

My Sister 171

Chapter 171 WELCOME HOME

SERAPHINA'S POV

It had been more than a decade since I'd last driven down the long, cobblestone path to the Lockwood estate.

The gates loomed just as I remembered them—tall, wrought iron bars curling into elegant, merciless shapes.

Once, I used to think they looked like vines protecting a sanctuary. Now, I saw only the prison they were.

The gates creaked open as we approached, their slow groan slicing through the quiet afternoon air.

Daniel was practically bouncing in his seat, his face pressed against the window as the familiar expanse unfolded before us.

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel. The manor was as imposing as ever—gray-bricked, symmetrical, magnificent. The slate roof glinted faintly under the late afternoon sun, the pale stone façade catching light in that same proud, cold way.

The sight of my childhood home should have filled me with nostalgia. Instead, I just felt hollow.

The car rolled to a stop in front of the grand entrance.

As I got out of the car and Daniel helped my mother out of the backseat, the front door opened and two Omega servants stepped out.

At the sight of me, they did a double-take.

I couldn't blame them. My presence here was probably akin to seeing a ghost.

Daniel, my sweet, helpful boy, helped his grandmother up the stairs, his hands firmly on her waist like he could catch her if she stumbled.

She smiled at him with a tenderness that wrapped around my heart and squeezed.

I stood a few paces behind, feeling like an intruder watching someone else's family reunite.

When she turned back to me, her smile faltered, and something uncertain flickered in her eyes. "Come inside, dear. It's been too long."

Yeah, well, I wouldn't have minded if it could have been longer.

Inside, the manor was both familiar and strange.

The bones of it hadn't changed—the wide marble staircase, the chandelier suspended like frozen starlight, the oil paintings of stern-faced ancestors gazing down from gilded frames, the faint scent of lemon polish.

But everything seemed muted, dimmed. As if time itself had tried to blot out what once was.

My mother moved through the hall with practiced grace, calling softly to the servants. "Tea for three, please. And the lemon scones Daniel likes. Oh—and the honey biscuits."

Daniel blinked. "I've never had your honey biscuits, Grandma."

She looked briefly startled, then smiled faintly. "No? Perhaps I just remembered wrong."

She looked up at me and smiled gently. "You liked them when you were his age."

My teeth clenched.

I liked honey biscuits because Celeste loved honey biscuits, so my mother made them so much that they became a staple snack.

At least she was correct about Daniel's preferences.

I followed her into the sitting room, where sunlight spilled through tall windows and turned the dust into glitter.

Daniel perched on the edge of the velvet sofa next to her, looking around with wide-eyed curiosity.

"Grandma, did you change the curtains?" he asked. The fact that he'd been here often enough to notice minute changes like that sent a twinge of...envy?

My mother smiled. "Sharp eye, hon. The old ones were fading."

Her tone was casual, but her hands shook slightly as she poured the tea. She offered me a cup with a tentative look, as though testing whether I'd take it.

I did—mostly out of politeness.

We sat like that for a few minutes—her fussing over Daniel, me trying not to shrink into the furniture.

She asked him a million and one questions, mainly about his time on the island, and what he'd been doing since he came back. He answered excitedly, the love and adoration he had for his grandma evident.

It was one of the reasons I could never fully hate my parents.

They'd ostracized me for my mistake, but they'd never made Daniel—the product of that night—feel anything other than adored.

My gaze fixed on the old grandfather clock beside the mantel, and I counted the seconds under my breath. How long did we have to stay before we could politely leave?

172. 173. 174. 175—

"Grandma, do you still bake cookies?" Daniel asked excitedly.

"Of course," she said, smoothing her skirt. "Would you like to make some together?"

He grinned, bright and open. "Can we?"

Her eyes softened in that way I'd never seen directed at me. "I'd love that, sweetheart."

“Yes!”

When they stood to go to the kitchen, my mother turned to me. “Sera? Will you join us?”

I shook my head stiffly. “I’ll just get some air. It’s...a lot, being back.”

Her expression shuttered ever so slightly. “I understand.”

No, she didn’t.

But I nodded anyway.

The moment they disappeared down the hall, I let out a long breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

I wandered to the window. The gardens stretched endlessly beyond it—tamed, manicured, beautiful in a way that had always felt...fake.

The Lockwoods had always preferred their beauty controlled. The hedges were trimmed in perfect symmetry, the flowerbeds so precise they might as well have been drawn with a ruler.

And then I saw it—the old oak.

It still stood at the far end of the garden, tall and defiant, its gnarled branches thick with leaves. Beneath it, the swing.

The same wooden seat. The same sturdy ropes.

The same one from my dream.

Before I knew it, I was outside.

The air was warm, scented faintly of flowers and soil. I walked down the familiar path, my shoes crunching over the gravel.

Every corner of this garden felt suspended in amber—preserved, unchanged, yet tinged with distance.

The flowers no longer spilled wildly over borders, but the roses and lavender still provided a riot of color that softened the formal edges.

And there, under the great oak, was the swing.

My breath caught.

It swayed lightly in the breeze, creaking faintly, the wood worn smooth with age. My hand trembled as I brushed the seat. Solid. Real.

My throat tightened. I could almost hear a child's laughter, see a man's broad shadow cast across the grass.

I sat down, the wood warm against my palms.

From here, the view was almost identical to my dream—the rose bushes lining the stone path, the fountain glinting in the sun.

I closed my eyes.

For a moment, I felt dizzy. The dream and my longing tangled so tightly I couldn't tell which was which.

Had I truly sat here once, giggling while my father stood behind me, steadying the ropes with those hands that built empires?

Or had that just been the wishful invention of a lonely child who'd wanted to believe she'd been loved?

'Higher, Papa!'

'If I push you too high, little wolf, you'll take off flying and forget to come back down.'

'I won't forget. I'll always come back to you.'

'That's because you're my Seraphina. My precious princess.'

My cheeks were wet before I even realized I was crying.

"Miss Seraphina?"

The voice startled me.

I opened my eyes to see an elderly Omega in a crisp black suit standing a few feet away. His gray hair was neatly parted, and his eyes—clear, sharp, kind—widened when he saw me.

"Miss Seraphina," he repeated softly, his lips parting in disbelief. "It is you."

My heart stuttered. "Paxton." I hastily wiped at my wet cheeks. "H-hi."

Our old butler smiled widely, his eyes nearly disappearing beneath his wrinkled lids. "Oh, it's been far too long since you've been home, Miss Sera."

"Home," I echoed softly, testing the word. It didn't fit.

Paxton's gaze drifted to the swing and softened. "Your father built that himself, you know. Said it was for his little wolf. Even after you...left, he'd come here often. Stand there, just looking at it."

I blinked, caught off guard. "My father?"

He nodded. "He never said a word to anyone, but I knew. He missed you. We all did."

My chest constricted. "You must be mistaken," I said lightly, forcing a smile. "You probably mean Celeste." Celeste was the one people missed.

How could you miss what you never noticed?

His brows furrowed. "No, Miss Sera. I know who I mean. Your sister hated these swings, remember?"

I blinked, unsure what to say.

I wanted to dismiss the old butler, to scoff and walk away—but his eyes held a conviction that made my chest ache.

“He visited your room often, too,” he continued softly. “Always alone. I’d find the lamp lit in there at night, even when he was supposed to be asleep.”

My voice cracked. “My...my room?”

He smiled faintly. “It’s just as you left it. If you’d like to see.”

My stomach twisted. “That’s not possible.”

He shook his head. “Your father never allowed anyone to change it.”

“That’s not possible,” I repeated. Did Paxton have dementia? Shouldn’t he have retired anyway?

He chuckled a little patronizingly. “Would you like to see?”

I hesitated. And then hopped off the swing.

“Fine,” I mumbled. “If only to prove you wrong.”

I heard Daniel and my mother chattering away animatedly as Paxton led me up the grand stairs to the second floor.

The corridors felt smaller than I remembered. Childhood had a way of enlarging everything—ceilings, doorways, the distance between rooms. Now everything seemed narrower, heavier with silence.

The one leading to my old room was lined with portraits. My mother’s serene face. My father’s stern, imposing gaze. Celeste’s perfect smile. Ethan’s smug grin.

And tucked near the end—mine.

I paused in front of it. My younger self looked back at me—barely thirteen, uncertain, but hopeful. She still had the light in her eyes that the coming years would eventually dim.

I wanted to reach into the frame and warn her. Tell her how cruel the world would be to her. Tell her that her heart would break in more ways than she could count.

Paxton stopped at my room door and opened it quietly. “Here we are.”

When he opened the door, a faint scent of lavender and old paper wafted out.

I stepped inside and froze.

It was exactly as it had been the day I left. The bed neatly made, the pale curtains fluttering in the breeze, the bookshelf lined with old fairy tales, adventure, and romance novels.

Even the framed drawing I’d made at seven—a crude wolf under a crescent moon—still hung crookedly on the wall.

Paxton’s voice was soft behind me. “Before your father passed, this was one of the places he visited most often. The garden swing, and this room. He’d sit right there by the bed for hours sometimes.”

I turned. “You’re sure?”

He nodded, eyes kind. “He missed you, Miss Seraphina. More than you know.”

The words struck deep, splitting something open inside me. I wanted to reject them, to insist he was wrong. But my lips refused to shape the denial.

“Thank you,” I whispered finally.

He inclined his head and quietly excused herself, leaving me alone with the ghosts of my childhood.

I walked slowly across the room, my fingers brushing the familiar textures. The bedspread. The carved edges of the dresser. The faint scratches on the desk where I’d once tried to carve my initials with a hairpin.

A single tear slipped down before I could stop it. Then another.

And then a flood.

My father had kept my room intact? He’d sat here every day, missing me?

Why?

The answer was too improbable to consider. Yet, it was the only one that made sense.

Could it be possible that the dream had been a memory? That my father, in his own deeply flawed way, had loved me?

But then...why?

Why would he treat me so terribly? Why did he disown me? Abandon me?

"Sera?"

I turned sharply. My mother stood in the doorway, one hand pressed against the frame, her eyes wide and glistening.

For a long moment, neither of us moved.

"I didn't mean to intrude," she whispered. "I just came to tell you the cookies are ready."

Her gaze dropped to the tears on my cheeks. I saw her flinch, as though each one cut her open.

Then, hesitantly, she stepped forward. "Oh, my love," she murmured. "I should have brought you home sooner."

Before I could react, she wrapped her arms around me.

I went rigid.

It had been years—decades, maybe—since my mother had held me. Her scent was faintly citrusy, the same perfume she'd worn when I was a child. Her body trembled against mine.

For a heartbeat, I considered pulling away. But I didn't.

I stood still and let her hold me, unsure if I was forgiving her or simply too tired to resist the warmth.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes shone wet and weary. "Welcome home, Seraphina."

The words landed softly, painfully.

Home. It still didn't quite fit.

How could I be welcomed to a place I'd never really belonged in?

Before I could answer, a sharp sound echoed from downstairs—a clatter, followed by Daniel's startled exclamation.

My blood ran cold.

I was already moving before my mother could react, the thud of my rushed footsteps echoing through the hall as I bolted down the staircase.

The smell of burnt sugar and butter hit me first, then the sight—

Cookies scattered across the marble floor, an upturned tray, Daniel standing rigid and wide-eyed.

And Celeste.

She towered over him, fury etched into every elegant line of her face.

I didn't breathe as my vision tunneled, narrowing on the scene before me: my son, my sister, and the storm gathering between them.