piece of him, every little thing he did, changed something inside me until one day I realized everything had changed. He drives me insane. Half the time I want to throw something at his head, and somehow, he’s still the easiest person I’ve ever been

with. Because he knows every ugly part of me. The angry parts. The terrified parts. The parts I try to hide. The broken parts. And he stayed."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 729

My eyes never left Leone's.

And that's why Raphael deserves more than me. He deserves someone who can take care of him the way he's always taken care of everyone else. Someone who gives instead of only asking. Someone who can carry some of his weight when he gets tired. Someone who makes his life easier instead of becoming another burden he has to bear.

I want to be that person for him.

I don't know if I am yet.

But I will be.

"I belong to him and he belongs to me," I drew a slow breath, "So if you think I'm ever going to betray him..." I shook my head, "I'd die first."

Leone stared at me like he didn't recognize the woman standing in front of him. Then he laughed, "So that's it? That's what I waited six years to hear?"

He dragged a hand over his face before looking back at me.

"I never touched another woman. I never wanted to," his eyes searched mine desperately, "I had women throw themselves at me. I turned every single one away. I never kissed anyone. I never shared a bed with anyone. I spent six years believing you'd come back," a bitter smile tugged at the corner of his mouth," And now you're standing here telling me another man owns your heart." 1

I didn't answer.

There wasn't anything left to say, I had said what I wanted to.

Leone gave a small shake of his head, "I wasted six years."

"No," I said quietly, "You chose to wait. I never asked you to, I left my engagement ring behind."

His jaw clenched, "I would've waited sixty."

A sharp knock echoed through the office. Leone's head turned toward the door.

"Leone," Dad's voice carried through the wood, "Open the door."

Leone didn't move for a second, then he reached over, unlocked it, and pulled it open. Dad stepped inside. His eyes immediately swept across the room.

The locked door, Leone standing beside it. Me near the middle of the office. Silence settled between the three of us. Dad's gaze stopped on the lock.

His expression hardened, "Why," he asked calmly, "was my office door locked?"

Leone answered before I could, "Gianna and I were only talking."

Dad looked at him for a long second. Then his eyes narrowed slightly, "I see. Perhaps," he said evenly, you should spend your time with your fiancée instead, Leone."

Leone went completely still.

Dad continued as though he hadn't noticed, "I'd rather not have her hear rumors about private conversations with my daughter. Her family has become a very valuable business partner. I have no interest in damaging that relationship over something unnecessary."

For a second, I thought I'd heard him wrong. Then it hit me. I looked at Leone, then back at Dad, then at Leone again.

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it, "You're engaged?"

Leone didn't answer and that alone was enough.

Another laugh slipped out. This one was louder, not because it was funny, but because it was unbelievable, "You?" I shook my head, "The man who just told me he spent six years waiting for me... is engaged?"

Dad answered instead, "Yes. He is, and I suggest you remember that every single time you find yourself alone with my daughter. You had your history. It ended. My daughter is my heir. You are my underboss. From this moment forward, the only conversations I expect the two of you to have are conversations that concern this syndicate."

Leone lowered his eyes, "Got it, boss."

Dad gave one short nod, "Good," then he looked at me, "Come. I still have a lot to show you today."

I glanced at Leone one last time, shook my head with a laugh and left with my Dad.

Raphael

The wind coming off the bay carried the sharp smell of salt and diesel.

I sat on an old wooden bench outside a weather-beaten bait shop, a faded baseball cap pulled low over my face and a pair of cheap sunglasses hiding the rest. A paper coffee cup rested in one hand. It had gone cold nearly an hour ago.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 730

I hadn’t taken a single sip.

My attention never left the water.

The marina looked ordinary.

Fishing boats rocked gently against their docks. A father untangled a fishing line while his son chased gulls across the pier. A mechanic cursed as he disappeared beneath the engine hatch of an old trawler.

Exactly the kind of place people stopped paying attention.

Across the channel, beyond the last row of docks, stretched open water.

Somewhere out there was the island. You couldn’t see it from here. Distance and morning haze swallowed everything beyond the horizon.

But I knew exactly where it was.

Giovanni Toricelli believed winning before the Council meant he’d won the war. He thought he could steal the woman I love, humiliate my family, and walk away untouched. He’d mistaken restraint for surrender.

That mistake would cost him painfully.

Everything that went into that island, eventually came back out. People, supplies, information. All I needed was one mistake.

I checked my watch, three hours. My phone vibrated once inside my pocket.

Dante: Anything?

I typed without looking away from the water.

Me: Nothing yet.

The reply came almost immediately.

Dante: Don’t get impatient.

Me: How is Vincenzo?

Dante: The same. He is barely speaking to anyone anymore. Claire’s the only person he’ll talk to. I called Alessia… maybe she’ll be able to get through to him.

A low diesel engine echoed across the bay. My head lifted. A dark cabin cruiser appeared from the morning fog. It was not fast enough to draw attention but not slow enough to look like it belonged to tourists. The boat slipped quietly into one of the private docks near the end of the marina.

Two men climbed off first. They were security. You could always tell. They looked around before anyone else moved.

A third man followed.

Late forties, gray suit, leather briefcase tucked beneath one arm, clean shoes, no visible weapon. He looked like an accountant or a lawyer. Someone whose job involved paperwork instead of bullets.

One of the guards spoke to him quietly.

The man nodded, then the guards climbed back aboard. Within seconds the boat pushed away from the dock. I watched it disappear back into the bay. The suited man adjusted his tie before walking toward the parking lot.

I counted silently.

One…

Two…

Three…

All the way to thirty.

Then I stood.

I blended into the small crowd, keeping half a block between us. He never looked back. He crossed the marina, passed seafood warehouses, walked beneath rusting cranes that hadn't moved in years.

The farther he went, the fewer people remained, his pace changed, barely noticeable but I noticed.

He'd realized someone was behind him.

He glanced into the reflection of a parked delivery truck. Our eyes met for the briefest second. He turned the corner faster now. I followed. His walk became a jog, then a run.

Wrong decision.

I broke into a sprint and the distance disappeared almost instantly.

He reached a narrow service alley and spun around, breathing hard, "You-"

His hand shot toward the inside of his jacket.

Phone, maybe a gun but it didn't matter. I already had mine, held backward. I closed the last few feet between us and swung. The steel butt of my pistol slammed into the side of his head. A dull crack echoed off the brick walls. His eyes rolled back, his body folded and I caught him before he hit the concrete.

His briefcase slipped from his hand and landed beside us with a thud. I crouched beside him, listening and looked toward the mouth of the alley.

No one had seen... or me. 4

The Council had handed Giovanni exactly what he wanted.

Now...

I was going to use their own ruling against them.

I dragged the man into the center of the dark room, his limp arms scraping across the floor. Then I bound tightly to a heavy steel chair bolted directly to the ground. Zip-ties bit deep into his wrists and ankles, cutting off his circulation.

On the wooden table beside him, I set up my equipment with care. No rusty knives. No heavy hammers. Precision was faster, cleaner, and far more effective.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 731

I unrolled a small black leather pouch containing fine silver acupuncture needles, a pair of insulated wire strippers, a small bottle of conductive copper gel, and a handheld digital nerve-stimulation unit, a high- voltage medical device usually kept inside specialized labs.

Next to it sat my open laptop, its dark screen flickering with real-time biometric tracking software and a digital layout of the Toricelli island territory.

I slapped a wide strip of thick black tape across his mouth, then turned on a small, bright LED lamp, pointing the harsh white light straight into his face.

“I am going to ask you questions,” I said, “Every time you lie, delay, or give me half an answer, I will send a high-frequency electric pulse straight into your nervous system. It will bypass your skin and burn your nerves from the inside out.”

The man let out a gasp from his blood filled mouth, his eyes wide with blinding terror as he thrashed against the steel frame. The chair didn’t budge an inch.

I picked up the first silver needle and pushed it deep into the soft, sensitive pad beneath his right thumbnail. The metal slid in until it touched the bone.

He let out a muffled, high-pitched scream behind the black tape, his legs kicking violently against the chair legs.

I attached a thin copper wire to the head of the needle, connecting the other end straight to the digital stimulation unit. I daubed a drop of conductive gel over the entry point to make sure the current hit every single pain receptor.

I reached over and flipped the switch.

A sharp, high-voltage burst hit his nerve endings.

His whole frame slammed back against the chair, his jaw locking tight as his muscles convulsed in wild, uncontrollable spasms.

The pain wasn’t just on the surface, it vibrated right through his bones, making his eyes roll back into his head. His skin flushed dark red, sweat pouring down his forehead in thick beads.

I let the current run for six full seconds before turning the dial back to zero. He collapsed forward, gasping for air, saliva and tears dripping down his chin.

“P-please!” he sobbed, his voice cracking violently. “Please, don’t! I’ll tell you whatever you want! Don’t do that again!”

“What goes on on that island?” I asked, “I want the exact security detail. Where are the cameras? Where are the blind spots? Give me the shift schedules, the patrol routes, and every single entry point.”

“I don’t know!” he screamed, shaking his head frantically as tears streamed down his cheeks, “I swear to God, I don’t know! I don’t work security! I don’t know the cameras!”

My fingers hovered over the dial.

“Wrong answer,” I murmured.

“No, wait! Wait!” he shrieked, “I know nothing about the guards! I swear it! I only go there sometimes! I just deliver things! That’s all I do!”

I paused, my hand resting flat on the table, my dark eyes locked onto his twitching face.

“What do you deliver?” I demanded, leaning in until he could see his own terrified reflection in my eyes.

“P-pills!” he gasped out, his chest heaving as he tried to pull his body as far away from the wire as the chair allowed. “Just pills! Small boxes! I take them to the dock, hand them to the guard, and leave!”

My eyes narrowed, “What pills?” I asked, “What kind of pills are you taking to that place?”

“Drugs!” he cried out, completely broken, sobbing hysterically as the fear tore through him. “It’s drugs! High-grade sedatives and muscle blockers! I deliver drugs there!”

I didn’t move my finger from the key. The cold glow of the laptop screen lit up the sweat shining on his face.

“What do they do with the drugs?” I asked, “Tell me what those pills are for.”

“I don’t know!” he sobbed, his head shaking violently back and forth. “They are sealed in heavy metal boxes! I just haul them from the docks! I don’t open them, I don’t ask questions! I swear to you, I’m just the middleman!”

I tapped a key on the board.

The box clicked. A higher surge of electricity shot straight through his thumb, up his arm, and into his chest.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 732

The man let out a high-pitched scream that bounced off the damp concrete walls. His legs kicked wildly. His eyes rolled back into his head, his chest heaving as if his lungs were collapsing.

Seven seconds.

I cut the power.

He fell forward against the straps, gasping, coughing, and crying like a child. Wet tears and sweat dripped off his chin onto his ruined gray suit.

“Don’t lie to me again,” I said softly, “You don’t just carry boxes without knowing who is running the show. Give me a name. Who is in charge of that island? Who controls the supply line?”

“I don’t know!” he shrieked, “I don’t know the whole family! I don’t see the big bosses! Please, turn it off!

Please!”

I rested my hand on the laptop again, “Give me a name or I double the voltage.”

“Wait! Wait!” he screamed, his whole body shaking with pure terror, “I don’t know everyone! I only know the man who runs the facility on the west side! The doctor!”

My eyes narrowed. Every nerve in my body went taut. “What doctor? What is his name?”

“The head of the facility!” he choked out, struggling to catch his breath, staring at me with desperate, wide eyes. “He takes all the drug shipments! He runs the whole building! He’s the one who signs off on the orders!”

“Give me his name,” I said.

“Dr. Vance!” the man sobbed out, spilling the words as fast as he could. “Dr. Arthur Vance! That’s his name! I swear on my life, that’s all I know! Dr. Vance!”

Dr. Arthur Vance.

I stood up slowly, looking down at the broken, sobbing man tied to the chair. I reached out and tapped the key on my keyboard one last time.

A sharp, violent wave of electricity surged straight through the wires, hitting his nerve endings like a wall of pure fire.

The man's spine snapped straight back against the metal frame of the chair. A loud, shrill scream tore out of his throat, echoing hard against the concrete walls. His legs kicked wildly against the floor, his entire body shuddering, twitching, and shaking under the sudden, blinding shock.

Ten seconds.

I cut the power.

His head flopped forward, his lungs dragging in desperate gulps of cold air. Saliva and tears dripped off his chin, soaking into the ruined collar of his shirt. He was trembling so hard the whole chair rattled against the ground.

"Please..." he wept, his voice completely broken, barely louder than a whisper. "Please... I gave you... the name..."

I closed the lid of my laptop and then I stepped in close, leaning down until my mouth was right beside his ear.

"I am going to keep you here in this basement for a while," I said, "Because who knows? Once I start pulling on this thread, I might need you again."

He let out a weak, helpless sob, his eyes rolling back in terror as he realized he wasn't going anywhere.

I stood up to my full height and turned toward the dark corner of the room, Luca stepped out from the shadows, his hands resting casually in his pockets, his dark eyes fixed on the weeping man bound to the chair.

I looked at my brother and gave him a single nod, "My brother will take it from here," I said, as I picked up his briefcase from the table, "I have a feeling we can get a whole lot more out of you before the night is done."

Gianna

I had spent hours walking beside my father, sitting through conversations, looking at files, listening to him explain the world he wanted me to step into.

But the one thing I needed...

The one thing I came back for...

I never got.

Every time I tried to bring up Dr. Vance, every time I thought I was finally getting close to asking what happened, Dad found a way to move the conversation somewhere else.

Business.

The syndicate.

The future.

Anything except the past.

By the time I returned to my room, I felt exhausted in a way sleep couldn’t fix.

I hadn’t come here to learn how to run companies.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 733

I hadn’t come here to wear expensive clothes and stand beside my father like everything was normal.

I came here for answers.

And somehow, after an entire day, I had even more questions.

When we finally returned to the house, I thought I could at least spend time with Gio and Perla. I wanted to talk to them. I wanted to understand what happened while I was gone. I wanted to know why Gio looked at Dad that way but Dad stopped me before I could even ask.

“They go to bed early,” he said simply.

So I was back here.

Alone.

In the room I had left six years ago.

Missing Jules.

Missing the Capones.

Missing Raphael so badly it felt like there was a hole in my chest.

I opened my closet, expecting to find something familiar. Instead, I found a time capsule. Everything inside belonged to a girl who no longer existed.

Sixteen-year-old Gianna.

Tiny dresses, old sweaters, clothes that fit a body that hadn't finished changing. I pulled out a shirt and stared at it. It looked ridiculous in my hands. I put it back.

After searching through everything, I finally found something that fit.

A small tank top and underwear.

I put it on and the tank top ended above my waist. I stood in front of the mirror, my eyes moved over my reflection and my fingers moved to the necklace around my neck.

Raphael's mother's necklace.

I touched the pendant softly, just thinking about him made something inside me ache.

I knew he was hurt. I knew he was angry and I couldn't blame him. He had fought for me. He had lost because of me. The thought made my stomach twist.

I looked back at my reflection, tilting my head slightly as I studied myself. Maybe... Maybe if he saw me like this, maybe if I reminded him of the girl he loved instead of the mess I felt like now. Maybe if I made him smile first, distracted him for just a little while.

Maybe he wouldn't be able to stay angry at me.

A small, guilty smile pulled at my lips. It was a little manipulative. A little unfair but Raphael knew me.

I adjusted my hair, pushed my breast together, pulled at my neckline, making it deeper, fixed the necklace so it sat against my skin, and looked at myself one more time.

I wanted to see the way his expression changed when he looked at me and because I wanted to remind him...

I was still his Gianna.

I climbed onto the soft bed and set my phone up against the pillows. I sat back on my heels, opening my thighs wide to show the thin band of my dark underwear stretched tight between my legs.

And then I stared down at Raphael's name on the screen for several long, breathless seconds.

He was probably angry.

He had every right to be.

I had walked away with my father.

I had left him standing outside that Council room.

I had left Jules.

I had left everyone.

I wanted him.

I wanted his voice.

I wanted to know if he was okay.

And before anything else, I needed to know the truth.

Could I call Jules?

Would she answer?

Was she angry?

Did Claire and Maddie hate me?

Did the Capones think I had betrayed them?

My thumb hovered over his name, then I pressed the video call button. The screen started ringing and suddenly, all the courage I had carried all day disappeared.

Because I could face my father.

I could face the Leone.

I could face Dr. Vance.

I could face anything.

But facing the possibility that Raphael no longer wanted me...

That was the thing I couldn’t handle.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 734

Gianna

The screen rang three times, then it connected. I smiled automatically and it disappeared just as fast.

My breath caught, “Raphael?”

He was sitting somewhere dark with dirty concrete walls. A single light hanging above him.

His white dress shirt was rolled to his elbows, the sleeves stained with dark red. Tiny flecks of blood dotted one side of his face. It was fresh.

He was breathing harder than normal, not exhausted, just controlled like someone forcing himself to calm down.

“Raph...”

My eyes searched the screen. His jaw. His neck. His hands. Looking for injuries, looking for something that told me the blood belonged to him.

He didn’t answer me, didn’t even say a single word. Instead, he lifted one hand and slowly dragged it down his face.

The blood smeared across his cheek, some of it caught against the edge of his light stubble. He leaned back into the chair without breaking eye contact.

The silence made my stomach twist, “Raphael...” my voice came out smaller than I wanted, “Where are you?”

He just stared at me, saying nothing at all. Cold panic rushed through my veins. My stomach twisted into a tight, heavy knot, and my hands started to shake.

“What happened?”

I sat up straighter on the bed without even realizing it.

“Are you hurt?”

He kept staring, not at my face anymore, but at me. His eyes traveled over the screen slowly, taking in everything.

The tank top, the necklace around my neck, the thin tank top stretched tight across my chest and the little underwear I wore, showing off the bare skin of my legs.

Heat rushed into my cheeks.

For a second, I'd almost forgotten what I was wearing.

"I..." I looked down at myself before meeting his eyes again, "I was just-"

The words died because he still hadn't said anything. My heartbeat sped up.

"Raphael," I swallowed, "Please. Say something."

Another long second passed, then slowly his eyes finally lifted to mine.

He drew one slow breath through his nose. A low, rough sound escaped him, it was not quite a sigh, it wasn't even a growl either, "Are you okay?"

Everything inside me stopped. That... That was the first thing he asked, not why I'd left, not why I'd gone with my father, not whether I had betrayed him.

Just...

Are you okay?

My chest tightened so hard it hurt.

I nodded before realizing he probably couldn't tell, "I'm..." My voice cracked, "I don't know."

His expression didn't change. He kept watching me the same way he always did like he was checking for things no one else could see.

My eyes drifted back to the blood on his face, my stomach turned, "That's not yours, right?"

His jaw flexed. For a long moment, I thought he was going to avoid the question again..Instead, he spoke quietly, "It's not mine."

The knot in my chest loosened just enough for me to breathe again. I closed my eyes for a second,"

Thank God."

Then, I remembered what I was wearing..My eyes dropped to the screen again.

The tank top.

The bare skin.

The stupid idea I'd had five minutes ago. My face burned. God. What was wrong with me?

He was sitting somewhere covered in blood, looking like he'd walked straight out of a war, and I'd actually thought distracting him would fix everything.

Heat rushed into my cheeks, "I..." I reached for the blanket at the end of the bed. "Hang on."

I pulled it toward me, trying to throw it over my lap.

"Don't."

My hands stopped. I looked back at the screen.

His eyes were still fixed on me, "Don't cover up."

I frowned, "I was just going to-"

"I like you like this," the words came quietly, "They made my night a little easier."

Everything inside me melted. The blanket slipped back onto the bed. A smile found me before I could stop it, the first real one I'd had all day.

"I thought..." I looked down for a second before meeting his eyes again, "I thought you'd be furious with me."

"I am."

My smile faded immediately.

"I'm pissed," he didn't raise his voice, just like he never does, "I'm pissed at you but that doesn't mean I stop loving you."

I blinked, while his eyes stayed locked on mine. Something in my throat tightened.

"You don't get punished by me loving you less," his jaw flexed, "You get loved anyway but I am angry."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 735

I nodded slowly, "I know."

“No,” he shook his head once, “I don’t think you understand how pissed I really am,” he leaned back farther into the chair, one forearm resting against the armrest, “I’m pissed you left. I’m pissed you walked into Giovanni Toricelli’s house.”

He rubbed a tired hand across his face again, not seeming to care about the blood still smeared along his cheek.

His eyes found mine again, “I don’t get to stop loving you because you made a decision I hate.”

“I…” My throat closed around the words.

He continued before I could answer, “What I don’t understand…” he said, “…is why. What is so important in that house? What could your father-the man Hazel clearly despised-possibly have that makes you think it’s worth leaving me?”

I looked down at the phone. I couldn’t tell him because I already knew what would happen. The second Raphael found out why I came here…

He’d come for me.

He wouldn’t care about the Council.

He wouldn’t care about Daddy.

He’d drag me out of this house himself if he had to and he’d call me an idiot for thinking I had to fix myself first.

He’d tell me I was enough.

He always did.

But that wasn’t the point.

He deserved more than someone who was barely holding herself together. He deserved someone who could stand beside him instead of always leaning on him.

I wanted to become that person, not because he’d asked me to. He never had. I wanted it because every time I looked at him. I saw someone who carried everyone else’s weight without ever asking for help.

For once…

I wanted to become someone who could carry a little of his.

For once, I wanted people to look at us and stop wondering why a man like Raphael chose someone like me. I wanted them to look at me and think, She deserves to stand beside him. Not because I became someone else... but because I finally became someone worthy in my own eyes.

Raphael's voice pulled me back, "Gianna."

I lifted my head.

"Don't even think about lying to me."

My fingers curled tighter around the edge of the blanket.

"I know there's something you're not telling me," his eyes never left mine, "You don't trust me with it."

"No," the answer came out too quickly, "I do trust you."

"Then tell me."

I couldn't, not because I was afraid of him but because I was afraid he'd stop me before I had the chance to become the woman I wanted to be.

"I can't," I whispered.

Raphael closed his eyes for a brief second.

When he opened them again, there was frustration there. And underneath it... worry, "So that's it. You'd rather carry this alone than let me carry it with you."

I bit the inside of my cheek so hard it hurt, because he had no idea, the only reason I was carrying it alone, was because I was trying, in the most broken way possible...

To become someone strong enough to carry him, too.

My throat tightened, "I love you."

The words slipped out so quietly I almost didn't hear them myself. The hard look on Raphael didn't soften.

He simply looked at me for another long moment before speaking, "Do you have any idea what I'm risking just by answering this call? The Council didn't give us a warning, Gianna. They drew a line. We're not supposed to call each other. We're not supposed to meet. We're not supposed to exchange messages. They don't even want us looking in each other's direction again."

Every sentence made me shrink into myself.

“You asked your father for help. He took you away from us,” his jaw tightened, “And now every second I stay on this call...” he looked toward something off-screen before returning to me, “I’m putting my family in danger.”

Guilt flooded my chest, “I’m sorry. I’ll deal with Dad. I promise. I’ll handle him. You don’t have to worry about my father,” a bitter laugh escaped me, “But... I can’t do this. I can’t go a whole day without hearing your voice or Jules’.”

The moment I said her name, my chest ached.

“How is she? Is she...” I struggled to get the words out, “Is she mad at me too?”

“When we got back, she locked herself in her room. She cried until she couldn’t anymore. When Claire finally got her to talk. She went to Hazel’s grave and told her that you left her.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 736

The tears I’d been holding back spilled over, “No...”

Raphael looked back at me, “She said you were the worst sister in the world. She said everyone leaves her. And I didn’t correct her.”

The sob escaped before I could stop it. My entire body folded forward. It felt like someone had reached into my chest and crushed my heart with their bare hand.

I wiped at my face so quickly I only made things worse, “Please. Please let me talk to her. I just... I need to see her. Please, Raph, just one minute. I don’t even care if she screams at me. I just need her to know I didn’t leave her.”

Raphael’s expression hardened, “No.”

I stared at him, “What?”

“No. I want you to understand exactly what you left behind. You won’t call Jules. You won’t see Jules. And if I have any say in it, you won’t be anywhere near her until you tell me what the hell is really going on.”

My head shook immediately, “Raphael, please don’t do that.”

His voice carried something I'd almost never heard from him before, "You didn't have to do this either but you still did. And now she's sitting in that house believing her sister chose someone else over her."

I shook my head so hard it hurt, "That's not true."

He looked straight into my eyes, "This is the one thing I'm willing to punish you with until you trust me enough to tell me the truth, you don't get Jules."

My vision blurred completely.

Because out of everything he could've taken from me, he'd found the only thing that could truly break me.

Neither of us spoke for a long time then, but we stayed on call. The room was quiet except for my uneven breathing. Raphael didn't rush to fill the silence. He reached just out of frame before coming back with a cigarette between his fingers.

A silver lighter clicked. He lit the cigarette, took one slow drag, then leaned back in the chair. The end glowed orange. A thin stream of smoke escaped his lips before drifting toward the ceiling.

I frowned, "You're smoking?"

His eyes stayed on me, "I smoke sometimes."

I blinked, "You hate cigarettes."

"I do," he took another drag, "I hate a lot of things. But sometimes..." his jaw tightened, "...I need something to quiet the violence in my head."

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Violence.

He didn't say anger.

He didn't say frustration.

Violence.

Like it was something living inside him that constantly wanted out.

I swallowed, "You've been smoking because of me?"

His eyes narrowed slightly, “I’ve been smoking because if I don’t calm down, people get hurt.”

He brought the cigarette back to his lips. The blood was still smeared across one side of his face. The smoke curled around him until he looked almost unreal.

Then his gaze dropped to my neck. His eyes stayed there for several long seconds, “You kept the necklace.”

I instinctively touched the pendant resting against my skin. My fingers wrapped around it without thinking, “Yeah. I’m not taking it off again. Because…” I smiled faintly despite everything, “I heard you.”

His expression didn’t change, “Heard what?”

I tucked one leg underneath me, “You thought I was asleep. I wasn’t. I heard you talking.”

His cigarette paused halfway to his mouth.

“I heard you telling Dante about the tracker. So…” I looked down at the pendant again, “I kept it on.”

His eyes searched mine, “You know it’s transmitting?”

I nodded once, “The second I realized what it was, I decided it was staying.”

Raphael stared at me, “Why?”

I laughed quietly, “Because if you can’t reach me, at least you’ll always know where I am. I wanted one thing to stay easy for you.”

And for the first time since the call began, the anger in his eyes cracked only a little, just enough for me to see the man underneath it.

The cigarette rested between his fingers as he watched me in silence, then his jaw shifted, “Take it off.”

I frowned, “The necklace?”

A corner of his mouth twitched, “No. Your top.”

I blinked, “What?”

“The shirt.”

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I stared at him for a second before an embarrassed laugh escaped me, “Raphael Capone…”

He took another slow drag from his cigarette, “What?”

“You were just threatening to keep Jules away from me.”

“I still am.”

“And now you’re asking me to-”

“I didn’t ask,” he exhaled a thin stream of smoke, “I ordered. I’ve been covered in someone else’s blood for the last hour. I’ve spent the entire day trying not to burn Philadelphia to the ground. Let me have one good thing tonight.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 737

The heat climbed into my face, “You know… I put all this effort into trying to distract you because I thought you’d yell at me.”

“I noticed.”

“You noticed?”

“The second you answered,” he looked me up and down again, completely unashamed, “You were trying to manipulate me. It was cute.”

I buried my face in one hand, “Oh my God.”

“You failed,” a tiny smile tugged at his lips, “But I appreciated the effort.”

I peeked at him through my fingers, “So, you’re not distracted?”

“Mess,” his voice turned rough, “I’ve been distracted since you answered the phone but I’m also still pissed.”

I groaned dramatically and fell backward onto the bed, “I can’t win with you.”

“No,” he took one last drag before crushing the cigarette out somewhere off camera, “You really can’t.”

I laughed at that. Raphael watched me for a long moment then leaned forward slightly, resting his forearms on his knees.

“Keep the top on.”

I blinked, “What?”

“I changed my mind,” the corner of his mouth lifted just enough to soften the hard lines of his face, “I’d rather look at your face. I’ve missed that more.”

And those words undid me far more than his teasing ever could.

He looked at me for another few seconds before speaking again, “You’re going to call me every night?”

I nodded without hesitation, “Every single night. And if I don’t. I want you to assume something happened.”

His eyes hardened instantly.

“I mean it,” I whispered. “If I miss even one night without warning you, don’t think I forgot. Don’t think I stopped loving you. Think something’s wrong. I won’t stop calling you unless I physically can’t.”

He inhaled sharply, “The moment that necklace stops moving the way it should, I’m coming. I don’t care what council made what decision. I don’t care what lines they drew.”

He leaned closer to the camera.

“If something happens to you,” his gaze turned frighteningly empty, “They’ll wish they’d killed me first.”

I smiled through the tears threatening my eyes, “I know.”

Then Raphael leaned back in his chair and ran a tired hand over his face. The blood on his knuckles had already started drying, “I’ve still got work to do.”

My brows pulled together, “What kind of work?”

He looked at me without a hint of emotion, “I’m not done questioning someone.”

I knew that look, nothing I said would change his mind. He’d already made the decision.

I bit my lip, “Stay on the call with me while you do it.”

His brow lifted slightly, “What?”

“Please,” my voice came out smaller than I’d intended, “Stay with me until I fall asleep. I’ll just... listen to your voice.”

I curled up beneath the blanket, pulling it over my legs.

He gave one slow nod, “I’ll stay.”

Relief spread through my chest so quickly it almost hurt.

“You can do whatever you need to do,” I whispered. “Just… don’t hang up.”

“I won’t,” he picked up the phone and stood, carrying it with him as he walked toward the dirty door, “You should close your eyes.”

I obeyed without arguing.

“Good girl,” he murmured.

The words wrapped around me like warmth. I smiled into my pillow, “Raphael?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

Then, in the same calm voice he’d used all night, he whispered, “And I love you enough to make sure you come home… and then I’ll fuck you.”

I listened to his footsteps echo through the hallway as my eyes slowly drifted shut, holding onto the sound of his breathing, refusing to let go until sleep finally claimed me.

Raphael

–

The room had gone quiet again. The screaming had stopped almost twenty minutes ago. The man was still alive. I sat down in front of my workstation, rolling my shoulders once before waking every monitor.

Eight screens, three secured networks, two isolated servers. One air-gapped machine that never touched the internet.

Gianna’s video call stayed open on the monitor to my far right. I’d muted her microphone the moment I went back downstairs, not because I didn’t want to hear her but because I didn’t want her hearing what happened in this room.

Now…

She slept, curled onto her side, one arm tucked beneath her pillow, dark hair spread across the sheets. Mom’s necklace still rested against her throat.

My eyes lingered there for a second.

I reached over and enlarged her video for a brief moment, checking her breathing out of habit, no movement outside her bedroom could be seen from this view. I minimized the window again but kept it visible.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 738

Only then did I turn toward the remaining screens.

Arthur Vance.

The name appeared in the search bar. I didn’t search the public internet first. That would’ve been useless. Men like Giovanni buried the truth long before newspapers ever saw it.

Instead, I started with medical licensing archives. Old university records, state licensing boards, hospital employment databases, conference attendance, research papers.

Everything.

Lines of code rolled across one screen while another quietly copied decades of archived files into temporary storage.

Nothing.

It was too clean, far too clean.

Doctors left trails, publications, photographs, medical journals, interviews, grants. Arthur Vance barely existed.

That wasn’t normal.

I leaned back. I opened another terminal. This time I searched for Giovanni Toricelli, business photographs, political fundraisers, charity galas, hospital donations, hundreds of pictures flooded the screen.

Most were useless.

I wrote a quick facial-recognition script and let it isolate recurring faces standing near Giovanni over the years.

The program worked in silence.

Then, a folder appeared.

MATCH FOUND.

I opened it.

The first photograph looked almost thirty years old. Giovanni stood outside a hospital during a ribbon- cutting ceremony. Beside him, was a man in a white coat-dark hair, round glasses, stupid fucking smile.

Caption:

Dr. Arthur Vance.

I opened another.

Five years later, the same man was standing beside Giovanni again. Then another, another and another.

For almost twenty-five years...

The same doctor appeared beside Giovanni and no one else. Meetings, fundraisers, private dinners, medical conferences.

Always there.

Always close.

I enlarged the newest photograph but something about it felt wrong. I placed the oldest picture beside the newest one. It had the same height, same hairline, same beard, same smile.

Twenty-five years and not a wrinkle worth mentioning, not the natural aging I'd expect.

I zoomed in, then again, skin texture, ear shape, jawline, eyes. The algorithm highlighted differences, tiny ones that were almost invisible, like someone trying very hard to become another person.

My fingers started moving faster now. I searched for death certificates, burial records, historical archives, hospital obituaries.

But there was nothing.

What the fuck?

Then, one corrupted county archive surfaced, deleted... and that made me smile. I recovered it but it was partially damaged and then I repaired it.

Thirty seconds passed.

Then forty.

My eyes drifted back to Gianna.

Somewhere in her sleep, she'd shifted again. The tiny tank top had ridden even higher, the soft swell of her breasts pressing against the thin fabric, leaving very little to the imagination.

Feral little fox.

Even unconscious, she somehow managed to test the limits of my self-control.

A scanned document slowly appeared, forcing me to look back at it.

Death Certificate.

Name: Arthur James Vance.

Date: Twenty-five years ago.

Cause of death: Classified under restricted judicial order.

My eyes narrowed. Judicial? Not medical?

I dug deeper into the court archives, restricted criminal records, expunged files, deleted newspaper scans. Half the files had been erased.

Which only made me want them more.

Deleted information was never truly deleted for someone like me. It simply became harder to reach.

Three minutes later...

Fragments started coming back. Headline after headline rebuilt themselves from damaged backups.

DOCTOR CONVICTED IN MASS CHILD MURDERS

Another.

SERIAL KILLER SENTENCED TO DEATH

Another.

NEARLY THREE HUNDRED CHILD VICTIMS IDENTIFIED

I stopped typing, and the room became completely silent. He was exactly the kind of man I preferred to put in the Void to be hunted. The articles never mentioned Arthur Vance. It was a different face, different name, different doctor.

opened the execution records. The Death sentence had been carried out. He was officially deceased, no surviving identity, no appeals, no release.

Executed.

Officially.

I looked back at the photographs beside Giovanni, then at the execution file, then back again.

My jaw tightened.

Someone had disappeared from history and another man had appeared wearing a dead doctor's name.

I overlaid the execution photograph with Giovanni's "Arthur Vance."

The software processed facial structure, bone measurements, eye spacing, nasal bridge, and jaw proportions.

99.4% MATCH

I stared at the screen, the executed serial killer and Giovanni's trusted doctor were the same man.

Only the name had changed.

Every public record insisted the killer had died. Every private photograph proved otherwise. Giovanni

31 for 739 hadn't simply hidden a criminal. He had erased one man and resurrected him as someone else.

I looked toward Gianna's sleeping face.

"Jesus Christ."

I sat there for a full minute because I couldn’t make it make sense.

Why?

What possible reason did Giovanni Toricelli have for risking everything to save a serial killer?

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 739

Money?

No.

Loyalty?

Impossible.

Men like Giovanni didn’t rescue strangers out of compassion.

Blackmail?

Maybe.

But if all he needed was leverage, there were easier people to own than someone sentenced to die.

I opened another screen, started building possibilities.

Illegal surgery.

Organ trafficking.

Identity changes.

Plastic surgery for fugitives.

Off-the-books medical treatment.

Experimental pharmaceuticals.

Chemical manufacturing.

Human testing.

Counterfeit medications.

Biological research.

The list kept growing. Each theory looked possible for about ten seconds, then fell apart because any doctor could do this for the right price, and none of them justified this level of secrecy, none of them justified giving a dead serial killer an entirely new life.

None of them explained why every shipment arriving on that island contained sedatives and muscle blockers.

I looked at the notes I'd taken from the courier. There was no food deliveries worth mentioning, no medical equipment. Just prescription drugs, large quantities of them, regular shipments.

Then something caught my eye.

The deliveries had stopped completely two years ago. The shipments had stopped, the drugs had stopped. Then, six months ago...

They started again, regular and consistent. As if someone had simply picked up where they'd left off.

My fingers tapped slowly against the desk. Sedatives, and muscle relaxants. None of those were unusual but together... They painted a different picture.

Control.

I didn't like that thought.

Whatever connected Giovanni and that doctor... It wasn't recent. It had started long before Gianna was ever born.

I leaned back in my chair, took off my glasses and rubbed the bridge of my nose, "Why would you need him?"

The words disappeared into the empty room.

Giovanni wasn't an idiot. He didn't collect dangerous people for amusement. Everything he did had a purpose. Every person around him earned their place.

So why keep a convicted serial killer alive?

I opened another window.

Neurology?

Psychiatry?

Behavioral modification?

Experimental medicine?

Rehabilitation?

Genetics?

One possibility after another filled the screen, none of them strong enough to become fact.

I hated assumptions.

Assumptions got people killed.

Facts won wars.

I closed every theory, there wasn't enough evidence, not yet.

My thoughts went back to Vincenzo. He moved through the house like a man carrying a weight no one else could see. Claire was the only person he spoke to for more than a few words.

Even his children couldn't pull him out of it.

I'd spent my whole life trying to earn that man's respect. His approval had never come easily and I had worn it like armor every single time I managed to earn another piece of it, not because he demanded it but because he deserved it.

He had built us.

Protected us.

Given every one of us a place to belong.

Now...

Because Giovanni Toricelli had taken Gianna away under the Council's ruling, people whispered, they questioned, they wondered whether Vincenzo Capone had lost control. Whether my brother had allowed another Don to walk into his life and leave with one of his own.

This wasn't finished.

Giovanni had won a meeting. He hadn't won the war, not while I was still breathing. I wasn't interested in revenge. Revenge was emotional and temporary.

I wanted something permanent.

If Giovanni had hidden a man who should have died decades ago. If he had built an entire operation around that lie, then somewhere inside those secrets was everything I needed.

Proof.

Enough to drag Giovanni Toricelli before the Council with nowhere left to hide and fuck him in the ass. Enough that no one could question where Gianna belonged. Enough that every whisper about my brother died the same day the evidence surfaced.

Enough to make every self-righteous fuck who signed off on that decision lower their heads in front of Don Vincenzo Capone and choke on their own mistake.

Enough to remind them exactly who they humiliated... and exactly why they should've thought twice before crossing my brother.

And when it was over, I'd take my woman back. Right where she fucking belonged.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 740

Raphael

I stepped into Adriano's office above Velluto Rosso. On paper, it was a Michelin-starred restaurant owned by a successful businessman.

In reality, it was the perfect front for the Underboss of the Chicago Outfit to hold meetings. Politicians, judges, CEOS, and federal agents all booked tables downstairs.

Adriano stood by the window with his jacket off, sleeves rolled to his forearms. He turned around when I walked in, "You look like shit."

"I've had a long night."

His eyes moved over the dried blood still staining the cuff of my shirt as I took off my jacket," Successful?"

"I got something," I dropped a thick folder onto his desk, "I spent the last twelve hours digging through every medical archive, court record, death certificate, tax filing, shipping manifest, and hospital database I could get my hands on."

Adriano pulled out his chair, “Sit.”

I stayed standing.

He sighed, “That bad?”

He opened the folder. The first photograph showed Giovanni Toricelli standing beside a man in a white lab coat.

The caption underneath read:

Dr. Arthur Vance.

Adriano stared at it for a few seconds before looking back up at me, “Congratulations,” he deadpanned.” You’ve discovered doctors wear lab coats. I’m assuming there’s a part two to this before I start questioning your sanity.”

I slid another photograph beside it, “This is the real Arthur Vance.”

Another man.

Almost identical.

Same height.

Same build.

Same hair.

Even the jawline was close enough that most people would never question it.

Adriano leaned closer, “They could pass for brothers.”

“They weren’t. The real Arthur Vance died almost Twenty-five years ago.”

Adriano looked up, “Natural causes?”

I shook my head, “No records.”

“What?”

“There was no funeral, no obituary, no hospital report, no police investigation, no family statements,” I tapped the picture, “It was like this man simply stopped existing.”

Adriano slowly leaned back, “You don’t erase someone this completely without help.”

I gave him a nod, “No, you erase them because someone powerful wanted another man wearing his face.

His eyes narrowed, “And that other man?”

I reached into the folder again. This time I placed an old newspaper clipping onto the desk. The paper had yellowed with age.

Across the front page sat the photograph of a younger doctor smiling into the camera.

Beneath it...

A headline.

PEDIATRICIAN SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR MURDERING PATIENTS.

Adriano read it twice, then his face hardened, “Jesus.”

“It was never Arthur Vance,” I said, my eyes settling on the photograph. “His real name was Dr. Elias Crowe. A young pediatrician. Unknown. Unremarkable,” I looked back at Adriano, “Until people started counting the dead children.”

I slid another stack of papers across the desk. Adriano flipped through page after page, autopsy reports, court transcripts, victim lists, psychiatric evaluations.

“He didn’t start by murdering hundreds,” I said. “He started by making people trust him. One child died, then another, then a handful more. Every death had an explanation. Heart failure. Respiratory arrest. A rare reaction to medication. Complications no one could prove were his fault.”

I tapped one of the reports.

“He was a pediatrician. Parents handed him their children because they believed he was trying to save them. Instead, he learned how far he could push a body without anyone asking questions. By the time muestigators realized those deaths wenen accident the sun was aREDIT THE TIMES

Every parlem became an extenment suffering E MERCTED STEST WESKET Day Bher day studying every cry every tear every desperate breath with the detached ounty of ETTET DIDE glass

Par fascinated tim moects seneat the mid behind a white coat and a calm smile while his wins teneraed IT FOOT of the very people who trusted him most me documented symptoms that never exGET DE TIWITE CREME WE confidence and convinced fingrenes parents that serachs were of the ilmest

They thanked him for trying to save ther children

He thanked them with another le

Succer

Brome

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 741

Sometimes, when a child slipped into cardiac arrest, he didn’t panic. He didn’t rush to help.

He just stood there...

Watching.

Watching the monitors scream.

Watching parents beg.

Watching the life leave another little body.

It wasn’t enough for Dr. Elias Crowe that his victims died. He wanted to witness every second of their suffering first.

Adriano stopped turning pages, “How many?”

“The courts proved almost three hundred,” I met his eyes, “The investigators believed the real number was much higher.”

Adriano let out a slow breath,.”They sentenced him?”

“Death row.”

“And?”

“He never died.”

His eyes lifted sharply.

I nodded, “The execution happened, the paperwork exists, the witnesses signed off, the prison closed the file but the man who walked into that execution chamber,” I pointed toward the photograph of Arthur

Vance, “...wasn’t Elias Crowe.”

Adriano stared, “You have proof?”

“Enough to convince me.”

I opened my laptop.

Several photographs filled the screen.. One showed Giovanni entering a courthouse decades ago on the day of the execution. Another showed financial transfers disappearing into shell companies that no longer existed. Another displayed altered medical licensing records.

Every trail...

Ended with Giovanni.

“The day Crowe was supposed to die,” I zoomed in, “Arthur Vance died instead, Crowe appeared using Arthur Vance’s identity working exclusively for Giovanni Toricelli.”

Adriano sat back slowly, rubbing a hand over his jaw, “Why would Giovanni go through all that trouble for a man like him?”

I held his gaze, “I don’t know, not yet. But men like Giovanni don’t risk everything to save monsters unless those monsters are useful. And right now... the list of reasons is a long one.”

Giovanni wasn’t sentimental. Everything he did had value. Everything had purpose. Which meant Crowe was useful. Useful enough to erase an entire man’s life. Useful enough to protect for three decades. Useful enough to hide on an island no one officially knew existed.

Adriano broke the silence, “What else?”

I opened another file, “Shipping manifests. The island receives regular medical deliveries. Large quantities.”

His eyes scanned the list. There were sedatives, general anesthetics, muscle relaxants, neuromuscular blockers, high-dose opioid painkillers, ketamine, midazolam, propofol, fentanyl, morphine, lidocaine, paralytic agents, diazepam.

Adriano looked back at me, “That’s enough medication for a hospital.”

Neither of us liked where they pointed.

“There are refrigerated shipments too. Controlled storage, temperature-monitored deliveries, medical equipment, surgical supplies, replacement imaging parts.”

Adriano slowly sat back, “What the fuck is on that island?”

“Whatever it is…” my jaw tightened, “Giovanni Toricelli buried it so deep that even I can’t see it yet.”

Adriano watched me for another few seconds before speaking again, “So?” he asked quietly. “How does any of this help us?”

I looked down at the photograph of the man calling himself Arthur Vance, “It doesn’t. It gives me questions,” I continued. “Not answers. A dead pediatrician assumes another doctor’s identity. Giovanni Toricelli risks everything to make that happen. He keeps him hidden for decades. He builds an entire facility where this man works,” I looked back at Adriano,.”People don’t do that for no reason.”

Adriano folded his arms, “So we’re back where we started.”

I let out a slow breath, “I need the piece that connects everything. I bet Hazel knew something.”

Adriano studied me for a long moment,.”So what now?”

“I keep digging.”

“You’ve barely slept in two days.”

“I’ll survive.”

“Raphael.”

“I said I’ll survive.”

The words came out colder than I’d intended. He didn’t react. He knew me too well.

His eyes drifted briefly toward the dried blood still staining the sleeve of my shirt, “You planning on telling Vincenzo any of this?”

“No. Not yet.”

His expression tightened, “You know he’ll lose his mind when he finds out you’ve been keeping things from him.”

“I know.”

“And you’re still going to.”

“Yes.”

He sighed, “You’ve never hidden anything from him.”

“I still won’t,” I looked down at the files again, “I’ll tell him when I have something worthy of putting in his hands.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 742

Not theories.

Not guesses.

Not loose threads.

Evidence.

Something that couldn’t be explained away.

Something that wouldn’t leave even the smallest opening for Giovanni Toricelli to crawl through.

Adriano picked up the photograph of Elias Crowe, “So until then?”

I grabbed the files into a neat stack, “Until then,” I slid them back into the case, “I keep following this doctor.”

Adriano looked at me for another second before giving a slow nod, “You really think this leads somewhere?”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” I walked toward the office door, “But it’s all I have right now. I need one weakness, just one. So I’ll keep pulling the thread,” I looked back at my brother, “One way or another, something buried on that island is going to unravel. And when it does,” a cold smile touched my face,” I’m going to be there to watch Giovanni choke on it.”

Gianna

I buttoned the charcoal jacket slowly, smoothing the sleeves before fastening the single button at my waist.

The woman in the mirror still surprised me.

The suit fit like it had been stitched onto me. Sharp shoulders, a narrow waist and straight trousers. The kind of outfit that made people think twice before speaking.

I stepped closer to the mirror, tilting my head from one side to the other. I pulled my phone from my pocket, angled it toward the mirror, and snapped a picture.

My expression was calm. One eyebrow slightly raised. Just enough attitude to annoy him. Exactly how he liked me. My thumbs hovered over the keyboard before I finally typed.

Me: I'd spank you wearing this.

I hit send, then waited. Three dots appeared almost immediately, disappeared and then came back.

I grinned.

He was thinking.

Finally, his reply came through.

Raphael: Statistically speaking, that sentence has several flaws.

I blinked.

A second message appeared before I could answer.

Raphael: First, you're assuming you'd still be in charge five seconds after walking into my room wearing that.

I laughed.

Another message.

Raphael: Second, that suit is giving you dangerous levels of confidence.

Raphael: I approve.

I bit my lip, my smile growing wider.

He wasn't finished.

Raphael: Third… if you showed up looking like that, I'd spend exactly three seconds appreciating the tailoring before wondering how long it would take to ruin my self-control.

Heat rushed into my cheeks.

I typed back.

Me: Only three seconds? I'm offended.

His reply came almost instantly.

Raphael: Gianna…

Raphael: I've analyzed this very carefully.

I rolled my eyes and leaned against the dresser and typed again.

Me: So… no spanking?

The typing bubble appeared almost immediately. It stayed there long enough that I knew he was choosing his words.

Raphael: I'm saying I'd let you think you were winning.

Raphael: Confidence makes you happy.

Another message followed.

Raphael: I'm willing to encourage scientifically significant amounts of it.

I covered my mouth, trying not to laugh.

One last notification lit up my screen.

Raphael: Now stop distracting me.

I smiled.

Me: You replied in under thirty seconds.

His answer came back almost before I finished reading.

Raphael: Exactly.

Raphael: You're the distraction.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket, unable to stop smiling. Raphael had always had that effect on me. He could be hundreds of miles away, buried in work, probably planning something terrifying, and somehow... he still found time to make me laugh.

The smile faded as soon as I opened my bedroom door.

Reality was waiting outside.

The house was too silent. There was no Luca complaining that Dante had stolen his coffee. No Dante pretending he hadn't. No Raphael walking through with another impossible schedule in one hand and espresso in the other. No Maddie reminding everyone to stop arguing before breakfast.

Just...

Silence.

I walked downstairs. A maid opened the dining room doors before I reached them. The table was just as enormous as I remembered but only one chair was occupied.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 743

Dad sat at the head of the table, already halfway through breakfast. He looked up when I walked in, Good morning, darling."

"Good morning, Daddy..."

I pulled out the chair beside him. A servant immediately stepped forward to pour coffee into my cup before another placed fresh fruit, eggs, toast, and yogurt in front of me.

Everything looked perfect.

Everything felt wrong.

Without meaning to, my mind drifted somewhere else again.

The Capone dining room.

Too many people trying to talk over one another, people stealing food off each other's plate. Someone laughing so hard that they nearly choked on food.

Vincenzo pretending he wasn't smiling.

Claire sitting beside me, quietly moving the strawberries from her plate onto mine because she'd remembered I liked them.

Someone always threatening to throw someone else out of the house.

It had never been quiet.

I looked around the room again and the silence pressed against my ears, "Where's Gio?"

Dad continued cutting his food, "In his room."

"And Perla?"

"They're together."

I frowned, "Aren't they coming?"

He looked at me, "For what?"

"Breakfast."

He shrugged, "They eat somewhere else."

Somewhere else, the words sounded so strange. I blinked, "Where?"

"I don't know."

I stared at him, "You don't know?"

"I've never asked."

Something inside my chest tightened, "You've... never checked?"

He took another sip of coffee, "Perla prefers eating with Giovanni alone."

"Every morning?"

"So it seems."

I looked toward the empty chairs surrounding us. Twenty seats. One father. One daughter and everyone else was somewhere else. I slowly pushed my chair back.

Dad looked up, "Where are you going?"

"I'm getting them."

His brows drew together, “There’s no need.”

“There is.”

“They’re comfortable where they are.”

I shook my head, “No.”

“Gianna.”

I looked at him, “We’re family.”

His expression turned annoyed, “They’ve been doing this for years.”

“Then today can be different.”

“Leave them.”

“No.”

He sighed, setting his fork down, “You’re making something out of nothing.”

I gave him a small smile, “I’d like to eat breakfast with my family. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Without waiting for permission, I turned and walked out of the dining room. I heard him call my name once. I kept walking. After asking two housekeepers where they might be, I finally reached Giovanni’s bedroom door.

I knocked gently before stepping inside, the room was empty, then I noticed the balcony doors standing open. I walked toward them.

Perla sat beside Giovanni’s wheelchair, a blanket tucked neatly over his legs. The two of them were sharing a small breakfast set on a round table between them. They were talking so quietly I couldn’t make out the words.

I rested my shoulder against the doorframe, “There you are.”

Both of them turned at once. Perla smiled first. Giovanni’s face brightened a second later.

“Morning,” he said.

I crossed my arms, “I’ve come to kidnap the both of you.”

Perla laughed softly, “Oh?”

“We’re all having breakfast together.”

The smile on her face faded. She exchanged a quick look with Giovanni then she looked back at me carefully, “Gianna.”

“No excuses,” I pointed toward the hallway, “Come on.”

Perla hesitated, “You don’t understand-”

“I understand we’re a family,” I walked over and rested my hands lightly on the wheelchair handles, “So today, we’re going to have breakfast together.”

Giovanni looked at me, then at Perla, neither of them moved.

I gave the handles of his wheelchair a small push, “Come on.”

Perla’s fingers stayed wrapped around the teacup in her hands for another second before she slowly set it down.

“Gianna...”

‘I’m not taking no for an answer.”

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of Giovanni’s mouth.

“You always were stubborn,” Perla sighed.

“I got it from my mom,” then I started pushing the wheelchair, “Now let’s go before Dad finishes breakfast without us.”

Giovanni’s room had something I hadn’t expected.

A private elevator.

The doors opened silently at the press of a button. The space inside was wide enough for the wheelchair without forcing anyone to squeeze together. I rolled Gio inside while Perla stepped in beside us.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 744

The elevator hummed softly as it carried us downward. For a few moments, nobody spoke.

I looked over at Gio, “So...”

He looked back, “So?”

“I have an important question.”

His expression immediately became suspicious.

“When did you become taller than me?” I asked.

“I grew.”

“Does growing mean you have to become unbearably boring.”

His eyebrows lifted, “I’ll have you know I’ve become incredibly sophisticated.”

“Oh?”

“I drink tea now.”

I gasped, “Tea?”

He nodded with complete seriousness, “Sometimes without sugar.”

I placed a hand dramatically over my heart,.”I don’t know who you are anymore.”

Perla laughed softly. “It’s strange,” she admitted. “Six years is a long time. People change.” She looked at me with warm eyes. “But... I think I like the woman you became even more than the little girl I knew.”

A small smile found its way onto my face, “That’s all because of Mom.”

Perla’s smile slowly faded. She lowered her eyes for a moment before looking back at me, “Hazel did what I couldn’t. She gave you the kind of love that lets a child grow instead of just survive,” she swallowed, “I wish... I’d had even half her courage. Maybe then I could’ve been the mother you deserved.”

The words were simple. There wasn’t any hidden meaning behind them.

“You were enough,” I smiled, though it felt a little shaky, “I don’t think you realize how much you did for me.”

She opened her mouth, but I gently shook my head. My eyes drifted ahead for a second as memories came rushing back.

“I never forgot what you said,” I could still hear her voice, “Be brave. If you hadn’t opened that door. I never would’ve met my mom. I never would’ve met Jules.”

I never would’ve met Raphael.

“I never would’ve become the woman standing here. So don’t tell yourself you weren’t enough,” I stepped closer until only a few inches separated us, “Because you were. And sometimes…” I whispered, “one act of love changes someone’s whole life.”

She let out a shaky laugh through her tears, “I can see your mother in you.”

I smiled, “I get that a lot.”

The elevator doors opened. I pushed Gio into the hallway..Together, the three of us made our way toward the dining room. A maid opened the large double doors the moment she saw us approaching.

Dad was still seated at the head of the table, he looked up, his eyes moved over me first, then Giovanni, then Perla.

I smiled anyway, “Perfect.”

I looked toward one of the staff members, “Could you set two more places, please?”

The staff immediately nodded, “Of course, Miss Gianna.”

Within moments, more plates appeared. Everything was placed neatly in front of Gio and Perla. I rolled Gio beside me before taking my own seat. The enormous table suddenly didn’t feel quite as empty.

I reached for a piece of toast and looked sideways at Gio, “I was wondering if getting older finally made you good at chess.”

He looked offended, “I’ve always been good.”

“No.”

“I have.”

“You cried the last time I beat you.”

“I was ten.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that you cried.”

Perla laughed quietly into her teacup.

Gio pointed his fork at me, “I’d beat you now.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve had six years to practice.”

“I’ve had six years to get even better.”

“We’ll see.”

A smile finally appeared on his face. It wasn’t a big one but it was real.

Then, Dad’s voice drifted across the table, “Confidence comes easily, when life hasn’t reminded you of your limits.”

The smile faded from Gio’s face so quickly it hurt to watch.

Dad folded his napkin neatly beside his plate, “You’ve always had spirit, Gio. I admired that. But spirit without discipline has never been enough.”

He turned slightly toward me.

“Your sister understood that much earlier.”

I frowned.

Dad looked back at Gio, “Gianna falls. She gets back up. You…” His eyes flickered briefly toward the wheelchair before returning to Gio’s face, “…have always needed someone beside you.”

Chimpie 745

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 745

Perla’s hand quietly found Gio’s beneath the table.

Dad continued eating as though he hadn’t said anything unusual, “I used to think time would harden you. It didn’t. You’ve always been… gentle. There are people who admire that quality. I simply don’t happen to be one of them.”

I looked at Gio. His fork rested untouched on his plate. His shoulders had curled inward ever so slightly, not enough for most people to notice, enough for me to see.

Because...

I'd sat like that once too.

I'd learned to make myself smaller once too.

Dad reached for his coffee as though nothing had happened. As though he hadn't just taken the smile off his son's face.

I set my toast back onto the plate, "Dad."

He looked at me, "Yes?"

I kept my voice calm, "You know....I don't think he's weak."

Dad rested his cup on its saucer,."Don't you?"

I shook my head, "I think he's still here."

His brow lifted slightly, "What does that mean?"

"He survived something that would've broken most people," I looked at Gio, "He wakes up every morning in a body that doesn't listen the way it used to and he still gets out of bed..So no," I leaned back in my chair, "I don't see weakness, or gentleness... I see someone very, very strong."

Dad smiled, a slow patient smile, "You've confused endurance with strength."

"Have I?"

"Yes. A man can endure because he has no other option," His gaze shifted briefly toward Gio, "Strength is having options and choosing the difficult one."

I nodded slowly, "I agree..Which is why I don't understand something."

His eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly, "What?"

"You keep talking about what Gio isn't but you've never once told him what he is."

Dad watched me for several long seconds, "I've always expected more from my children. I refuse to lower my standards. I push because I care."

I smiled politely, "But people usually grow better when they're watered, not when they're reminded every day that they aren't enough."

Perla looked at me.

Gio slowly lifted his eyes from his plate.

Dad's jaw tightened,."You've become," he searched for the word, "...remarkably outspoken. I don't like it."

I held his gaze, "I do."

His expression hardened, "Gianna."

I shook my head once, "You spent sixteen years teaching me to lower my head. Mom spent six teaching me to lift it again."

His eyes flashed, "Hazel filled your head with-"

"Confidence," I cut him off gently, "She filled it with confidence and love."

Dad's fingers curled around his coffee cup,."You mistake confidence for defiance."

"No. I don't. I've simply stopped confusing obedience with love."

Dad stared at me, long enough that I could almost hear him thinking.

When he finally spoke, his voice had gone very quiet, "Your mother always wanted to make you soft."

I smiled faintly, "That's strange. Because the girl you raised, wouldn't have survived telling you any of this.

He had no answer, his jaw shifted. A muscle ticked near his temple, then he pushed his chair back. The legs scraped sharply across the marble floor and Dad stood.

He adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, "I have work to do. Finish your breakfast in the next ten minutes and then we're leaving."

I met his eyes without looking away. It almost looked like he wanted to say something else. Instead, he turned. His polished shoes echoed across the dining room as he walked toward the doors. The staff opened them immediately and he left.

I let out a slow breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and reached for my coffee. It had already gone lukewarm, "Well," I smiled weakly, "I don't think our first family breakfast could've gone much worse."

Neither of them smiled, the joke landed and died right there. I looked between Perla and Gio. Both of them were staring at me with something that made my stomach tighten.

Fear.

Real fear.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 746

“What?”

Perla glanced toward the dining room doors, making sure Dad was really gone. She waited until the sound of his footsteps disappeared completely before looking back at me, “Why did you come back?”

The question caught me off guard, “I...”

She shook her head, “No, Gianna. I need the truth. Don’t even think about lying to me, or telling me you missed him.”

I looked down at my hands. My fingers were twisting together without me noticing, “I can’t...” I lifted my shoulder, “I can’t spend the rest of my life wondering if he was right. What if I gave up too early? What if I ran because I couldn’t take it anymore... and that made me weak?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, disbelief kept her frozen in her seat.

I smiled bitterly, “What if I ran because I couldn’t take it anymore... and that made me weak? I keep asking myself the same question. What if there really was something at the end of all that pain?” I looked back up at her, “What if everything he did was supposed to make me into someone better? What if I walked away before I found out?”

Perla stared at me like she couldn’t believe i just said that, “Gianna...”

“I need to know. I need to know if all those years meant something...”

Perla looked at me with tears gathering in her eyes, “After everything Hazel did for you... After everything that woman sacrificed just to probably teach you that none of this was your fault... you came back here because you still believe him?”

“No,” I answered too quickly, then stopped, “I don’t know. I don’t know anymore.”

She pointed at me, “Look at yourself. You stand differently. You smile differently. You argue. You laugh. You don’t apologize every time you speak,” tears gathered in her eyes, “Do you know how impossible that would’ve been six years ago? Hazel gave that to you.”

Her voice dropped to barely a whisper.

“So why?” She looked around the enormous dining room, “Why would you throw yourself back into the place that tried so hard to take it away?”

“I have to know,” my answer came out quieter than I’d meant, “I have to know if any of it worked.”

Perla looked completely lost, “What worked?”

“The treatment, the lessons. If there was any truth in it.”

“Why? Why would you need that? You’re doing s good… so good. Why would you throw it all away?”

“Because…” I let out a shaky breath and looked away. “No matter how hard I try, people still look at me and see someone who’s lacking.” I swallowed. “I fell in love with a man who deserves the very best this world has to offer… and his own father looked at me and decided I wasn’t it.”

My fingers curled into my palms.

“He looked at me like I’d stain their bloodline just by standing beside his son. He told me to leave him. And I can’t walk away from him. I won’t. So if there’s even the smallest chance that I can become the kind of woman no one can look down on… why wouldn’t I take it?”

Just saying Raphael’s name made something inside my chest hurt.

“I need to know,” I whispered, my voice beginning to shake. “I need to know if everything he put me through was leading somewhere. Because if it wasn’t…” I swallowed hard. “Then all that pain was for nothing.”

I looked down at my hands.

“I love him so much it scares me.”

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

“I don’t want people looking at us and thinking…” My throat tightened. “Raphael could’ve had anyone, and this is who he ended up with?’ I don’t want them whispering that he settled.”

My eyes burned.

“I don’t want to spend the rest of my life wondering if I’m just another weight on his shoulders. Another problem he has to solve. Another person he has to slow down for.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 747

I forced myself to meet Perla's eyes.

"I want to stand beside him because I deserve to be there. Not because he loves me enough to overlook everything that's wrong with me."

Perla looked at me as though I'd just shattered right in front of her, "There is nothing wrong with you,

Gianna. There never was."

She said it with such certainty that it almost made me angry, just like mom used to do.

A quiet, bitter laugh escaped me, "You believe that but not everyone does. My father spent my whole childhood trying to fix me. And Leone... He didn't want me. He wanted the version of me that never questioned him. One that stayed quiet, agreed with everything he said, and looked pretty standing beside him. As far as he was concerned, I didn't even need a mind of my own. Just a body."

Then I took a deep breath.

"And Raphael's father looked at me once and decided I wasn't worthy of his son. How many people have to tell you there's something wrong with you before you start wondering if they're seeing something you can't?"

Perla looked away, wiping her tears.

"My mom..." I smiled, but it hurt, "My mom loved me so much she never saw me as broken. Maybe that's what mothers do. They love you enough to make you believe the world will too. But then the world reminds you it doesn't. And she's not here anymore to fix it."

Perla was beside me before I realized she'd moved. She wrapped both hands around mine, holding them so tightly they almost hurt, "Gianna..."

I closed my eyes, "I need to know. I need to know whether he was trying to make me into someone stronger or whether he was just breaking me because he could."

Perla's grip tightened, "And if finding that answer destroys you?"

"It won't."

“It could.”

I slowly slipped my hands from hers, “I’m not sixteen anymore. I know exactly what I’m walking back into, “I held her gaze without blinking, “And if I find out every sleepless night, every panic attack, every nightmare, every piece of myself I had to rebuild,” I felt my jaw clench, “...was for nothing. I’ll make sure someone answers for it. And I’ll start with Dr. Vance.”

Perla froze, the color drained from her face, “Vance? No, no...”

I frowned, “What?”

She didn’t answer. She only looked at Gio..The fear in her eyes made my stomach twist, “Do you want to end up like your brother?”

I frowned, “What?”

Her eyes drifted toward Gio’s wheelchair. She looked at it for a long second before looking back at me, Do you want to end up there too, you stupid girl?”

The words didn’t make sense.

I stared at her, “What are you talking about? What does that have to do with—”

My heartbeat suddenly felt too loud. Perla opened her mouth and closed it, before she looked at Gio as if the answer wasn’t hers to give.

Gio hadn’t touched his breakfast once. His fork still rested exactly where he’d put it. His eyes stayed on the plate for another few seconds before he slowly raised his head.

When our eyes met, he drew in a slow breath, “Gianna. You and I... we were never what he told the world we were.”

I felt my stomach drop, “What do you mean?”

Gio swallowed, “We weren’t raised, we were studied.”

Every hair on the back of my neck stood up.

“We’re not just his children, Gianna,” his voice dropped to almost a whisper, “We’re his first genetically related lab rats.”

I hope this chapter answered some of your questions, guys! Let me know what you think. I’d love to hear your thoughts!

XOXO

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 748

Giovanni | Age 8 | Siderno, Calabria, Italy

The classroom door slammed behind him as the last lesson ended.

Children poured into the narrow hallway, laughing, shouting, racing one another toward the courtyard. Giovanni stayed where he was for a moment, slowly putting his worn notebook into his bag.

The page stared back at him, red marks, crossed-out words.

Wrong.

Again.

Read properly.

He blinked hard and shut the notebook before anyone else could see it.

“There he is.”

Giovanni’s shoulders stiffened. Three boys stood near the staircase, each a year or two older than him.

The tallest one smirked, “The idiot.”

Another laughed. Giovanni lowered his eyes and started walking.. Maybe if he ignored them, maybe today they’d leave him alone.

Heavy footsteps followed behind him.

“Hey!”

A hand shoved his shoulder. His small body stumbled sideways into the wall. The boys laughed.

“Didn’t you hear us?”

Giovanni kept walking. His heart beat faster with every step.

“I said stop!”

A harder shove hit his back, this time he lost his balance completely. His schoolbag slipped from his shoulder, books scattering across the dusty ground. Loose papers floated everywhere.

The boys burst into laughter.

One of them bent down, picked up Giovanni's notebook, and flipped it open.

His grin grew wider, "Oh, look," he held the notebook high enough for everyone nearby to see, "More mistakes."

Another boy leaned over dramatically, "I don't think he even knows what these letters are."

They laughed again.

Giovanni rushed forward, reaching for the notebook, "Give it back."

The taller boy pulled it higher, "What?"

"I said, " Giovanni swallowed, "Give it back!"

The word only made them laugh harder. One of the boys read aloud from the page, deliberately mixing up the words and pretending to struggle.

"I'm Giovanni," he spoke in an exaggerated baby voice, "I can't read. I can't write. My brain doesn't work."

Children walking through the courtyard slowed to watch. No one stepped in.

Giovanni's ears burned. He jumped, trying to grab the notebook. The tallest boy simply pushed him away hard.

Giovanni crashed onto the stone pavement. Pain exploded through both palms as they scraped against the rough ground.

Before he could get back up, a shoe slammed into his side. Air rushed out of his lungs. Another kick landed against his back. He curled instinctively, wrapping his arms around his head.

The boys didn't stop.

One grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him halfway upright. A punch landed across Giovanni's cheek. His head snapped sideways. His lip split open as warm blood filled his mouth.

Another fist crashed into his stomach. Giovanni folded over, coughing violently. The notebook hit him in the face. Pages tore free and scattered across the courtyard.

One boy shoved him again. Giovanni hit the ground so hard his head bounced off the stone. Everything rang.

Shoes surrounded him.

More kicks.

Someone stomped on his fingers.

A sharp cry escaped before he could stop it.

“There!” One of the boys pointed, “The idiot can make noises after all!”

Another grabbed Giovanni by the hair and forced his face up, “Say it.”

Giovanni stared at him through blurry eyes.

“Say you’re stupid.”

A slap cracked across his face.

Yeant say if the vision bhuned

His whole body hurt His ribe burned every time he breathed, I’m

The boy leaned closer What?

Tw he throat tightened. stupid

The bays laughed Louder

Tears rolled down Giovanni’s face, I’m stupid’

There the tallest boy smiled, “Now you’re learning

He let go Giovanni fell face first onto the ground The boys walked away laughing, kicking one of his books into a muddy puddle as they left Around them, the other children slowly drifted away too

Nobody helped him

Nobody picked up his books

Nobody asked if he was all right

For a long time, Giovanni stayed where he was His knees shook as he slowly pushed himself upright Blood dripped from his nose onto the front of his school shirt His lip throbbed One eye was already beginning to swell He crawled across the courtyard instead of standing One by one, he gathered the pages scattered by the wind Some had muddy footprints across them Others were ripped straight through the middle He smoothed each page as carefully as he could before placing it back inside his bag

Finally, he stood

His body ached with every breath He adjusted the strap of his bag and began the long walk home

Giovanni dragged his bruised, aching body down the narrow, dark alley toward the rotting wooden door of his home Every step made a sharp pain shoot through his cracked ribs, and his face burned red and purple from the boys at school. He wiped his nose with his dirty sleeve, swallowing back his tears before he touched the rusted doorknob

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 749

He pushed the door open, hoping to slip quietly to his corner.

He froze just as he entered because sitting, at the dirty kitchen table was his father, a glass of dark liquor clutched in his stained, yellowed hand, his eyes red and glassy.

His mother stood nearby, leaning against the counter, holding a half-empty bottle by the neck, her greasy hair falling over her angry, tired face.

Empty glass bottles cluttered the floor, clinking together as Giovanni stepped inside.

His father’s gaze snapped to the door, “Who said you could go to school today, eh?” his father roared, slamming his heavy glass down onto the table so hard the remaining liquid splashed over the wood.” Who gave you permission to run off and waste time with books?”

“Look at him,” his mother sneered, taking a long drink straight from her bottle before pointing a dirty finger at him, “Walking in here like a big shot with his stupid little backpack! Did you get our alcohol on the way back? Where are the bottles?”

Giovanni shrank back against the wall, his hands shaking at his sides, “I... I don’t have money,” Giovanni squeaked out, his small voice trembling. “They... they took my money at school...”

“You useless little rat!” his father barked, pushing his chair back with a loud screech. He stood up, swaying slightly on his feet, his dark shadow falling over the terrified boy, “You went to that stupid school, wasted your day, and came back empty-handed?”

Before Giovanni could run, his father’s heavy, calloused hand flew out, striking him hard across the face.

The force tore Giovanni off his feet, crashing him hard onto the dirty wooden floorboards. Pain exploded in his cheek, making his head spin.

“Get up!” his mother screamed, stepping over and driving the heavy heel of her shoe straight into his lower back, “We give you a roof over your head, and you can’t even fetch us a single drink! You’re good for nothing!” ”

Giovanni curled into a tight ball on the floor, holding his head as his father grabbed him by the back of his shirt and dragged him across the dusty floorboards like a sack of trash.

“You think school is going to fix you?” his father growled, raising a heavy leather belt he yanked from his waist, “You’re a broken, stupid piece of shit! You can’t even read a single line of a page!”

The thick leather swung down with a loud snap.

Giovanni let out a sharp scream as the leather bit deep into his shoulder. Another blow hit his back, followed by his mother kicking him hard in the ribs with her shoe.

“Can’t even carry a simple bottle home without sniveling like a little girl!” his mother yelled.

His father grabbed a heavy wooden stool, dragging it across the floor with a harsh scrape before bending down to yank Giovanni up by the collar of his shirt until his small feet barely touched the ground.

“You’re a brain-damaged half-wit!” his father spat directly into his bruised face, his grip tightening until the collar choked the boy. “Listen to what I’m about to say to you. You are a worthless, soft-headed mistake! You came out of the womb as defective trash, you worthless pig, and you’re going to rot in the dirt as defective trash! You hear me? You’ll never be nothing! You’re lower than the dirt under my boot!”

With a harsh laugh, he threw Giovanni back down onto the filthy floorboards.

Giovanni | Age 16 | Siderno, Calabria, Italy

Giovanni leaned against a graffiti-covered wall with a cigarette between his fingers.

At sixteen, he already looked older. There were too many broken noses, too many bruises, too many nights sleeping wherever he could after his father drank himself into another rage that had changed him.

A faded leather jacket hung loosely over his shoulders. A knife rested inside his boot. His hands were scarred. His knuckles were split open from another fight the night before.

Around him stood five boys from the neighborhood. The people they called family. The people they called brothers. Or at least... that was what Giovanni kept telling himself.

One of them laughed as he tossed a stolen wallet into the air before catching it again.

One of the boys threw an arm around Giovanni's shoulders, "Come on, Gio," he pointed across the street,"

Read it."

Giovanni followed his finger. A faded sign hung above a butcher's shop. The letters shifted the moment he looked at them. His stomach sank.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 750

The smallest boy let out a howling laugh, "I always thought you were pretending all these years."

Giovanni smiled because everyone else was smiling. His jaw hurt from holding it there.

One of them pulled a crumpled receipt from his pocket, "Here," he shoved it into Giovanni's hand, Tell us what this says."

Giovanni stared at it, the letters swam. He turned the paper upside down without meaning to.

The group watched him.

One snorted, "He doesn't even know which way is up."

Another doubled over, "I'm going to hell for laughing."

"No, you're not," the tallest one grinned, "God's probably laughing too."

Someone reached over and gently took the paper from Giovanni's hands, not to help him but to wave it in front of everyone else.

"Look at this. Our fearless gangster. He can spot an undercover cop from fifty meters away, he tapped the receipt, "...but this? This is his final boss."

The laughter echoed down the alley.

"You know what scares me?"

"What?"

"One day we're all going to get arrested."

"Why?"

"Because Gio's going to be the lookout."

The group laughed, "He'll be standing there screaming..."

One of them put on a confused voice, "I don't know which street we're on.

Another chimed in.

"Boss, I lost the warehouse."

"How?""

"The sign beat me."

Someone slapped Giovanni on the back, hard, "You know what's really impressive?"

"What?"

"You've managed to survive sixteen years while being too dumb to read a bakery sign," he shook his head, "That's fucking talent."

Another nodded solemnly, "I've met stray dogs smarter than you. They at least know which street they're on."

The tallest one looked him up and down, "If I ever get shot..." he pointed at Giovanni, "Don't call him."

"Why?"

"He'll read the medicine bottle upside down and finish the job."

The alley erupted again. Giovanni laughed with them, a little.

The tallest boy smiled, “We love you, Gio. You’re family,” then his smile widened, “But if brains were money, you couldn’t afford a loaf of bread.”

The laughter started all over again. Giovanni kept smiling. It was easier than letting them see what every joke was doing because each laugh sounded like every teacher who had sighed at him. Every kid who had called him stupid. Every night his parents had told him he was worthless.

He had come here thinking he’d finally found people who didn’t care.

Instead...

They had simply found a kinder way to remind him.

To them, he wasn’t Giovanni.

He was the joke they all happened to like.

Giovanni | Age 18 | Brooklyn, New York | Associate, Cosa Nostra

Giovanni sat on the edge of the examination table, his broad shoulders tense beneath a worn leather jacket.

The sharp smell of disinfectant burned his nose. He hated places like this. They reminded him of school. Of teachers. Of people looking at him with pity or disgust.

The doctor sat across from him, flipping through a folder. He looked to be in his late fifties, with silver hair and round glasses balanced low on his nose.

He studied the notes for another moment before looking up, “Giovanni?”

Giovanni folded his arms, “Yeah.”

“I’ve spent the last two appointments evaluating you.”

Giovanni waited.

The doctor smiled kindly, “I know you’ve been worried.”

“Worried?” Giovanni let out a short laugh. “I’m trying to find out what the fuck’s broken.”

The doctor shook his head, “Nothing is broken.”

Giovanni’s expression didn’t change.

The doctor continued carefully, “You have dyslexia.”

Giovanni stared at him, “What’s that?”

“It’s a learning disorder.”

“No disease?”

“No.”

“No damage in my head?”

“No.”

“No tumor?”

“No,” the doctor folded his hands together, “Dyslexia is a learning difference. Your brain processes written language differently from most people’s.”

Giovanni frowned, “So…” he searched for the words, “What’s the treatment, Doc?”

“There isn’t one.”

Giovanni blinked, “I asked for the treatment.”

The doctor held his gaze, “And I answered. There isn’t one.”

The room fell quiet. Giovanni’s jaw tightened, “You telling me people spend years becoming doctors,” he gestured around the office, “…all this fucking equipment…” he pointed toward the shelves lined with medical books, “…and you don’t know how to fix reading?”

The doctor’s expression remained calm, “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Then tell me how it works.”

“Dyslexia isn’t something that needs to be cured.”

Giovanni stared at him, for a second, he thought he’d misheard, “Say that again.”

“It doesn’t need to be cured.”

A humorless laugh escaped Giovanni, “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“You think not being able to read is normal?”