

My Sister 95

Chapter 95 BYE-BYE CIVILITY

SERAPHINA'S POV

The hospital smelled like antiseptic and boiled linen, a sharp, sterile scent that clawed at my nerves the moment I stepped through the sliding glass doors—and was bombarded with painful memories of the last time I was called to a parent's hospital room.

Kieran tentatively laid a hand on my elbow when I halted just a few feet from the entrance, trying to catch my breath.

"Sera." His voice was uncharacteristically soft, unnervingly kind. "Do you want me to go in with you?"

I shook my head, stepping out of his reach. We'd spent the entire trip back in our tentative truce bubble, and I didn't want him to think that now that we were back in California, it had evaporated.

As much as I didn't want to face the prospect of my possibly dying mother alone, I didn't want to have to lean on Kieran.

Especially since he wasn't there to lean on when my father died.

"I'm fine," I said quietly, before heading towards the nurse's station.

Five minutes later, the elevator doors dinged open on the top floor.

For all the frantic urgency with which Kieran and I had left the island, I half expected to find my mom's room barricaded by doctors, machines hissing, nurses rushing in and out with grave expressions.

Instead, I found her sitting upright in bed, propped on too many pillows, her hair neatly combed, a pale silk robe drawn around her shoulders, a glass of cucumber water in her freshly manicured hands.

Her pulse monitor ticked steadily, unhurried, as though mocking my own racing heartbeat.

My lungs loosened at once. Relief flooded me—so sharp it almost left me dizzy.

She wasn't dying. She wasn't even close.

Hell, her color looked better than mine, and I'd just come back from the fucking Caribbean.

And just like that, suspicion coiled up in the hollow of my stomach.

Of course. Celeste.

I should have known better than to dance to her strings. When had we ever had an interaction that didn't have an ulterior motive?

How could I have so blindly and naively believed her?

Still, a sliver of doubt gnawed at me as my mother's eyes lifted from the book in her lap to meet mine.

Her expression—genuine surprise widening her gaze—wasn't the calculated performance I would've expected if she'd been in on Celeste's little scheme.

"Sera?" Her voice caught, halfway between disbelief and something softer, almost tentative.

The sound pressed against a bruise inside me I didn't want to examine.

"I—I was worried," I said, the words tumbling out sharper than I intended. "Celeste said you were hospitalized. We came straight from the island."

Her gaze softened, and she gently set her glass down on her bedside table, next to a bowl of fruit salad.
"You came... for me?"

I exhaled slowly and stepped closer. “How are you feeling?”

She smoothed her robe, as though embarrassed by the attention. “A spell, that’s all. The doctors insist it’s nothing serious. Exhaustion, a touch of dehydration...age creeping in where I wish it wouldn’t.”

Relief pricked through me again, but it came tangled with bitterness.

I had left Daniel’s laughter and love behind on sunlit sand for this?

Celeste’s ploys never failed to rob me of peace, but she might have well and truly crossed the line this time.

Margaret gestured to the chair beside her bed. “Sit with me, Seraphina.”

I hesitated, but courtesy—or maybe exhaustion of my own—guided me into the seat.

The silence between us pressed tight, awkward in its restraint. My mother glanced at me, then away, as if she didn’t know where to begin.

“And Daniel?” she asked at last, her voice gentler than I remembered. “How’s my boy?”

My chest eased despite myself. I could never hold ugly emotions where Daniel was concerned. “He’s thriving. He’s grown taller these past weeks, I swear. And he never tires of the beach—collecting shells, building fortresses in the sand, surfing the waves—” I caught myself before I rambled on.

She didn’t need the litany of small joys I hoarded like rare pearls. My mother and I didn’t do small talk like this. It was too strange and uncomfortable to continue.

Her lips curved faintly. “He always did remind me of your father. Sprightly and venturesome.” She chuckled softly. “You could plop the man in an ice cave in the middle of nowhere and return to find a glacial wonderland.”

I froze.

It wasn’t so much the mention of my father, but how she’d done it—like we were a normal family reminiscing. Like we were united in our grief.

Like the husband she’d loved and the father who loathed me were somehow the same person.

“Maybe,” I murmured.

Another silence stretched, brittle as sugar glass. I folded my hands tightly in my lap, keeping my tone neutral. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

I glanced at the door. 'I should leave now,' I thought. Before we ran out of amicable topics and delved into dangerous territory that would no doubt end with me carrying shards of my heart out of the room.

My mother's eyes lingered on me, searching for something I didn't want to give.

And then, with a sudden burst of determination that reminded me of the Margaret who once commanded an entire pack as fearsome Luna, she said, "We should all sit down together soon. Have dinner. As a family."

I blinked. "As...a family."

She nodded, and I could feel us slowly edging towards that line, the one that separated strained civility from blatant hostility. "You, Ethan"—I could see the line clearly, big and bold—"Celeste..."—yep, stepping over the line—"and Lucian Reed."

Line effectively crossed, barrier erected behind. Bye-bye, civility.

The name landed like ice water poured down my spine.

Lucian.

I stared at her, dumbstruck. Had she really just—?

My mom, seemingly oblivious to the storm she had unleashed, continued matter-of-factly, "It's time, don't you think? To put appearances in order. People have already started talking about the two of you, and we wouldn't want another...occurrence like last time, right? So we have to do this right; it's awe-inspiring enough that after—you know—everything, that someone of Lucian Reed's status would actually..."

She might have trailed off, or the white noise building in my head momentarily drowned out her words.

Her phrasing. Saints above, her phrasing. As though Lucian was a benefactor I ought to thank properly. I should be grateful someone of his standing would deign to bother with me.

Heat rose in my chest, rushing too fast for me to contain.

"Enough." The word cracked from me before I could stop it.

Margaret blinked.

"I came here because, foolishly, I was worried; Daniel was worried," I said, my voice shaking but hard. "Because common decency, stupid, misplaced duty, demanded it. But don't mistake that for anything more. My life—my choices, the people in it—aren't yours to judge, or tidy up, or parade for appearances. You forfeited that right a long time ago. So no, I will not be having any ridiculous sham of a dinner with any ridiculous sham of a family. And you can be sure that as far as anyone bearing the Lockwood name is concerned, Lucian Reed lives on the other side of the fucking planet."

The words left me trembling, the air burning in my throat.

For a moment, all I saw in my mother's face was shock. And then—something sharper. A flicker of dejection, pain carved into fine lines around her mouth and eyes.

It pierced me against my will. My heart faltered, guilt pricking at me with familiar claws. Had I gone too far? Had I just buried the line of fragile truce in mountains of ice?

But then memory rushed in—every time I begged silently for her to look at me, and she'd turned away.

How she had adored Celeste's every whim, and left me to scavenge scraps of affection.

How she'd stood on that stage and asked me to dance like a puppet for Celeste, the puppet master.

No. I would not be swayed. Not this time.

I stood abruptly, gathering my composure like armor. "Daniel will be glad to hear you're well."

Her lips parted, as if to protest, but I was already reaching for my bag.

“Sera—”

My steps faltered at the sound of her voice.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said quietly. “I never quite find the right words with you, do I?” She punctuated the sentence with a self-deprecatory chuckle like she expected me to turn around and comfort her, to let her know that it was okay to keep hammering in the nail she’d embedded in my heart years ago.

“But I am...glad you came. It means a lot, Sera. Thank you.”

I closed my eyes. For a heartbeat, I let myself imagine that sentence, this entire conversation had come a decade earlier, when it might have mattered.

But it was too late, and now it just stung. The past was set in stone, and piling flowers over trash didn’t curb the smell—it just made it worse.

When I opened my eyes again, the sterile walls pressed cold and unforgiving around me.

“Rest well,” I managed, my voice flat.

And then I turned, my heels clicking too loud on the linoleum as I walked for the door.

The corridor outside buzzed faintly with life—nurses chatting, monitors beeping, someone’s laughter ringing from down the hall.

I focused on the rhythm of my steps, anything to drown the white noise still echoing faintly in my ears.

But as I rounded the corner, the air snagged in my lungs.

There, not ten paces away, stood Celeste.

And Kieran.

Her body was pressed flush against his, her arms looped around his neck, his tightly gripping her waist—their lips locked in a passionate kiss.