

My Sister 17

Chapter 17 THOUSANDS OF MILES

SERAPHINA'S POV

"So, baby, the thing is—"

"Is it about my vacation?"

I paused, blinking at Daniel. "What?"

He shrugged. "I've been on break from school for a week now, and Dad said I was going to go on a longer one with Grandma and Grandpa."

"Oh..."

The tension eased out of my body. I wasn't sure how I felt about Kieran beating me to break the news to Daniel, but I was relieved that I didn't have to do it myself when I didn't even know where to start.

"And... you're okay with that?"

Daniel's shoulder lifted in that careless way only children could manage. "I was worried about missing school, but Dad said I'll have a private tutor so I won't be behind when I come back."

Kieran had thought of everything. I supposed my feelings were shifting towards gratitude.

Daniel raised our intertwined hands and pressed them to his chest. "Now that you're back from your training..." His voice was suddenly small, his eyes wide and hopeful. "...will you come with me?"

My throat closed.

He rushed on before I could respond, words tumbling like waves: "Dad said it's a really cool private island, and we can swim every day and learn to surf and barbecue on the beach and—"

"Oh, sweetheart."

I leaned forward and kissed his forehead, taking in a shaky breath. "You don't need to list all those things to make me go with you."

"So..." His voice was shaky with anticipation. "You'll come with?"

I closed my eyes tightly and willed the tears brimming not to fall. "No," I choked out. "I can't."

I pulled back in time to see his face fall. "Why?"

My heart cracked at that one word, but I forced my voice steady, smoothing his wild curls. "I have to train harder, baby. To protect you."

He sniffed. "But I'm the one who's supposed to protect you."

The dam broke. I gathered him close, squeezing my tears back before they soaked into his hair.

I made a smile as I held his face again. "I know, my love. But how amazing would it be if we could protect each other?"

He managed a small smile, and I took it as a victory. Then, he turned to his plate of fried rice and wrinkled his nose.

"Can we order pizza instead?"

The sun was just beginning to bleed gold over the horizon as I pulled up to the private terminal at Van Nuys Airport.

The area hummed with quiet efficiency, staff and crew buzzing around Kieran's large private plane at the beginning of the private runway.

Daniel stepped out of the car, shouldering his Spider-Man backpack as he stared up at the huge plane.

"That's a Gulfstream G650," he said excitedly, turning to me as I retrieved his suitcase from the trunk. "Dad says when I'm old enough, I could learn to fly it."

I smiled, smoothing his wild curls, my fingers lingering. "You'd make a dashing pilot."

Tires crunched on asphalt. The silver Escalade rolled up beside my battered sedan like a predator circling prey.

Kieran got down from the driver's side and immediately walked over to open the passenger door.

I gritted my teeth as Celeste hopped out, tossing a perfect curl over her shoulder, half of her face shielded by oversized sunglasses. Leona and Christian alighted from the backseat, and a tightness spread in my chest.

A man in a pilot's uniform walked across the tarmac to the car, and while Kieran only gave him a cursory nod, he engaged Leona and Christian in conversation, which left Kieran and Celeste free to head our way.

"How's my boy doing?" Kieran crouched to receive Daniel's flying hug, his voice warm with pride.

"Good," my son mumbled against his dad's shoulder. When they pulled apart, his eyes darted between me and Kieran. "Are you sure neither of you can come with me?"

Kieran crouched down and whispered something in Daniel's ear.

Daniel's face set, and he nodded once. "Got it."

"That's my boy," Kieran said softly, and I wondered what he had said to Daniel.

"Danny!"

Celeste's saccharine voice set my teeth on edge as she swooped in, her manicured claws digging into my son's shoulders. Her hospital threat echoed in my mind—I'll take Daniel as my own—and it took every ounce of control not to shove her away and snarl at the catty bitch.

Her smile stretched too wide. "Aren't you excited for your little adventure?"

Daniel recoiled, his small body pressing back against me. I encircled him protectively, my arms a living shield.

He glanced up at Kieran. "She's not coming with us, is she?" he asked coldly.

A muscle ticked in Kieran's jaw as Celeste's ears reddened.

"No, sweetheart," I answered, pressing my lips to his soft hair. My glare at Celeste could have melted steel. "She definitely isn't."

One more car drove in—Ethan's Mercedes—stopped nearby, disgorging more family members I couldn't bear to acknowledge.

Look at us, I thought bitterly, One big happy family.

The plane suddenly came alive, the engines humming in the stillness of the early morning.

"It's time," Kieran said somberly.

Illogical panic gripped me.

Even though we packed his things together and spent all night watching his favorite shows and gorging on pizza and ice cream before finally falling asleep at 2 a.m., it felt like I hadn't had enough time with my baby.

It seemed like Daniel felt the same because he turned to me, his beautiful dark eyes glassy with unshed tears. "Mom?"

I crouched down, wrapping my arms around his waist as he threw his arms around my neck. "Oh, my baby," I breathed, trying to choke back the tears building at the back of my throat.

"I'm going to miss you so much," he whispered.

"Not as much as I'm going to miss you," I replied shakily.

"I'll call you every day," I promised. "And remember to be good for your grandparents. Listen to everything they tell you, okay?"

Daniel nodded. Then, he pulled back slightly and shrugged his backpack off. He zipped it open and pulled out something grey and fluffy.

"Here," he handed it to me, and my eyes widened. It was his stuffed wolf—very accurately named Wolfy—that I'd given him for his third birthday. For the last six years, Daniel hadn't gone anywhere without Wolfy.

He pressed the stuffed animal into my hands. "Wolfy will stand guard over you till I come back," he said solemnly.

"Shit," I whispered as I lost the battle with my tears, and they started pouring down my cheeks like rain. I pulled Daniel back to me, clutching him as tightly as I clutched Wolfy.

"I don't have to go," he whispered, his voice shaky. "I could stay, Mom."

What if there'd been a silver bullet for him, too? Kieran's words echoed in my head, and I sniffed, wiping away my tears with the back of my hand.

"No, baby." I pulled away. "Don't worry about me, okay?"

Daniel's brows knit.

"But—"

I pressed a kiss to his forehead and squeezed him one last time, memorizing the feel of his little body against mine and his scent. Then I let him go.

Kieran appeared beside us, a hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Come on, bud. I'll show you all the cool things in the plane before takeoff."

Daniel's face lit up a little, and he nodded.

Kieran leaned forward, and our fingers brushed as he took Daniel's suitcase from me. Our eyes locked briefly, and something sizzled in the air between us that was gone as quickly as it had happened.

I wrapped my arms around myself as I watched Kieran and Daniel move towards the airstairs of the jet, suddenly feeling cold.

I jerked instinctively when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I turned to see Leona and Christian smiling at me softly. I frowned in response, confused.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Leona asked in a gentle voice that was completely out of character. This wasn't the woman who'd once told me I'd never be worthy of standing beside her son as Luna.

"Yes," Christian added. "It must have been an awful experience."

I took a cautious step backward, causing Christian's hand on my shoulder to drop. All their sudden "concerns" just reeked of performance.

In ten years, my ex-in-laws had never once offered me so much as a kind word. The only reason they tolerated my presence under their son's roof was that my defective womb somehow produced Daniel—the perfect heir. That was what I'd heard after my delivery. I wouldn't forget it.

"Save the act," I said in a measured tone. "We all know I was never family to you. And now that the divorce is finalized... there's no more need to pretend."

I didn't bother looking at them. My gaze snagged on the plane instead—on Daniel paused at the top of the boarding stairs, turning to wave at me.

I waved back, forcing back a sob.

"Just take care of him," I said, turning back to Leona and Christian. "If any harm comes to my baby—"

"He's our family, too," Leona said tightly, her expression an odd mix of indignation and guilt.

"Keep. Him. Safe."

They exchanged a look, Christian sighed, and then they turned away from me, walking towards the plane.

A minute after they boarded, Kieran came down the stairs, and a slight whimper escaped me as the airstairs retracted.

I tightened my arms around myself as Kieran walked towards me and stood by my side.

"They'll be flying nonstop to Nassau, then a quick switch to our private seaplane for the last hop to Musha Cay," he said, like he was reading today's headlines.

I nodded once.

"The house is fortified," he continued. "No outside contact with anyone but you and me. He'll be safer there than anywhere in California."

I nodded again.

After that, the only sound in the airfield was the increasing hum of the plane as it taxied and then took off, taking a part of my heart away with it.

I stood there a while longer till the plane became a tiny speck across the dusty blue sky.

Then I exhaled once and turned—and walked right into my mom.

"Oh, Sera," she whispered, her arms outstretched like she was about to hug me. I took an instinctive step back—and crashed into Kieran's chest.

The contact was a shock to my system, and I sidestepped, putting distance between me and my so-called family, who were suddenly crowding me.

"What?" I asked, my voice shaky. All I wanted now was to go home, crawl into Daniel's bed, and cry while clutching Wolfy to me.

Her arms dropped to the side. "H-how are you?"

"Fine," I answered curtly.

Kieran took a hesitant step forward. "Can I drive you home?"

I glanced at Celeste, noting the way she stiffened at his offer, and scoffed. "No, thanks."

I moved around them, heading to my car.

"Sera," my mom called out softly, and I stiffened.

"I'm glad you're okay," she said.

I took a deep breath. I hadn't been okay in a long time, but what would my mother know about that?

I opened the door and slid into my car without a word.

The drive home seemed to last forever, blanketed with eerie silence without Daniel fiddling with the radio and calling out every traffic sign he saw.

Stepping into the house was worse. It's like the building knew that the light of my life was currently being taken thousands of miles away from me.

I didn't even make it to Daniel's room. I slid down the front door and clutched Wolfy to me as the first of many, many sobs wracked my body.