

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 161[1,523 words]

Chapter 161: Chapter 161

The line had been quiet for so long that Levi pulled the phone away to check if the call had dropped.

"Harry? You there, man?"

Harry's voice came back, but it sounded like it was dragged through gravel. "Yeah. I'm here."

"You good? You sound like you've seen a ghost."

Harry didn't answer immediately. He was staring at his phone screen, at the text he'd typed out and deleted three times.

"Harry?"

"I'm fine," Harry lied, his jaw tight. "Just tired. Look, I gotta go."

"Wait, are you still coming back Tuesday? I can pick you up, we can go see Sienna like we planned—"

"Yeah. Tuesday. Let's leave it at that."

He hung up before Levi could say another word, tossing the phone onto the passenger seat. He stared out at the Italian countryside, but all he could see were wide, terrified eyes and a woman who moved like a soldier.

The Next Day.

Elodie didn't wake up. She just opened her eyes.

There was no grogginess, no stretching. One second she was asleep, the next she was sitting on the edge of the bed, feet on the cold floor. It was easier this way. No time for the thoughts to creep in.

She went for a run for thirty minutes. She ran until the sweat stung her eyes and the only thing she could feel was the fire in her muscles. It was better than the hollow ache in her chest.

Back at the mansion, she showered, dressed in a sharp white blouse and black trousers, and ate half a piece of toast. It tasted too bland and she left the rest.

When she arrived at the law firm, Johnny was already there, perched on the edge of a mahogany desk, scrolling through his phone. When she walked in, his head snapped up and that easy, lopsided grin broke across his face, the only real thing she'd seen in weeks.

"There she is," he said, hopping off the desk. "Looking like you're about to buy the building and fire everyone."

"Tempting," she murmured, her voice dry.

Paul Blake's assistant, a nervous guy with glasses, scurried over with a porcelain cup. "Ms. Wilson. Tea. Earl Grey. Just how you like it."

"Thanks, Paul." She didn't correct him.

She sat. Johnny sat next to her. She slid the manila folder across the glass table. Divorce Agreement. The words looked official.

Paul sat down opposite them, adjusting his glasses. "Alright. Let's dive in."

Johnny leaned over Paul's shoulder, just to look. His eyes scanned the first page, catching the bold header: Article 1: Custody and Guardianship of Liora Bellini.

He froze. Just for a second.

He looked at Elodie. Her face was a mask of calm. She was stirring her tea, the spoon clinking softly against the ceramic.

Johnny's stomach dropped.

He remembered three years ago. They were working on the Cole Tech merger, pulling all-nighters. Elodie would fall asleep on the couch in her office, phone in her hand, showing him pictures of a chubby baby with Dante's eyes. "She rolled over today, Johnny! She rolled over!" Liora was her oxygen. Her religion.

But since she'd come back from that trip abroad with Dante... silence fell. Absolute radio silence. She hadn't said Liora's name once. Not when they were coding. Not when they were grabbing late-night burgers.

Johnny wasn't stupid. He'd seen the tabloids. He knew Dante was parading Sienna around like she was the Queen of England. And if Liora was with them... if Liora was calling Sienna "Auntie" and smiling...

He looked back at the paper. Elodie wasn't fighting for joint custody. She wasn't even fighting for weekends.

She was walking away.

A cold anger flared in his chest, but when he looked at her profile, the set of her jaw, the slight tremor in her hand that she was hiding by gripping the cup harder, the anger turned into something heavy. Heartbreak. She wasn't being a bad mother. She was being a mother who had been evicted from her own child's heart.

He didn't say a word. He just sat back, letting Paul read.

Paul cleared his throat, flipping the page. "Okay... moving on to assets. Wow." He looked up, eyes wide. "The Bellini estate in Tuscany. The penthouse in Milan. The lake house in Como. Ms. Wilson... Matteo is being incredibly generous."

Elodie took a sip of tea. The liquid was hot, scalding her tongue and she didn't say a word.

Generous.

The word tasted like bile.

Dante wasn't being generous. He was paying her off. He was buying his freedom to be with Sienna. He was buying Liora's silence. He was handing her a golden parachute so she'd disappear quietly and not ruin the perfect little family he was building with her half-sister.

Paul Blake leaned back in his leather chair, looking almost giddy. He tapped the stack of papers in front of him.

"I've gone through this with a fine-tooth comb, Elodie. Twice. And honestly? It's bulletproof. I've never seen a settlement this... clean."

Elodie took a slow sip of her tea. It had gone cold ten minutes ago. "Clean how?"

"Generous," Paul corrected himself, adjusting his glasses. "The cash transfer is immediate. The properties—all of them—are free and clear. No liens, no disputes." He flipped a page. "But the real kicker is the shares. He's giving you fifteen percent of Bellini Corp, but look at clause 14. You get the dividends. Pure profit. If the company tanks, if there's a lawsuit, a hostile takeover—zero liability falls on you. He's taking all the risk."

Elodie stared at him.

Johnny, who had been quietly fuming in the corner, let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "You're kidding me. Matteo Dante Bellini? The man who once sued a waiter for spilling water on his shoes? He's just... handing her a blank check?"

Paul looked offended. "I don't make mistakes, Johnny."

"It's not a mistake," Elodie said quietly.

She looked down at the document. Johnny thought it was a mistake. Paul thought it was a miracle. Elodie knew exactly what it was.

It wasn't generosity. It was erasure.

Dante wasn't buying her silence. He was buying her absence. He was paying a premium to make sure she never, ever had a reason to come back. He was severing the tie so cleanly that there wouldn't even be a scar. He wanted her gone so badly he was willing to pay millions to ensure she stayed gone.

He wants me to disappear, she thought, a cold, hard knot forming in her stomach. And he knows exactly how much that costs.

"It's fine," she said, her voice steady. "If there are no loopholes, there are no loopholes."

She picked up the pen. She didn't hesitate. She didn't read the lines again. She knew what they said. She signed her name, Elodie Miller, right at the bottom. The ink looked black and permanent against the white paper.

She slid the folder back to Paul.

"File it," she said. "Please. Just get it done."

Dante was signing acquisition papers when his personal line buzzed. He didn't recognize the number, but he answered anyway.

"Wilson."

"Mr. Wilson, this is Paul Blake. I represent Elodie Miller."

Dante's hand stilled over the contract. The name hit him like a draft of cold air. "Go on."

"I'm calling to inform you that Ms. Miller has signed the divorce agreement. She's accepted all terms. No counter-offers."

Dante stared at the wall.

He should have felt relief. This was what he wanted. This was the end of the mess. The end of the guilt he refused to acknowledge. The end of Elodie's sad, quiet eyes haunting the corners of his house.

So why did his chest feel tight?

"Good," Dante said, his voice bored. Detached. "I have two video calls this afternoon. Send the finalized copy over. I'll sign it tomorrow morning."

"I was hoping to come by today to—"

"Tomorrow, Paul. Ten a.m."

He hung up before the lawyer could argue. He tossed the phone onto the mahogany desk and immediately turned his attention back to the merger documents.

Back at the Miller family villa, Elodie sat in her car at the gate, waiting for the sensor to read her plate. The sun was setting, painting the sky in bruised purples and oranges. It was beautiful, and she hated it.

Her phone started vibrating in the cup holder.

She glanced at it and saw it was Liora.

The name on the screen felt like a physical blow. She could picture her daughter right now, probably in one of the expensive restaurants, probably with Sienna, probably laughing about something Elodie wasn't there for.

The phone buzzed again. And again.

Elodie's thumb hovered over the green button. She could answer. She could hear her voice. She turned the phone face down.

The buzzing stopped. The silence that followed was deafening.

A sharp knock on her driver's side window made her jump.

Elodie flinched, her heart hammering against her ribs. She turned her head.

Standing there, looking awkward and out of place in his leather jacket, was Harry Becker.

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The knock on the car window made Elodie's heart skip, just a small flutter, nothing more. She turned to see Harry standing there, hands in his pockets, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else but also somehow exactly where he meant to be.

Of all the places, she thought, slowly rolling down the window. The autumn air rushed in, carrying the scent of rain that hadn't quite started yet.

"Mr. Becker." She kept her voice neutral.

His eyes searched her face, and she could practically see the assessment happening behind them, checking for signs of damage, exhaustion, whatever he expected to find after everything that had happened. When he found nothing but her carefully composed expression, something flickered across his features. Relief? Disappointment that she didn't need rescuing?

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

Please say no. Please just walk away.

"I came here for something," he said, shifting his weight slightly. "Saw your car, thought I'd come over and say hello."

The words hung between them, and Elodie almost laughed. They both knew he could've easily pretended not to see her. Could've walked past without this awkward dance they were doing now. But here he was, standing in the drizzle that had just started, making small talk like they were old friends instead of... whatever they were.

He helped you before, she reminded herself. And you'll see him when you visit Daisy. Don't make this harder than it needs to be.

She nodded, aiming for polite distance. "Then you should get going, I—"

"Actually," he cut in, and she noticed how his jaw tightened slightly, like he was improvising. "I heard there's a famous pastry shop around here. Been looking but can't seem to find it. You wouldn't happen to know where it is?"

Elodie blinked. Harry Becker, asking for directions to a bakery? The man who probably had three assistants who could GPS their way to the moon if he asked? But his expression was earnest enough, even if his eyes kept drifting to her hands on the steering wheel, her face, anywhere but direct eye contact.

"There is one," she said slowly, "but it's not here. Different street, about a kilometer that way." She pointed east, watching as he nodded seriously, like she was giving him state secrets.

"Right. Thanks."

"No problem." The car ahead moved, and the scanner beeped for her turn. Perfect timing. "I should go. Goodbye, Mr. Becker."

"Goodbye, Elodie."

The way he said her name, soft, and careful, like he was trying it out, made something twist in her chest. But she was already pulling forward, already leaving him in her rearview mirror where he belonged.

Harry stood there for a moment after she left, rain dotting his shoulders. Of course he knew where the damn bakery was. He'd known before he asked. But watching her drive away, so composed and distant and completely fine... that was what he'd really needed to see.

Wasn't it?

He pulled out his phone as he walked back to his car, thumb hovering over Dante's number before scrolling past it. "Levi," he said when his friend picked up. "I'm back. Got a flight to catch later, but check if Dante's free. If not, come with me to the hospital to see Sienna."

"You're back?" Levi's surprise crackled through the phone. "Since when?"

Harry ignored the question, already calculating time. "Just call Sienna, see if she's up for visitors."

He could feel Levi wanting to ask why Harry didn't call Dante or Sienna himself, could feel all the questions piling up. But Levi knew him well enough to let it go. For now.

Dante was busy, something about Pack business that couldn't wait. No surprise there.

Harry bought flowers at the hospital gift shop, the expensive ones that would last more than a day, and a fruit basket that looked properly thoughtful.

Sienna was propped up in bed when he walked in, and her whole face transformed with that smile of hers, the real one, not the polite society version.

"What made you suddenly come back?" she asked, her fingers already reaching for the flowers.

"Had some matters to handle," he said, settling into the visitor's chair like he hadn't rearranged three meetings and a conference call to be here.

"I see..." She lowered her head, breathing in the scent of the lilies, and he could see her doing the math. He hadn't come immediately when she'd gotten hurt, couldn't, really, but here he was now, jet-lagged and pretending he wasn't.

Elodie woke to the pale grey light of early morning that crept in softly and unhurried through the curtains.

She was at the Miller's family house.

For a moment, she just lay there. Breathing. And for the first time in longer than she could remember, that felt like relief rather than displacement.

The succulents on the windowsill caught her eye, a neat little row of them, that were green and plump and thriving. Her aunt had always been good with plants. Patient and attentive.

She pushed the thought away before it could settle, stretching her arms above her head until her spine gave a satisfying pop. Her body felt lighter today. Looser. Like she'd finally set down something heavy she hadn't realized she'd been carrying.

Downstairs, the kitchen was already warm with activity. The smell of flour and sesame oil wrapped around her as she descended the creaky wooden stairs, and there was her aunt at the

counter, her sleeves rolled up, her hands working dough. The two children were still asleep, Elodie could hear the quietness of the upper floor.

"Elodie." Her aunt looked up, and her face softened into something knowing. "You look different this morning."

Elodie crossed to the counter, reaching for the spare apron hanging on its hook. "Different how?"

"Lighter." Her aunt tilted her head, studying her. "Like you actually slept."

"I did, actually." Elodie tied the apron strings behind her back and moved to help with the dough. The texture was familiar under her palms. "First time in a while."

They worked in comfortable silence for a few minutes. When her aunt finally set a steaming bowl of noodles in front of her, Elodie's stomach growled audibly.

She picked up her chopsticks. The first bite was perfect, the broth was rich and warming, the noodles exactly the right texture. She was reaching for a second mouthful when her phone buzzed against the wooden table.

The screen lit up and revealed it was Dante.

Elodie looked at the name. Just looked at it.

She set her chopsticks down slowly, watching the phone vibrate its way across the worn wood. Once. Twice. Three times. Then silence.

Her aunt glanced over but said nothing.

Elodie picked up her chopsticks again.

The phone started buzzing almost immediately. This time it was Liora.

This time, Elodie didn't even pause her eating. She watched the name flash and pulse, demanding attention, demanding response, demanding that she drop everything and answer the way she always had. The way she'd trained herself to, because being a good mother meant being available. Being a good wife meant picking up.

But she's not his wife anymore.

The call ended. Started again. Ended. Started again.

Without a word, Elodie reached over and held down the power button. The screen went dark and silent.

She went back to her noodles.

"Trouble?" her aunt asked mildly.

"Nothing I need to deal with right now."

Her aunt hummed and poured her a cup of tea.

Across the city, in the master bedroom of the Bellini estate, Liora stood with her phone clutched in both hands, staring at the screen like it had personally betrayed her.

'The number you are trying to reach is currently unavailable.'

She tried again. Same message. Again. Nothing.

The door to her father's bathroom was open, steam curling out from his shower. Liora marched over and stopped just outside, with her arms crossed, her lower lip jutting out in that particular way she'd perfected at age four and never quite outgrown.

"Dad."

Dante emerged a moment later, a towel around his waist, his hair still damp from his morning run and the shower that followed. He took one look at her face and paused.

"What happened?"

"Mom won't answer." Liora held up her phone like evidence. "I called her yesterday, and she didn't pick up. I called her this morning twice and now it says her phone is off. Off, Dad. Like, completely unreachable."

Dante reached for his shirt, pulling it on with unhurried movements. "She probably turned it off."

"Why would she do that?" Liora's voice pitched higher. "What if something happened? What if she's hurt? What if—"

"Liora." His voice was calm. Too calm. "Your mother is fine. She likely just wanted some quietness."

"But I wanted to go skiing today," Liora pressed on, apparently unconvinced by his reassurances. "She promised she'd take me if she had time. I was going to stay with Aunt Sienna at the hospital, but now that she's feeling better and doesn't need company, I thought—"

"Try again in half an hour," Dante interrupted gently. "She'll have her phone back on by then."

Liora huffed, but her shoulders dropped slightly. "Fine. But if she doesn't answer, you're taking me. You promised last time."

"I'll take you," Dante agreed, because it was easier than explaining that her mother's silence wasn't about dead batteries or poor reception.

Elodie finished her noodles slowly, savoring each bite like she had nowhere to be. Because she didn't.

After helping her aunt clean up, wiping down counters, stacking dishes, she wandered into the small sunroom at the back of the house. The morning light was stronger now, slanting through the windows in golden bars.

She sat in the worn armchair by the window, pulled her phone out, and turned it back on.

The screen flooded immediately with missed calls. Text messages. Voicemails.

Dante. Dante. Liora. Dante. Liora. Dante.

And then, further down: Johnny. Paul.

She smiled at those names.

She typed a quick message to Johnny first: At my aunt's. I'm okay. Call when you're free.

Then she looked at Dante's texts.

'Where are you?'

'Liora is trying to reach you.'

'Call me when you get this.'

Elodie didn't reply. She just sat there, her phone in hand, feeling the sun warm her face through the glass. She wondered how long it would take before he realized that she wasn't going to come running back just because he called. That the leash he'd never known he was holding had finally slipped from his fingers.

Exactly forty-three seconds after her phone reconnected to the network, it rang.

Elodie watched the screen flash with Liora's number.

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Elodie didn't even look at the phone.

It buzzed against the mahogany desk, a frantic, vibrating little scream that tried to derail her train of thought. It was Dante. The name flashed on the screen, illuminating the dusty sunbeams cutting through the Miller house library.

But instead she stared at the laptop screen instead.

The buzzing stopped. Then started again.

And it was Liora this time.

Elodie's finger hovered over the trackpad. The old instinct kicked in, to answer, answer, answer, she might be hurt, she might need you' but she crushed it down like a cigarette under a heel. She took a sip of cold coffee, let the bitterness settle on her tongue, and kept typing.

"Dad!"

Dante paused, one arm halfway into the sleeve of his suit jacket. Liora was standing in the doorway of his walk-in closet, her phone held out like a weapon.

"Mom still isn't picking up. Can you call her? Please?"

Dante looked at his daughter. She looked... unmoored. Her hair was half-brushed, her favorite ski jacket bundled in her arms, but her face was crumpled with a confusion he hadn't seen in years.

"Alright." He pulled his phone out, dialed Elodie's number, and put it on speaker.

It rang once. Twice.

Then, silence.

'User busy.'

Dante stared at the screen. He hadn't been declined. He hadn't been sent to voicemail. She had hung up on him.

"Well?" Liora pressed, bouncing on her heels. "Is she on her way?"

Dante killed the screen, his face a mask of calm he didn't feel. "She didn't pick up for me either."

Liora's face fell. "That's... impossible. Mom always picks up for you. Even when she's mad. Even when she's in the bathroom. She always—" She cut herself off, looking down at her boots. "Maybe she was busy? Like, really busy? And didn't see it was you?"

"Maybe," he said, because the truth was too sharp to say out loud.

He grabbed his coat in his hands. "I have to go. Hospital first, then the office. If you want to ski, tell the bodyguard to take you."

"But I want Mom," Liora whined, the pout back in full force. "It's not fun with just the bodyguard. He just stands there and looks scary."

Dante walked over, resisting the urge to check his own phone again. He tapped her forehead, a gesture that felt automatic, rehearsed. "Go have fun, Liora. I'll see you tonight."

He left before she could argue.

Liora tried two more times in the car. Nothing. By the time she got to the slopes, the snow looked grey, the wind felt mean, and the whole day felt like a waste. She was home by two, throwing her jacket on the floor and slamming her bedroom door.

The Bellini Group office was cold. Dante had just poured two scotches when Levi wandered in, looking like a cat who'd found the cream and wasn't going to share.

"Heard there was a circus in town," Levi said, flopping into the leather chair opposite the desk. "Thought I'd buy a ticket."

Dante slid a glass toward him. "You're an asshole."

"And you're a man whose wife isn't answering his calls. So, who's really winning?"

Before Dante could tell him to get out, the intercom buzzed. "Sir? Mr. Blake is here."

"Send him up."

Paul Blake didn't look like a man bringing the end of the world. He looked like a guy who'd had a good lunch. He shook Dante's hand, nodded at Levi, and sat down.

No small talk.

He opened his briefcase and slid a single sheet of paper across the desk.

The divorce agreement.

Dante picked it up. His eyes went straight to the bottom.

Elodie Miller.

The signature was clean. No smudges. No shaky lines. The 'E' had that little loop she always did, the one he used to tease her about. It looked exactly like her grocery lists.

"She signed it," Levi said, leaning over the arm of the chair to look. "Holy shit. She actually signed it."

Dante didn't say anything. He just stared at the ink.

"The asset division is fair," Paul said, his voice cutting through the silence. "My client isn't interested in bleeding you dry. She just wants out."

'Out.' The word echoed in Dante's head.

He forced himself to look up, to meet Paul's eyes. "The property transfers and share liquidations... it's a lot. I'll need my finance team to go over it. It'll take time."

"Take your time," Paul said, standing up. He didn't look fooled. "But Elodie wants this done. Don't drag it out."

"Chad," Dante called out, his voice sounding distant to his own ears. "See Mr. Blake out."

When the door clicked shut, the silence rushed back in, heavier than before.

Levi picked up the scotch Dante had poured him, swirling it and then proceeded to say nothing.

Paul the moment he was down, he called Elodie from the car.

Elodie's PoV~

Paul's voice on the other end was crisp and professional, exactly what I needed right now.

"He has the papers," he said.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling of my aunt's guest room. "And? How long until it's done? Until everything is actually processed and he's out of my life?"

"That depends on Dante," Paul said. "He claimed the asset division is too complex to rush. Needs his finance team to go over it. Blah, blah, blah."

I let out a short, sharp breath. A laugh without the humor. "Stalling."

"Looks that way."

"Figures." I closed my eyes. Of course Dante wouldn't just sign and let go. He had to drag it out. Had to remind me that even in ending this, he was the one holding the clock. "Fine. Let him stall. Just make sure he knows we're not waiting forever."

"I will. Talk soon, Elodie."

I hung up and tossed the phone onto the duvet. Well, let him. I had work to do. I had a life to build. He could play his CEO games all he wanted; I was done being a pawn in them.

The next day, the hum of the Cole office was a balm to my soul.

I was in Johnny's office, my feet propped up on the edge of his desk, going over the Q3 projections for the bio-tech division. The numbers were beautiful. Green and upward-trending.

"If we keep this pace," Johnny was saying, tapping a pen against his teeth, "we're going to need a bigger building. Or at least a better espresso machine."

"Priorities, Johnny."

"Profit is my priority. Better coffee means better work, means more profit. It's a cycle."

He was just about to pull up the personnel files when his phone buzzed. He glanced at it, and his whole face soured, like he'd just bitten into a lemon.

"What?" I asked, not looking up from the tablet.

He turned the screen toward me. Rex Hardin.

My eyebrows went up.

"The one and only crafty old fox." Johnny stared at the phone like it was a bomb. "We haven't spoken since the Wilson Tech gala. Why is he calling me?"

We both knew why. The projects I'd been leading were about to blow up. Big government contracts, massive funding. The kind of thing that made sharks circle. The news hadn't even broken yet, but Reed Hardin didn't get to be where he was by waiting for the morning paper.

"Answer it," I said, taking a sip of my lukewarm tea. "Be nice."

"I hate being nice to him," Johnny muttered, but he swiped to answer. "Rex. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I watched his face. He listened for a solid minute, just making noncommittal noises. Mm-hmm. I see. Of course. Then he said, "Yes, I think a meeting would be... productive. Let me check my calendar."

He was lying. His calendar was wide open.

"Right. I'll have my assistant reach out. Goodbye, Rex."

He hung up and threw the phone onto the desk like it burned him.

"He wants a partnership," Johnny said, disgust dripping from every word. "Wants to 'discuss synergies' over dinner. The slimy bastard probably has a dossier on us already."

"He's a politician like his father, Johnny. That's what they do."

"Rex's father is interested in you," Johnny shot back, his eyes narrowing. "Don't pretend you don't know. Ever since he met you at that gala, he's been sniffing around. And I know his son got a hard-on for Sienna, too. It's creepy."

I felt a flicker of annoyance, but I kept my voice even. "So what? Reed Hardin is in a position to help us fast-track the approvals we need. If he wants to have dinner and flirt a little, let him. Our goal is profit. His ego is secondary."

I had met Reed once. He was intense, yeah. A little too handsy. But my old professor trusted him, and in this world, trust was a currency more valuable than gold.

Johnny sighed, slumping back in his chair. "I know. I know. I'm just... tired of these people." He ran a hand through his hair. "Fine. We'll take his money. But I'm not making it easy for him."

He smirked, a wicked, petty little thing. "I'm going to make him wait. Make him think we've got five other offers on the table. Let the old fox sweat a little."

I couldn't help but smile. "Whatever makes you happy."

"Damn right."

We went back to the spreadsheets. Then, thirty minutes later, Johnny's phone buzzed again.

He picked it up, ready to roll his eyes at Rex again, I assumed. But when he looked at the screen, his expression shifted. The annoyance was still there, but underneath it... something else. Something like amusement. A grudging respect.

"Who is it?" I asked, my curiosity piquing. Another shark?

Johnny chuckled, a low, dry sound. He turned the phone so I could see the screen.

"Harry Becker."

I froze.

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Elodie's POV~

"Another potential partner?" I asked, watching Johnny stare at his phone like it had personally insulted him.

"Most likely." He tossed the device onto the desk, where it skidded across the surface. "Harry Becker. We don't exactly run in the same circles, you know? And honestly, after everything with Dante, I'm not thrilled about dealing with his friends."

I understood what he wasn't saying. Harry was the kind of man who looked at me and saw a problem to be solved—or worse, a puzzle to figure out. He'd always been polite enough to Sienna, but me? I'd never really registered on his radar as anything more than Dante's wife.

"Take the call," I said, not looking up from the spreadsheet in front of me.

Johnny's head snapped toward me. "What? Why would I—"

"Because ignoring him won't make him go away. And honestly, that's bad business." I pulled my reading glasses off and met his eyes. "I don't want you acting out of spite. That's how mistakes happen."

He stared at me for a moment, probably looking for signs of distress. Some indication that hearing from Harry's circle would shake me. When he didn't find it, he picked up the phone and swiped to answer.

"Mr. Becker," Johnny said, his voice dropping into that cool, professional register he used for people he didn't like. "This is unexpected."

I could hear Harry's voice through the speaker, calm, exactly the way I remembered it. Always so composed. So sure of himself.

"Johnny. I'll get straight to the point. I hear Cole's got some interesting developments coming down the pipeline. I'd like to discuss a partnership."

Of course he did. News in this world traveled faster than light. The He family had their fingers in every pie. They knew things before the people living those things did.

"News travels fast," Johnny said with a dry laugh. "We haven't even filed the preliminary paperwork yet."

"I have ears," Harry replied. "And I have resources. The He family can expedite your military approvals. You know how these things work. We can cut through all of it."

It was a good offer. Really good. The kind of offer that could change everything for Cole. And Harry knew it.

But Johnny was in a mood. I could see it in the set of his jaw, the way his fingers drummed against the desk.

"I appreciate the offer, Mr. Becker," Johnny said carefully. "But we're evaluating multiple options right now. We're looking for partners with clean records and low drama. You understand."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. That was a direct hit.

Harry didn't flinch though. "Drama is just another word for leverage, Johnny. And I don't create unnecessary complications. I create results." He paused. "Why don't we meet for dinner? We can discuss the specifics properly."

"Can't do it," Johnny said smoothly. "Absolutely swamped with quarter-end reports. My schedule's a nightmare for the next few weeks. My assistant will reach out if we decide to move forward."

Translation: Don't bother calling back.

"I see," Harry said, and I then heard the slight shift in his tone. The moment he realized he wasn't going to get what he wanted just by asking. "Well, don't take too long making your decision. I happened to hear that the Brown family is already making inquiries..."

The office went quiet. Even the sound of the air conditioning seemed to stop.

The Browns.

Johnny's face went still. "The Brown family?"

"Mm-hmm." Harry's voice turned almost conversational, like he was just making idle conversation. "Funny how these things leak out, isn't it? Anyway, think it over, Johnny. I'll be waiting."

The line died.

Johnny stared at the phone in his hand like it might explode. "Elodie. The Browns are complete outsiders. They're trying to establish themselves in the capital, and they don't have the resources or the reputation to, how would they even know about this? We literally haven't told anyone outside of our core team."

I felt that cold, familiar sensation creeping up my spine. The feeling of being watched. Of being played.

Dante. Or Harry. Maybe both.

They'd leaked the information to the Browns deliberately. Not because the Browns were a real threat, but because they wanted me to know that they could. That even though I'd left, even though I'd signed the papers and walked away from the Bellini estate, I was still in their world. Still on their board.

Johnny was watching my face now, waiting for the panic. For the tears. For me to call Dante and ask him to make the bad men go away.

Instead, I picked up my bag and stood up.

"Elodie?" His voice was worried. "Hey. If this is getting too intense, we can tell them all to go to hell. Seriously. We don't need their money. I've got enough capital to bootstrap this entire thing on my own. We don't need them."

I looked at him, really looked at him. At this man who'd believed in me when no one else did. Who'd offered me a job and a friendship when my entire life was imploding.

"I know we don't," I said quietly. "And I appreciate that. I really do."

Then I smiled. Not the fake, placating smile I'd perfected over years of being Dante's wife. A real one.

"But Senior Brother promised me the best steak in this city," I said, walking toward the door. "And a wine that costs more than my rent. Are you really going to make me walk out of here disappointed?"

Johnny blinked. Then, slowly, a grin spread across his face. "You're serious right now? You're not—"

"Not freaking out? Not running back to Dante? Not begging Harry to make the Browns go away?" I picked up my jacket and slung it over my arm. "No, Johnny. I'm not. Because I finally figured something out."

"What's that?"

I paused at the door and looked back at him. "They only have power over me if I care what they do. And I'm done caring."

Johnny winked at me with a soft smile on his lips and then grabbed his keys.

The restaurant's entrance was filled with soft lighting when they stepped in. Elodie stepped through the glass doors with Johnny just behind her, already mentally settling into the quiet corner table they'd reserved.

Then she saw the Brown family and the Green family. A whole cluster of them, standing in the lobby like they owned the place, heading straight toward the dining area. Logan Brown was at the front, his face breaking into that practiced smile the moment his eyes landed on Johnny.

"Mr. Gray," Logan called out, extending his hand. "What a pleasant surprise. We seem to keep running into each other."

Johnny's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "Logan. Yes, we do."

"In fact," Logan continued, his smile widening, "we were just about to have dinner. Why don't you and your... companion join us? It would be good to discuss the Cole projects in a more relaxed setting."

Elodie could feel Johnny's irritation radiating off him like heat. He'd literally just declined this man on the phone hours ago. And now here Logan was, trying again, acting like the universe had handed him a second chance.

"I appreciate the offer," Johnny said, his voice dropping into that polite-but-firm register that meant he'd already made up his mind. "But this is personal time. Another occasion, perhaps."

Logan's smile faltered just slightly. "Ah... of course. Another time, then."

Johnny didn't wait for more. He simply nodded at Elodie and gestured toward the stairs. "Shall we?"

Elodie followed without a word, deliberately not looking back at the Brown family. She could feel their eyes tracking them as they climbed toward the private dining floors, but she kept her spine straight, her chin level, her pace unhurried.

By the time they reached their table, Johnny had already started to relax.

Downstairs, in the lobby, Logan's smile had completely evaporated.

Lauren turned to him, her brow furrowed with something that looked like worry. "Did you see how quickly he dismissed us? Johnny Gray has never been that cold. He's usually at least polite."

"It's because of the woman," Janice said quietly, her gaze still fixed on the staircase where Elodie had disappeared. "I heard from Sienna that Johnny's been distant with her ever since he started working with... her."

"Freya Miller, you mean?" Miles interjected, using Elodie's old name out of habit. "But she's divorcing Dante, isn't she? Why would Johnny care?"

"Because," Janice said, her voice turning cold, "he might not believe the divorce will actually happen. Or he doesn't want it to."

Granny Green, had been quiet until now. She'd been watching the two of them disappear up the stairs, noting the way the woman hadn't so much as glanced in their direction. The way she'd moved like she had nothing to prove and nothing to hide.

It unsettled her.

"The divorce is definitely happening," Miles said, trying to reassure everyone. He gestured vaguely, as if that alone could settle the matter. "Levi told me himself. He said Dante's made his decision. He wants Sienna, not Freya. The divorce papers are already signed."

"Yes," Janice agreed, her lips curving into something that wasn't quite a smile. "Dante's been waiting for the right moment. And now, with Sienna's accident, with her nearly dying... well, that's all the motivation he needs. He's going through with it. No hesitation."

Logan nodded, his confidence returning. "Of course. Dante always gets what he wants. He's made his choice clear."

"Sienna's patience is finally going to pay off," Miles added, his voice brightening. "She's been waiting for years. Soon, it'll all work out."

They stood there in the lobby, reassuring themselves, building their case on assumptions and whispered gossip and Sienna's long, patient game.

But Granny Green wasn't listening anymore.

She was thinking about the woman upstairs, the one who'd climbed the stairs like she was walking into her own future, not running from her past. The one who hadn't looked back. Not even once.

That girl definitely doesn't want the divorce,* Granny Green thought, a faint line appearing between her brows.

Because if she did, she would look desperate. She would look like she was running. She would look like someone losing something precious.

Instead, she'd looked like someone who'd already decided what mattered.

Janice must have noticed Granny Green's silence, because she leaned closer. "What are you thinking, Nonna?"

"I'm thinking," Granny Green said slowly, "that we might be underestimating the situation. Dante may want the divorce. But if that woman upstairs doesn't want it..." She paused, her shrewd eyes narrowing. "Well. Dante's made decisions before. He can unmake them, too."

"With all due respect," Janice said, her voice turning sharp, "Sienna nearly died for him. That changes things. That makes it real."

"Perhaps." Granny Green's smile had faded completely now. She was watching the staircase, as if she could see through the floors and walls to where Elodie and Johnny sat.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 165 [1,863 words]

Chapter 165: Chapter 165

Rex's fingers tightened around his wine glass. The question had hit a nerve, and Jimmy knew it.

"Can we just not talk about her?" Rex said, his voice coming out sharper than intended. He forced himself to relax, to take a breath. "There's nothing interesting there. Let's order."

Jimmy shrugged, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He'd gotten his answer, even if it wasn't the one Rex had spoken aloud.

Wednesday morning came too fast. The conference room was freezing, the air conditioning blasting, smelling faintly of stale coffee and dry-erase markers. Elodie sat at the head of the table, flipping a pen between her fingers. The sound echoed in the quiet room.

Johnny was droning on about Q3 projections. Elodie was halfway through zoning out, thinking about how much she needed a latte, when the door opened.

Johnny's secretary, a nervous girl named Beth, peeked her head in. "Mr. Gray? I'm so sorry to interrupt. Mr. Becker is here. He says it's urgent."

The room went still. Johnny didn't move for a second. His face went blank, that corporate mask slamming into place. But Elodie saw his hand stop moving over his tablet.

Harry, she thought. Well, shit. That was fast.

It had been two days since Johnny had basically hung up on the guy. And now here he was. No call, no email, just showing up at the office like he owned the building. It was a power move. A big, flashy, 'I don't need an appointment' power move.

Johnny stood up, smoothing his tie. He looked calm, but Elodie could smell the shift in his scent, sharpened adrenaline under the cologne. "You continue with the meeting," he said, his voice even. "I'll go take a look."

"Okay," Elodie said simply. She didn't offer to come. She knew better. This was alpha business.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind him, the silence in the room changed. Everyone looked at her.

"So," the CFO started, leaning forward. "Becker Capital. In the flesh."

Elodie just shrugged, leaning back in her chair. "Let's finish the budget. He'll tell us if we need to know." But her mind was racing.

By the time Johnny got to the reception area, Harry was already sitting on the white leather sofa, looking like he'd been there for an hour. He was scrolling through his phone, completely at ease.

When he saw Johnny walk in alone, his eyes lifted. They were dark, assessing. A slow smile spread across his face, but it didn't reach his eyes. He stood up, tall and imposing in a way that was practiced, not natural like Dante's.

"I didn't give notice before coming," Harry said smoothly. He extended a hand. "Please forgive me, Mr. Gray."

Johnny took the hand into a firm grip. "Mr. Becker," Johnny said, pulling his hand back. "You're too polite. Walk with me."

He led Harry into the private reception room, the one with the view of the city. No windows here, just soundproof walls and expensive art.

Once they sat, Harry didn't waste a breath. No small talk about the weather, no "how's the family." He reached into his briefcase and slid a manila folder across the glass table. It landed with a heavy thud.

"This is my proposal for cooperation," Harry said. "Please. Take a look."

Johnny picked it up. The paper was thick. Expensive. He opened it.

His eyes scanned the first page. Then the second. The numbers jumped out at him. The equity split. The territory. The Bellini Pack's involvement in logistics.

Shit, Johnny thought, his heart giving a hard thump against his ribs.

He kept reading. The more he read, the tighter his chest got. It was... good. It was really fucking good. Better than he'd expected. Better than he'd even dreamed up in his late-night sessions. Harry hadn't just come to beg; he'd come with a weapon, and the weapon was a deal so sweet it tasted like poison.

Johnny forced himself to slow down. He reached the last page. He set the document down, aligning the corners perfectly with the edge of the table. He looked up.

Harry was watching him, that same calm, gracious smile on his face. Waiting.

"Mr. Becker," Johnny said, his voice carefully controlled. "You certainly have shown a lot of sincerity. However, I have other considerations. I'll probably need some time before I can give you a reply."

Harry leaned back, spreading his hands. "That's fine. It's always good to compare different offers. If Mr. Gray has any concerns with the conditions I've provided, feel free to contact me anytime. I'm happy to discuss and adjust."

He stood up. Just like that. He didn't push. He didn't glare. He just... left.

Johnny had to walk him out. The guy had just dropped a nuclear bomb on his desk and walked out whistling.

When Johnny got back to the office, the meeting was over. The conference room was empty except for Elodie, who was packing her laptop into her bag.

She looked up as he came in. "Well?"

Johnny walked over to the window, staring out at the gray sky. He ran a hand through his hair, messing it up. He felt unmoored.

"Harry is quite efficient," Johnny said, the words tasting like ash.

Elodie stopped zipping her bag. "Define efficient."

Johnny turned around, leaning against the glass. "Just the other day, I shut him down over the phone. Today? He shows up. No warning." He gestured vaguely at his office, where the folder was sitting on his desk. "He had a full proposal. Not a pitch. A proposal. Didn't waste a single word."

He looked at her, and for the first time all morning, he let the mask drop. He looked tired. And impressed.

"Honestly, Elodie," he said, his voice dropping. "The proposal he gave... I'm pretty tempted."

"You can wait and see," she said with her voice even. "If the numbers really hold up, working with him isn't a bad idea."

Johnny leaned back in his chair, the leather groaning in protest. He knew she was right. Logically, it was a smart play. But logic didn't stop the bitter taste in his mouth. Harry was a snake, and Dante's friend on top of it. Wanting to tear the guy's throat out for business reasons was one thing; wanting to do it because he was Dante's friend was personal. And now, Elodie was taking that away from him too. It left him with this restless, buzzing frustration, like a fly trapped in a jar with no lid.

Five o'clock in the evening rolled around, painting the city outside in shades of bruised purple and orange. Elodie was still buried in work, the glow of the monitor reflecting in her tired eyes.

Her phone buzzed on the desk. A sharp, insistent rattle against the wood.

She glanced at the screen and saw it was Liora.

The name sat there, glowing, demanding attention. Elodie stared at it for three full seconds. Then, she turned her back to it, picking up her pen and clicking it open. She didn't silence it. She just let it ring until the screen went dark.

Two days passed by. Forty-eight hours of silence.

Friday morning, the sun was barely up, just a gray sliver through the blinds. Elodie was standing at the kitchen island, cracking eggs into a bowl, when the phone started screaming again. This time Liora again.

She didn't even look at the table. She whisked the eggs, the metal tines clinking against the ceramic, drowning out the sound. When it finally stopped, the silence in the apartment felt heavier.

Meanwhile miles away, in the quietness of Dante's mansion, Liora stared at her phone like it had personally betrayed her. She looked like she wanted to throw it through the window.

She didn't. She just lowered her head, her shoulders slumping. She picked at her pancakes, cutting them into tiny, miserable pieces.

"Dad," she mumbled, not looking up. "This is the fourth time. Since last Saturday, I've called Mom four times. She hasn't picked up once."

Dante sat across from her, scrolling through financial reports on his tablet. He didn't even blink. "Then just wait a bit longer."

Liora pushed the plate away. The syrup was making her sick. "What if she still doesn't pick up?"

"Then just wait a bit longer," Dante repeated, his voice flat, devoid of any emotion. "After some time, she'll answer."

Liora looked up, a tiny, desperate flicker of hope in her eyes. "How long is 'some time'?"

Dante finally paused. He looked at his daughter, really looked at her, with that cold, calculating gaze he reserved for board meetings. "Within two weeks."

The hope died instantly. "Two weeks? That's... that's forever!"

Dante took a sip of his black coffee. "Yes. It is a bit long."

Liora let out a sigh that sounded like it came from the bottom of her soul. She poked at a strawberry. "But I want to go out this weekend. Auntie Sienna still can't walk right and can't come with me. Dad, will you come instead?"

Dante actually considered it. "Dad has a lot to do on Saturday. But I'll be free on Sunday. If you want to go out Saturday, you can go with Uncle Harry and Daisy."

"Okay," Liora whispered.

Anything. As long as she wasn't stuck in this house with the ghosts.

Dante picked up his phone and dialed Harry. It was answered on the first ring.

"Take Liora for the day, Harry. Would you please?" Dante said.

"Sure," Harry's voice came back.

Saturday at Disneyland was an assault on the senses. Several noises. Colors. Screaming kids. The smell of popcorn and sugar hanging thick in the air.

Harry walked between the two girls, Daisy chattering a mile a minute about meeting Mickey. Liora trailed behind, her hands shoved deep into her hoodie pockets. She wasn't looking at the castle. She wasn't looking at the rides. She looked like she was walking through a graveyard.

Harry stopped at a cart and bought two giant ice cream cones, strawberry and vanilla. He handed one to Daisy, then knelt down and offered the other to Liora.

"Hey," he said softly. "Earth to Liora. You still with us?"

She took the cone, her fingers brushing his. She sat down on a nearby swing, not moving, just holding the melting treat. She licked it, once, a tiny, mechanical movement.

Harry sat on the swing next to her, watching the crowd. He looked at her profile, the shape of her jaw, the frown between her brows. It was uncanny. It was like looking at a smaller, sadder version of Elodie.

"You're not having any fun today, are you?" he asked.

Liora didn't look at him. She stared at her shoes, scuffing the woodchips on the ground. The noise of the park seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of them in a bubble of quiet misery.

"I miss Mom a little," she whispered. It was so quiet he almost didn't hear it over the roar of a roller coaster. "Just a little."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 166[1,435 words]

Chapter 166: Chapter 166

The swing set creaked. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Liora stared at her shoes, scuffing the woodchips on the ground. It hadn't always been like this. When she was abroad, sometimes she wouldn't see Mom for two, maybe three months. But the phone never stopped ringing. Every single day, like clockwork. And whenever she called, even if it was the middle of the night there, Mom would pick up. She'd rush home just to cook Liora's favorite soup.

But now? She has called four times and mom had given her four days of silence.

This had never happened before. Not ever.

Harry watched her from the next swing over. He felt like an intruder in a grief he wasn't supposed to know about. He knew, of course. Everyone in their circle knew the divorce papers were signed. He knew Dante had taken full custody. But hearing it from a six-year-old's mouth, seeing that raw, confused look in her eyes... it was different. It was ugly.

"Your mom definitely isn't ignoring your calls on purpose," Harry said, his voice sounding too loud, too fake in the quietness. "She's probably just... swamped. You know how work gets. It'll be okay after a while."

Liora nodded slowly. "Yeah. Dad said the same."

Harry's jaw tightened. He looked away.

Daisy, sensing the heavy cloud, tugged on Liora's sleeve. "I wanna see Auntie too," she whispered, trying to be brave. "But Uncle Harry says Auntie's busy. Adults are always busy. It's 'cause they have to buy us toys, right? It'll be okay."

"Okay," Liora mumbled.

Harry didn't say anything else. He hadn't called Elodie. Not because he thought she was busy. goddess, no. He was terrified to call. The divorce had just gone through. She'd lost custody. If he called, if he asked her to come hang out with Daisy... wouldn't that just be rubbing salt in the wound? Hey, look at the kid you can't see anymore. Want to babysit? He wasn't that cruel. He was just... useless.

Five o'clock hit. The sun was starting to dip, painting the sky a bruised purple. A sleek, black Bentley pulled up to the curb, and Dante got out.

He left his long wool coat in the car, standing there in a charcoal suit that fit him like a second skin. He didn't walk; he prowled. Even in a theme park, he looked like he owned the place.

"Dad!"

It was like a switch flipped. Liora launched herself off the swing, forgetting Harry, forgetting Daisy, forgetting the silence of the last week.

Dante's face, usually a mask of cold indifference, cracked just a fraction. He bent down, sweeping her up into his arms like she weighed nothing. He pinched her cheek, which was a rare, and tender gesture. "Did you have fun today with Uncle Harry and Daisy?"

Liora buried her face in his neck, breathing him in. "Yeah! It was fun!"

She refused to be put down. Dante didn't seem to mind. He carried her, heavy as she was, all the way into the restaurant.

Inside the private room, the air was warm, smelling of truffle oil and expensive wine. Dante finally set her down, smoothing her hair. He turned to Harry, his expression shutting down again, the friendly father vanishing to reveal the CEO. "Thanks for taking care of her today."

"No trouble," Harry said, leaning back in his chair, swirling the ice in his glass. "They played by themselves most of the time. I was just the wallet."

He watched Dante pour juice for Liora, the picture of the doting father. The two kids were huddled over a menu, whispering. Harry leaned forward, lowering his voice. The casual act was over.

"I know the custody is with you," Harry said, keeping his eyes locked on Dante's. "But... how did you both arrange her visitation rights?"

The room went quiet. Not scary quiet. Just... heavy.

Dante paused. He looked up, and a slow, sharp smile spread across his face. It wasn't a nice smile. It was the smile of a man who just heard a challenge.

"Do you think," Dante said, his voice silky smooth, and dangerous, "I'm not letting her come see the child?"

Harry didn't blink. He held Dante's gaze, unbothered. He picked up his glass and took a slow sip.

Harry had thought that. He'd absolutely thought Dante was the kind of man who'd change the locks just to prove a point.

Dante picked up his porcelain cup, the fine china clinking softly against the saucer and then he took a slow sip of his tea, his eyes hooded, unreadable. "Although the custody is with me," he said, setting the cup down with a sharp click, "the agreement clearly states that as long as she wants to see the child, she can see her. Anytime. Without restrictions."

Harry blinked. He hadn't expected that. He'd expected a fight, a legal loophole, something. Not... open doors.

Just then, Liora let out a giggle from the other side of the table, pointing at a drawing Daisy had made. The conversation died instantly. The wall between the men went back up.

Dante turned his gaze to the window, then back to Harry, his tone shifting, becoming casual. Too casual. "I heard you've been in touch with Cole recently?"

Harry froze for a split second. "Yeah." He recovered quickly, tilting his head. "What about you? No intentions there?"

Dante leaned back, draping an arm over the back of his chair as a picture of a man with all the time in the world. "Not decided yet," he said, a small, enigmatic smile playing on his lips. "It's still early. I'm not in a hurry."

"Mm," Harry hummed. He didn't believe a word of it.

Elodie's thesis was a monster that refused to die.

She spent a day and a half drowning in it, surrounded by empty coffee cups and the blue light of her laptop. By Sunday evening, her eyes were burning. She met Cara for dinner, at some noisy place with good wine and they walked for two hours through the city, just moving, not talking about anything important. It was quiet. Peaceful. No phones ringing.

And then Monday morning came too fast.

Elodie walked into Cole Technologies like she owned the place. Because, technically, she kind of did. Johnny was gone, he flew out Wednesday for some emergency investor meeting in the European Pack. Left her holding the fort.

And everyone decided this was the week to attack.

Rex Hardin showed up Thursday.

Elodie was in the middle of debugging a line of code when her assistant buzzed. "Miss Miller? Mr. Hardin is here. He doesn't have an appointment, but he's... insistent."

Elodie sighed, and saved her work, and stood up. She smoothed down her blouse. "Send him to Meeting Room B. I'll be right there."

She walked down the hall, her heels clicking a steady rhythm. When she pushed the door open, Rex was standing by the window, looking impatient. He turned, expecting Johnny.

When he saw her, his face fell. Just an inch. But she saw it.

"Hello, Mr. Hardin," Elodie said, walking straight to the head of the table. She didn't wait for him to sit. She extended a hand, her expression polite, professional, yet ice-cold. "My name is Elodie Miller. Johnny flew out of town yesterday. He's not at Cole. I'm handling all matters here now. If you have anything to discuss, you can talk to me just as well."

Handling everything? Rex's brain practically screamed the words.

He shook her hand. It was a limp, perfunctory shake. Who the hell is she? he thought, pulling his hand back. Johnny's girlfriend? His secretary with delusions of grandeur?

He sat down slowly, eyeing her. Does she even know what we do?

It was laughable. Absolutely laughable. He was here to discuss a multi-million dollar tech merger, and she came in alone. No laptop. No notepad. No tech team. Just... her.

But Johnny was obsessed with her. The whole Pack knew it. So Rex swallowed his scoff. He sat back, crossing his legs, and slid a thick manila folder across the glass table. It landed with a heavy thwack.

"Then I'll trouble you, Miss Miller," he said, the skepticism dripping from his voice.

He gestured to the folder. "This is our company's proposal. Lots of technical specs. It's... dense. Take a look."

Elodie pulled the folder toward her. She didn't open it. Not yet. She just looked at him, her gaze was unimpressed.

"Okay," she said, her voice even. "I'll take a look."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 167[1,533 words]

Chapter 167: Chapter 167

Elodie's POV ~

The paper felt heavy. I flipped the page, my eyes scanning the technical specs. Rex Hardin. He'd come later than everyone else, but God, he'd done his homework. This proposal wasn't just good; it was terrifyingly precise. It matched the schematics I'd drafted in my secret files almost perfectly.

I kept my face stone-cold. Don't let him see you're impressed.

A soft knock resounded. The door opened a crack. One of Johnny's junior secretaries poked her head in, looking terrified. She scurried over to my side and leaned down, her voice a barely-there whisper that tickled my ear.

"Miss Miller? Um... there are visitors downstairs. They say their names are Logan and Sienna Brown. Should I... should I show them to your office?"

The air in the room suddenly felt too thin. Logan and Sienna was here?

My stomach dropped, a cold, heavy stone sinking straight to my shoes.

I didn't even look at the secretary. I kept my eyes on the document, on the black ink blurring slightly at the edges.

"No need," I said. My voice was quiet, and flat. Dead. "Send them away."

"Oh. Uh, understood." She practically ran out.

I took a breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. I pushed the image of my father's disappointed face and my half sister's smug smile into a box and locked it.

I looked up at Rex, offering a tight, apologetic smile. "Sorry about that. Where were we?"

I went back to reading. Or at least, I looked like I was. I could feel Rex's eyes on me. He wasn't buying it. He thought I was just Johnny's decoration, a pretty face he kept around. He probably thought I was looking at his proposal and seeing gibberish.

Let him think that, I told myself. It'll make it funnier when I tear it apart.

But I wasn't going to tear it apart. It was too good.

Thirty minutes. I let him sweat for thirty minutes. I turned a page. I frowned. I nodded. I played the part of the serious executive.

Finally, I closed the folder.

"Mr. Hardin," I said, leaning back in the chair. "Your proposal really aligns well with what our company needs. We'll give it serious consideration."

Rex stood up. He was bored. I could see it in the way he checked his watch. He didn't want to talk to me. He wanted Johnny.

"Thank you for your recognition," he said, his smile not reaching his eyes. "I look forward to the opportunity to cooperate with your company." He paused, clearly fishing for an exit. "I have other matters, Miss Miller. See you next time."

Please don't let there be a next time, I thought. But I smiled. Business is business. I didn't need him to like me. I just needed his tech.

"Alright," I said sweetly. "See you next time."

I pressed the intercom. "Secretary, please see Mr. Hardin out."

Rex left. The door clicked shut, and the silence rushed back in.

I stared at the folder. He was good. He was really good. And he was an arrogant prick. Perfect.

I got up and walked to the window. We're on the 14th floor. The view of the city is usually calming. Today, it just looked gray.

I watched the front entrance. I saw Rex walk out, adjusting his cuffs.

And then I saw them.

Logan and Sienna. They were still there. Standing by the fountain, looking stubborn. The secretary hadn't just "sent them away." She'd told them Johnny was out of town, and they'd called her bluff. They were waiting. Like vultures.

Rex stopped.

From up here, I couldn't hear them, but I saw the way Rex's posture changed. He wasn't the arrogant CEO anymore. He walked over to them. He spoke to Logan first, a polite nod.

Then he looked at Sienna.

And his whole face... crumpled. Just a little.

I remembered what Johnny had said. Sienna had been "injured" a few weeks ago. Badly. She'd been in the hospital. She looked pale, I could see that even from here. She looked thinner. The usual vibrant glow she had when she was playing the victim was dimmed.

Rex said something to her. He looked... heartbroken. Actually heartbroken. He reached out, like he was going to touch her arm, but stopped.

Of course. Rex. He's been circling the Pack for years. He knows them. He probably knows Sienna better than I do at this point. He knows she's Dante's little pet.

I watched him look at her like she was a broken doll. And I watched Sienna look up at him, her eyes wide, probably summoning a tear.

I turned away from the window.

Pathetic. All of them.

I sat back down and pulled Rex's proposal back in front of me. I opened it to the first page.

"Let's see how much you're really worth," I whispered to the empty room.

"Miss Brown?"

The air in the lobby was thick enough to choke on.

Rex stood a few feet from the Browns, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes fixed on Sienna's face. The sympathy radiating off him was so potent it was almost visible. He was remembering the hospital reports, the whispers about how she'd taken a hit meant for Dante Wilson.

Logan, oblivious to the undercurrents, just saw a man in an expensive suit. He nudged his daughter. "Sienna, who is this?"

Sienna didn't flinch. She turned her head slowly, her movements graceful despite the obvious stiffness in her shoulders. "Rex Hardin, Mr. Hardin." Her voice was flat, neutral. She gestured to Logan. "This is my father, Logan Brown."

"Ah, Mr. Brown," Rex said, shaking Logan's hand, though his eyes kept darting back to Sienna. "A pleasure."

"Are you here at Cole to discuss a partnership with Mr. Gray?" Sienna asked, cutting straight through the pleasantries.

"Yes," Rex said. "And you?"

"Yes. Did you meet Mr. Gray?"

"No," Rex replied. "Mr. Gray went on a business trip."

Logan let out a short, bitter laugh. "So he really went on a business trip. I thought he was just making an excuse not to meet us."

Rex paused, his brow furrowing. "Didn't they invite you up?"

"No," Sienna said. Her voice didn't crack. "Mr. Gray's secretary said Mr. Gray was away, so they asked us to leave."

The temperature around Rex dropped ten degrees. His jaw hardened. He turned his head sharply toward the elevators, where Elodie was probably still preening.

"Mr. Gray is indeed not here," Rex said, his voice icy. "But the person I spoke with earlier was Miss Miller. Elodie." He said the name like a curse. "She said that since Mr. Gray is away, she is handling all matters at Cole. She can represent Cole in negotiating cooperation with me."

Logan's mouth fell open slightly. He looked from Rex to his daughter, waiting for the explosion.

Sienna just blinked. Once. Twice.

"Is that so?" she said.

She turned to her father, her face a mask of bored indifference. "Since that's the case, Dad, let's go back."

"But—" Logan started.

"Dad." One word. And it was final.

Logan clamped his mouth shut and nodded. "Alright."

Rex looked like he was about to march back upstairs and burn Elodie's office down. He opened his mouth, fury in his eyes.

Then, a phone rang.

Sienna pulled it from her bag. The screen lit up her face, and suddenly, the boredom vanished. The pallor was still there, but her eyes sparkled. She looked... soft.

"Dante?" she answered.

Rex froze.

"You're here?" A small, genuine smile touched her lips. "Alright, I'm coming out now."

She hung up.

"Has Mr. Wilson arrived?" Rex asked, the anger in his voice replaced by awe.

"Yes." Sienna's voice was tender now, like velvet. "My wound hasn't fully healed yet. Dante is too worried, so he came over to pick me up."

She didn't look at Elodie. Not even a glance. She started walking toward the revolving doors, her chin high.

"Mr. Hardin, we're leaving now. See you next time."

Rex stood there, torn. He looked at Elodie, who had just stepped off the elevator and was watching the scene with a smug little smirk. Then he looked at Sienna's retreating back that was proud, unbothered, walking away from the woman who had just stolen her meeting like it was nothing.

Something shifted in Rex's eyes. The anger at Elodie curdled into disgust. The pity for Sienna turned into admiration.

He didn't say a word to Elodie. He didn't even look at her again.

He turned and hurried after the Browns. "Ms. Brown, wait up. I'll walk you out."

Elodie stood alone in the middle of the lobby. The smirk slid off her face.

Through the glass doors, they could see a black SUV idling at the curb. Dante's driver stood by the back door, waiting. Sienna walked right past and got in the car.

As the car pulled away, Rex glanced back through the glass.

He stared right at Elodie.

It wasn't a look of anger anymore. It was colder. It was the look you give a bug on the windshield.

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Chapter 168: Chapter 168

The look Rex gave her was heavy, loaded with the kind of disdain men usually reserved for cockroaches. Elodie didn't need a manual to translate it. You're trash. Sienna's a saint. She'd seen that look a thousand times.

So she didn't flinch. She didn't drop her eyes. She just stared right back, cold and empty, then deliberately looked away as if he were a piece of uninteresting architecture.

Her heels clicked sharply on the marble as she walked past them. She walked parallel actually, close enough that her shoulder almost brushed Rex's arm, treating them like they were invisible furniture.

Rex actually froze mid-step.

He'd expected shame. A guilty flush, averted eyes, something. He hadn't expected this glacial indifference. It threw him off balance. A sneer tugged at his mouth. Unbelievable, that's what his face said. The audacity.

Logan Brown, trailing behind like a lost puppy, looked confused. He watched Elodie strut past, then looked at his daughter, waiting for a reaction.

Sienna didn't give one. Her steps didn't falter. If anything, her spine straightened. She just kept walking, her gaze fixed on the revolving doors ahead.

Outside, the heat of the day was dying. And there, leaning against the hood of a matte-black SUV, was Dante.

He was checking his watch, looking bored and dangerous. When he looked up and saw the group emerging, his eyes flicked over them. He saw Rex. He saw Logan. He saw Sienna.

And he saw Elodie.

His eyes met hers for a fraction of a second. No smile. No nod. Just a blank assessment, like he was checking traffic before pulling out. Then his gaze slid off her and locked onto Sienna. The change was instantaneous. The boredom evaporated, replaced by a sharp intensity.

Elodie felt her stomach twist with a sick, familiar lurch.

Don't look. Don't you dare look.

She kept her head high, walked straight to her silver coupe, and slid into the driver's seat. She punched the start button, the engine roaring to life a little louder than necessary.

As she pulled out of the slot, she had to pass them. Her eyes darted to the side mirror.

Dante had moved. He wasn't leaning anymore. He was right there, hand on the back door of the SUV, pulling it open for Sienna. He said something, and Sienna looked up at him with that soft, fragile look. He waited until she was settled, his hand brushing a stray hair from her face, before he shut the door.

Elodie slammed her foot on the gas. The tires screeched slightly as she merged into traffic.

Johnny flew in Friday afternoon. He tossed his bag on the floor and flopped onto the sofa.

"Rex Hardin?" he asked, after Elodie had given him the five-minute debrief. "The guy who looked at you like you killed his puppy?"

"The very same," Elodie said, not looking up from her laptop.

Johnny laughed. It was the laugh he used when he decided to crush someone's stock price. "Perfect. In that case, we don't need to cooperate with him anymore. It's better to avoid seeing him and getting annoyed. Tell procurement to blacklist him."

"Already done," she said.

"Good girl."

Saturday afternoon. The sun was slicing through the blinds. The dress for the banquet was laid out on the bed, it was a slash of emerald silk.

Bzzt. Bzzt.

The phone on the nightstand vibrated.

It was Liora. Elodie stared at the name. The screen went dark. Then, ten minutes later.

It rang again. She let it ring. And ring. And ring until it went to voicemail.

She wasn't angry. She wasn't sad. She just felt... static. A radio tuned between stations.

Liora had called three times this week. Elodie hadn't answered once. She told herself it was for the best. The kid was better off without her mucking things up. But every time the phone buzzed, her chest got tight.

This time, it wasn't a call. It was a text.

Liora: Mom? Nonna is making lasagna. I saved you a piece. Are you coming to dinner?

Elodie picked up the phone. Her thumb hovered over the screen.

Don't reply, the logical part of her brain said. If you reply, she'll think there's hope. Be the bad guy. It's cleaner this way.

But then another text came through.

Liora: Dad said I should keep trying. He said if I call enough, you'll eventually pick up. Is that true?

Elodie's breath hitched.

She dropped the phone face down on the mattress. The emerald dress shimmered in the sunlight, looking cold and beautiful and completely empty. She sat on the edge of the bed, put her head in her hands, and for the first time all week, she let herself feel like garbage.

EARLIER THAT AFTERNOON

The master bedroom was a mess of discarded clothes. Dante stood in front of the floor-length mirror, adjusting the cuffs of his tuxedo jacket.

On the bed, Liora lay on her stomach, kicking her legs in the air, her socks sliding down her ankles.

"Dad," she said, twisting her head to look at him. "Are you going to pick up Aunt Sienna soon?"

Dante's hands stilled for a fraction of a second. "Yes."

"Then you'll come back early tomorrow and take me to play?"

"Okay."

Ten minutes later, the front door clicked shut.

8:00 P.M.

The Grand Ballroom of the St. Regis was a galaxy of chandeliers and champagne flutes. The hum of conversation was just a low, sophisticated thrum.

Then the double doors opened.

The hum didn't die, but it shifted. Heads turned. Conversations paused mid-sentence.

Dante Wilson stood in the doorway. He wore black tie like it was a second skin, his expression unreadable, his presence sucking all the oxygen out of the room.

But it was the woman on his arm who drew the eye.

Sienna wore a gown the color of crushed rubies. It clung to her frame, the silk shimmering with every breath. She looked pale, ethereal, like a ghost haunting a ballroom.

Dante leaned down, whispering something in her ear. Sienna smiled, it was just a small, shy thing and squeezed his arm.

The ballroom was already humming when Harry, Levi, and their group arrived, drinks in hand, scanning the room. Near the entrance, Rex, Jimmy, and Yves had just set down their coats and were doing the same.

The atmosphere shifted.

Dante and Sienna had walked in.

Rex's eyes locked onto Sienna instantly, the cynicism in his face melting into something raw and admiring. She was wearing ruby red, a striking contrast to the sea of black tuxedos.

"Is that Raven?" Jimmy murmured, nodding toward the couple.

Yves followed his gaze and let out a low whistle. "Yes. She's gorgeous and captivating, right?"

Jimmy looked at her for a moment longer, taking in the pale skin, the dark hair, the way she held herself like she might break and then deliberately turned away. He took a sip of his drink. "Doesn't matter. She's Dante's."

Matteo's influence was undeniable. It was physical. People seemed to part for him before he even reached them. Within minutes, he and Sienna were swallowed by a crowd of suits and silk, a vortex of handshakes and forced smiles.

That's when the double doors opened again.

Johnny. And Elodie.

They were fashionably, painfully late. Harry, watching from the sidelines, narrowed his eyes. He hadn't been sure Elodie would show. She hated these things. But there she was, hanging off Johnny's arm.

Levi, standing next to Harry, felt his stomach do a complicated flip. He hated her. God, he hated her. But he couldn't deny the way the light caught the sharp line of her jaw, the clean, captivating aura she had that made everyone else in the room look like smudged charcoal sketches.

All that glitters is not gold, Levi thought, forcing himself to look at his shoes.

Rex had seen them too. The admiration for Sienna vanished, replaced by a sneer so fast it looked painful.

Yves, however, was still staring, awestruck. "Wait, who is that with Johnny? She's... wow. She's really something."

Rex made a sound of disgust in his throat. "That's Elodie Miller. Don't waste your time."

"The one from Cole?" Yves asked, surprised. "She doesn't seem the type to..."

"To what?" Rex snapped. "To be a viper? Trust me. I saw it two days ago. She looked Sienna right in the eye after humiliating her and walked away like she was stepping over trash."

Yves looked genuinely confused. "No way. She looks too classy for that. Maybe there's some history between her and Miss Brown that we don't know about?"

"I don't care if they were sisters in a past life," Rex spat, turning his back on her. "Just because there's a grudge doesn't mean she can take it out on innocent people. It's pathetic."

Jimmy stayed neutral, swirling his scotch. "Well, she's here. And she's with Johnny Gray. So maybe keep your voice down."

Over by the bar, the current was just as strong.

Cole was the hot topic of the year. Everyone wanted a piece of Johnny. He moved through the crowd like a politician, shaking hands, laughing at jokes. Elodie stood half a step behind him, silent, her expression bored but her eyes missing nothing.

"Mr. Gray, you're killing it! The CUAP project was genius!" someone shouted.

"Johnny, when's the IPO? You gotta let us in!"

"Is it true you're moving into Bellini Pack territory?"

Johnny held up his hands, grinning that shark grin. "Whoa, whoa, easy. You're all going to make me blush. Cole's success today is the result of our entire team's efforts."

He scanned the crowd, found Elodie leaning against a pillar, and crooked a finger at her. She pushed off the pillar and walked over, smooth as oil.

Johnny draped an arm around her shoulders. The crowd went quiet. They all knew she was his right hand, but they didn't know what she did. They didn't know her true identity.

"Especially Elodie," Johnny said, his voice carrying. "Her contribution is indispensable."

A ripple of whispers. She was ghost engineer. The one who solved the unsolvable.

"Whether referring to the previous CUAP or the two recent projects, the core technology has been handled by her," Johnny added, leaning into the mic someone was holding. "Though her identity can't be disclosed, emphasizing her importance is still acceptable."

He looked at Elodie. She didn't smile. She just gave a tiny, almost imperceptible nod.

From across the room, Rex watched the scene, his face stone.

"Elodie?" Yves choked on his drink. "That's Elodie? The tech genius is... her?"

"It explains it," Jimmy said quietly. "The arrogance. Smart people are always arrogant."

"She's not smart," Rex lied, his jaw tight. "She's just cruel."

But the damage was done. The room was buzzing. Elodie Miller wasn't just Johnny's girlfriend. She was the brain. And as she turned to whisper something in Johnny's ear, catching Rex's stare for a split second, her eyes were cold, clear, and utterly unbothered.

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Chapter 169: Chapter 169

Johnny's words landed and for like two seconds, people looked interested. Then reality kicked in.

Wait. Didn't she just start working there?

The math wasn't mathing. But nobody was gonna say that out loud. Instead, they all just smiled and nodded like Johnny had said something totally normal instead of something that screamed "I'm trying to make my girl sound impressive."

Look, everyone got it. Johnny was successful, Elodie was gorgeous, and men say dumb things when they're into someone. Tale as old as time.

"Miss Miller truly combines both talent and beauty," some guy said, and honestly? That line was so rehearsed it practically had dust on it.

A few others mumbled similar crap. The kind of compliments that sound nice but mean absolutely nothing. Then they went back to their drinks, already bored.

Meanwhile, Sienna was about to crack her champagne glass.

She wasn't even trying to hide it anymore. Just standing there, staring, her whole body tense like she was watching a car crash in slow motion.

She looked over at Dante.

He glanced at Elodie for maybe a second. Maybe. Then looked away like he'd just checked the weather and found it mildly cloudy. His face showed nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Sienna hated that she'd even looked. She turned away, annoyed, and caught Harry Becker staring across the room like he was trying to burn a hole through something with his eyes.

She followed where he was looking. Johnny. Obviously. Harry wanted that Cole deal bad. Everyone knew it. He was probably just waiting for the perfect time to walk over and start talking business.

It wasn't about Elodie. Why would it be? Harry didn't even like her. He'd made that pretty obvious before.

"What?" Harry said suddenly.

Shit. He'd noticed her staring at him.

"Nothing," Sienna said.

He looked at her for a second, then shrugged it off. The little crowd around Johnny and Elodie was breaking up now. People were wandering off to find more interesting conversations.

"I'm gonna go say hi," Harry announced. He straightened his jacket, messed with his watch. Getting ready, then he looked at Dante. "Dante, you still thinking about working with Cole? We could go together."

Dante swirled his drink around, the ice clinking. "Go ahead. I'm good."

"Suit yourself."

Harry walked over like he owned the place, an easy smile already on his lips.

"Mr. Gray," he said, all friendly. "Miss Miller."

Johnny's face changed completely. The smile stayed but everything behind it went cold. Like someone had flipped a switch.

"Mr. Becker," Johnny said. His tone could've frozen water. "Didn't expect to see you."

"Mr. Becker," Elodie said. Just that. Two words with no emotion.

Then Rex Hardin showed up because apparently things weren't awkward enough.

The man looked straight past Elodie like she literally wasn't there. Just focused on Johnny.

"Mr. Gray."

Oh boy. The temperature dropped fast.

Johnny's expression went from cold to arctic. "Mr. Hardin." He bit the words out. "Didn't see you. We've been busy."

Rex finally looked at Elodie. And the look on his face? Like he'd stepped in something gross and just noticed.

Nobody said anything after that. They just stood there in this horrible silence while the rest of the party went on around them. People laughing, talking, having fun. And their little group just frozen in the world's most uncomfortable moment.

Elodie didn't move. Didn't react. Her face was completely calm, like nothing was wrong. Like she wasn't being treated like garbage right in front of everyone.

Rex knew exactly what Elodie had probably told Johnny. Women like her always twisted things, made themselves look like the victim. Whatever story she'd spun, it clearly worked.

Still, he wasn't about to back down. "A few days ago, I came by Cole," he said, keeping his voice even. "Not sure if you knew about that, Mr. Gray?"

"Oh, I knew." Johnny's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Elodie told me all about it. I looked at your proposal too. It's good, actually. Solid work." He paused, and Rex could feel the "but" coming from a mile away. "But personally? I'm not interested. So I'm afraid the collaboration isn't going to happen, Mr. Hardin."

Rex's jaw tightened. Was this guy seriously letting a woman cloud his judgment?

"I thought you were the type to keep business and personal stuff separate," Rex said. He didn't bother hiding the edge in his voice.

"I am," Johnny shot back, not even pretending anymore. "Depends on the situation though."

Translation: when it came to Elodie, all bets were off. Johnny wasn't even trying to be professional about it.

Rex felt his frustration spike. His father had been crystal clear, focus on Cole Technologies for the next two years. These projects had potential, way more than most people realized. Which meant he couldn't just walk away because Johnny Gray had a thing for his employee.

"If you think my proposal needs work," Rex said carefully, "I'll bring you a better one. Soon."

He glanced at Harry, then back at Johnny. "Since you're busy, I won't take up more of your time. Excuse me."

He turned and walked away before he said something he'd regret. Not once did he mention Elodie's name. Didn't need to. They all knew what this was really about.

Harry had been standing there the whole time, watching the exchange like it was a tennis match. It didn't take a genius to figure out why Johnny had shot Rex down. This had Elodie's fingerprints all over it.

But Harry wasn't stupid. He didn't ask. Instead, he acted like he'd heard nothing interesting at all.

"I've actually got a new proposal ready too," Harry said smoothly. "Mr. Gray, Miss Miller... would you two be free Monday? Maybe we could grab dinner, talk it over?"

Johnny had never really liked Harry. Even though Harry's proposals were always top-notch, there was just something about the guy that rubbed him the wrong way.

But now Harry was including Elodie in the invitation. Being respectful. That earned him a few points.

"Monday?" Johnny kept his tone professional. "Not sure yet. If I'm free, I'll reach out. Don't wait around for me, Mr. Becker."

Harry smiled like that was exactly the answer he'd expected. "I'll hold you to that, Mr. Gray."

Right then, the host stepped up onto the small stage at the front of the hall. The chatter died down as he started talking, thanking everyone for coming, the usual speech. Then the music shifted into something slow and elegant, and he took his wife's hand. They started dancing.

Applause rippled through the crowd. Within seconds, other couples were joining them on the floor. Women in expensive gowns, men in tailored suits, all of them moving together like they'd rehearsed it.

A young, pretty woman, clearly from money based on her jewelry alone, appeared next to Harry. She smiled up at him. "Mr. Becker, would you dance with me?"

Harry's expression changed. Just slightly. Something flickered across his face, too quick to read.

His eyes shifted. Toward Elodie.

It was fast. Subtle. Most people wouldn't have even noticed.

Johnny didn't. He was too busy turning toward Elodie with this ridiculous grin on his face. He made this over-the-top bow, hand extended like some character from a period drama.

"Beautiful and lovely Miss Miller," he said, hamming it up completely, "may I have the incredible honor of dancing with you?"

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Chapter 170: Chapter 170

Elodie smiled at him. "Of course. I'd love to."

She put her hand in his, and Johnny led her onto the dance floor. His grip was warm, confident.

Harry watched them go, then turned to the girl waiting beside him and offered his hand. She took it, looking pleased.

The music swelled as Elodie and Johnny stepped into the crowd of dancers. And that's when it happened... their eyes landed right on Dante and Sienna, who were just about to start dancing too.

For a split second, everyone was just looking at each other.

Elodie was about to glance away when she caught it. Dante's mouth curved up slightly. Was that... did he just smile at her?

Her chest did this stupid little jump before her brain caught up.

She frowned, focusing harder. No. He wasn't looking at her at all. The smile was aimed past her, at Sienna. Of course it was. He probably hadn't even registered that Elodie was standing there.

She turned her attention back to Johnny and tried to focus on the steps. One, two, three. Left, right. Don't think about it.

Around them, the dance floor was filling up fast. All the eligible bachelors like Rex, Jimmy, Levi and co were basically celebrity sightings at these things. Girls were already circling, hoping for a chance.

Rex looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. After his disaster of a conversation with Johnny, he'd planted himself near the edge of the room, eyes constantly drifting toward Sienna. He clearly had zero interest in dancing.

Jimmy looked equally thrilled about the whole thing, which is to say, not at all.

But then some older relatives started giving them looks. You know the kind. The "you better ask someone to dance or we'll have words later" kind. So eventually, Rex and Jimmy gave in and reluctantly led some well-connected girls onto the floor. Duty calls and all that.

Levi, on the other hand, was having the time of his life. That guy loved this stuff. He was already charming his way through his third dance partner.

Elodie moved through the steps easily. There was something about the way she carried herself tonight, so calmly, graceful, that qipao flowing with every turn. She wasn't trying to stand out, but she did anyway. The quiet elegance just pulled people's eyes toward her.

She could feel it. The stares. The attention.

Johnny noticed too. He was grinning like he'd won something.

Within minutes, other guys started making their moves. Trying to cut in, swap partners. It was a whole thing.

Some guy named Yves danced closer with his partner, clearing his throat. "Mr. Gray, mind if we switch for a bit?"

His eyes were locked on Elodie like Johnny wasn't even there.

Johnny's expression went ice cold. "Yeah, I mind. A lot, actually."

Yves blinked. "Oh. Uh... okay then."

Awkward.

But then, barely a minute later, another voice spoke up. This time directed at Elodie.

"Miss Miller, right?" It was a girl, she was sweet-looking, probably early twenties. She was currently dancing with Jimmy but looking at Johnny like he was a three-course meal. "Would you be okay with switching partners?"

Elodie paused mid-step and glanced over. The girl smiled hopefully.

Elodie looked at Johnny. He looked stunned. Completely blindsided.

She couldn't help it, she smiled. Just a little. "I don't mind. Mr. Hall, are you okay with it?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Sure. Why not."

Johnny's mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again.

"Wait, so... my opinion doesn't matter here or...?"

Nobody answered him.

Johnny paused, looking at Jimmy. Then he looked back at the girl who wanted to dance with him.

Okay, fine. Jimmy was actually a solid guy. Successful, respectful, good family. Not a bad match for Elodie at all, now that he thought about it.

Maybe this wasn't such a terrible idea.

"Alright," Johnny said, making up his mind. "Let's switch."

And just like that, they swapped partners. Smooth as anything.

Elodie's hand left Johnny's and was suddenly in a stranger's grip. Her other hand rested against Jimmy's shoulder. The whole thing felt weird. Wrong, somehow. Too close to someone she barely knew.

Jimmy kept his touch light though, respectful. His hand on her waist was barely there, gentle. He clearly noticed she looked uncomfortable.

Actually, watching her reaction, Jimmy got the feeling she wasn't used to this kind of thing. Like maybe she hadn't dated much. Or at all. There was something almost... innocent about the way she held herself.

They'd met before. Briefly. But never really talked.

"Jimmy," he said, introducing himself properly. "That's my name."

Elodie took a second to adjust. Being this close to someone she didn't know felt strange, but she forced herself to relax. She looked up at him, her voice calm. "Elodie."

Jimmy went still for a beat.

"Elodie," he repeated.

It suited her. Really suited her.

He didn't say that out loud though.

Around them, people were noticing. Rex glanced over, eyes narrowing. Levi looked too, eyebrows raised. Harry's attention drifted their way. Even Dante and Sienna turned to look.

Partner swapping wasn't unusual at these things. Happened all the time.

But Elodie and Jimmy together... They looked good. Really good, actually. Like they belonged together.

Rex's frown deepened.

Harry's steps faltered slightly.

"Mr. Becker?" his dance partner asked, noticing.

Harry blinked and looked back at her. "Sorry."

"It's fine," she said sweetly.

Harry's mind was elsewhere though. Swapping partners was normal, sure. He wouldn't mind switching with Dante or Rex or whoever.

But with Elodie?

That felt different somehow.

Sienna was watching too. She'd seen Rex earlier tonight, but Jimmy hadn't come over with him. She had no idea who this guy was.

But judging by the way Rex and Yves treated him? He was important. Probably just as powerful as Rex, maybe more.

And now he was dancing with Elodie. Looking at her with interest. Actual interest.

Sienna's jaw tightened.

"Frank," Levi's voice cut through the moment. He was grinning. "Want to swap for a bit?"

Sienna pulled her attention back.

Dante looked down at her. "What do you think?"

She smiled. Forced it a little, but it stayed in place. "Sure. I don't mind."

Dante nodded and smoothly traded partners with Levi.

Levi's partner, a young woman with wide eyes and an expensive dress, looked absolutely shocked that Sienna had actually agreed. And now she was in Dante's arms.

Dante Wilson. Alpha of the Bellini Pack. The most powerful man in the room.

She forgot how to breathe for a second. Forgot how to move. Her feet just stopped working.

Her face went bright red as she realized she'd completely frozen up. She looked up at him, mortified.

Dante noticed. Of course he did.

His voice came out low, almost gentle. "Relax. You're fine."

The girl took a shaky breath. Dante's calm voice helped. She mumbled an apology, then started following his lead, her steps getting steadier.

Sienna didn't mind switching partners. Why would she? She was confident. Secure.

But watching that girl stare up at Dante like he'd hung the moon, cheeks all flushed, eyes practically turning into hearts... yeah, that bothered her. Her eyebrows pulled together.

Meanwhile, Levi was having his own crisis.

Dancing with Sienna felt weird. She was his brother's girl. Where was he even supposed to put his hands? He held her like she might break, keeping as much distance as physically possible while still technically dancing.

Sienna noticed. "It's just a dance," she said. "Dante doesn't care."

Levi relaxed a little, finally smiling. "Yeah. You're right."

While they talked, Elodie and Dante were getting closer on the dance floor. Not on purpose, just the way the crowd was moving, pushing everyone together.

Elodie didn't even notice.

Not until she heard his voice right next to her.

"Jimmy, want to switch?"

Her head snapped up. Dante was right there, close enough that she could see the exact shade of his eyes.

Jimmy looked at Elodie, clearly asking permission. "Miss Miller, are you—"

He didn't get to finish.

Dante had already passed his partner over to Jimmy. Just smoothly handed her off like it was decided. And if Jimmy didn't catch her, the poor girl was going to hit the floor.

So Jimmy had no choice. He let go of Elodie and grabbed his new partner by the waist, steadying her.

Which left Elodie suddenly off balance, until Dante caught her. His arm went around her waist, solid and sure, pulling her in.

For a second, Elodie's brain just stopped working.

Then it kicked back in and her first thought was to shove him away. Get some space. Get away from him.

"Relax."

Dante's voice was low, almost amused. Like he'd known exactly what she was going to do. His grip tightened on her waist, keeping her in place.

"You—" she started.

She wanted to push harder. Make a scene if she had to. But they were surrounded by people. Everyone was watching. And if she caused a scene, it would be everywhere by morning.

He came to her. He initiated this. Which meant he wanted something.

She stopped fighting and went cold instead. "What do you want?"

Dante looked down at her. Her expression was ice, but he didn't seem bothered at all. Just kept that casual tone like they were discussing the weather.

"When are you planning to call Liora back?"

Elodie blinked. "Soon."

Dante smiled. Not a nice smile. A knowing one. "Ten days?"

She froze for half a second. "...Around that, yeah."

Ten days would be the end of the month. That's when she called Liora. Once a month. One day out of thirty.

It used to be every day. Then every week. Now it was once a month, and even then, Liora barely wanted to talk to her.

But she was still Liora's mother. That had to count for something.

Dante nodded. "Alright."

That seemed to be it. Conversation over. Nothing left to say.

Elodie gave him a look that clearly meant let go of me now.

He didn't.

Instead, he asked, "How have you been?"