

My Sister 206

Chapter 206 NOT A CARDBOARD CUTOUT

SERAPHINA'S POV

Lunch went better than I'd expected—shockingly so, actually.

Once the twins' earlier chaos had settled, the atmosphere loosened.

My mother and Sarah engaged in a gentle, yet enthusiastic, discussion about garden herbs, while Devin, Maxwell, and Ethan exchanged polite small talk about pack politics.

Daniel, ever the little diplomat, tried his best to win the twins over—showing them how to fold napkins into wolf shapes and tossing in a playful imitation of a pup's howl that drew a few reluctant smirks. I took it as a good sign.

By the time plates were cleared and the last of the pumpkin tarts disappeared, laughter had replaced the tension that had crept in with Maxwell and the twins' arrival.

Maya stretched back in her chair, letting out a satisfied sigh. "That was divine, Mrs. L, thank you."

Smile lines spread in the corners of my mother's eyes as she smiled at Maya. "Thank you, dear. I'll give your compliments to the chef."

As my mother ushered Devin and Sarah toward the sitting room for coffee and Ethan leaned in to whisper something to Maxwell, Maya touched my arm lightly.

“Come with me?”

I blinked. “Where?”

“Anywhere but here,” she said with a grin. “I’ve already heard Ethan’s childhood stories a thousand times. I want to hear yours.”

The mischief and curiosity in her eyes were so familiar, so Maya, that it overshadowed my innate instinct to recoil whenever my childhood was mentioned.

I hesitated for only a moment, glancing toward Daniel, who was busy helping my mother arrange teacups. He caught my look and gave me a little thumbs-up before turning back to his task, and that tiny gesture made my heart swell.

“All right,” I said softly. “Come on.”

We slipped out of the dining hall and into the quieter east corridor. Afternoon light poured through tall windows, scattering honey-gold patterns across the marble floors.

“Gods,” Maya breathed, eyes wide as she ran her hand along the wall, her head tilting back to take in the corridor’s height. “This place is massive. I still can’t believe you grew up here.”

I exhaled. “Yeah. Sometimes, neither than I.”

She gave me a knowing look, a tenderness in her eyes that bordered on pity. “Was it hard? Because of the whole ‘no wolf’ thing?”

My laughter wasn’t so much bitter as resigned. “It was whatever.”

Maya stepped closer and intertwined our fingers as we walked up the grand staircase to the second floor.

I instinctively leaned into her, my favorite peppy golden retriever companion.

“So,” she began, her soft tone curious, “how did your trip to the famously elusive Shadowveil go?”

My lips tugged up into a smile as we stepped onto the landing. “Amazing. They were so welcoming. I got to join their Blue Moon festival, and later, their pack run.” I turned to her, my hand rising. “Also—I partially Shifted.”

Her mouth opened, but I slapped my hand over it before she could let out the scream. The muffled sound vibrated against my palm as her eyes bulged like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

I laughed softly. "It was just my fingers into claws and some fur," I clarified. "But...yeah."

Maya's eyes sparkled. She tried to say something, but my hand still stifled the sound.

I arched a brow. "Promise you won't scream and spill my secret to the Lockwood/Cartridge household?"

Her chest heaving, she gave a grudging nod.

When I dropped my hand, she gasped and threw her arms around me. "I can't fucking believe it!" she whisper-yelled.

She pulled back and took my hands in hers, staring at them as if they presently sprouted claws and fur. "That's amazing. Monumental. Fantastic..."

"Ow!" My eyes widened as I rubbed my shoulder where she'd just hit me. "What was that for?"

"For going on a spiritual awakening or whatever the fuck and making me miss such a milestone in your life."

I laughed, rolling my eyes. "I'm...sorry?"

She sniffed. "You have to make it up to me."

I wrapped my arms around her. "That wasn't the last time. I fully intend to Shift, and I promise you'll be there."

"You hear that, Alina?" Maya poked a finger at my chest. "Don't you dare surface if I'm not around."

Alina's amusement hummed through me.

Maya cupped my cheeks. "My beautiful caterpillar-turned-butterfly."

My eyes watered. "I'm not there yet."

She smiled. "But you're well on your way."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

Then she looped her arm through mine. “Now, show me the infamous Seraphina Lockwood childhood lair.”

I laughed, pulling her along.

The corridor still seemed small, but it somehow didn’t feel as suffocating. Maya stopped to coo at Ethan’s portrait, even taking a picture on her phone.

When we reached my bedroom door, the earlier trepidation I felt with Paxton was nowhere to be found.

It was exactly like the last time. Except, it looked like it had been recently cleaned. The scent of lemon cleaner mingled with lavender.

Maya stepped inside and turned in a slow circle. “This. Is. So. Fucking. Cute.”

I rolled my eyes as she trailed her fingers over every surface, just like I’d done last time I was here. “It’s okay.”

“It’s adorable. All that’s missing is a life-size cardboard cutout of your teenage crush.”

I snorted.

She turned to me, her eyes narrowed. “Seraphina, is there a life-size cardboard cutout of Kieran in this room?”

My eyes widened. “What the hell—no!”

She crossed her arms, head tilted as she regarded me carefully.

My cheeks heated under her scrutiny. “Maya, stop looking at me like that.”

Her lips twitched, and she pointed her thumb over her shoulder. “There’s a sketchpad in that bookshelf over there. I’m going to open it.”

I frowned, my gaze following the direction she pointed to.

It was a testament to her keen senses that she’d noticed the sketchpad wedged between two old textbooks, and when I noticed it too, a barrage of memories slammed into me.

My eyes widened. “No, don’t—”

But Maya was already across the room, and before I could catch up to her, she had flipped the sketchpad open.

“They’re just old doodles, Maya,” I said, reaching for it. “You don’t need to—”

She sidestepped, holding the pad just out of reach.

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, what’s this?”

She turned to me. “Not a cardboard cutout, but somehow, even better.”

My stomach twisted with an odd mixture of dread and nostalgia before the page came into focus. And then it did, and I forgot to breathe for a moment.

The sketch was rough—drawn in pencil, faintly smudged from years of handling.

The profile was turned slightly, as though he’d been caught unaware. Because he had. Because I’d drawn it from memory, and my memories of Kieran included me watching from afar while he completely disregarded my existence.

“I don’t know why I kept that,” I said quickly, reaching for it. “I should throw it away.”

Maya danced back out of reach, holding it to the light. “Are you kidding? This is beautiful. You captured him like—like something entrancing. Something you couldn’t look away from.”

I hesitated, my throat tightening. “Maybe that’s because, back then, I couldn’t.”

Her gaze softened. “You loved him even then, didn’t you?”

The words hovered in the space between us, heavy but gentle.

I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the portrait in her hands. “Love’s a complicated word,” I murmured.

She came to sit beside me, careful not to wrinkle the drawing. “Complicated, maybe. But true?”

I gave a weak shrug. “It’s—”

“Don’t you dare say it’s whatever.”

I sighed.

I turned my gaze toward the sketch, tracing the faint curve of pencil shading around Kieran's eyes. The curve of his jaw, the quiet intensity in his eyes, the barely-there smile tugging at his lips.

I was a writer, not an artist, but I remember feeling that words were inadequate, insufficient to capture what I wanted to express.

Things that weren't tangible—his steadiness, maybe, or the inescapable pull in his voice when he spoke. Or the way the world seemed to slow and speed up at the same time when he so much as looked in my direction.

Maya's voice broke the silence. "What drew you to him first? Do you remember?"

I turned away, toward my desk.

For a second, I saw my younger self at that desk again—shorn hair tangled, sleeves smudged with charcoal, trying to draw a boy who made her feel something beyond loneliness.

"I don't remember," I said softly.

I think—I could be wrong, but I think that was the first time I ever lied outright to Maya.

Because I remembered. Every single detail.

