

## 9 9-Fool Me Once!

Helanie: 1

I had woken up early, anxious about my stepbrother waking and revealing the truth about our mate bond. Would he be that stupid to tell everyone and get us both in trouble? 3

Maximus had warned me of the consequences if anyone even heard us joking inappropriately.

Imagine how I'll be treated when they discover I've felt the mate bond with my stepbrother. 1

My mother would kick me out, and I'd be seen as a lewd creature. As if my pheromones hadn't already made me feel filthy.

I put on an old dress and left my room for breakfast, hoping to learn what was going on in the mansion.

Since Charlotte stayed up until 5 a.m., her mother couldn't wake her. So, it was just the two of us.

As I sat down, I noticed the man from last night, engrossed in his phone. The way he abruptly ended his call after seeing me made me hold my

breath.

Introductions were made, but he kept staring at me. For a moment, I wondered if he remembered me at all.

I mean, he was pretty drunk last night.

"Emmet! Why don't you try this? I made a cheese omelet for you. It's a new recipe, and I know how much you like it," my mother said brightly to my stepbrother. But I noticed they seemed quite hostile towards her.

Emmet tapped his fork in his plate, but instead of accepting the plate she offered, he just stared at her.

"Emmet! She's trying her best to get along with you. At least make an effort," Lord McQuoid complained, but his son only rolled his eyes.

I didn't want to see him that way, but he was so masculine and oddly attractive. My gaze then shifted to Norman, sitting beside him, his perfectly pressed light silver shirt with the sleeves rolled up just past his elbows, exposing his muscular arms.

I quickly looked away, realizing what I was doing.



Even though I tried to stay calm, it didn't change the fact that I had felt the mate bond with the man sitting there, acting like he owned the world. He was my stepbrother, and that spelled trouble.

The only good thing was that I didn't have an active wolf, so after the initial mate call, there was no way he could know we shared the mate bond.

But if he somehow remembers, I'm doomed.

"I'm done," Emmet suddenly stood, causing Norman to glance up at him. He then looked over at their father and noticed that Emmet's abrupt departure was going to upset him.

"I have some meetings I need to finish before the storm. Also, I've asked Emmet for help," Norman quickly got up after his brother. I wondered if he was telling the truth or just making up an excuse to cover for him. The moment he offered that excuse, their father seemed to relax.

"Ah, right. I'm glad Emmet is taking an interest in the business as well. Everything my golden child touches turns to gold," Lord McQuoid smiled with pride, even as Emmet himself didn't seem too moved by the praise.

Emmet slid his hands into his pants pockets, casually tossing his coat back, then strolled away. His broad and muscular brother followed, grabbing his coat in a very particular way, draping it over his arm before leaving.

I hadn't known them for long, but Norman struck me as someone extremely image-conscious. The way he dressed, accessorized—everything was so precise and expensive.

Emmet, on the other hand, was the complete opposite. His coat was disheveled, his shirt wrinkled, and he hadn't even bothered to tuck it into his pants. His tie was loose and askew.

"Helanie! I'm so glad you joined us for breakfast. I've been wondering why you've been avoiding us, but then Emma told me that you're an introvert and don't enjoy being around people. That's why I stopped asking for you. But I'm glad you made the effort today," Lord McQuoid explained, clearly relieved by the excuses they'd made for my absence. A knot formed in my stomach.

It broke my heart that, instead of just tolerating my company for a few minutes, they'd gone to the trouble of crafting a lie.





I could only offer a weak smile in response. Just then, Charlotte appeared, though by that point, Lord McQuoid and my mother had already finished their breakfast.

"I'll help you get ready for the office," my mother offered eagerly, desperate to ingratiate herself with these people. She left with Lord McQuoid, leaving me alone with Charlotte and Aunt Emma.

"Helanie! Why don't you make yourself useful?" Aunt Emma's sharp tone caught me off guard as she got up from the table, carefully filling a tray with small portions of every dish.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked, prepared to endure any challenge. I noticed a secretive glance exchanged between Emma and Charlotte before Aunt Emma set the tray in front of me.

"The brothers didn't join us because of you. Why don't you take this tray of food to one of them?" Her request shocked me.

I was new in the mansion—why would I be the one asked to bring them food? They should be the ones coming down to eat with everyone else.

"I don't think that would help. If anything, it might just annoy them even more if I showed

up," I refused the task. I knew they didn't like me from our very first meeting.

I had seen Norman's anger firsthand, and Charlotte herself had said the others were the real threat. So why would I willingly go before them?

"Kaye is the youngest of the brothers. He's really sick today, so he'd appreciate it if you took his food upstairs," Charlotte chimed in, agreeing with her mother. I turned my head, contemplating my options.

"Come on, didn't you see how worried your mother looked? Help her out by dealing with the brothers yourself, and convince them you didn't come here to steal their money or live off them," Aunt Emma insisted, standing behind me and pushing me to get out of my chair. 2

I really didn't want to do it, but she wasn't wrong about my mother being worried. She didn't deserve to be punished by the brothers because of me.

I had to start handling my own problems. Maybe bringing food to my stepbrother would make him hate me less. 1



"Okay, but which room is his?" I asked reluctantly, finally getting up from my chair, though I was so hungry I could have eaten right then.

"The first room on the second floor. It has a black doorknob, which makes it stand out from the others," Aunt Emma added, giving me a little shove forward.

The tray was heavier than I expected—or maybe I was just feeling light-headed. I took it and made my way upstairs, but deep down, I had a gnawing feeling that I was making a mistake. 6

But it was too late to turn back. I was already on the second floor, standing before the door with the black knob.

Before I could knock, Aunt Emma rushed up behind me, swiftly turning the doorknob and pushing the door open. I didn't like what she did. Why didn't she knock? 3

"Just leave it inside," she whispered, then quickly stepped back and headed downstairs, leaving me in a difficult situation.

The room was pitch dark when I entered. He must have been in the bathroom, so I thought I'd



just set the tray on the side table and leave quietly. 7

But my clumsiness betrayed me. As I placed the tray down, I knocked something off the table. It didn't just fall; it shattered loudly, echoing in the dark room.

"Who the fuck is in my room!"

His voice boomed from inside the bathroom, dripping with menace. I immediately regretted coming here.