My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 981

Gianna

A year changed more than I had expected.

When I first wrote Hazel AI across that empty whiteboard, the office had been nothing more than a handful of desks, unopened boxes and an idea I wasn't completely sure I could turn into something real.

Now, there were people everywhere.

Engineers moved between desks with laptops tucked beneath their arms. Researchers argued over data in the conference room. Product designers were still making last-minute changes to screens that were supposed to be finished two weeks ago, and someone had left three cups of coffee beside my computer because apparently nobody in my company trusted me to remember to drink one myself.

The office had grown.

So had I.

I wasn't the woman who had walked into therapy convinced that talking about her life would be pointless. I wasn't the girl who had spent years believing every mistake proved her father right. I wasn't even the young woman who had first opened her laptop and wondered whether she still had what it took to work in technology.

I had learned.

I had failed.

I had built things that didn't work and rebuilt them.

I had sat in meetings where people twice my age challenged my ideas and learned that being questioned didn't mean I was stupid.

And now, a year after opening my first office, Hazel AI was launching something that had started as a much smaller idea.

We called it Luma.

It wasn't designed to teach children how to learn the "right" way.

That was the whole point.

There was no single right way.

The platform had been built around the idea that education should adapt to the person sitting in front of the screen rather than forcing that person to adapt to the system.

A student could change the way text appeared on the screen. They could increase spacing, adjust the size of the letters, change contrast, slow the reading pace or have written material read aloud. Lessons could be presented through text, audio, visual material or a combination of them.

The system could adjust exercises according to how a student responded, repeat concepts without aking the student feel as though they had failed, and offer different ways of reaching the same answer.

It wasn't only designed for dyslexia.

That was something I had been very careful about.

A student with dyslexia could use it.

So could a student with ADHD who struggled to stay focused on long blocks of information.

A student with a visual impairment could use accessibility features designed around their needs.

A student with hearing difficulties could rely on visual instruction and captions.

A student with motor difficulties could use alternative input methods.

A student who simply learned better by hearing something instead of reading it could use audio.

And a student who didn't have a disability at all could use it because they preferred learning differently.

That mattered to me.

I didn't want to build another system that looked at a child and asked, What's wrong with you?

I wanted the first question to be, How do you learn best? 1

The launch event was being held in the main conference room of our new office.

The entire family had shown up for me.

Every single one of them.

Vincenzo stood near the back with Claire beside him. Alessia had taken a seat beside Maddie, while Adriano was talking quietly with Silvio. Dante was already eating something he had apparently found on the refreshment table despite the fact that the presentation hadn't started.

Luca stood beside him, watching with the same expression he usually wore when Dante was doing something stupid.

Jules was sitting near the front.

She was old enough to understand that this wasn't just another one of my work projects.

Raphael stood beside me.

He had been there through every stage of this. The first messy prototype. The first failed presentation. The first contract. The first office. The first employee.

The first time I stayed at work until two in the morning because I couldn't stop thinking about a problem.

He had never tried to take over. He had never told me how to build my company. He had simply been there.

Today was no different.

Nooked around the room and suddenly, I wasn't sure I could do this.

Raphael noticed, "You're nervous."

"I'm not."

He glanced down at my hands.

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ollowed his gaze, "Fine. Maybe a little."

“You’ve presented to investors.”

“Investors don’t include my entire family.”

The projector came on, the room quieted. I walked to the front. For a second, I looked at the screen behind me.

Luma.

Underneath it was the line we’d chosen for the launch:

Learning should adapt to the learner.

I took a breath.

“About a year ago, I started working on this because I had a very personal reason for wanting to understand how people learn.”

I paused.

“I grew up believing that if my brain didn’t work the way someone expected it to, then I was the problem. I don’t believe that anymore.”

My eyes moved briefly toward Raphael.

Then I turned toward Jules and Gio Jr. He stood with Perla in the corner, leaning against the wall with the support of a crutch.

“I don’t think intelligence has one shape. I don’t think learning has one speed. And I don’t think struggling with something means a person isn’t capable of mastering it.”

I clicked to the next slide.

The interface appeared.

“This is Luma.”

I demonstrated the reading tools first, then the audio support, then the adaptive exercises.

I showed how the system could change the presentation of the same lesson depending on what helped the student engage with it.

One of the engineers joined me for the technical section, explaining how the system analyzed learning patterns without turning those patterns into a diagnosis.

That part had been important to me from the beginning. The software wasn't there to tell a child what was wrong with them.

It was there to give them options.

When the demonstration finished, I looked at the audience.

his isn't a machine that fixes people," I smiled slightly, "People don't need fixing simply because they learn differently.".

Nobody spoke for a moment, then Jules started clapping loudly.

Then everyone else, the room filled with applause. I laughed, suddenly embarrassed, and looked down.

When I looked up again, Raphael was watching me. There was something in his expression that made my throat tighten.

Pride.

The kind of pride that came from knowing exactly how hard I'd worked to get here.

Vincenzo stood and clapped harder. Alessia was smiling and nodding at me. Claire had tears in her eyes. Maddie was crying and taking pictures.

Silvio shouted, "That's my sister!"

Dante immediately corrected him, "Technically she's all of ours, including Raphael."

Luca looked at him, "Please don't make this about incest again."

Dante shrugged, "I was being supportive."

"You were eating during her presentation."

"I can multitask."

I stepped away from the podium before they embarrassed me even more. Jules reached me first and threw her arms around me.

"You made that?"

I hugged her back, "We all made it."

"No," she pulled away and pointed at me, "You made it."

I smiled, “Okay. I made it.”

She grinned, “It’s really cool. You’re really cool.”

Being called cool by my younger, infinitely cooler sister was probably the highest compliment I was going to receive all day.

Then Vincenzo came over, he put one hand on my shoulder, “I knew you could do this, Picolina.”

I smiled, “That’s a dangerous amount of confidence.”

He smiled, “You work harder than all of us.”

Dante called from behind him, “Speak for yourself.”

Luca didn’t even look up, “He’s right. Sleeping eight hours a night is technically a full-time commitment.”

Dante stared at him, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Luca finally glanced over, “Nothing. I was just impressed you found something you’re actually committed to.” 1

I laughed so hard I had to look away. For a few minutes, everyone talked at once. Questions, congratulations, jokes.

I stood there listening to them, looking around at the people who had somehow become my family, and something inside me just... settled.

I didn’t want the children to become a chapter in my life that ended the moment they were safe.

That thought had been sitting in the back of my mind for months, especially as my work at Hazel AI started becoming more serious.

I had spent so much time learning how to build systems, studying how information moved through networks, understanding how technology could recognize patterns humans might miss, and slowly becoming comfortable calling myself an engineer and a founder instead of someone who was simply trying to prove she belonged in the room.

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But there was one thing I couldn't stop thinking about.

What happened after the rescue?

Finding a child was only the beginning. Getting them medical treatment was only the beginning. Giving them a safe room, a bed, clean clothes and people who cared about them was important, but none of those things answered the question that kept bothering me.

What happened when the cameras were gone?

There were three hundred children already under our care, and every one of them had a future that needed more than medicine.

So I decided to build something.

Not another hospital program, not another charity that handed out supplies and disappeared six months later. I wanted something structured, permanent and designed around what happened after survival.

I called it The Haven Project.

The name came to me late one night while I was sitting alone in my office, surrounded by notebooks, and financial projections.

I wanted the word haven because that was exactly what I wanted it to be-a place people could grow without constantly being reminded that the worst thing that had ever happened to them was supposed to define the rest of their lives.

The first thing I did was stop thinking about it as one giant project.

I broke it down into medical care, education, mental-health support, legal documentation, family and social support, vocational training and independent living.

Each part had its own budget, its own specialists and its own measurable goals. No vague promises about changing lives. No inspirational slogans pretending that money alone could solve years of damage. If we were going to do this, I wanted to know exactly where every dollar went and exactly what we were trying to accomplish with it.

And I wanted the children involved in deciding what came next.

Some of them were young enough that adults would obviously have to make most decisions for them. Others were old enough to have opinions, ambitions and ideas of their own. I didn't want to build a beautiful institution where everyone simply followed a plan I had designed for them.

I wanted to build somewhere they could eventually leave.

That was the entire point.

Over the following months, the project grew far beyond what I had originally imagined. We established long-term medical partnerships, brought educators into the planning, created scholarship funds and started developing individual education and career plans for the older children. We built systems for racking appointments and treatments without turning their lives into numbers on a spreadsheet, and we made privacy one of the first requirements rather than something we promised to think about later.

The technology side became my responsibility.

I designed the first version of a secure platform that kept each child's records organized across the different professionals involved in their care. Medical history, education progress, rehabilitation goals, appointments, documentation and eventually career planning could be managed in one place, with access restricted according to exactly what each professional needed to see.

And I was beginning to understand that usefulness was what I wanted my work to be measured by.

By then, I had already helped reunite eighty-five of the children with their families, including families living outside the country, and watching those reunions had changed something in me. Not because it made me feel like I had accomplished something heroic, but because it showed me how much could happen when the right people, resources and information were put together properly.

Sadly, we lost two of them. They had already suffered far too much by the time we found them in that facility, and there was nothing the doctors could do to save them. Losing those two lives only made my anger toward Vance and Leone burn hotter, and once a month, Raphael and I would make our way to the Void for one of our rather twisted little escapades.

The remaining children deserved that same chance at a future, whatever that future eventually looked like.

One afternoon, I stood in the Hazel AI conference room while my team went through the first full presentation of The Haven Project.

The screen behind them displayed the numbers. Projected costs over five years. I listened quietly until they reached the final slide.

Goal: Independence.

That was the part I cared about.

I wanted to build things that mattered and I wanted my name to mean something because of what I had built.

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Not because of where I came from.

The Haven Project launch was being held at one of Hazel AI's newest buildings, a glass-and-steel space we'd converted into a permanent headquarters for the initiative.

The entrance had been transformed for the evening, with soft lighting, a long reception desk, photographers positioned along the carpet and enormous screens displaying nothing more dramatic than the project's name.

THE HAVEN PROJECT

I stood just inside the entrance for a moment, watching people arrive through the glass doors. Journalists, technology reporters, magazine editors, representatives from international organizations.

Doctors and educators who had agreed to work with us. People from charities and advocacy groups. Government representatives who wanted to understand how the system would work.

And, inevitably, a ridiculous number of photographers who seemed convinced that standing still near a flower arrangement constituted an important business activity.

A woman from one of the magazines recognized me almost immediately, "Ms. Toricelli?"

I turned.

She approached with a photographer following her, smiling as she introduced herself and explained that they were covering Hazel AI's expansion and the launch of The Haven Project. She asked if I would mind taking a few photographs.

"Sure."

The photographer raised his camera, "Could you stand closer to the logo?"

I glanced behind me and a few minutes later, I was surrounded by flashes.

I smiled when appropriate, answered questions when people asked them, and tried not to look like I wanted to hide behind one of the pillars every time another camera appeared.

The questions, however, were what interested me.

“How did The Haven Project begin?”

“What made you decide to expand Hazel Al into this area?”

“How many people will the program eventually support?”

“Will the technology be available internationally?”

“Are you personally funding the initiative?”

“How long do you expect the project to operate?”

I answered carefully, “The Haven Project isn’t designed as a temporary response. The goal is long-term pport for people who have survived trafficking, exploitation, displacement or other circumstances that have separated them from a stable home and future.”

Another reporter raised his microphone, “And what does long-term support mean in practical terms?”

“It means we don’t disappear after the immediate crisis is over,” I looked around the room before continuing, “Medical care when it’s needed. Education. Documentation. Psychological support. Housing assistance. Family reunification when that’s possible and wanted. Vocational training. Scholarships. Help finding employment. Whatever someone needs to move from surviving to actually building an independent life.”

A reporter from a major technology magazine asked, “And where does Hazel AI come into that?”

The screen behind us changed, displaying the platform we’d built for The Haven Project. It wasn’t flashy. I had deliberately kept it that way.

Nothing that looked revolutionary at first glance but I knew how much work had gone into making something that simple actually function.

“We’re using technology to make the system less fragmented,” I explained. “A person shouldn’t have to tell the same painful story ten different times because ten organizations can’t communicate with each other. The people helping them should be able to coordinate without compromising their privacy.”

The Haven Project wasn’t about creating another organization that expected vulnerable people to fit into a complicated system.

We were building the system around them.

A magazine editor asked, “Are you expecting this to become one of Hazel AI’s biggest initiatives?”

I considered the question, “Eventually, I hope it becomes unnecessary.

She looked surprised.

I laughed softly, “If we’re doing this properly, we’re helping people build lives where they don’t need us anymore. That’s success.’

“}

There was a pause before several people began writing, then came the question I had been expecting all evening.

“Ms. Toricelli, this project has received significant attention because of your personal connection to the subject. Do you consider The Haven Project part of your legacy?”

“No,” the answer came easily, “My legacy isn’t something I get to decide. That’s something other people can talk about years from now if they think I’ve earned one. Right now, I’m just trying to build something that works.”

The photographer started taking pictures again.

Later that evening, after the formal presentation, the room became less structured. People moved between tables, reporters interviewed members of my team, investors spoke with our executives, and several organizations approached us about partnerships.

tood near the back of the room with a glass of water in my hand, watching it all happen.

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Two years after everything that happened at that facility with my father, I was finally able to do something for the children. It hadn’t been easy. I wanted to build it entirely on my own, without relying on anyone else, and that took tine-more time than I had expected. But after two years, all that work, and everything I had learned along the way, we were finally here.

Now there were journalists asking me about international expansion. Magazine editors discussing feature stories. People from different countries asking when they could bring the program into their own communities.

And my team was already discussing the next stage.

I didn't feel like crying. I didn't feel overwhelmed. Mostly, I felt strangely calm.

The Haven Project was only beginning.

There would be mistakes. There would be funding problems, difficult cases, complicated partnerships and decisions that wouldn't have easy answers. Some people would criticize us. Some would accuse me of using my past for publicity. Others would expect me to solve problems that no organization could solve alone.

That was fine.

I wasn't trying to create something perfect. I was trying to create something that could keep getting better.

And suddenly, he was behind me. I felt his presence before I even saw him, and without saying a word, I reached back and slipped my hand into Raphael's.

"I think I like this."

He bent down and pressed a soft kiss to the top of my head, "What?"

I smiled, resting my head lightly against him, "Being good at something."

His grip tightened on my hand, his thumb stroking the back of my knuckles, "You were always good at it, Gianna. You just finally gave yourself permission to see it."

I looked up at him, and the pride in his face made something warm settle in my chest. He had watched me struggle, start over, doubt myself, learn, fail, try again and eventually build something that belonged entirely to me. He knew how much this moment meant without me having to explain it.

"Excuse me, Ms. Toricelli? The photographer from Tech Vision Magazine is set up in the lobby. They'd love to get a few quick couple shots of you and Mr. Capone for the spread."

Beside me, Raphael went instantly still.

He slowly lifted his head, his eyes narrowing on the poor assistant with an intensity that made the woman visibly flinch. Raphael hated cameras. He hated paper trails, public exposure, and having his face anywhere near a printed publication.

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"No," Raphael said, "She gets her picture taken. I don't."

e assistant swallowed hard, looking like she wanted the floor to swallow her whole. “Um, they just thought-since Mr. Capone is such a prominent figure-”

“I said no.”

I quickly stepped in, squeezing his hand before he terrified the poor woman into resigning on her first day. “Give us just two minutes,” I told her with a reassuring smile.

She nodded hastily and bolted back into the hallway.

I turned around to face Raphael, placing both hands on his broad, suit-clad chest. He was glaring at the doorway, his jaw clenched so hard a muscle twitched in his cheek.

“Raph,” I coaxed softly, tilting my head, “It’s just one photo. For my feature.”

“I don’t do photos, Gianna,” he rasped, looking down at me, “You know that.”

“I know,” I murmured, sliding my hands up to the collar of his shirt, my thumb lightly tracing his strong jawline. I leaned up on my tiptoes, brushing my lips close to his ear, “But if you stand there, look pretty, and let them take one nice picture of us.... I’ll spend the entire drive home on my knees in the back of your car, giving you the slowest, dirtiest blowjob of your life.”

The dangerous, murderous glare in his eyes melted a little. He stared down at my lips, his jaw working as he weighed his deep-seated hatred for press photography against what I had just promised him.

He let out a low, defeated sigh, pressing his forehead against mine, “You’re a monster.”

I gave him a sweet, innocent smile. “Is that a yes, Mr. Capone?”

“Tell them they have two minutes,” he rasped, “If they take three, I’m taking the camera.”

Swipe up again

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Raphael

X8

+15 Bonus Bonus

Lake Michigan stretched beyond the glass wall, black beneath the moon. The water caught pieces of silver light whenever the wind moved across it, and beyond the shoreline there was nothing but darkness.

The guest cottages were empty tonight, the marina was still, and the beach sat untouched beneath the night sky.

Just us.

Exactly the way I liked it.

I stood in the kitchen shirtless, looking down at what I'd put together on the counter. My body was still warm, still humming from the hours we'd just spent together, but my mind was completely focused on the task in front of me.

It wasn't complicated. All I had to do was follow the instructions and make sure I didn't screw up something that should have been simple.

She liked simple things done properly.

And if I was going to make something for her, I was going to make it right.

I heated the pan until it was ready, then lowered the flame and worked slowly. The bread had to be golden without getting too dark. The butter needed to reach the edges. The cheese had to melt all the way through without turning the outside greasy.

I checked it twice and then again the third time. There were very few things in my life I did without a reason.

Making sure her late night food was exactly right was one of them.

The pot beside me simmered quietly. I stirred it, tasted it, added a little seasoning, stirred again, then left it alone for another minute.

I glanced toward the stairs.

She was still asleep.

And that's exactly what I needed.

She'd been exhausted after the long day, and after everything we'd done earlier, I made sure she stayed asleep until I had everything ready.

Except I knew her.

If I took too long, hunger would eventually drag her out of bed, and I'd find her wandering into the kitchen half-asleep, hair a mess, stealing whatever she could get her hands on before I had a chance to stop her.

I finished everything properly and on time. I put the food onto a tray, added a glass of water and carried it upstairs.

The bedroom was almost completely dark.

Moonlight slipped through the curtains and spread across the floor. Gianna was exactly where I'd left her, asleep in the middle of the bed. She was lying on her stomach, one arm tucked beneath the pillow, her hair scattered across it.

She was wearing my black t-shirt, the soft cotton stretched over her back, pulling up just enough to expose her round beautiful little ass and the red lace of her underwear.

For someone who could spend an entire day arguing with me about absolutely nothing, she looked remarkably peaceful when she slept.

I set the tray carefully on the nightstand, then I stood beside the bed for a moment.

She didn't move.

I leaned over the bed, my shadows falling over her soft form. I didn't whisper her name. I didn't touch her hair. I raised my palm and brought it down hard on the bare, exposed curve of her ass.

SLAP!

She jerked awake.

"What-"

Gianna gasped, her back arching instantly as she jerked awake, her eyes snapping wide open in the dark. She rolled over onto her side, clutching her ass, her dark eyes flashing with a mix of shock, sleep, and sudden heat as she glared up at me.

"Raphael!" she choked out, her voice raspy and thick with sleep, "What the fuck?"

I stood towering beside the bed, looking down at her flushed skin, my lips pulling into a slow smile.

"Get up, ballerina," I said softly. "I made you some of that terrible late-night junk you love so much."

She stared at me as though I had just announced that I'd bought her a private island, "You made me food?"

"Yes."

"At this hour?"

I glanced toward the clock, "It's not that late."

"It is absolutely that late."

"You're awake now."

"That is not the point."

She rubbed her face, trying to wake herself up, then looked past me toward the nightstand. The smell reached her before her eyes properly focused on the tray.

Her whole expression changed. She sat up straighter, "Wait."

I folded my arms.

Her eyes moved from the bowl to the plate beside it, and then she made a tiny, shocked sound that was so different from the woman who had been half-dead asleep a second earlier.

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that-"

She reached for the tray.

"Don't burn yourself."

She ignored me completely.

A grilled cheese sandwich sat beside a bowl of hot tomato soup, the bread crisp and golden, the cheese melted inside.

Gianna stared at it, then she looked at me, then back at the food.

Her face lit up, "Oh my God."

I shook my head. She picked up the sandwich with both hands, looking genuinely delighted, “I haven’t had grilled cheese in like-”

“Since I stole it from you?”

Her hands stopped. She slowly looked up at me. Then the excitement in her face softened into something quieter.

“Yeah,” she said, “I think.”

I remembered it clearly, not because it was some important event. It wasn’t.

It had been three years ago, Hazel had just married Dad and Gianna was still finding her place in our home. It was before either of us understood what the other would eventually become to them. She had been making one for herself, and I’d taken it from her.

Apparently, I had created a debt.

“I owed you a grilled cheese sandwich.”

Her mouth curved into a small smile. She looked down at the sandwich again, suddenly much quieter.

I reached over and pulled the tray closer to her, “Eat.”

She glanced at me suspiciously, “You’re not going to lecture me?”

“Ábout what?”

“Eating this late.”

I gave her a flat look, “You know I don’t encourage you to eat junk in the middle of the night.”

“I know.”

“I’ve told you a hundred times that you need to stop treating your body like it has an unlimited supply of forgiveness.”

She smiled, “You have.”

And yet here Tam.”

Smiling widely, she took a bite. I watched her chew.

“So you’re making an exception?”

I nodded, “For tonight.”

“Why?”

I looked down at her, “Because you were a good girl today, ballerina. You earned every bit of it. A-plus for that mouth of yours, by the way. You really know how to spoil me.”

She rolled her eyes and took another bite, then dipped a corner of the sandwich into the soup. I watched her eyes close as she tasted it.

“Good?”

She nodded quickly, “Very.”

“Then eat.”

She smiled around the bite.

I reached over and wiped a little bit of soup from the corner of her mouth with my thumb, “Little Mess.

She caught my wrist before I could pull away, “You’re really sweet sometimes.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

She laughed quietly and let go.

I sat beside her while she ate, watching the woman who could walk into a room full of investors and journalists without blinking, who could argue with engineers twice her age and make them rethink their entire approach, sitting in my shirt at two in the morning looking ridiculously happy over a sandwich.

I wouldn’t trade that version of her for anything.

She took another bite and looked at me, “I love you.”

Something in my chest shifted, “I love you too.”

She smiled and took another bite, completely unaware that the next few seconds were about to change the rest of our lives.

Then she stopped.

Her teeth caught something hard. She frowned, slowly pulled the bite away, and stared at the small object between her fingers.

For several seconds, she didn’t move, then her eyes lifted to mine, “Raphael…”

“Before you say anything,” I said quietly, “I want to tell you something.”

She went completely still.

ooked down at the ring for a moment, then back at her.

“Before you, my life had a purpose, but it wasn’t really mine. There was the family. The business. The responsibilities that came with being a Capone. I knew what I was supposed to do every morning when I woke up, what was expected of me, what I had to protect, what I had to build, what I had to become.”

I paused, letting the truth settle between us, giving her a moment to absorb what was happening.

“But I never stopped to ask myself what I actually wanted. I didn’t even realize how strange that was until you came into my life,” a faint smile touched my mouth, “And you didn’t exactly make an ordinary entrance.”

She gave a tiny, disbelieving laugh through the emotion already gathering in her eyes.

“No. You walked into my life in the most unconventional way possible. You became my stepsister, and I should have left it there. I should have kept my distance, accepted what we were supposed to be, and let you live your life,” I looked directly into her green beautiful eyes, “But something about you kept pulling me back.”

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My voice softened.

“I couldn’t explain it. I didn’t understand it. I just knew that whenever you walked into a room, I noticed. When you were upset, I noticed. When you laughed, I noticed. When you were gone, I noticed even more,” I took her hand, the one with the ring and took off the pieces of cheese off the diamond ring, “And somewhere along the way, I stopped wondering why.”

Her fingers tightened around mine.

“I had spent most of my life feeling like I was watching myself from the outside. I knew how to function. I knew how to make decisions. I knew how to run a company, protect my family, solve problems, control situations. I could understand almost anything if I had enough information,” I swallowed, my gaze never leaving hers, “But I couldn’t understand myself.”

A quiet breath left me.

“Then you came along and somehow managed to make me feel things I had spent years convincing myself I didn’t need,” I lifted her hand to my mouth and kissed her knuckles, “You made me angry. You made me laugh. You made me worry. You made me jealous. You made me terrified. You made me want things I had never allowed myself to want. You changed the way I saw sex and intimacy. You made me want a best friend, a partner, and a wife, after spending my entire life telling myself I didn’t need any of those things.”

My voice dropped.

“You made me brave enough to admit that I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life simply existing.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“I wanted to live.”

I reached up and brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

“And somehow, Gianna, when I finally figured out what I wanted, every answer led back to you.”

She whispered my name, tears streaming down her face, “Raph…”

“I don’t want a life without you in it. There isn’t a version of my future where I wake up and you’re not there. I don’t want the house without your shoes thrown somewhere they shouldn’t be. I don’t want the kitchen without you stealing food. I don’t want the quiet without your voice eventually ruining it.”

A small laugh escaped her through her tears.

“I don’t want the success if I can’t turn around and find you standing beside me. I don’t want the family gatherings, the ridiculous arguments, the late nights, the terrible decisions, the good days or the ones that nearly break us if I have to experience any of them without you,” I held her hand tighter, “You didn’t fix me. I don’t want you to think that. You didn’t come into my life and magically make everything perfect.”

I shook my head slightly.

“You made me want to understand myself. You made me want to become someone who could feel verything I was feeling instead of hiding behind control and logic because that was easier. And I love you for that.”

I kept my eyes locked on her because there was nothing else in the world worth seeing for me.

“I love you more than I knew a person could love another person. I love you when you’re brilliant and when you’re stubborn. When you’re confident and when you’re terrified. When you’re driving me completely fucking insane and when you’re sitting beside me at two in the morning looking happier about a grilled cheese sandwich than anyone has a right to be.”

She laughed, tears slipping down her cheeks now.

“You are the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened to me, ballerina.”

I brought the ring between us, completely clean now. Okay, maybe a little greasy, but knowing her, that was probably her thing.

“You gave me something I didn’t know I was missing. You gave me a reason to want tomorrow. So, Gianna...”

I took her hand and slowly lowered myself in front of her.

“Will you marry me?” 1

For a second, she didn’t move. Then the sandwich slipped from her fingers and landed back on the tray with a soft thud. She stared at me, and whatever control she had been trying to hold onto finally disappeared.

A sob broke out of her before she could stop it, “Yes.”

The word came out so quietly that I almost thought I’d imagined it. Then she shook her head, tears spilling down her cheeks as she laughed through them.

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Yes, I will marry you.”

She reached for me so quickly that I barely had time to catch her before she threw her arms around my shoulders.

“Yes,” she repeated against me, crying harder now, “Yes, Raphael. I will marry you. Yes.”

I held her tightly, burying my face against her shoulder as the sound of her crying filled the room. She pulled back just enough to look at me, her cheeks wet and her eyes red.

“Yes,” she said again, as if she needed to make absolutely certain I understood, “I’m going to marry you.”

A laugh escaped me, low and breathless, “I got that the first three times.”

“I don’t care,” she grabbed my face between both hands and kissed me, tears still running down her cheeks, “I love you so much,” she whispered.

I closed my eyes for a moment.

“So much,” she repeated, laughing through another sob, “You have no idea.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea.”

“No, you don’t,” she shook her head, wiping at her cheeks with the back of her hand, “I can’t believe you proposed to me with a sandwich.”

I glanced at the abandoned tray, “It seemed appropriate.”

She stared at me. Then she laughed so hard she started crying again. She looked down at the ring in my hand, and her expression softened.

“Put it on me.”

I took her left hand and slowly slid the ring onto her finger. She stared at it for several seconds, turning her hand slightly beneath the light.

Then she looked back at me, “My God.”

I kissed her knuckles, “My fiancée.”

Her eyes filled again, “My fiancé.”

Something about hearing her say it made the moment feel real in a way the ring hadn’t. I pulled her into my arms once more, holding her against me while she cried and laughed at the same time.

She stayed in my arms for a while, still crying softly, her fingers resting against the back of my neck. Eventually, she pulled away and wiped at her cheeks, taking a shaky breath as she looked down at the ring on her finger.

Then she looked back at me, “I need to tell you something too.”

I fell silent.

She took a breath, trying to gather herself, but the tears were already returning, “I don’t think I would have achieved everything I have if it wasn’t for you.”

I opened my mouth, but she immediately stopped me.

“No. Don’t.”

“That was all you.

“Raph.”

“It was.”

She shook her head, “You’re not getting away with that, mot tonight.”

I let out a laugh, “You built all of this,” I said. “You worked for it. You studied. You stayed up when you were exhausted. You kept going when nobody could have blamed you for stopping. I didn’t write your code. I didn’t build your company. I didn’t stand in front of those investors and journalists. You did that.”

“I know I did,” she said softly, “But I wouldn’t have believed I could do any of it without you.”

That stopped me.

She moved closer, her hand still resting over my chest.

“You became my strength, Raph. When I didn’t have any left, you gave me somewhere to find it. When I was terrified of failing, you reminded me that failing didn’t mean I was broken. When I didn’t trust myself, you trusted me enough for both of us until I learned how to do it myself. You made me brave.”

I watched her carefully, wiping her tears.

“You made me bold. You made me stop apologizing for taking up space. You made me stop thinking I had to be perfect before I deserved to be proud of myself. You never looked at me like I was something that needed fixing,” she swallowed, her eyes never leaving mine, “You looked at me like I was already enough.”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

“You were there when I was scared. You were there when I was angry. You were there when I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. You listened to me when I couldn’t even explain what I was feeling, and you never made me feel stupid for not having the words.”

Her fingers curled lightly against my shirt.

“You became my support system without ever making me feel dependent on you. That’s the difference.”

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e smiled through her tears.

“You didn’t carry me, Raph. You taught me that I could carry myself. And every time I accomplished something, every time I did something I never thought I could do, you were the person I wanted to tell first.”

She laughed softly.

“You’re the person I still want to call when something goes wrong. You’re the person I want beside me when something goes right. You’re the person I look for in a crowded room. You’re the person who makes me feel safe enough to be ridiculous, emotional, stubborn, ambitious, scared, excited, whatever I happen to be that day.”

Her thumb brushed slowly over my chest.

“You didn’t give me my life, Raph. You gave me the courage to actually live it. You made me a better woman,” she whispered. “Not because you changed who I was, but because you made me believe I was allowed to become everything I wanted to be.”

She leaned forward until her forehead rested against mine.

“So when you tell me everything I achieved was all me, maybe you’re right. But you need to understand something. I couldn’t have become this version of myself without you standing beside me.”

I closed my eyes briefly.

“And now,” she whispered, “I want to spend the rest of my life standing beside you too.”

I opened my eyes.

She smiled, “You’re my person, Raph. My strength. My safe place. My biggest supporter and, my everything. I love you so much…”

I pulled her into another kiss, but she started smiling so hard against my lips that I couldn’t help but smile too.

“And there’s one more thing.”

“What?” I asked.

She glanced toward the tray, then back at me, “This.”

I followed her gaze to the grilled cheese.

“You proposed to me with grilled cheese.”

“I did.”

Her smile became almost shy, “Do you know how perfect that is?”

She looked down at the ring again, turning her hand beneath the light.

+15 Bonus Bonus

“I always imagined my proposal being something that actually felt like me, not some giant ballroom with a thousand flowers or a photographer hiding behind a curtain or some ridiculous public spectacle.”

Her eyes lifted to mine.

“I wanted something private. Something ridiculous. Something that would make me laugh and cry at the same time. Something that belonged to us,” she pointed at the sandwich, “And somehow, you managed to put a diamond ring inside grilled cheese.”

“I thought you’d appreciate the creativity.”

“I love it,” she laughed, shaking her head, “I actually love it so much. It’s probably the most us thing you could have possibly done.”

I leaned closer, “So you’re saying I got it right?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, “You got everything right.”

Her forehead rested against mine. I brushed my thumb beneath her eye, catching another tear.

“You’re happy?”

She looked at me as though the question itself was ridiculous, “I’m marrying the man I love, wearing the ring he put on my finger after hiding it in a grilled cheese sandwich,” a grin broke through her tears, “How could I possibly be anything but happy?”

I pulled her against me, and she settled into my arms without hesitation.

For once, there was nothing left to question.

She had said yes.

And after everything we’d survived, after everything we’d lost and everything we’d fought our way through, I was sitting in a quiet bedroom at two in the morning with the woman I loved pressed against my chest, her engagement ring catching the light between us.

It wasn’t extravagant.

It wasn’t perfect.

It was ours.

Janedoewritings

Author

Swipe up again