

## **My Sister 43**

Chapter 43 SPONGEBOB BAND-AIDS

SERAPHINA'S POV

I had never danced like this before.

Not at any debutante ball. Not during etiquette class. Not even in the privacy of my own kitchen.

Lucian moved with effortless grace, his hand firm but not controlling against my waist, guiding me with the kind of assurance that made me feel like I could do anything—so long as I let go and followed his lead.

I wasn't even aware of my feet anymore—just the warmth in his eyes and the comfort in his smile.

The music flowed through me, and for once, I didn't think, didn't worry about who was watching me or if I was performing well enough.

I just... moved.

When the song ended, the room erupted with applause again, though this time it wasn't thunderous like during my speech. It was gentler, more appreciative—a wave of admiration and awe that blanketed us like snowfall.

Lucian leaned in, his breath brushing the shell of my ear. "You're a natural."

I gave a breathless laugh, flushed from more than just the dance. "That was you. I just followed."

He pulled back slightly, brows lifting. "No, Sera. You met me step for step. That's not following. That's dancing."

The sincerity in his voice stirred something warm in my chest, but I couldn't hold his gaze. Not when his words rattled loose a memory out of the cache I'd long buried.

Years ago. A different ballroom. Different music. My feet in delicate slippers, my body trembling as I tried to find the rhythm.

Ethan's jaw clenched in frustration as I stumbled yet again.

"You're off again." His voice was angry and tight. "Try to keep up."

He stepped away, pinching the bridge of his nose, muttering something about Celeste never needing this much instruction.

That's how it always was—there wasn't a single thing I did that I wasn't compared with my younger sister.

He'd given up on me with a frustrated sigh, mumbling about how I'd never measure up and that I lacked potential.

I'd stayed late that night, long after everyone else had left—after shooting sneers and snide comments my way.

I practiced in front of the mirror until my legs ached and my toes blistered. Every night, alone in that ballroom until I got better.

But by then, it didn't matter. No one ever asked me to dance again at galas and balls. Not unless Celeste was already occupied.

And even then, I was always a last resort, and my partner was too grumpy about getting the short end of the stick to appreciate how hard I'd worked.

"Sera?" I blinked, coming back to the present. To Lucian. To the flicker of concern in his eyes. "Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere." I forced a smile, pushing the memory out of my head, shelving it with the rest I'd buried.

He seemed ready to press the issue, but a tall man in a sharp gray suit and salt-and-pepper hair stepped up, hand already outstretched. "Alpha Reed. So glad to see you here tonight." He gave me a courteous nod. "Miss Seraphina, what a riveting speech."

My cheeks heated up. "Thank you."

He turned back to Lucian. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you about the Crescent City development?"

"Oh," Lucian glanced at me, hesitation flickering in his eyes.

I shook my head, giving him a reassuring smile. "That's okay. Go ahead."

I'd always been excluded from any kind of administrative conversation in my pack, and that kind of polished small talk had always made me feel like I was wearing someone else's skin.

Lucian gave me a look—Sorry, I'll be right back—before turning to shake the man's hand.

As he stepped away, I suddenly felt bereft. Couples were floating onto the dancefloor as a new song played, and it felt like my... purpose here was over.

So I slipped away.

As I moved through the ballroom, my head swiveled, looking out for Maya. She didn't seem to have arrived yet, and worry was beginning to creep in.

I was surprised when people stopped me to compliment my dress and my speech. It was a little overwhelming, but despite the fact that I was just as visible as I'd feared—maybe even more so—it wasn't as bad as I'd thought.

In fact, it was oddly... gratifying.

But by the time I made it out of the ballroom, past the corridors lined with gold trim and blooming white orchids, through a door leading outside, I couldn't resist the sigh of relief.

The night air wrapped around me like a cool embrace.

The moon hung low and luminous over the garden, and everything smelled faintly of honeysuckle and citrus.

The cobbled path wound through manicured hedges and fountains. As I walked through it, it felt like a dreamscape carved for moments like this—private, hushed, surreal.

I sat on a bench tucked beside a trickling stream and pulled out my phone.

No messages. No missed calls.

I tapped Maya's contact and waited. It rang. Once. Twice. Thrice. Voicemail.

"Hey," I started, holding my phone to my ear, "just checking in that your mysterious mate hasn't gone feral and eaten you up." I snorted. "Oh, who am I kidding? You're more likely to have eaten him up. Anyways, you missed my speech, and it was really badass. I think you would have liked it. Are you still coming?"

I sighed when there was no answer—because, of course, it was a voicemail. "Call me when you get this, okay?"

I hung up and sighed, placing my phone next to me.

Without the distraction of adrenaline and my anxiety, I noticed the ache pounding at my ankle.

Reaching down, I slipped off one heel, then the other, wincing as I examined the damage. Blisters had already begun to rise, angry and red, on the back of my ankles.

Flats exist for a reason, Sera.

I laughed bitterly under my breath and dug around in my clutch for a tissue or—gods, even some tape. But the matching purse Maya had gotten me was one of those tiny sparkling ones with no other use but as a statement piece.

I was debating whether I would stay here for the rest of the night or hobble back to the ballroom barefoot without looking like a lunatic when I heard footsteps—solid and familiar.

And then—

"That was quite the speech," said a voice I knew almost as well as my own.

Kieran.

I looked up. He was standing a few feet away, his tux jacket slung over his shoulder, collar slightly undone. His tall, imposing frame blocked out the moonlight, his sharp, infuriatingly handsome face unreadable.

His hair looked like running his hand through it had become an Olympic sport, and he was going for gold.

"Oh," I said. It sounded like a compliment, but since when did Kieran give me those? "Thanks?"

He smiled a little. Wistful. "Why are you hiding out here and not basking in the glow of your adoring fans?"

I snorted, turning away.

"I'm not hiding," I said, my voice quiet. "Just... resting my feet."

His gaze dropped, catching sight of the angry red marks on my ankles. He stepped forward. "That looks painful."

"Aren't you observant?"

He shot me a sharp look, but it was laced with something... fond.

"Here." He slid his hands into his jacket pocket, and when it resurfaced, there was a pack of SpongeBob band-aids.

I raised a brow.

"Why on earth do you have that with you?"

"After that time Danny got hurt at the park, you mentioned that it was best to always carry band-aids around, remember?"



I blinked up at him, frozen in shock. I didn't know which was more surprising—that he'd listened to an off-hand comment I'd made, or that he'd actually carried around the band-aids, even in his fancy tuxedo.

My throat tightened. I reached for the pack with a murmured thanks, but before I could take it from his hand, he was already kneeling.

"Kieran—"

"Let me."

"You don't have to—"

I sucked in a breath as his hand wrapped around my ankle. It was like I'd stuck my toe into an electrical outlet and now volts of electricity were racing up and down my body, originating from that seemingly harmless point of contact.

Kieran's shoulders briefly stiffened, and I wondered if he felt that too—the current flowing between us. But then his fingers started moving, gentle but sure, calloused from years of combat, warm against my skin.

I still hadn't released my breath as he dabbed around the blister with his pocket square, then peeled the band-aid open with deft fingers.

His touch was clinical, and he applied the bandage with practiced care.

But when his hand lingered, fingers brushing the edge of my feet longer than necessary, something passed between us.

A pull. Unfamiliar, but...

He lifted his head then, and our eyes met. There was something in the depth of his dark gaze, a fierce... longing I had never seen before. Except for when he kissed me on my porch.

I don't know if it was the memory of the kiss or the heat of his gaze that sent warmth flooding my chest.

We stayed like that for a beat too long.

His Adam's apple bobbed. His jaw tensed. His thumb idly grazed my skin like it couldn't help itself.

"Sera, I—"

"Kie?"

Celeste's voice rang out like a slap.

I flinched, letting out the breath in a sharp whoosh. Kieran rose fast, his back stiffening, face shuttered.

Celeste stepped into view, her stiletto heels clicking against the stone like a metronome. She looked at Kieran, then at me, and her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Oh you have got to be fucking kidding me," she hissed. "One Alpha isn't enough for you, Cinderella? When are you going to be satisfied?" She took a menacing step forward, and her next words were laced with enough poison to fell an elephant. "After you've seduced everyone's man, you shameless whore?"

I sighed, closing my eyes briefly.

Here we go again.