

## **My Sister 159**

Chapter 159 STILL A FAMILY

KIERAN'S POV

“Mom!”

My son's voice ricocheted through the waiting hall, sharp and bright as a bell. Every head turned, but I watched only Seraphina.

Her entire body went still—frozen in that way I knew well. Shock. Disbelief. The instinctive flinch before emotion struck.

She didn't even notice when Maya slinked away, throwing me a conspiratorial wink over her shoulder.

And then, as Daniel bounded forward, her favorite flowers clutched tight in his hands, she unraveled.

The shock melted away, and in its place, joy erupted—raw, unguarded, and so blindingly beautiful it made my chest ache.

For a moment, I forgot we weren't alone. I forgot the murmurs of other families, the bustle of staff, the clamor of reporters and cameramen.

All I saw was Sera, her eyes glassy, her arms outstretched, trembling, as Daniel leapt into them.

“My baby!” she gasped, burying her face in his hair. Her arms wrapped around him like a vice.

His laughter muffled against her shoulder, and watching them cling to each other with such fierce tenderness broke open the gate inside me that I’d forced shut in the Arena.

This—this was why I’d done it.

After Daniel’s call about the elixir, and my promise about making something better for Sera, I’d racked my brain for a solution.

It had plagued me for a long time. What could I give Sera to infuse the strength Daniel wanted for her? What would fulfill her?

And then, it had hit me.

There was nothing, no one, Sera loved more in this world than our son. And no energy drink or magical elixir would be as powerful as her being able to embrace him on the day of her victory.

I’d put the plans into motion instantly.

I'd had Gavin increase surveillance on Jack and monitor his communication with his potential allies.

Only after I'd gotten favorable feedback often enough to gauge that there would be no trouble and ensured that Daniel would be one hundred percent safe did I make arrangements for him to come home.

I recalled the concern in my mom's voice when I told her what I had planned. "Are you sure, Kieran? Is this worth it?"

"Yes," I'd answered without a doubt.

"But you're banking all this on the off chance that Sera wins. You can't even be sure of that."

Back then, I didn't even know I would end up being her team's Gatekeeper Boss. But still, somehow, I'd known it would come to this.

Sera, wearing a medal, tears of joy tracking down her cheeks at the sight of our son.

I leaned against the wall, unnoticed in the chaos, and allowed myself a rare exhale.

The relief was a heavy, grounding thing. It anchored me as Daniel's small hands framed his mother's tear-streaked cheeks.

"You did it, Mom! You were amazing! Everyone's been talking about you!" His words tumbled out in a rush, voice cracking with pride. "You're the strongest, the smartest, the coolest! You're...you're the best in the whole world!"

Her laughter trembled, high and breathless. "Sweetheart..." She kissed his face over and over, clutching the bouquet to her chest like it was worth more than all the other prizes she'd gotten. "Gods, I missed you so much. I can't believe you're here."

She pulled back slightly then, assessing him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"Wait—how are you here?" she spluttered.

Daniel spun on his heels and pointed straight at me. "Dad made it happen!"

Seraphina's head whipped toward me, and I braced as emotions flickered in her wide eyes.

I'd expected hostility, maybe even anger or hurt in her gaze—something disapproving or rejecting in response to seeing me here, given all that had passed the last time we'd seen each other.

Surely she resented me for how brutal Ashar had been with her team. I knew I'd done my job with the fairness and ruthlessness it required. Still, guilt pressed at me, and I expected a grudge, or even just cold indifference.

But there was none of that in her gaze. Only surprise. Gratitude. Something...tender. It resembled the way she'd looked at me last night at the bar just before we stepped out of each other's arms.

Then her lips parted. "Kieran..."

Her voice was low, uncertain, but warm in a way I hadn't heard in...ever.

I'd taken a step forward before I even realized I was moving.

Daniel, oblivious to the delicate balance of the moment, bounced on his heels, his grin so broad it split his face in half.

"He planned it all, Mom! He talked to Grandpa and Grandma, and he said he knew you were going to win, so he brought me so I could hug you when you did!"

"Is—is that true?" Sera asked softly, her gaze still locked on me.

I forced my legs to stay in place, to not carry me any closer to her. "Yes." My voice came out rougher than I intended. "Daniel wanted to be here. And...I thought you deserved this. Both of you."

In the midst of the hubbub around us, silence stretched for a moment, taut and fragile.

Then she swallowed hard, her throat bobbing. “Thank you.”

Two words. But they carried more weight than any title or trophy.

Before I could gather myself enough to respond, the sharp snap of a camera flash jolted me.

“Winners, gather up!” the official photographer called, waving impatiently. “It’s time for group photos.”

Judy appeared next to Sera, wrapping her arm around hers. “Come on,” she said, grinning. “Pictures!”

“I’ll be right back!” she called out breathlessly as she let Judy pull her away.

I moved closer, taking Daniel’s hand as the five members of OTS Team One posed for their official pictures, pride and delight plastered across their faces.

After a while, the photographer announced. “Okay, with family now.”

Sera reappeared, her smile brighter than anything I'd ever seen in my life.

"Come on, baby." She tugged at Daniel's hand.

"Oh—" His eyes lit up as they turned to me. "Dad should be in it too."

I blinked. "Daniel—"

"Yes!" he barreled on, cutting me off with the unstoppable certainty only a child could have. "He's proud of you, too, Mom," he said to Sera. "He should be in the picture."

Sera stiffened, concern flickering through her bright smile, the effort to mask her discomfort obvious as she weighed the implications of me being included.

I could see the calculations sparking in her mind: the politics, the optics, the personal mess of it all. I had been her Gatekeeper Boss. Even more significantly, I was her ex-husband.

I wanted to bow out, to save her the pressure of the decision. But the truth held my tongue in place.

No matter how awkward or uncomfortable it was, no matter how much I didn't deserve to be—I wanted to be in the picture.

“It would only be fitting,” a voice cut through the tension.

My muscles instantly locked in place, and my guard shot up like an armed fortress as Lucian Reed stepped into view.

Sera had the opposite reaction. “Lucian,” she exhaled, her smile glowing brighter like she’d added new batteries.

His returning smile was gentle, warm, filled with pride.

He took her free hand in his as he stood beside her, and I fought the growl that built up in my throat.

More than the potent jealousy that rose at the sight of Lucian’s hand on Sera, I had a bone to pick with him.

Back in the Snowfield Arena, had he known that I would face Sera and Celeste?

Had that been his plan all along? To pit me against my past and present and see which way I swayed?

He inclined his head smoothly, his tone gracious as he spoke. “Given Alpha Kieran’s contributions to OTS during the Trials, a picture is only fitting. Join us.”

I bristled.

Join us...

As if he were the one with the right to be by her side. As if I were the outsider who needed an invite.

Well, screw him.

I didn’t need his fucking permission to do anything.

And if he thought the dynamics of our relationship—or lack thereof—had changed because I’d agreed to be Gatekeeper Boss, he had another thing coming.

“Come on, Dad!” Daniel’s excited tug drew my attention, and I let him pull me along to where everyone else gathered for photos.

I kept my expression neutral, though inside, my chest thundered.

Standing beside Sera—our son between us—felt like...trespassing. Like breaking into a house I used to live in, but was now sold.

The photographer fussed with angles, lining us up: my hand on Daniel's shoulder, Sera close at his other side. Her team flanking us, their families filling in.

"Perfect," the photographer chirped, snapping flash after flash. "Smile!"

Daniel's smile could have lit the whole damn hall, and the only thing that rivalled it was Sera's.

I tried to smile too, though mine felt heavier.

For just those few seconds, though, I let myself pretend—pretend this was normal. Pretend we hadn't fallen apart. Pretend we were still a family, posing for a picture.

The last flash popped, leaving spots in my vision.

"Wonderful," the photographer declared. "That's a wrap!"

Before we could break apart, Daniel turned to me, his voice bubbling with excitement.

“Dad, you’re coming to Mom’s victory celebration, right?” he asked, tugging at my sleeve.

The question caught me off guard, and I glanced over his head at Sera, looking for an answer in her eyes.

Did she want me there?

She winced almost imperceptibly with every movement, and I knew that underneath her gear, she bore bandages—thanks to me.

There was no way she wanted one of the obstacles to her victory at her celebration.

So I braced myself for the rejection. I would deserve it; as Lucian would say, it was only fitting.

But before Sera could deliver the blow, another voice cut through—sharper, dripping with malice.

“You see! Look at him!” Celeste’s voice cut through the hum around us, drawing everyone’s attention. “Smiling with them, standing with her—you expect me to believe he didn’t throw the fight?”

The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

And just like that, the fragile spell of reunion shattered.