My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 321

“Yeah, yeah, we love you too,” Bri giggled, throwing her arms around my neck again. “Now cut the cake before the frosting melts.”

The rest of the night blurred into a beautiful haze of vanilla frosting, tears, and loud, chaotic laughter. The girls forced me to set up the new phone, Brianna and Jas yelling over each other about which apps I needed to d****** d first.

But as the clock crawled past three in the morning, the laughter in the room began to quiet down. The girls fell asleep one by one, curled up against each other on the plaid couch under mismatched blankets.

I stood up quietly, slipping my new phone into my pocket. I kissed Mama D on her soft cheek while she dozed in her rocking chair, and then I stepped back out into the freezing night.

The walk back across the city was cold. The happiness from the birthday cake slowly drained out of my boots with every block I walked, replaced by that familiar, suffocating weight in my chest.

And the only thing I could think about was Raphael.

With the girls, my mind had been distracted, but now, the quiet streets only echoed with the sound of that awful slap. I looked down at my right palm, my skin still feeling ghost-stung from hitting his face. My stomach twisted into a tight, agonizing knot of pure regret.

I had been so mean to him. I had used him as a punching bag for all the anger I couldn’t throw at my mother or my father. I had accused him of wanting to use my body when he was just...

I’m sorry, I whispered into the dark, empty air, the wind catching my breath, I’m so sorry, Raphael.

By the time I reached the perimeter of the estate, the sky was starting to turn a faint, bruising shade of purple. I didn’t use the main gates. Instead, I snuck toward the laundromat that sat on the edge of the property line, the one with the backdoor that connected straight into Silvio’s hidden underground passage.

I dragged my feet through the dark, I didn’t want to go up to my bedroom. I couldn’t bear to look at the overturned vanity, the spilled jewelry, or the empty places where my helpers used to be.

So, when I finally reached the exit of the passage near the main house, I didn’t go inside.

I walked out onto the stone courtyard and just sank down onto the very bottom step of the grand front entrance. The cold stone bit sharply through the fabric of my clothes, but I didn’t care. I buried my face into my knees, my hands gripping my ankles tight, and let the silent tears finally spill over.

I didn’t sob out loud, I didn’t have the strength left for noise but my shoulders shook violently in the freezing morning air.

I felt so small, so entirely broken, and so utterly alone.

A soft, scraping sound cut through the air. I didn’t move. I kept my face hidden against my knees, too tired to care if a guard was coming to tell me to go inside.

But then, the air right beside me shifted, and I felt his presence. He came to a halt right next to my step, standing completely still.

Slowly, trembling, I lifted my head from my knees. My vision was blurry from the tears, but as I turned my neck, my eyes dropped to the ground first.

My eyes fell on the black tactical boots that I knew far too well.

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My eyes traveled slowly up his pants, past the wide, solid line of his thighs, until they found his chest. He wasn’t wearing his jacket anymore. Just a thin, black shirt that clung to the hard muscles of his torso, rising and falling.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight and dry.

The silence between us wasn’t empty anymore. It felt the loudest it has ever been. My heart began to batter against my ribs. My gaze dragged further up his strong throat, past the tight, clenched line of his jaw.

Slowly, I lifted my chin, forcing myself to look all the way up.

My eyes went up and finally met his eyes in the dark.

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Author

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Gianna

My eyes locked with his, and whatever strength had carried me across the city completely drained out of my body.

God.

The faint purple light of dawn stretched across the stone courtyard, catching against the sharp cut of his cheekbone.

My stomach twisted violently. The mark was gone now but I could still see it. I could still hear it. That horrible sound of my hand cracking across his face replayed inside my skull so loudly it made my chest ache.

My bottom lip trembled, then my chin trembled harder. I looked away first. I couldn't bear it. My eyes dropped back to his boots as fresh tears burned down my cheeks. My fingers tightened around my ankles until they hurt, trying to stop the shaking tearing through my body.

He still hadn't said anything, that somehow made it worse.

"I..." my voice cracked so badly the word barely came out.

I swallowed hard, but my chin kept trembling uncontrollably.

"I shouldn't have done that."

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, shaking my head at myself like I physically couldn't believe what I had done.

"I'm sorry," I whispered again, weaker this time, "God... Raphael, I'm so sorry."

The apology ripped something open inside my chest because now that he was standing here in front of me again, I could finally see the truth clearly without all the screaming in my head twisting it into something ugly.

He hadn't touched me wrong.

He hadn't threatened me.

He hadn't tried to take anything from me.

He had just reached for me.

And I had looked at him like he was a monster.

A harsh breath left me as another tear slid down my mouth. I wiped at it quickly with the back of my hand, but more just kept coming.

“I was horrible to you,” I choked out, my voice wobbling harder with every word, “You were trying to help me and I-I said all those things and then I…” my breath hitched violently, “I hit you.”

Raphael still didn’t interrupt me. That calm silence was slowly shredding me apart.

“I am not…” I stopped, sucking in a shaky breath, “I’m not usually like that,”

The second the words left my mouth, shame immediately crashed over me again because that wasn’t even fully true, maybe I was like that. Maybe this ugly, panicked, vicious version of me had always been hiding underneath my skin.

My hands slowly slipped from my ankles as I pushed myself up from the freezing stone step. My knees felt weak beneath me. I almost stumbled when I stood.

Raphael’s eyes followed the movement instantly, the look on his face was unreadable and that hurt too.

I wrapped my arms tightly around myself as I stood in front of him, my shoulders shaking from the cold and humiliation.

“What I did was wrong,” I said quietly, forcing the words out even while my throat burned, “It was unfair. You didn’t deserve that.”

Another horrible wave of guilt rolled through me as my eyes flickered toward his face again.

“I used you like…” I swallowed hard. “Like somewhere to throw all my anger.”

The wind moved through, brushing strands of hair across my wet cheeks.

“You didn’t even defend yourself.”

That part twisted the knife deeper because Raphael easily could have stopped me. He was bigger than me, stronger than me but he hadn’t even tried.

My breathing turned uneven again.

“I don’t believe women get a free pass to hurt people just because they’re women,” I whispered, “I don’t believe that.”

Raphael’s jaw tightened slightly, still silent, still watching me. The trembling in my chin became almost painful now.

“I slapped you hard,” I admitted, “I know I did. I wasn’t holding back.”

The memory of his head snapping sideways made nausea crawl up my throat. A shaky breath left me. Then slowly, before I could lose my nerve, I let my arms fall away from my chest.

My hands dropped to my sides, “I think...” My voice faltered, “I think you should do it back.”

Raphael’s brows pulled together immediately.

“I mean it,” I rushed out before he could speak, “You should.”

My heart started slamming violently against my ribs, but I forced myself to keep going.

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“It would be fair.”

The words sounded pathetic the second they left my mouth, but I couldn’t stop now.

“I hurt you, so...” my veice shook harder, “So you can hurt me back.”

Raphael finally moved, only slightly. His expression darkened instantly, something cold flashing across his face but I kept talking anyway because the guilt inside me was eating me alive.

“You can hit me as hard as I hit you,” I whispered, “I won’t stop you. I deserve it.”

The second those words left my mouth, Raphael took one step toward me. I flinched automatically. Humiliation burned through me immediately after. I clenched my hands tighter at my sides.

Then, slowly...

I closed my eyes. My entire body locked up. I stood there in the freezing dawn air waiting for it. Waiting for the sharp crack against my cheek. Waiting for the sting. Waiting for my head to snap sideways the same way his had.

My breathing turned shallow and uneven as seconds dragged past in horrible silence.

One second.

Two.

Three.

I kept my eyes squeezed shut tighter, bracing harder for the impact but nothing happened, not a single sound, not the rush of movement, not the sting of skin against skin.

My lungs burned as I stood there with my eyes squeezed shut, my entire body locked tight waiting for pain that refused to come.

Then suddenly, his hand wrapped around my jaw.

I gasped.

My eyes flew open instantly.

His fingers curled firmly against the side of my face, not soft enough to be gentle, not rough enough to hurt. His thumb pressed hard beneath my chin, forcing my head upward until I was looking directly at him.

My breath caught.

God.

He looked terrifying.

The weak purple light of dawn threw shadows across his face, sharpening every hard angle of him. His dark hair was messy, like he had been dragging his hands through it all night. The black shirt stretched tightly across his chest and shoulders, the sleeves pushed up enough to reveal the dark ink twisting down his forearms but it was his eyes that made my stomach clench.

“Don’t ever stand in front of me asking for that again.”

A shiver crawled violently down my spine. His grip tightened slightly against my jaw. The softness in his tone made it worse because beneath it, there was something dark enough to make my pulse stutter.

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“Gianna,” he murmured, leaning slightly closer, “I would rather cut my own fucking hand off than use it to hit a woman.”

The words slammed directly into my chest. My lips parted shakily. Raphael's gaze dragged slowly over my face, taking in the tear tracks, the trembling mouth, the exhaustion hollowing out my eyes. Then his expression darkened further.

"You think equality means I get to hurt you back?" he asked.

I swallowed hard.

"I-"

"No."

His thumb pressed harder beneath my chin, keeping my face tilted toward him when I instinctively tried to look away.

"You don't get to stand there and offer yourself up like punishment to make yourself feel better about what happened."

Heat flooded my cheeks instantly because he was right. God, he was right. I had been trying to punish myself. Raphael took one slow step closer until the tips of his boots nearly touched mine.

The size of him suddenly felt overwhelming, not because he threatened me but because he didn't.

Because despite how terrifying he looked, despite the violence living underneath his skin, he was still handling me like I might shatter apart in his hands.

"I was angry this morning," he admitted quietly, "I was furious. When you slapped me, the first thing my brain wanted to do was react. Do you understand me?"

My heart slammed painfully against my ribs. Because yes. I did understand. Raphael wasn't pretending to be some saint. He was telling me exactly what he was. A dangerous man with violent instincts but one who chose restraint.

"But I would never touch you like that," he said, "Not in this life. Not in any fucking life."

Fresh tears blurred my vision instantly. Raphael looked down at me for another long second before his hand finally loosened against my jaw but he didn't let go completely.

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Chapter 324

"You hurt me," he said bluntly.

The honesty of it made me flinch harder than shouting would have.

His eyes darkened at the reaction, “But not because of the slap.”

A shaky breath escaped me, his face moved closer, not enough to kiss me, just enough that I could feel the warmth/ of his breath against my cold skin.

“It was hearing you think so little of me,” he said quietly, “Like I would ever use you when you were falling apart in front of me.”

My throat tightened so painfully I could barely breathe. Shame crawled through every inch of my body.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again, my voice breaking completely this time.

Raphael stared at me silently. Then finally, very slowly, he let go of my face but the heat of his hand stayed burned against my skin. He took half a step back, enough to give me room to breathe again, but not enough to feel far away.

The weak dawn light catching the silver watch around his wrist as he flexed his hand once at his side.

I wiped at my face quickly with my sleeve, embarrassed by how badly I was falling apart in front of him but another tear slipped down anyway, then another.

God.

I looked away instantly, “I didn’t mean any of it,” I whispered hoarsely, “I just... everything got too loud.”

A tiny flicker crossed Raphael’s face. Understanding settled over his expression slowly, “You were overwhelmed,” he said softly.

Heat flooded my face immediately. I hated that he had seen that. Hated that he had witnessed the ugliest parts of me laid open on the closet floor like some pathetic confession.

“And then I touched you. I shouldn’t have reached for you that fast,” he admitted quietly.

My head snapped up instantly, “No-”

His eyes stopped me, “I know what panic looks like.”

A strange silence settled between us. Raphael looked away briefly, dragging a hand over the back of his neck like the next words physically irritated him then his gaze returned to mine..

“I think…” he paused once. “I think you needed somewhere for all that pain to go. Whatever that pain… is.”

My lips parted shakily.

“And this morning,” he said quietly, “it landed on me.”

Emotion climbed painfully into my throat.

Raphael’s jaw flexed once before he continued, “I can handle that.”

My chin trembled harder, “I still shouldn’t have done it,” I whispered.

A small smile pulled at the corner of his mouth, soft in a way I had never seen from him before. He shook his head

+15 Batas once like he had already accepted something I was still fighting against. Then he looked away from me, his gaze drifting toward the massive iron gates standing in the distance beyond the driveway.

The cold morning wind moved lightly through his messy hair. My chest pulled painfully tight. I couldn’t stop staring at him. I didn’t think I had ever truly looked at him before this moment, not really. I had seen the expensive suits. The predator in the night. The sharp tongue. The control.

But this…

This felt different.

There was something unbelievably lonely about him standing there with his hands in his pockets.

My eyes moved over him slowly. The hard line of his jaw. The faint marks I had left on his neck last night.

A horrible ache bloomed in the center of my chest. No one had ever handled me the way Raphael just had, not my mother, not my father, not Leone.

Most people either treated me like I was too much or not enough.

But Raphael had stood there and looked directly at the ugliest parts of me without flinching once. He hadn’t tried to shame me. Hadn’t tried to fix me. Hadn’t looked disgusted.

He had just…

Stayed.

Raphael rubbed slowly at his jaw again before looking right back into my eyes.

My pulse stumbled hard.

I suddenly understood why people wrote poems about eye contact.

Because the way this man was looking at me right now felt intimate enough to ruin lives.

His gaze dropped briefly to my mouth. Heat exploded low in my stomach so suddenly it almost made me dizzy.

Oh.

Oh no.

My heartbeat started climbing higher and higher inside my chest.

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Chapter 325

Raphael looked away first this time, dragging a hand through his dark hair with a quiet curse under his breath like he was trying to regain control of something.

And weirdly enough, that made my heart beat even harder because this powerful man standing in front of me actually seemed affected by me too.

Raphael's gaze held mine for a second longer than necessary before he spoke again, "If you still feel like you need, somewhere to put all that anger..." he said, glancing briefly toward the long stretch of stone path, I know a place."

My brows pulled together slightly, "Where?" I asked, hesitant.

He pushed off the pillar and turned just enough to look back at me, "Change," he said simply. "Wear something you can move in."

My confusion deepened, "Move for what?"

A faint, almost restrained look passed over his face like he was choosing his words carefully, "Meet me in the private garage in ten minutes," he added, already starting to step back.

Then, as if it were nothing at all, he glanced at me once more.

“You’ll know when you see it.”

I looked at the clothes scattered in my closet. I didn’t own tactical pants like his, but I knew I needed to match his energy for wherever we were going.

I reached into the back and pulled out a pair of deep green military cargo pants. The fabric was thick, but loose enough around my legs to let me move. I pulled them on, tugging the heavy material up over my hips and buttoning them tight around my waist.

Next, I grabbed a simple black crop top. It was tight, hugging the curves of my chest and ribs, leaving a strip of bare skin exposed at my stomach. I laced up my heavy leather boots, pulling the strings until the leather wrapped tight around my ankles.

My slightly wavy, light brown hair was a messy storm around my shoulders. I couldn’t leave it loose. I grabbed a brush, pulling the wavy strands back with tight strokes, smoothing down every single bump until it was plastered tight against my scalp. I twisted the length of it behind my head, coiling it into a sleek, tight bun right at the back of my neck.

I took one deep breath, checked the time on my new phone, and slipped out of my room and into his garage. Rows of sleek, dark sports cars sat under the soft overhead spotlights, but my eyes didn’t care about the cars. They scanned the place, looking for him.

Then, I saw him.

Near the back wall sat his custom heavy bike. And right there, sprawling out over the seat, was Raphael.

He was lying leisurely on his back across the bike, looking incredibly relaxed, as he waited for me. He had one long leg draped loosely over the side of the metal tank, his boot resting casually against the exhaust pipe, while his other leg stretched out long toward the floor. His hands were tucked behind his head, his elbows pointing outward, a position that forced the dark fabric of his black shirt to stretch incredibly tight across the massive, hard planes of his chest and stomach.

From this angle, his broad shoulders looked even bigger, blocking out the bike beneath him. The sleeves of his shirt were still pushed up, showing the thick muscles of his forearms and the dark ink of his tattoos curling around his skin.

He looked so effortlessly beautiful, so heavy and masculine against the black metal, that my mouth went completely dry.

Slowly, as if he could feel the sudden shift in the air, his long eyelashes fluttered. His head turned just a fraction on his arms, and his dark, intense eyes opened, locking instantly onto me standing by the door.

Raphael didn't jump up from the machine. He didn't even move his hands from behind his head. He just lay there on his back, his dark eyes locked onto mine.

Slowly, his gaze dropped from my face.

He looked me up and down. He took his time, assessing every single inch of me, before his gaze crawled all the way back up to my face, pausing on the sleek, tight bun.

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Chapter 326

A sudden, electric heat flooded my cheeks, a deep blush staining my skin as my heart battered violently against my ribs.

He uncurled his thick arms from behind his head and swung his long legs over the side of the black motorcycle, He stood up to his full, massive height, his broad shoulders blocking out the overhead spotlights.

"Fucking..." he paused, and then added, "...ruin."

I felt those two words everywhere.

Raphael stared at my burning face for one more long, silent second, his jaw flexing, before he abruptly turned on his heel. He reached down toward the handlebars of the bike, grabbing a sleek, matte-black helmet that had been hanging from the frame.

He turned back and held it out to me, "Put it on," he muttered.

I took the matte-black helmet from his hands, my fingers brushing against his for a split second. A sharp spark of heat shot up my arm, making my breath hitch as I pulled the heavy plastic shell down over my head.

The world outside instantly muffled, the loud thumping of my heart echoing inside the tight padding.

Raphael reached for his own helmet, lifting the dark metal casing and sliding it over his messy hair. The tinted visor snapped down, completely hiding his face and turning him into a faceless shadow.

He swung his long leg over the bike, his heavy boots settling firmly onto the foot pegs. The bike looked like a monster between his thighs. He gripped the handlebars, his thick forearms flexing as he leaned forward.

“Get on,” his voice came through the helmet, low and distorted.

I stepped up, my heart battering my ribs as I threw my leg over the leather seat behind him. The moment I settled into place, the sheer difference in our sizes became overwhelming. His back was a wide, solid wall of muscle, blocking out the entire garage.

Slowly, hesitantly, I reached forward. I wrapped my arms around his waist, my hands flattening against the hard, burning planes of his stomach. I pressed my chest flush against his spine, tucking my head down until my helmet rested right against the slope of his shoulder.

Raphael kicked the engine to life.

The garage exploded with a deafening, throbbing roar that vibrated straight through the floor and into the bones of my legs. He twisted the throttle, and the bike shot forward like a bullet, tearing out of the iron doors and into the freezing morning air.

Raphael drove like a man possessed, weaving through the tight streets of Chicago with a speed that made my stomach drop. The wind whipped fiercely against my pants and tore at the bare skin of my stomach, but I didn’t care. I only squeezed him tighter, digging my fingers into his shirt, trusting my entire existence to his frame as the speed pushed us together.

Soon, the bright lights of the city began to fade away. And I knew exactly where we were going. This was the dark territory where the noise of the world couldn’t reach. The place where we started this. The place where Raphael held his hunts.

Finally, the bike began to slow down.

Through the tinted visor of my helmet, I watched a massive shape materialize out of the black fog.

Raphael rolled the bike to a stop right in front of the steps. He cut the engine, and the roaring noise died instantly, leaving nothing but the ticking sound of the hot metal cooling down in the freezing air.

We didn’t move for a long moment. I stayed wrapped around his back, my face still buried against the thick muscle of his shoulder, my breathing shallow and fast.

Slowly, Raphael turned his head to the side, his neck muscles straining against his collar. Then he leaned closer and bumped his tinted visor sharply against mine.

The small impact vibrated through my skull. He didn’t take the helmet off. He kept his face right there.

“Happy birthday, stepsister,” his voice rumbled out from the depths of the helmet, lower and darker than the woods around us, “Let’s go find a place for all that pain.”

Janedoewritings Author

I Like

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 327

Raphael

I felt the engine die beneath me, but the heat between my shoulder blades didn’t fade. Gianna was still there, a small weight pressed against my spine. Her arms were locked around my waist, her fingers digging into my shirt as if she were afraid I’d disappear into the shadows of the woods if she let go.

I felt her shift. She slowly untangled herself from me, her boots hitting the ground. I watched her in the side mirror of the bike, the way those green cargo pants hugged her hips and that black top exposed the pale skin of her waist made my vision go dark.

Why in the absolute hell did she have to be my damn stepsister?!

I swung my leg over the bike, my own boots hitting the ground and I pulled my helmet off, the freezing air biting at my skin.

She pulled the helmet off, and her hair was slightly messy now, a few light brown strands falling over her eyes. She looked up at me, her cheeks flushed pink from the ride, her lips parted and soft.

The urge to touch her hit me like a blow to the gut. Before my brain could tell me no, I reached out. I grabbed her by the waist, I pulled her forward, dragging her body flush against mine until her chest bumped my own.

“Keep your head low,” I told her, my voice sounding rough even to my own ears. I leaned down, my mouth hovering right by her ear, “There are people in there, stay behind me. Stay quiet.”

She nodded, her eyes wide, and I finally let go, though the loss of her contact felt like a burn. I led her toward the arched wooden doors of the mansion. As soon as I pushed them open, a wall of sound and heat slammed into us. The air was filled with the scent of

expensive cigars, spilled vodka, and heavy perfume. Bass from the music throbbed through the floorboards, vibrating in my teeth.

I felt Gianna shrink behind me, her hand catching the back of my shirt.

“Raphael!”

A group of girls in shimmering, tiny dresses drifted toward us. One of them, a blonde I had actually forgotten the name of, stepped into my path, her eyes raking over my face before sliding toward the girl hiding in my shadow.

“You’ve been gone a long time,” the blonde purred, reaching out to touch my arm. She glanced at Gianna, her lip curling in a small, judgmental pout. “And who is this little bird?”

I didn’t even look at her. I didn’t look at any of them. The irritation rose in my throat, hot and bitter. I stepped sideways, shielding Gianna from their prying eyes with the width of my shoulders. I felt a surge of pure, possessive anger at the way they were looking at her, like she was something they could comment on.

“None of your business,” I muttered.

I kept moving, my hand reaching back to grip Gianna’s wrist, pulling her through the crowd. I felt the eyes of the room on us, the whispers starting, but I didn’t care. I just wanted her away from them.

We stepped into the room where I kept my weapons and I locked the door behind us. The walls were lined with glowing high-tech displays and racks of weapons that cost more than most people made in a lifetime.

Gianna let out a small, breathless sound. She started to walk around the room. I stayed by the door, leaning my back against the wood, my arms crossing over my chest. I just watched her.

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She walked to the long glass case on the left. Inside were rows of sleek, matte black pistols and custom-made knives with handles carved from bone and carbon fiber. Her fingers hovered over the glass, her eyes scanning the sights, the triggers.

She moved to the center table, where a disassembled long-range rifle lay under a bright white light. She leaned in close, her eyes tracking the intricate pieces of the bolt and the barrel. She looked at the weapons the way a normal girl looked at jewelry, with awe.

“Like what you see?” I asked.

She jumped slightly, her shoulders tensing, but she didn't look away from a row of silver-plated revolvers.

I pushed off the door and walked toward her. I stopped at a large glass case that held the heavy hitters, the tools 1 used when I needed to make a point. I tapped my knuckle against the reinforced glass.

"Choose one," I said, my gaze dropping to the back of her neck, "Pick something for the hunt. Whatever feels right in your hand."

Gianna froze. She turned to look at me, her eyes wide, her breath hitching in her throat. She took a step back, her hands flying up to her chest as if she were protecting her heart.

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"No," she whispered, her voice shaking. "No, Raphael. I can't do that. I can't pick one."

I tilted my head, watching a stray lock of hair that was brushing against her neck, "Why not? You know how they work, right? I mean, you're Gianna Toricelli."

"It's not that," she said, "I've never... I've never killed anyone. I'm not a murderer. I can't just take a life. I won't do it."

I stepped closer, closing the gap until I could smell the vanilla on her skin and the cold wind still clinging to her clothes.

"You think I'm asking you to kill people?" I asked. I leaned down, my face inches from hers, "We aren't going out/ there to hunt men, Gianna. Those things aren't human. They're the trash of the earth. The ones who touch what isn't theirs. The ones who hurt children. The ones who think they can take whatever they want from the weak."

"The sex offender list?" she asked and I nodded.

I reached out, my thumb grazing the soft skin of her jaw, "They don't deserve the air they breathe. I'm not asking you to kill a person. I'm asking you to help me take out the garbage."

She didn't pull away from my touch. Instead, she turned her head slightly, her gaze drifting past me toward the far wall.

She went completely still.

Hanging on a back-lit panel of dark velvet was a weapon that didn't look like the others. It was my high-tech compound bow, made of matte-black carbon fiber and shimmering silver cables. Beside it were rows of arrows tipped with different heads.

Gianna walked toward it as if she were in a trance. She reached out, her fingers trembling as she brushed the curved limb of the bow. She looked at the smart-tech sights and the laser guidance system built into the grip.

"This one," she breathed, "It's... it's amazing."

I walked up behind her, my chest almost brushing her back, and looked at the bow.

"Good eye," I murmured, the heat of my body wrapping around her, "It's silent. It doesn't make a mess, and it never misses."

I leaned in closer, my lips brushing the shell of her ear, and for the first time in a long time, a real, genuine grin tugged at my mouth.

"It's my favorite, too."

"It's beautiful..." she whispered, "So beautiful, but made for nothing but murder."

"It's more than just murder, Gianna," I said, as I watched the blue light reflect in her eyes, "For me, this... all of this... it's a form of therapy."

She turned her head to look at me, her brow furrowing in confusion, "Therapy?"

"Think about it," I said, tapping her temple with one finger, "When you grow up in a house where the walls are built on bones, violence isn't a choice. It's the air you breathe. It's the language we were taught before we could even read. You don't just walk away from that. It stays in your blood, looking for a way out."

I straightened up, walking slowly toward the rack of silver-tipped arrows.

"My brothers... they all found their own ways to let the pressure out," I continued, "Luca, Vincenzo, and Adriano, they like the sweat and the noise. They go to the cage matches. They want to feel the skin hit skin, the bone break, the crowd screaming. It's raw and it's messy."

I pulled an arrow from the rack, turning the point over in my light.

"Then there's Silvio," I said, "He's the rare exception in our bloodline. He doesn't have that frantic hunger for carnage that the rest of us were born with. He'd much rather solve a problem with a checkbook and a quiet conversation than a blade and a body bag. He finds blood... messy. But Dante..." I paused, smiling, "pante is different. He doesn't just use violence, he loves it. He breathes it. Whether it's these hunts, the torture of a captive

in the cellar, or a bloody cage match, he finds joy in every single drop of it. For him, the world is just one big playground for pain."

Gianna's breath hitched, her eyes rounding in genuine shock. "Dante? But he's always so... sweet. He's nice."

I couldn't help it, a short, dry laugh escaped my throat, "Nice? He is 'nice' to you because he has categorized you as family, Gianna. And believe me, you never want to see what happens when Dante decides someone is a stranger.

"And you?" she whispered, as she looked up at me then, her eyes searching mine with a sudden intensity, as if she were trying to peel back the layers of my skin to see the gears turning underneath, "What is your outlet, Raphael? This?"

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Chapter 329

I looked back at her, and I gestured around the room, at the perfect rows of weapons and the monitors, "I like my violence contained. I like it surgical. I like to be the one who decides exactly when and where the hammer falls."

I stood right in front of her now, so close that she had to tilt her head a little to look up at me.

"That's why I organize these hunts. I don't kill for the sake of killing. I choose the targets that the world is better off without. The filth. The trash that thinks they're safe because they can hide better." I leaned in, "It's a controlled release. It's better than a rage room, and it's cleaner than a cage match. It's a healthy outlet for the monster our father built inside me. It's how I stay sane."

I saw her swallow hard, her gaze moving from my face back to the black bow.

"Everything in life is about balance," I murmured, my hand reaching out to brush a stray hair back from her neck, "I choose to balance the scales by taking out the people who tip them too far. It's logical. It's precise. And tonight... it is the exact medicine you need to silence the static in your mind."

I stepped deeper into her space.

"You don't need to turn that blade inward anymore, Gianna. You don't need to punish your own skin to find peace. You just need to point all that beautiful rage at the people who actually fucking deserve to feel it."

Gianna went very still, her shoulders hunching forward as if she were trying to disappear into herself. Her dark lashes fluttered down, hiding her eyes from me as she stared at the floor.

“How can you be so sure?” she whispered, “How do you know that I don’t deserve it?”

I reached out, and hooked my fingers under her chin. I tilted her head back, forcing her to look up and meet my gaze.

“I think I’ve seen enough of you, the real you, to know exactly who you are. You are many things. You are complicated, you are loud, and you are hurting but you are not bad. You definitely do not deserve it.”

The wail of a siren drifted through the walls, echoing from deep in the mansion. It was the signal that the perimeter was set, that the game had officially begun.

The sound made my blood hum with sharp energy. I looked down at Gianna, a slow smile spreading across my face. The darkness in the room seemed to pull toward us, tightening the air.

“It’s time,” I murmured.

Gianna mirrored my expression, a small smile touching her lips. She reached out, her fingers gripped the matte- black riser of the high-tech bow. She pulled it from the display.

And as we stepped out of the room, she paused. She looked at my empty hands, then back up at my face, her brow pulling together in a small frown.

“You’re not going to choose a weapon for yourself?” she asked.

“I don’t need one,” I said, “You’re my weapon tonight, Gianna. I’m just the one pointing you at the target.”

A soft, breathless laugh escaped her lips. She looked up at me, and for the first time, the shadows in her eyes were replaced by a spark of pure, dangerous excitement. She gripped the black bow tighter, her knuckles white, ready to follow me into whatever hell I had waiting for her.

“Come on,” I whispered.

I didn’t lead her back toward the noise of the party. I pressed my hand against a hidden panel in the stone wall of the hallway that led us straight to the woods.

I grabbed her hand, her fingers laced perfectly between mine and we were outside, but far away from the front of the mansion. The only sound was the distant, fading wail of the siren and the rustle of dead leaves in the wind.

“Keep up, stepsister,” I told her

Then, I started to run.

I didn’t let go of her hand. I pulled her with me, dragging her into the dark woods. We tore through the underbrush, the branches of the trees reaching out like thin fingers to scratch at our clothes.

And then, I heard it.

Gianna let out a sound I hadn’t expected. It started as a small giggle in the back of her throat, and then it broke wide open. She laughed out loud.

She ran faster, her boots pounding the earth beside mine, her light brown hair flying behind her. She was laughing at the darkness. She was laughing at the danger.

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 330

We were flying through the trees, when the laughter suddenly died in her throat.

My shoulder slammed into a shape then there was a wet thud and the sound of someone gasping for air. We stopped instantly, the dirt kicking up around our boots.

A man was sprawling on the forest floor, his hands scraping through the dead leaves as he tried to scramble backward. He looked pathetic. He was wearing a cheap, wrinkled shirt, and his face was pale, glistening with a cold sweat. He looked up at us, his eyes wide and bulging with terror, his entire body shaking so hard his teeth were clicking together.

“No,” he choked out, his voice high like a dying bird. He started shaking his head back and forth, over and over, Please. No. I didn’t... please, mercy. I beg you.”

I didn’t feel a flicker of pity. I felt nothing but a cold, hard disgust. I turned my head to look at Gianna. She was standing perfectly still, the black bow gripped tight in her hand, her chest heaving as she watched the man crawl

“You see him, Princess?” I asked, “He looks like a normal man, doesn’t he? Just a regular guy you’d pass on the street.”

I took a slow step toward the shivering heap on the ground. The man let out a small whimper and tucked his chin into his chest.

“He worked at a daycare,” I said, “The parents loved him. They handed him their most precious things every single morning. They looked him in the eye and they trusted him.” I

leaned down slightly, my eyes narrowing,' But he didn't deserve a second of that trust. He used that job to find his prey. He used his hands for things that make the devil sick."

Иooked back at her, my gaze locking onto hers.

"You understand what I'm telling you, right, Mess? You see what's sitting in the dirt in front of you?"

I watched the change happen in real-time. The confusion in Gianna's face died. Her eyes turned dark, her jaw locked tight. She didn't say a word. She didn't have to.

She reached back, and pulled a sleek, silver-tipped arrow from the quiver. She notched it perfectly into the string. The high-tech cables of the bow groaned as she pulled back, the laser sight painting a tiny, lethal red dot right on the man's chest.

The man saw the red light. The terror finally broke him. He scrambled to his feet, turned, tearing into the dark woods. He ran like a coward, his arms flailing, trying to disappear into the blackness of the trees.

"Go on," I whispered, "Take it."

Gianna exhaled a slow, steady breath and let the string fly.

The arrow hissed through the air, a silver streak in the moonlight. It struck him, burying itself deep in the center of his back. The man let out a choked yell and fell forward, his face hitting the dirt hard. He groaned, his fingers clutching at the dead leaves, but he was still breathing. He was still moving.

I stepped up behind Gianna, my chest pressing against her back. I reached around her, my fingers hovering over the small, glowing touch panel built into the grip of the carbon-fiber bow.

"Wanna see something real cool?" I murmured, the heat of my breath brushing her ear.

I tapped the screen.

+15 Apr

Inside the man's body, the arrow woke up. Suddenly, the head of the arrow didn't just sit there. It exploded outward. Ten silver metal wings snapped open like a dark flower blooming inside his chest.

The sound was beautiful, the sound of metal tearing through everything in its path. The man's chest literally came apart from the inside out, the silver blades ripping through his shirt and skin until they were visible, dripping in the moonlight.

He didn’t even have time to scream again. He went perfectly still, pinned to the earth.

Gianna stared at the shape in the distance, her breath coming in gasps. She didn’t look away. She didn’t look disgusted. She looked like the noise in her head had finally, mercifully, gone silent.

I kept my hand on her shoulder, feeling the way the rage was leaving her body, replaced by a cold peace.

“See?” I whispered into the dark, “Much better than a rage room.”

Janedoewritings

Author

I’ll update another chapter in an hour or so!

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