

My Sister 141

Chapter 141 CRUEL HALLUCINATION

SERAPHINA'S POV

I was exhausted. That had to be it. Or maybe my wistfulness and longing had conjured up this outrageous sight.

Because there was no universe where Margaret Lockwood stood on my porch with a pie in her hands—eerily identical to the one Mrs. Barnes had pressed into mine—like some doting mother out of a storybook.

Not when the pain from the last time I'd seen her was still fresh, like a new wound.

The image rose in my mind—her face carved with disdain, her words slicing me open in that suffocating hospital room. 'She tried to kill my daughter!'

She hadn't even flinched as she delivered that gutting accusation.

Whether she knew it or not, in that very moment, with the broken pieces of my family as witnesses, my mother had shoveled the last bit of dirt onto the grave of our already dead relationship.

She'd chosen Celeste. She'd shoved me aside.

And there was nothing left between me and Margaret Lockwood anymore.

So I tried to ignore her.

My arms ached from the weight of pastry-filled containers and cellophane-wrapped pies, but I tightened my hold on the bags and shifted them against my hip as I took a long, steadying breath.

Maybe if I hurried, I could make it to my door, slip inside, and pretend Margaret Lockwood was nothing more than a cruel hallucination born of exhaustion and stupid, stupid longing.

“Seraphina.” Her voice was as it always was. Too composed, too careful.

She reached out for me, but I jerked away before she could touch me.

“Do I know you?” I asked, my voice as composed and careful as hers.

Hurt flashed across her face before she skillfully masked it. “I’m your mother, Sera.”

I scoffed before I could help myself. “Nope. Not doing this.”

“Sera—”

“You made your choice, remember?” I snapped, cursing myself when my voice wobbled. “Celeste is your only daughter.”

Her lips parted, and that mask fractured, just slightly, around the edges, and suddenly she looked...older. So much older.

And tired.

Her spine was still stiff as a ruler, her posture screaming control, but her eyes—those sharp, unyielding Lockwood eyes—wavered.

I hated myself for the sudden urge to drop the bags in my hands and wrap my arms around her.

And then—as I was still trying to stamp out that ridiculous feeling—she sighed. “I was wrong.”

The feeling vanished.

“Wrong?” My laugh was bitter, humorless. “Wrong doesn’t even begin to scrape the barrel of all the faults you bear.”

“You have every right to be upset with me,” she admitted, her chin dipping.

It startled me, that dip—like lowering a crown from her head. “I was...irrational at the hospital. I let my anger, my grief, blind me.”

I nodded. “Please, don’t take the blindfold off on my account. Keep your eyes on your only daughter, okay?”

I adjusted the bags in my hand and reached for my door handle.

“But I came here because I heard you advanced in the Trials. I wanted to congratulate you.”

I blinked, turning back to her. “You...watched?”

She smiled softly. “Of course, dear. My daughters are participating.”

Of course.

For some ridiculous, inane reason, Celeste was part of Frostbane's team in the OTS.

I could only thank my lucky stars that I hadn't run into her—yet. I wasn't a fool; I knew that our regularly scheduled confrontation was still in my near future.

And, of course, Celeste's participation would be the reason my mother would deem it fit to watch the LST.

I eyed the pie in Margaret's hand. My words came out as a jagged whisper. "And I'm supposed to believe these aren't just Celeste's leftovers?"

She actually had the nerve to flinch. "No," she said quickly, clutching the pie box as though it were precious evidence she had to submit. "These aren't leftovers, Sera. I prepared this separately. Intentionally. For you."

The box trembled slightly in her hands as she extended it toward me, her gaze a contrasting mixture of defiance and shame.

"It's your favorite." Her self-deprecating smile seemed calculated to garner sympathy or leniency from me. "I made sure this time."

I almost didn't take the box. My instincts screamed at me to leave it dangling in the air, to watch her face tighten with that same wounded pride she'd inflicted on me my entire life.

But my traitorous fingers brushed the edge of the box before I could stop them.

I told myself I was only curious—I wanted to see if she’d actually gotten my favorite pie correct.

Margaret’s relief was a fragile exhale. She placed the box carefully on the porch rail, as if she didn’t trust me to keep hold of it.

“I’ll go.” She took a shaky step back.

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. “I didn’t come to intrude or push you, dear. Just...to say congratulations. I hope you know you’ve made me—” She stopped, swallowing hard, as if the words were painful to release. “You’ve made me proud.”

Without waiting for an answer, she turned and descended my porch steps. Her heels clicked against the pavement, steady as a metronome, until the night swallowed her figure whole.

I stared at the pie box like it might detonate.

It looked like the physical embodiment of every spiteful word, every cutting dismissal, every nail hammered into my psyche.

I wanted to hurl it straight into the trash.

But then my eye caught on something scrawled in one corner of the cardboard lid.

A small, childish doodle—almost invisible unless you knew to look. It was a little crescent moon sketched in blue ink, curved around a five-pointed star.

My breath hitched. My knees wobbled under the weight of recognition.

My lucky charm. It was a silly little thing I came up with when I was little, and I doodled it over every single space I came across—mirrors, napkins, once on Margaret’s favorite apron.

She remembered?

I set the bags Judy’s family had given me down, hands trembling, and lifted the lid.

The aroma hit me first—sweet, tangy, spiced. Familiar. My chest constricted. It wasn’t some generic flavor pulled from Celeste’s favorites.

It was mine.

My favorite pie, at least.

Cherry and almond, dusted with cinnamon sugar across the lattice crust.

Images bloomed in the forefront of my mind: my mother carefully teaching me how to bake the recipe when I was five; my father teasing her because the edges had come out slightly charred; me fanning my mouth because I'd been too impatient for a taste to let the pie cool down; Ethan stealing extra bites when he thought no one was looking; Celeste, sticky-fingered and babbling as she took her first unsteady steps across the kitchen tiles.

Not only was it a nostalgic punch in the gut, it was a poignant reminder that once, a million years ago, the Lockwoods had been a happy, whole family.

Tears pricked hot in my eyes.

I couldn't bring myself to throw the pie away. But I couldn't bring myself to eat it either.

So I placed the box on the kitchen counter, like it was some cursed artifact I hadn't decided how to handle.

That night, sleep dragged me under heavy and deep. And in my dreams, the Lockwood garden bloomed.

Although it wasn't the garden of today—pruned too carefully, stripped of its wildness, transformed into a sterile showcase for power—I knew it instantly.

It was the garden of my childhood. Alive. Vibrant. Lavender and roses spilled over stone borders, and fireflies sparked like embers in the dusk.

In the dream, I was small again, no older than six or seven, my hair tangled, my dress rumpled from climbing trees with Ethan.

My legs swung, kicking idly at the air, because I was perched on the wooden swing suspended from the great oak.

And there he was.

My father.

Edward Lockwood, in his prime, with his broad shoulders and weathered hands. His eyes softened when they landed on me—full of the love that had waned more and more as the years passed.

He pushed the swing gently, not too hard, letting me soar just enough that the world tilted and the sky spread impossibly wide.

“Higher, Papa!” I squealed.

He chuckled, deep and warm. “If I push you too high, little wolf, you’ll take off flying and forget to come back down.”

“I won’t forget.” I twisted to look at him, hair whipping across my face. “I’ll always come back to you.”

His expression softened in that way I barely remembered—the way that, back then, had belonged only to me. “That’s because you’re my Seraphina. My precious princess.”

I giggled. “I’m not a princess. Princesses wear crowns. I don’t have one.”

“You don’t need one,” he said simply. “Because one day, you’ll be the heroine of your own story. Like the ones I tell you at night. The ones with courage and fire and wolves who never bow to anyone.”

My eyes widened as he crouched in front of me. “Really?”

He reached out and cupped my cheeks as the swing slowed. “Really.”

I giggled. “A hero is better than a princess.”

He nodded, chuckling. "And you, my love, are going to be the best of them all."

The swing stopped, his hand warm on my shoulder as he steadied me. His eyes were on the horizon, where the first stars began to glimmer.

A chill swept through the air, but I didn't shiver. I was never cold when my daddy surrounded me with his warmth.

"Promise me something, Seraphina."

I blinked up at him. I had his eyes. I loved that I had his eyes. "What?"

"That you'll never let anyone tell you your worth. Not even me. You'll decide who you are. You'll fight for it, even if the whole world stands against you."

"I promise," I whispered, though my voice trembled.

He smiled, brushing a strand of hair from my face. "That's my girl."

The dream wavered then, blurring around the edges. The oak tree stretched taller, the stars dimmed, and his voice grew distant, echoing through the thinning air.

“Remember, little wolf. You were always meant for more.”

I reached for him, desperate, but my hands closed around nothing. The swing vanished. The garden dissolved into mist.

And I woke with tears streaming silently down my cheeks.