

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

C 1

Gianna

— 3 6 5 —

I tugged at the scrap of black lace riding up my hip. This outfit wasn't clothes, it was a prayer. A tiny, see-through prayer.

I caught my reflection in the cracked dressing room mirror and barely recognized the girl staring back. The silver wig was cold and synthetic against my neck.

"We're getting that money, Bri. I swear," I said.

Brianna looked at me, her eyes rimmed with red, "Gianna, you don't have to do this. You've already done enough for us. You shouldn't have to be in here, looking like this. We'll find another way."

"There is no other way, and you know it," I snapped, then immediately softened. I grabbed her hands. They were ice cold, "I am not letting anything happen to any of us. I'd rather stand out there in front of a thousand strangers than spend one second wondering

where Cole Mercer took you. If this is what it takes to keep all of us safe, then I'm doing it. End of story."

The door swung open, Mama D came in with a smile. She looked us up and down, her eyes lingering on the way the black straps dug into my skin. She hated this as much as we did.

"Are you ready, girls. It's go time," she said, waving a hand dripping in fake gold rings, "We've got a private party in the Gold Room. These aren't your usual local creeps. These guys are fancy. Suits that cost more than your lives, clean fingernails, the whole deal. They'll throw heavy cash if you make them feel like kings. Don't blow it."

I swallowed hard and reached for the black lace mask on the vanity. I tied the silk ribbons behind my head, feeling a tiny bit of relief as the fabric hid my eyes and nose. If I couldn't see them clearly, maybe they couldn't see the real me.

Walking into the private room felt like stepping into a freezer. It was dark, filled the smell of top-shelf bourbon and the kind of cologne that lingers in your throat. Three men sat on the leather U-shaped couch. They were leaning in, talking in low voices.

"It's a simple wire," one was saying, "We move the first billion through the offshore accounts in Cyprus by morning."

First billion.

The word made my head spin. I was here risking everything for a few grand, and they were talking about money that didn't even sound real.

The music started, I stepped into the center of the rug, moving my hips, not like Bri and Tasha were moving. Instead, I used the only thing I knew: my training.

I rose onto the tips of my toes, my calves flexing, I moved my hips in a slow circle, every muscle in my stomach rippling with a control that only years of the barre could give you.

I arched my back until my silver hair nearly swept the floor, my ribs expanding as I took a shaky breath.

I could feel their eyes on me. The room went dead silent. The talk of billions stopped. I arched my back, sliding my hands down my sides, trying to look like I enjoyed the way their eyes tracked my every move.

The man in the center slowly sat straight. He didn't say a word. He just lifted one hand and curled two fingers, beckoning me closer.

As, I got closer, the details hit me. He was wearing a dark charcoal suit that fit his broad shoulders perfectly, no tie, just a crisp white shirt unbuttoned at the top.

I stood between his knees, my body swaying to the beat. I looked up, and for a second, I forgot to breathe.

He was... beautiful, like, scary beautiful. He had a jawline so sharp that it looked unreal. But it was his eyes that trapped me, a light, piercing brown, like clover honey held up to a flame.

Ruby Walker

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