

My Sister 204

Chapter 204 LOCKWOODS AND CARTRIDGES

SERAPHINA'S POV

The Lockwood manor looked softer, less imposing than it had the last time I came.

I expected to feel the same twist of anxiety that had accompanied me—but instead, a stillness settled within me. Not comfort, but no longer discomfort either. A kind of tentative equilibrium.

My mother greeted us at the entrance herself. “Seraphina, darling!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly.

“Hello, mother,” I greeted, a little caught off guard by her bubblyness.

She was wearing makeup today, and, though I was surprised, I was glad for it. It meant that grief over my father and worry about Celeste hadn't outweighed the most important thing to her: appearances.

“And Daniel, look at you! You've grown again, haven't you?”

Daniel grinned, puffing his chest a little. “Maybe just a little.”

“Oh, I’d say more than a little,” she laughed, squeezing his cheeks. “Come in, both of you. Ethan’s just finishing getting ready before Maya and her family arrive.”

The manor’s great hall was as grand as ever. But it looked different than the last time we visited, with sunlight streaming through tall windows and painting the marble floors in shades of gold.

And, somehow, I didn’t feel quite as out of place as before.

Maybe it was the happy occasion, or because, after everything I’d experienced since the last time I was here, I no longer felt haunted by the ghosts within these walls.

Ethan appeared at the end of the grand staircase, straightening his collar as he descended. His face lit up at the sight of us. “You came.”

I nodded. “I promised Maya.”

My mother, too, had sent a message, hoping Daniel and I could be present at the formal meeting between the Lockwoods and Cartridges.

But I’d come mainly for my best friend.

Ethan nodded, relief flickering in his eyes. “I appreciate it. I’m sure Mom does too.”

He hesitated, then added, “It means a lot that you’re here, Sera. I know I’ve not always been the brother you deserved, but—”

“Ethan.” I cut him off gently. “Today’s not for confessions or apologies. It’s for you and Maya. Don’t ruin it by looking backward.”

For a moment, surprise softened his face—then understanding followed. “You’re right.” He exhaled, offering a faint smile. “Thank you.”

I mirrored his smile.

The rumble of a car engine broke the moment.

My mother’s excited gasp echoed through the house. “That must be them!”

I blinked in surprise when Ethan’s smile faded and his eyes darted toward the door, anxiety tensing his jaw and tightening the muscles around his mouth.

“You’re not nervous, are you?” I teased.

He cleared his throat and straightened his tie. “Of course not, I’m an Alpha.”

“Uh huh.” I smirked. “Maya’s pretty intimidating on her own. I wonder what her family is like.”

“Right?” he exhaled.

I laughed, slapping his hand away from his tie. “You’re fine. Maya loves you and that’s all that matters.”

He exhaled again, shoulders relaxing, and smiled down at me, less agitated. “Thank you, Sera. Really.”

“You’re welcome.” I took his hand and tugged him toward the entrance. “Now come on.”

We stepped out just as a sleek black car came to a stop in the front courtyard.

Maya stepped out first, radiant as ever in a floral dress that swayed with the breeze. Her hair was styled in loose curls that framed a smile filled with irrepressible excitement.

Her parents followed—her mother, Sarah, a tall, warm-eyed woman with elegant poise, and her father, Devin, a broad-shouldered man with a neatly trimmed beard and an expression that suggested he didn’t often smile.

But the moment he stepped toward his wife and placed his hand on her waist, his gaze softened.

“Devin! Sarah!” My mother greeted them cheerfully, as if they were old friends, stepping forward to clasp Sarah’s hand. “It’s wonderful to meet the parents who raised this remarkable woman.”

Devin Cartridge smiled politely, though his voice carried a roughness that hinted at disuse. “She raised herself half the time,” he admitted. “So I only half claim her. Especially when she makes trouble.”

Maya gasped. “Dad!”

Sarah laughed softly. “Oh, don’t look so scandalized, darling. It’s true.”

The lighthearted teasing was the perfect segue. I gently nudged Ethan.

He stepped forward, his usually steady voice carrying a rare tremor as he faced Maya’s parents. “Mr. Cartridge. Mrs. Cartridge,” he greeted, extending a hand. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Devin’s grip was firm and measured. “Likewise. I was convinced there was no male on earth who could handle my firecracker of a daughter.”

“Dad.” Maya rolled her eyes, her voice half-warning, half-affectionate.

Ethan chuckled. "I take on that task with as much enthusiasm as I can muster."

Devin's lips twitched. "And you're a great man for it."

"Oh my gods." Maya groaned and turned to me, her face lighting up.

"Sera!" She threw her arms around me. "Oh, I missed you so much."

I hugged her tightly. "I missed you, too."

She pulled back and cupped my cheek. "You have a lot of dishing to do later."

I laughed. "Yes, Miss Cartridge."

Then she grabbed my hand and turned to her parents. "Here you go, the great Seraphina Blackthorne you've all been dying to meet."

She leaned in and whispered conspiratorially. "Even more so than my actual mate."

I laughed softly as I greeted her parents. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

Her mother beamed. “Oh, the pleasure is ours. We followed the trials closely. What you accomplished...” She shook her head. “Extraordinary.”

I flushed slightly. “Thank you. I’m honored.”

Sarah’s smile deepened, the kind that radiated genuine warmth. “We’ve heard so much about you from Maya. You’re practically a household name at this point. Devin even made us rewatch your final challenge twice just to ‘study your composure under pressure.’”

Devin huffed, looking only mildly embarrassed. “I was impressed,” he admitted. “Most wolves can barely keep their head straight in a high-stress confrontation, let alone under global scrutiny. You didn’t just hold your own—you dominated.”

Maya laughed, leaning into Ethan’s side as she shot her father a playful look. “Wow. Look at you, Dad. I’ve never seen you this talkative with anyone. You sure you’re not a fanboy imposter?”

Devin feigned a scowl. “Maybe if you’d come home more often, you’d see I have range.”

Laughter rippled through all of us—even my mother, who’d been watching the exchange with undisguised delight.

I wrapped an arm around Daniel's shoulder and gently pushed him forward. "This is my son, Daniel."

Daniel straightened, every inch the confident young wolf he was growing to be. "It's lovely to meet you," he said politely.

Sarah held a hand to her chest. "Oh, he's such a fine young man."

My cheeks warmed. "Thank you."

The introductions stretched into easy conversation, laughter threading through the air, carrying through the manor's open halls like sunlight through glass.

My mother, clearly in her element, took charge again, ushering everyone toward the doors with the grace of someone hosting a royal delegation.

With time to spare before lunch, she insisted on giving the Cartridges a tour of the Lockwood gardens.

Roses lined the stone pathways, hedges trimmed into symmetrical art, and the air carried the faint sweetness of jasmine that reminded me a lot more of Celeste than I liked.

As we walked, Mother shared stories from Ethan and my younger years—though her recollection of my childhood was always gentler than reality.

Some tales reached so far back that even I struggled to remember them—Daniel listened with wide-eyed fascination, giggling whenever a story suggested I had once been clumsy or trouble-prone.

“That bench there,” she said, gesturing toward a moss-dusted stone seat beneath an oak tree, “was Ethan’s favorite spot to brood. And over there, the pond—that’s where he once fell in while trying to catch a frog.”

I smiled faintly. “I think I remember that one.”

“You were the one who screamed,” Mother added, chuckling. “You thought the frog was attacking him.”

Daniel giggled, eyes wide. “Mom screamed?!”

I sighed, laughing despite myself. “I was five.”

We continued down the path until we reached a small wooden nook tucked near the edge of the orchard.

The sight of it made my steps falter. The little structure was weathered now, ivy climbing up one side, but I recognized it immediately.

“Grandpa and I built that together,” Daniel said softly.

My breath hitched.

The air turned quiet. Even the breeze seemed to hush, carrying memories with it. Daniel’s fingers tightened around mine, his eyes solemn.

“Grandpa would be happy today.” His gaze moved between Ethan and Maya. “He’d love that Uncle Ethan found his mate.”

The words lightened the sudden heaviness. Mother’s eyes glistened, and Ethan swallowed hard before giving Daniel’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you, bud,” he said, voice rough.

The moment lingered, tender and fragile, until Devin cleared his throat.

“Your son is very thoughtful,” he said to me, his tone approving. “And remarkably well-mannered. You’ve raised him well.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “He’s my pride.”

Devin nodded. “We could use some of that discipline at home.” He glanced at Maya. “Your nephews...well, let’s just say they have too much of your energy.”

Maya huffed. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

Her mother laughed. “They’re a handful, but they’re good boys. Just...spirited.”

Before anyone could reply, a sudden commotion rose from the driveway—a dog barking wildly, followed by two high-pitched voices shouting over each other.

“Speak of the little devils,” Maya muttered. “I think that’s—”

“Maxwell,” Devin finished, sounding both exasperated and resigned.

We stepped out into the courtyard to see a second car parked on the gravel path.

A tall man climbed out—handsome, if slightly disheveled, his shirt half untucked and his tie askew.

In one arm, he carried a wriggling boy, and in the other, another identical one, both kicking wildly and trying to claw at each other.

“He started it!”

“Did not!”

“Did too!”

A massive golden retriever bounded out after them, tail wagging furiously.

“That,” Maya said, half-resigned, half-affectionate, “is my brother, Maxwell, and his twin hurricanes.”