My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 331

Gianna

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He leaned in close, his voice a low, smooth crawl against my ear as he pointed toward a figure hiding behind a thick oak tree.

“That one,” Raphael whispered, his breath hot against the side of my neck, “He spent years breaking into the homes of single mothers, watching them sleep before he took what he wanted. He thinks nobody saw him.”

It was so easy. The moment he spoke the words, the man in the distance stopped being a person. He became a target. He became a piece of trash that needed to be thrown away.

I reached back, my fingers gliding over the smooth arrows in the quiver. I notched the string, the mechanical parts of the bow whirring with a soft sound. I pulled back until the string pressed against my cheek. I looked through the smart-sight, watching the little red dot dance across the man’s shaking shoulder.

I let go.

The arrow vanished into the dark. A second later, a sickening thud echoed through the trees, followed by a loud cry. I didn’t feel sick. I felt a rush of power. It was like a knot that had been tied tight in my stomach for years was finally beginning to unravel.

“Good,” Raphael murmured, his hand resting on my shoulder, “Again.”

We moved deeper into the woods. We were like two predators dancing through the moonlight. Every few minutes, we would find another one, the monsters. Raphael would tell me their stories in that calm voice of his. He told me about the man who sold poison to children, and the man who beat his wife until her bones were like powder.

With every story, I felt my element taking over. My movements became fluid and fast. I saw a man trying to crawl through a patch of thorns, his face twisted.

“He preys on the elderly,” Raphael whispered in my ear, “He took their life savings and left them to die in the cold. He has no heart, Gianna.”

I didn’t wait for him to finish. I swung the bow up, my muscles flexing under the black fabric of my top. I felt the power of the high-tech machine in my hands. I pulled the string back to my ear, and released the arrow. It struck him right in the thigh, pinning him to a

log. I didn't stop there. I reached for the touch panel on the grip, my thumb sliding over the glowing screen just like Raphael had shown me.

Click.

The mechanical wings inside the man's leg snapped open. The sound of tearing fabric and breaking bone filled the quiet air. I watched him fall, and I felt a smile stretch across my face.

I looked at Raphael, my eyes wide and glowing in the dark. I was covered in sweat despite the cold, my hair wild, wavy brown streaks. I felt like I had finally found the place where I was meant to be.

"Next one," I breathed, my voice coming out in a fast, excited rush.

Raphael looked down at me, his dark eyes scanning my face, seeing the fire he had lit. He didn't say a word, but the way he gripped my hand told me everything.

The night bled forward in flashes of silver arrows, snapping branches, and heavy breathing.

Γ

One turned into three.

Three turned into seven.

Then ten.

Then more.

The deeper we moved into the woods, the darker the trees became, thick branches swallowing the faint daylight. above us while dead leaves cracked beneath our boots.

Every target blurred together.

A man crying behind a fallen log.

Another one trying to limp through the creek after an arrow tore through his calf.

One dropped to his knees and begged Raphael for mercy so hard he vomited into the dirt.

Raphael never even blinked.

He would simply tilt his head toward them and tell me what they had done in that same smooth, emotionless voice like he was reading grocery lists instead of sins.

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And somehow, that made it easier. The monsters stopped looking human after a while. Especially when Raphael spoke.

“He sold videos of little girls online.”

Arrow.

“He buried his wife in the basement and told everyone she ran away.”

Arrow.

“He drugged women at bars and filmed them, then killed them.”

Arrow.

My body stopped shaking after the first few kills. The bow no longer felt foreign in my hands. At some point, Raphael stopped needing to guide my hands entirely. Now he only stood close enough for me to feel the heat of him at my back while I aimed.

Hours passed.

We had to be close to fifteen targets by now. Maybe more. I had lost count somewhere between the screaming and the running. Sweat clung to the back of my neck despite the freezing air. My breathing came out in visible white puffs while we moved through the woods again, stepping over roots and broken branches.

Raphael walked slightly ahead of me now, one hand holding mine as he guided us.

The silence between us felt different now. It was comfortable like we had shared something ugly enough to bind us together forever.

Birds had started singing somewhere far away. It was morning. I slowed down suddenly and Raphael noticed immediately.

His grip tightened lightly around my hand as he looked back over his shoulder, “You okay?”

I stopped walking completely. My chest was still rising hard from the running, but something else had started building inside me now. Something bigger than adrenaline.

Raphael turned fully toward me.

The sunrise cut across his face, catching against the sharp line of his jaw and the dark ink on his throat.

He looked beautiful.

And for some reason, standing there between the trees with blood drying beneath my fingernails, I suddenly wanted to tell him everything.

The realization scared me because I never told anyone everything, not even myself sometimes. But Raphael looked at me in a way that made lying feel impossible. My fingers tightened unconsciously around the bow.

“It helps me focus,” I said quietly.

Raphael’s brows pulled together slightly, “What?”

My throat felt tight suddenly, painfully tight, “It makes everything stop moving around in my head.”

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Raphael stayed silent, watching me carefully. I stared down at the dead leaves beneath my boots and I forced myself to say it.

“The pain helps.”

A cold breeze moved through the trees between us.

My fingers curled tighter around the bow grip until my knuckles hurt. Then slowly, I looked back up at him, “The electricity,” I whispered. “The burns.”

I rushed to keep talking before I lost the courage.

“When the words start moving too much... when I can’t make things stay still on the page...” My voice shook harder, “I hurt myself because it makes me focus for a little while.”

Raphael’s jaw tightened instantly. I saw it happen. The muscle jumped hard beneath his skin but he didn’t / interrupt me. So I kept going.

“Sometimes I scratch at my skin until it bleeds because it helps me stay awake while I study. I burn myself in the office to work better,” my breathing turned uneven now, “And

when I fail something... when I mess up... I go home and I punish myself for it. I cut my skin, I cut off my breath...”

The shame hit me all over again saying the words out loud. It sounded insane now that someone else could hear it.

Tears burned behind my eyes, “I know it’s stupid,” I whispered quickly.

“It isn’t-”

“It is,” I cut him off immediately.

The force of my own voice startled even me. I shook my head hard, tears finally slipping free.

“Look at you,” I choked out.

Raphael went still. I gestured at him helplessly with the hand holding the bow.

“Look at everything you are.”

The morning light spilled across him while I spoke. The black clothes. The confidence. The intelligence sitting behind those dark eyes. The terrifying calmness. The power.

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Even standing in the middle of blood-soaked woods after a night of hunting monsters, Raphael somehow still looked... perfect.

“You built an empire before most people your age even figure out who they are,” I whispered. “You walk into a room and everybody listens. You know how to talk to people. You know how to lead. You’re good with business, you’re good with computers, you’re good at...” My voice cracked slightly as I looked at the bow in my hands, “This too.”

Raphael’s expression darkened but I couldn’t stop anymore. The words were spilling out too fast now.

“Is there anything you’re bad at?” I laughed weakly, wiping angrily at my wet face, “Seriously. Is there?”

He opened his mouth again, but I kept talking over him.

“Do you know what it’s like watching someone like you when your own brain feels broken all the time?” I whispered.

The pain in my chest started spreading everywhere now.

“I tried so hard growing up,” I admitted shakily. “So hard. Everybody else could just read things normally. They could remember things normally. They could do simple things without feeling stupid all the time.”

Raphael’s eyes never left my face.

“I wanted to be smart so badly,” I whispered. “I wanted to be normal so badly.”

Fresh tears rolled down my cheeks.

“But no matter how hard I worked, I still wasn’t enough.”

The sunrise kept spilling through the trees around us and Raphael standing there listening to the ugliest parts of me without looking away once.

“I hurt myself because I don’t know what else to do with all the disappointment,” I admitted finally, “Every time I fail, it feels like proof that something inside me is wrong.”

My chin trembled violently.

“And after a while…” I whispered, barely able to get the words out anymore, “you start believing maybe you deserve the pain anyway.”

“Gianna,” he said quietly, “do you know what the cruelest thing in the world is?”

My brows pulled together slightly through my tears.

Raphael’s dark eyes held mine, “It’s when people judge a fish for drowning on land.”

I blinked.

“You grew up in a world that measures intelligence one specific way. Reading quickly. Memorizing fast. Sitting still. Processing information exactly the same as everyone else.” His jaw tightened slightly, “And because your brain works differently, they made you believe that meant your brain works wrong.”

Emotion climbed painfully into my throat.

Raphael shook his head once, “That isn’t failure,” he said, “That’s people failing you.”

My chest tightened so hard it hurt because a part of me wanted to believe him. God, I wanted to but the weight inside me had been there too long.

Too many years.

Too many humiliations.

Too many red marks on papers. Too many disappointed looks. Too many nights crying alone beside burned skin and bloody fingernails.

I shook my head immediately, “No,” I whispered, “You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand...” the softness in his voice nearly shattered me.

I looked away from him fast, staring out into the trees while my grip tightened painfully around the bow.

“My father...” I swallowed hard. “He was supposed to give everything to me one day.”

Raphael went completely still.

I laughed weakly, but there was no humor in it, “Crazy, right?” I whispered. “Everybody looks at me now wouldn’t believe it, but that wasn’t the original plan.”

The morning wind pushed lightly through my hair.

“When I was little, my father used to bring me into meetings. I would sit beside him for hours while men argued over shipments and contracts and money.”

Raphael listened silently.

“He used to tell people I was smarter than all his grown men combined,” a painful smile pulled briefly at my mouth before disappearing again. He wanted me to run the Toricelli empire someday.”

Raphael’s brows lowered slightly.

“And then...” I let out a shaky breath. “School got harder. The older I got, the worse it became.” I laughed weakly again, “Everyone else moved forward and I just... couldn’t keep up. I would read the same sentence ten times and still not understand it,” tears blurred my vision, “I would study for weeks and still fail exams.”

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Raphael's jaw clenched harder.

"My father started getting angry," my voice turned smaller now, "At first he thought I wasn't trying hard enough. So I tried harder."

My fingers curled tightly into my palm. I didn't tell him about my sessions with the doctor that was the secret was taking to my grave.

"I stopped sleeping properly. I locked myself in rooms for hours," my breathing turned uneven again, "And when that still didn't work..."

The burns. The scratching. The punishments. The shouting.

"I kept failing anyway," I whispered, "But then Gio was born, my half brother."

Something inside me twisted painfully saying his name.

"And suddenly my father had another option."

Raphael's eyes darkened instantly.

I laughed again, quieter this time, "You should've seen the difference. Everything changed after that."

The memories hit me one after another.

My father teaching Gio to shoot. Teaching Gio to speak in meetings. Teaching Gio how to command rooms. While I sat alone with the doctor and unfinished papers and growing panic.

"He slowly pushed me aside," tears rolled freely down my cheeks now, "Not publicly. Not cruelly. Just..." I swallowed hard. "Quietly. He stopped bringing me into important meetings. Stopped asking for my opinions. Stopped looking at me like I was worth investing in."

The shame felt endless.

"And the worst part?" I whispered, "I understood why."

Raphael's expression hardened immediately, "No."

“Yes,” I snapped suddenly, emotion breaking sharply through my voice, “Because he was right!”

The words echoed through the trees. My chest heaved violently, “I wasn’t good enough!”

Raphael stepped toward me instantly, but I kept going before he could speak.

“I kept failing over and over and over again!” I cried, “Do you understand how humiliating that is in a family like ours?”

The tears were falling too fast now.

“I was supposed to be useful,” my voice shattered apart completely, “That was my role. That was the one thing I was supposed to be good for. And I couldn’t even do that right.”

The bow felt heavy in my hands suddenly.

“He still expected things from me,” I said quietly, “Still wanted me useful. Still wanted me working in the background. He wanted me to become someone like you. But every mistake became proof that I wasn’t enough.

BA

Again and again and again. Every time I failed, I could see it on his face.”

Disappointment.

“I wasn’t the daughter he imagined. So tell me,” I whispered, staring directly into Raphael’s eyes now, “how exactly am I not supposed to hate myself for that?”

Fresh tears spilled down my face.

“I watch you and your brothers and it’s like watching people built correctly,” I admitted shakily. “You all know who you are.”

My gaze locked onto his.

“And then there’s me.”

The words came out so small.

“So tell me honestly, Raphael…” my chin trembled violently, “What exactly am I supposed to do with all the pain from becoming the child nobody could fix?”

“You know what your father’s real problem was?” he asked quietly.

My throat tightened as we looked directly into each other's eyes.

"He only understood strength when it looked like him."

The words hit me hard enough to steal my breath.

"But you aren't built like him," he continued. "And instead of learning how your mind worked, he kept trying to force you into shapes that were never meant for you.'

Something painful twisted in my chest. Raphael looked almost irritated now, not at me but at the idea of it.

"You think struggling to read makes you stupid?" he asked. "Gianna, I watched you tonight."

Heat crawled weakly up my neck.

"You adapted faster than most trained men I've worked with."

I blinked.

"You notice patterns almost immediately," he said, "You track movement naturally. Distance too," his eyes flicked briefly toward the bow still in my hands, "By the fifth target, you were already compensating for wind direction without realizing it."

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I stared at him.

My breathing slowed slightly.

"You process information differently," he continued, "Not worse. Differently."

Nobody had ever said it like that before.

Different.

Not defective.

Not broken.

Different.

Raphael gestured vaguely toward the woods behind us.

“You know what I saw tonight?” he asked. “I saw someone who moves like she was built for field work.”

A weak, disbelieving laugh escaped me instantly, “Raphael-”

“No,” his voice turned hard, “Listen to me.”

The seriousness in his tone made me fall silent.

“You move quietly without thinking about it. You react fast. Your instincts are sharp,” his eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me, “And the second you stopped doubting yourself, your aim became lethal.”

The word sent heat curling strangely through my stomach. Lethal. My grip tightened unconsciously around the bow. Raphael noticed. Of course he noticed.

“You think brains only belong behind desks because that’s how your father taught you to measure worth,” he said quietly. “But intelligence isn’t just spreadsheets and reports.”

He pointed lightly toward my head.

“Pattern recognition like yours?” he murmured, “That’s rare. You see details other people miss,” Raphael continued, “You absorb behavior. Movement. Repetition. Your brain connects things quickly even when you don’t realize it’s happening.”

Emotion climbed painfully into my throat again.

“But I fail-”

“Everybody fails.”

The sharpness of his interruption startled me.

Raphael’s eyes locked onto mine, “The difference is that you were punished for failing instead of taught through it.”

He dragged a hand through his dark hair roughly before continuing.

“You know what happens when soldiers under me make mistakes?” he asked, “I correct the mistake. I train the weakness. I adjust strategy. I don’t destroy them for being human.”

My vision blurred instantly.

“Your father kept trying to hammer you into becoming something familiar to him,” he muttered, “And when that didn’t work, he made you believe the failure belonged to you instead of his inability to understand you.”

My chest physically hurt. Raphael looked at me for another long second before speaking again.

“You know what I need in my world?” he asked quietly.

I swallowed hard, “What?”

“Not another version of myself.”

The answer surprised me enough that my brows pulled together.

Raphael gestured toward himself with faint irritation, “I already have men like me everywhere in my basement, he said, “Men who think like me. Fight like me. Solve problems like me.”

A humorless smile touched his mouth.

“And do you know what happens when everyone in a room thinks the exact same way?”

I shook my head slowly.

“You create blind spots.”

The morning sunlight flickered through the trees around him while he spoke.

“I know what I’m good at,” he continued calmly, “Violence. Strategy. Control. Building systems. But the smartest empires survive because of the people filling the gaps where others fall short.”

His gaze dropped briefly toward the bow in my hands again.

“You see things differently than I do,” he said, “That’s value to me. If I was building something important,” he murmured, “I would want somebody exactly like you beside me.”

My heartbeat stumbled violently. He said it so simply like it was obvious, like there was no question about it at all.

“I don’t need another copy of myself, Gianna,” he said quietly. “I need people who can see the things I can’t.”

The wind moved softly through my hair. And suddenly, for the first time in my entire life, the broken parts of me didn't feel ugly standing in front of him.

They felt... seen.

Janedoewritings Author

I took inspiration for the prey in these hunts from real-life monsters and similar cases.

Enjoy..

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 336

Gianna

You know that exact feeling? The one where a guy says something so specific, so deeply real about you, that your brain completely shortcuts and you find yourself imagining what it would look like to stand at an altar with him?

That was the exact wave that crashed over me as I stood there, looking up at him through the fading shadows of the trees.

I realized right then that I had been playing a losing game.

It wasn't just a bad idea to get involved with Raphael, the real danger was thinking I could actually protect my heart from him. It was so easy to tell myself that I would never fall for him when he was acting like an arrogant jerk. It was easy to build a wall when he was pushing my buttons. But now, when he looked right through me and spoke to the broken parts of my soul like they were valuable?

How the fuck was I supposed to look him in the eye after this and pretend that everything between us was normal? How was I supposed to act like he was just my stepbrother?

The heavy black bow slipped right out of my hand, hitting the damp leaves with a dull, forgotten thud. I didn't care about the weapon anymore. I didn't care about the dirt or the blood or the hunt.

I took a sharp step forward, closing the small distance between us until the heat radiating off his chest swallowed me whole. I reached up, my hands catching the rough fabric of his shirt, and I pressed my lips directly against his.

My entire body completely electrified.

It wasn’t the awful, painful kind of shock that I used to force myself to focus at my desk. It wasn’t the kind of burning sting that made me cry alone in the dark. This was a wild, roaring current of pure heat that shot straight down my spine and made my knees go weak. It was a beautiful, terrifying jolt that made every single nerve in my skin wake up and scream for more.

I melted into his solid weight, my fingers digging into his clothes, completely falling into the deep, dark void of him.

He didn’t hesitate for even a single second.

The moment my lips touched his, Raphael reacted like an animal that had just been unleashed. A low groan ripped from the deep center of his chest, a sound so raw it vibrated straight into my own mouth.

Before I could even blink, his massive hand shot up and wrapped around the back of my neck, his long fingers tangling into the messy strands of my brown hair.

His other hand slammed against the small of my waist, his large palm locking around my skin right where my top ended.

I couldn’t get close enough to him. I was drowning in the scent of his skin, and the only way to breathe was to take more of him.

I tangled my fingers deep into the fabric of his shirt, using every ounce of my strength to push him back. My boots slid through the damp dirt as I forced his body backward until his spine slammed hard against the rough bark of a massive pine tree. The impact made a low thud shake the air, but neither of us broke the kiss for even half a second.

I pressed my entire body against his, pinning him there. I kissed him like my life depended on it, like the world was ending around us and he was the only safe place left to hide.

I lost control. I nipped at his bottom lip, my teeth catching the soft skin just hard enough to make him let out a breathless grunt. I sucked on his lip, nibbling at the corners of his mouth. Raphael groaned, his hands tightening around my waist, pulling my hips flush against his thighs until I could feel how badly he wanted me. He bit me back, a mean, possessive ntp that sent a sharp spike of adrenaline straight to my core.

Shore

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The world was just the taste of his mouth, the scrape of his stubble against my chin, and the desperate sound of our breathing echoing through the quiet woods.

BANG.

The sudden roar of a gunshot shattered the morning air.

The sound ripped through the trees, right next to my head. My ears instantly started ringing, the vibration shaking my entire skull. The sudden noise startled me so badly that I violently jerked back, my lips tearing away from his as my heart leaped into my throat.

I stumbled back a step, my eyes wide and blinking against the bright morning light, my chest heaving for air.

Raphael hadn't moved an inch. His back was still pressed flat against the tree trunk, his face completely calyn. But his right arm was extended straight out past my shoulder, his hand gripping a heavy silver pistol I hadn't even seen him draw. Wisps of gray smoke were lazily curling out from the barrel of the gun, floating up into the chilly air.

Slowly, I turned my head to look where the gun was pointing.

Just ten feet away from us, a man had a bloody hole right between his eyes, his face frozen in a mask of shock. He had a long, rusted hunting knife gripped in his dead fingers. He had been trying to sneak up on us from behind the bushes while I was too busy losing myself in Raphael's arms.

Raphael didn't even look at the dead man. He kept his dark eyes locked entirely on me. He slowly lowered the gun, the muscle in his jaw jumping as he watched me breathe.

"You got distracted, mess," he murmured, "Never lose your focus in a hunt.

A small, breathy sound escaped my throat before I could stop it. I looked from the dead man on the ground, whose eyes were still wide with surprise, back to Raphael's face. His dark hair was a little messy from my fingers, and his lips were slightly swollen from how hard I'd been kissing him.

I let out a laugh, hearing me, the tight line of Raphael's mouth broke, and a rumbling chuckle vibrated deep in his chest. He lowered the silver pistol entirely, shaking his head as his shoulders relaxed against the bark.

"I didn't get distracted," I said, my voice still a little breathless, "You're just a really good distractor."

Raphael smiled, and reached out like he always does, his thumb catching a bit of dirt on my jaw and wiping it away.

But he didn’t drop his hand. Instead, his long fingers spread out across my skin, cupping my jaw and holding my face firmly in his palm. He used that solid grip to pull me right back into his space, tilting my head up so he could look into my eyes for one burning second before his mouth slammed down onto mine, kissing me hard and taking my breath all over again.

His hand finally slid down from my jaw, tracing the line of my neck and moving down my spine until his palm landed flat against my bare ass. He gripped the soft flesh, his long fingers squeezing with a pressure that made me let out a muffled whimper straight into his mouth.

While his lips were still completely devouring mine, he hooked his other arm right under my thighs.

With one smooth, effortless lift, Raphael pulled my body completely off the ground and brought me up into his arms. I instinctively wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms locking tight behind his neck as he held me up like I weighed nothing at all.

I pulled my lips away from his just a fraction of an inch, my chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath in the chilly air. My skin was tingling everywhere his mouth and hands had just been.

“We need to get back home,” I murmured, my voice sounding incredibly small, and breathy. I rested my forehead against his shoulder, closing my eyes for a second as the cold wind brushed over my legs, “I have college in a few hours... and then I have to be at work.”

GETIT

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Raphael held my weight against his chest, his dark eyes looking down at me with a lazy, arrogant kind of amusement.

“I wouldn’t worry about work, Mess,” he said, as his thumb brushed against my hip, “Maybe your boss will cur you some slack today.”

A small, breathless smile tugged at the corner of my mouth, “And what makes you think he’d do that?”

“Because,” Raphael murmured, his dark eyes narrowing as he leaned in to nip lightly at my bottom lip one las time, “he’s currently holding you in the middle of the woods, and he likes keeping you exactly where you are.”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't stop the small smirk from pulling at my lips. I planted both of my palms flat against his broad chest, pushing back just enough so he had to look me straight in the eye.

"Oh, really?" I said, "Is that how you run your business, Mr. Boss Man? Just giving out free passes to employees who distract you in the woods?"

Raphael raised an eyebrow, his grip tightening around my thighs as he watched me challenge him.

"I don't need handouts," I continued, "I plan to earn every single dollar on my paycheck. I am going to absolutely crush it, and I don't want you giving me any special treatment just because of... this."

I gestured between the two of us, my legs still wrapped tightly around his waist.

"So, you can keep your slack," I murmured, leaning in close until my lips were brushing against his ear, sending a hot, teasing breath over his skin, "I'm showing up on time, I'm doing my job perfectly, and if you try to make it easy for me, I'll just have to find a way to make things very, very difficult for you in your office."

He let out a laugh, "Is that a threat?"

"Maybe... Besides," I said, resting my chin on his shoulder with a dramatic sigh, "I am absolutely starving after all that running through the woods. And after everything else you just did to me."

Raphael gave a judgmental grunt, but the corner of his mouth twitched up. He slowly lowered me down, his hands sliding along my waist until my boots hit the damp earth again.

"You're always starving," he muttered, "And if I leave it up to you, you'll just eat some chemical-filled trash from a vending machine on campus. Your diet is an absolute disaster."

"Hey! It's called being a busy college student," I argued, straightening my crop top, "Chips and energy drinks are a perfectly fine breakfast."

Raphael shook his head, his dark eyes rolling as he turned back toward the path, "It's poison. You're lucky we have a chef at the estate who actually knows how to cook real food, or your body would have given out weeks ago."

I laughed, jogging a step to catch up to him as we started walking back down the narrow, hidden trail through the brush.

We finally reached the edge of the trees where the black motorcycle sat waiting. Raphael grabbed my helmet, slid it over my head. He fastened the strap under my chin, making sure it was perfectly tight. Then, he pulled his own black helmet on, the dark visor snapping down and hiding his face completely.

He swung his long leg over the leather seat, and I climbed up right behind him. I locked my arms around his wide waist, pressing my chest flat against his solid back as he kicked the engine. The bike let out a loud roar that echoed through the quietness, and then we tore forward.

Instead of going straight to the main gates of the Void, Raphael turned the bike onto a long, empty road that wound along the outer edges of Chicago. The sun was fully up now, painting the sky in bright streaks of orange and pink. He drove us through beautiful, isolated spots where nobody else was around.

We cruised along a high stone cliff that overlooked the massive, deep blue water of Lake Michigan. The cold wind whipped past my helmet, but the view of the endless water and the distant city skyline looked like a beautiful painting.

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I still talked through the helmet, even though my voice was muffled, he still understood me. At first, we just talked about random things, the architecture of the old buildings we passed, the way the morning light hit the glass towers in the distance, and how the city felt completely different when everyone else was still asleep.

I tightened my arms around his waist, burying my helmet against his jacket, breathing in the scent of his leather and the fresh morning air. And suddenly, I wanted more, every dark corner of his soul, every cold and logical piece of his brain, I wanted it all.

“Raphael?” I asked, my voice echoing inside my helmet. “Can I ask you something real?”

“Ask,” his voice came back.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked, “What is your biggest fear?”

There was a short silence between, filled only by the sound of the engine.

“I don’t have any,” Raphael replied. His tone wasn’t arrogant or bragging, he said it perfectly flat, like he was stating a simple mathematical fact, “Fear is just an emotional reaction to a lack of data or a lack of control. If you understand the variables in any given situation, there is no logical reason to experience fear. You simply look at the problem, calculate the risk, and execute the solution.”

I smiled against the inside of my visor, shaking my head at how perfectly rational his brain worked.

“You know, it really impresses me how you do that,” I murmured, looking out at the beautiful, empty road ahead of us, “In real life, when we are at the office, you are this incredibly intelligent know-it-all. You think through everything. You are so calm, so logical, and everything you say makes perfect sense.”

I paused, remembering the pistol in his hand just a little while ago, and the cold look in his eyes when he shot that man without even blinking.

“But then you go on these hunts,” I continued, “And you completely change. You turn into this wild, dangerous animal who doesn’t follow any rules at all. It’s crazy how you can be the smartest, most rational man in the city, and then become a complete monster whenever you want to.”

The heavy rumble of the motorcycle engine filled the silence between us as we cruised past a long stretch of green grass overlooking the water. I held onto him tighter, leaning my head against his broad back.

“How do you just switch it off, Raphael?” I asked through the helmet, my voice echoing in the small space, “How do you keep those two sides of you so far apart? It is like you put your life into different, separate boxes. One box is for the smart businessman in the suit, and the other box is for the monster in the woods. How do they never mix?”

Raphael took a smooth turn, his body leaning perfectly with the heavy bike. His voice came back into my ears, deep and husky.

“I just told you how it works, Gianna,” he said, “It is simple organization. The violence is inside me. It has been engraved in my DNA since the day I was born. It is a part of who I am, and it does not go away. But keeping it locked up in a box inside my mind is the only healthy way to live. The hunts are my release. I open that specific box in the woods, I let the violence out so it can breathe, and then I close the box tightly before I put my suit back on. It is a system. A system keeps everything running perfectly.”

I listened to him, amazed by how easy he made it sound. But my mind kept twisting the idea around, wondering about the boundaries of his control.

“Okay, but what if something really pisses you off in real life?” I asked, my tone turning a little curious and testing. “What if you are sitting at your big desk in the office, normally doing your work, and someone pushes your buttons? Are you telling me you won’t ever act on those violent impulses during the day?”

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My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 340

“I might get mad but I won’t get violent. I won’t ever do that,” Raphael said immediately, “In the civilized world, what my brothers can’t seem to understand is that, violence is messy, inefficient, and highly illogical. It ruins business, and it creates problems that take too much time to fix. If someone angers me at the office, I use my brain to crush them financially or professionally. I do not use my hands.”

A small, playful smile crept onto my face inside my helmet. I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to pester him. I wanted to see if I could find a single crack in his perfection.

“Oh, come on,” I teased, “Not even a little bit? What if you are in the middle of a super important meeting, and some annoying guy accidentally spills boiling hot coffee right all over your favorite, expensive Italian suit? And then he laughs about it? You wouldn’t want to throw him out the window?”

“No,” Raphael replied flatly, “I would simply fire him, sue him for property damage to ruin his credit, and buy a new suit before the meeting finished.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, giggling a little as I squeezed his waist. “What if you are driving your nice bike through the city, and some terrible driver cuts you off? You fall, and it scratches your beautiful bike. And then they flip you the bird through their window? Wouldn’t you want to chase them down and ram their car off the road?”

“No,” Raphael replied, “Ramming a car with a motorcycle violates basic laws of physics. The mass of the car would easily overpower the bike, causing further damage to my machine and unnecessary physical injury to myself. It is a terrible risk-to-reward ratio.”

He paused for a brief second as he accelerated smoothly down a straight stretch of asphalt.

“The logical response is to remain down, note the vehicle’s model and plate, and let my lawyers handle it. The driver’s insurance would pay for every single scratch on this bike, their premium would skyrocket, and I would use the settlement money to upgrade the engine. Getting angry does not fix a paint job, Gianna. Making them pay for it does.”

“You are no fun!” I laughed, shifting my weight on the seat as the bike passed a beautiful, empty pier, “What if you go to your favorite restaurant after a very long, stressful day, and the waiter is incredibly rude to you? What if he brings you the completely wrong steak, and when you complain, he rolls his eyes and tells you to just deal with it? Wouldn’t you want to drag him into the kitchen and put his hand on the hot stove?”

“No,” Raphael said again, letting out a dry laugh, “I would buy the restaurant, walk into the kitchen as his new boss, and fire him on the spot so he could not pay his rent. That is much more satisfying than burning his hand, and it creates a profit for me.”

I let out a loud laugh, shaking my head against his back. No matter what crazy situation I threw at him, his brain just found a smart, and completely non-violent way to handle it.

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