

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 151 - 152 [2,033 words]

Chapter 151: Chapter 152

Elodie stopped mid-thought, realizing what Harry meant. Five visits total. She'd agreed to come see Daisy five times, and this was one of them.

"Understood," she said simply.

Daisy appeared out of nowhere, dragging two scarves behind her like victory flags. Her face was lit up with that specific kind of childhood determination that didn't take no for an answer. "We're making another one! A big snowman next to a little snowman, like me and you!"

Elodie blinked. The kid wasn't asking. She was announcing.

And somehow, that made it easier to just... go along with it.

Daisy spun toward her uncle. "Uncle Harry, you're helping."

It wasn't a question for him either.

Harry looked at Elodie for half a second, then crouched down and started packing snow without a word.

They worked in relative quietness. Daisy did enough talking for all three of them, narrating every step like she was hosting some winter crafting show. "No, no, Uncle, that side's uneven. Auntie, can you fix the arms? Yes! Perfect! We need rocks for eyes, hold on—"

Elodie kept her hands busy shaping snow, and that was fine. It kept her mind from wandering to places it shouldn't. Like how long it had been since Liora looked at her the way Daisy did, like spending time together was something to be excited about.

She didn't let herself linger on it.

When the snowmen were done, one tall and lopsided, one rounder and oddly charming, Daisy clapped her mittened hands together. "Pictures! Uncle Harry, take pictures!"

Harry pulled his phone out.

Elodie knelt down beside Daisy, and before she could even settle, the girl wrapped both arms around her neck and squeezed. Tight. Gave her a genuine kind of hug that didn't come with conditions.

Elodie's chest did something weird. Something uncomfortable and warm at the same time.

Harry raised the phone. Through the screen, he saw her face shift, just barely. The careful mask she wore so well slipped just enough to show something softer underneath. He took one photo. Then another. Then a couple more.

"Done," he said quietly.

Daisy bolted off to admire their work from every possible angle, leaving Elodie and Harry standing there in the snow. The air between them was still. Not awkward. Just... there.

The day bled into evening faster than Elodie expected. The sky dimmed to a deep bruised purple, and the smell of grilling food started drifting through the camp. Tents glowed from the inside, little pockets of warmth against the cold.

Harry came back holding a few skewers. "Seafood okay?"

She glanced up. "Yeah."

He handed them over without making it a thing.

The camp had filled in throughout the day. It was not crowded, but it was alive with people. People were laughing, talking, kids were running around half-frozen and fully caffeinated on excitement. Someone mentioned a bonfire party happening soon.

Harry asked, "You want to go?"

Elodie bit into a shrimp, chewed, and swallowed. "I don't really care either way."

He was about to reply when his phone rang.

The name on the screen said Levi.

Harry stepped a few feet away and answered. "What."

"Drinks tonight?" Levi's voice came through loudly, too upbeat for this hour.

"Pass. You guys go without me."

"Wait... what's going on, are you—"

Daisy appeared at Harry's side, holding up a skewer like a prize. "Uncle! Chicken wings!"

He bent down to take it, and Daisy grinned up at him before running off again.

On the other end, Levi paused. "Hold on. Are you eating barbecue?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Outside." Harry kept his tone even. "Camping."

There was a beat. Then Levi's voice came back sharper, more interested. "Camping? In the middle of winter? With all this snow? That's actually perfect with all that bonfire, snowball fights, the whole damn vibe. How did I not think of that?"

Harry said nothing.

Levi's tone shifted. "Wait. You went camping and didn't invite us?"

"Next time."

"Bullshit. That babysitter of Daisy's is there, isn't she?" Levi was grinning now, Harry could hear it through the phone. "Where are you? I'm coming over. Actually, forget that. I'll call Dante and the others. We'll all—"

"I'm hanging up."

"Wait, Harry—"

He ended the call and shoved the phone back in his pocket.

The temperature was dropping fast now. The cold was one that got under your clothes no matter how many layers you had.

Harry walked back to the tent and came out a minute later holding two coats, one big, one small.

He held the larger one out toward Elodie.

She looked at it, then at him. "I'm fine."

"Just take it."

Before she could argue, he shook the coat out and dropped it over her shoulders in one smooth motion. Then he handed the smaller one to Daisy, who barely noticed because she was mid-story about something involving a snow fox.

Elodie almost protested. She didn't need help. She'd been managing on her own for years now. But the coat was warm, and it did block the wind that had been sneaking under her sweater all evening.

So she let it stay.

After they finished eating, the bonfire was being lit in the center of camp. Daisy grabbed Elodie's hand and pulled her toward it.

The second they got close, someone whistled. "Damn. That's one gorgeous family right there."

Elodie's steps faltered.

Her jaw tightened, but her voice stayed calm. "We're not a family."

A few people laughed, not cruelly though, just knowingly. Like they'd already decided how this story ended.

She didn't bother correcting them again. What would be the point?

Daisy ran off to join some other kids who were building something in the snow.

Elodie stood there, hands tucked into the coat pockets, watching the flames climb higher. Around her, people sat in clusters, friends, families, couples. All of them fitting neatly into something.

She used to fit into something too.

Now she just... stood next to it. Close enough to feel the warmth. Far enough that nobody noticed when she wasn't really there.

And for a second, just one, she let herself wonder what it would feel like to belong somewhere again.

Then she blinked, and the thought was gone.

Elodie and Harry didn't know a soul at this camp. Once Daisy scampered off to join the other kids, the silence that dropped between them felt almost solid, like something you could reach out and touch.

There wasn't much to say, really.

Family? That road led straight to Dante and Sienna, and Elodie would rather sit in uncomfortable silence than go anywhere near that conversation.

Work? Wilson Tech was a wound she had no interest in reopening, especially not with Harry Becker of all people.

So they just... existed. Side by side. Quietly.

Elodie was fine with it. She'd gotten comfortable with silence. It didn't ask questions. Didn't expect anything from her.

Harry shifted beside her, clearing his throat. "How's it going at Cole? You settling in alright?"

She was halfway through weaving a butterfly from some dried grass she'd found near the edge of the fire pit. Her fingers worked methodically, folding and twisting the brittle stems into shape. She didn't bother looking up.

"It's fine. I'm settling in."

"Johnny seems like he's got your back."

"He does."

A pause. Then: "You studied AI at university, right?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you two meet? You and Johnny?"

That question landed differently. Elodie's hands stilled for half a second before resuming their movements. She kept her eyes on the grass butterfly taking shape in her palms.

She didn't answer.

Harry noticed. Of course he did. He wasn't oblivious. She'd been keeping a careful distance from him this whole trip, and he understood why. He was Dante's friend. That alone was enough.

He didn't press.

Throughout the evening, his phone rang multiple times. Each time, he excused himself and walked a few paces away, his voice low and clipped as he spoke to whoever was on the other end. Elodie didn't ask. Didn't care to know.

By the time he came back for good, the sky had gone fully black and the bonfire had burned down to glowing coals. Most of the other campers had retreated into their tents for the night.

Elodie had made a small pile of grass butterflies by then—five or six of them, lined up neatly on the log beside her.

Daisy came running over, her eyes going wide when she spotted them.

"Are these for me?" she asked breathlessly.

Elodie glanced at her, then at the butterflies. "If you want them."

Daisy's entire face lit up. She scooped them into her hands like they were made of glass, cradling them with a gentleness that made something twist painfully in Elodie's chest.

"I'm keeping them forever," Daisy whispered, tucking them carefully into her coat pocket.

Elodie's smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

Liora used to do that.

She used to collect every little thing Elodie made for her, paper cranes, beaded bracelets, drawings. She'd display them on her shelf like they were treasures. Like her mother's hands had created something worth keeping.

But that was before.

Before Sienna became "Auntie." Before Dante's attention shifted entirely. Before Liora started looking at Elodie like she was... optional.

Elodie blinked and the memory scattered. She didn't chase it.

That night, Daisy refused to sleep anywhere but next to Elodie.

Harry glanced at Elodie, silently asking if that was okay.

She nodded. "It's fine."

Daisy squealed in delight and immediately burrowed into the sleeping bag beside Elodie's. She tried to coax Elodie into holding her, but that wasn't happening. Separate sleeping bags. Boundaries. Elodie wasn't about to blur those lines.

Still, Daisy seemed content just being close.

Elodie lay there in the dark, staring up at the sloped ceiling of the tent. She could hear Daisy's soft, even breathing beside her. Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the tent fabric and whistling through the trees.

She didn't sleep well.

She hadn't in a long time.

Morning came too soon.

Daisy woke up sniffing, her face flushed and her voice hoarse. She'd caught a cold, probably from the wind the night before. Her small body wasn't built for this kind of weather.

Harry checked her forehead and frowned. "We're going to the hospital."

Daisy whimpered but didn't argue.

Elodie started packing up her things. "I'll head back on my own."

"No!" Daisy's voice was small and raspy, but insistent. She reached out and grabbed Elodie's wrist, her fingers weak but determined. "Please come with me."

Elodie looked down at her. At those glassy, fever-bright eyes. At the way Daisy's bottom lip trembled just slightly.

She should say no. She should keep her distance. She should stop letting herself get pulled into situations that would only hurt later.

But Daisy looked so small. So sincere.

"...Alright," Elodie said quietly. "I'll come."

Daisy's face brightened despite the fever.

They climbed into Harry's car. Daisy curled up in the back seat, and Elodie slid in beside her without a word. The little girl immediately leaned against her, resting her warm forehead against Elodie's arm.

The engine rumbled to life, and the car pulled out of the campsite and onto the main road.

Elodie leaned her head back against the seat. She hadn't slept more than a few hours, and exhaustion was settling into her bones now. Her eyelids felt heavy. Her body felt heavier.

Beside her, Daisy had already drifted off.

Elodie's eyes slipped closed.

Harry glanced into the rearview mirror.

Daisy was out cold, her head resting against Elodie's shoulder now. And Elodie, she'd fallen asleep too, her face turned slightly toward the window. Her long hair had fallen across her cheek, a few strands catching against her lips.

She looked exhausted. Not just tired, worn down. Like she'd been carrying something too heavy for too long and had finally stopped pretending it didn't hurt.

Harry's hand moved without thinking. He reached back, fingers hovering just above her face, ready to brush the hair away from her mouth.

Then her lashes fluttered.

He pulled his hand back immediately, gripping the steering wheel instead.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 152 - 153 [1,207 words]

Chapter 152: Chapter 153

In someone else's car, Elodie had dozed off for a few minutes, though it wasn't deep sleep, it was more like her body finally giving in to exhaustion. When she opened her eyes and saw Harry pulling his hand back from near her shoulder, she didn't think much of it. He'd probably been adjusting her seatbelt or something.

"Are we there?" she asked, her voice still a little rough from sleep.

"Almost."

Two minutes later, the car pulled into the hospital parking lot. Harry carefully lifted Daisy out of the backseat, cradling her against his chest. He glanced back at Elodie. "Do you want me to arrange a driver to take you home?"

Elodie shook her head, already reaching for her keys. "No need. I'll drive myself back."

Harry didn't push.

As Elodie was about to get into her car, her phone buzzed in her pocket. A message from Dante.

'Nonna's planning to visit your grandmother later. We should all head back to the Miller house together.'

She stared at the message for a moment.

This needed a response.

She pressed the call button instead of typing back.

Dante answered almost immediately. "Hello?"

"I'll pick up Liora and bring her over," Elodie said, keeping her tone neutral.

By saying it like that, she was making it clear she didn't expect him to come with her. After all, every time she'd asked him to go back to the Miller family with her in the past, he'd found some excuse to bail.

And honestly, her family didn't exactly want to see him either.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

Then Dante replied simply, "Okay."

Elodie hung up without another word and turned the car toward Dante's villa.

When she arrived, Liora was already waiting, her little backpack sitting neatly by the door.

But the moment Elodie stepped inside, Liora curled up closer to Dante on the sofa, turning her face away pointedly.

She was still mad about the skiing trip.

Dante glanced up at Elodie, and his expression shifted slightly. "Did you not sleep well last night?"

Elodie hadn't expected him to ask.

Maybe it was because she hadn't bothered with makeup today, or because her hair was still a little windblown and messy. Whatever it was, her lack of sleep must've been obvious.

She gave a curt "Mm" and didn't elaborate.

The housekeeper, however, jumped in with concern. "Oh dear, have you been having trouble sleeping? We have some wonderful lavender incense, I can put some in your room if you'd like."

Elodie waved her off gently. "I usually sleep fine. I just went camping yesterday, and I'm not used to sleeping outdoors."

The housekeeper frowned, clearly worried. "Camping in the winter? You'll catch your death of cold!"

Elodie smiled despite herself. "Winter camping is actually pretty fun. You can have snowball fights, build snowmen, play games around the fire... The atmosphere's just different."

She thought back to the other campers she'd seen, laughing, bundled up in blankets, roasting marshmallows under the stars.

She'd felt a little envious, honestly.

Dante, who had been quietly listening, set down the newspaper he'd been holding and looked at her more closely.

Liora, however, felt her irritation spike even higher.

Last time, Mom didn't comfort her when she was upset.

And now she'd gone camping! Camping which sounded amazing, and she didn't even invite her?!

Liora grabbed her backpack, hopped off the sofa with a huff, and stomped toward the stairs.

Elodie's brow furrowed, but before she could say anything, Dante's voice cut through the room.

"Liora. Come back."

He didn't raise his voice. Didn't sound angry.

Liora pouted, her little shoulders slumping as she turned around slowly and stood still.

Dante glanced over at her, his expression calm but expectant.

Liora lowered her head, dragging her schoolbag behind her as she shuffled back in silence.

But she didn't go to Elodie's side.

Instead, she walked straight to Dante, grabbed his hand, and looked up at him with wide, pleading eyes. "Daddy, can you come with us? Please?"

Dante didn't look at Elodie. He just reached down and gently tapped Liora's nose with his finger, his voice soft. "Daddy has work to take care of. Be good and listen to your mom, alright?"

Liora's face fell. "Okay..."

She stood there for a moment longer, clearly reluctant, before finally glancing over at Elodie.

Then, slowly, she reached out her hand.

It was her way of making peace.

Elodie took her small hand in hers, squeezing gently. After saying a brief goodbye to the housekeeper, they left the house together.

When they arrived at the Miller family home, Nonna had already been there for a while.

The moment she saw that only Elodie and Liora had arrived, with no Dante, her expression soured. "Where's Dante? Don't tell me he's busy again."

Elodie nodded quietly. "He had something he couldn't get out of."

Nonna looked like she was about to grab her phone and call him herself, but Grandma Miller, who already knew about the impending divorce, gently placed a hand on her arm.

"He's got work to do. I understand. No need to make a fuss," Grandma Miller said, her tone carefully neutral.

Nonna huffed but didn't push further.

They went inside, and Liora immediately ran upstairs to play video games with Hugo.

Elodie stayed downstairs with the two grandmothers, settling into the familiar rhythm of conversation.

When Nonna spotted the two new paintings Grandma Miller had recently finished, her eyes lit up. "These are beautiful! You've really outdone yourself."

Grandma Miller smiled, a touch of pride in her expression. "I've been using the calligraphy set Elodie gave me for my birthday. It's made all the difference."

Nonna's smile widened. "That's wonderful." Then she paused, her tone shifting slightly. "What about Dante? Did he at least send something thoughtful?"

Grandma Miller's expression tightened just a bit, though she kept her voice even. "He did. A set of jade jewelry, master-grade, apparently. And an embroidered piece. It was... nice."

Nonna looked satisfied. "Well, at least he listened to me about that."

Elodie said nothing, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

After a while in the study, the two grandmothers moved out to the garden for tea.

Grandma Miller gestured toward the house next door, her tone though was casual it was curious. "It's odd, you know. That place was being renovated around the clock recently, day and night. I thought the new owners were in a rush to move in. But then, suddenly, everything just stopped."

Nonna sipped her tea thoughtfully. "Maybe something came up. Plans change."

"Maybe."

Elodie had been considering selling that property for a while now, but she'd been worried it might end up in the hands of the Brown or Green family. So she'd done nothing.

She hadn't even gone inside to look at it.

Ever since the Green family had been involved, the thought of stepping foot in there made her skin crawl.

So the matter had been left unresolved.

Just as she was thinking about it, a sudden chill ran down her spine.

She sneezed.

Grandma Miller looked over, concerned. "Are you catching a cold, dear?"

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 153 - 154 [1,775 words]

Chapter 153: Chapter 154

Elodie's POV ~

Both grandmothers turned to me immediately, concern written all over their faces. "Are you alright, dear? Are you catching a cold?"

I grabbed a tissue and wiped my nose, trying to sound casual. "Maybe. I'm not sure."

I probably had caught something last night, the wind at the campsite had been brutal but it hadn't really hit me until now. My throat felt scratchy, and there was this dull ache starting to settle behind my eyes.

My grandmother and Nonna had been friends for decades. You'd think that would make things easier, but it didn't. Neither of them mentioned the disaster that was Nonna's birthday banquet. Neither of them brought up Dante or Sienna or the fact that my marriage was a public joke at this point.

They just kept chatting. Laughing. Pretending everything was fine.

I sat there, half-listening, feeling the fog in my head getting thicker.

My phone buzzed in my lap. Cara's name flashed across the screen.

I excused myself quietly and stepped into the hallway to answer.

"I swear to God, Elodie, I can't escape these people," Cara said immediately, her voice sharp with frustration. "I just ran into Dante and the entire Green family again. I'm so over this. Where are you?"

"At my grandmother's."

"Did you go alone?"

"No. Liora and Nonna are with me."

There was a pause. Then Cara's tone shifted, colder now. "So Dante didn't come back with you. He went to have dinner with the Greens instead."

I didn't answer.

What was there to say? She already knew.

"Elodie—"

"I have to go," I said, cutting her off gently. "I'll call you later."

I hung up before she could argue.

When I walked back into the sitting room, I felt another sneeze building. I tried to hold it back, but it came anyway.

Aunty looked at me with motherly concern. "You're definitely getting sick. Come on, let me make you some ginger soup."

I tried to protest, but she was already heading toward the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, I was sitting at the table, forcing down a bowl of ginger soup that tasted like liquid fire. It burned all the way down, but I finished it because she was watching me like a hawk.

Almost immediately after, the exhaustion hit me hard like a freight train. My head felt heavy, my limbs sluggish.

I must've dozed off on the couch because the next thing I knew, someone was shaking my shoulder gently.

When I opened my eyes, everything felt wrong. My head was pounding. My body ached. And I was *burning up*.

Liora was standing next to me, her face scrunched up in something that might've been concern. "Mom, are you sick?"

I nodded. Even that small movement made my head throb.

Nonna was there too, hovering nearby. "We need to take you back to the estate. Dr. Stanley can see you there, he'll know exactly what to do."

My grandmother agreed immediately. "Don't wait. If she's running a fever, she needs to be looked at now."

I didn't have the energy to argue.

The ride back to the Wilson estate was a blur. I remember the car moving, the low hum of conversation around me, but none of it really registered.

By the time we arrived, Dr. Stanley was already waiting. He checked my temperature, listened to my breathing, asked a few questions I barely had the strength to answer.

Then he handed me a bowl of some herbal medicine that smelled like death and tasted worse.

I drank it anyway.

After that, someone, Nonna, I think, guided me upstairs. I didn't even realize where I was until I collapsed onto the bed and felt the familiar weight of the blankets.

I was in Dante's room.

The room he grew up in. The one that still had traces of him everywhere, his books on the shelf, his scent faintly clinging to the pillows.

I was too tired to care.

I closed my eyes and let the darkness pull me under.

When I woke up, the room was dim. The small lamp on the nightstand cast a soft, golden glow across the space.

I blinked slowly, my head still heavy but not quite as unbearable as before.

Then I saw Dante was sitting in the chair by the window, a book open in his hands. He looked calm. Like this was perfectly normal.

I froze.

For a second, I thought I was still dreaming.

But then he turned his head, and his eyes met mine.

"You're awake," he said quietly.

My throat felt like sandpaper. I didn't want to talk. Didn't want to engage. Didn't want to be here, in his space, with him looking at me like that.

I didn't answer.

Instead, I reached for the coat draped over the chair beside the bed and pulled it on. My body protested every movement, but I forced myself to sit up.

I needed to leave.

But before I could swing my legs over the side of the bed, Dante stood and walked over, holding a glass of water.

I stared at it.

Then, after a long pause, I took it.

I didn't say thank you.

I drank in silence, the cool water soothing my raw throat.

Dante watched me for a moment, then reached out, his hand moving toward my forehead like he was going to check my temperature.

Instinct kicked in.

I jerked my head back, avoiding his touch.

His hand hovered in the air for a second. Then he pulled it back, his expression unreadable.

He stood there for another moment, then turned toward the door.

"Dr. Stanley's still downstairs," he said flatly. "I'll have him come up and check on you again."

And then he left.

The door clicked shut behind him, and I was alone again.

I set the glass down on the nightstand and lay back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling.

A few minutes later, the door opened again, and this time it wasn't just Dante.

Dr. Stanley walked in first, followed by Nonna, then Dante, and finally Liora trailing behind like she wasn't sure if she wanted to be here or not.

Dr. Stanley came over to the bed, checked my pulse, peered at my eyes, asked me a few questions. After a moment, he nodded to himself.

"You're already improving," he said, his tone measured and professional. "But you'll need to keep taking the medicine for at least another few days."

I nodded.

He hesitated, then added, "Your body's run down. You're physically exhausted, and there's... emotional strain as well. That's why a simple cold hit you this hard. You need to take better care of yourself."

Emotional strain. Right.

What a polite way to say my life was falling apart.

I nodded again, because what else was I supposed to do? Argue with him?

Nonna stepped closer, her face soft with concern. "Elodie, sweetheart, are you hungry?"

I hadn't eaten much at lunch, my stomach had been in knots all afternoon, and I'd passed out not long after. Now, the sky outside the window was darkening, and yeah, I was hungry. But I didn't really have an appetite.

Before I could answer, Nonna was already making decisions for me.

"Dante, go downstairs and bring her something to eat. Something light, soup, maybe some bread."

Dante didn't argue. He just stood, set his book down on the chair, and left the room without a word.

Dr. Stanley packed up his things, gave me one last look that said **take care of yourself**, and followed Nonna and Liora out.

The door clicked shut.

And I was alone again.

For about five minutes.

Then Dante came back, carrying a tray that consisted of soup and then bread and a small bowl of fruit.

He set it down on the nightstand, then, without asking, he sat back down in the chair beside the bed.

Like he planned to stay.

I picked up the spoon, more to have something to do with my hands than because I actually wanted to eat.

Dante picked up his book again. The same one he'd been reading earlier.

I glanced over at it, and something clicked in my brain.

That book. I knew that book.

I stared at the cover for a second longer, and then it hit me. That was my book. The one I'd been reading at the hot spring resort. The one I must've left behind when I—

"You kept it," I said before I could stop myself.

Dante looked up, his expression unreadable. "I did."

"Why?"

He leaned back in the chair, his thumb marking his place in the book. "I started reading it that day. Just out of curiosity. But some of the notes you'd written in the margins, they were interesting. Gave me a different perspective on a few things. So I kept it. Been reading it whenever I had time."

My notes.

He'd been reading my notes*.

I felt something tighten in my chest, but I forced it down.

"You could've just asked for it back," he added, his tone annoyingly calm.

I turned my face away and focused on the soup in front of me. "I didn't care enough to ask."

That wasn't entirely true, but I wasn't about to admit that.

I took a spoonful of soup. It was warm, savory, exactly the type of thing Nonna would've insisted on. But it tasted like nothing.

Dante was still watching me.

"You still can't take a compliment, can you?" he said after a moment, and there was something almost amused in his voice.

I didn't answer.

He sighed, like I was some kind of puzzle he couldn't quite figure out. "Fine. I won't push. Just eat."

I wanted to snap at him. Wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing here, sitting beside me like he had any right to be concerned.

But more than that, I wanted to ask him about the divorce.

I'd left the agreement on his desk months ago. Three months, to be exact. I'd made it clear that I didn't want anything. No money. No property. No custody battle over Liora.

I'd signed it. I would walk away.

And yet, he still hadn't finalized it.

He hadn't called. Hadn't sent the papers. Hadn't done a damn thing.

And I didn't understand why.

I set the spoon down and turned to look at him, ready to ask, ready to finally force the conversation we'd been avoiding.

But before I could say a word, there was a knock at the door.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 154 - 155[1,429 words]

Chapter 154: Chapter 155

Elodie's POV~

Then a voice that sounded a little uncertain, suddenly called out from the hallway.

"Sister-in-law? I heard you were sick. Are you feeling any better?"

I recognized it immediately. Yancy. Dante's younger brother.

Before I could answer, Dante spoke up. "Come in."

The door had been left ajar after everyone had filtered in and out earlier. Now it swung open wider, and Yancy stepped inside, his expression cautious.

He looked at Dante first. "Brother."

Dante gave a short nod. "Mm."

Then Yancy's eyes shifted to me, and I could see the hesitation there. We'd never really talked much, just made greetings at family dinners, the occasional nod in passing. He probably wasn't sure how to navigate this.

So I made it easier for him.

"I'm feeling a lot better now," I said, keeping my tone light. "Thank you for asking."

He scratched the back of his head, looking relieved. "Oh. Good. That's... that's good."

I offered him a small smile. "You haven't been back here in a while, have you?"

"Yeah, no, I've been swamped with school stuff. But I missed the food here, so I figured I'd come back for a bit. Soon as I walked in, Nonna told me you had a fever."

Before I could respond, Nonna herself appeared in the doorway, her face lighting up when she saw me sitting upright.

"Oh, sweetheart, you look so much better already." She clasped her hands together. "The kitchen just finished making the soup. Dr. Stanley said you can have some now. Would you rather come downstairs, or should Dante bring it up?"

I hadn't eaten much earlier, and honestly, staying cooped up in this room was starting to suffocate me.

"I'll come down," I said.

Nonna beamed. "Perfect."

Downstairs, the dining room smelled like chicken broth and herbs. It was one soup that smelled comforting with a homey scent that should've made me feel better.

It didn't.

Yancy plopped down across from me. "Where's Liora?"

Nonna handed me a bowl of soup before answering. "She had a little earlier but didn't finish. I'll have her drink the rest later."

I accepted the bowl and blew gently on the surface, watching the steam curl and dissipate.

Dante sat down beside me. Close, but not too close.

Then his phone buzzed.

I saw him glance at the screen. His jaw tightened just slightly, and then, deliberately, he angled his body away from me, shielding the phone as he typed out a response.

I didn't need to see the screen to know.

He was texting Sienna.

I kept my eyes on my soup, sipping slowly, letting the warmth slide down my throat.

Nonna frowned at him from across the table. "Can't that wait until after dinner?"

"Just a minute," Dante said without looking up.

I finished the soup quickly. Set the bowl down with a soft clink.

"Would you like more?" Nonna asked.

I shook my head and stood. "No, thank you. I'm full."

As I rose, I caught a glimpse of Dante's screen, just a flash, but it was enough to see.

Sienna: Can we go over the Verona project specs tonight? I want your input before the meeting.

Dante: Sure. I'll call you in a bit.

He noticed me looking and shifted even further away, his shoulders angling to block my view entirely.

Like I cared.

I turned and walked into the living room, picking up a newspaper someone had left on the coffee table. I didn't actually read it. Just stared at the words until they stopped making sense.

A few minutes later, Yancy appeared with a plate of freshly cut fruit. "Want some?"

I looked up. "No, thanks. You have it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dante stand and leave the dining room, phone still pressed to his ear as he headed upstairs.

I dropped my gaze back to the newspaper.

Yancy sat down beside me, fidgeting with the plate. I could feel him glancing at me every few seconds, like he wanted to say something but wasn't sure how.

Finally, I lowered the paper. "What is it?"

He hesitated, then let out a sheepish laugh. "Okay, so... my brain's not wired like yours or my brother's, you know? I've got a few physics problems I'm stuck on, and I was wondering if maybe—"

Yancy kept talking, oblivious to the way my good mood had just curdled in my stomach. "I wanted to ask my brother for help, but he said he was busy and told me to ask you instead."

I blinked, pushing the sudden chill down. "Oh."

I took the test papers from his hand without a word.

Yancy wasn't a bad student. He just lacked confidence. His foundation was solid; he just needed someone to translate the textbook gibberish into plain English. I went through three of the problems, explaining the logic step-by-step. Once he saw the pattern, he got it immediately.

"Whoa. Oh my God, that makes so much sense!" Yancy's eyes went wide. "Sister-in-law, you're a genius! Thank you!"

He started scribbling answers furiously, looking like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "Finally! I can go play on my phone guilt-free now!"

I chuckled softly, setting the newspaper aside. My head felt clearer, the fever finally retreating. I thought about going upstairs to grab a different book, something to kill the next hour.

Yancy suddenly leaned in close, whispering like he was sharing state secrets. “Hey, Sister-in-law. My idol raced again last week. She was insane this time. I’ve got the replay. Wanna watch?”

My smile froze. Just... stopped.

“No, thanks,” I said, my voice coming out flatter than I intended. “I’m not really into car racing.”

“Really?” He looked genuinely shocked. “But that day at the track? You were watching with binoculars for like, an hour. I totally thought you were a fan too...”

My chest tightened. That day. The day I saw her win.

“I just... saw some acquaintances there,” I lied smoothly.

“Oh.” Yancy looked disappointed but didn’t push it. He turned back to his phone, sighing dreamily. “Man, I miss her. She didn’t race this weekend, and who knows when she’ll be back. It’s so boring...”

I stood up abruptly. “I’m going upstairs to get a book.”

“Okay! Get some rest, yeah? You look pale.”

“Mm.”

I walked away, feeling as though my heart was thumping a little too hard.

Upstairs, the hallway was quiet. When I got back to Dante’s room—my room, for now, I saw the book I’d been reading earlier sitting on the desk. The one Dante had stolen.

I picked it up and shoved it into my bag. I wasn’t leaving that here.

I scanned the room. I’d finished the newspaper, and I didn’t want to go back downstairs to face Yancy’s racing obsession or Dante’s... whatever he was doing. I needed a distraction.

I remembered I’d left a thriller in Liora’s room last time I was here.

I walked down the hall to her door.

It opened a crack.

And then I heard bright, sweet, bubbly voice that belonged to Liora. The one she never used with me anymore.

“Aunt Sienna! I’m so bored! Can you keep me company for a bit?”

I froze, my hand hovering over the doorknob.

A pause. Then Liora giggled. “I’ll drink the soup soon, I promise! Don’t worry, Aunt Sienna.”

Aunt Sienna. Aunt Sienna.

I leaned back against the wall, closing my eyes for a second. The soreness in my throat had nothing to do with the fever anymore. I let out a soft cough, just enough to announce myself and pushed the door open.

Liora was lying on her bed, legs kicking in the air, phone pressed to her ear. She saw me and sat up, looking surprisingly cheerful.

“Mom! Why are you out of your room?”

“Just came to get a book,” I said, my voice perfectly level.

She scrambled off the bed and grabbed my hand. Her palm was warm. “Great-grandma said the soup’s ready. Are you coming down with me to drink some?”

I gently pulled my hand away. The contact felt like a lie.

“I already had some,” I said. “You go ahead.”

Liora, still high on whatever Sienna was saying to her on the phone, didn’t even notice the distance. She just grinned. “Alright then! I’ll head down now!”

She bounded past me, practically skipping down the hallway.

I stood there in the doorway of her room, staring at the empty space where she’d just been.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 155 - 156 [1,607 words]

Chapter 155: Chapter 156

After Liora bounced out of the room, I didn’t go back to Dante’s room. I couldn’t. The air in there felt too heavy, too full of him.

Instead, I grabbed the thriller I’d been looking for and went to the second-floor lounge. I curled up in the window seat, the one with the floor-to-ceiling glass that looked out over the dark, sprawling gardens of the Wilson estate. It was quiet here. Safe.

I read for maybe half an hour, losing myself in a plot that didn’t involve love triangles or family betrayal.

Then the door opened softly.

"Mag, so you're here."

I looked up. Nonna was standing there, holding a bowl of that godawful herbal medicine. Steam curled up from the dark liquid.

I put my book down and stood up to take it. "Grandma, you didn't have to bring this up yourself. You could've just sent someone to get me."

"You're sick, you shouldn't be moving around," she said, waving me off. She sat down on the sofa opposite me, her brow furrowed. "I was going to ask Matteo to bring it up, but he's locked in the study. Typing away like the world's ending. It's the weekend! I don't know what he's so busy with."

I stared into the bowl. Black. Bitter.

I knew exactly what he was busy with.

Earlier in the dining room, he'd been whispering to Sienna about project specs. He probably figured it was easier to just go to the study and finish it for her. Save her the trouble.

Of course he did.

I picked up the bowl and drank. The medicine was lukewarm now, which was somehow worse. It wasn't hot enough to burn, just cold enough to let every single bitter note coat my tongue. I didn't sip it. I just gulped it down, emptying the bowl in one go.

Nonna winced watching me. "Mag, slowly! It's so bitter."

I set the bowl down, my face impassive. "It's okay. Wasn't that bad."

She handed me a piece of candy to cut the taste. I took it, but I didn't eat it. I just held it in my palm.

Dinner time came and went. I wasn't hungry. Nonna went downstairs to eat with Liora.

About half an hour later, they came back up.

The atmosphere was... off. Nonna's face was like thunder. Liora was dragging her feet, looking mutinous.

"It's already this late, and Matteo *still* went to the company?" Nonna fumed, slamming her hand lightly on the side table. "Busy for nothing! On a Saturday night!"

I hadn't even heard a car leave. I'd been too wrapped up in my book.

He'd gone.

Of course he had. Something came up with Sienna's project, and he went running. Probably didn't even tell Liora goodbye.

Liora flopped onto the sofa next to me and laid her head on my lap, pouting. "Daddy didn't take me with him."

Naturally he didn't, Liora.

If he took you, the whole company would see you. They'd ask questions. They'd wonder who the little girl was. And then someone would do the math, and they'd realize the Alpha of the Bellini Pack has a wife.

And that would ruin Sienna's reputation.

He'd never let that happen. He'd never let *her* suffer even a second of public scrutiny.

I gently pushed Liora's head off my lap. "Mom's still sick, baby. Go sit somewhere else."

She muttered something under her breath but moved to the other sofa. "...Okay."

By ten o'clock, I was done. Exhausted. I took a quick shower and went to bed.

Dante's side of the bed was empty. The sheets were cold.

He didn't come back that night.

The next morning, I woke up to an empty room.

The doctor came by again, clucked his tongue, and said I was almost fully recovered. Just needed to replenish my blood and energy. He wrote two more prescriptions.

I planned to go to work. I had things to do at Cole.

But Nonna blocked the door. "Absolutely not. You're drinking that medicine tonight. If you don't want to make it yourself, you're staying right here."

She looked so determined, so fierce in her protection, that I didn't have the heart to fight her. I agreed. One more night.

Liora was getting ready for school, shoving books into her backpack. She looked up at me with big, hopeful eyes.

"Mom, can you take me to school today?"

I hesitated. "Mom didn't bring her car back, baby. Maybe next time."

She waved her hand dismissively. "Then take Dad's car! It's right in the garage. I'll call him, he'll definitely agree!"

She was already reaching for her phone.

I watched her, my chest tightening.

Take his car.

The car he drove to see Sienna. The car that probably still smelled like her perfume.

And call him? Call the man who spent last night at his mistress's side to ask for a favor?

"No," I said, my voice sharper than I meant it to be.

Liora froze, her finger hovering over the screen. "Why not?"

I turned away, picking up my book again. "Because I said so, Liora. The driver will take you."

Liora was already dialing before I could even answer her question about the car.

The phone rang once. Twice.

Then it picked up.

I saw Liora's lips part, ready to spill a name. I saw the way her eyes lit up, that instinctive, affectionate reaction she only ever had for one person.

*"Aunt Sienna—"

The words died in her throat the second she saw me looking at her. She choked on them, swallowing hard, her face flushing pink.

"It's nothing," she blurted into the phone, then hung up immediately.

She turned to me, smiling that fake, bright smile. "Mom, then can you take me to school next time?"

I stared at her. My chest felt tight, like someone had wrapped a band around my ribs and was slowly cranking it.

She'd almost said *Sienna*.

Which meant *Sienna* answered Dante's phone.

My daughter was calling my husband's mistress "Aunt" and talking to her like she was family, and she lied to my face without even blinking.

"Okay," I said. My voice sounded flat. Dead.

Liora didn't seem to notice. She grabbed her bag and bolted for the door.

Yancy and I went the same way. The driver dropped him at his high school first.

He was in the back seat, muttering physics formulas under his breath, stumbling over the same word three times.

"It's *velocity*, not *viscosity*," I said, not even looking up from my phone.

"Oh! Right! Velocity!" Yancy gave me a thumbs-up from the rear-view mirror. "Sister-in-law, your memory is insane. How do you do that?"

"I pay attention," I said dryly.

The car pulled up to the gates of St. Jude's. I looked out the window. I'd graduated from here. The brick buildings looked the same, but smaller. Or maybe I was just bigger.

A flicker of something—nostalgia? regret?—tried to surface. I shoved it down.

No time for that.

Yancy jumped out. "Bye, Sister-in-law! Feel better!"

"Mm. Bye."

The car merged back into traffic, leaving him waving on the sidewalk.

When I walked into Cole Tech, Johnny took one look at me and pinched my cheek. Hard.

"Ow!" I slapped his hand away.

"Why does your face look like death warmed over?" he demanded. "Did you get sick?"

I rubbed my cheek, glaring at him. "I had a fever yesterday. I'm fine now."

"A fever? And you're dragging your ass into work today?" He looked like he wanted to drag me back out. "Go home, Elodie."

"I'm not going home," I said, walking past him toward my desk. "We have the Wilson Tech data to review."

"Are we going later or not?" he called after me.

"Sure," I tossed over my shoulder. "Give me an hour."

I sat down and tried to focus on the documents, but my eyes kept blurring. I found a discrepancy in two sets of data and went over to Simon's desk to point it out. By the time I got back, Johnny was leaning against my desk, tapping his watch.

"Ready?"

"Mm."

At Wilson Tech, we didn't waste time. The CEO—some guy named Henderson—knew better than to make small talk with Johnny. We got straight to work.

About an hour later, the pressure eased. Most of the diagnostics were done.

Henderson came in, looking way too chipper for a Monday morning. He handed us each a cup of coffee. "Fresh brew from the new machine on the executive floor. Try it."

Johnny took a sip. He raised an eyebrow. "Huh. This is actually good. Better than the swill you guys used to have. Welfare budget getting a boost?"

Henderson laughed, leaning back in his chair. "Well, can't take the credit. That's all thanks to Miss Brown."

The air in the room shifted. Just a little.

Johnny's hand tightened around his cup. "Brown," he repeated, his voice flat.

"Yeah, Sienna Brown," Henderson said, oblivious. Or maybe just an idiot. "She joined the board last month. First thing she did was overhaul the employee benefits. Great girl. Smart, too."

Johnny didn't say anything. He just took another slow sip of coffee, his eyes cold.

He hadn't expected *her* to be involved in this, either.

He set the cup down on the desk with a clink.

Then he turned his head.

And looked at me.

His gaze was heavy. Searching. Waiting to see if I was going to crack. Waiting to see if I'd grab that hot coffee and throw it at Henderson's smiling face.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 156 - 157[1,618 words]

Chapter 156: Chapter 157

Elodie's POV

"I'm thirsty," I said.

I didn't even look up from my screen. My throat felt like I'd swallowed a handful of gravel, but I didn't care. I just reached out blindly for whatever liquid was closest.

Beside me, Johnny went rigid. I could feel the rage radiating off him like heat from a sidewalk in August. He was staring at the CEO, Mr. Henderson, with pure murder in his eyes.

But Henderson? He was clueless. Blissfully, stupidly clueless.

"Wasn't it President Wilson who gave Miss Brown that project?" Henderson continued, leaning back in his chair like he was about to drop the hottest tea of the year. "Managing it all on her own? Brave girl."

Johnny made a noise deep in his throat. "Mm."

"I mean, Miss Brown is probably terrified she's going to mess it up," Henderson sighed, shaking his head like he was watching a puppy try to climb stairs. "Her team's been working overtime all weekend. I heard they were there until ten last night. Poor things."

The temperature around our desk dropped ten degrees. I could practically see frost forming on Johnny's keyboard.

"Oh," Johnny said. The word was clipped. Ice cold.

"To be honest, she's really responsible," Henderson added, nodding sagely. "She didn't just coast because she's the President's girlfriend. She's grinding."

Johnny actually sneered. It was an ugly, sharp sound. "Or," he drawled, finally looking at the man, "she's incompetent, and she's making everyone else pay for her lack of talent."

Henderson blinked. "Well... everyone has to grow, right?"

"Maybe," Johnny said, his eyes flicking to me for a split second. You okay?

I took a sip of the drink he'd just handed me. It was lukewarm. Bitter. I didn't even flinch. I'm peachy.

"When Elodie hosted her first major project here?" Johnny continued, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "She crushed it. Flawlessly. By herself. No daddy... oops, I mean husband, to hold her hand."

Henderson, who had seen my code once and still had nightmares about it, paled. "Right. Right. Of course. Elodie is... exceptional."

He cleared his throat, trying to pivot. "Well, at least Miss Brown has the right attitude. With that, plus President Wilson's investment? She's going places." He sighed, looking wistful. "She's just so lucky."

Lucky.

I gripped the cup. Lucky. Yeah. So lucky that my husband decided to fuck my half-sister on my dime. So lucky that he gave her the high-profile tech project he told me I was "too emotional" to handle. So lucky that I have to sit here and listen to this moron praise her work ethic.

"By the way," Henderson lowered his voice, leaning in like he was sharing state secrets. "Her team worked all weekend, barely moved the needle. But then... President Wilson swung by last night around seven."

My hand stopped halfway to my mouth. Seven PM.

I had been home at seven. I'd made Liora's favorite pasta. I'd waited until nine.

"He stayed," Henderson whispered, wiggling his eyebrows. "Helped her sort out the core logic. And get this, they haven't come up for air yet. They're still in the upstairs office."

The subtext was so loud it was practically screaming. They fucked... On the executive desk. In the glass-walled office. While I sat at home wondering if my daughter remembered my face.

Johnny moved fast. He slapped both hands over my ears. "My ears are dirty!" he shouted, glaring at Henderson. "Don't pollute the merchandise!"

I stared at him. I pulled his hands away.

"It's too late, Johnny," I said quietly. My voice sounded dead even to me. "I heard."

I'd heard every word. And honestly? Henderson was just stating facts. I'd known the moment Isabella called Dante's phone this morning and Sienna had answered, breathless and sleepy. The picture was already painted. I didn't need the colors filled in.

The office doors slid open.

And speak of the devil.

Sienna walked in.

She looked... glowing. Absolutely radiant. Her hair was slightly messy, falling over one shoulder, and she was wearing a high-necked silk blouse. Hiding the marks. She looked exhausted, sure, but it was that specific, satisfied exhaustion of a woman who had been thoroughly ruined and put back together all night long.

Johnny snorted, dropping his hands. "Well, look who decided to rise from the dead."

Henderson turned, saw Sienna, and immediately started coughing like he was dying. "Ah! Miss Brown! Good morning! Uh... looking... fresh!"

Sienna offered them a dreamy, distracted smile. She didn't even look at me. She just floated past us, humming a tune, heading straight for the meeting room with her team. Like she owned the air. Like she owned the building.

"Disgusting," Johnny muttered.

Just then, Henderson cleared his throat, looking proud of himself. "Oh! I almost forgot. Miss Brown had the new machine installed on the executive floor personally. Brewed a fresh pot for everyone."

He pushed a mug toward me. It was steaming. Dark roast.

"Try it," Henderson beamed. "Best coffee in the city, she says."

Johnny stared at the mug like it was a grenade. "Elodie, don't—"

I picked it up.

Johnny's eyes went wide. He watched, horrified, as I lifted the cup to my lips.

I took a long, slow sip.

It tasted like shit. Burnt. Bitter.

I didn't even blink. I just swallowed it down, burning my throat all over again.

"It's good," I lied. My voice was flat. "Strong."

Johnny was staring at me like I'd lost my mind. Like I was drinking poison and asking for seconds. He looked at his own mug, untouched, then back at me, sipping away at Sienna's coffee like it was water.

He didn't get it. He thought I was going to snap.

But I wasn't snapping. I was just... empty. If I can survive being married to Dante, I can survive this coffee.

We sat in silence for an hour. I worked. I coded. I killed bugs in the system with violent keystrokes. I refused to think about Dante's hands on her skin. I refused to think about how she was failing upward while I was drowning in place.

Then, lunchtime.

"Thai food?" Johnny asked, trying to cheer me up. "I'm buying. Pad Thai? Spicy basil?"

"I don't care," I said, rubbing my temples. "Just not Italian. I can't look at pasta."

"Deal. Let's go."

Johnny stood up, grabbing his jacket. I grabbed my purse. And froze. The glass doors at the entrance swung open.

Dante walked in.

You know that feeling? When the Alpha walks in, and even the air conditioning seems to bow down?

He didn't look at me. He didn't even glance in my direction. He walked straight past my desk like I was a potted plant he'd forgotten to water, heading straight for the glass-walled meeting room where she was.

I watched his reflection in the glass. God, he looked good. The suit was probably Italian, the watch was definitely expensive, and he had that post-coital glow that made me want to vomit.

Inside the room, her team scrambled to their feet like he was the Pope.

Sienna? She stayed seated.

She just tilted her head back, smiling up at him like he hung the moon. "You're here?" she chirped.

"Mm," Dante grunted. That was it. That was the big greeting. Then he softened, just a fraction. "How's it going?"

"It's coming together. Finally," Sienna said, flipping her hair. "Thanks to your help last night."

My grip on the coffee cup tightened.

Dante actually smiled. A real one. The kind he used to give me before I became "too emotional" and "unstable."

"It was nothing," he said, looking so humble.

Then he turned to her sycophants. "Thanks for the hard work. Let's all go out for a meal later. My treat."

The room erupted in cheers. Oh, thank you, Mr. Wilson! You're so generous!

I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt.

"How about I go tell Mr. Gray and the others?" Sienna suggested suddenly. She stood up, smoothing her skirt. She meant Johnny and me.

It was such a power move. Look at me, inviting my husband's employees to lunch like I'm the First Lady of this Pack.

Dante didn't even blink. "Alright."

Sienna sashayed out of the room, heels clicking on the tiles. She stopped at Johnny's desk. Kim practically tripped over his chair to greet her. "Director Brown!"

Sienna gave him a pitying smile, then looked at Johnny. "Dante is treating my team. Would you and Kim like to join?"

She said it loud enough for me to hear. But she didn't look at me. I was air. I was dust.

Kim was already opening his mouth to say yes, the little suck-up, but Johnny beat him to it.

"Miss Brown," Johnny said, his voice smooth as silk but sharp as a knife. "We appreciate the kindness, but we have our own arrangements."

Sienna's smile faltered. Just for a second. "Mr. Gray..."

She glanced at me then. Finally.

I looked up from my screen, met her eyes, and took a slow sip of her shit coffee. I didn't smile. I didn't frown. I just looked at her like she was a bug on a windshield.

Sienna flinched. She actually looked away first.

"Alright," she said, her voice tight. "Next time then."

She spun around and marched back to the meeting room, ignoring Kim completely.

Kim stared at her back, mouth hanging open. "Jesus. She can be proud sometimes." He looked at me, expecting me to agree.

I shrugged, going back to my code. "I noticed."

"I mean, Dante's the big boss and he's polite to us, but her?" Kim scoffed. "She acts like she owns the Pack."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 157 - 158 [1,361 words]

Chapter 157: Chapter 158

Elodie's POV ~

Dante must have heard Sienna whisper that they were skipping the post-lunch debrief, because of course he did. He always knew exactly where she was.

He walked over to our table, that picture of politeness, and shook Johnny's hand. "We'll leave now. Please do join us next time, Mr. Gray."

Johnny's jaw tightened, but he nodded. "...Of course."

Dante smiled that cold, perfect smile that never reached his eyes and glanced at me. Just a flicker. Like I was a piece of furniture he was debating whether to keep. Then he turned and walked out, Sienna falling into step beside him.

Back at Wilson Tech, the afternoon was a blur of every damn thing. Sienna's team rolled in around two, looking like they'd just had a spa day, while Johnny and I had been grinding since nine.

By six, my eyes were burning. "Let's go," I said, shutting my laptop.

Johnny stretched. "I'll treat you to a meal. You look like you need protein."

"No," I said, grabbing my bag. "I have other plans."

Nonna had been texting me all afternoon.

Come home. The cook made the fish you like. It wasn't a request. It was a summons.

When I got to the old residence, I saw his coat on the rack. His shoes by the door.

I froze. I hadn't expected him to be back. I figured he'd be at the office, holding Sienna's hand while she complained about a bug in the system.

He was in the living room, laptop on his knees, typing furiously. He glanced up when I walked in, then immediately looked back down. Not a word.

Dinner was agony. Nonna chattered away, trying to bridge the gap between us. Dante ate in silence. I pushed peas around my plate.

Then, out of nowhere, he stopped. He set his fork down and looked at me.

"Do you have time later? I need to talk to you about something."

My heart did a stupid, painful lurch. Hope. I hated it.

I kept my voice flat. "Alright."

Nonna smiled, her eyes crinkling. She thought it was happening. The talk. The fix.

If only she knew.

After dinner, Nonna bustled off to get my medicine, the bitter sludge Dr. Stanley prescribed. Dante stood up, his phone already to his ear. "I have to take this."

He walked out onto the terrace, sliding the glass door shut.

I drank the medicine. It tasted awful. I set the bowl down, ready to go upstairs and wait for him, when I heard the low rumble of an engine. Headlights cutting through the trees.

I paused in the doorway. "He's leaving?"

Nonna came up behind me, her face falling. "Yes. He said it was urgent. Left in such a rush. I don't even know what he's off to do."

I did. I knew exactly what was so urgent. She was urgent.

He'd asked to talk to me. He'd looked me in the eye and asked for my time.

And then he left.

I stood there, staring at the empty driveway, the taillights disappearing into the dark. I waited for an hour. Then two.

He didn't come back.

The next morning, the routine was a nightmare. Breakfast at the old house. Then the car to Wilson Tech.

Johnny was waiting at the entrance, looking like he hadn't slept.

"Morning," he grunted.

We walked in. Sienna's team was already there, huddled around a whiteboard. They looked wrecked, pale, messy hair, eyes bloodshot but they were moving.

Johnny nodded toward them. "So early? I thought they were pulling an all-nighter."

"They were," the General Manager said, passing by with a stack of files. He looked exhausted. "But to catch up with the schedule, we had to come in early. We're really pushing it."

Pushing it for her. I knew it.

We got to work. I buried myself in the code. It was safer there.

About an hour later, my bladder was screaming. I was about to get up, to walk to the restroom and splash some cold water on my face, when the office doors opened.

Dante walked in.

For the first time in months, he didn't seem to be here for Sienna.

He walked in, scanned the room, and actually greeted Sienna from a distance before turning his attention toward us. Toward me.

Johnny tensed up beside me. "Wilson," he said, his voice guarded. "Is there something we can help you with?"

Dante stopped at our desks. He looked... professional. Calm. "I've had some time these past couple of days to learn about the system you've developed," he said, his tone even. "It looks impressive. However, I still have a few ideas I'd like to discuss with both of you."

Ideas. Right.

Johnny glanced at me, looking for an exit strategy. I just wanted to disappear.

"Sorry," I said, my voice sounding hollow even to my own ears. "I need to use the restroom. Please go ahead."

I didn't wait for a reply. I just stood up and walked away, my back straight, refusing to run.

The restroom was cold. I splashed water on my face, staring at my reflection in the mirror. *Get it together, Elodie. He's just talking shop. It means nothing.*

I dried my hands slowly, buying time. When I finally opened the door and stepped back into the hallway, I was only a few steps away from the open-plan office when a sharp cry pierced the air.

"Director Brown!"

Then came the sound of a crash. A commotion.

I turned my head, but before I could even focus, I saw Dante's face change.

The calm mask shattered. His eyes went wide, and he moved.

He didn't walk. He bolted.

He sprinted toward the meeting room, and in his haste, he didn't even see me standing there. His shoulder slammed into mine, hard.

The impact was jarring. A shockwave of pain radiated down my arm, and I stumbled sideways, my breath leaving me in a gasp.

"Hey!" Johnny was there in an instant, his hand shooting out to steady me before I hit the floor. "You alright?"

I clutched my shoulder, wincing. The spot where Dante hit me was already throbbing. "I'm fine," I lied.

I looked up just in time to see Dante disappear into the meeting room.

Two seconds later, he emerged.

And he was holding Sienna.

She was limp in his arms, her head resting against his chest. He wasn't walking, he was carrying her, his face buried in her hair, murmuring something I couldn't hear.

They vanished down the hallway toward the elevators.

The entire office was silent.

The General Manager cleared his throat, looking flustered. "What... what happened to Director Brown?"

One of Sienna's assistants peeked out. "She fainted," he whispered. "I think she's been overworking and got exhausted."

Exhausted.

I looked at Johnny. His face was dark. Thunderous. He was staring at the empty hallway where Dante had disappeared, his jaw clenched so tight I thought his teeth might crack.

"She won't be worked to death," Johnny gritted out, his voice low and vicious.

The GM hesitated, sweating. "John... Wilson is just really worried about Director Brown. You don't need to—"

"Shut up," Johnny snapped.

The GM clamped his mouth shut.

I rubbed my shoulder, trying to massage the ache away. It didn't really hurt that much. Not physically. It was just... a bruise. Another one.

Seeing how furious Johnny was, I managed a small, tired smile. "It's not serious," I said quietly. "Doesn't hurt much anymore."

Johnny looked back at me, his eyes still blazing. "Should we go home and rest for a while?"

I shook my head. I patted his arm. "I'm not that fragile, Johnny. Let's continue working."

He let out a breath, subdued but still angry. "Mm."

He sat back down, but he didn't open his laptop. He just stared at the screen, his fingers hovering over the keys. After a long silence, he asked the question I'd been avoiding for three months.

"It's been a while since you filed for divorce," he said, not looking at me. "Why hasn't it been finalized?"

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 158[1,620 words]

Chapter 158: Chapter 158

"I'd like to know too."

Those words slipped out of Elodie's mouth before she could stop them. Last night. She'd actually waited up for Dante. She'd wanted to pin him down, look him in the eye, and demand to know when they could finally make this official. When could she stop being Mrs. Wilson?

But he'd left. Just vanished into the night like he always did, forgetting he'd even promised her five minutes of his precious time.

Across the table, Johnny just sighed, poking at his salad. "Just get it over with, Elodie."

"I know," she muttered.

At lunch, the manager had swung by their table to deliver the update: Sienna was fine. Dante had already taken her home to rest. Of course he did.

The herbal medicine Old Nonna had forced on her? Was still sitting on the counter, half-finished. Now, after leaving Wilson Tech, Elodie stood in front of the old house. It had been days since she'd seen Dante. Three, maybe four. The place felt empty, hollow. Even Liora had been quiet, either ignorant of Sienna's injuries, had been sneaking out of the house last night without a word, probably to go see her friends.

There was only one dose of that foul medicine left. She just needed to drink it and leave.

She unlocked the door. The hallway was dark, but light spilled from the living room upstairs.

Her heart did a stupid, painful little stutter. He's home.

She froze for a second, then steeled her spine. Divorce. Remember? That's the only thing that matters.

She walked upstairs. Dante was there, standing by the window, looking out at the Pack lands. And of course, Levi was there too, looking like he owned the place.

They both turned when they heard her heels on the floor.

"You're back," Dante said. His voice was flat. Tired.

"Mm," Elodie replied. She didn't ask about Sienna. She honestly didn't give a damn if the woman was on her deathbed.

She didn't bother avoiding Levi. She looked straight at Dante. "That day, I mentioned—"

"Take a look at this."

He cut her off. He didn't even let her finish the sentence. He walked over and slapped a thick stack of papers onto the coffee table.

"If there are no objections, we can sign it."

Elodie stared at the top page. DIVORCE AGREEMENT.

Her breath left her lungs in a rush. Finally.

She picked it up. Her fingers were shaking, just a little, so she gripped it tighter. She flipped to the first clause.

'Custody of the minor child, Liora, shall be granted to Dante Bellini.'

She blinked. Stared at it. Then flipped the page. And the next. And the next. It went on for pages. Houses. Cars. Money. More money than she could spend in ten lifetimes.

Levi was watching her. She could feel his eyes boring into the side of her head. He was waiting. They all were. Waiting for the tears. The begging. The scene where she threw the papers on the floor and screamed that she loved him.

Because everyone knew how she'd clawed her way to the top. Everyone knew how pathetic she'd been for him. Levi probably thought she'd fall to her knees right now.

Elodie let out a short, dry laugh. It sounded ugly in the quiet room.

She looked up at Dante. He was staring at her, his jaw tight, his eyes dark and unreadable. He looked... surprised? Did he think she'd fight him?

"I have no objections," she said. Her voice was... cold.

She dropped the papers back on the table. She opened her bag, pulled out a pen, and clicked the top.

She leaned over the table, her pen poised over the signature line.

Sign it. Just sign it and walk away.

Levi smirked in the background. *There she goes,* she could practically hear him think. Couldn't even last ten seconds.

The pen tip touched the paper.

But then... Elodie stopped.

She pulled the pen back.

Levi's smirk faltered. Dante's eyes widened, just a fraction.

Elodie capped the pen with a sharp click. She looked at Dante, her expression bored, almost amused.

"On second thought," she said, keeping her voice light. "I'll have a lawyer look over this tomorrow. Just to be safe. Make sure you haven't buried some poison pill in clause 4, subsection B."

She slid the papers back toward him, just an inch.

"Once I confirm it's clean, I'll sign it the day after. My lawyer will contact you."

She stared at the line item, 'Bellini Pack Holdings: 15%—' and a dry, humorless laugh almost bubbled up in her throat. Fifteen percent. He was giving her a piece of the empire. The empire he'd built while she played the perfect, silent wife.

It was too much. Way too much.

Her thumb brushed over the edge of the page. The last time she had presented the divorce papers months ago, she was prepared to walk away with nothing but her suitcase and a bruised ego. She'd been the idiot who thought love was enough.

Not this time, she thought, her eyes scanning the dense legal jargon. I'm not that girl anymore.

If she signed this, she'd be rich. Independent. Free.

But Elodie didn't trust free. Not from Dante.

He was an Alpha. He didn't do anything without a reason. Was this guilt? A payoff to clear his conscience so he could marry Sienna without a shadow hanging over him? Or was it a trap?

Loopholes, her mind hissed. *Find the loopholes.

If the Pack went south, if the feds raided them, if a rival Pack made a move, those shares would make her a target. And if Sienna had her claws in Dante's legal team... oh, she'd love nothing more than to throw Elodie to the wolves and watch her burn. Sienna would twist every clause until Elodie was taking the fall for something she didn't do.

No. She wasn't signing shit today.

"That's fine," Dante said suddenly.

Elodie blinked, looking up. He was watching her, his dark eyes unreadable, leaning back in his leather chair like a king on a throne. He looked... bored?

"Fine?" she repeated, her voice flat.

"Take it home," he said, gesturing to the document. "Have your people look at it. I'm not in a rush."

Liar, she thought. You're dying to marry her.

But she didn't say it. She just nodded, folded the paper with deliberate slowness, and slid it into her tote bag. The zzzzzip of the zipper sounded like a gunshot in the quiet office.

She stood up. Her legs felt shaky, but she forced them to be steady. Chin up. Shoulders back.

"Elodie," Levi called out, sounding like he'd just watched a car crash in slow motion. "Wait, you're just... leaving?"

She didn't turn around. "I have things to do, Levi."

She walked out. She didn't run. She didn't cry. She just walked.

Levi stared at the closed elevator doors, his mouth hanging open. He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Is she okay?" he asked, turning to Dante. "Like... mentally? Did she hit her head?"

Dante didn't answer immediately. He was still staring at the spot where she'd been standing. The air still smelled like her, jasmine and something sharp, like rain. He hated that he noticed that.

"I don't know," Dante said finally, picking up his whiskey glass. The ice clinked.

"You don't know?" Levi stood up, pacing. "Dude, she just took the deal. She didn't scream. She didn't throw the lamp at your head. She didn't even mention Liora!"

Dante's jaw tightened. "I noticed."

"That's messed up! Liora is her life. She literally breathes for that kid. And you're suing for full custody, and she just... took the stock options and left? That's not Elodie. That's a pod person." Levi stopped pacing, his eyes widening. "Wait. Did you guys settle it? The custody? Did you already talk about it?"

The room went quiet.

Dante's gaze darkened, the lazy mask slipping for a fraction of a second. "No," he said. "We haven't talked about it."

"What the fuck?" Levi threw his hands up. "Then why isn't she fighting? She should be tearing your throat out right now!"

Dante didn't have an answer. And that pissed him off more than anything. He took a long drink of the whiskey, letting the burn slide down his throat. He expected tears. Begging. A fight.

He didn't expect... nothing.

Ding.

The elevator opened again. Nonna stood there, looking impatient, her silver hair perfectly coiffed.

"Dinner is ready," she announced, her voice sharp. "Elodie and Liora are already downstairs. Why are you two still sitting here like statues? Hurry up."

Levi looked at Dante. Dante looked at Levi.

"Coming," Levi muttered.

Downstairs, the dining room was warm. Too warm. The smell of roasting garlic and rosemary hung heavy in the air.

Liora was on the couch, kicking her little legs, showing Elodie a drawing. "And this is Mommy, see? You have curly hair!"

Elodie was smiling. It was a perfect smile. She was leaning in, nodding, her hand resting on Isabella's knee. "It's beautiful, baby. You're so talented."

It was a Hallmark movie scene. Mother and daughter heart melting scene.

But Levi felt ice in his veins.

He looked at Elodie's eyes. They were dead.

She was looking at her daughter like she was memorizing her face. Like she was trying to burn the image into her brain before... before what?

She's not giving up, Levi realized with a jolt. She's not giving up Liora.

Then why the hell did she take the deal?

Levi frowned, a cold dread pooling in his stomach. Something was very, very wrong.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 159[1,462 words]

Chapter 159: Chapter 159

Nonna Wilson had no idea she was hosting a funeral.

Well, not a real one. But the marriage between Elodie and Dante was definitely in a coffin, and Nonna was over here serving lasagna like it was a wedding reception.

"Elodie, Liora, come eat!" Nonna beamed, ushering them toward the table. "It's getting cold!"

"Okay, we're coming," Elodie said.

"Coming," Dante echoed.

They spoke in perfect unison. Same rhythm. Same polite, and empty tone. It was synchronized swimming in a sea of lies.

Liora skipped ahead, clutching Elodie's hand, totally oblivious. Levi watched them go, a knot tightening in his stomach. He slid into the seat next to Dante, across from Elodie and the kid.

"Levi, dear!" Nonna chirped, slapping a massive platter of veal onto the table. "You haven't been here in ages. I told the chef to make the parmigiana just for you. Eat!"

Levi forced a smile. "Thanks, Grandma. You're trying to kill me with carbs, I see."

"Good! Get fat! Matteo is too skinny, you need to balance it out."

Levi laughed, but it died in his throat. Because he wasn't looking at Nonna. He was looking at Elodie.

She was serving Liora. It was a picture-perfect moment. She was meticulously picking the tiny bones out of the white fish, her movements graceful. She placed a flake on Liora's plate.

"There you go, baby," Elodie murmured.

On the surface? Mother of the Year.

But Levi's skin started to crawl.

He stared at her, trying to figure out the glitch in the matrix. And then, she felt it.

Elodie looked up.

Her eyes locked onto his.

Levi froze. Oh.

That wasn't the look he was used to. The old Elodie? If he stared at her, she'd give him this shy, hopeful little smile. Like a puppy waiting to be petted. She'd always been awkward around him and Harry, always trying so hard to be liked by Dante's friends.

This now? This was ice.

It wasn't anger. It wasn't sadness. It was just... nothing. She looked at him like he was a chair. Like he was a piece of dust floating in the air. A stranger she had zero interest in knowing.

She hates me, Levi realized. No, worse. She doesn't care enough to hate me.

And then the really fucked up thought hit him.

He shifted his gaze to Liora.

Elodie was looking back down at her daughter, cooing something soft. But Levi replayed that look in his head. The coldness. It was the same.

The warmth in her voice was a recording. The smile was painted on. But her eyes? Her eyes were dead calm. She was looking at Liora the same way she looked at him.

Like they were both just... props.

Is she faking it? The thought whispered in his brain. Is this a move? Is she acting cold to get Dante's attention? Like, 'Oh look, I'm so hurt I'm turning into a robot, please notice me'?

It sounded crazy. But it sounded like something a desperate wife would do.

Levi glanced sideways at Dante.

And there it was. The proof.

Dante wasn't eating. He wasn't talking to Nonna. He was staring at Elodie. Just... drinking her in. His fork was halfway to his mouth, forgotten. His jaw was tight, his dark eyes narrowed, focused entirely on the woman who had ignored him all day.

He was hooked.

Levi let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. Holy shit. She's playing him.

She wasn't fighting for custody. She wasn't begging. She was pulling away, and Dante, Mr. Control Freak, Mr. Alpha CEO of the Bellini Pack, couldn't stand it.

"Levi!"

Nonna's voice cracked like a whip.

Levi jumped. "Huh?"

Nonna narrowed her eyes at him, pointing her fork accusingly. "What are you staring at? You've been zoning out since you sat down. Eat your food!"

Nonna Wilson wasn't born yesterday, but she was old enough to miss the obvious sometimes.

She narrowed her eyes at Levi, who'd been staring at Elodie so hard he'd probably burned a hole through her skull. "Levi? Why are you looking at your sister-in-law like that?"

Shit!

Levi's brain scrambled for an excuse. He couldn't exactly say, 'Oh, I'm just wondering why she looks like she's planning a murder instead of eating lasagna.'

He forced a chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck. "No, no, Grandma. I just... it's weird, right? She's usually the one talking Matteo's ear off. Tonight she's so quiet. I guess I was just surprised."

It was a lie. A good one.

Nonna's face fell, the smile dropping right off. She let out a long, suffering sigh and shot a look at Dante. "It's his fault. That's what it is."

Dante didn't even look up from his plate. Just a faint, almost imperceptible twitch of his jaw.

"The girl tried so hard," Nonna muttered, shaking her head. "For years. And him? Stone. A man can't just ignore his wife like that and expect her to stay the same. He froze her out. Of course she's quiet now."

Levi glanced at Elodie.

She was... eating. Just eating. She speared a green bean, brought it to her mouth, chewed. Swallowed. Not a single flicker of emotion. It was like Nonna was talking about a neighbor, not her.

"She really doesn't care, Levi thought, a chill running down his spine. She's checked out.

Before anyone could say another word, Dante's phone buzzed.

He pulled it out. One look at the screen, and the whole atmosphere in the room shifted. He stood up so fast his chair scraped loudly against the floor.

"I have to take this," he said.

He walked out onto the terrace, the glass doors sliding shut behind him. Levi watched him pace, hand on his hip, his head bowed. He was only gone for two minutes.

When he came back, he was grabbing his keys. "I have to go. Business."

Business. Right. The only 'business' he had at 9 PM on a Tuesday was in a hospital bed downtown.

Liora, perked up. "Dad! I wanna go too!"

Dante paused. "Fine. Get your coat."

Nonna, bless her oblivious heart, clapped her hands. "Elodie! Go with them. Take Liora. It's a nice night, go for a walk around the gardens."

The room went silent.

Levi held his breath. This was it. The explosion. The screaming. The 'How dare you ask me to go see your grandson's mistress' moment.

Elodie slowly put down her fork. And it clinked.

She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. She looked at Nonna, then at Dante, then at Liora. Her face was a perfect mask.

"I can't, Grandma," she said. Her voice was light and polite. "I'm meeting a friend later."

Nonna blinked. "Oh. Oh, okay then."

Liora looked visibly relieved. "Bye Mom!"

"Bye, Liora."

Dante didn't say anything. He just stared at her for one second too long, that dark gaze searching for a crack in the armor. He didn't find one. He turned and left.

The sound of the garage door closing was the sweetest music Elodie had ever heard.

She didn't rush. She walked to her own car, the little one she'd bought with her own money, not Dante's and slid into the driver's seat. The leather was cool against her back.

She didn't cry. She didn't scream. She didn't even feel angry anymore. Anger was for people who still had hope.

She pulled out of the driveway, the tires crunching on the gravel. Once she hit the main road, the streetlights blurring past her windshield, she hit speed dial.

It rang twice.

"Elodie? To what do I owe the—"

"I'm doing it, Johnny," she cut in. "I'm divorcing him."

There was a clatter on the other end, like Johnny dropped his fork. "Wait. What*? Holy shit, really? Did he finally—"

"He gave me the papers tonight," she said, stopping at a red light. She watched a moth batter itself against the streetlamp. "He's giving me assets. Shares of the company. The house in Milan."

Johnny whistled low. "Okay... that's... a lot. Is it a trap? Because Bellini Pack lawyers are sharks, El."

"That's why I'm calling you," she said, a small, cold smile touching her lips. "I need you to find me a lawyer. The best one. Someone who isn't afraid of Dante. I need them to tear this agreement apart. Every clause. Every footnote. If there's a single loophole that Sienna can use to screw me over later, I want to know now."

She wasn't asking for advice. She was giving orders.

Johnny sounded ecstatic now. "Consider it done. I know a guy. He's a vulture. You'll love him."

"Good." The light turned green. She pressed the gas. "Send me the number."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 160 [1,347 words]

Chapter 160: Chapter 160

The silence in the Audi was deafening. It was the kind of silence that used to terrify Elodie, the quiet that meant Dante wasn't home, or worse, that he was home but in a mood.

Now?

It just felt like peace.

She drove with one hand, the city lights of the Bellini Pack territory blurring into streaks of gold and red. Her mind wasn't on the road, though. It was on the spreadsheet Johnny's lawyer had already emailed her.

It was beautiful.

Meanwhile, the air in the hospital VIP ward was thick with the smell of expensive lilies and antiseptic.

Levi leaned against the wall in the corridor, the phone pressed to his ear, listening to the wind howling on the other end.

"Matteo is preparing to divorce Freya," he said, keeping his voice low.

Harry stopped. Levi could practically hear the brakes screech in whatever random European Pack Harry was terrorizing for business. "What? Are you sure?"

"Dude, I was there. I watched her walk out with a goddamn smile on her face," Levi hissed. "And get this, he's not giving her custody of Liora. At all."

A sharp intake of breath. Then, the sound of Harry moving fast. Footsteps. A door slamming. "I have to go. I'll call you back."

Then the line went dead.

Levi pulled the phone away, staring at it. "...Okay? Rude."

Harry didn't mean to be rude. He just felt like he was on fire.

He paced the marble floor of his hotel lobby, his heart hammering against his ribs. Divorce with no custody.

Matteo was insane. He was actually going to do it. And Freya... God, Freya. She must be a wreck. She was probably curled up in a ball, crying her eyes out, wondering how the man she loved could just erase her and her daughter.

Harry's thumb hovered over Freya's contact.

He shouldn't call. Matteo would kill him. But he couldn't not call. He had to hear her voice. He had to know if she was breathing.

He hit dial.

Elodie had just kicked off her heels in the foyer of her house. The phone buzzed in her purse. She pulled it out, saw Harry Becker flashing on the screen, and answered without thinking.

"Mr. Becker? Is there something you need?"

Her voice was... fine.

Harry froze in the middle of the lobby. "You—"

You what? he screamed internally. You okay? You heartbroken? You dying?

"How are you?" he blurted out. It sounded so stupid. So empty.

Elodie frowned, walking into the kitchen to pour a glass of water. She assumed this was about their kids' school charity thing. Harry was always so weirdly involved in that stuff.

"If it's about meeting Daisy," she said, leaning against the marble counter, "I have something to handle tomorrow and might not be free. Could we do next week?"

She had the lawyer at 10 AM. Then Johnny was coming over to help her move some important stuff out. She didn't have time for small talk.

Harry blinked. Daisy?

Oh. Right.

He should correct her. He should say, *'I don't care about our date right now with Daisy, I care that your husband is throwing you in the trash.'

But her voice... it was so calm. So bored.

"Alright," Harry said weakly.

Elodie waited. She drank her water as she checked the time. "Mr. Becker? Is there anything else?"

Harry stood there, thousands of miles away, feeling completely useless. He'd prepared a speech. He'd prepared to be her shoulder to cry on.

And she was asking him about a playdate.

Was she in shock? Was this how people snapped?

"I'm here," he said lamely, still struck that she sounded normal.

"Okay..." Elodie drew the word out. She really didn't have patience for this tonight. "If not, then we'll leave it at that? I'm kind of busy."

Harry's ego took a hit, but his worry was bigger. "Alright," he whispered.

The phone hit the velvet sofa with a dull thud. Elodie didn't even look at it.

For years, a call from one of Dante's friends would have sent her into a spiral. Did I say something wrong? Was I too quiet? Too loud? Did Dante tell them he's ashamed of me?

Now? She just felt... nothing. Just the quiet hum of her own house. A space that was finally, finally starting to feel like hers.

She walked past the living room, past the bar where Dante used to pour scotch and ignore her, and sat down at her desk in the corner. The mahogany was cold under her elbows.

She flipped open her laptop. The screen flickered on, casting a blue-white glow on her face.

There was an unread email from Professor Nolan. She clicked it open.

Elodie... The data set you sent over is brilliant. Seriously. Organize the final citations and send it back to me by Thursday. If this holds up, we're submitting to the Bellini Economics Review. This is career-defining stuff.

A small, sharp smile cut through the numbness.

Career-defining.

She'd almost forgotten she was allowed to have one. For three years, her only job had been "Dante's Wife." Managing his schedule, smoothing things over with the Pack elders, pretending she didn't see the texts from Sienna. She'd buried her own brain under a mountain of his laundry.

But not anymore.

She opened a blank document. The cursor blinked.

It sounded like a countdown.

She started typing. Not because she had to. But because she wanted to. This wasn't survival. This was ambition. And God, it felt better than any orgasm Dante had ever given her.

Harry stared at his hotel room ceiling, the expensive silk canopy doing nothing to calm the storm in his chest.

He hit redial.

Levi picked up on the first ring, sounding frantic. "Harry? Dude. Tell me I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy," Harry said, his voice low. "She really signed?"

"She really signed," Levi hissed. He was back in the hospital corridor, pacing a hole in the linoleum. "Divorce. Custody. The whole nine yards. I watched her do it, Harry. She didn't even blink. It was like she was ordering a coffee, not giving away her kid."

Harry sat up, swinging his legs off the bed. "Liora too? She just... gave her up?"

"Gone. Poof." Levi stopped pacing. "Okay, here's the thing. Here's what I'm thinking. It's a power move."

Harry rubbed his temples. "A power move."

"Yeah! Think about it. If she fights, she's the crazy ex. If she cries, she's weak. But this? The Ice Queen? She's messing with his head. She's making him feel guilty. It's 4D chess, bro. She's trying to win him back by walking away."

Harry was silent. He thought about the voice on the phone.

Did that sound like 4D chess? Or did it sound like she'd already forgotten the board existed?

"How did Dante look?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Huh?"

"At dinner. When she was signing. How did he look?"

Levi paused. "Weird. He looked... weird. He kept staring at her. Like he was trying to figure out a puzzle. I've never seen him look at her that much in ten years."

"So it's working," Harry muttered. "Her trick."

"Obviously! She knows exactly what she's doing. She's been obsessed with him since she was sixteen. You think she just wakes up one day and stops? No way. She's playing him."

Harry stood up and walked to the window, looking out at the Milan skyline. "Or," he said slowly, "maybe she's not playing."

"What else would it be?"

"Maybe," Harry said, the words tasting like ash, "she's actually done."

Levi laughed. A loud, disbelieving bark. "Done? Elodie? Harry, come on. She literally breathes for him. She's faking it. She has to be."

"People change, Levi."

"Not her," Levi insisted. "Trust me. I know women. This is a tactic. Anyway, who cares? This is good news! Once you get back, and Sienna is out of the hospital... we gotta celebrate. Finally get rid of the dead weight."

Harry didn't answer.