

## **My Sister 173**

Chapter 173 COOKIES AND SMILES

DANIEL'S POV

The cookies smelled like sunshine and vanilla and everything good in the world.

Grandma said it was because I didn't stir too much. "Gentle hands make soft cookies," she'd said, tapping my nose lightly with a gentle smile.

I liked it when she smiled like that. It made her eyes crinkle; it made her look less sad.

I wished Mom could have joined us to bake, but she'd gone outside for a while, saying she wanted some air.

I knew what that meant—"air" meant thinking, and that meant something heavy sitting on her chest.

Hopefully, she'd feel better if she came back to the smell of cookies.

I arranged them on the tray carefully—chocolate chip, some a little burnt at the edges, but Grandma said that made them taste like caramel. I specially set aside the one with extra chips for Mom.

“Be careful, darling,” Grandma said as I balanced the tray in my hands, which were covered by oven mitts. “They’re still hot.”

“I got it,” I said proudly. “I’ll take them out to Mom. Maybe they’ll make her smile.”

Grandma’s face softened in that way that Mom’s did when she was happy-sad. “Actually, love, I think I saw your mother go upstairs earlier. I’ll go fetch her, okay?”

“Oh.” I nodded. I could tell Grandma wanted alone time with Mom. Probably to say grown-up things they didn’t want me to hear. “Okay.”

The tray was warm, and the cookies made my stomach growl a little. But I waited patiently at the foot of the stairs for them to come back down. I wanted Mom to have the first taste.

Then the front door slammed.

The sound was sharp and angry, echoing down the hall so loud that I jumped. One of the cookies rolled right off the tray and hit the carpet.

I turned slowly.

Aunt Celeste stood there in the doorway, her sunglasses on, even though she was indoors now.

Her red dress shimmered like fire—pretty, but not the warm kind.

Her lipstick was perfect. Her hair was perfect. Everything about her was perfect.

Except her smile.

She didn't have one.

"Hi, Aunt Celeste," I said, trying to sound polite like Mom taught me. It was especially hard with Aunt Celeste. "Do you want a cookie? Grandma and I just made them. They're chocolate chip."

She didn't answer right away. She just looked at me, then at the cookies, and then back at me.

Then she pushed her sunglasses into her hair, and I had to hold in a gasp.

I'd never seen such...what was that? Anger? Hate?

No one had ever looked at me like that—except Aunt Celeste, back in OTS, when I invited her to Mom's party.

And she looked at me like that now.

Except it was so much worse this time.

When she finally spoke, her voice was smooth, but not gentle. “Cookies,” she repeated, like the word tasted bad. “You’re offering me cookies?”

“Yeah.” I lifted the tray a bit higher, though my hands shook a little. I wanted Mom and Grandma to hurry back downstairs. “Mom says sweets can make you feel better when you’re sad.”

Aunt Celeste’s lips twitched into a smile that wasn’t...quite. “Oh, is that what your Mom said?”

I nodded, smiling even though I didn’t like the way she said ‘Mom’. “You can have one if you want. They’re really good. I put extra chocolate in—”

But before I could finish, her hand shot out, fast and sharp, and the tray went flying.

The cookies hit the floor, shattering into pieces. Chocolate smudged the rug. The tray clattered so loud my ears rang.

I just stood there, frozen, my hands empty, and I felt the way I felt when I invited her to Mom's party and she cursed at me: stupid.

Aunt Celeste didn't even look at the mess. She was breathing hard, her shoulders trembling like she was cold, though the house wasn't. Her perfume filled the air—jasmine and something bitter underneath.

"I—" I started, but my throat felt tight, and my eyes stung.

Then I heard footsteps from upstairs.

Mom appeared at the top of the stairs, her face pale. Grandma followed behind her, eyes wide.

The moment Mom saw the mess, her worried expression changed.

Her eyes locked on Aunt Celeste, and I swear the air got colder. This time, I was the one shivering.

"Did you just—" Mom's voice was low, dangerous. She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to.

Celeste turned slowly, raising an eyebrow like nothing had happened. "It was an accident," she said, like she was bored.

“An accident?” Mom stepped closer and stood in front of me, blocking my view of Aunt Celeste. “You call knocking a tray out of a child’s hands an accident?”

I peered around Mom to see Aunt Celeste crossing her arms, her lips curling into that not-smile. “Oops.”

I heard Mom’s teeth grind together. She was shaking, but I think it was from anger, not fear. I rarely saw her like this. I hated seeing her like this.

“If you ever touch my son again,” she said quietly and coldly, “I will tear your throat out.”

There was a heartbeat of silence where I didn’t breathe.

Then Aunt Celeste laughed.

It was a sharp, high sound that made me want to cover my ears.

“Really, Sera? And how exactly do you plan to do that? With your weak little human nails?” She scoffed. “You couldn’t even scratch a lottery ticket, let alone claw anyone’s throat out.”

That hit something deep. I could feel it. Mom flinched—just barely—but then she straightened.

I wanted to jump to Mom's defense, to tell Aunt Celeste that she had an amazing wolf. But I'd promised to keep the secret. I told Mom she could trust me. I pressed my lips together tightly.

"I don't need claws to protect what's mine," Mom declared.

"Please," Aunt Celeste sneered, "because you lucked your way to first position, you think your worthless ass can—"

"That's enough!"

Grandma stepped into view, and I flinched.

I'd never heard her sound like that before. It wasn't a yell; it was worse. It was the sound of authority, of something powerful and wild.

I recognized it immediately: her wolf.

"Mom—" Celeste started, but shut up when Grandma's eyes flashed gold.

"You will not speak to your sister like that in this house," Grandma growled, looking and sounding nothing like the frail woman I had baked cookies with.

For the first time, Aunt Celeste looked unsure. Her chin lifted, but her voice shook a little when she spoke. "So that's how it is now? Even my mother's wolf takes her side?"

Grandma's gaze softened slightly, but her voice stayed firm. "It's not about sides, Celeste. It's about right and wrong."

Aunt Celeste shook her head, tears starting to build but not fall. "No. It's always been about Sera, hasn't it? You're all so quick to jump to her side. She ruins my life, and yet plays the victim. And now, because she won the stupid Trials, you're welcoming her back with open arms?"

Mom didn't say anything. Her hand was on my shoulder now, reassuring and warm.

Aunt Celeste took a step forward, her voice rising. "And what about me, huh? The one who was hurt? The daughter who had everything stolen from her? Where's my love?"

"Celeste," Grandma said softly, "you've always been loved—"

"Don't!" Aunt Celeste snapped, cutting her off. "Don't lie to me. You love honor, Mother. You love reputation. You love whichever child is making you proud." She shook her head. "You don't love me. You just love what I was supposed to be."

Her voice cracked on the last word, and for a second, she looked so small and lost. I almost wanted to hug her. I might have, if I wasn't scared she would scratch my face off.



Grandma's hand trembled. I could tell she wanted to reach out, but she didn't. Maybe she didn't know how to.

Then Aunt Celeste's gaze fell on me again. Yep, that was definitely hate and anger.

"And you," she said bitterly. "Perfect little Daniel. You're a little peacemaker, aren't you? Always trying to fix things. Always trying to make everyone happy. Do you think that works? That cookies and smiles fix shit?"

"Celeste," Mom warned.

But I shook my head. "You're just sad," I said softly. "It's okay. People say mean things when they're sad."

Something flickered across her face—something like guilt—but then she straightened, scoffing. "Sad? Oh, don't be ridiculous. I'm perfectly fine. I'm not the slut who married my sister's boyfriend so I wouldn't have to raise a bastard."

I flinched.

Mom froze.

Grandma gasped.

Aunt Celeste's not-smile was even wider. "What? Did I hit a nerve?"

"That's enough!" Grandma said again, louder this time. Her hand lifted like she might slap Aunt Celeste, but I darted forward and grabbed her wrist.

"Grandma," I said quietly. "Don't. Please."

Everyone went still. Even Aunt Celeste.

I looked up at her and tried to smile, even though my chest hurt. "It's okay. I know you didn't mean it. You're just...in a bad mood."

Her face twisted, like I'd said something awful. "I'm not in a bad mood," she snapped. "I don't need your pity, Daniel."

"I wasn't—"

"I don't!" Her voice broke this time, the words tumbling out like shattered pieces. "I have everything I've ever wanted. Kieran and I are getting married soon. In fact, our engagement party is just around the—"

She cocked her head, and I squirmed under her gaze. “Oh, I get it now, you’re trying so hard to curry favor because you know I’m going to be your step-mother soon.”

Mom moved again, blocking my view. Her voice was low, shaking, deadly calm.

“My son doesn’t have to curry favor with anyone. Least of all someone who doesn’t even understand what love is anymore.”

Aunt Celeste recoiled like she’d been hit. “You think you’re so noble, Sera, but you’ve just learned how to hide your claws behind your pathetic little façade.”

Mom shook her head, and I heard the pity in her voice. “And you wonder why everyone is leaving your side.”

She turned then, taking my hand. “Let’s go, Daniel.”

“Wait—” Grandma began, panicked, but Mom just shook her head again.

“It was a mistake to come here in the first place.”

Grandma’s face twisted in pain. “Please, Sera—”

But Mom was already tugging me toward the door.

I glanced back once. Aunt Celeste stood in the middle of the mess—cookies crushed beneath her heels, her lipstick smudged, her hands trembling.

For a second, I thought she'd cry.

But she didn't. She just stood there, frozen, while Grandma knelt to pick up the tray in silence.

Outside, the air was cool and sharp, like rain might come soon. I didn't say anything. Neither did Mom.

We just walked to the car.

When she started the engine, I glanced at her. Her face was calm, but her eyes were wet.

"Mom?" I whispered.

"Yes, baby?"

“Why is Aunt Celeste so mean?”

I didn’t understand it. Mom was amazing. Uncle Ethan was nice. Why was their sister like...that?

Mom didn’t answer right away. She looked out the window, her jaw tight. “Sometimes,” she said softly, “when people are hurt, they try to make everyone else around them hurt too. Like you said, people are mean when they’re sad.”

I nodded slowly, even though I didn’t really understand all of it. I reached out and took her hand. Her fingers squeezed mine gently as she turned back to me.

“Honey, you know Celeste’s reaction to you is a testament to her character and has nothing to do with you, right?”

I nodded and gave her a smile I hoped would draw out one of hers.

She only exhaled and leaned forward, kissing my hair. “My beautiful, perfect boy.” She pulled back to look at me. Her eyes were so pretty. “Never stop being kind to people, no matter how mean they are to you, okay?”

I nodded. “I promise.”

The drive home was quiet.

The sun was setting, turning the world gold and pink, and everything felt better.

Until Mom stepped on the brakes and muttered angrily, "You have got to be kidding me."

I followed her gaze and sighed. There, in our driveway, leaning against the hood of his car with his arms crossed, was my dad.