My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 901

Raphael's thumb brushed my cheek, "You were grieving-

I cut him off immediately before he tried to rationalize my bad decisions, "I left Gio, too."

That one hurt differently.

"My little brother had to stay there with him. With Dad. I didn't stop to think about what that would/do to him I was so focused on getting away from that life that I never asked myself what the person I was leaving behind would have to survive," I closed my eyes, "I acted selfishly with everyone I loved."

"Gianna-"

"I did."

The words came faster now.

"I've done selfish things with you too. I punished you because you couldn't love me the way I loved you. I wanted you to hurt because I was hurting. I wanted you to understand what it felt like to be rejected by someone you couldn't stop loving," my voice became smaller with guilt, "And I thought that made sense at the time."

Raphael said nothing.

That was why I could keep going.

"I've made choices because they felt right to me in the moment. Sometimes they were right. Sometimes they weren't. But I've never been good at stopping long enough to think about what my choices might do to someone else," I opened my eyes again, "How am I supposed to bring a child into that?"

Raphael's expression softened, "It wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault."

I gave him a tired little smile, "I knew you were going to say that."

"Because it's true," he almost snapped, "If you'd stayed, your father could have killed you too. You were trying to survive, Gianna. You didn't have the information or the power you have now."

I looked away, "But that doesn't erase what I did, does it? My mother spent her whole life trying to keep me away from this world. She did everything she could to give me a chance

at something normal," I laughed once, quietly, without humor, "And the moment she was gone, I ran straight back into it."

I remembered her hands. Her voice. All those little things she'd done to keep me away from the people and places that had swallowed her own life. 1

"Sometimes I wonder if she would be disappointed in me."

"No, she was so proud of you..."

My eyes drifted around the room, but I wasn't really seeing any of it anymore.

"You can't know that for sure. How could she?" My voice softened, "I don't even know who I am yet. I still have so much to figure out. How am I supposed to know what kind of woman I'll be five years from now? Hell, I don't even know what kind of life I want yet."

"You're twenty-two," he said quietly. "You'll figure it out."

A small laugh escaped me.

I let myself sink into the warmth of him, feeling his presence around me. After everything that had happened, being there with him felt like the first safe thing I'd had in a long time.

Safe in every way that mattered.

I looked back at him, "I don't want to take a child dependent on me until I know I can give them more than survival."

Raphael again pressed his lips to my knuckles.

"I want to be twenty-two for a while. I want to figure myself out. I want to learn how to take care of myself without constantly tearing myself apart in the process. I want to become someone who doesn't make every choice out of anger, fear, or guilt." I swallowed, my fingers tightening around his. "I've been thinking about what you said, and you're right. I want to learn how to love myself first before I bring another life into this world, Raph."

He took a slow breath, then gave me a small smile, "Yeah. You need to do that."

I rolled my eyes, "You need to take your own advice, too. You need to learn how to love yourself and accept yourself just as you are. Stop being so damn hard on yourself."

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 902

thumb brushed over my knuckles.

“Maybe one day, a few years from now, we’ll want a child.”

The corner of his mouth lifted, “Yeah…”

“But if that day comes, I want us to know we’re both ready. Mentally. Emotionally. I want to be healthy enough to give them the life they deserve. And when I’m scared and have no idea what I’m doing…” I squeezed his hand, I’ hold your hand.”

His eyes stayed on mine, “I’ll probably need you to hold mine, too,” he admitted quietly. “You teach me things no one ever bothered to explain to me. Things I didn’t even know I was missing but you will teach me that too.”

For a moment, neither of us tried to decide what our future would look like.

There was no promise about anything.

No deadline.

No perfect answer.

Just two people lying there after the worst night of our lives, finally admitting that neither of us had any idea what the hell we were doing with the rest of our lives.

“But there is one more thing…”

That caught his attention immediately. One eyebrow lifted. “What?”

I took a breath, suddenly wishing I’d kept my mouth shut, “I know your family is obsessed with marriage, family, legacy, all that Capone bullshit, but…” I hesitated, “I don’t want to get married right now.”

His expression changed to confusion, “You don’t?”

I shook my head, “No. And it’s not because I don’t want you.” I reached for his hand. “I just don’t want to rush into something that big because everyone expects us to. If I need time to figure out who I am, then I need to do that without having another giant decision hanging over my head.”

He watched me quietly.

“I want us to be happy when we make those choices,” I continued. “I want us to be clear-headed. I want us to choose each other because we’re ready, not because we’re scared of

losing each other or because your family has decided we're supposed to be married by Tuesday. And we definitely don't have to bring all of this up tonight, you idiot."

"I was just thinking."

I gave him a mocking nod, "That was your first mistake. Please don't think."

He actually laughed out loud. I smiled and rested my head against his shoulder.

"We have our whole lives ahead of us, Raph. We don't need to figure everything out tonight."

His fingers laced through my hair, "If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do."

I looked up at him. "Just like that?"

"Just like that."

studied his face for a moment before another thought crossed my mind, "What about Vince? Do you think he'll be okay with us waiting?"

His eyebrow rose, "That's not his decision to make."

"Tell that to Vincenzo."

"He'll try to convince us."

I raised an eyebrow, "Convince?"

He laughed again, "He'll probably try to pressure us into marriage so you take the Capone name officially. Because then he'll have undeniable proof that you're family."

I stared at him for a second before a grin slowly spread across my face, "Maybe I'll finally sign those adoption papers."

Raphael went completely pale. I actually watched the color drain from his face. It was almost impressive.

I laughed.

His eyes narrowed, "Gianna."

"What?"

"Don't joke about that."

“You look like I just threatened to burn down the Vatican.”

“I’d rather you burn down the Vatican.”

I laughed harder, “Why are you panicking?”

“Because you’re not funny.”

“I am hilarious.”

“You’re talking about becoming my sister.”

I widened my eyes innocently, “And then,” I continued, barely keeping a straight face, “I’d have to start calling you big brother.”

“Stop.”

“Maybe I’d even ask you for dating advice.”

“Gianna.”

“Raph, do you think this guy likes me?””

“Enough.”

“Raph, should I kiss him?””

He moved over me so quickly that my laugh turned into a startled breath. His hands planted on either side of my head. His face was inches from mine, “Say one more word about becoming my sister.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 903

it my lip, “Big brother?” 1

His eyes turned into slits, “Do not say things like that when I’m already using every ounce of self-control I have not to move.”

I narrowed my eyes back at him, my arms slipped around his neck naturally, I smiled sweetly, “As I said before...” I pulled him a little closer, “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Wr

A few people sat scattered around the café, speaking in low voices while the smell of coffee and warm bread hung in the air.

I sat at the small table near the window in a dark pantsuit, my hair pulled back loosely because of the bandage on my temple, my hands wrapped around a cup of coffee I had barely touched.

I looked nothing like the woman who had been running through a blood-soaked facility a few hours ago.

I still felt exactly like her.

Perla sat across from me, with Gio beside her. Raphael was next to me, one hand resting on the table, his bruised knuckles still visible and swollen, and his other hand rested behind me on my chair.

Gio hadn't stopped looking at me since we sat down. He had questions, a lot of them.

I finally put my coffee down, "Okay."

Gio looked at Raphael, "What exactly happened?"

Raphael didn't answer immediately. His eyes moved toward me, giving me the choice. I nodded.

He leaned back slightly and explained everything about Dad, Leone, Dr. Vance and his real identity.

He name wasn't even Vance.

He was Elias Crowe-a serial killer who had disappeared years ago and somehow found his way into my father's life.

My father had been desperate to fix my dyslexia, Crowe had seen that desperation and used it. He made Dad believe he was helping me while secretly using his obsession to gain access to children.

My eyes dropped to my coffee. The thought made my stomach turn. All those children hadn't been some accident. They had suffered because a monster found another monster to manipulate.

And my father had unknowingly opened the door for him.

I stared through the window.

Cars moved past outside. People walked along the pavement carrying shopping bags and coffee cups.

Normal life.

It felt strange to look at it.

“Children were brought there,” I said quietly. “Hundreds of them.”

Gio looked at me, “How many?”

Chapter geg

“Three hundred and eighty-seven were still alive when we found them.”

mouth opened slightly, “Three hundred…”

“Eighty-seven.”

Perla’s hand moved over her mouth in horror.

“Some had been there for years. Some were barely alive. Some had been operated on so many times that there wasn’t much left for their bodies to fight with.”

Gio looked down. I watched his fingers curl around the edge of the table, “He did all of that? I actually thought it was just you and me.”

Raphael answered, “Crowe did most of it. Giovanni’s obsession gave him the access. Leone protected the, operation. The Toricelli network provided the money and structure.”

I took another sip of coffee, “I don’t want us spending the rest of our lives fighting over what Dad left behind.”.

Gio looked at me, “What do you mean?”

I reached into my bag and pulled out the folder I’d brought with me. I placed it on the table, “I want to split the Toricelli network.”

His eyebrows pulled together, “Split it?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

Perla looked between us, “Gianna, your father left you everything, you don’t have to-”

“I’ve thought about it,” I opened the folder, “Businesses, legitimate holdings, accounts, properties, routes, contacts. Everything that can be divided legally within the organization gets divided between us.”

Gio stared at the papers, “And the syndicate?”

I looked at him, “I don’t want it.”

That surprised him.

“You’re Dad’s son,” I continued. “Whether you like it or not, people will look at you and expect you to become something.”

He looked away, “I don’t know if I want to be a Don after all this.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 904

Then don’t be like him.”

His eyes returned to mine.

I closed the folder, “I don’t want you learning how to be one from Dad. You’ll work under Vincenzo.”

Gio blinked, “Vincenzo Capone?”

“Two years.”

“Two?”

“You’ll shadow him. You’ll learn how a real head of the family handles people, money, conflict, loyalty, and consequences. You won’t just learn how to give orders. You’ll learn when not to.”

Raphael’s mouth moved slightly, almost a smile.

I continued, “When you turn eighteen, if you still want the position, you take your half of the operation and decide what kind of Don you want to become.”

Gio stared at me, “And you?”

I leaned back, “I’m staying independent.”

Perla frowned, “Gianna, you were born into this too.”

“My mother didn’t want me in it,” I answered, and looked down at my hands, “She spent years trying to keep me away from this life. She wanted me to have something else. I ignored that the moment she was gone,” my throat tightened, “I can’t undo that but I can respect what she wanted for me now.”

Gio watched me quietly, “So you’re just walking away?”

“From the syndicate?” I nodded, “Yes.”

“What about the people who work for us?”

“Junior, they’re not mine to rule,” I pushed the folder toward him, “They’re yours. And if you decide you don’t want any of it, you can walk away too.”

His eyes lifted sharply, “You’d let me?”

I gave him a tired smile, “I spent too much of my life believing family meant being trapped by other people’s choices. I’m not doing that to you.”

Perla reached across the table and covered my hand, “And what are you going to do?”

I knew exactly what she meant.

I looked toward Raphael, then back at her, “The children. That’s all I can think about.”

I looked down at the coffee I’d forgotten to drink.

“Three hundred and eighty-seven children are alive because we found that place. I don’t care about the territory right now. I don’t care who gets what building or which family controls which route.’

I looked at Gio.

“I care about whether those children wake up tomorrow. I want doctors. Specialists. Safe places for them to stay. People who know how to deal with what they’ve been through. I want their names found. Their families contacted if they’re alive. I want the dead ones identified too,” my fingers tightened around Perla’s, “I want every single child accounted for.”

Gio nodded slowly, “And if the government finds out?”

“That is my problem.”

Raphael finally spoke, “No.”

I turned toward him.

He looked at me with that calm, serious expression I knew too well, “It’s our problem.”

I looked at him for a moment, then I nodded, “Our problem.”

Gio leaned back in his chair, “I’ll do it. I’ll work with Vincenzo,” he glanced at the folder, “And I’ll take the fifty percent.”

A small smile touched my mouth, and I looked toward the window again, “And I’m going to use my money and my family’s resources to build something completely separate from the Syndicate. A proper foundation. Medical care, long-term therapy, education, housing, legal help, everything they’ll need until they’re old enough to stand on their own.”

I looked at Raphael and he nodded.

“And nobody gets to profit from them. Nobody gets to use their stories for publicity. Their identities stay protected unless they choose otherwise when they’re old enough to make that decision.”

Пlooked at Gio and Perla with a smile.

“I just need to make sure the last thing my family ever did to those children wasn’t the worst thing that happened to them.”

Gio looked at me for a long moment before his chair scraped softly against the floor, “You’re not disappearing again, are you?”

The question caught me off guard.

Perla’s expression softened. She looked between us, waiting for my answer.

I shook my head. “No.” I reached across the table and took his hand, “I’m going to try to be a better big sister to you. I don’t want to lose you again, Gio.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 905

Hs fingers closed around mine, “You won’t.”

Perla leaned forward and placed her hand over ours, “None of us are doing that again.”

I looked at her, “We call. We visit. We annoy each other. We fight over stupid things. We celebrate birthdays together. Whatever it takes.”

Gio nodded, “And if you disappear for more than a day, I’m calling Raphael.”

I glanced at Raphael.

He calmly lifted his coffee. “I’ll answer. But if she doesn’t, it’ll probably be because I want your sister’s undivided attention.”

Gio’s smile widened, “Oh. You mean our sister?” 1

I laughed under my breath.

Raphael slowly turned his head toward him, looking genuinely caught off guard by the comeback.

Then his mouth twitched, “Wow. I didn’t know you were as annoying as Jewel.”

We finished what was left of breakfast a little while later.

The important things had been said. The children were being cared for. The facility was sealed. The future of the Toricelli name had been decided, at least for now.

Gio and Perla left first, promising to call the moment they reached Philadelphia.

I watched them walk away through the café window until they disappeared into the crowd.

It felt strange.

It was not a good-bye.

Just... see you later.

A few minutes later, Raphael and I slipped into the back of the waiting car. The door shut, cutting off the noise of the street.

I leaned into the seat and finally let my shoulders drop.

Raphael sat beside me, looking out the window.

I turned toward him, “Why do you keep calling her Jewel? Her name is Jules. Not Jewel.”

A small smile appeared on his face, “I know.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Then why?”

He looked almost embarrassed, “Because the first time I saw you and her together, I thought both of your eyes looked like emeralds.”

I blinked.

He shrugged, “Bright ones. The kind that catch the light. So when someone said her name, I thought they said Jewel.”

I stared at him for a second, “You genuinely thought her name was Jewel?”

[laughed.

He glanced at me, completely serious, “I didn’t know it was wrong until you pointed it out.”

“You’ve been calling my sister the wrong namne because you thought she had jewel eyes?”

He continued, as if he were presenting a perfectly logical argument in court, “I had limited information. Green eyes. Someone said something that sounded like ‘Jewel.’ I made the most efficient conclusion available.”

I stared at him for three seconds, then I started laughing so hard my stomach hurt.

Raphael only shook his head, “I don’t see why you’re making this complicated.”

“Because her name is Jules.”

“I know.”

“Say it.”

“Jules.”

“Again.”

“Jules.”

I nodded.

“Good. Look at you. Learning.”

He glanced at me, “I still prefer Jewel.”

I groaned, “You’re so weird sometimes.”

“That’s what you like about me.”

Unfortunately, he was right.

I hated how easily he could say things like that and make my heart do something stupid.

“Unfortunately,” I said dryly, “I’m in love with an idiot.”

“Yeah.” He side-eyed me, the corner of his mouth lifting, “Your idiot.”

My smile softened, “My idiot.”

Janedoewritings

Author

Guys, I always believed the love I’ve received would outweigh the hate, but the last chapter genuinely hurt me. It made me feel like so much of what I pour my heart into isn’t appreciated, and that’s a difficult feeling to sit with. Every author has their own voice, their own style, and their own way of telling stories. Maybe mine simply isn’t for everyone, and I have to accept~

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 906

Gianna

The jet hummed beneath my feet as it cut through the night sky. I sat across from Vincenzo in one of the private seats, a folder open between us.

He had been reading through it for the last twenty minutes without saying much.

Finally, he closed the folder.

“This is everything that came with the Toricelli territory.”

I looked at the papers.

“Businesses. Warehouses. Shipping contracts. Gambling houses. Properties. Accounts. Men who still answer to the Toricelli name,” his finger tapped the folder once, “Some are clean. Some aren’t. Some can be made clean. Others need to disappear.”

I leaned back, “And all of that is mine?”

“By blood and succession, yes.

I looked out the window. It was strange hearing someone say it so casually. My father’s empire had once been the thing that controlled every part of my life.

Now it was sitting inside a folder.

Vincenzo studied me, “If you want to become Donna, I’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

I looked back at him, “You’d really do that?”

“Without question,” his voice was calm, but there was something firm beneath it, “You’re my sister. If you choose to take the seat, nobody will question whether you belong there.”

I shook my head, “No.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, “No?”

“I don’t want it.”

He remained silent.

I pushed the folder away, “I don’t want the businesses. I don’t want the territory. I don’t want men standing behind me waiting for orders. I don’t want to sit at a table and decide which family gets what piece of Philadelphia.”

Vincenzo leaned back, “You’re certain?”

“Yes,” I looked down at my hands, “Watching what happened in that facility didn’t make me want to control this world. It made me hate it more.”

Chucle: 905

Vincenzo’s expression didn’t change, but his eyes softened, “I understand.”

“I don’t think this is my calling, Vince.”

He nodded once, “Then it isn’t.”

There was no argument, no pressure. He simply accepted it and that somehow meant more than anything else he could have said.

I looked toward the folder again, “But I do want something.”

“Tell me.”

“Gio.”

His expression sharpened, “Your brother?”

I nodded, “He’s still young. He has time to decide who he wants to become but if he chooses this life, I don’t want him becoming our father.”

Vincenzo’s jaw tightened, “He won’t.”

“I want you to teach him.”

That made him still, “Teach him what?”

“How to survive this world without becoming a monster.”

Vincenzo looked at me for a long moment, like he couldn’t quite believe what I had just said. As if he had spent so many years seeing himself as a monster that my words didn’t fit anywhere in the version of himself he knew.

I continued quietly, “You know how this works. You know when to use force and when not to. You understand loyalty. You understand consequences. And somehow, after everything you’ve seen, you still care about your family.”

His gaze dropped for a moment, “You want him to become like me.”

“Yes.” I gave him a faint smile. “I want him to become the version of you that you wish someone had taught you how to be in this world.”

Vincenzo was quiet for several seconds, then he picked up the folder and closed it completely, “If Junior wants this life, I’ll teach him but I’ll teach him the truth too,” he added, “This isn’t a game. There are no clean hands in our world.”

“I know.”

“And if he decides he doesn’t want it?”

I raised an eyebrow in question, “Then?”

“Then I help him walk away.”

My eyes stung but I smiled, “That’s exactly what I wanted.”

Vincenzo nodded, “You’re sure you don’t want the territory?”

I shook my head, “No.”

“And Philadelphia?”

“Let Gio decide what he wants when he’s old enough.”

“And you?”

I looked through the window at the endless darkness beneath us, “I’ll build something of my own.‘

The smallest smile touched his mouth, “Good.”

I frowned, smiling, “Good?”

“You were never meant to live in someone else’s shadow,” his eyes held mine, “I realized that the first time you walked into our house and refused every bit of help I offered you. You didn’t care who I was or what my name meant. You didn’t want favors. You didn’t want anyone carrying you. That’s when I knew I was going to like you.”

I let out a small laugh, “I’m not sure you like me very much after all the disastrous decisions I’ve made.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 907

He lifted one shoulder, completely unfazed, “We all make mistakes. Constantly.” A faint smile tugged at his mouth, “Claire and Adriano have made enough of them to keep me busy for the rest of my life.”

I laughed again.

“I’ve threatened to kill both of them more times than I can count,” he continued, his expression still painfully serious, “Neither of them has had the decency to take me seriously.”

“That sounds like them.”

“It is.” His eyes softened for a moment. “They drive me insane. They argue with me, ignore me, make decisions that shave years off my life, and somehow still expect me to clean up after them,” he paused, “But I would still choose all of you every time.”

Then his gaze returned to me.

“You did what you thought was right. You made a mistake, and you learned a hard lesson from it. That matters more to me than pretending you were never wrong. I’m confident you won’t make the same mistake twice,” he tilted his head slightly, “Would you?”

I looked at him for a moment, the warmth in his voice settling somewhere deep in my chest, “I’ll try.”

His eyebrow lifted, “Try?”

I smiled sheepishly, “Okay. Fine. I won’t make the same mistake twice but I’m not promising I won’t make completely different mistakes.”

A quiet laugh left him as he shook his head, “That,” he said, “I believe.”

I laughed too, and for a few seconds, the weight that had been sitting between us seemed a little lighter, then I looked down at the folder on the table, “I really did make a mess of things, didn’t I?”

“You made a decision without thinking about what it would cost you.”

I nodded slowly, “And people got hurt because of it.”

“People always get hurt in this life,” he said. “The important part is what you do after you realize you were wrong.”

I looked at him, “And what if I keep getting it wrong?”

“Then you learn again.”

“And if I make another terrible decision?”

“I’ll tell you it’s terrible.”

“And if I don’t listen?”

“I’ll tell you again.”

“And if I still don’t listen?”

He leaned back in his seat, completely calm, “Then I’ll let you make your mistake.”

I blinked, “That’s it?”

“No,” his mouth twitched, “I’ll be standing nearby when you do something stupid enough to need rescuing.”

I burst out laughing, “You make that sound very comforting.”

“It should be.” He glanced at me, his voice quieter now. “You’ll never have to wonder again whether someone will be there when you fall. Not if I have anything to do with it.”

Something inside me went still as I looked at him. Those words pulled another memory to the surface.

The study.

The way his voice had sounded that night when he spoke to Raphael. The calm certainty in his voice. The things he had said about us.

At the time, I had been too angry to ask him what he meant, now I couldn’t stop myself.

“Did you mean that?”

His brow pulled together, “Mean what?”

“What you said in the study.”

He watched me for a second in confusion.

I swallowed, “What you said to Raphael about me.”

His expression changed almost immediately. The warmth faded from his face, replaced by something more serious as he understood exactly what I was talking about. He was sharp enough to read it from my face before I even had to explain.

“You heard that.”

“I heard... a little,” I looked down at my hands, “You really thought we weren’t good for each other?”

He stayed quiet.

I forced myself to look at him again, “You thought I’d slow him down?”

“Gianna-”

“Did you?” My voice came out smaller than I wanted, “Did you think that one day he’d resent me because of my dyslexia? Because he would have to explain things to me, wait for me, help me with things that come easily to him? And did you think he’d always have to carry me?”

The last question barely made it out. Vincenzo leaned forward, resting his forearms against his knees, “No, I did but not anymore,” there was no hesitation in his answer, “I was wrong.”

I stared at him.

He gave me a single nod, “I was wrong about you. I was wrong about Raphael. And I was wrong about what the two of you needed.”

The admission seemed strange coming from him.

Vincenzo didn’t look like the man who’d apologized easily. He was the kind of man who made decisions and expected everyone else to live with them.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 908

“I said those things because I was trying to protect you,” he continued, “But I was protecting you from something that wasn’t actually hurting you.”

I didn’t say anything.

He sighed quietly “I made the same mistake before with Madeleine,” his eyes dropped for a moment, “I looked at Maddie and saw what I thought she needed to become to survive this family. I looked at the life around her, the people around her, the rules, the violence, the expectations...” He paused. “And instead of asking whether that life was good for her, I expected her to fit into it.”

His fingers slowly tightened together.

“I told myself I was doing it for Adriano. For the family. For their future. I was wrong then, too. I disregarded who she was because I thought love meant making her strong enough to live our way,” his eyes came back to mine, “It doesn’t.”

His voice was quiet, but there was something in his eyes that made it clear he wasn’t saying it lightly. He meant every word.

“Love doesn’t mean taking someone and reshaping them until they fit your world. I didn’t want to do that to you.”

I looked down, “So when you spoke to Raphael...”

“I was afraid,” he answered immediately.

The answer surprised me.

Vincenzo eased back slowly, “I was afraid he would do to you what our family did to Maddie. Not because I thought Raphael was a bad man. I know exactly what kind of man he is. That’s why I was worried. Raphael is capable of living in this world without changing himself. I didn’t know if you could.”

My throat tightened, “And you thought I couldn’t.”

“I thought you shouldn’t have to.”

That made me look up.

He held my gaze, “You had already spent enough of your life being forced to become something you weren’t. Your father did it. That doctor did it. Everyone who decided what was best for you did it. I’m not going to be another man standing over you and telling you what your life should look like.” 1

“But you still thought Raphael wasn’t right for me.”

“At that time, yes,” he didn’t soften the truth, “If I had believed Raphael was going to hurt you, I would have made him leave you alone.”

My heart stumbled.

“I don’t care how much he loves you. I don’t care if you love him. If he wasn’t good for you, I would have put distance between you but then he said something. And I realized I had been looking at the wrong thing.”

“What did you see?”

“Raphael.”

Just his name.

Then Vincenzo continued, “The man who barely speaks unless he has something worth saying suddenly had an endless amount to say when he told me what you meant to him.”

I smiled faintly, “He talks a lot with me.”

“I noticed,” there was a hint of amusement in his eyes now, “He listens to you. He waits for you. He explains things to you with a patience I’ve never seen him have with me. And when you’re overwhelmed, he doesn’t look at you like you’re a problem he needs to solve. He just stays. He gives you time. He lets you find your way through it. That’s the part I missed.”

He looked toward the dark window of the jet for a moment before turning back to me.

“Raphael doesn’t function worse because you’re around, Gianna,” his voice softened, “He functions better.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“He is calmer with you. More open. More human. And you don’t slow him down. You make him stop long enough to remember he’s a person and not just a machine that solves problems.”

A small laugh escaped me through the tightness in my throat.

“And as for me thinking he’ll have to carry you forever…” he shook his head, “That’s not how I see it now.”

I waited.

“Sometimes you’ll need him. Sometimes he’ll need you. That’s what being with someone means, Piccolina.”

I smiled at the nickname.

“He is many things, but he isn’t a martyr. If something becomes too much for him, he’ll say so.

I almost laughed, “He really will.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke but then Vincenzo’s expression softened even more, “But I don’t think that’s what is going to happen.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked him.”

My stomach flipped, “What did he say?”

Vincenzo looked at me for a long moment, “He said something I had never heard Raphael say before. He told me that if he didn’t have you, he had nothing.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 909

My breath caught, and something warm and fluttery stirred in my stomach. Heat crept into my cheeks, turning them pink.

“He didn’t say you were convenient. He didn’t say you made his life easier. He didn’t say he needed someone to take care of. He said he needed you.

I swallowed hard.

“And that’s when I understood that I had been asking him the wrong question.”

“And what question would be right?”

“The question I should be asking was whether the two of you were good for each other. And you are. Not because you’re perfect. You’re not. Neither is he. God knows that man can be difficult.”

I laughed softly.

“But you make room for each other’s weaknesses. You challenge each other. You calm each other down. And neither of you is asking the other to become someone else. That is what I wanted for you.”

His gaze softened.

“And if Raphael ever stops being that man, I’ll be the first person to remind him that loving you is a privilege, not a burden.”

My eyes stung, “And if I become the problem?”

“Then I’ll tell you the same.”

I laughed through the tears threatening to fall, “You really don’t know how to give a comforting answer.”

“I am giving you a comforting answer.”

“No, you’re giving me a warning.”

“It’s a very comforting warning.”

I shook my head, smiling.

He studied me for a moment. “You don’t have to be perfect to deserve him, Gianna. Neither does he. And neither of you is here to carry the other. You walk beside each other and always have each other’s back. That’s all that matters. The rest will fall into place.”

Something in my chest loosened.

For the first time since that night in the study, I didn't feel like I had to prove that I was worth staying for. Vincenzo had already answered the question I had been too afraid to ask.

And the answer was enough.

The car was quiet except for the low hum of the engine and Raphael's voice.

He sat beside me in the backseat, one arm resting against the door while his phone was pressed to his ear.

I, on the other hand, was falling apart.

My fingers wouldn't stop moving.

I rubbed my thumb over the side of my index finger, then picked at the skin beside my nail. When that wasn't enough, I pressed my thumbnail into my palm.

Hard.

The little sting gave my mind something else to focus on. I pressed again and again until the skin started to burn. I didn't even notice Raphael looking at me.

His conversation continued for another few seconds, "Send the report to Ciro. I want it before-"

His hand suddenly closed around mine and I froze. He pulled my hand away from my other one and turned it over. The center of my palm was red, the skin irritated where I'd been pinching it.

Raphael's brows pulled together, he didn't say anything, he simply rubbed his thumb slowly over the sore spot. The warmth of his hand spread through mine.

I looked down at our hands.

His fingers were long, strong and tattooed around mine, but his touch was so soft. Almost ridiculously careful for a man who could make an entire room go silent just by walking into it.

He continued talking on the phone like this was perfectly normal.

"No, not tomorrow. Tonight," his thumb moved over my palm again, "Because I said so."

I shifted closer without thinking. His eyes flicked toward me. There was the smallest change in his expression.

He finished the call a few moments later, “I’ll deal with it.”

Then he lowered the phone.

The moment the screen went dark, his attention settled completely on me.

He tilted his head, “What?”

I swallowed, my fingers tightened around his, “I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

I stared out the window.

The city lights passed across the glass in long streaks, disappearing almost as quickly as they appeared, “Seeing Jules.”

His thumb stopped moving.

I took a breath, “What if she doesn’t want me anymore? What if she looks at me and realizes she doesn’t need me? What if she’s angry? What if she thinks I abandoned her? What if she doesn’t forgive me? I don’t know what I’m supposed to say to her. How do I explain it to her? Every reason was too ugly, too violent for her little brain to ever understand.”

Raphael watched me for a long moment, then he turned my hand over and placed his palm against mine, “She asked me to bring you home and I made her a promise.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 910

Something inside my chest pulled painfully, “That doesn’t mean she’ll forgive me.”

“No,” his thumb moved over my knuckles, “But it means she wants you there. She will want you.‘

My eyes stung.

Then he added, completely straight–faced, “If it helps, we can offer her ten thousand dollars.”

I blinked, “What?”

“Ten thousand.”

I stared at him, he looked completely serious, “Raph.”

“What?”

“Children have feelings. Jules isn’t going to forgive me because you wave ten thousand dollars in front of her.”

“She might.”

I let out a laugh before I could stop it.

He watched me, and the corner of his mouth lifted.

“She won’t,” I said.

“It would improve our position.”

“Our position?”

“Yes.”

“What position?”

“The position where she hates you slightly less.”

I stared at him and he was actually considering it.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m practical, she will forgive you… eventually, if she feels like it.”

There was something so simple about the way he said it, no grand speech, or a promise that everything would magically be fine, just him quietly trying to make something painful hurt a little less.

He lifted my hand and brushed his thumb over the center of my palm again, right over the spot I’d hurt, “And you need to stop hurting yourself. We really need to work on that.”

I glanced down, “I wasn’t-”

“You were.”

“I was nervous.”

“You were pinching your hand, you were almost about to make it bleed.”

“Maybe my hand was being annoying.”

His eyebrow lifted.

I bit my lip to stop myself from smiling,.”Don’t look at me like that.”

He rolled his eyes, and somehow, it was the hottest eye roll I’d ever seen a man give. A soft warmth spread through my chest, making my cheeks heat as my stomach fluttered.

I shifted closer again until my knee brushed his. His gaze dropped briefly to my mouth and my heart stumbled, then his eyes came back to mine.

My breath grew quieter, “You know,” I whispered, “you’re very distracting, Mr. Capone.”

“I know.”

“You weren’t supposed to agree.”

“I’m usually distracting.”

I laughed softly, “That’s not something you should be proud of.”

“I’m not,” he leaned a little closer, “I just know you.”

My smile disappeared, not because I was upset but because the way he looked at me made it difficult to remember what I had been worried about five seconds ago.

His face was close enough now that I could feel the warmth of his breath.

He didn’t kiss me.

He didn’t need to.

He simply looked at me like I was the only thing in the car worth looking at. He lifted our joined hands slightly and kissed the red mark in my palm.

“No more pinching.”

I sighed, “Fine.”

“Promise?”

I looked at him, “Promise.”

A small smile tugged at his mouth as he leaned closer. His lips brushed against mine, barely there, but it was enough to make my stomach flutter.

I was just reaching for the back of his neck when the car suddenly came to a stop. I blinked and pulled back, breathing a little faster than before.

I looked out the window.

We were already in the driveway of the Capone mansion, with the entire Capone family waiting outside.

Chapter alo

Then, suddenly, Raphael’s whole body went rigid.

I looked back at him with a frown.

His jaw was clenched so tightly I could see the muscle jumping beneath his skin. His shoulders squared, his back going stiff against the seat. His hand tightened around mine until his knuckles turned pale, while the fingers of his other hand curled slowly into a fist against his thigh.

His breathing changed. The kind of breathing that told me he was forcing every ounce of anger back down before it could take control of him.

I followed his line of sight and realized that his eyes were fixed on his father and the look on his face made my stomach drop.

There was no warmth left in his eyes.

Only rage.

Then he spoke, his voice so low and calm that it sent a chill down my spine,.“Gianna.”

I looked at him. “What?”

His gaze never left Salvatore, “Tonight, my father is going to learn what it costs to put his hands on what belongs to me.” 2

Enjoy! <3

Unedited*

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 911

Raphael

The moment I saw my father standing in the driveway, everything else disappeared.

The Capone mansion was right in front of me. Cars lined the drive. People stood outside. I could see Claire, Alessia, Maddie, and the others waiting for us.

I didn’t register any of them.

I saw only him.

Salvatore.

He was standing beside Aunt Alessia with a smile on his face, looking completely at ease.

As if nothing had happened.

As if he hadn’t spent the last few months making Gianna believe there was something wrong with her.

As if he hadn’t made her feel like she was a burden.

As if he hadn’t stood there and watched her walk away.

My jaw locked, heat rushed up my neck. My hands tightened. I didn’t hear the car door open. I didn’t hear anyone call my name.

I barely felt Gianna’s hand catch my arm, “Raphael.”

I stepped out.

She grabbed me harder, “Raphael, wait.”

I kept walking.

“Don’t do anything stupid!”

Her fingers tightened around my sleeve. I stopped only because she was holding me. I looked down at her.

Her eyes were wide, “Please,” she moved in front of me, “None of this was his fault. I made the decision myself. He didn’t force me to leave. I chose to go. He tried so hard to stop me, please!”

I heard the words. I understood every single one. They simply didn’t matter anymore because I could still see my father smiling.

That smile was getting under my skin.

I looked past Gianna, at him. He noticed me, and his smile faded slightly.

Gianna stepped closer, “Raphael, please.”

I pulled my arm free, her hand slipped from my sleeve, then I strode toward him.

“Raphael!”

I didn’t stop. I crossed the distance between us in seconds. Salvatore barely had time to straighten before my hand

Chapter Oll caught the front of his shirt.

Grabbed his collar and yanked him toward me.

His smile vanished completely, “What the hell-”

My fist hit his face, the sound cracked through the driveway. His head snapped to the side.
1

Someone screamed.

Salvatore stumbled back, but I still had his collar in my fist. Blood immediately ran from his nose, spilling over his upper lip. His hand came up to his face, he stared at the blood on his fingers.

For a second, he looked completely lost, confusion flashing across his face. Then his eyes found mine again, and I drove my fist straight into his cheek.

“What is wrong with you?!”

I pulled him forward again, “You.”

His face hardened, “Raphael-”

I tried to swing again but this time, I didn’t get the chance. An arm locked around my chest and another caught my shoulder.

“Raphael!”

Adriano.

Dante grabbed my arm before I could break free.

Silvio came in from the other side, wrapping both arms around me and dragging me backward.

“Let me go!” my voice tore out of me.

I fought against them, hard. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t hear, I couldn’t see anything except Salvatore.

His blood..

His face.

His hands.

Everything I’d heard about Gianna came rushing through my head at once. Every time she’d questioned herself. Every time she’d wondered if she was too difficult. Every time she’d apologized for something she shouldn’t have apologized for.

Every time she’d looked at me like she was waiting for me to decide whether she was worth staying for.

And my father had been standing there all along, smiling.

“Raphael!” Aunt Alessia’s voice shook somewhere behind me.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know!”

“Get him away from Salvatore!”

Choptar

“Raphael, stop!”

barely heard them. I tore myself away from my brothers and landed another punch before they could stop me, forcing them to tighten their grip and use even more strength to hold me back.

Adriano tightened his hold, “Raph, enough.”

“Get your hands off me!”

“No.”

“Move.”

“Not happening.”

I jerked forward again, but Dante held my arm down. Silvio caught my other shoulder.

“Raphael, look at me.”

I didn’t, my eyes stayed on Salvatore. Aunt Alessia had stepped away from him, one hand covering her mouth. Maddie stood frozen beside Claire.

Gianna was behind them, staring at me, her face had gone pale. Salvatore wiped beneath his nose with the back of his hand.

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Chapter 912

When he looked at the blood again, something ugly flashed across his face. It was anger, confusion and disbelief.

He looked at me like he couldn’t understand how his own son had just hit him, “Have you lost your mind? What the hell is the meaning of this?”

I strained against the men holding me, “You know exactly what this means.”

Salvatore stared at me, “I don’t. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You never fucking do!” I Shouted.

“Enough!” Adriano’s voice came hard beside my ear.

I tried to pull away again, “Let me go.”

“No.”

I looked at Salvatore. He was now holding the bloodied tissue beneath his nose that Aunt Alessia gave him.

His expression had changed now, but the confusion was still there, but the anger was growing, “You hit me without a word,” he said. “In front of everyone, without a reason!”

I stared at him, “You deserved worse.”

The driveway went silent.

Gianna’s voice came softly behind me, “Raphael.”

Salvatore looked past me toward Gianna. That was enough to bring the anger roaring back.

“Don’t,” my voice was low but everyone heard it.

Salvatore’s eyes returned to mine. I stared at him from between Adriano, Dante, and Silvio.

“Don’t you dare look at her,” I took one step forward despite the arms holding me back.

Salvatore’s breathing turned hard, “What did I do?”

That question snapped something inside me, “What did you do? You really want me to answer that?”

I pulled forward again. Adriano swore under his breath and tightened his grip around me, “Jesus Christ, Raphael.”

I barely registered the words. My entire body was burning. My hands were shaking. My jaw hurt from how hard I was clenching it.

I wanted to hit him again.

I wanted him to understand what it felt like to watch someone you loved walk away because another person convinced her she wasn’t enough.

Then Vincenzo stepped between us and everything stopped. He simply planted himself between me and my father, his eyes moving from Salvatore’s bleeding face to me.

His expression was hard, “Would someone like to tell me what the hell is going on?”

When nobody answered.

Vincenzo looked at me, “Raphael.”

ould still feel the anger shaking through my arms. My chest rose and fell hard as I stared at him, “Either I’m going to kill him,” I said, my voice low, “or you’re going to have to kill me. There isn’t going to be anything in between.”

Vincenzo’s jaw tightened, “No, we don’t kill each other.”

“Then ask him,” I pointed past him, “Ask him what he did.”

Vincenzo glanced over his shoulder at Salvatore. Salvatore was still wiping blood from his mouth. Alessia stood beside him, one hand hovering near his arm, her face tight with confusion.

I looked back at Vincenzo, “Ask him why he didn’t come to you if he had a problem with us.”

Vincenzo’s brows pulled together, “What are you talking about?”

“He hasn’t changed,” my voice shook with anger, “Not one fucking bit. He hasn’t changed, Vinçe!”

Salvatore’s face hardened, “Raphael-”

“Shut up.”

Vincenzo lifted one hand toward him, “Let him speak.’

I swallowed hard, the words had been sitting inside me for too long, “He acts like he’s changed because he knows he doesn’t have any power over us anymore. That’s the only difference but underneath it, he’s still the same man.”

I took a step forward. Adriano and Dante’s hold immediately tightened around my arm, ready to stop me if I went for him again.

“He is still the man who ruined Mom’s life.”

Vincenzo went still but I kept going.

“The same man who hurt Aunt Alessia. The same man who kept her own daughter away from her for years. He lied to her, manipulated her, and made her give up her entire life so she could raise his sons while he went around fucking his whores like none of it mattered.”

Alessia’s face fell.

“The same man who fucking destroyed Claire’s life simply because she loved you, Vince! The same man who used me to drag that fucking abuser back into her life, knowing

exactly what he was capable of and then stood by while she was tortured and hurt mentally and physically!”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 913

Caire looked at me, stunned. Her eyes immediately fill up.

“And now... Now he went after Gianna.”

Vincenzo’s expression changed instantly, “What the fuck are you talking about?”

I looked at him, my chest heaving, “The girl he treated like she was his own daughter. You may have forgiven him a hundred fucking times, Vince. That’s on you. But don’t stand there and expect me to do it.”

I pulled against Adriano’s hold so hard his arm tightened around my chest.

“I told him to stay the fuck away from me,” my eyes stayed locked on Salvatore, “I told him he was done. Done with me. Done with my life. Done having any say in what I do or who I love. And what did he do?”

I laughed, but there was no humor in it.

“He crossed the fucking line anyway,” my whole body shook with rage, “He doesn’t get to hurt people and then hide behind you every damn time he gets caught!” I looked at Vincenzo, “You want to forgive him? Fine. You want to believe he’s changed? Fine. I don’t.”

Then I looked at Salvatore again.

“He fucked with my life after I warned him not to. He went after Gianna,” my teeth clenched, “So now I’m going to show him what happens when he finally runs out of chances.”

Vincenzo looked between us, “Would someone fucking tell me what is going on here?”

I could hear my own heartbeat, “Ask him what he said to her. Ask him what he made her believe.”

Vincenzo turned toward Salvatore, “Dad?”

Salvatore opened his mouth.

But before he could answer, Gianna's voice cut through the driveway, "No."

I turned, she was standing a few feet behind me. Her face was pale, her eyes were wide. She looked scared... not of me but of what I was doing.

"Raph, stop," She came closer, "He tried to stop me. It wasn't like that."

"Gianna," I warned.

"I'm telling you the truth," she stepped closer until she was right behind me.

Her hand touched my arm. The anger in my body fought against that single touch.

"It was my fault," she whispered, "It was my decision. I chose to leave. He never told me to go to Philadelphia. He tried to stop me, Vincenzo. I was the one who walked away. If you all want to blame someone, blame me. Don't punish him for something I did."

I looked at Gianna. She looked at me with those wide, worried eyes, and for one second, I wanted to let it go, then I remembered her sitting alone after her mother died.

I remembered what she looked like and my anger came rushing back.

"But he did tell you to leave this house, didn't he, Gianna?"

Her eyes widened, "Raphael..."

You told me he did. You were standing beside your mother while she took her last breath, and he still found the fucking time to tell you to get out."

Salvatore's skin turned bone-white, "That's not what happened."

I snapped my head toward him, and he stopped. I looked back at Gianna, "He told you to move out because he wanted you away from me."

She swallowed.

I could see the conflict in her face, "He wanted you gone."

"Raph, he-"

I shook my head, "You don't have to defend him."

Then I turned toward Vincenzo, Claire, Maddie and Aunt Alessia. They were all staring at me now.

“You want to know why? Why he didn’t want Gianna in my life?” my laugh came out bitter, “Because he thought she wasn’t good enough.”

Vincenzo frowned.

I pointed toward Salvatore, “He didn’t want his bloodline ‘tainted.’”

The words felt disgusting coming out of my mouth.

“He was worried about what his grandchildren would be like. He thought Gianna would give them something defective.”

Gianna went completely still behind me.

My chest fucking tightened, “He looked at her dyslexia and saw something wrong with her. He didn’t see the woman she is. He saw a problem he didn’t want attached to his name.”

Claire’s hand went to her mouth. Maddie’s frown deepened as she stared at Salvatore with disbelief. Aunt Alessia stared at her brother with anger.

I turned fully toward him, “Well, congratulations. I won’t be contributing to your precious bloodline.”

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Chapter 914

vatore’s face changed instantly, “Raphael, I didn’t mean—”

I stepped forward. Adriano’s hand immediately caught my shoulder but I didn’t even look at him.

“If it were up to me, the Capone bloodline would end with the six of us. There’d be no future for your name beyond us,” I sneered, watching his throat bob as he swallowed.

Vincenzo’s brows pulled together as he slowly turned toward Salvatore, “You said that to her?”

Salvatore didn’t answer and that was answer enough. Vincenzo’s face hardened. I could see the disbelief settling over him.

I wasn’t finished, “He said more than that. He had already planned it.”

Vincenzo looked back at me, “Planned what?”

“To get her away from us. After Hazel died, while Gianna was grieving, he was already thinking about moving her somewhere else. Away from this family. Away from me.”

He looked away.

I laughed under my breath, “Fuck him and fuck his bloodline.”

Vincenzo remained silent for several seconds, then he looked at Salvatore again. Something had changed in his eyes.

It wasn’t the patience he’d shown him before. It wasn’t the tired forgiveness he’d given him over the years.

It was colder than that, much colder.

Aunt Alessia stepped forward. Her shoulders were straight, her chin lifted, and her eyes were fixed on Salvatore with a firmness I had rarely seen from her.

“Sal,” she said, “What is he saying?”

Salvatore looked at her, and then looked away.

“I asked you a question,” she stated, “Did you really say those things to Hazel’s daughter?”

“Alessia ”

She took another step toward him, “Don’t even think of lying to me. Don’t try to explain something else. Answer me.”

Salvatore looked around at all of us, at Vincenzo, at me, at Gianna, then back at Alessia, “It wasn’t like that.”

Aunt Alessia’s jaw tightened, “Then tell me what it was like.”

“I love that girl,” his voice cracked slightly, “I love Gianna as if she was my own daughter.”

Gianna lowered her eyes.

Salvatore continued, “That is exactly why I didn’t want her with my son.”

My entire body went rigid. Adriano’s arms tightened around my chest before I could move.

Salvatore looked directly at Vincenzo, “As a father, you cannot blame me for that. You have children. You know what it means to worry about them. I wasn’t trying to hurt her. I wasn’t trying to destroy anything. I thought I was protecting them.”

“Protecting them?” I spat.

Adriano’s arm locked harder around me, “Raphael.”

I jerked against him, “Let me go.”

“No.”

“I said let me the fuck go.”

Dante grabbed my other arm when I twisted toward Salvatore. I drove my shoulder forward, trying to break their hold.

Silvio stepped in behind me and caught my waist, “Raph, stop.”

“Get off me!”

I fought them again.

My elbow slammed backward, but Dante moved before I could catch him. Adriano hooked his arm tighter across my chest, pulling me back against him, “Enough!”

“Fuck you!”

I kicked against the ground, trying to get free but three men were holding me now and I still wanted to get to him.

I could hear my own breathing. My heart was pounding so violently it hurt, “You made her feel like she was something you had to protect your precious family from.”

“That isn’t what I said.”

“Then what the fuck did you say?”

Salvatore’s face tightened, “I told her to move out, yes…”

The entire yard went silent.

Vincenzo stared at him, “You planned to have Gianna move out?”

Salvatore swallowed, “I wanted her somewhere safe.”

“Without telling me?”

Salvatore hesitated.

Vincenzo’s voice dropped, “Did you plan to have Gianna leave this house without even talking to me first?” “I” Salvatore looked uncomfortable, “When I said she should move out, I meant the apartment.”

Vincenzo frowned, “What apartment?”

“The one I had arranged for her,” Salvatore looked at Gianna, “I had an apartment prepared for her. Somewhere close. Somewhere she could live comfortably. I wasn’t sending her away,” he took a breath, “I never told her to go to Philadelphia. I never wanted her out of our lives,” then he looked directly at Gianna, “Tell them. Tell them, Gianna,” his voice softened, “I love you. You know I do.”

Chooters

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 915

She didn’t answer.

“I wanted the best for you and for my son. I thought giving you your own place would be better for both of you.)

I felt something inside me snap, “You thought?” I tried to pull forward again. Adriano and Dante immediately tightened their grip, “You don’t get to stand there and rewrite what happened.”

“I am not rewriting anything.”

“You told her she wasn’t good enough for me.”

“I was afraid!” his voice finally rose, “I was afraid for my son!”

“And you thought her dyslexia made her a fucking risk?”

Salvatore’s face fell, “I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

I felt Gianna move. I turned my head as she stepped forward.

Her face was pale, as she turned to Vincenzo, “Please. I’ve caused enough problems in this family. I don’t want your family ruined because of me. He didn’t do anything. He didn’t say what you think he said. Raphael is just taking everything out of proportion because he’s angry.”

I stared at her, for a moment, I couldn’t understand the words, then I did. And somehow they hurt more than anything Salvatore had said.

I slowly turned toward her, “What did you just say?”

Her lips parted, “Raph-”

“What did you say?”

“I shouldn’t have told you anything.”

My stomach dropped, “What?”

“I shouldn’t have told you about it,” she glared at me, “Please, stop this.”

After everything she’d told me. After every night she’d spent carrying the things that man had said to her. After every time she’d told me she felt like she wasn’t enough.

Now she was standing there trying to protect him, “Are you taking his side?”

Her eyes widened, “No.”

“Then why are you defending him?”

“I’m not defending him!”

“You just said he didn’t do anything.”

“Because I don’t want this!” she pointed around us with a shaking hand, “I don’t want everyone fighting. I don’t want this family tearing itself apart because of me. This isn’t what my mom would have wanted!”

“Gianna-”

“No!” she shook her head, “I can’t do this again. I already lost my mother. I lost my friends. I already lost my home. I already lost so much. I don’t want to be the reason you lose your family too.”

Something inside me went completely still, “We’re not a fucking family with this man. Don’t ever put yourself between me and what he did.”

“Raph-”

I shook my head, “You don’t have to protect him from me.”

“I don’t want anyone hurt.”

“And I don’t want him anywhere near you.’

Salvatore stepped forward, “Raphael, listen-‘

I lunged and Adriano caught me around the chest. Dante grabbed my shoulder. Silvio locked both arms around me and pulled me back so hard my shoes scraped across the stone.

Vincenzo finally stepped forward, “Enough.”

Everyone stopped, even me. Vincenzo looked at me, then he looked at Salvatore, then at Gianna. I breathed through my nose, still fighting the hands holding me.

I wasn’t done as I looked straight at Vincenzo, “Choose.”

His eyes narrowed, “Raphael.”

“If he stays, I leave.”

Gianna stared at me with wide eyes, shaking her head.

I continued, “I won’t live under the same roof as him. I won’t sit at the same table. I won’t pretend nothing happened. And I sure as hell won’t watch him keep finding ways into our life.”

Salvatore’s face hardened, “This is my family too.”

I looked straight at him, “I won’t share a home with the man who took away the one person who ever understood me, then turned around and tried to take away the second,” then I turned back to Vincenzo, “Choose, Vincenzo.”

Vincenzo’s jaw tightened and he looked at me with a dee frown.

“If you choose me, he stays the fuck away from this family. No calls. No visits. No private conversations with any of the children.”

Salvatore’s eyes widened.

Gianna whispered my name.

I ignored it “You have a choice, Vince. It’s him or me. And if you choose him... I won’t stay here anymore.”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 916

Chapter Plu

Ganna

I couldn’t move.

I stood there between them, staring at the ground while the words I’d said kept playing in my head.

I don’t want your family ruined because of me.

But maybe I already had.

The Capones had been a family long before I ever walked through their doors. They had their own history, their own wounds, their own fights that had nothing to do with me.

And now Raphael was standing there, being held back by three men because of me.

Vincenzo was looking at his father like he didn’t know him anymore. Luca stood next to him, not saying a word.

Alessia looked hurt.

Claire looked pissed.

Maddie had gone completely quiet.

And Salvatore...

Salvatore was looking at me.

I couldn’t breathe properly.

Maybe I should never have told Raphael, maybe I should have kept all that to myself. Maybe I should have swallowed every word Salvatore said and let it die with me.

Then Vincenzo's voice exploded across the driveway, "Enough!" he looked around at all of us, "I said enough! Everybody shut the hell up for one minute!"

Vincenzo dragged a hand over his face and took a slow breath, then his eyes landed on me and the anger in his face changed.

"Gianna."

I looked up, swallowing.

"Tell me everything."

My stomach dropped, "Vincenzo..."

"Everything," his voice was cold and hard, "And don't even think about leaving anything out."

I swallowed, "I don't want to cause-"

"I don't care what you think you're causing," he took a step toward me, "I need to know what happened."

I looked at Salvatore. He was already watching me. His eyebrows were pulled together. There was a question in his eyes, maybe even a warning.

Gianna, think carefully.

elt my fingers Curl against my palms, then I looked at Raphael. He was still being held back but Raphael wasn't fighting anymore, not because he had calmed down, but because he was staring at me.

Waiting.

His eyes were fixed on mine. There was anger there but underneath it was something else.

Fear.

Fear of what I was about to say.

I looked away from him as Alessia moved closer and stopped in front of me.

Her face was serious, "Gianna, tell me the truth. Every word. Whatever he said to you, you need to tell us. I promised your mother that you were in safe hands. Don't protect him. Don't protect any of us," she glanced toward Salvatore, "You don't owe anyone a lie."

I felt my throat tighten.

Alessia reached for my hand, her fingers closed around mine, “Tell us what happened.”

I looked down at our joined hands. Alessia’s grip was warm, gentle, and strangely familiar. For a second, it felt like Mom’s hand around mine again, the same comfort, the same warmth I hadn’t felt since she died. My throat tightened, and whatever strength I had left melted away. I couldn’t hide behind silence anymore.

I swallowed, “It happened the night Denise died.”

Raphael’s head lifted slightly and Alessia’s fingers tightened around mine. Vincenzo didn’t say anything, he just watched me, asking me to continue wordlessly.

I took a shaky breath, “That was probably the night Salvatore realized there was something between me and...”

My eyes moved toward Raphael. He was still standing between Dante, Silvio and Adriano. His face had gone completely still.

I looked away again, “...Raph.”

The word barely left my mouth. I rubbed my thumb against Alessia’s fingers. Salvatore’s frown deepened, I saw it from the corner of my eye.

“I went to see Mom. I was still disoriented from the blow to my head, and I needed her. But before I could even reach her door, he caught my arm and stopped me.”

Vincenzo’s voice was quiet, “Then what happened?”

I could hear the faint sound of someone breathing behind me, “He said he thought I didn’t care about Mom because I had been... because Raph and I...”

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ouldn’t finish.

Raphael’s jaw clenched.

Alessia’s eyes softened for half a second, then she nodded, “Keep going.”

I forced myself to keep going, telling them the things I remembered most clearly from that night. Saying those words out loud in front of everyone was humiliating and painful, and my voice shook with every sentence.

“Then he asked me what people would call a woman who slept with her stepbrother behind her mother’s back”

Raphael’s entire body went rigid, Dante and Adriano immediately tightened their grips on him,

I looked at Salvatore, but he didn’t look at me anymore.

I whispered the word, “He called me a whore.”

Alessia’s face went completely still.

Raphael strained against the three men holding him, his eyes locked on Salvatore. “That’s what you called her? You want to know who the real fucking whore in this house is?”

“Raphael,” Vincenzo warned.

I kept talking before the fight could start again, “He didn’t stop there. He asked if I wanted to be known as his respectable daughter…” I swallowed, “…or if being Raphael’s bed warmer was enough for me.”

“Jesus Christ, Salvatore!” Claire snapped, her voice sharp with disbelief, “Do you ever fucking know when to stop?”

The silence that followed was horrible. Raphael’s breathing changed.

Adriano pulled him tighter against his chest, “Don’t you dare,” he warned him.

Raphael didn’t even seem to hear him.

I could barely breathe, “He told me that if Mom found out…” I squeezed my eyes shut, “He said she wouldn’t survive it.”

My tears fell freely now, I wiped my cheeks with trembling fingers, “He told me he was disappointed in me. And then he asked me if Raphael was worth it.”

Raphael pulled forward again. Dante, Adriano, and Silvio all grabbed him harder, “Let me go.

“Raph, no,”

“Let me fucking go!” his voice echoed across the driveway.

Salvatore sighed and his eyes dropped.

“And then he told me to end it,” I swallowed, “To stay away from Raphael.”

“Is that everything?” Vincenzo asked.

Raphael answered before I could, “No,” his voice was rough, “Tell him everything, Gianna.”

I blinked the tears from my eyes and forced myself to push past the embarrassment burning through me. I looked

+15 8gnus at everyone standing around us, “He took me into another room shortly before my mom took her last breath. He old me that once she died, I needed to leave.”

I paused, trying to sort through everything that had happened in those days. I told them the other things he said. Some of them I remembered clearly. Some of them... I might have forgotten but I remembered enough.

I looked at Salvatore, “He knew I was going to leave after mom died because I believed I wasn’t good enough for Raphael. I thought I wasn’t good enough for this family. And then Dad came back.”

I wiped another tear from my cheek.

“He apologized when Dad asked to take me to Philadelphia because he knew about the treatments. He knew about the sessions. Mom had told him everything.”

Vincenzo’s head snapped toward Salvatore, “And you still let her leave?” His voice rose, “While I was begging for something I could take to the Council, you knew all of this the entire time?”

Salvatore squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, wiping the blood from beneath his nose with the back of his hand.

“But then he told me the real reason he wanted me gone,” I took a shaky breath, “He told me he didn’t want someone like me in his bloodline.”

The words still hurt coming out of my mouth. Maybe because some part of me had believed them that night but I don’t anymore.

“He said Raphael was special. That his abilities were something that had to be carried on,” my fingers tightened together, “And he didn’t want grandchildren with my disabilities. He was afraid having children with me would somehow ruin Raphael’s perfect genetics.”

I swallowed against the tightness in my throat.

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made it sound like loving me would cost Raphael everything he was supposed to become."

I lowered my eyes.

"I knew how I felt about Raph. I loved him, and I wanted so badly to believe I could be enough for him if I go through the treatments again. But he kept asking me why I left. Why I did it. Why I chose Philadelphia over him? If it was his fault? Why? Why? Why?"

I drew in a shaky breath.

"Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore. I broke down and told him."

I glanced toward Raphael. He was staring at me, his jaw tight. I could see how much it hurt him to hear every word.

"I never wanted to tell him," I shook my head, "I didn't want him to hate his father. I didn't want any of this."

My eyes moved around the driveway.

"I didn't want all of you standing here fighting. I didn't want to put Vincenzo in a position where he had to choose. I didn't want to be the reason this family fell apart."

Raphael finally spoke. His voice was quiet, but there was no hesitation in it, "You're not the reason," his eyes moved to his father, "He is."

Alessia took a slow breath, and finally let go of my hand. For a moment, she didn't say anything. She simply stood there, staring at Salvatore.

I watched her chest rise and fall beneath her coat. Her hands were still at her sides, but her fingers had curled into tight fists then she started walking toward him.

Salvatore straightened, "Alessia, I only wanted the best-"

The slap cracked through the driveway. Salvatore's head snapped to the side more in shock than anything else. The sound seemed to echo against the stone walls.

His hand slowly lifted toward his cheek. Blood from his nose had already dried beneath his nostril, but the fresh red mark across his face stood out clearly.

He looked back at Alessia, “Aless-”

“Don’t,” her voice stopped him cold. She stood directly in front of him, her eyes shining with tears, but there wasn’t a trace of hesitation in her face, “Don’t you dare explain this to me.”

Salvatore stared at her incredulously.

Alessia’s lips curled with something that almost looked like disgust, “Hazel would have hated you.”

His expression changed, I saw it happen. His shoulders dropped slightly, his eyes lost some of their anger.

Alessia stepped closer, “I need you to hear me, Salvatore, because you need to understand what you have done. Hazel would have hated what you did to her daughter. She would have looked at you and wondered how the man she trusted with her family could ever do something like this.”

Salvatore looked away.

Alessia caught his chin with her eyes, “No. Look at me,” he slowly looked back at her, “She put her entire life in

Chapte your hands. She trusted you with her children. She trusted you to protect them. She trusted you when she couldn’t be there herself. And do you know what she asked me?”

Salvatore looked almost afraid to move. Almost as if he seemed to know that even the smallest wrong step might push Alessia into an even deeper rage.

“She asked me if you were worth it.” Alessia’s voice trembled. “She begged me to tell her if you were worth leaving her daughters with after she was gone. She trusted me to tell her the truth. And you disappointed her too.

Salvatore’s face tightened in discomfort.

“You disappointed every woman who ever trusted you.”

“Alessia...”

“No.” She lifted a hand, her eyes slowly moving over his face, “You hurt Isabella. You hurt Silvio simply because he wasn’t the son you wanted him to be. You made him feel ashamed for being different. You hurt Claire. And now you’ve hurt her.”

Salvatore stared at her, “I never wanted to make Gianna feel-”

Alessia shook her head, tears gathering in her eyes, “It doesn’t matter, not anymore. Do you know what scares me the most now?” she whispered, “It isn’t what you’ve already done. It’s that there are still two girls in this family who love you. Two girls who still look at you and see someone they can trust. How long, Salvatore?”

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vatore furrowed his eyebrows, “What are you saying?”

She took another step toward him, “How long until you hurt Jules too? How long until you find some reason to decide what’s best for Aurelia and destroy something she loves in the name of protecting her?”

His face changed color, “No. No. Don’t bring them into this. Jules and Aurelia have nothing to do with this. I would never hurt them. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t,” he swallowed, his fingers tightening against his shirt, “Those girls... he stopped, struggling to get the words out, “Those girls are my heart.”

I felt my throat close.

Alessia turned back to him, “You don’t deserve them, Salvatore.”

Salvatore stared at her in disbelief, he looked older suddenly.

“You always do this,” Alessia whispered. “You love people, and then you decide that your version of protecting them matters more than what they actually want.”

Salvatore’s lips parted, “I loved Hazel.”

“I know,” Alessia’s answer came immediately, “And that’s what makes this so much worse. You loved her and she loved you enough to trust you with everything,” her gaze moved toward me, “You loved Gianna. You love Jules. You do,” she whispered. “I know you do. Maybe you don’t know how to love people without hurting them. Maybe you’ve convinced yourself that everything you’ve done was for the people you love.”

She stepped closer.

“But love doesn’t give you the right to decide their lives for them. If Hazel were standing here right now... She wouldn’t let me slap you,” she looked at her own hand, “She’d do it herself.”

Salvatore closed his eyes, his face tightened and that was when I saw it.

The anger disappeared.

The man who had stood there defending himself suddenly looked like someone had taken the ground out from beneath him.

Alessia took a step away from him, “So don’t ever tell yourself this was love. Love wouldn’t have made her feel ashamed of herself. Love wouldn’t have made her believe her mother might die because she loved your son. And love certainly doesn’t call a girl you claim to love a whore or a bed warmer.”

Salvatore flinched as if each word had landed against him. He looked away once more, unable to meet her eyes. His throat seemed too tight for the words he wanted to say. His fingers curled against his palms, then loosened again, restless and helpless.

“And love wouldn’t have made her think she had to disappear so your precious family could stay perfect. If Hazel were here, Sal... She wouldn’t forgive you for this.”

“She would,” he said weakly. “She would understand that I did what any father would have done in my position. She knew me. She knew why I made those choices. She knew what I was trying to protect,” his voice faltered, “I wasn’t trying to hurt Gianna.”

Raphael let out a dry, humorless laugh, “She wrote me a letter. A letter that made it very clear she trusted me more than she ever trusted you, even after all those years she spent with you.”

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Salvatore looked at him immediately, his expression riddled with shock, “No, she wouldn’t, she would-”

Enough, Dad...” Vincenzo, who had been standing silently until then, finally moved, “I’ve made a lot of excuses for you... And I have been doing that for years.”

Salvatore lowered his head, pressing his fingers against his brow as his face crumpled with the weight of what he’d done.

“I told myself I didn’t know what I would have become if I’d been the one who had to rebuild this family from the ashes. I didn’t know what it was like to wake up every morning wondering if we were going to survive another day. I didn’t know what it was

like to have the whole world coming after you and still have to stand there and keep everyone else alive.”

Salvatore’s lips trembled, “Vincenzo...”

Vincenzo sighed, there was no anger in his voice, only exhaustion, “I knew what you had done for us. I knew how much you had carried when none of us were old enough to understand it. You went through hell,”

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Salvatore looked from one face to another, searching for some sign that they still understood him, but found nothing, “And I’d do it again-”

Vincenzo didn’t let him continue, “You saw things I never had to see. You made choices I never had to make. You knew what this life really was before I was even old enough to understand what the word family meant and I respected you for that. I loved you for that. And I forgave you for it.”

Salvatore took a small step toward him, “Vince, I-”

“I thought you deserved grace. I thought maybe you had become the man you had to become because someone had to protect us.”

Vincenzo let out a slow breath.

“Even after what happened with Claire, I made excuses for you.”

Salvatore’s eyes shined.

“I told myself there had to be a reason. I told myself you hated her because she came from Cosa Nostra. I told myself you were still carrying everything they had done to Alessia,” his eyes flicked briefly toward his aunt, “I thought maybe you couldn’t separate Claire from the people who hurt Alessia.”

Salvatore lowered his gaze, trying to hide the tears gathering in his eyes as he slowly shook his head in denial.

“I told myself you were angry. That you wanted revenge. That you had spent so many years watching them hurt the people you loved that eventually you stopped seeing the difference between the people who had done it and the people connected to them,”

Vincenzo's jaw clicked, "I even told myself that if I'd lived the life you lived, maybe I would have done the same thing. That's the excuses I gave myself over and over and over again."

His lips parted, yet no words came, as he fell completely silent.

"I told myself you wouldn't have treated Claire that way if she hadn't been connected to Cosa Nostra. I told myself there was still a good man underneath all of it who loves his family no matter what."

A tear slid down Salvatore cheek, "There is."

Vincenzo stared at him, "I wanted to believe that."

"You can."

"I did."

Salvatore took another step, "Then believe me now."

Vincenzo's face hardened in an instant, "No."

Salvatore stopped, "Why?"

"Because Gianna wasn't Cosa Nostra," his voice cut through the room, "She wasn't one of the people who hurt Alessia or anyone in this family. She wasn't your enemy."

"I know that, but she was my daughter. I had to protect her and Raphael from each other. I thought I was doing the right thing."

"She wasn't a threat. She was just a girl who loved your son. She was supposed to be the one person you didn't have to fight."

Salvatore jaw trembling despite his attempt to control it, "I wanted to protect her."

You made her afraid to stay."

Salvatore's posture collapsed slightly, "I didn't mean-"

"You let her walk away," Vincenzo gave his head a slight shake, his eye twitched with anger, "You knew what she. was going through. You knew she had no one. You knew she was already scarred from the life she lived and you still let her leave with Giovanni."

Salvatore's mouth opened, "I thought-"

“You thought you knew better, right? Is that what you are going to say now?” Vincenzo asked sardonically.

Salvatore took another step back. His shoulders had fallen, his head bowed slightly, and he looked completely crushed.

“You stood there and watched her leave. You let me walk into that Council meeting and take the fall while you sat there knowing the truth.” Vincenzo’s voice sharpened, the cold authority returning to every word. You knew why she had left. You knew what had happened. You knew what would happen to her if her father got his hands on her again. And you said nothing.”

Salvatore backed away half a step again, “I was trying to protect this family. I won’t apologize for wanting to protect Raphael, even if he hates me for the rest of his life. I can live with that.” His voice shook. “But I could never stop loving him. I love all of your more than anything in this world.”

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Raphael’s eyes were cold, “You took the one person who made me happy and made her believe loving me was something she should be ashamed of,” a bitter smile touched his mouth, “If that’s what your love looks like; then I hope you never love me again.”

My heart clenched at his words, but instead of feeling relieved that he was standing up for me, guilt twisted deeper inside me.

I knew I hadn’t caused what happened, yet some part of me couldn’t stop wondering if I had somehow started all of this by telling him the truth.

Now everyone was fighting, the family was breaking apart, and Raphael was looking at his father like he hated him. I couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow, I was the reason it had all come to this.

“Salvatore,” Vincenzo said his name so coldly that the entire room seemed to go still.

I watched Salvatore’s face change.

His eyes flickered toward Vincenzo, and for a second, he looked almost confused. Then it hit him.

Vincenzo hadn’t called him Dad.

He had called him Salvatore.

The hurt that crossed his face was immediate.

“Vince?” he whispered, his voice suddenly small.

Vincenzo breathed in heavily like it was difficult for him to even say the words, “You hurt my mother. You hurt my aunt. You hurt my wife. And now you hurt my sister.”

Salvatore shook his head quickly, “No. Vince, please.”

He reached out but Vincenzo stepped back before Salvatore could touch him. Salvatore’s hand stopped in the air. For a few seconds, he simply stared at his own fingers, then he slowly lowered them.

“When I was young, I thought you were the strongest man I’d ever known,” Vincenzo stated, “I thought you could do anything. I thought you were the man who would always be there when the rest of the world wasn’t.”

Salvatore’s eyes filled, “I tried.”

“I know.”

“And everything I did was for my

Vincenzo nodded slowly, “That’s why I kept forgiving you but I’m done.”

Salvatore shook his head, “No, please,” It was the first time any of them had heard Salvatore plead, “Don’t do this.”

Vincenzo’s jaw clenched, “I want you to leave.”

Salvatore stared at him, “Vince…”

“Leave.”

“I can fix this.”

Chapter

“No, you can’t.”

can talk to Gianna.”

“She doesn’t need another explanation.”

“I can apologize. I’ll do anything.”

Vincenzo’s eyes hardened, “Then leave her alone.”

Salvatore went quiet, his eyes dropped and a tear slipped down his cheek. He wiped it away quickly, almost embarrassed to be seen crying.

Vincenzo looked at him one last time, “I spent years finding reasons to forgive you. I don’t have one left.”

Salvatore’s lips trembled, “Vince, son...”

Vincenzo’s face tightened at the word, “Get out.”

Salvatore stood there for another moment. His eyes moved from one son to another, searching their faces as if he was waiting for someone-anyone-to stop this.

No one did.

Even Alessia, Claire, and Maddie turned away from him.

His shoulders sank.

He looked at them one last time, as though he couldn’t quite believe that none of them were going to come after him.

Then, slowly, his eyes found me.

And he stopped.

Enjoy!

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Ganna

Salvatore’s eyes found me.

And he stopped.

His face had changed again.

There was no anger left in it, no pride, no trace of the man who had stood in the driveway trying to defend every choice he'd made.

He just looked wounded, almost.

His eyes stayed on mine, and something in them made my chest ache despite everything he had said to me.

"Gianna..."

My name came out so quietly that I almost didn't hear it. He took one careful step toward me and I instinctively moved back. He stopped immediately, the pain that crossed his face was quick, but I saw it.

"I know you're angry with me," he added and I couldn't answer, "I know you have every reason to be but please, just listen to me."

My fingers curled around the edge of my sleeve.

"I know what I said was wrong. I know I hurt you. I know I made you believe things about yourself that you never should have believed," his voice shook, "But I never stopped seeing you as my daughter. I never looked at you and thought you were worthless."

He shook his head, almost desperate for me to understand.

"I thought I was protecting you. I thought I was protecting Raphael. I thought I was protecting this family," he looked around the driveway, "And I was wrong," the words seemed to cost him everything but he said them, "I was wrong, Gianna."

He took another breath, running both of his hands down his face before looking at me once more.

"I should have trusted you. I should have trusted Raphael. I should have trusted his judgment. I should have let you make your own choice. I should never have made you feel ashamed for loving him."

My heart hurt because I really did believe that he was regretting it now but regret didn't erase what happened.

It didn't erase the nights I'd spent wondering if I had destroyed Raphael's life simply because I loved him.

It didn't erase the fear.

It didn't erase the years I'd spent thinking there was something wrong with me.

Salvatore took another small step, “I can fix this.”

Before I could say anything, Alessia stepped directly in front of mes

Salvatore stopped, her back was to me now, completely blocking his view, “Salvatore.”

He pleaded with his eyes, “Alessia, please. Just let me talk to her.”

“No.”

sexpression tightened, “I just need five minutes.”

“You’ve had enough minutes.”

“Alessia-”

“That’s enough for now. You need to leave.”

Salvatore looked past her, trying to find me again, “I can’t just leave.”

“You can.”

“This is my family.”

“And you are standing in the middle of them while they are asking you to stop,” she looked around the driveway Look at them, Sal.”

His eyes moved slowly across the family. No one stepped forward. No one reached for him. No one told Alessia to stop. No one told Vincenzo he was wrong. No one told Raphael to forgive his father.

“Do you see how not a single person here stood up for you?”

Salvatore looked at Vincenzo but he wouldn’t meet his eyes, then Claire. She stood close to Vincenzo, her face still wet from tears, but she looked away from him too.

Alessia looked back at Salvatore, “Do you know why? Because you made them stop. You did this to yourself.”

She pointed toward the house.

“You spent years asking people to understand why you did what you did. You asked them to forgive you. You asked them to believe there was a reason behind every cruel choice,” her voice shook, “And they did. We forgave you more times than you deserved.”

Salyatore looked down, shaking his head.

“But every time we forgave you, you gave us another reason not to.”

He shook his head, “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

”

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She stepped cluser, “You never mean for it to happen. You just keep deciding what is best for everyone else, and then you act surprised when they bleed because of it.”

Salvatore’s lips parted, “Alessia, I—”

“No, stop it,” she shook her head, “You need to leave right now if you want any chance of being part of this family in the future.”

His eyes widened, “This is insane. You’re all asking me to leave my own family?”

“I’m telling you to leave before you destroy what little chance you have left.”

He looked toward Vincenzo again, “Vince…”

Vincenzo didn’t turn.

Salvatore’s voice cracked, “Please. I won’t go. I won’t leave my family.”

Alessia stared at him for a long moment, I looked at the side of her face as the anger faded.

“Sal,” her voice turned colder than before, “You once told me that Hazel dying in front of you was your atonement.”

Salvatore froze and his face lost what little color remained.

I furrowed me eyebrows?

My mother’s death?

His atonement?

Alessia continued before I could ask a question, “You told me that you had watched the woman you loved die, and that you would carry that pain for the rest of your life. You said that was enough punishment for everything you had done. You believed her death would make you understand suffering,” she glanced toward me from over her shoulder, “But it didn’t.”

Salvatore’s eyes filled, “Alessia…”

“You watched Hazel suffer. You watched her die and you still kept hurting people closest to her.”

“That isn’t true.”

Alessia looked directly into his eyes, “Other people’s suffering means nothing to you. Hazel’s suffering meant nothing to you.”

Salvatore shook his head harder, “No. That’s not true. Hazel’s death was not nothing to me,” he pressed a hand against his chest, “You have no idea what she was to me.”

Alessia’s eyes softened with something closer to pity, “I can see what she meant to you. I can see it in the way you still say her name. I can see it in the way you let Gianna go back to the man Hazel saved her from.”

Salvatore’s lips trembled, “I tried to stop it.”

Alessia sighed, “You want to know what your real atonement is? It isn’t Hazel’s death,” she shook her head, “It isn’t the pain you felt watching her die.”

Chant

She stepped closer, forcing Salvatore to meet her eyes.

Your real atonement is living with what you did. Alone. You need to go somewhere else tonight and sit in that house without anyone around you.”

Salvatore threw his head back, staring up at the sky like forcing his tears back into his eyes.

“You need to lie awake and realize that the people you keep saying you love may not want to hear your voice tomorrow.”

He looked toward all of his children.

Alessia continued, “You need to wake up and wonder whether Vincenzo is alive and well. You need to wonder whether Adriano is safe. You need to wonder whether you will hear Raphael’s or any of your other son’s voices ever again. You need to wonder whether Claire

will ever forgive you. You need to wonder whether Gianna will ever look at you the way she used to."

My chest tightened.

Alessia's voice became quieter, "That uncertainty should follow you into every sleepless night. You should know what it feels like to have no control over whether the people you love are safe, happy, angry, alive, or gone. That would be your atonement."

Salvatore stood completely still.

"Not Hazel's death," Alessia's voice broke, "Your own loneliness. To sit with yourself and finally understand that you lost the people you were trying so desperately to protect because of the choices you made for them. I want that loneliness to eat away at your soul," she stepped back, "Now leave."

Salvatore stared at her. His lips moved, but for several seconds nothing came out.

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Then he looked toward Vincenzo, "I just want-"

"Are you going to leave on your own?" Luca's voice cut through him.

Salvatore looked over, shocked.

Luca stood with his hands in his pockets, his expression flat, "Or do you want help leaving?" he tilted his head, " Should I do the honors?"

Salvatore stared at him in complete disbelief, I thought he might argue again, then his eyes moved toward Vincenzo again.

Vincenzo completely turned away from him. He pulled Claire into his arms, wrapping one arm around her shoulders and drawing her against his chest. Claire rested her face against him.

Salvatore watched them and something inside his face broke. His gaze moved to Raphael who was still being held back by Adriano, Silvio and Dante.

Then, his eyes moved to Alessia, she wouldn't meet his eyes anymore.

His eyes found me again and I didn't know what he wanted me to give him,

Forgiveness?

Permission?

A reason to stay?

Maybe just one last sign that he hadn't lost everything but I couldn't give him any of it. My eyes filled with tears. Salvatore looked at me for another long moment, then his shoulders dropped.

He turned away.

And for the first time since I'd known him, Salvatore Capone walked away from his family without anyone following him.

Everyone watched as he crossed the distance to the iron gates alone. No car waited for him. No guard walked at his side. He didn't even take his gun with him. He simply walked through the gates and out into the street.

The moment he disappeared from view, Raphael tore himself free of his brothers' grip. This time, they let him go.

And he came straight for me.

His hand closed around my arm before I had time to say anything, and he pulled me after him, "Raphael-'

"What the hell was that?"

"I-"

He didn't slow down.

I stumbled once trying to keep up with him, my shoes catching against the marble as he dragged me away from the others and toward his side of the house.

"Raphael, wait."

His grip wasn't painful, but there was no room in it for an argument. He kept walking until we reached the corridor leading to his wing.

didn't want to ruin your family," I said, trying to keep up with him, "That was the whole point. I didn't want you to lose your father because of me."

He stopped so suddenly that I nearly walked into him, then he turned, "You still don't understand."

Before I could answer, he caught me around the waist and pushed me back against the wall beside his bedroom door.

The impact made me gasp.

He braced one hand against the wall beside my head, keeping himself close without actually hurting me.

“You’re my family,” he said, every word hard and clear, “Why can’t you see that? You are what I need, Gianna. You. And you make me so fucking angry when you do things like that.”

“I was trying to help.”

“You were trying to protect a man who spent weeks making you believe you had to disappear from my life.”

“He’s your father.”

“And?”

“And he loves you.”

Raphael gave a short, bitter laugh, “You really believe that?”

“I do.”

“After everything you just heard? You’re defending him again.”

“No.” I pushed myself away from the wall, but he didn’t move aside, “I’m telling you that you didn’t have to go completely insane on him. You could have hated him. You could have told him exactly what you thought. You could have made him leave without nearly killing him.”

“He deserved worse.”

“Maybe he did. But no matter what he said or did, he loves you.”

Raphael stared at me for several seconds.

I swallowed and forced myself to keep going, “And that’s coming from a girl whose own father hated the very idea of her. I know what it looks like when someone doesn’t love you. Salvatore isn’t that.”

Chapter 925

As expression became darker, colder, “Is that what you think?”

“What?”

“You think he loves us when he does shit like this?”

I shook my head, “That’s not what I meant-”

Raphael stepped back and dragged a hand over his face, “Maybe you should reevaluate what you think you know about love.”

The words were quiet but they stopped me, I blinked at him.

“Then come talk to me when you figure it out,” he said, “Because from where I’m standing, Gianna, you don’t understand love. And sometimes, I think, you don’t understand me either.”

Then he stepped inside and the door shut between us. A second later, I heard the lock click and I just stood there staring at it while his words echoed in my head on repeat.

You don’t understand love.

You don’t understand me either.

I leaned against the wall, covered my face with both hands, pressing my palms against my eyes until the sting faded.

I lowered my hands slowly.

I needed to do better, not just for Raphael but for myself too.

I couldn’t keep walking into the middle of things, making choices out of fear, then expecting the people I loved to understand why I had done it.

If Raphael was angry with me, then I had to let him be angry.

If he needed time, I’d give it to him.

But I wasn’t going to run away again.

My fingers found the edge of his door, resting there for a moment, “I’ll do better,” I whispered, though he couldn’t hear me.

Then I stepped back.

I'd let him cool down.

And then I'd find a way to make him understand that I was trying to learn how to love him the way he needed to be loved.

But there was someone else I needed to see first.

Jules.

I turned and started walking.

The Capone mansion had never felt so large.

The hallway leading toward Salvatore's wing seemed longer than I remembered. My steps slowed as I got closer, because memories kept catching me off guard.

There had been a time when this part of the house had felt beautiful.

Me.

Jules.

Mom.

We had spent so many ordinary days here. For a little while, we had been happy.

I stopped outside Jules's bedroom and reached for the handle. It didn't move and I realized it was locked.

She wasn't out there. Her door was locked too, which made her the second person who didn't want to see me right now.

I knocked softly, "Jules?"

Nothing came from the other side of the door but I knew she was in there.

I knocked again, "Jules, it's me."

Her answer finally came from the other side, "Go away.

I closed my eyes, "Jules..."

"I don't want anything to do with you. Why did you even come back?" she shouted.

I put my hand flat against the door, "I came back because I missed you."

“Liar!”

The words went straight through me, “I did.”

“No, you didn’t,” her voice broke and then there was a pause, “You were gone. You left me!”

I closed my eyes, “I know.”

“You left.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“You lived all those days without me. And even before that. You were here, but you weren’t really here.”

I didn’t interrupt.

She had every right to say it.

“After Mom died, you barely even cared about me. You were always thinking about yourself. You were always upset about something. You were always leaving.”.

I blinked away the tears, “I know I wasn’t there enough.”

“You weren’t there at all,” her little voice cracked again, “I lost Mom too, Gianna.”

My fingers curled against the door, “I know.”

“No, you don’t. I lost her too,” Jules whispered. “But Claire was the better sister to me than you ever were. She actually stayed. She listens to me. She knows when I’m sad. She doesn’t disappear like everyone else! I don’t need you anymore!”

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Chapter 926

puld have defended myself. I could have told her why I left. I could have told her everything that had happened. But she was just a kid. She didn’t need my reasons right now.

She needed her sister.

“I know Claire has been there for you,” I said softly, “And I’m glad she was. I don’t want you to choose me over her, Jules.”

Nothing came from inside the room. I lowered myself until I was sitting on the floor outside her door.

“But I don’t want you to think that you have to stop loving me either. You don’t get to replace me just like that.

“Go away, Gianna. I don’t want to talk to you!” she screamed and than threw something at the door.

My lips pressed together, “Okay. I won’t force you but I’m going to stay here until you forgive me,” I looked at the closed door, “You can hate me for a while. You can be angry with me. You can tell me to go away every single day f that’s what you need but I’m still your sister, Jules. And I’m sorry I wasn’t the sister you needed when Mom died.”

I rested my hand beside me on the floor.

“I can’t change those days. I can’t go back and sit beside you when I should have. I can’t make you feel less alone when you were hurting,” my voice dropped, “But I will be right here from now on.”

I waited but all I could hear were little sniffles she was trying hard to muffle.

“You don’t have to open the door tonight,” I whispered, “You don’t even have to talk to me but I’m not leaving you again. I’m staying right here.”

And I stayed.

I knew I had a lot of apologies to make, a lot of broken things to face, and people I had hurt without meaning to.

I had already taken the first step with Raphael while we were trapped in those cages.

Now it was Jules’s turn.

She needed to know that leaving her had never meant I loved her less. I needed to prove it, not with promises, but by staying long enough for her to believe me.

And Raphael needed to know it too.

They both meant everything to me. They were two pieces of my heart, and I had spent too much of my life acting like loving someone meant I had to lose someone else.

I wasn’t doing that anymore.

I would start with Jules.

I would stay outside that door for as long as it took, I would take every angry word, every slammed door, every day she refused to speak to me. I would keep showing up until she knew I wasn't going anywhere.

And then I'd go back to Raphael.

I wasn't going to let him push me away because he was angry, and I wasn't going to run because I was afraid of making things worse.

I loved that man with everything I had.

And once I got through to him, I was going to love him so fiercely, so completely, that there would never again be any doubt about where I belonged.

I would make a home in his life and hold on to him with both hands.

And neither of them was getting rid of me.

I stayed outside her door for hours until the morning light slowly faded and footsteps came down the hallway.

I looked up to see Claire carrying a tray.

She stopped when she saw me sitting on the floor. Claire glanced at Jules's door, then back at me, "I brought her dinner."

I moved away from the door, hoping to see a glimpse of her when she opened.

Claire knocked gently, "Jules? It's me. Sweetheart, open the door. You need to eat something."

"I don't want it."

"You haven't eaten since breakfast."

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Chapter 927

don't care."

Claire sighed, "Jules."

“I said I don’t want it.”

Claire looked at me for a second, then back at the door, “You are going to eat it whether you like it or not. Tell me what do you want me to do with your dinner?”

There was a pause before Jules replied, “Have one of the soldiers climb over from the balcony and give it to me

Claire blinked and I smiled despite everything.

“From the balcony?” Claire repeated.

“Yes.”

“You want one of the men to climb up there with your dinner?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

I stared at Claire incredulously.

She shrugged, “If that’s what gets her to eat, I’d do it.”

From behind the door came a quiet, “Thank you.”

Claire smiled faintly, “You’re welcome, troublemaker.”

Then Claire carried the tray away to find a soldier willing to climb Jules window but before she could leave, Maddie appeared at the end of the hallway with another plate in her hands.

Her eyes went to me, “You haven’t eaten either.”

“I don’t feel hungry.”

“That wasn’t what I asked,” she came over and lowered herself beside me, “You’ve been sitting here this whole time?”

I nodded.

Maddie held the plate out, “Take it.”

I looked at the food, “I’m fine.”

“Gianna.”

There was no room to argue with that tone.

I took the plate, “Thank you.”

Maddie gave my shoulder a small squeeze before getting up, “Eat.

“I will.”

She gave me a look that said she knew I was lying, then walked away. I placed the plate beside me, the food was

Chapter still warm but I didn’t touch it.

urned back toward the door, “Jules? I got dinner too. You want to eat together?”

Silence.

I pulled my knees toward my chest and settled against the wall. For a while, I talked. I told her about stupid things.

About why Raphael called her Jewel even though everyone had corrected him.

I told her about Giovanni junior.

Jules didn’t answer. I kept going anyway. I talked about Mom, not about the day she died. I talked to her about the mornings when Mom used to make breakfast and Jules would steal food from my plate.

“You always took the good pieces,” I whispered, “And then you’d act like you had no idea where they went.”

I rested my cheek against my knees.

The hallway grew quieter.

People moved around the house somewhere far away, doors opening and closing, low voices passing through the walls but no one came to make me leave.

Because they knew I needed this.

Every now and then, I spoke to Jules. Sometimes I waited five minutes before saying another word, sometimes ten but she never answered.

Eventually the food beside me went cold. My back began to ache from the hard floor. I shifted once, then settled again.

“I’m still here,” I whispered.

My eyelids were getting heavier by the second. I fought the sleep creeping over me because I didn’t want to miss the moment Jules finally opened that door. But the pain medication was pulling me under, making it harder to keep my eyes open.

I wanted to be awake when she came out.

I needed her to know I was still there.

So I kept my eyes on the handle.

Just in case.

But the house was quiet now, and exhaustion was stronger than my will. My head slowly slipped against the wall, my eyes closed.

I opened them again, the door was still closed.

“I’m not leaving,” I murmured, barely awake.

My head tipped to the side.

A few seconds later, sleep finally took me right there on the floor outside my little sister’s bedroom.

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Chapter 928

Ganna

The floor beneath my feet was freezing, the kind of cold that seemed to climb through my skin and settle in my bones. I stood barefoot on white tile, staring down a long hallway lined with metal doors. The ceiling lights flickered above me, buzzing softly, and for some reason I couldn’t remember how I had gotten there.

Then I heard a scream.

I turned toward it, but there was no one in the hallway.

Another scream followed, then another. Soon the air was filled with the cries of children. Some were begging for their mothers. Others were calling for help, their voices breaking between sobs.

“Please!”

“Help me!”

“I want to go home!”

The voices came from every direction. I backed away until my shoulders touched the wall and then the walls changed.

The solid surface became glass, and suddenly I could see rooms on the other side. Children were sitting on narrow beds, curled into themselves or staring at the floor. Some had bandages wrapped around their heads. Others had blood running through the cuts on their arms and legs.

A little girl slowly lifted her face. One of her eyes was covered by a thick bandage. She walked toward the glass and raised her hand.

“Why didn’t you save us?”

My mouth went dry, “I did.”

Her fingers rested against the glass, “You didn’t.”

“I tried.”

“You left us.”

“No.”

The lights flickered, when they came back, the hallway was gone.

I was standing inside my father’s study.

A book lay open on the desk in front of me. I knew it immediately. It was one of the books I had used when I was younger, filled with words I had struggled to read and pages covered in red marks.

Footsteps sounded behind me.

I turned.

Dr. Vance stood near the door in his white coat, looking exactly as he had at the facility. His hands were folded behind his back, and there was a calm smile on his face that made my skin crawl.

“Good morning, Gianna.”

tepped away from the desk, “Where am I?”

“You know where you are,” he nodded toward the book, “You’ve been here before.”

The door opened behind him and Leone walked inside. There was blood on his shirt, but he didn’t seem bothered. by it. He looked at me and smiled as if we were somewhere completely normal.

“Come here.”

I moved backward, “No, you can’t be here.”

He kept coming. When he reached for me, I shoved his hand away.

“Don’t touch me!”

He laughed under his breath, “You used to be sweeter.”

He reached for me again, and I pushed him harder, then another voice came from the doorway.

“Enough.”

I turned.

My father stood there.

Dad wasn’t looking at Leone. His attention remained locked on me, “I want you to take my empire, Gianna. Every piece of it. Every weapon, every body, every secret buried beneath it. I want you to sit where I sit. I want blood on your hands that you no longer remember whose it was. And when you finally look at yourself and realize there’s nothing innocent left in you, I want you to understand that you became exactly what I made you.”

I stared at him, “What?”

“You heard me.”

Suddenly, I was strapped to a chair, looking up at Vance. He was still smiling, “Have you learned your lesson today?”

“No.”

The smile disappeared from his face, “What did you say?”

I shook my head, “No.”

He walked toward me, “Read.”

“I can’t.”

“Read.”

“I said I can’t!”

Vance reached toward the machine beside him. A low electrical hum filled the room. I struggled to get out of that chair, “Please.”

“Read.”

“I can’t!”

“Read!”

+15 8gnus e machine screamed. Pain tore through my body, and I screamed with it, then everything disappeared.

When I opened my eyes again, I was inside a glass cage. My hands slammed against the walls as I tried to find a way out.

“Help!” I screamed, but no one answered.

I turned around.

Children filled the room beyond the glass. There were so many of them that I couldn’t see where the room ended. Some were sitting on the floor, some were lying on metal tables, and some were pressed against the walls.

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Chapter 929

They were the children from the facility. I recognized the scars, the bandages, the missing limbs, the empty spaces where some of their eyes should have been.

My knees weakened, “No.”

Every child turned toward me, then they began to speak, “It was your fault.”

I covered my ears, “No.”

“You brought us here.”

“I didn’t.”

“You knew.”

“No!”

“You didn’t stop him.”

“I tried!”

“You are his daughter.”

“I didn’t know!”

Their voices grew louder until they blended into one terrible sound.

“You let him hurt us.”

“You let us die.”

“You need to pay.”

I shook my head so hard that my hair fell across my face, “No, no, no.”

A little boy stepped toward the glass and placed his palm against it, “You saw us.”

I backed away, “No.”

“You saw what they did.”

“I didn’t know!”

“You walked away.”

“I didn’t!”

More children crowded around him, pressing their hands against the glass, “You need to pay.”

“No.”

“Your fault.”

“No!”

“Your fault.”

“Stop!”

“You need to pay for what happened to us.”

Te glass began to crack beneath their hands. I stumbled backward, shaking my head as the cracks spread across the walls, “No, no, no, no!”

The children kept repeating it until their voices became deafening, “Your fault.”

I screamed.

And woke up.

My body jerked violently, and my shoulder struck the wall behind me. I gasped for air, staring into the darkness while my mind struggled to understand where I was.

There was no glass.

There were no children.

No Vance.

No Leone.

No Dad.

Only the quiet hallway. I looked around, breathing hard, and slowly recognized the door in front of me.

Jules’s bedroom.

I looked down and realized I was still sitting on the floor outside her door. My dinner was beside me, untouched and cold, and my hands were trembling in my lap.

Nobody was there. Claire was gone. Maddie was gone. There were no soldiers in the hallway.

Just me and the locked door.

I pushed myself off the floor slowly, one hand braced against the wall while my other wiped at my face before the tears could fall again.

I wasn’t going to cry.

I had already cried enough. I had begged enough, apologized enough, and said enough words that I wasn't sure anyone had actually heard. I couldn't keep falling apart every time another memory found me.

So I dragged the heel of my palm across my cheeks and took a breath.

It didn't help.

The moment I looked down the hallway, I saw them again.

A little girl with a bandage over one eye.

A boy whose fingers had been curled around the bars of that cage.

The children looking at me as though I was the one person who could save them.

Your fault.

I squeezed my eyes shut, "No."

The word came out so quietly that even I barely heard it. I opened my eyes again and forced myself to move.

Me hallway seemed much longer than it had a few minutes ago. Every step took effort, but I kept going. I passed the sitting room without looking inside. I passed the staircase. I didn't stop when someone farther down the hall glanced in my direction.

I just kept walking.

I needed Raphael.

That was the only thought that made any sense, not because he could magically make everything disappear, not because I expected him to fix what had happened to me.

I just needed him.

I reached his wing and walked straight to his bedroom. I stopped outside the door and pounded on it.

"Raph!" I hit the door again, harder, "Raphael, open the fucking door!"

My palm came down against the wood again and again until the sound echoed through the hallway.

The lock finally turned.

The door opened, and Raphael stood there shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of dark boxers, his hair messy and his face carrying the last traces of the anger he'd had when he walked away from me earlier.

He barely had time to look at me when I threw myself at him.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 930

His arms came around me instantly.

One hand caught the back of my head while the other wrapped tightly around my waist, pulling me against his bare chest. I buried my face against him and the control I'd been holding onto all the way from Jules's room finally gave out.

I cried, not quietly, not prettily, the kind of crying that hurt.

"Hey," he murmured, his palm moving slowly over the back of my head, "I've got you."

"There is something seriously wrong with me, Raph," my voice broke against his chest, "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to control it. I don't know what's happening to me."

He didn't tell me to calm down. He didn't tell me I was fine. He simply held me tighter, "Come here."

I couldn't make myself let go, so he didn't ask me to. He guided me instead, keeping one arm around me while he reached behind him and pulled the door shut.

The click of the lock sounded strangely comforting.

Raphael led me toward the bed, and when my knees started giving out, he caught me before I could stumble. He sat me down carefully, then crouched in front of me, bringing himself level with my face.

His hand stayed on my cheek, "Look at me."

I did.

His eyes were softer now, "What happened?"

I shook my head, wiping at my face, "I had a nightmare."

“I figured.”

“No,” I grabbed his wrist before he could move his hand away, “It wasn’t just a nightmare.”

He waited, “Tell me.”

I took a shaky breath, “I can’t seem to get the faces of those children out of my head.”

Something changed in his expression, but he didn’t interrupt me.

“I close my eyes and they’re there. I see the girl. I see all of them. I hear them screaming, and then I see that place again. I can smell it. I can hear everything. I see Jasmine and Tasha,” my fingers tightened around his wrist, “And they keep telling me it’s my fault.”

Raphael moved closer, “Gianna.”

“I know they’re not real. I know I’m here. I know they’re dead or they’re safe or they’re somewhere else, but my head doesn’t seem to understand that. It keeps taking me back there.”

He listened without trying to rush me.

“I don’t want to sleep because every time I do, I see them again. I don’t want to close my eyes. I don’t want to be alone. I don’t even know why I’m like this,” my voice dropped, “I should be stronger than this.”

“No,” he answer came immediately. He reached for both my hands and held them between his, “You’ve been

Choptor 930 through something no one should have to go through. You’ve seen things that would break most people. You don’t get extra points for pretending it didn’t affect you.

I looked down, “I don’t know how to stop it.”

“You don’t have to stop it by yourself,” his thumb moved slowly over my knuckles, “Gianna, it’s okay to need help sometimes.”

I opened my mouth, but he continued before I could argue.

“This isn’t something both of us can fix. I can sit with you. I can listen to you. I can hold you when you’re scared. I can make sure you’re not alone when you wake up from a nightmare,” he paused, “But I can’t treat this.”

The word treat made my whole body tense.

Raphael noticed, “You need a therapist.”

My head snapped up, “No.”

“I’m not listening to your tantrums this time,” his voice wasn’t harsh, “You hear me? You can be angry with me. You can yell at me. You can tell me I’m being an asshole. I don’t care. I’m still going to get you help.”

I pulled my hands away, “I’m not going to a doctor.”

“Therapist.”

“I don’t care.”

“You care enough to be afraid.”

The words stopped me.

My eyes filled again, “I’m scared. I’m scared to go to doctors. I’m scared of them. I don’t want to go. I don’t want someone sitting across from me asking me questions. I don’t want them touching me. I don’t want them putting me in a room and telling me what to do,” my hands began trembling, “What if they want to hurt me again?”

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 931

Raphael went completely quiet and simply looked at me and I watched the moment he understood.

A man who was supposed to help me had turned medicine into something I learned to fear.

Raphael’s fingers closed gently around mine, “Vance.”

His face changed in a way I couldn’t quite name. The anger was there, but it wasn’t-directed at me. He shifted closer until his knees touched mine.

“Nobody is going to do that to you again.”

I looked at him through wet lashes, “You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“How?”

His hand came up to the side of my face again, his thumb brushing away a tear, “You’ll choose the person. You’ll meet them before anything happens. You decide what you’re comfortable talking about. If you don’t like them, we leave. If they make you uncomfortable, we leave. If you want me outside the door, I’ll be outside the door. If you want me sitting beside you, I’ll sit beside you.”

I stared at him, “And if I panic?”

“Then we stop.”

“What if I can’t do it?”

“Then we try again another day.”

My lips trembled, “What if I never can?”

Raphael leaned closer, “Then I’ll still be here.”

I reached for him again. This time, when I wrapped my arms around his neck, he pulled me into him without hesitation. My cheek pressed against his warm skin, and his arms settled around me with the kind of certainty that made my whole body finally start to loosen.

His bare chest rose beneath my cheek. I could feel his heartbeat. My fingers slipped into his hair, holding him as tightly as I could.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“For what?”

“For being so difficult.”

A quiet breath left him, “You’ve never been difficult.”

“I was.”

“You were scared.”

I pulled back enough to look at him. His face was close to mine now, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his breath, close enough that the familiar pull between us was there even in the middle of everything else.

His eyes moved over my face, checking every tear, every shaky breath.

“You don’t have to be brave with me,” he said.

Touched his cheek, “You make it very hard not to love you.”

One corner of his mouth lifted, “Good.”

A tiny laugh escaped me through the tears. He brushed his thumb beneath my eye. I leaned into his touch, then rested my forehead against his.

I didn’t try to hide what was happening inside me.

I was afraid.

I was exhausted.

I was hurting.

And I needed him.

Raphael held me there as though none of those things made me less worthy of being loved.

“I’ll go,” I whispered.

His brow creased slightly.

“To the therapist,” I added.

He studied me for a moment, “You’re sure?”

“No,” that almost made him smile, “But I’ll try.”

His arms tightened around me, “That’s enough.”

Raphael kept one arm around me for a while, letting me breathe against him until the worst of the crying passed. His fingers moved slowly through my hair, untangling the strands I’d messed up.

Then he pulled back just enough to see my face. I looked at him for a moment before leaning forward and kissing him.

It wasn’t planned. I didn’t even think about it.

I just needed the familiar feel of him.

His mouth met mine for barely a second before he pulled away. I froze and blinked at him. He didn't let go of me, but he put enough space between us that I could see his face clearly.

My heart sank, "Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

I lowered my eyes, "Even now?"

"Especially now," his hand came up and pushed a strand of hair away from my face, "You kept things from me, Gianna. You let me believe you were okay when you weren't. You didn't tell me what happened between you and my father, and every time I asked you, you gave me pieces of the truth instead of the whole thing."

"I didn't want to hurt you."

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Chapter 932

know."

"Then why are you still angry?"

"Because you decided for me."

That made me look at him.

"You decided what I could handle. You decided what I should know. You decided that protecting me meant lying by omission and pretending everything Salvatore did came from love."

I opened my mouth.

He shook his head, "You kept defending him today. Even after everything you told me. You stood there and tried to explain his behavior to me as if loving someone makes what they do acceptable."

"I wasn't trying to say it was acceptable."

“You were trying to make it easier for everyone else.”

I looked down at our hands.

Raphael watched me for a moment before continuing, “And I’m angry because you made some fucking awful decisions.”

My eyes lifted, “Raph-”

“No. I’m not finished,” he leaned back slightly, giving himself room to speak without losing his temper, “You left. You went to Philadelphia. You trusted people you shouldn’t have trusted. You stayed around your father when you knew something was wrong. You asked for that doctor because you thought if you tried hard enough, someone could fix you. Those were shitty decisions.”

I winced, “I know.”

“But…”

The word stopped me.

Raphael looked away for a second. His gaze dropped to the floor before returning to me.

“But those decisions also led you to those children. If you hadn’t made those choices, you wouldn’t have ended up there. You wouldn’t have found them. Three hundred and eighty-seven children are alive because you went there.”

My eyes burned again as I smiled.

“And we found out what they were doing because of you. The people who were running that place can’t hide behind locked doors anymore. Their victims have names now. Their families can be found. There are children who will grow up because you made it out of there.”

I shook my head, “I didn’t do it alone.”

He rolled his beautiful eyes in that annoyingly sexy way, “I’m not giving you all the credit. I’m telling you that your choices had consequences.”

He paused to think about something and then continued.

“Some of them were terrible and some of them saved lives. If you hadn’t made those shitty decisions, those hildren could still be there and more would have come after them.”

That thought had crossed my mind before, but hearing him say it made it real in a different way.

Raphael's thumb brushed away the tear that escaped, "So no, I'm not going to sit here and tell you everything you did was right nor am I going to tell you everything you did was wrong."

His hand slipped behind my neck, keeping me close.

"I love you too much to lie to you, I'm proud of you and I'm still fucking mad at you."

A small, broken smile appeared on my lips. My fingers curled around his wrist, "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I really am."

"I know that too."

He didn't kiss me, instead, he rested his forehead against mine.

The closeness made my pulse jump anyway.

His skin was warm against mine, his breath brushing my lips, and for a few seconds neither of us said anything.

Then I whispered, "Can I kiss you again?"

His mouth twitched and I waited.

He sighed, but there was no real anger left in it, "Come here."

I closed the small space between us. This time, when our mouths met, he didn't pull away.

His hand stayed at the back of my neck while my fingers settled against his shoulder, and the kiss was slow, nothing like the desperate way I'd thrown myself into his arms earlier.

His hand stayed tangled in hair as he kissed me once, then again, deeper this time, his lips parting beneath mine as his tongue slipped against mine.

His other hand closed around my waist, fingers squeezing firmly as he pulled me against his bare body. I slid both hands over his shoulders and down his back, my palms moving over the warm skin and the hard muscles beneath it. He reacted by drawing me even closer, his fingers tightening in my hair as he tilted my head and kissed me with more hunger.

Support/

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teeth caught my lower lip in a slow, playful bite before he soothed it with his tongue. I shivered and held onto him tighter.

The kiss became a back-and-forth of teasing touches, his lips pressing firmly against mine, pulling away for barely a breath before finding them again. His tongue brushed mine, while his thumb traced the side of my neck.

My hands moved farther down his back, feeling him tense beneath my touch. When he finally broke the kiss, neither of us moved away.

His forehead rested against mine, his hand still buried in my hair and the other firmly around my waist.

We were both breathing harder.

And the look he gave me made it very clear that pulling away had taken more self-control than either of us wanted to admit.

“I still hate that you’re mad at me,” I whispered.

“I’m allowed to be mad at you.”

“I know.”

His fingers slipped through my hair again, “And you’re going to therapy.”

I groaned and gave him a weak shove against the shoulder, “You ruined the moment.”

His quiet laugh warmed something inside me, then his arms came around me again, pulling me against him and I let myself settle there.

The next morning, I stood outside Jules’s bedroom looking nothing like the woman who had fallen asleep on this same floor the night before.

I’d showered, washed the exhaustion from my face, brushed out my hair, and put on clean clothes. I had even taken the time to make myself look presentable.

I pounded on the door hard, “Jules. Come on. Open the door,” I put one hand on my hip, “You can’t ignore me forever, you know.”

From behind the door came a small, very unimpressed voice, “Try me, bitch.”

My mouth fell open. For one second, I genuinely wondered if I’d heard her correctly, then I stared at the closed door, “Excuse me? What did you just call me, you little shit?”

“I said what I said.”

I gasped, “You did not.”

“I did.”

“You are eleven!”

“Congratulations. You can count.”

This was not funny.

This was my little sister insulting me through a locked door.

was absolutely not funny.

“Jules, open this door before I-”

“Before you what?”

I stopped, “Before I…”

I had no idea.

The door remained stubbornly shut.

“Before I ask Claire to come deal with you.”

“Claire likes me.”

“That’s because she doesn’t have to deal with your attitude.”

“I don’t have an attitude.”

“You just called your older sister a bitch.”

“An accurate description.”

I stared at the door in disbelief, “Who taught you that?”

“Life.”

That was when footsteps approached from behind me.

Claire appeared at the end of the hallway carrying a cup of coffee, looking far too calm for someone walking into the middle of a family argument before breakfast.

She took one look at me standing outside Jules's door, "Still no luck?"

"She called me a bitch!"

From inside the room came a muffled, "I should have called you a dumb bitch!"

Claire took a sip of coffee and I pointed at the door, "And you're not going to say anything to her?"

Claire's mouth twitched, "Why don't you go down to the breakfast table? I'll bring her down in a minute."

"Claire, you're spoiling her too much. She's acting like a brat."

Claire leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I can't do much until she opens that door. Once she does, we'll have a little talk about that attitude."

I stared at her and Claire just gave me a patient look.

From behind the door, Jules called, "She's just mad because I'm smarter than her."

I slowly turned toward the door, "You know what? I'm going to-

"Don't," Claire said.

I looked at her and she was trying very hard not to smile.

Then Jules added, "Maybe go find your brother-boyfriend. I'm sure he's tired of waiting for you to finish being annoying."

I covered my mouth.

Claire looked down at her coffee, her shoulders shook once.

"Did she just-"

"Yes."

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ointed at the door, “I’m going to kill you!”

Claire grabbed my arm, “She won’t come outside as long as you’re standing here. She’s stubborn. You’re stubborn. Neither of you is going to win.”

“I can out-stubborn her.”

“Can you?”

“Absolutely,” I added and Claire raised an eyebrow. I thought about it then I sighed, “Fine.”

She smiled, “If you want a chance to actually see her face-to-face this morning, let me try to get into her room first.”

I looked at the door one last time and nodded, “Tell her she’s lucky I love her.”

I started walking away.

Behind me, Jules called, “I hate you.’

I stopped dead.

Claire burst out laughing and I turned around, “Jules!”

“Have a nice breakfast, bitch!”

“You little-“I

Claire grabbed my arm before I could march back, “Go.”

I let her pull me away, muttering under my breath the entire time, “Brat.”

By the time I reached the staircase, I was smiling. I hated that I was smiling but I was.

Jules was angry with me. She was hurt. She didn’t trust me yet but at least she was talking to me. Even if half of what she said was designed to make me lose my mind.

That counted for something.

I walked into the dining room a few minutes later, “Good morning, everyone.”

A few greetings came back from around the table. I pulled out a chair and sat down between Maddie and Claire.

Then I looked across the table and Raphael was already there.

And God.

Seeing him dressed for the day after seeing him half-naked in his bedroom the night before should not have affected me as much as it did.

He wore a dark fitted t-shirt, with black sweatpants. His reading glasses rested on his nose while he looked over something in front of him on his tablet, giving him that serious, focused look that always made him seem even more intimidating.

I smiled.

His eyes lifted from the screen.

For a second, neither of us said anything.

Men the smallest smile appeared on his mouth.

Irested my chin against my hand and kept looking at him.

His gaze lingered on my face.

I could still remember his hands in my hair. His arms around me. The way he'd held me when I'd fallen apart.

Last night, he'd been standing in front of me shirtless and barefoot, holding me while I cried.

This morning, he looked like the dangerous, polished man everyone else knew.

Except for the glasses.

Those did something unfair to me.

His eyes lifted over the top of them and he caught me staring. One corner of his mouth curved upward.

I picked up my glass.

He adjusted his glasses.

I looked at his hands.

He looked at my mouth.

I took a sip of water.

He leaned back slightly in his chair.

The entire exchange lasted maybe ten seconds but it felt much longer.

Then Vincenzo cleared his throat loudly.

I nearly choked on my water.

Raphael calmly turned a page on his screen.

Vincenzo was staring directly at us. He looked between Raphael and me, “So....” he paused long enough to make me nervous, “When are you two getting married?” 1

The table went quiet. My hand froze around my glass. Raphael slowly lowered his tablet.

For once, he looked just as caught off guard as I was.

And judging by the grin beginning to spread around the breakfast table, we were never going to hear the end of it.

Hey, everyone!

After

A little beginning to some lighter chapters ahead is finally here! everything we’ve been through with these characters, I think we could all use a little breathing room.

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Chapter 935

Raphael

For perhaps the first time in my adult life, I had absolutely no idea what to say. Vincenzo had asked a simple question.

When were Gianna and I getting married?

I looked at him, then at Gianna. She was staring at me too, eyes wide enough to make it very clear that she had not seen that coming either. My mind went through several possible answers.

None seemed useful.

“Um...” Gianna muttered, slowly pouring herself a cup of coffee so she wouldn’t have to look at anyone’s face.

I cleared my throat, “Not yet.”

Vincenzo frowned, “What does not yet mean?”

I looked at Gianna again. She gave me a tiny shake of her head, as if somehow this was my fault. I had no idea how I was supposed to answer a question neither of us had expected to receive before breakfast.

Gianna put her cup down, “We, um...”

She glanced around the table, every single person was now listening.

“Marriage isn’t really what we want right now,” she said carefully, “I think we’re just going to... date for a while before we take the next step.”

Vincenzo stared at her.

She smiled nervously, “I mean, what’s the rush?”

He raised an eyebrow, “What’s the rush?”

The way he repeated it made the room noticeably quieter. I set my cup down beside my plate.

Here we go.

Vincenzo leaned back in his chair, “You’re asking me what’s the rush?”

Gianna’s shoulders dropped, “No... yes? I don’t know.”

Dante quietly whispered, “This is where you should probably lawyer up.”

Silvio nodded, “Preferably before Vincenzo starts asking about sleeping arrangements.”

Vincenzo pointed between us, “You two are dating.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re planning on continuing to date.”

“Yes.”

“Without being married.”

I looked at him, “That is generally how dating works.”

Silvio made a choking sound into his coffee. Dante looked down at his plate, shoulders shaking but Adriano openly laughed.

Vincenzo ignored all of them, “I understand how dating works.”

“Then I don’t see the issue.”

“The issue,” he said very seriously, “is that you’re my brother and she’s my sister.”

“Well, when you put it like that-”

Vincenzo cut me off, “So there are things you don’t get to do.”

Gianna rubbed her forehead, “Can we please not do this? Here. Now...”

Vincenzo tilted his head to the side, “You’re telling me the two of you are madly in love, you’re spending nights together, you’re sharing a bedroom whenever you want, and you expect me to sit here and pretend I don’t understand what happens when the bedroom door closes?”

Dante whispered, “Oh, this is going to be good.”

Silvio gave a solemn nod. “I have no idea what happens behind a closed bedroom door, but I’m suddenly very interested in finding out.”

Adriano lifted his coffee, looking entirely too innocent, “Same. So, Raphael, perhaps you could enlighten us. What exactly happens when that bedroom door closes?”

Vincenzo pointed at them without saying a word, the gesture making it very clear that he wanted them to shut

They immediately went quiet.

For approximately two seconds.

Then Luca, sitting farther down the table, said in his usual flat voice, “I think the children should be allowed to speak.”

And that immediately pissed Dante and Silvio off.

Gianna looked at Luca, “You’re not helping.”

Luca smiled slightly at her, “I wasn’t trying to help you.

Vincenzo turned back to me, “I know you’re an adult and I know you can make your own decisions but you’re not going to treat my sister like she’s one of the temporary women.”

I stared at him.

Gianna covered her face with one hand, “Oh my God.”

Vincenzo continued as if nothing unusual had happened, “She’s family.”

“I am aware.”

“So there are rules.”

I leaned back, “What rules?”

Vincenzo gave me a look that suggested the answer should have been obvious, “Respectable rules.”

Dante muttered, “That’s very clear.”

Silvio added, “Extremely specific.”

Adriano nodded, “I completely understand them. I proposed after a month or two of dating.”

Maddie let out a sharp scoff, “Don’t use our marriage as an example, because I will embarrass you in front of everyone.”

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Adriano took a slow sip of his coffee. “You can embarrass me all you want. You still said yes.”

Maddie glared at him, and kicked him under the table, “That’s not the point,” and then she turned to Gianna, ” Do not let these men rush you. Date Raphael for ten years if you want. Make him suffer. Make him earn that ring.”

Gianna nodded along with Maddie, the support giving her just enough courage to face Vincenzo, “Vincenzo, we’re not doing anything wrong.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

She blinked, “You are very strongly implying it.”

“I’m saying there are boundaries.”

“Between me and my boyfriend?”

Vincenzo narrowed his eyes at her, “Between you and my brother.”

I looked at Gianna, she looked at me, then I looked back at Vincenzo, “Do you actually think we’re going to sit in separate rooms and hold hands until we’re married?”

Vincenzo’s face remained completely serious, “If that’s what it takes.”

I almost laughed, “You cannot be serious.”

“I am.”

“Vincenzo.”

“I’m not saying you can’t kiss.”

I rolled my eyes, “How generous.’

“But there are limits.”

Gianna’s face turned even redder.

Dante leaned toward Silvio, “I think he’s going to make a rulebook.”

Silvio nodded, “Chapter one: kissing.”

“Chapter two,” Adriano added, “acceptable hand placement.”

Luca took another sip of coffee, “Appendix A: approved hugging duration.”

Gianna looked at them, “Stop it! All of you!”

Vincenzo looked genuinely annoyed, “I’m glad you all find this funny but I’m trying to protect my sister.”

Maddie spoke up from beside Gianna, “She’s twenty-two.”

“I know.”

“She’s not twelve. I think you’re confusing her with Jules.”

Vincenzo didn’t even blink, “Jules isn’t dating until she’s twenty-five, when her frontal lobe is fully developed and she can hopefully make sane decisions.”

Gianna stared at him, “Twenty-five?”

“Yes.”

“That’s… something.”

“It’s preventative.”

Maddie snorted, “You’re going to have that poor girl living under house arrest until she’s thirty.”

Vincenzo looked completely serious, “If necessary.”

“Vincenzo,” Gianna groaned.

“I’m being a responsible brother.”

Maddie smiled, “Then maybe let Gianna have a boyfriend for a while before she gets married.”

“I am letting her have a boyfriend.”

I looked at him, “What about me?”

Vincenzo looked at me thoughtfully and then shook his head, “You are on probation.”

Dante lost it. He bent forward, laughing into his hand.

I stared at Vincenzo, “What exactly am I on probation for?”

“Everything.”

“That’s not rational.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“It should.”

“I’m your older brother.”

“And?”

“That makes it rational.”

I considered that, “It does not.”

Vincenzo wasn’t finished, “And Raphael.”

I looked at him, “Yes?”

His voice became lower, “You cannot do all those things with her and expect there to be no strings attached.”

There was a brief silence. I understood exactly what he meant. Gianna understood too. Her entire face went crimson, “Vincenzo.”

He looked at her, “What?”

“You don’t have to say that.”1

“I think he does,” Dante said.

Silvio nodded, “Communication is important.”

“Shut up,” Gianna snapped.

I rubbed my forehead, “This conversation has become unnecessarily complicated.”

Vincenzo ignored me, “She’s not some woman you can sleep with and walk away from.”

Gianna nearly dropped her fork, “Vincenzo, please!”

“What? I’m being clear.”

Maddie reached over and patted Gianna’s arm, “I agree with you but I also think Vincenzo is trying to say that Raphael should take you seriously.”

Gianna looked at her, “I know he takes me seriously.”

“I do,” I said.

Vincenzo gave me a hard look, “Then marry her.”

I stared at him, “That is not how seriousness works.”

Adriano turned away, laughing.

Silvio whispered, “He’s going to need a flowchart.”

Luca looked at me, “You could always just get married and end this horrendous meeting.”

“No!” Gianna answered at the same time as me. We looked at each other, then back at Vincenzo.

“No,” she repeated.

Vincenzo folded his arms, “Then you’ll have to accept the rules.”

“What rules?” Gianna asked.

“Respect.”

I gave him a nod, “I already respect her.”

“Commitment.”

“I am committed to her and only her.”

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“Responsibility.”

I squeezed my eyes shut because it was obvious, “I have that.”

Vincenzo narrowed his eyes, “And restraint.”

And that’s where I paused and Gianna closed her eyes.

I looked directly at Vincenzo, “Define restraint.”

Gianna’s head snapped in my direction instantly, and I glanced at her. She mouthed, Don’t.

Vincenzo pointed at me, “That.”

“What?”

“That look.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What look?”

“Exactly that look.”

Luca calmly buttered another piece of toast, “This family needs a less exciting breakfast for once,” he said. 1

“No,” Dante replied, “This is the best breakfast we’ve had in months.”

Gianna covered her face.

“I can approve hand-holding?” Vincenzo said it like a question, uncertain, “I love you both. You’re my brother. She’s my sister. So if you hurt her, I will have a problem with you.”

I nodded, “Understood.”

“And if she hurts you, I’ll have a problem with her.”

Gianna blinked, “Wait. Really?”

“You’re both my family.”

That seemed to take some of the fight out of her.

He sighed, “Just…” He rubbed a hand over his face, “Don’t make me regret letting you two date.”

Dante immediately chimed in, “Too late. At this rate, we’ll be welcoming the family’s first incestuous little bastard soon.”

“DANTE!” Gianna and I shouted at the exact same time.

He grinned over his coffee, completely unbothered.

I glared at him, “Say one more word and you’re eating breakfast through a straw.”

Dante’s grin widened, “Worth it.”

Vincenzo threw a napkin at him hard and the table erupted again. I looked at Gianna. She was laughing now, cheeks still pink, eyes bright.

She finally caught her breath and shook her head, “Just so we’re clear,” she said, pointing between herself and me, “there isn’t going to be some huge family scandal because there aren’t going to be any children.”

Dante stopped laughing and slowly lowered his coffee, “What?”

Gianna looked at him as if the answer was obvious, “Children. We’re not planning on having any. At least not anytime soon.”

Dante stared at her, then at me and then back at her, “You both don’t want children?”

“No.”

“Why?”

Gianna shrugged, “Because we don’t. We’re happy with each other. We have a lot going on, and neither of us feels like getting married immediately and having a baby is something we need to do just because we’re in love.”

Dante stared at her as if she’d just announced she intended to sell the entire family mansion, and then whispered, “I want twelve.”

I stared at him, “Twelve… what?”

“Twelve children.”

Silvio slowly put his fork down, “Why?”

Dante looked around the table like everyone else was the unreasonable one.

He spread his hands, “Have you seen me? I’m a masterpiece. The world deserves at least twelve more opportunities to witness my genetics.”

Vincenzo stared at Dante, “You are not having twelve children, Dante.”

Dante looked offended, “Why not? I want a big family. I want twelve little versions of me running around this house, causing problems, breaking hearts, ignoring authority, and generally making everyone’s lives worse.”

Gianna laughed, “That sounds exhausting.”

I shook my head, “You’d regret it.”

“Never.”

“You’d have no sleep.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

“You’d spend your entire life paying tuition.”

Dante paused, “Okay, that’s a problem. Fine. Eleven.”

Gianna stared at him, “You negotiated down one child because of tuition?”

“I can afford twelve, you know?” he demanded. “Why is everyone acting like twelve is unreasonable?”

“Because you’re a commitment-phobe,” Silvio said immediately.

Dante made a face, “I am not.”

“You are.”

“I simply believe in keeping my options open.”

“That is the definition of a commitment-phobe,” Maddie said.

“And no woman is having twelve children with you,” Adriano said.

Luca didn’t look up from his coffee, “A billion dollars might convince her to have twelve. It certainly won’t convince her to raise them with you.”

Dante looked betrayed by all of us, “You people are supposed to support me.”

“We support your right to remain single,” Adriano said.

“I don’t want to remain single.”

Everyone went quiet.

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Dante’s expression changed when he realized what he’d just admitted.

Maddie slowly raised an eyebrow, “Oh?”

“I mean-eventually.”

“Eventually?” I repeated.

“Yes.”

“You’re the man who has spent the last ten years running away from anything that resembles emotional responsibility,” I stated.

“That is a gross exaggeration.”

“You disappeared for three days because a woman asked you where the relationship was going,” Silvio reminded him.

“She was moving too fast.”

“She asked if you wanted dinner next week,” I added.

“I felt pressured.”

Luca lowered the cup and looked at Dante over the rim, saying absolutely nothing.

Dante immediately pointed at him, “Don’t.”

Luca’s eyebrow lifted.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Luca took another slow sip, his face completely blank.

Dante stared at him, “You’re judging me.”

Luca shrugged, “I don’t need to.”

Gianna

The first thing I noticed about the room was how ordinary it was.

That bothered me.

After everything I had seen, I had expected something colder. A prison like room. Metal furniture. Bright lights. Something that looked like a place where people were examined and taken apart.

Instead, there was a gray sofa, two comfortable chairs, a bookshelf, a small table with a box of tissues, and a plant sitting near the window.

The plant was alive.

I stared at it for a few seconds, then I looked away. My right leg kept bouncing.

Up.

Down.

Up.

Down.

I tried to stop it, but three seconds later, it started again. The woman sitting across from me didn't comment on

She had introduced herself as Dr. Miriam Hale. She was somewhere in her forties, dressed simply, with her dark hair pulled into a loose bun. No white coat, no clipboard held against her chest, no tools resting beside her.

Just her.

And me.

She had spent the first ten minutes asking questions that seemed almost insultingly normal.

How had I slept?

"Not well."

How often were the nightmares happening?

"I don't know."

"Every night?"

I looked at the window, "Sometimes."

"How often is sometimes?"

"I don't count them."

She wrote something down. I immediately watched her pen. My leg bounced faster. She didn't smile. She didn't tell me to relax.

Dr. Hale leaned back slightly, "Let's make one thing clear before we go any further. What you say in this room is confidential. I know who your family is."

That made my attention snap back to her.

"The Capones have taken additional steps to protect your privacy," she continued, "Even my staff has been instructed not to use your name outside this office. Your appointment is not listed under your full name. Your records are protected. No one in this practice has permission to discuss your presence here."

I said nothing.

“There are also private security arrangements around the building. Not because I expect anyone to attack us, but

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because your family wanted every reasonable precaution taken.”

I studied her face. “And if someone asks you about me?”

“I don’t discuss my patients.”

“What if they’re the police?”

Her expression remained calm, “I know who your family is, Gianna. I also know better than to put my nose where it doesn’t belong. I have no interest in attracting attention from people with the kind of reach the Capones have.”

I looked down at my hands, “And you won’t tell Raphael?”

“No.”

“Vincenzo?”

“No.”

“Claire?”

“No.”

“Even if they ask?”

“No.”

Something in my shoulders loosened. Dr. Hale didn’t rush to fill the silence. She let me sit with it.

After a while, she asked, “Would you like to tell me why you’re here?”

“No.”

She nodded, “That’s okay.”

I looked at her, “You’re not going to make me?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because forcing you to talk would probably make this room a place where someone else controls what happens to you.”

My fingers stopped moving. She had guessed too close.

Instead, she asked, “Can we start somewhere easier?”

I gave a small shrug, “Maybe.”

“How were you as a child?”

I almost laughed, “Annoying.”

“What made you annoying?”

“Dyslexia.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“My father thought it was.’

The words came out before I could stop them.

Dr. Hale didn’t react dramatically, she only asked, “Why?”

I looked at the floor, “Because I was bad at school.”

“Bad at school?”

“I couldn’t read properly.”

She waited.

“I mixed things up. Letters. Words. I’d read something and forget what I’d just read. Sometimes I’d know what the word was when someone said it, but I couldn’t get it from the page.”

“How old were you when you were diagnosed with dyslexia?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Was anyone supportive?”

I smiled, “My mom.”

“Who wasn’t supportive?”

“My father.”

“What did he do?”

I rubbed my thumb against the side of my finger, “He decided it meant something was wrong with me and I needed to be fixed.”

“Did you believe him?”

“When you’re a child, you believe your father.”

She nodded slowly, “What happened when you struggled?”

“He’d make me read.”

“Was that helpful?”

“No.”

“What did it feel like?”

I stared at the carpet, “Like being punished for not being able to do something you have no control over.”

“Did anyone help you learn differently?”

“My mother tried.”

My leg started bouncing again. I pressed my palm against my thigh.

“He kept sending me to a doctor,” I said.

“A doctor for dyslexia?”

“Yeah... kinda, I don’t know what he was...”

“What kind of treatment would you get?”

I hesitated, “Different things.”

“Did any of them hurt you?”

My mouth went dry, so, I looked at the plant again, “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Okay.”

She accepted it immediately. There was no argument, no gentle push disguised as pressure.

Just okay.

For some reason, that made it easier to keep talking, “My father thought he could fix me.”

Dr. Hale’s voice remained quiet, “And did you think you needed fixing?”

“When I was little.”

“And now?”

I looked at her, “No.”

It was the first answer I’d given without looking away.

She nodded, “Good.”

I didn’t know why that word bothered me less than I had expected. She picked up her pen and moved on to more questions, and I answered as many as I could without feeling like I was giving away pieces of myself.

Still, I couldn’t understand how Raphael thought this was supposed to help me.

Sitting in a quiet room, talking to a stranger about things I’d rather forget, didn’t feel like help.

It felt pointless.

I wasn’t convinced any of it would change anything.

“Gianna, based on what you’ve told me today, the nightmares, the low mood, the exhaustion, the loss of interest in things you normally care about, the guilt, the difficulty sleeping, and what you’ve described about your thoughts and functioning, I want to assess you for depression as well as trauma-related symptoms.”

“I know I’m messed up.”

“I didn’t say you’re messed up.”

I looked at her, “You said it yourself.”

“I said you’re experiencing symptoms.”

“That sounds nicer.”

“It isn’t meant to sound nicer. It’s meant to be accurate.”

She then continued to ask more direct questions after that.

Had I been feeling hopeless?

“Yes.”

Had I been withdrawing from people?

“Yes.”

Was I enjoying things less than before?

“Yes.”

Was eating difficult?

“Sometimes.”

Was sleep difficult?

“Yes.”

Had I thought about dying?

I went still.

Dr. Hale didn’t change her question, “I’m asking because I ask every patient who comes to me with severe depression symptoms.’

I stared at my hands, “I don’t want to die but I want to hurt myself.”

“Have you wished you wouldn’t wake up?”

My fingers tightened together, “Sometimes.”

“Have you made a plan?”

“Once or twice.”

“Have you prepared anything?”

“No.”

“Do you feel that you might act on those thoughts?”

“I have in the past but now... no.”

She held my gaze for a moment, “Okay.”

She wrote something down.

I expected the room to change after that. It didn’t. No equipment was brought out for shock therapy or water therapy. There were no long needles waiting on a tray, ready to hurt me until fear forced my brain to obey.

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Chapter 940

There was just the sound of her pen moving across paper.

Eventually she set it aside, “You’re describing symptoms consistent with a major depressive episode, and given your history, I also want to keep trauma-related symptoms in mind. I don’t think medication alone will be enough.”

“I don’t want medication.”

“I expected you might say that.”

“Then why bring it up?”

“Because medication can reduce the weight of some of these symptoms enough for therapy to become easier.”

I frowned, “Will it stop the nightmares?”

“It may help with some of the symptoms around sleep and mood, but I don’t want to promise it will make the nightmares disappear. We may need to work on those separately.”

I looked at the floor, “I’ve taken medication before.”

“Do you remember what it was?”

“No.”

“Did you have a bad reaction?”

“I don’t know.”

She nodded, “We’ll start carefully.”

She explained that she wanted to begin with a standard antidepressant at a low starting dose, review how I responded, and watch for side effects. She told me it would take time to work and that the first few days weren’t a measure of whether it was helping. She also told me to contact her immediately if I developed a sudden worsening in mood, severe agitation, or thoughts of harming myself.

I listened without interrupting.

Then I asked, “What if I don’t like it?”

“Then we adjust the plan.”

“What if I stop taking it?”

“Tell me.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“You won’t be angry?”

“No.”

I stared at her.

She gave a small shrug, “I’m your doctor, not your father.”

That one landed harder than she probably intended. My eyes burned. I looked away before she could see too much.

Then she said, “You don’t have to tell me everything today.”

I nodded.

“But I need you to come back.”

I glanced toward the door, he was waiting outside, “I don’t think my boyfriend is going to give me much of a choice. He seems pretty convinced I need this.”

A small smile touched her face. “Then perhaps you can come back for yourself next time, even if he was the reason you came today.”

I looked at her, frowning.

She closed her folder, “You don’t have to believe this will help yet. Just give yourself enough time to find out. And next time, we can talk more about the nightmares if you’re ready.”

I hesitated, “Maybe.”

Her mouth lifted slightly, “Maybe is enough for today. You don’t have to fight everything that’s frightening you all at once. But eventually, you have to turn around and face it. The things we keep running from usually get louder in the dark.”

I said nothing.

She held my gaze, “And facing it doesn’t mean you’re not scared. It means you’re done letting fear decide where you go.”

Something inside me shifted. It was not enough to fix anything, it was not enough to make the nightmares disappear but enough to make me loosen my grip on my pants.

The therapy session had left my head full of heavy thoughts, but the moment I pulled Raphael into my bedroom and shut the door, all of it turned into static.

I pushed Raphael onto the bed, leaning his broad back against the wooden headboard but before he could even settle, I scrambled up onto the mattress, swinging one leg over his thighs and straddling his lap. I grabbed the front of his shirt with both hands, yanking him toward me as I crashed my mouth against his.

His arms wrapped hard around my waist, his huge hands digging into my hips, pinning me tight against him. The kiss was rough and frantic.

My tongue pushed past his lips, tangling with his, tasting the heat of his mouth while he growled low in his throat. His fingers tangled violently in my hair, pulling my head back just enough to deepen the angle before slamming his lips onto mine again.

My chest heaved against his. I rocked my hips forward, grinding my clothed pussy hard against the thick bulge growing beneath his pants.

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A dark moan tore from his chest. His hands slid down to grab my ass, squeezing full handfuls of my flesh through my shorts as he lifted me slightly and slammed my weight back down onto his hard shaft.

“Fuck,” he rasped out against my lips.

“Don’t stop,” I gasped, biting down softly on his lower lip before pulling it between my teeth.

Raphael grabbed my shirt at the collar and yanked, the thin fabric tearing down the front as he exposed my breasts. He leaned forward, burying his face into the side of my neck, biting down hard enough to leave a mark, then sliding his mouth down to suck fiercely on the skin above my collarbone.

His hands didn’t stay still for a second, one was shoved up under my torn top, his rough palm gripping my breast, his thumb rolling over my hard nipple through the thin lace of my bra, while his other hand dug into the small of my back, driving my pelvis into his with force.

I gasped, my hands flying to the back of his neck, my fingers pulling at his thick hair as I rode his lap in hard, fast thrusts. The friction of our clothes rubbing together created an unbearable, throbbing heat right between my thighs.

Every time I pressed myself down against his thick cock, a sharp bolt of pleasure shot straight up my spine.

He pulled his mouth away from my neck, grabbing my jaw with one big hand to force my lips back to his. His tongue invaded my mouth, deep and aggressive, while his hips bucked upward to meet every single slide of my body.

My whole frame was shaking, my mind completely consumed by the hard weight of his body beneath mine, the frantic sound of our wet lips, and the intense friction building up between us in the dark.

I closed my eyes.

For one second, I only wanted to disappear into him, then the darkness changed and faces appeared.

Small faces.

Too many of them.

Wide eyes staring through glass. Pale cheeks. Bruises. Bandages. Tiny hands pressed against the walls. Children who had looked at me as if I was the last person in the world who could save them.

My breath caught.

I jerked away from Raphael so quickly that I nearly lost my balance.

“Gianna?”

I scrambled backward, putting space between us, “No. No, no...”

Raphael immediately sat forward, “What happened?”

I couldn’t answer, the room was still the same, but I could see them.

All of them.

The children.

Their faces were everywhere I looked.

I pressed both hands against my head, “I keep seeing them.”

“Who?”

“The children.”

Raphael moved toward me, then stopped when he saw the look on my face, “They’re safe.”

“I know.”

“They’re being taken care of.”

“I know.”

“Gianna-”

“I want to see them.”

He went quiet.

I looked at him, “I want to go see them again.”

“Not tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s too soon.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’ve barely started dealing with what happened.”

“I need to see them.”

“You need to rest.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I need to know they’re really okay.”

“They are.”

“You can’t know that.”

“I do.”

His voice stayed calm, even though I could see the worry he was trying to hide.

“We have people there around the clock. Doctors, nurses, security. They’re being fed, treated, cleaned, and monitored. They’re getting everything they need.”

I blinked, “All of them?”

“All of them. They’re fighting for every single one of them,” he continued. “Some are worse than others, but they’re alive. They’re recovering. They’re being cared for.”

“I still want to go.”

“Gianna, maybe we should-”

“Now, Raph…”

He watched me for a moment, there was no argument in his expression anymore, just concern.

I pushed myself off the bed, “I want to see them now.”

Enjoy, my loves!

We’re healing, we’re getting better. So let’s breathe, enjoy the good moments, and soak it all in..

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Chapter 942

Gianna

Raphael’s hand rested against the small of my back as we walked through the hospital corridor.

The hospital was so quiet. There were no crowds, no strangers wandering around. The Capones had sealed the entire pediatric wing from everyone except the medical staff, the children, and the people directly responsible for their care.

A nurse saw us coming and stepped aside.

Raphael’s hand moved slightly against my back, guiding me through the open doors.

Then I saw them.

The children.

There were beds everywhere.

Some were occupied by children sleeping beneath thin blankets. Some sat propped against pillows while nurses checked dressings or adjusted IV lines. A few were awake, staring at the television mounted high on the wall. One little boy was trying to eat pudding with his left hand because his right arm was wrapped from the shoulder down.

A girl near the window had both legs covered in bandages.

Another child slept with one side of his face heavily dressed.

My feet slowed, I couldn’t make myself walk any farther.

Raphael stopped with me, “They’re doing better,” he said quietly.

I looked at him, “Better?”

He nodded, “The first priority was keeping them alive and getting the infections under control. Most of them came in malnourished, dehydrated, badly injured and with

untreated wounds. Some had been living with injuries for so long that their bodies had started adapting to them."

I looked back at the beds.

Raphael continued, "Every child has a pediatrician assigned to them. They're being seen by trauma surgeons, orthopedic surgeons, ophthalmologists, plastic surgeons, neurologists where necessary, dentists, nutritionists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists. They're not being pushed through the same treatment plan. Every child has a different one."

My eyes burned, "How long?"

"For some, weeks. For others, months," something in his voice made me look at him again, "The Capone medical network will keep treating them for as long as they need it. Surgeries, medication, prosthetics, rehabilitation, therapy, follow-ups. Their care isn't ending because they're discharged from this hospital."

I looked at the nearest child. A little girl was sleeping with a stuffed rabbit tucked beneath her arm.

"Some of them are missing eyes."

Raphael's expression changed very slightly, "I know."

"Can they get them back?"

He took a breath before answering, "Not in the way you're hoping."

My chest hurt.

"If the eye itself was destroyed or had to be removed, they can't replace it with a donor eye and restore sight. Whole-eye transplantation isn't a routine treatment that can give someone vision. It's still experimental."

I stared at the little girl, "But they can do something?"

"Yes," his hand remained on my back, "If the socket is healthy enough, an ocular surgeon can reconstruct it. Some children may eventually receive an orbital implant and then a custom prosthetic eye. It won't restore vision in that eye, but it can look remarkably natural. They'll also be monitored as they grow because children don't stay the same size. Their faces and eye sockets develop, so their prostheses may need to be changed or adjusted over time." 1

I nodded slowly, "And the ones who still have their eyes?"

“Some may regain useful vision. Some won’t. It depends on what was damaged.”

“Corneal transplants?”

“For some injuries, yes. If the cornea is badly scarred but the rest of the eye still has visual potential, a corneal transplant can sometimes help. Other children may need cataract surgery, retinal surgery or other reconstruction. But nobody is promising them vision that medicine can’t give them.”

That last sentence hurt more than everything else because it was honest. Raphael didn’t try to make the future sound perfect. He just made sure it didn’t sound hopeless.

“And the limbs?”

“Same principle.”

His thumb moved once against my back. I watched a boy being helped into a wheelchair.

“He’ll walk again?”

“Maybe. That’s what they’re working toward. But if he can’t, they’ll teach him how to live independently with whatever mobility he has.”

My eyes filled, “Will they go to school?”

“Yes,” the answer came immediately, “Not right away. Some aren’t physically ready. Some aren’t emotionally ready. But they’ll be educated. Tutors are already being arranged for the children who can handle lessons during recovery. Once they’re stable, they’ll have access to schools, special education support where needed, therapy and whatever accommodations their injuries require.”

I looked at him, “And when they’re adults?”

“They’ll have a future, Gianna, I will make sure of it, but that part is going to take longer.”

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He glanced toward the children.

“Some will need several surgeries. Some will need prosthetics. Some will live with permanent blindness or limited vision. Some will have scars that never completely disappear. Some will need years of therapy because what happened to them doesn’t end when the wounds close but none of that means their lives are over.”

I looked down. A small hand appeared over the edge of one of the beds. A child was awake. A little boy. He couldn't have been more than seven.

His hair was growing back unevenly where part of his scalp had been shaved. There was a thin scar near his eyebrow and a bandage around his left wrist.

His eyes found mine, then his mouth curved into a tiny smile. My heart broke. I looked at Raphael and he gave me the smallest nod.

I moved toward the bed. The boy watched me come closer. I pulled the chair beside him and sat down, "Hi."

His smile became a little bigger, "Hi."

His voice was soft. I didn't know what to say. There were hundreds of things I wanted to tell him, and somehow none of them felt right.

So I just smiled, "How are you feeling?"

He lifted one shoulder, "Tired."

"Me too."

That made him giggle. It was such a small sound that I almost cried.

"What's your name?"

"Noah," he told me.

"Noah," I repeated it carefully.

He studied my face for a moment then he reached toward me. I offered my hand. His fingers wrapped around two of mine. They were so small.

"You are the lady?"

I frowned slightly, "What lady?"

"The one who came. The one who got us out."

I couldn't answer.

He squeezed my fingers, "You saved us."

My eyes filled so quickly that I had to look down, "No. I helped get you out but you did the hard part. You survived. You fought hard and you survived. You stayed alive. You were

hurt and scared and still stayed here," I brushed my thumb gently over his knuckles, "That's very brave."

He shook his head, "I was scared."

"So was I."

He looked surprised, "You?"

I nodded, "Very."

"Of us?"

"No," I looked around the room, "Of what happened to you."

Then he asked, "Are we going home?"

The question nearly destroyed me, "Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know yet," I told him and his face fell immediately, "But we're working on it. Everyone here is working on making sure you have somewhere safe to go."

Some of these children had families searching for them. Some had no one. Some would need new homes. Some would need years before they could even understand what had happened.

He nodded as though that was enough, then his eyes moved past me, "Is that your husband?"

I turned. Raphael was standing a few feet away. He looked completely out of place in a children's hospital. Dark clothes, controlled expression, one hand in his pocket, the other hanging at his side.

"No."

Raphael raised an eyebrow.

I laughed despite myself, "He is my boyfriend."

The boy nodded thoughtfully, "He's scary."

Raphael looked at me and I tried my very best to hide my smile, "He's not scary."

The boy stared at him, "He is."

Raphael walked over. He crouched beside the bed, careful and slow because of his own injuries. The boy looked at him for another second as Raphael held out his hand. The boy hesitated before touching it.

“What’s your name?” Raphael asked.

“Noah.”

Raphael nodded, “Good to meet you, Noah.”

The boy looked at me, “He’s nicer than he looks.”

I laughed.

And then another voice called from the next bed. I turned and a little girl was sitting up. Her face was still bruised. One eye was covered with a dressing. She lifted her hand.

I stood, “Hi.”

She smiled, “You came back.”

I went to her and she reached for me before I even sat down. I took her hand. Another child called me, then another. Soon I was moving from one bed to another, listening to names, answering questions, letting tiny fingers hold mine.

One wanted to know if I liked chocolate.

Another asked if I could bring him a blue toy.

A girl wanted to know whether her hair would grow back.

One boy wanted to know if he could play football again.

I didn’t promise things I couldn’t promise. I told him the doctors were going to work with him. I told the girl her hair could grow back. I told the child who wanted chocolate that we could arrange that.

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Chapter 944

When one little girl asked whether she would always have to wear an eye patch, I told her the doctors would explain every step to her and that there were doctors who specialized in helping children with eye injuries.

I didn’t tell her that life might look different. She didn’t need me to decide that for her. She needed time. She needed doctors. She needed people who would stay.

And so I stayed.

Hours seemed to disappear. At some point, Raphael brought a chair beside mine. He didn’t rush me. He didn’t tell me we had to leave.

He just sat there. His hand found mine between the chairs. I looked down at our fingers, then I looked around the room again.

These children were alive, not untouched, not magically healed but they were alive.

Some would lose sight. Some would lose limbs. Some would carry scars for the rest of their lives. Some would need prosthetics, surgeries, therapy, medication and help learning things most children never have to think about. 1

There would be bad days.

There would be nightmares.

There would be days when a child looked into a mirror and hated what they saw. There would be days when a prosthetic hurt, when a surgery failed, when rehabilitation felt impossible.

But there would also be school mornings, birthday cakes, friends, arguments over toys, first crushes, graduations, jobs.

And love.

Ordinary things.

Things my father had tried to steal from them.

I looked at Raphael, “Thank you.”

He frowned slightly, “For what?”

“For bringing me here, for being with me... and for being yourself,” I looked around the room once more, “And now I know I can’t just leave them after they’re healed. They are always going to be with me, they’ll always be a part of my life.”

I stayed beside the bed until the little boy’s fingers finally loosened around mine. His breathing had become slow and even.

A nurse came to check his monitor, smiled at me, and quietly adjusted the blanket around his shoulders.

I stood and then I looked around the room. The anger came back. Something that had been waiting underneath my grief.

My father had gotten an easy end.

One final moment.

One stab to the artery, and it was over before he could truly feel what was happening.

Whatever happened to him, whatever he had done, it wasn't enough.

I looked at the children again and Giovanni had gotten to die. My father had gotten an ending.

These children didn't get one.

They got a lifetime of what he did to them.

My fingers curled around the edge of the chair, "No."

Raphael turned toward me.

I looked at him, "My father got an easy way out compared to what he did to these children. And I'm not letting Vance and Leone get one."

Raphael watched me carefully. I could see his mind already working, putting the pieces together, but there was no surprise in his eyes. He knew exactly where my thoughts had gone.

"I can't sleep, Raph. I close my eyes and I'm right back there. I can't breathe properly, I can't settle down, and this restlessness just won't leave me alone. I need the people who did this to us to pay for what they did. Maybe then I can finally put it behind me and start living again. I want them to pay, Raph. I need them to."

"What do you want us to do?" he asked. "You decide what happens, and I'll make sure it does."

I stared at him, "You're still doing the hunts?" 1

His expression barely changed, "Yes."

The Void.

His estate hidden deep in the woods outside Chicago. Miles of private land behind walls and gates, far enough from the city that nobody stumbled across it by accident.

Raphael and a small circle of wealthy acquaintances gathering predators, convicted offenders, repeat offenders, and the people the Capone wanted to get rid of. 1

The hunters went into the woods.

The people they hunted never came back out.

“You once told me these hunts were a lot of work to arrange.”

“They are. That’s why I only hold them once every six months now.”

“You also told me you had to find the right people first. From all over the world. That it takes time to verify everything and put it all together. And your friends are constantly bothering you about when the next one is happening.”

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Chapter 945

“Yes, why would you ask?”

I looked back toward the children, “So all that work. All those people. All those names. What if you stopped looking for new prey all the time?”

His attention sharpened.

I turned toward him, “What if you had only two names? Vance and Leone.”

Something changed in his face, a dark glint flashed in his eyes, “What are you suggesting?”

“A hunt that doesn’t end.”

He stared at me with a lot of questions in his eyes.

I stepped closer, “They don’t get an easy ending. They don’t get a bullet, a cell, or the chance to decide when it’s over. Put enough guards around them that they can’t hurt themselves. They don’t get to escape everything they did.”

Raphael’s expression remained calm, but I could almost see the calculations starting behind his eyes, “You’re asking for something outside the normal structure.”

“I’m asking you to make this personal.”

His eyes stayed on mine, “Who are you?”

A laugh escaped me, and I rolled my eyes, “What if they wake up every morning and have no idea what the day is going to bring? What if, for once, they’re the ones trapped somewhere they can’t leave? No control. No way out. No idea what comes next.”

I placed my hand on his chest and looked up into his eyes.

“I want them to remember what it felt like to be helpless. To lie awake wondering whether someone was coming for them, whether the next door opening meant pain, whether someone was about to take something from them. I want them to live with that uncertainty,” I held his gaze, “Every single day.”

His mouth curved. It was the smallest, darkest expression I had ever seen on him, “Then we need to start preparing.”

I exhaled.

Raphael moved toward the corridor, and I followed. His mind had already moved several steps ahead of mine.

“The first thing we establish is the objective,” he said.

“What objective?”

“Neither man dies.”

I nodded.

“They remain alive, medically stable and physically capable of understanding what is happening to them.”

Raphael continued in the same calm voice.

“No random participants. No audience. No unnecessary involvement from anyone outside the people we trust completely. And no improvisation.”

“You really are making a plan.”

“I always make a plan.”

“Even for revenge?”

“Especially for revenge.

I smiled up at him.

That was Raphael. He could take something emotional and turn it into a list of problems to solve.

“We also need to separate their treatment from their punishment,” he continued. “If either man requires medical care, they receive it. We don’t let infection or untreated injuries make the decision for us,” he said it without raising his voice, “No confusion. No delirium. No convenient excuse. If they suffer, they should know why.”

Part of me wanted something uglier, something final, but the thought of Leone waking up every morning and remembering that he had lost everything because of what he had done made something inside me settle.

Raphael continued, “And there’s another problem.”

“What?”

“Vance and Leone know how to manipulate people. They’ll try to make someone feel sorry for them. And if anyone who frequents the Void starts to forget what they did, I want the truth right in front of them.”

“So, what do we do?” I asked.

“We’ll put screens throughout the property. Their victims’ names. Their faces. The lives they had before Vance and Leone took them. Every child whose life was cut short because those two men decided they had the right to treat human beings like spare parts. So if someone starts feeling sorry for them, they can look at those screens and remember exactly who they’re feeling sorry for. They can see what happens when men like Vance and Leone are given even a little power over someone weaker than them.”

I looked through the glass doors toward the children’s ward. The little boy was still asleep. A nurse adjusted his blanket again.

My anger didn’t disappear but it simply changed shape and became something far colder.

Janedoewritings

Author

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 946

Gianna

By the time we reached Raphael's basement office beneath Orion Vector Technologies, I had already changed my mind three times.

Not about Vance and Leone.

About whether I was actually capable of doing this.

The basement was built for work that needed privacy. Large screens covered one wall, two long desks sat beneath them, and half the room was taken up by equipment I couldn't name without asking Raphael. A whiteboard stood against the far wall.

Raphael switched on the lights. I stared at the empty board, then at him. He took off his jacket and dropped it over the back of a chair.

I followed him, "What are we doing first?"

"Defining limits."

"Maximum pain."

His eyes came to mine, "Without causing permanent damage."

"And without killing them."

"Correct."

"And they stay conscious?"

"Not necessarily."

I frowned.

Raphael pulled a chair toward the desk for me, "We're not designing something based on how much pain we can create. That's not engineering."

I sat down, "What is it, then?"

"Controlled effect."

He opened a blank file on the main monitor, "We define the outcome first. Then we work backward from the constraints."

I leaned toward the screen as he started to write a list.

I stared at the list, "You make revenge look like a university project."

“It works better that way.”

I picked up a marker, “You’re no fun.”

“I’m extremely fun.”

I looked at him. He looked back, neither of us smiled, then I burst out laughing, “That might be the biggest lie you’ve ever told me.”

He reached across the desk and took the marker from my hand, “You’re distracting me.”

My cheeks warmed. I turned toward the whiteboard before he could see it, “I want something they can’t predict.

“That’s difficult.”

“You’re supposed to be a genius.”

“I am.”

“Then solve it.”

He gave me a long look, then his mouth finally curved. I smiled back.

Then we worked.

I filled one section of the board with ideas and crossed most of them out. My handwriting became worse the faster I tried to keep up with my thoughts. Letters collided, words changed shape halfway through. I stopped, the marker hovered above the board and I stared at what I’d written.

It was wrong.

I knew it was wrong before I even read it, “God,” I rubbed my forehead and erased it, “Again.”

He turned toward me, “You don’t have to-”

“I know,” I picked up the marker again, “But my brain is moving faster than my hand. And then my hand decides we’re doing something completely different.”

I tried again. This time, I said each part aloud while I wrote it slowly. This is what my new therapist taught me, the words were still uneven, the spacing was terrible but they were mine.

Raphael came closer.

He didn’t take the marker, he simply pointed at one section, “That part.”

“What about it?”

“The idea is good.”

I looked at him suspiciously, “You actually think so?”

“Yes.”

“You aren’t just being nice?”

“I don’t know how to be nice,” he tapped the board, “You noticed something I didn’t.”

I looked at the design, “Which was?”

“Human reaction.”

He explained it without making me feel stupid.

My idea wasn’t technically perfect, but it exposed a weakness in the assumptions we’d made. If the target could understand the pattern, they could eventually adapt to it.

“So we don’t give them a pattern,” I said.

“Exactly.”

I stared at the board, my mind already racing again as I scribbled down the most fucked-up idea I could think of for them. Every time Raphael tried to interfere, I pointed the marker at him like a warning. He immediately backed off, careful to keep his pristine white shirt far away from the ink.

The fourth time, he caught my wrist before I could poke him again. I tried pulling my hand away. He didn’t let go.

His eyes dropped to my mouth for half a second and I forgot what I was going to say.

Raphael leaned closer, “You were saying?”

I swallowed, “I... forgot.”

His thumb moved lightly over the inside of my wrist.

I smiled, “You’re doing that on purpose.”

“Doing what?”

“Trying to distract me.”

“Is it working.” 1

I narrowed my eyes and before I could answer, he leaned in and kissed me. It wasn’t long, just enough to make me forget the whiteboard entirely.

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Chapter 947

When he pulled away, he kissed the corner of my mouth again, “Come on.”

I tried to stay serious, “You’re ruining my genius.”

He released me, “Then work.”

I turned back toward the desk, still smiling. We continued for another hour, not designing something meant to make suffering into a science.

We were building the framework for a controlled system and weapons that could restrain, disorient and overwhelm without turning unpredictable, with every dangerous variable accounted for and medical safeguards built into the plan.

Raphael caught errors before they became problems. I challenged assumptions he had accepted too quickly.

He corrected my calculations. I corrected his.

Sometimes we argued over one tiny detail for ten minutes.

And sometimes I was right.

Those were my favorite moments.

Especially when he stared at the screen, went quiet, and finally said, “You’re right.”

I would lean back in my chair, “Say it again.”

“No.”

“Raphael.”

“No.”

“You have to.”

“I don’t.”

I laughed, “You hate admitting I’m right.”

“No, I hate that you’re enjoying it.”

I picked up the marker again. My handwriting was still messy. My spelling still betrayed me. Some words took three attempts but I kept going without thinking too much of it.

Because this time, nobody was standing over me telling me I was stupid. Nobody was forcing letters into place until they blurred. Nobody was telling me that my brain needed to be fixed before I deserved to be proud of it.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“I’m actually good at this.”

Raphael leaned back in his chair, “You are.”

The answer came without hesitation. Something warm spread through me. Then I reached over and deliberately dragged one messy line through his perfectly organized notes.

He stared at the screen, then at me. I tried not to laugh, “You did that on purpose.”

“Maybe.”

His chair scraped against the floor. I immediately took a step back, “Don’t.”

He came around the desk. I backed away, laughing, “Raphael.”

“You ruined my work.”

“It was boring.”

“It was organized.”

“It needed personality.”

He caught me around the waist. I squealed and tried to escape.

“You’re about to learn why I keep my work private,” he said it like a threat.

He kissed my cheek hard.

I laughed against him, “You’re not mad.”

“No.”

“Then why are you threatening me?”

“I’m considering consequences.”

“For drawing on your notes?”

“For being annoying.”

I looked up at him, “You’re in love with me.”

He paused, then his hand settled more securely at my waist, “Unfortunately.”

The screens continued glowing behind us.

The whiteboard was covered in crossed-out equations, messy handwriting, and ideas neither of us had finished but for once, I didn’t care that my writing looked imperfect.

I had put it there.

I had thought of it.

And Raphael had listened.

We were finally done, or at least, done enough for tonight.

The whiteboard was a mess. My handwriting covered half of it, Raphael’s neat notes filled the other half, and several pages had been abandoned across the desk after I decided they were useless.

I dropped the marker onto the table. I walked around the desk and stopped in front of him, “I can’t think of anything else.” 1

My fingers curled around the edge of the desk.

Raphael studied me for a moment, then he held out his hand, “Come here.”

I took it and he pulled me onto his lap. The change in position made me laugh softly. His arms settled around my waist. I rested my hands against his shoulders.

His hand slid up to the back of my neck, his long fingers tangling in my hair as he pulled my face down to his.

His lips met mine in a kiss that immediately turned deep. It wasn't the sweet, quick kiss from earlier. His tongue pushed into my mouth, tasting me until my breath caught in my throat.

I wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders, pulling myself tighter against his chest. His other hand slid down my back, cupping my hip and pulling me hard against his lap until I felt the solid bulge beneath his trousers pressing right against my thigh.

A low moan escaped my lips, but as his mouth moved down to my jawline, my mind suddenly short-circuited.

The heat in my blood began to curdle. Behind my closed eyes, Raphael vanished for a fraction of a second, replaced by the ghost of cold glass cages, grey walls, and the shadowy faces of Leone and Vance. The rage and the panic twisted together in my chest, locking my lungs up tight.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 948

I pulled my head back, my breath coming out shallow and fast. My hands pressed flat against his chest, holding a tiny bit of space between us.

"Raph..." I gasped, my voice trembling. I looked down at his dark eyes, feeling a sudden wave of frustration at myself. "I can't... I can't focus on this. On us."

His hands stilled on my body, his gaze locking onto mine with total patience. He didn't pull away, but he stopped pushing, "Why?" he asked softly.

"Because they're still in my head," I whispered, my heart hammering against my ribs, "Leone. Vance. Every time I try to just feel you, their faces pop up. I can't let go. Not until they are completely gone."

Raphael stared at me for a long moment, his thumb gently stroking the side of my face, "Maybe this will help," he murmured quietly.

He reached over to the large desk console beside his chair without making me get off his lap. His fingers moved over a small hidden keypad near the edge of the sleek black surface. He tapped a short code, then hit a button on the side panel.

The main monitor on the wall-the giant screen where we had just been working on our technical diagrams- went dark for a second.

Then, a file opened.

A video began to play.

My breath hitched in my throat as I recognized the room immediately. It was this exact office. This exact chair.

Months ago.

On the screen, I was sitting on Raphael's lap, my skin glowing beneath the soft overhead lights.

The video showed my head thrown back in pure pleasure, while Raphael's hands gripped my hips, driving himself up into me again and again.

The sound of our heavy breathing, and my loud, breathless cries filled the quiet basement speakers. My cheeks burned red-hot, but I couldn't look away.

"Raph..." I breathed, my eyes wide as I watched my own screen image arch her back while he buried his face in her neck.

The next moment, he shifted my weight effortlessly, turning my body around in his lap so my back pressed flat against his chest, matching the exact position playing on the screen above us.

"Look at it, Gianna," Raphael whispered near my ear. His chest rumbled against my back as he held me close, Look at who you are with me. They aren't in that video. They aren't in this room."

He reached down, his broad, warm hand slowly sliding beneath the hem of my shirt. His palm flattened against my bare stomach, his long fingers spreading wide over my skin.

On the screen, the video showed Raphael, asking me to lower myself on his cock. The sound of his deep, guttural growls echoed off the walls.

Real-life Raphael leaned his head down, pressing his lips to the sensitive skin right behind my ear. He bit the soft lobe gently, then dragged his open mouth down the long line of my neck.

"You belong to me," he whispered softly against my skin, his hand moving up from my stomach to cover my breast. His thick thumb found my nipple through my thin bra, rubbing it in slow circles until it hardened into a tight peak, "Not to them, not to your past."

I let out a ragged gasp, my fingers digging into his thigh as I watched myself on the screen crying out his name.

The sight of us together-so wild, so completely consumed by each other-started to push the dark thoughts right out of my head. The cold images of cages and those men began to melt away, replaced entirely by the scorching reality of his touch.

Raphael slid his hand lower, gliding over the fabric of my pants, his palm cupping my crotch. He didn't press hard at first. He just held me there, letting the heat of his hand seep straight through the cloth into my core.

Then, his fingers began to move, rubbing up and down in a slow stroke that matched the thrusts playing on the wall in front of us.

"Raph... oh God," I whimpered, leaning my head back against his shoulder.

My hips twitched on his lap, instinctively pressing down against his hand. The wetness was already soaking through my underwear, making the friction through my clothes agonizingly hot.

On the screen, I rode him fast and hard, completely out of control.

bapt 949

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 949

In the chair, Raphael's fingers hooked into the waistband of my pants. He tugged them down slightly, just enough to slip two of his long, warm fingers inside my underwear.

He slid them straight into my hot, slick folds, finding my sensitive spot and stroking it with slight pressure.

A loud moan burst from my throat, filling the room just like the sound coming from the speakers. I arched my back, my chest heaving, completely trapped between the beautiful video on the wall and the real, hard body holding me tight.

"See?" Raphael whispered, his voice dark and heavy with deep satisfaction as his fingers worked faster inside me, "There is only us."

Raphael lifted me off him effortlessly. He set me down on my feet right beside the large desk, the cool air touching my bare stomach where my shirt was pushed up.

I looked at him from over my shoulder, as his hands reached up, grabbing the waistband of my pants. He yanked them down over my hips in one smooth pull, taking them all the way down my legs until I could step completely out of them.

Before I could move, his hands gripped the soft flesh of my ass. He pulled my hips towards him, burying his face into my waist first and then, he opened his mouth and bit down hard on my right ass cheek, his teeth sinking into my skin just enough to make me let out a sharp gasp.

The tiny sting sent a flash of intense heat straight down into my core.

He smoothed his hand over the bite mark, his warm tongue licking the sore spot before he hooked his fingers into the sides of my underwear. He dragged them down slowly, stripping them off my feet, leaving my lower half completely bare in the light of the office.

Raphael looked up at me from his chair, his broad chest rising and falling, his hands resting on my bare thighs," We don't have to go all the way tonight," he rasped, "Just let me ease you back into me, Gianna. Find your way back to me, baby."

He stood up to his full, towering height, his frame blocking out the light. He grabbed me under my thighs, lifted me up, and sat me right on the edge of the smooth, dark desk. The cool surface felt sharp against my bare skin, making me shiver, but Raphael immediately stepped in close, filling the gap between my knees with his body.

He sat back down onto his chair, his hands sliding under my rear. He gripped my ass tightly, lifting me slightly as he pulled my body straight to the very edge of the desk, forcing my hips to tilt up toward him.

His long fingers reached down, spreading my wet folds wide open to the cool air and the soft light of the glowing screens.

Raphael leaned down, his face inches from my bare center. He let out a low, rough breath that blew hot air over my sensitive skin. He brought his thumb up, pressing it directly against my swollen clit, rubbing it in slow, tiny, agonizingly good circles that made my toes curl up tight.

"Look at you," he said low in his throat, his dark eyes fixed right between my legs, "So fucking beautiful. Look how pretty you are, Gianna. So wet, so soft."

His thumb stroked over my peak again, pressing a little harder, teasing the sensitive spot until my back arched off the desk. My hands flew out, gripping the cool edges of the wood as a soft, helpless moan pulled from my throat.

"Raph..." I whimpered, my thighs shaking slightly.

"I've got you," he rasped, his other hand moving to cup my cheek, forcing me to look at him as his thumb kept working between my legs, driving every single dark thought completely out of my mind.

Raphael dropped his head lower, burying his face right between my wide thighs. His warm breath blasted hot across my wet folds, making my skin goosebump instantly. Then, his tongue shot out, dragging a hard, long stroke straight up from the bottom of my entrance all the way to my swollen clit.

“Raph!” I screamed out, my hands clutched the edges of the desk so hard my knuckles went white.

He latched his mouth directly onto my peak, sucking my clit deep into his warm mouth while his tongue swirled around it in circles.

Chapte 950

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 950

The wet sounds of his mouth over me filled the quiet room, echoing off the high walls alongside the noise from the video still playing behind us.

His hands gripped the sides of my thighs, his broad fingers digging into my skin, holding my legs open as wide as they could go. He licked me like a man dying of thirst, swallowing my taste, licking up every drop of wetness.

While his mouth kept working over my clit, Raphael drove two fingers straight inside me in one deep, hard thrust. The sudden intrusion made my back snap off the cold wood. My head hit the desk, my mouth opening in a silent gasp as his fingers stretched me wide.

I forcefully pushed myself on my elbows to keep looking at him. He didn’t ease into it gently. He started pumping his fingers in and out of me with fast, aggressive strokes, curling them upward to hook hard against my sensitive spot inside.

“Fuck, Gianna,” he grumbled against my skin, “You taste so fucking good. So tight around my fingers.”

He added a third finger, forcing my body to take the extra thickness. He rammed his hand deeper, his palm slapping hard against my bare ass with every single downward thrust. His thumb stayed locked over my clit, grinding down in circles while his fingers worked like a machine inside me.

The heat inside my belly built up into a wild, terrifying storm. The pleasure was too sharp, too deep, completely tearing away every last piece of control I had left. I twisted my hips wildly on the desk, my legs shaking violently as I tried to chase the intense peak hovering right out of reach.

“Look at me,” Raphael demanded, pulling his mouth away for a fraction of a second, his dark eyes burning with raw hunger as his hand kept thrusting relentlessly inside me. “Come for me, baby. Give it all to me.”

His fingers gave one last deep, upward hook, jamming hard into my hot center while his thumb pressed down flat against my clit.

That was it.

My whole body shook out of control.

A sharp, violent wave of pure climax crashed over me, locking my muscles up tight. I screamed his name, my inner walls clamping down hard around his fingers, pulsing again and again in tight, helpless spasms.

Raphael let out a laugh, deep in his chest, keeping his fingers buried deep inside me, stroking me through every single pulse of my release until my legs went completely limp and my body sagged back flat against the desk, gasping for air.

Raphael stayed between my legs, his hands resting heavily on my thighs as my body slowly stopped shaking. He slid his fingers out of me with a soft, slow pull, leaving my skin dripping and warm.

He rose up to his full height, his frame towering over me as I lay flat on the desk, my chest heaving and my legs resting loosely against his hips. He leaned down, placing his large palms on either side of my head, trapping me beneath his shadow.

His eyes searched my face, quiet, intense, and completely unreadable, looking for any lingering trace of fear or pain. His thumb came up to brush a soft stroke across my cheekbone, wiping away a stray tear of overstimulation.

“Now,” he rasped, “What are you thinking now?”

I looked up into his beautiful face, feeling the beat of his heart against my hands as they rested on his chest. The cold cages, the shadowy faces, and the terrible memories were completely gone for a moment, burned away by the fire of his touch.

A small smile broke across my face. I reached up, my fingers tangling in his dark hair, pulling him down an inch closer, “You,” I whispered softly, “Only you...”

Janedoewritings

Author

I hope you guys enjoy today’s updates.

I’m going to do my best to wrap up this story within the next few days. I think it’s time. I just haven’t been able to make the time for it lately, and I know that’s beer –