

## My Sister 169

Chapter 169 CERULEAN ON CERULEAN

SERAPHINA'S POV

'It's what Zara would've wanted to see. She would be so proud.'

Gods, it was worse than I'd thought.

I had braced myself for something difficult, but this—this tragic tale of love and loss—shook me in a way I hadn't anticipated.

I stared at the portrait, something cold twisting along my spine.

Zara—gods, even her name was beautiful—had fierce, intelligent blue eyes and a defiant smile. Pale blonde hair framed her face in a braid crown, and her hand rested on the hilt of a blade.

I could envision her from the stories Lucian had told. Fierce. Dauntless. Radiant in every sense of the word. The kind of woman who drew every eye when she entered a room without even trying. Whose light outshone everything around her.

Kind of like Celeste, but...worthy.

And even as Lucian spoke of Zara—softly, reverently—I could see that same light still reflected in him. Like a candle that refused to go out, no matter how much time passed.

He didn't cry—Lucian wasn't the kind of man who broke easily. But the way his breaths shuddered, the way his frame stiffened like it was taking all his willpower to hold himself together, the way his voice faltered around her name, told me everything.

Zara wasn't gone from him. Not really. She was the echo between his heartbeats, the ghost haunting every silence.

And somehow, I was supposed to live with that.

I tried to smile, but it felt like pressing cracked glass together and pretending it would hold. "She sounds..." Unreal. Daunting. "...remarkable." My voice came out smaller than I intended.

"She was," Lucian agreed.

"You must have loved her a lot."

"More than anything in the world—" Lucian's gaze softened, the faintest flicker of guilt flashing through it.

“Sera...” He exhaled slowly. “I never meant to hide her from you.”

There was no hiding the accusation in my tone. “Then why did you?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked, and his eyes darted back and forth like he was searching for the answer.

“You didn’t trust me to handle the truth,” I answered for him when nothing was forthcoming. “You didn’t think I could have respected your love for her.”

“No—Sera, I didn’t...” He shook his head. “I just didn’t want her shadow to color how you saw me. I didn’t want you to see yourself as a replacement.”

The word hung between us, as heavy and imposing as Zara’s portrait.

I turned back to the picture, taking in her pale hair—the same color as mine. The blue in her eyes—same shade as mine.

“You’ll forgive me if I find that hard to believe,” I said, my words barely above a whisper.

“Sera—”

I turned to him. "You expect me to believe you never looked at me and saw her?"

I shook my head, running over every interaction with Lucian from the day we met. "There was always something different in the way you looked at me. It always felt like—like you're searching for something familiar."

He inhaled, deep and steady. "Sera, I swear to you—I never once looked at you and saw Zara. I saw you," he insisted.

I scoffed. "Then why didn't you tell me about her? From the beginning?"

Silence stretched between us, heavy and suffocating.

He looked away first. "Because I knew what it would do," he finally admitted. "You'd have stepped back, built a wall. You'd have kept your distance."

He added dejectedly: "Like you're doing now."

"I—"

I couldn't refute that. Not if I was being honest with myself.

Because I could feel myself withdrawing, feel my defenses rising.

Lucian's eyes met mine, determined and devastatingly open. "I didn't want you to keep your distance. I didn't want to just be your friend forever. I wanted you, Sera. As my partner. My Luna."

Just like Zara would have been.

My pulse stuttered. The bluntness of his words stole the air from my lungs. "Lucian..."

He took a step closer, his voice rougher now. "You want honesty? Fine. I did have selfish reasons for getting close to you. But not the kind you think."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The day of Edward's funeral wasn't the first time I saw you," he confessed quietly. "It was months before that, at a charity gala for an orphanage. One of the children was huddled in a corner, separated from the rest. And you went to her, offered her a slice of cake, talked to her. Made her smile. At that time, I didn't know your name or who you were. But I couldn't stop watching you. You were gracious. Compassionate."

I blinked, stunned. I barely remembered the gala he was talking about. It was one of the many events where I'd been cast aside. I'd seen the little girl across the room, and been reminded of myself. "You remember that?"

“I remember everything about you, Sera.”

He said it so simply that I almost missed the weight of it.

“Later,” he continued, “when I realized who you were—when I invited you to join OTS—it wasn’t pity or strategy. I wanted to understand what it was about you that stayed with me. And then I did. Every day since, I’ve seen something new: your fire, your determination, your loyalty. You made me want again, Sera.”

My heart thudded painfully. “And yet, you didn’t tell me any of this.”

He exhaled slowly. “Because I thought telling you would ruin it. That you’d see me as manipulative.” He shrugged almost defeatedly. “Maybe I was. I knew a long time ago that a second-chance mate wasn’t in the cards for me, and I meant what I told you a while back, Sera—you are my choice.”

I wanted to believe him. Gods, I wanted to. But every time I closed my eyes, I saw Zara’s ghost standing between us—beautiful, untouchable, invincible.

Maybe Lucian was right to keep her existence hidden from me. Because, just like he’d predicted, her shadow loomed.

I could feel it coloring every interaction Lucian and I ever had.

When he saved me at my father's funeral, was he thinking of the battle when he hadn't been able to save her? When he invited me to join OTS, was it because my presence in its halls would feel like Zara's?

How often did he look at me and think of Zara? Did he ever compare us?

How much of what he'd said to me was meant for Zara? How much of what we'd done was déjà vu for him?

"Do—" I swallowed. Now was probably the worst time to ask this question, but at this point, I was grasping at straws. "Do you...love me?"

"Yes," he answered without missing a beat.

My chest clenched.

Fuck.

That was supposed to be it. That was supposed to blast every doubt out of my mind, soften my resolve, but his answer tangled with disbelief into a tight knot sitting in my chest.

How could he possibly mean it? After Zara—perfect, luminous, fearless Zara—how could someone like me even measure up?

“You don’t make sense.” I didn’t know if it was my whole body trembling or just my voice. “You talk about Zara like she was the center of your world. And then you look at me and say you love me. How can both be true?”

Lucian’s jaw tightened, his expression unreadable. “Because the heart doesn’t work logically,” he said finally. “I loved her. That’s true. But that doesn’t mean my love for you is smaller or weaker—it’s just...different.”

Different.

That word tasted bitter.

“It doesn’t feel different,” I whispered. “I feel like I’m standing in someone else’s shadow.”

He reached for me before I could pull away, his hands brushing my arms with almost reverent care. “Because you don’t see yourself clearly yet,” he said. “If you did, you’d know there’s no shadow that could dim your light, Sera.”

He’d always been good at that—saying exactly what I needed to hear.

How many of my warm, encouraging speeches had been recycled from his relationship with Zara?

“Lucian,” I said softly, stepping back, “you say you love me. But love isn’t the same as needing someone to fill an empty space.”

He froze. “That’s not what this is.”

“Isn’t it?” I asked. “You loved Zara because she was bright, courageous, whole. You love me because I’m...what? A survivor? Someone you can protect? A new project? A consolation prize? A purpose to make you feel alive again?”

“That’s not fair,” he said, voice tightening.

“Maybe not,” I murmured. “But you know the kind of life I’ve lived. You know that I spent a decade married to someone who longed for another. How is this any different?”

The only sound between us was the hum of the exhibition hall’s air conditioning and the faint echo of voices from another room. The lights overhead painted the marble floor in soft, sterile reflections.

It felt wrong that we were standing in a place meant to preserve history, while mine and his was quietly collapsing.

Lucian scrubbed a hand over his face, his composure cracking. "Sera, I can't undo the past. I can't change the fact that I loved Zara. But I'm here now. With you. Isn't that what matters?"

I wanted to say yes. I wanted to step into his arms, to pretend the ache in my chest was just another fear I could conquer.

But.

"Loved"—I shook my head—"is in the wrong tense. You still love her; perhaps you always will."

Lucian flinched, but his lack of response was a response enough.

I swallowed hard. "You're asking me to share a heart that's split in two, Lucian. I've done that before. I refuse to do it again."

His eyes searched mine, and for the first time since I'd known him, he looked uncertain. Vulnerable, even. "Then what do you want me to do?" he asked quietly.

I hesitated, then said, "Give me time."

His lips parted, but no words came. Just silence. The kind that felt like standing on a ledge, looking down, knowing one wrong move could end everything.

"I need to think," I continued, my voice softer now. "To decide if this is something I can...live with."

He nodded slowly, though his jaw was tight enough to crack. "And if you decide you can't?"

My heart thudded painfully. "Then we'll both have to live with that too."

Lucian took a slow step toward me, then another, until we were close enough that his breath blew wisps of my hair.

His voice dropped to a low murmur I felt more than heard. "I meant what I said, Sera. I love you. Not because you remind me of her. But because when I look at you, I see the future I want. The future I've always wanted."

My chest constricted so tightly I could barely breathe. "How can you face the future when the past still has such a strong hold on you?"

At the back of my mind, I was aware that I sounded borderline hypocritical. Divided hearts, tug of wars between the past and future...

I wasn't even sure which one of us I was talking about anymore.

Gods, it was all so messy.

The quiet stretched again. The faint sounds of the exhibition—distant footsteps, muted voices—became almost unbearably loud. I forced myself to look up at him one last time.

“Lucian,” I said, barely above a whisper, “I need space. Please.”

Something flickered behind his eyes—pain, restraint, maybe both. He exhaled, long and hard, like he was forcing himself to let go.

“Alright,” he said finally. “If that’s what you need.”

I nodded once. Firmly.

And then he was gone.

I stood there long after the sound of his footsteps faded, staring at the spot where he’d been. The atmosphere in the hall wrapped around me, dense and cold.

And then I raised my head to look at Zara’s portrait. Her eyes seemed to lock onto mine—cerulean on cerulean.

It was like looking through a warped mirror. At a version of myself I would never be.

This is what Lucian saw when he looked at me, I was sure of it.

I pressed my hand to my chest, half-expecting to feel something burning there—jealousy, anger, heartache.

Instead, there was only stillness.