

My Stepbrother's Dirty Little Secret

Chapter 9

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I looked at her, surprised by how normal she acted. She seemed like she actually enjoyed being here.

“Thank you,” I managed to say.

She gave me a quick, cheerful wave before heading back toward the stairs. I stepped into the room and

closed the door.

It was a beautiful room, filled with expensive things, but as I looked around, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the walls were closing in on me.

I grabbed my suitcase and started to move my things into the giant walk-in closet. The space was so big it felt like it was swallowing my life. My few clothes didn’t even fill half the racks, leaving wide, empty

gaps.

I reached for the hidden pocket at the bottom of my bag. My fingers brushed against the familiar texture, and I pulled it out.

It was my sliver of wood.

It was a simple, thin wooden rod. It wasn't decorated or special to look at. But as I held it, I felt my heart rate finally start to slow down.

I called it my Reminder.

I tucked it away on the top shelf, hidden behind a pile of sweaters. I needed it close. Because the Reminder was the only thing that kept my head clear. It was the only thing that kept me from forgetting who I really was and what men were capable of.

I stayed locked in my bedroom for the rest of the day, hiding out on my phone and talking to my friends. It was the only way to feel like I still had a life outside these stone walls.

Eventually, a soft knock came at the door. A maid walked in carrying a tray of dinner. She was quiet and quick, and when I was done, she came back to clear the dishes away.

“Ms. Claire sent me,” the woman said with a small smile. “She wanted me to tell you that if you aren’t ready to go downstairs for dinner yet, you can eat wherever you feel safe. But she also said she’d really love it if you gave them a chance soon.”

It was a small gesture, but it felt unexpectedly sweet and it finally made me smile.

The moon was high, but sleep wouldn’t come. My eyes felt like they were full of sand, but every time I closed them, my brain started spinning.

It was the insomnia, the same old ghost that followed me everywhere.

I reached for my nightstand, but the bottle of sleeping pills wasn’t there. I squeezed my eyes shut,

1:3

+15 Bonus

realizing I left them back home. My chest tightened. I couldn’t do a night in this house without them

I

I slipped out of bed, my feet hitting the cold floor. I was wearing just an oversized t-shirt and thin socks opened my door and stepped into the hallway. It was pitch black, I tried to remember what Claire had said. My room is just down the hall. But which way? This wing was a maze of identical doors and

darkness.

I turned left, then right, my heart starting to thud. I felt small in the middle of all this. I walked for what felt

like forever until I heard a sound.

I followed it, hoping it was Claire or a maid. Maybe they had something to help me sleep. I turned a corner into a different hallway. At the very end, a door was cracked open, a sliver of warm yellow light spilling onto the floor.

I walked toward it, my breath hitching. As I got closer, the sounds became clearer. It wasn't talking. It was a low, rough groan.

I reached the door and my hand froze. I couldn't help it, I looked through the gap.

It wasn't Claire's room.

Because sitting in a black leather armchair was a Raphael... He was completely naked, his skin pale and covered in dark ink that looked like snakes in the dim light. I recognized the sharp, mean line of his jaw

immediately.

He was completely naked, his skin was glowing in the lamplight. His muscles were bunched, his head thrown back. Between his legs, a girl was kneeling, her dark hair spilling over his thighs. I watched, frozen, as his fingers tangled in her hair.

My stomach did a somersault. I knew that face. I remembered the way he had looked at me at the Gold Room last week. Seeing him like this, so raw and stripped down, made my blood turn to ice.

I needed to move. I needed to run.

I tried to back away, but my heart was hammering so hard I couldn't feel my own feet. I took one step back, but my sock hit a slick patch of polished marble.

My foot slid out from under me.

"Oh-"

The sound died in my throat as I tumbled forward. I didn't just fall, I slammed right into the heavy wood of the door. It swung wide open with a loud, echoing bang, and I went skidding across the floor, landing hard on my hands and knees right in his room.

The girl gasped and pulled away, her eyes wide with shock. But Raphael didn't jump. He didn't even cover himself. He just slowly tilted his head down, his dark, empty eyes locking onto mine as I lay sprawled on his rug.

And the silence was the loudest thing I had ever heard.

Ruby Walker