

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 171[1,549 words]

Chapter 171: Chapter 171

Elodie pressed her lips together. What was he trying to do?

"That's my business," she said flatly.

Whether she was fine or not wasn't his problem anymore. Hadn't been for a long time.

Dante just shrugged like he'd only been making small talk. When she didn't answer, he didn't push. Instead, he quietly steered them off the dance floor, then let go and walked away without another word.

Nobody had seen it coming, that Dante would suddenly be dancing with Elodie. People were staring now, whispering. Confused.

Sienna bit down on her lip hard enough to hurt.

But she pulled herself together fast. If Dante had feelings for Elodie, it would've happened years ago. It didn't. So whatever that was, it didn't mean anything.

When Dante came back, Sienna stepped off the floor to meet him. "Did you need to tell her something?"

"Just talked about Liora," Dante said simply.

Sienna nodded. "Oh. Okay."

That made sense. If it wasn't about their daughter, Dante wouldn't bother talking to Elodie at all.

She smiled and held out her hand. "Want to dance again?"

Dante took it and followed her back onto the floor.

On the other side of the room, Johnny had watched the whole thing with his jaw tight. When Elodie told him it was about Liora, he relaxed a little. But only a little.

"Stay away from him from now on," Johnny said quietly.

"I will," Elodie replied. She meant it.

That's when Jimmy walked over, looking genuinely apologetic. "Miss Miller, I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have switched without asking you first."

After the swap, he'd noticed how stiff she'd gotten. How cold. She clearly didn't want to be anywhere near Dante.

Jimmy had put two and two together. Dante was Sienna's boyfriend. Sienna and Elodie didn't get along. So Dante probably grabbed Elodie to say something about Sienna. Maybe even to defend her or something.

Elodie shook her head. "It's not your fault. I would've done the same thing if I were you."

She sounded sincere. Calm. Like she really didn't blame him.

Jimmy had already noticed during their dance that Elodie wasn't the type to play games or work a room. She was quiet. Honest. When she looked at him, there was no hidden agenda, no flirtation. Just a polite stranger being polite back.

He held out his hand again. "Want to dance? Make up for that mess?"

Elodie hesitated.

But Jimmy's expression was open. Friendly. There was nothing weird about it. He wasn't hitting on her, he was just trying to be decent. Apologizing properly.

So she took his hand. "Alright."

He smiled and led her back onto the floor.

Across the room, Harry had already left the dance area. But when he saw Elodie and Jimmy dancing again, his expression darkened. Just a flicker, but it was there.

Sienna noticed too. Her eyes followed them, something uneasy twisting in her chest.

And Dante?

He noticed.

Dante's eyebrow lifted, amused by something. He smiled just slightly, then kept dancing with Sienna like nothing had happened.

A minute later, his phone buzzed. He glanced at it, then left the floor with Sienna following.

Levi had also had enough dancing for one night. He headed over to where Harry was standing, and Sienna joined them.

Harry's eyes were still locked on the dance floor. On Elodie, specifically.

She was still dancing with Jimmy.

Levi grabbed a drink from a passing waiter and took a long sip, his gaze drifting to Elodie too.

"Jimmy seems pretty interested in her," he said casually. "But even if he is, the Hall family would never go for it."

He didn't spell it out, but the implication was clear. Elodie was divorced. Had a kid. Her family was a mess. The Halls were one of the most powerful families in the European Pack, hell, in the whole region. There was no way they'd let their son get involved with someone like her.

Levi didn't say all that, but Sienna heard it loud and clear.

She'd been in the capital long enough to know the big names. Wilson, Becker, Kwan, Hall, Hardin, those families ran everything. When she'd first seen Jimmy tonight, she'd wondered if he was part of the Hall family.

Turns out she was right.

Still, watching Jimmy with Elodie... maybe he did like her. But not in a romantic way. More like friendly, polite way.

As for Elodie ever becoming part of the Hall family? Yeah, that wasn't happening.

Just then, Jimmy and Elodie left the dance floor.

Jimmy said something to her, nodded politely, and walked away. No lingering looks. No hesitation. Just gone.

Sienna's smile widened slightly.

See? She'd been right. Elodie didn't have whatever it took to make a guy like Jimmy fall for her at first sight. She just wasn't that girl.

"I'm starving," Levi announced, stretching. "Anyone else want food?"

He'd noticed Elodie and Johnny heading toward the buffet tables.

Harry glanced that way too. "Yeah. Let's go."

Sienna looked over at Dante, who was still on his phone across the room. She caught his eye and nodded toward the buffet. He nodded back.

So the three of them headed over.

The second they got close, people swarmed. Handshakes, and introductions, and compliments were exchanged. A few bold ones even started pitching business ideas to Harry and Levi right there by the shrimp cocktail.

Sienna stood off to the side, watching them work the room.

Then Rex and Jimmy showed up.

Rex spotted her immediately and walked over. "Miss Brown."

Sienna smiled. "Mr. Hardin."

"Where's Mr. Wilson? Thought he'd be with you."

"He's on a call."

Rex glanced at Jimmy, then back at her. "Oh, right. You two haven't met. Miss Brown, this is my brother Jimmy."

He turned to Jimmy. "Jim, this is Miss Sienna Brown."

Jimmy held out his hand, polite as ever. "Nice to meet you, Miss Brown."

Sienna shook it. "You too."

Right then, Elodie and Johnny walked up to the buffet table.

Johnny saw the whole group standing there and let out a quiet "tsk" under his breath.

There were some pastries over by the far table that Johnny had been eyeing all night. He was about to head that way when someone grabbed his arm and started talking business. Again.

Meanwhile, after Jimmy greeted Sienna, she turned and nodded to the others.

"Mr. Becker. Mr. Kwan."

Harry gave a small nod back.

That's when Dante finished his call and walked over.

Levi suddenly looked uncomfortable. He scratched his nose, cleared his throat. The thing was, Jimmy and Elodie had spent a decent amount of time dancing together earlier. And Elodie was still technically Dante's wife, so...

This could get weird.

Harry's eyes flickered toward Dante, watching.

But Dante? Didn't seem to care at all.

He walked right up to Jimmy and stuck out his hand like they were old friends.

"Mr. Hall."

"Mr. Wilson," Jimmy replied, shaking it.

Dante raised his glass slightly, clinked it against Jimmy's, and took a sip. "Been a while."

Jimmy's grip tightened on his own glass. "Yeah. It has."

Levi relaxed. Okay. False alarm. Dante clearly didn't give a damn.

The group settled into conversation, talking about business, upcoming projects, the usual stuff.

Across the room, Elodie and Johnny were still trapped in someone's orbit, nodding along as they pitched some venture capital thing. It took forever to politely extract themselves.

By the time they were free, Dante and his group had moved on. They didn't cross paths again.

Eventually, the night wound down. Elodie and Johnny said their goodbyes to the host and left.

Monday morning, Johnny had barely settled into his office when his assistant knocked.

"Mr. Gray, there's a General Manager from Wilson Group downstairs. Says he wants to discuss a partnership."

Johnny looked up. "Who's with him?"

"Miss Sienna Brown."

Johnny closed his eyes. Of course.

If Dante had shown up himself, Johnny would've told him to get lost. Easy. But the General Manager? That guy was decent. They had a good working relationship. Turning him away would be rude. Unprofessional.

Dante knew exactly what he was doing.

And he'd sent Sienna along too. Just to make it even more awkward.

Johnny rubbed his temples, already feeling the headache coming on.

He got up and went to find Elodie.

"Wilson Group's downstairs," he said. "General Manager and Sienna. Wanting to talk partnership."

Elodie didn't even blink. "Okay. So meet with them."

"You sure?"

"Meeting her isn't a problem," Elodie said simply. "Doesn't mean we're agreeing to anything."

Johnny nodded. "Fair. You want to sit in?"

"Yeah. I'll come."

By the time they got to the conference room, the General Manager and Sienna had been waiting a few minutes.

Both stood when Johnny walked in.

Then Elodie followed him through the door.

Sienna's expression shifted, just for a second but she recovered fast. She greeted the General Manager first, then Johnny.

"Mr. Gray."

Johnny nodded. "Miss Brown. Please, sit."

The General Manager's eyes landed on Elodie, and recognition flickered across his face. He'd worked with her before, back when she was still at Wilson Group. She'd been good at her job. Really good. And memorable... hard not to be with a face like that.

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Before he sat down, he couldn't help himself. "Wait... aren't you Secretary Miller?"

He smiled, the kind of genuine smile you give someone you actually remember. "I was just thinking the other day, haven't seen you in forever. So you left Wilson and came here?"

Back when Elodie worked at Wilson Group, she'd crossed paths with him a few times. He'd always found her competent. Sharp.

Elodie smiled back politely. "Yeah. I've been here a little while now."

"Good for you. Really, good for you," he said, still smiling.

The pleasantries wrapped up quickly after that. Time to get to business.

The General Manager slid his folder across the table to Johnny. Sienna did the same with hers.

Johnny took both, then without even looking at Sienna's, he passed it straight to Elodie.

"El, can you look over Miss Brown's proposal?"

Elodie nodded. "Sure."

Sienna's hand froze mid-reach for her water glass. She didn't say anything, but her jaw tightened just slightly.

Elodie opened the folder and started reading.

She wasn't one of those speed-readers who could flip through a document in thirty seconds, but she was fast. Faster than most. Her eyes moved steadily down each page, taking it in, processing.

A few minutes later, she closed the folder.

She handed it back to Sienna, meeting her eyes calmly. "It's obvious you put work into this. But there are problems. A lot of them, actually. Compared to other companies that have pitched to us, this doesn't stand out. At all."

Sienna's smile didn't waver. "Is that so?"

Her tone was light, but her eyes were sharp. Focused.

"Well then," Sienna continued smoothly, "maybe you could tell me what those problems are? That way I can fix them based on your feedback."

Elodie saw it immediately. The setup. The trap.

Sienna was baiting her. If Elodie listed specific issues, Sienna would have ammunition to argue back, twist things, make it look like Elodie was being unreasonable or nitpicky.

But Elodie wasn't biting.

She smiled, just a little. "Miss Brown, the problems in your proposal are yours to figure out. If you can't spot them yourself, why should we do it for you? Does that seem reasonable to you?"

"You need to understand, we don't owe you a partnership. If you're asking us to walk you through what's wrong, that tells me you don't even know what this company needs. And if that's the case, then yeah, I'm even more sure your proposal isn't a fit."

Sienna's face stayed calm, but inside, she was scrambling.

She had been setting a trap. She'd been so sure Elodie would take the bait, list out a bunch of criticisms, and then Sienna could counter each one, making her look petty or inexperienced.

But Elodie had flipped it. Turned it around completely. Now Sienna was the one sitting in a hole she'd dug herself.

She kept her expression neutral. Didn't let the frustration show.

"Miss Miller, I think you misunderstood," Sienna said evenly. "What I meant was, partnerships are about working together. If there are issues, wouldn't it make sense to talk through them? Improve the proposal together? That benefits both sides, doesn't it?"

Elodie blinked, genuinely caught off guard by the audacity.

She tilted her head slightly. "Is this your first time negotiating a partnership?"

Sienna's eyebrows pulled together. Where was this going?

Before she could respond, Elodie's smile softened. Her voice stayed gentle, almost kind.

"The kind of 'working together to improve things' you're talking about? That's something you do at home. Or maybe in school. But in business, people show up for one reason which is profit. If there's no benefit, there's no deal. And if we've got better options sitting on the table, why would we waste time on something that doesn't help us?"

Her tone was so warm. So polite. She was even smiling.

But the words hit like ice water.

Sienna felt her stomach drop.

She'd underestimated Elodie. Badly.

Looking at her now, so calm, composed, completely in control... Sienna realized she'd walked into this meeting thinking she had the upper hand. She didn't.

Elodie slid the teacup across the table toward Sienna, still smiling. "Miss Brown, please. Have some tea."

Sienna stared at the cup.

This was a power move. A polite dismissal wrapped in hospitality. And refusing it? That would make her look petty. Rude.

She had no choice.

She picked up the cup. "Thank you, Miss Miller."

"Of course, Miss Brown."

Johnny had been watching the whole thing in silence, trying not to react.

Honestly? He'd been worried. Sienna had a way of getting under people's skin, twisting situations to her advantage. He'd been afraid Elodie might get cornered, might stumble.

But she hadn't.

She'd handled it perfectly. Shut Sienna down without even raising her voice.

He was genuinely impressed.

After wrapping up the discussion with the General Manager, Johnny walked them both downstairs to see them out.

The second they were gone, he turned to Elodie and gave her a huge grin, thumbs up.

"That was incredible."

Elodie looked down, a small smile tugging at her lips. "I worked at Wilson Group for years. As a secretary. You pick things up."

Johnny blinked. Right. He'd almost forgotten.

She might've been stuck in a dead-end position there, but she'd still dealt with clients, negotiations, and high-stakes meetings. She'd been quietly learning the whole time.

"So," Johnny asked, leaning against the wall, "was there actually something wrong with Sienna's proposal? Or were you just shutting her down?"

"No, there were real problems."

The proposal was detailed. The technical stuff was solid, probably because Dante had helped her with it. Elodie would bet money on that.

But when it came to the actual implementation? There were gaps. Small ones, but they were there.

Johnny nodded, then switched gears. "What about Wilson Group's proposal?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking almost sheepish. "You know Dante's in our field. He knows the tech inside and out."

Wilson Group had money. Tons of it. They had some of the best engineers in the industry. And on top of that, Dante himself was sharp when it came to technology.

So the proposal he'd sent over wasn't just good.

It was perfect.

That's probably why Dante had waited this long to reach out. He knew Johnny would have a hard time saying no.

Elodie wasn't surprised.

She looked at Johnny, her expression calm. "When it's time to decide, just look at the facts. Judge it on merit."

Working with a solid team meant fewer headaches down the line. And whatever personal mess existed between her and Dante? That didn't matter when it came to business. Business was business.

Later that afternoon, Rex showed up at Cole.

This time, Johnny didn't even bother meeting with him.

Rex waited around for a bit, realized nobody was coming, and left.

Not long after he was gone, Harry arrived.

Johnny and Elodie met with him together.

They went through Harry's new proposal, flipping pages, scanning numbers. At one point, Johnny glanced up at Elodie. She met his eyes. They didn't need to say anything, they were on the same page.

Elodie looked back at Harry and smiled. "Mr. Becker, we look forward to working with you."

Harry had been watching them both carefully. It was clear Elodie had real influence here. More than he'd initially thought. His eyes shifted between her and Johnny for a second before he stood and extended his hand.

"Looking forward to it as well."

They sat back down and started hammering out contract details.

Hours passed. Outside, the sky faded from blue to orange to deep purple. They were almost done with the preliminary stuff when Elodie's phone buzzed on the table.

She glanced at the screen.

And saw it was Liora.

Her chest tightened.

The phone kept ringing. She let it go to voicemail.

It rang again with the same name. She declined it again.

This time, Liora didn't call back.

Meanwhile, across town, Dante picked up his phone.

Half an hour later, he walked through the front door of his house.

Liora was in bed, an IV drip attached to her arm. Her face was pale, a thin sheen of sweat still clinging to her forehead. When she saw him, her voice came out small and tired.

"Dad..."

Dante sat on the edge of the bed, pulling out a handkerchief. He gently wiped her forehead. "Does your stomach still hurt?"

"A little better now..."

She had improved, but not by much. The pain was still there, dull and lingering.

Dante didn't lecture her about eating something she shouldn't have. He could see she was already miserable. And more than that... she looked sad. Upset about something beyond just feeling sick.

"You want me to call Aunt Sienna?" he asked quietly. "She could come keep you company."

Normally, Liora would've lit up at that. She loved when Sienna came over.

But this time, she grabbed his hand and shook her head hard.

"No. I want Mommy."

Her voice cracked just a little.

She loved Sienna. She did. But when she felt this bad, the person she wanted, the person she needed, was her mother.

She wanted her mom to be the one sitting here. Holding her hand. Telling her it would be okay.

Dante looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded.

"Okay."

He didn't let go of her hand. Instead, he pulled out his phone with his free one and dialed Elodie's number.

Elodie had just wrapped things up with Harry. They were about to head out for dinner when her phone rang again.

It was Dante. Her stomach dropped.

She thought about those two missed calls from Liora. Something was wrong.

She hesitated, then answered.

"Hello?"

Dante's voice came through, calmly but direct to business. "Liora has mild food poisoning. She's at home on an IV. She's asking for you."

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Elodie's POV~

My hand tightened around the phone. "I understand. I'll come right away."

I hung up and looked at Harry. "I'm sorry. Something came up. We'll have to do dinner another time."

Harry's expression shifted, reading something in my face. "Is it Liora?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Is she okay?"

Dante hadn't given me details. I had no idea how bad it actually was. "I think she's stable now."

"Good." Harry looked relieved. He didn't push for more information.

I said a quick goodbye to Johnny and left.

The drive to the villa felt longer than it actually was. My mind kept circling back to Liora's missed calls. She'd called twice. Twice. And I'd ignored both of them.

When I finally got to her room, Dante was sitting at the desk, his laptop open, working like nothing was wrong.

He looked up when I walked in. "You're back."

I didn't answer. Just set my bag down and went straight to the bed.

Liora was asleep. The IV drip was still attached to her arm, the clear liquid slowly making its way down the tube. Her little face looked so small against the pillow, her eyebrows pulled together even in sleep.

I didn't wake her. I just stood there for a second, watching her breathe.

Then I turned to Dante. "How is she?"

"She was in pain when I got home. It's better now."

"Okay."

I moved to the couch and pulled a book out of my bag, trying to settle in and wait for her to wake up. But I couldn't focus on the words. They just blurred together.

"Have you eaten?"

I glanced up. Dante was watching me.

"No."

He opened his mouth like he was about to say something, but then Liora stirred.

Her eyes fluttered open, unfocused at first. Then she saw me.

"Mom?" Her voice came out soft, surprised. "You're back?"

"Yeah." I closed the book I'd barely opened and went to sit on the edge of her bed.

Before I could say anything, she pushed herself up and threw her arms around my neck.

"Mom, you're finally here."

Her little body was warm against mine. I froze for just a second before wrapping my arms around her carefully, making sure not to pull on the IV.

God, I'd missed this.

Liora had been on the drip for over half an hour now, and she was clearly feeling better. Her stomach growled loudly in the quiet room.

"Mom, I'm hungry."

Dante spoke up from the desk. "I can have someone bring food up."

Liora peeked out from where she was buried against my shoulder. "No. I want Mommy to make something."

I smiled, brushing her hair back. "It's too late for that tonight, sweetheart. But I'll cook for you next time, okay?"

She pouted. "...Okay." Then she perked up again. "But will you eat with me?"

"Of course."

That made her smile. A real one. The kind I hadn't seen in weeks.

The IV was almost done, so Dante came over and carefully removed the needle. Liora immediately held her arms up to me.

"Mom, carry me downstairs?"

I picked her up, settling her on my hip like I used to when she was smaller.

Except she wasn't as small anymore. She was heavier. Taller, even. Had she really grown this much in just twenty days?

Twenty days. That's all it had been since I'd last held her like this.

It felt like forever.

"Mom?"

I blinked. Liora was looking at me, her little hand reaching up to touch my cheek.

I didn't say anything. Just carried her downstairs.

Behind me, I heard Dante close his laptop and follow. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, he reached over and pinched Liora's cheek gently.

She was in too good a mood to care. She just giggled.

At the table, Liora sat right next to me, chattering away between bites about all the things she wanted me to cook for breakfast tomorrow. Pancakes. Eggs. That French toast I used to make.

I watched her animated face and felt something twist in my chest.

"Mom has to leave soon," I said carefully. "So those dishes will have to wait until next time, okay?"

Dante glanced at me from across the table but didn't say anything.

Liora's face fell immediately. "Mom, you're always working. You finally came back and now you're leaving already? I don't want you to go!"

Her bottom lip stuck out, trembling just a little.

Goodness.

I looked at her and realized how stupid this once-a-month thing was. Showing up for a few hours and then disappearing again. What kind of mother did that make me?

"Okay," I said quietly. "I'll stay tonight."

Her whole face lit up. "Really?"

"Really."

She beamed at me, then pushed further. "And tomorrow, you have to take me to school."

I was mid-bite but nodded. "Okay."

After dinner, Liora dragged me upstairs, talking nonstop. She told me about her classmates, about something funny her teacher said, about a new hobby she'd picked up. I sat on the edge of her bed and just listened, soaking it all in.

At some point, I noticed Dante leaning against the doorframe, watching us.

I had no idea how long he'd been standing there.

After I gave Liora a bath and dried her hair, I told her I'd be right back. I needed to wash up too.

Since none of my things were in her room anymore, I headed to the master bedroom.

The door was open. The lights were off. Dante wasn't there.

I flipped the switch. And froze.

For a second, I thought I'd walked into the wrong room.

I'd lived here for seven years. I knew every corner of this space. The way the light hit the curtains in the morning. The little scratch on the bedside table from when I'd knocked over a glass. The exact shade of cream on the walls.

But now?

Everything was different.

Well, not everything. The floor was the same. But that was it.

The chandelier was new. The curtains were a different color, darker, heavier. The bed was completely different, bigger maybe, with a new headboard. The bedside tables didn't match the old ones. Even the little round table by the window had been swapped out.

The couch. The coffee table. The carpet. The water dispenser in the corner. Everything.

And my dressing table? It was gone.

All the skincare bottles, the perfumes, the little trinkets I'd collected over the years... they had vanished.

It was like I'd been erased.

I stood there in the doorway, staring at a room that used to be mine but wasn't anymore.

It made sense, I guess. We were getting divorced. Almost done with the paperwork. And Dante had been in such a rush to finalize it after Sienna got hurt saving him. He wanted to make her legitimate. Give her the title. The ring. The life.

But still... We weren't officially divorced yet. The certificate hadn't gone through.

And he'd already wiped me out of this room like I'd never existed at all.

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Chapter 174: Chapter 174

Elodie's POV ~

I was about to turn off the light and walk out when I heard Sabina's voice behind me.

"Madam."

I turned around. She was holding a tray with a bowl of something steaming on it.

"Aunt Sabina."

She smiled at me, giving me that warm and familiar stare. "The old lady left this when she visited. Told me to make it for you when I had a chance."

Nonna. Of course she did.

I nodded. "Thank you."

Aunt Sabina hesitated, like she wanted to say something else. Then she did.

"Madam, your things... Mr. Wilson had me pack them up at the beginning of the month. Everything's on the third floor now. If you need anything, I can bring it down, or..."

Beginning of the month. Right when we signed the divorce papers.

"No need," I said quietly. "I'll get them myself later."

"Alright." She paused again. "Should I take the stew to Miss Liora's room?"

The implication was clear. I wasn't welcome in the master bedroom anymore.

I took the tray from her hands. "I'll handle it. Thank you."

"Of course."

I flipped off the light and carried the tray back to Liora's room.

After I finished the stew, I headed upstairs to the third floor.

My stuff was in a room at the far end of the hall. Tucked away. Out of sight.

Everything was organized neatly. Folded. Stacked. The room itself was spotless.

Aunt Sabina had been taking care of it. That much was obvious.

I grabbed the clothes and toiletries I needed and went back downstairs to shower in Liora's bathroom.

After, I read with her for a bit. Some picture book about a turtle and a rabbit. She snuggled close, her head resting on my shoulder.

Then she yawned. "Mom, I'm gonna go say goodnight to Dad. You wanna come?"

"No, you go ahead."

"Okay."

She padded out of the room, bare feet on the hardwood.

Three minutes later, she was back.

"Mom, Dad says goodnight to you too."

I set the book down. "Okay. I know."

She climbed into bed and burrowed under the covers, wiggling until she was pressed against my side.

"Alright, Mom. We can sleep now. Goodnight."

I smiled down at her. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

I turned off the lamp.

I woke up when the sky was just starting to lighten. That pale gray-blue that comes right before dawn.

Liora was still asleep, her mouth slightly open, one arm flung over her head.

I got up quietly, washed my face, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

By seven, I went back upstairs.

Liora was awake, sitting up in bed with her phone. The second she saw me, she minimized whatever she'd been looking at.

I pretended not to notice.

"Go wash up and get dressed."

"Okay!"

She bounced out of bed and ran to the bathroom.

I started gathering my things, the clothes I'd borrowed, the toiletries.

Aunt Sabina then came in to collect the pajamas I'd worn last night.

"Just throw them away," I said. "Don't bother washing them."

She looked confused.

"The other things too," I added. "Please just throw them out. I won't need them anymore."

The divorce would be final soon. And after that, even when I saw Liora, it wouldn't be here. I wouldn't stay overnight. Wouldn't need pajamas or a toothbrush stashed in a guest room on the third floor.

I didn't want to take any of it with me either.

There was too much history in this house. Too much pain tied up in every corner. Our marriage had been broken for a long time. The past few months, I'd barely come back at all.

When Dante had my things moved out of the master bedroom at the beginning of the month, it pretty much said everything.

Aunt Sabina got it. I could see it in her face.

She didn't know what to say. Just nodded quietly. "Alright, madam."

I grabbed my bag and headed downstairs.

The second I stepped outside, I nearly ran into Dante. He was coming back from his morning run, still in his workout clothes, a light sheen of sweat on his forehead.

He saw me first. "Good morning."

I nodded. "Morning."

That was it. I dropped my bag on the couch and went into the kitchen.

He headed upstairs.

Breakfast wasn't quite done yet, so Aunt Sara shooed me out, insisting she'd finish up. I went back to the living room, grabbed my book, and settled onto the couch to read while I waited for Liora.

Time ticked by. There was no Liora.

I glanced at the clock. If she didn't hurry, we'd be late.

Normally, I would've gone upstairs myself, poked my head into her room, hurried her along. But now? I stayed where I was and asked Aunt Sabina to go check on her instead.

It felt wrong. Like I was a visitor in my own daughter's life.

Aunt Sabina noticed too. I saw it in the way she looked at me before nodding and heading upstairs.

"Changed books?"

I jumped slightly. I'd been so focused on reading that I hadn't heard Dante come back down.

I looked up. He was standing there, freshly showered, dressed for the day.

I nodded.

He held out his hand. "Can I see it?"

I hesitated. "Don't you already have this one?"

It was the latest AI journal. Back when we'd first gotten married, back when I still thought things might work out between us, I'd noticed he had a whole collection of these in his study. He subscribed to them. Always had the newest issues before anyone else.

"I've been busy," he said simply. "Haven't had time to read it yet."

I heard Liora's footsteps thundering down the stairs.

Without thinking too much about it, I handed him the book and stood up.

Liora ran over and grabbed my hand. "Mom, is breakfast ready?"

I smiled down at her. "Yeah, sweetheart. Let's go eat."

We walked toward the dining room together. Liora glanced back over her shoulder.

"Dad, aren't you eating?"

"I'll be there in a minute," he said, still flipping through the journal.

Liora and I sat down. A minute later, Dante joined us.

He'd barely taken two bites when his phone buzzed on the table.

He set down his fork and picked it up, reading whatever message had come through.

I kept eating, my eyes on my plate. When I finished, I stood up quietly, grabbed the journal he'd left on the coffee table, and slipped it back into my bag.

Liora finished a few minutes later. She didn't say anything to Dante. Just hopped up, grabbed her backpack, and followed me out the door.

When we pulled up to Liora's school, I barely had the car in park before I heard a voice.

"Aunt Elodie!"

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 175 [1,087 words]

Chapter 175: Chapter 175

Elodie's POV ~

I turned around.

Tommy was running toward me, his little face lit up with that pure kid energy that makes you smile even when you don't want to.

"Auntie, my mom wanted me to give you some cookies last night, but you weren't home, so I brought them back."

Before I could even respond, Liora cut in, indignant.

"You're lying! My mom was home last night."

Tommy's face scrunched up in confusion. "Huh? She was? But then why didn't she—"

"Miss Miller?"

I turned. Liora's teacher was walking toward us, that polite smile teachers always have when they need to talk to you about something.

"Yes?"

She gestured to the kids. "Tommy, Liora, go on inside. I need to speak with Miss Miller for a moment."

They both shuffled off reluctantly, Liora shooting me one last look over her shoulder.

Once they were gone, the teacher's smile shifted. And turned into less polite, more hesitant.

"Next week, the school is holding a parent-child activity. Were you aware of that?"

I shook my head. "No. Liora hasn't mentioned it."

She paused, clearly uncomfortable. "Well... I wanted to confirm with you, who will be attending with her?"

Ah. There it was.

She'd probably already figured it out. That I wouldn't be there. That Dante would bring Sienna instead. But she needed to hear me say it.

"Anyone can go with her," I said simply. "Whoever she wants."

I'd made my position clear before. I wasn't going to fight over these things anymore. Wasn't going to make a scene or force myself into spaces where I wasn't wanted.

The teacher let out a small sigh. "Alright. I understand."

"Thank you," I said, and turned to leave before she could say anything else that might crack the careful numbness I'd wrapped around myself.

By the time I got back to the office, I'd barely sat down when someone knocked on my door.

"Miss Miller, Miss Brown and Mr. Logan Brown are here again."

Sienna and my father. Again.

Last time had been awkward enough. But Johnny and I had already decided, we weren't working with the Brown family. Not now. Not ever.

I heard Johnny's voice in the hallway, so sharp and firm. "Tell them we're not available."

A few minutes later, his phone rang.

He glanced at the screen, then looked over at me.

I didn't need to ask. "Dante?"

"Yeah."

I already knew why he was calling. I kept working, my eyes on my screen.

Johnny picked up. "Mr. Wilson."

I couldn't hear what Dante said, but Johnny's jaw tightened.

"Mr. Wilson," Johnny said, his tone clipped. "Is this call about the Brown family?"

A pause.

"Yes," came Dante's voice, faint through the speaker.

Johnny didn't even try to be polite anymore. "Then let me make this very clear. Cole will never work with the Brown family. I don't think I need to explain why."

He didn't wait for Dante to respond.

"Your proposal from Wilson Corporation was solid. I'll give you that. But if we're going to move forward, I have one condition."

I stopped typing. Looked up.

Johnny's eyes met mine for just a second before he continued.

"During our collaboration, you guarantee that no one from the Brown family or the Green family has any access to our projects. Not Sienna. Not Logan. No one."

His voice was ice.

"If you can't agree to that, then we're done here. Have I made myself clear, Mr. Wilson?"

"Very clear," Dante said on the other end.

Johnny didn't waste time. "Alright, Mr. Wilson. Goodbye."

He hung up.

And that was it. Dante didn't call back. Not that day. Not the next.

In the days that followed, Wilson Corporation went completely silent. No emails. No follow-ups. Nothing.

It was like Dante had decided that keeping Sienna happy was worth more than the deal.

And honestly? That's exactly what happened.

Two or three days later, Johnny heard through the grapevine that Wilson Corporation had started up a whole new project team. A different initiative. And guess who was involved?

Sienna. And the Green family.

Of course.

Sure, it stung a little that we weren't working with Wilson. They were huge. But we'd survive. There were plenty of other companies out there just as big, just as capable.

We didn't need Dante Wilson.

Friday evening, Professor Nolan came back into town.

I grabbed my laptop and went with Johnny to his place for dinner. Nolan's wife cooked this incredible roast chicken that I could've eaten twice over.

After we ate, Nolan sat with me at his dining table and went through a paper I'd been working on, red pen in hand, making notes in the margins like he used to when I was his student.

It was late by the time we finished. I said my goodbyes, thanked them both, and headed to the car.

That's when my phone rang.

Aunt Helen.

I answered. "Hey, Aunt Helen."

"Elodie, sweetheart, I'm so sorry to do this last minute, but something came up with my family. I have to head back home tomorrow, which means I can't take the kids, your cousins, on that boat trip we planned."

"It's okay," I said quickly. "I'm free tomorrow. I'll take them."

"Oh, thank you, honey. You're a lifesaver."

We hung up.

Two seconds later, my phone rang again.

Harry Becker.

I blinked at the screen, surprised, then answered.

"Mr. Becker."

"Miss Miller," he said smoothly. "I wanted to ask if you'd be available tomorrow. Daisy's been asking about you."

I sighed. "I'm sorry. I actually have plans tomorrow. I won't have time."

There was a pause. Then, instead of hanging up like I expected, he said, "Can I ask what the plans are? Daisy really wants to see you."

I hesitated. It wasn't a secret or anything.

"I'm taking my younger cousins on a day trip. Boat ride, that sort of thing."

"Ah." Another pause. Then, casually, "Daisy loves boats. Would it be alright if we joined you? Just the two of us?"

I stared at the dashboard, caught off guard.

"I... I'd have to ask them first. Make sure they're okay with it."

"Of course," Harry said. "Take your time."

I hung up and immediately called them up.

Five minutes and one very enthusiastic "Yes! Please! Harry Becker is so cool!" later, I called Harry back.

"They're fine with it," I said. "We're meeting at the dock at ten."

"Perfect. See you then, Miss Miller."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 176[1,412 words]

Chapter 176: Chapter 176

The next morning, around eight, Elodie pulled up to the dock with Xavier and Hugo in tow.

Harry and Daisy were already waiting.

The second Daisy spotted Elodie, she took off running. "Aunt Elodie!"

Elodie crouched down just in time to catch her in a hug, smiling. "Hey, Daisy. It's been too long."

Xavier and Hugo hung back a bit, eyeing Harry and Daisy with obvious curiosity. They had no idea who these people were.

Elodie straightened up and gestured between them. "Xavier, Hugo, this is Mr. Becker and his niece, Daisy. They're joining us today."

Harry stepped forward, all polite charm. "Nice to meet you both."

Then he pulled out two neatly wrapped gift bags and handed them over. "Wasn't sure what you guys would like, so I grabbed a few things. Hope that's okay."

Xavier and Hugo just stared at him, completely caught off guard.

Even Elodie blinked in surprise. She hadn't expected him to bring gifts for kids he'd never met.

After a few minutes of awkward small talk, they all headed onto the boat.

Xavier and Hugo already knew about the divorce. Elodie had told them a few weeks ago, keeping it simple, not getting into the messy details.

Now, watching Elodie hold Daisy's hand and chat with her so easily, Xavier shot Hugo a look.

Hugo raised his eyebrows. Is this the new guy?

Xavier shrugged. Maybe?

When Elodie and Harry weren't looking, Hugo leaned closer to his brother and whispered, "He's actually pretty cute."

And way less intimidating than Dante, that was for sure.

But watching Elodie with Daisy made them both feel weird. Sad, almost.

They knew what was coming. Elodie was going to lose custody of Liora. Dante wasn't budging on that, and from what they'd heard, Liora had been pulling away from Elodie for months now. Choosing to stay with her dad more and more.

It had to be killing her.

So if Elodie was moving on, finding someone new, maybe even building something with Harry and his family? Good. She deserved that.

Xavier and Hugo decided right then and there to be extra nice to Daisy. If this turned into something serious, they wanted Harry's family to like them too and treat Elodie right.

"Hey, Daisy," Xavier said brightly, walking over. "You wanna try the water slide?"

Daisy's eyes went huge. She looked over at the colorful slide setup near the back of the boat and nodded so hard her pigtailed bounced.

"Yes!"

The slide was indoors, heated with hot spring water, so even though it was winter, it stayed warm and steamy inside.

The slide was big enough for adults, but honestly, it was more of a kid thing. Teenagers and children were the ones who really went wild for it.

Elodie and Harry gave it a few tries, sliding down and splashing into the warm water. But after a couple rounds, they lost interest.

Daisy, Xavier, and Hugo though? They were having the time of their lives. Screaming, laughing, racing each other down over and over.

Elodie eventually climbed out and settled at the edge of the pool, letting the warm water lap around her legs. It felt more like a hot spring than a regular pool. It was relaxing, almost meditative.

Harry appeared beside her, holding out a cold drink.

"Thanks," she said, taking it.

He sat down a little ways away, close but not too close. "No problem."

There was a pause, just the sound of the kids shrieking in the background.

Then Harry asked, "How old are they?"

"Xavier's sixteen. Hugo's fourteen."

"Do you take them out like this a lot?"

Elodie shook her head. "I used to. But work's been crazy lately. Haven't had much time."

Harry's phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced at the screen, and something shifted in his expression.

"I need to take this," he said, standing up.

Elodie nodded.

He walked off toward the other side of the deck, far enough that she couldn't hear him, and answered.

"Dante."

Dante's voice came through, calm as ever. "Where are you?"

"On the yacht."

"Out at sea?"

"Yeah." Harry's eyes drifted back toward Elodie, who was sitting alone by the pool, drink in hand. "Why? What's up?"

"Liora wants to play with Daisy. I was calling to see if you could bring her by."

Harry paused. "We're in the middle of the ocean. Maybe another time."

"Alright."

That was it. Dante hung up without another word.

Harry stared at the phone for a second, then slipped it back into his pocket and returned to the deck.

At noon, they all sat down for lunch. Fresh seafood, filled with grilled fish, shrimp, crab legs. The type of meal that tasted better because you were outside, sun-warmed and salt-kissed.

Afterward, they sprawled out on the deck, lazy and full. Fishing rods were handed out. Nobody caught anything, but nobody really cared.

Daisy, Xavier, and Hugo eventually ran out of steam. One by one, they collapsed onto lounge chairs and passed out, their faces pink from the sun.

Harry had some work to deal with, so he excused himself and found a quiet corner to make a few calls.

When he came back, Elodie was deep in a book.

Harry stopped a few feet away, watching her for a second.

He recognized the book immediately. It was technical. Advanced. The same type of thing he'd seen Dante reading more than once.

She was completely absorbed, eyebrows slightly furrowed in concentration, one finger tracing the edge of the page.

Harry didn't move. Didn't want to interrupt.

Then the wind picked up, lifting the edge of the blanket draped over Daisy. The fabric fluttered and snapped.

Elodie looked up.

She blinked, startled to see him standing there.

Harry walked over and sat down in the chair next to hers.

"That book," he said, nodding toward it. "Do you read stuff like that often?"

He used the word often. Intentionally.

Elodie caught on immediately. He was talking about Dante.

She nodded. "Yeah."

The way she sat, the way she focused so completely on the pages in front of her, it was a lot like how Dante read. Not their looks or anything like that. Just the way they zeroed in on something, blocking out the rest of the world.

Harry noticed it then. How similar they actually were. Both of them were drawn to the same field. Both of them were passionate about technology, systems, the logic of how things worked.

They probably would've gotten along great, honestly.

But then...

Harry's expression shifted, something darker flickering across his face as he thought about their marriage.

People had always said Elodie trapped Dante. Forced him into it somehow. Used some kind of manipulation or dirty trick.

He'd believed it too. For years.

But now, after spending time with her, watching how she acted, how she carried herself, but it didn't add up. She wasn't scheming. She wasn't manipulative. She seemed... straightforward. Honest, even.

Her thoughts didn't seem twisted or complicated. Just quiet. Clear.

Harry looked away, unsure what to do with that realization.

By evening, the yacht was heading back to the dock.

Xavier, Hugo, and Daisy had become fast friends by then. They were laughing, making plans to hang out again, completely comfortable around each other now.

When it was time to leave, Xavier waved at Harry with a big grin. "See you next time, Harry!"

Harry smiled and nodded, though his eyes shifted to Elodie. "See you next time."

"See you," Elodie said simply.

She got into her car and drove off without looking back.

Back at the Miller family house, Hugo couldn't stop talking.

He bounded upstairs and immediately started telling Old Madam Miller everything about the day, about the boat, the slide, the food, how cool Harry was.

When Old Madam Miller heard that Elodie had spent the day with Harry Becker, she froze mid-sip of her tea.

"Harry Becker?" she repeated, clearly shocked.

After all, Harry and Dante had been close since childhood. Practically brothers. And Elodie had never been particularly friendly with him before. So why now? What had changed?

Jason, sitting nearby with his tablet, looked up. "I was wondering about that. The Becker family reached out to me recently about a collaboration. Harry's been unusually friendly toward me the past few weeks. So it seems..."

He trailed off, letting the implication hang in the air.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 177[1,545 words]

Chapter 177: Chapter 177

Aunt Helen chimed in, "So it's really true then?"

Old Madam Miller, who knew Elodie better than most, shook her head slightly. "Elodie's not officially divorced yet. I don't think she's looking to jump into anything new. Let's just leave it alone and see what happens naturally. No need to meddle."

Everyone nodded. "Understood."

The next morning, Elodie woke up at the Miller house. She'd just finished breakfast when her phone rang.

It was from Dante.

She looked at the screen but didn't pick up.

A few seconds later, a text came through instead.

Dante: Tomorrow is the parent-child event at Liora's school. Don't forget to come.

Elodie stared at the message, her jaw tightening. She typed back quickly.

Me: I'm not available.

Her phone rang again immediately. Dante calling.

She declined it and turned her phone off completely.

Hours later, after finishing up some work, she powered it back on. Another message was waiting.

Dante: Are you at the Miller house?

Just a few words, but the threat was clear. If she didn't answer, he'd show up there himself.

Elodie's grip on the phone tightened. She exhaled slowly and typed back.

Me: What time does it start?

It took him over half an hour to reply.

Dante: 9 AM

She didn't respond.

That evening, Liora called.

Elodie answered on the second ring.

"Mom, why aren't you home yet?" Liora's voice was small, worried. "Dad said you'd come back so we could go to the event tomorrow together, but it's already past nine and you're still not here..."

Elodie's chest ached. "I'm not coming back to the house, sweetheart. But I'll meet you at your school tomorrow morning. I promise."

There was a pause. "Oh... okay."

"Get some sleep, alright?"

"Okay, Mom."

After they hung up, Elodie texted Johnny to let him know she'd be late to work the next day.

Monday morning, Elodie pulled up to Liora's school right at nine.

"Mom!"

Liora spotted her immediately and waved like crazy from where she stood next to Dante.

Elodie walked over. Dante looked up as she approached.

"You're here," he said.

She ignored him completely, crouching down instead to check the schedule on Liora's tablet.

After a moment, she stood and followed them to their assigned seats.

The teacher noticed her arrival and lit up, hurrying over. "Miss Miller! You came!"

Elodie smiled at her. "Of course."

Liora ran up holding a little flower crown and tried to hand it to Dante. "Dad, put this on Mom!"

Elodie reached out and took it from her gently. "I can do it myself, sweetie."

Dante didn't argue. Just let her take it.

With both of them there, both tall, striking, and clearly wealthy, they drew stares from nearly every parent and kid in the courtyard.

Tommy's mom, who'd only recently learned from her son that Elodie had a daughter the same age as Tommy, walked over with wide eyes.

"Elodie," she said, a little breathless, "is this... your husband?"

Liora had wandered off somewhere, so Elodie just smiled and said it plainly. "We're getting divorced soon."

Tommy's mom's eyes widened, but she didn't look all that shocked. She'd probably already pieced it together. After all, Elodie had a daughter but lived alone in the apartment across the hall. And then there was that parent-teacher meeting Elodie had missed, when that other woman showed up instead. The gorgeous, overdressed one.

Dante, completely unfazed, extended his hand politely. "Hello."

Tommy's mom shook it, a little flustered. "Oh. Hi."

Dante's gaze shifted to Elodie. "You two know each other?"

The question was aimed at Tommy's mom, but his eyes stayed on Elodie.

Elodie didn't answer. Didn't even look at him.

Tommy's mom cleared her throat awkwardly. "I'm Elodie's neighbor."

The tension between Elodie and Dante was thick enough to cut with a knife. Tommy's mom could feel it radiating off them. She quickly mumbled something about needing to find her son and practically fled.

Dante watched her go, then turned back to Elodie. "You seem to be getting along well with the neighbors."

Elodie pulled out her phone and stared at the screen, ignoring him completely.

Dante didn't push it. Just stood there, hands in his pockets, like he had all the time in the world.

A moment later, Liora came running back, and the teacher's voice crackled over the loudspeaker. The first activity was starting.

Elodie had only done one of these parent-child events before, back when Liora first started kindergarten. After that, there'd always been some excuse. And then Dante and Liora had left for the European Pack last year, so the whole thing just... stopped.

The first game was musical chairs.

The rules were simple. Chairs arranged in a circle. Two fewer chairs than families. Parents held their kids and walked around while the music played. When it stopped, you had to grab a seat fast. No chair? You're out. Last family standing wins.

Dante looked at her. "You want to do it, or should I?"

Elodie was about to say "you do it" when Liora jumped in.

"Daddy should do it!"

Dante glanced back at Elodie. "That okay with you?"

"Yeah. You do it."

He nodded, then held out his phone to her. "Then you can record it."

Elodie hesitated. She didn't want to touch his phone. Didn't want to hold anything of his.

"I'll use mine," she said quickly. "I can send you the video after."

Dante paused, then pulled his phone back. "Alright."

He scooped Liora up into his arms and walked over to join the other parents circling the chairs.

Elodie stayed where she was, pulling out her phone and opening the camera. She aimed it at Liora's excited little face, and at Dante holding her steady.

Then, just as the music started, Dante looked over.

Right at her.

The camera was pointed straight at his face.

And he smiled.

Elodie froze. Her hand holding the phone trembled just slightly.

Then the music started. Dante turned away, his expression calm and easy as he held Liora and began walking around the chairs with the other parents.

They circled once. Twice. Then the music cut out.

Dante moved fast, sitting down smoothly in one of the chairs with Liora still in his arms, completely unbothered.

Liora's face lit up. She waved frantically at Elodie. "Mommy! We got a chair!"

Elodie nodded, lowering her phone. "I saw."

Honestly, when she'd first looked at the schedule this morning, she'd figured both Dante and Liora would be bored out of their minds. These games were silly. Childish.

But the second Dante picked Liora up, she'd been buzzing with excitement.

And now that they'd won a seat? She was practically vibrating.

Dante glanced over at Elodie, a small smile tugging at his mouth.

At first, it was obvious he wasn't into it. He'd looked stiff, detached, like he was just going through the motions.

But somewhere along the way, maybe it was the music, maybe it was the energy of all the other families, or maybe it was just Liora's infectious joy, he'd loosened up. Started actually playing. Even looked like he was having fun.

And because Dante was fast and competitive by nature, he won. Easily.

Liora bolted over to Elodie, hand raised high. "Mommy, we won!"

Elodie gave her a high-five. "Yeah, you did."

Dante walked over too, holding out his hand. "Did you get the video?"

"Yeah." Elodie pulled up the file and sent it to him without looking up.

The next game was called the Unstoppable Fire Wheel.

The rules were simple. Four families per team. Everyone had to step inside a giant circular band and move forward together by rolling it with their feet. First team to cross the finish line wins.

Dante looked at her. "Want me to sit this one out?"

Liora shook her head immediately. "No! Mommy, you play with me this time."

Elodie shrugged. "Okay."

As they lined up to start, Elodie hesitated, glancing down at her bag. She didn't have anywhere to put it.

Before she could figure it out, Dante held out his hand.

"I'll take it."

She blinked. "...Thanks."

She handed it over.

For most couples, this wouldn't be a big deal. Guys held their wives' bags all the time.

But for them? This was the first time Dante had ever done it.

Elodie couldn't help but wonder... had he done this for Sienna before?

He wasn't in a suit today. Just wearing a sleek black coat that looked casual but expensive-looking. And somehow, standing there holding her bag, he looked completely natural. Comfortable.

If someone saw him from a distance, they'd probably think he was just a husband waiting patiently for his wife to finish something. Holding her things. Smiling softly.

Elodie looked away.

The game started.

It required coordination. Elodie stood in the middle of the group, stepping carefully in rhythm with the others, turning the band as they moved forward.

Liora was right behind her, gripping the back of her shirt, trying to match her pace. She was laughing the whole time, completely in her element.

Then she noticed Dante on the sidelines, phone out, recording them.

Her grin got even bigger. "Daddy!"

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 178[1,512 words]

Chapter 178: Chapter 178

Dante was standing just a little ahead of her. Elodie could see him in her peripheral vision, but she kept her eyes on the game, focused on keeping pace with the others.

She heard Liora's excited voice calling out to him.

Then Dante's calm reply. "Don't look around. Stay in sync with your mom."

"Okay!" Liora chirped.

When Elodie had been recording earlier, she'd just stood in one spot and filmed. Nice and easy.

But Dante? He was walking backward, matching their speed, keeping the camera steady the whole time. Moving with them.

A few more steps and they crossed the finish line.

Liora immediately ran to Dante, bouncing on her toes. "Daddy, that was so fun! Can we do it again sometime?"

Dante smiled down at her. "Sure."

Elodie walked over and reached for her bag.

As soon as she picked it up, her phone buzzed inside.

She pulled it out and saw it was a video from Dante.

She saw the notification but didn't open it.

Liora, however, leaned right into Dante's side, tugging on his sleeve. "Daddy, show me! I wanna see!"

He handed her his phone without hesitation.

Then he twisted the cap off a water bottle and held it out to Elodie.

She blinked, surprised, but took it. "Thanks."

She was thirsty. Had been for a while, actually.

She took a few sips, then screwed the cap back on tight. Dante glanced at the schedule board nearby.

"What's next?"

Elodie didn't believe for a second that he'd forgotten. He'd looked at the schedule just as carefully as she had.

But still...

She looked down at the water bottle in her hand. Accepting little favors like this made her feel like she owed him something. And she didn't want to owe him anything.

She hesitated, then answered. "Little Ants Carrying the Ball."

"You want to do it, or should I?"

Elodie looked at Liora. "You pick, sweetheart."

Liora didn't even pause. "Daddy! Mom doesn't know how to play basketball, but Daddy's really good."

Elodie could play basketball. But she didn't correct her.

If that's what Liora thought, fine.

"You do it then," Elodie said.

"Alright," Dante replied.

The sun was getting stronger now, heat was starting to press down on them. Dante shrugged off his black coat and handed it to her without a word.

Elodie stared at it for a second.

Then she took it and laid it down on the grass next to her.

Dante raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything.

Right before the game started, he glanced back at her. "When you're filming this time, move with us. Don't just stand there."

Elodie's jaw tightened. "...Got it."

The rules for Little Ants Carrying the Ball were simple but tricky.

Parents had to pull a rope taut in a circle while dribbling a basketball inside the loop. At the halfway point, they switched and their kids took the rope, parents kept dribbling. The ball couldn't leave the circle the entire time.

Elodie used to play basketball and volleyball with Liora when she was younger. She'd been the one teaching her back then.

But Liora had been little. Probably didn't even remember.

Now, whether it was because the school had been teaching her or because Dante had, Liora was good. The second the whistle blew, she was dribbling like she'd been doing it for years.

Dante was moving backward, pulling the rope taut, perfectly matching Liora's dribbling rhythm.

They made it through the first leg without a hitch.

The way back was even smoother.

Liora had said Dante was good at basketball. She wasn't wrong.

He handled the ball like it was nothing, spinning it effortlessly between his hands. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and he moved with this easy, natural grace, keeping pace with Liora like they'd practiced it a hundred times.

Someone nearby let out a soft, admiring sigh. "He's so handsome."

Elodie kept her phone steady, recording.

But watching him move like that, so confident, and controlled, made memories suddenly hit her out of nowhere. She remembered him playing basketball back in school. On the outdoor courts. The way he'd looked then.

A few months ago, when she'd thought back to those days, his face had been crystal clear in her mind. Every detail was sharp.

But now, looking at him, now taller, broader, more polished than he'd ever been back then, those old memories felt... blurry. Faded.

Like they belonged to someone else.

Dante and Liora won, obviously.

Liora practically exploded with joy, jumping up and down, her smile so big it looked like it might split her face.

Dante laughed and scooped her up into his arms in one smooth motion.

Elodie caught it all on video.

She thought to herself... Liora was probably the happiest kid at this entire event today.

But then another thought crept in, quieter and sharper.

If it had been Sienna here instead of her, Liora would've been even happier.

Some of the other parents started drifting over to Dante, making small talk, shaking his hand. He handled it smoothly, like he always did. Polite. Charming.

Elodie stayed where she was. Tommy's mom wandered over and stood beside her.

After a moment, once the game had wrapped up and Elodie had stopped recording, Tommy's mom said, "Your daughter and her dad get along really well."

Elodie nodded. "Yeah."

They did. And that bond was only going to get stronger.

What Tommy's mom didn't say out loud was that it was actually kind of unusual for a kid to be closer to their dad than their mom. Most kids clung to their moms.

But she figured Elodie's husband must be a really involved father. That would explain it.

She also noticed something else.

The other parents were all watching their partners play with their kids, cheering them on, laughing when things went right, wincing when they didn't. You could see it with the way they were together in it as a team.

But Elodie?

She was there, but she wasn't really part of it.

Even when Elodie smiled at Liora during the games, something felt off. Disconnected. Like there was this invisible wall between her and the two of them.

Tommy's mom remembered the last parent-teacher meeting. The one where that other woman had shown up. The one Liora had clung to, all smiles and affection.

No wonder Elodie felt like an outsider. How could she not? Watching your own kid bond with the woman who wrecked your marriage, that had to hurt.

Tommy's mom felt a pang of sympathy. She glanced at Elodie, wanting to say something comforting but not knowing what.

Elodie caught the look. The pity in her eyes.

She smiled.

The worst of the pain had already passed. She'd survived it.

She knew Sienna must've been busy today. That's the only reason Dante and Liora had asked her to come. She was the backup. The stand-in.

And honestly? That's exactly how it felt.

Dante and Liora came back over.

Liora immediately leaned in to see the video Elodie had just filmed. Elodie pulled it up and sent it to both of them.

"I sent it to you. You can watch it on your tablet later."

"Okay!" Liora said happily.

After three rounds of games, the activities officially wrapped up.

Liora had won two trophies. She clutched them both like they were made of gold.

The second the teacher handed them over, Liora held them up high. "Daddy, take pictures of me!"

Dante pulled out his phone and snapped a bunch.

Then Liora turned to Elodie. "Mom, take some of me and Dad together!"

"Sure."

Elodie took Dante's phone and clicked through four or five shots of the two of them, Liora grinning between the trophies, Dante crouched beside her.

She sent the photos to Liora's tablet, then handed the phone back.

Dante looked at her. "Let me get a few of you and Liora too."

Liora nodded eagerly. "Yeah, Mom! Come on!"

"Okay."

Dante took Elodie's phone this time. She knelt down next to Liora, and he snapped a few quick shots.

When he handed the phone back, Elodie's screen lit up with an incoming call.

Johnny.

"I need to take this," she said.

"Okay, Mom!" Liora chirped.

Dante just nodded.

Elodie stepped away and answered. The conversation dragged on, all about work stuff, contract details, scheduling. More than ten minutes passed before she finally hung up.

When she turned back around, Dante and Liora were huddled together over his phone, clearly on a video call with someone.

Elodie didn't walk over. Just stayed where she was and opened the work files Johnny had sent.

A few minutes later, Liora waved at her. "Mom! Come here so we can take a group picture, then we can go eat!"

Elodie walked over.

The three of them joined the other families for a big group shot. Then the teacher went around taking individual family photos.

And just like that, the parent-child event was officially over.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 179[1,480 words]

Chapter 179: Chapter 179

Elodie was about to leave when Dante walked over, coat draped over his arm.

"Where do you want to eat?"

Before she could answer, Liora's hand shot up. "BBQ! That place we went to last time!"

Dante reached down and pinched her cheek lightly. "That place is too far. You've got class this afternoon. We won't have enough time."

Liora's face fell. "Oh... okay. Seafood then?"

Dante didn't answer her. Instead, he looked at Elodie. "What do you want?"

Elodie shook her head. "You two go ahead. I'm not coming."

Liora's eyes went wide. "You're not?"

"No, sweetheart." Elodie reached down and smoothed Liora's hair gently. "I have to get going. You and your dad have fun, okay?"

"Okay..." Liora's voice was small, disappointed.

Elodie gave her a soft smile, then turned and walked away without looking back.

Dante stood there watching her go. He didn't call out. Didn't even try to stop her.

After a moment, he looked down at Liora. "Let's go."

"Okay."

They'd barely gotten into the car when Dante's phone rang.

He saw it was Nonna.

He answered, already bracing himself.

"Did you really open a project for the Brown and Green families?!" Her voice came through sharp, furious. "At home and at the company?!"

Dante leaned back in his seat, completely calm. "Yeah. Just finding out now?"

"You—!" She sputtered. "What are you thinking? Are you planning to divorce Elodie or something?!"

Because that's what it looked like. Bringing Sienna and her family into Wilson Corporation business, making it public, not even trying to hide it... that meant he didn't care anymore. Didn't care what anyone thought.

He'd already made up his mind.

Before he could respond, Nonna kept going.

"I don't agree! And if you insist on this project, fine... but you change the people working on it. If you don't, I swear I'll—"

"Nonna." Dante's voice was quiet but firm. "I kept my promises to you. I married Elodie like you wanted. Now you need to honor your promises and stop interfering with my decisions."

Translation: Sienna and the Browns were off-limits. Stay out of it.

Silence on the other end.

Dante had been running Wilson Corporation for years now, and every single year, the company had grown. Profits were up. Reputation was up. They had expanded into new markets.

The shareholders trusted him completely. The executives followed his lead without question. If Nonna tried to push back against him now, they'd side with him, not her.

Wilson Corporation needed Dante.

Dante didn't need Wilson Corporation.

She couldn't leverage the company against him anymore. That card was gone.

And emotional manipulation?

Like he'd said... marrying Elodie had already been his compromise. He'd done what she asked.

Nonna knew her grandson well enough to know he wasn't the type to keep bending. Once he'd given what he was willing to give, that was it. He was done.

And if she pushed him too hard now...

The silence stretched out. Nonna had backed down.

Dante's voice softened slightly. "Have you eaten?"

Click.

She hung up on him.

Dante looked at his phone and let out a quiet laugh.

Liora leaned over, eyes wide with curiosity. "What happened?"

He set the phone down calmly. "Your great-grandmother's mad at me."

"What? You made Great-grandma angry?"

"Yeah."

"Are you gonna say sorry?"

"Not right now. Maybe later."

"Oh... okay."

When Elodie got back to the office, Johnny didn't ask about the event. Just looked up from his desk and said, "You're back? Did you eat yet?"

"No."

"Come on then. I'll buy you lunch."

She smiled a little. "Alright."

They ended up at a nice restaurant downtown. And of course, because the universe had a sense of humor, they ran into Mr. Lee from Wilson Corporation in the lobby.

He was there with his family. When he spotted Johnny, he told them to go ahead to the private room and walked over.

"Mr. Gray! I thought maybe we'd get another shot at working together, but now..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

Johnny smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I heard your new project's going well though?"

"Oh yeah, it's solid. President Wilson handpicked it himself, so you know it's gonna be good."

"Mm." Johnny's tone was flat. Then he asked, almost casually, "I heard the Brown and Green families have pretty big roles in it. Nobody at your company had a problem with that?"

Mr. Lee hesitated. "Well... some people weren't thrilled. But it's not a huge deal. When the company's working on a good project, all the shareholders want their people involved, you know? And President Wilson doesn't usually step in and assign people directly, so it'd be weird to make a fuss just because he chose the Browns and Greens for part of it. Besides, they're capable. They follow the rules. So honestly, it's fine."

Johnny said nothing.

He was done with this conversation.

"Alright, I won't keep you from your family. We'll catch up another time."

"Yeah, yeah, sounds good," Mr. Lee said, clearly relieved, and hurried off.

Once he was gone, Johnny turned to Elodie. "Let's go in."

"Yeah."

After lunch, they went back to the office.

Not long after, someone came in to let them know Rex Hardin was downstairs. Waiting.

Elodie and Johnny exchanged a look. Neither of them moved.

Rex didn't leave.

By evening, when Elodie was heading down to the parking garage, he was already there.

"Miss Miller."

She stopped and turned, her voice cool. "Mr. Hardin. Can I help you?"

Rex looked at her for a long moment. "Let's talk."

Elodie's eyebrow lifted. "Talk? Or lecture me?"

He paused, clearly caught off guard. Then he straightened up, his tone turning serious.

"I'm being sincere here. I think you need to put aside whatever personal issues you have and focus on work. Don't let emotions get in the way and hurt your company's interests."

Elodie almost laughed.

She tilted her head. "Funny. I was about to say the exact same thing to you."

It was obvious. Rex had let his feelings about Sienna cloud his judgment when it came to business.

But in his head? She was the one being unreasonable. She was the one abusing her power.

Elodie didn't bother arguing. She just turned, got in her car, and drove off.

Rex's expression darkened as he watched her leave.

His phone rang.

He answered it, climbed into his own car, and drove away too.

Half an hour later, Rex walked into a private dining room. Yves and Jimmy were already there, drinks in hand.

Yves took one look at Rex's face and smirked. "Didn't go well, huh?"

Rex had been to Cole two or three times in the past few days. Johnny refused to see him every single time.

So Rex had tried going after Elodie instead.

Thinking about the way she'd completely blown him off, Rex shook his head.

"Johnny won't talk to me. Miss Miller won't talk to me. So yeah... looks like the Cole project's off the table."

Yves leaned back in his chair. "If we can't get it, we can't get it. There are other projects out there. Cole's not the only game in town."

Rex frowned. "I've actually looked into the Cole project pretty closely. I'm legitimately interested in it."

Even without his personal reasons, he would've wanted in on this deal.

"Alright, alright," Yves said. "So what's the plan? We need another way in."

That's when Yves turned to Jimmy, eyes lighting up.

"Hey, Jim. Last time at that boat thing, you and Miss Miller seemed to hit it off. She was pretty friendly with you, right? Rex can't get anywhere with her... maybe you could smooth things over? Play mediator or something?"

Jimmy set his tea down and shook his head. "I don't really know her. We talked for like ten minutes. That's not enough to ask favors."

"Fine, fine. What about Johnny then? You two go way back, don't you?"

Jimmy paused. "I could try. But I don't think he'll listen."

He'd noticed something at the event. Elodie and Johnny didn't seem romantically involved... at least, not from her side. But Johnny? He clearly cared about her. A lot.

So asking Johnny to make nice with Rex for Sienna's sake? Yeah, that wasn't happening.

Yves groaned. "So we're back to square one. We don't know Miss Miller. We can't exactly walk up and start bribing her. Should we... I don't know, look into her? Find some leverage?"

Rex shook his head. "No. I'm done wasting time on her. I'll contact the old man instead."

Jimmy caught on immediately. "You mean Professor Nolan?"

"Exactly."

Johnny had been Nolan's student. If Nolan asked him to reconsider, Rex was betting Johnny wouldn't say no.

They didn't waste any more time talking about it.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 180 [1,414 words]

Chapter 180: Chapter 180

After dinner, on the drive home, Rex was thinking about calling his father.

But before he could, his phone rang. Reed Hardin. Calling him first.

Rex answered. "Hey—"

"How's the Cole deal going?"

Straight to the point. No pleasantries.

Rex grimaced. "...It didn't work out. I was actually about to ask for your help."

"What happened?"

Rex sighed. "I offended one of their technical staff. And Johnny's backing her, so now he won't even talk to me—"

"What's her name?" Reed cut in.

Rex blinked, a little surprised his father cared about the details. "Uh... Elodie."

Silence on the other end.

Then Reed let out a long breath and laughed. Actually laughed. "So let me get this straight. You haven't even closed the deal yet, and you've already managed to piss off their core technical person. That's impressive, son. Really."

Rex opened his mouth to clarify that Elodie wasn't exactly 'core' staff, more like someone Johnny had a thing for but Reed didn't let him.

"I'll handle it," Reed said simply.

Rex perked up immediately. "Really? Thanks, Dad!"

"Shameless."

"When are you coming back for a visit?"

Reed snorted. "I was thinking about it. But now? I don't know if I can handle seeing you in person. Might take years off my life."

Then he hung up.

Rex stared at his phone, unsure if that had gone well or badly.

On the other end, Reed sat back in his chair, shaking his head.

He wasn't going to tell Rex the real reason he'd help. That Elodie wasn't just some random employee. That she mattered.

Sometimes, when life handed you easy wins, it made you soft. Reed figured his son could use a little humility.

He then dialed Elodie's number.

She answered on the second ring. "Uncle Hardin?"

Reed smiled. Sharp as ever. "You already know why I'm calling, don't you?"

"Yeah."

Even though she'd guessed, Reed still asked properly. "Can you agree to work with Rex? As a favor to me?"

He kept his tone light. Business was business, after all. If both sides were professional about it, even people who didn't like each other could make a deal work. And Elodie and Rex weren't exactly enemies.

Still, Elodie hadn't done anything wrong here. And Reed knew she wasn't the type to roll over just because someone asked nicely.

But if he asked? She might.

Before she could answer, he added gently, "Take your time, Mag. No rush. Think it over and let me know when you're ready."

"Okay."

Reed's voice softened even more. "And as for Rex? Handle him however you see fit. Don't worry about sparing my feelings."

"I understand."

He chuckled. She was always so straightforward. "Good. I'll let you go. Talk soon."

"Goodbye, Uncle Hardin."

After she hung up, Elodie sat there for a moment, thinking.

Then she called Professor Nolan.

He didn't pick up right away. About half an hour later, her phone rang.

"What's going on?" Nolan's familiar voice came through, calm and curious.

Elodie gave him a quick rundown of the situation with Rex and the Cole deal.

Nolan was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Reed doesn't ask for favors often. When he does, it means something. Think carefully about this, Mag."

He was vouching for Reed. Making sure she understood the weight of the favour.

"I will. Thank you, Professor."

"Mm."

That was it. Nolan hung up without saying anything else.

Elodie didn't call Reed back until the next morning.

When he picked up and heard her answer, his voice went soft. "Alright. I understand. Thank you, Mag."

"Of course, Uncle Hardin."

After they hung up, Reed leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh.

One of his colleagues walked by and laughed. "What's with the face, Commander Hardin?"

Reed rubbed his temples. "I think I want a daughter."

The guy snorted. "You're getting sentimental in your old age. Your son's old enough to get married, focus on getting yourself a daughter-in-law instead."

Reed muttered, "It's not that my son isn't capable. He's just not trying hard enough."

That afternoon, Rex showed up at Cole.

Reed had already talked to Elodie. She'd talked to Johnny.

When Johnny heard Rex was downstairs, he made him wait. Over an hour.

When Rex finally got called up, he came prepared. He had a brand-new proposal in hand, even better than the last one.

Johnny skimmed through it, his expression unreadable. Then he looked up.

"Looking forward to working with you," he said flatly.

Rex shook his hand. "The sooner we start, the better."

Rex didn't have a problem with Johnny. His issue was with Elodie. But if they could put personal feelings aside and just do business? Fine. He could do that.

"It's getting late," Rex said. "Why don't we grab dinner and go over some of the details?"

Johnny smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. "Sure. But Elodie will be joining us. That's okay with you, Mr. Hardin?"

Rex figured Johnny had only agreed to this deal because Reed had pulled strings through Nolan. So really, Elodie didn't matter.

He didn't like her. But if this was what it took to close the deal, he'd deal with it.

"Fine by me," Rex said. "As long as Miss Miller doesn't mind."

Johnny didn't answer. Just called someone to bring Elodie in.

A few minutes later, she walked through the door.

Rex expected her to look annoyed. Maybe even pissed at Johnny for dragging her into this.

But when she saw him, her expression stayed calm. Professional.

She walked over, extended her hand, and said simply, "Looking forward to working with you."

Elodie's calm tone made it sound like she'd known all along they'd end up working together.

Rex didn't think much of it. Figured Johnny had probably filled her in beforehand.

He shook her hand stiffly. "Looking forward to it."

They all headed to the same restaurant. As Elodie and Johnny were getting out of the car and about to head inside, Rex spotted something or rather, someone.

Dante and Sienna, they were walking in from the other entrance.

Rex stopped and called out. "Mr. Wilson. Miss Brown."

Dante and Sienna turned and noticed them.

Dante nodded politely. "Mr. Hardin. Mr. Gray."

Johnny's smile was cold as ice. "Mr. Wilson."

Before anyone could say anything else, Johnny cut in. "You two enjoy your evening. We're heading up."

And just like that, he and Elodie stepped into the elevator.

Rex stood there, a little thrown off.

He'd noticed before that Johnny didn't like Dante. But this time, Johnny didn't even bother hiding it. Just straight-up dismissed him.

Rex had no idea what bad blood existed between them, but it was obvious Dante was trying to keep things civil while Johnny... wasn't.

Once the elevator doors closed, Dante and Sienna turned away.

Sienna glanced at Rex. "So the deal with Cole went through?"

Rex smiled. "Yeah. All set."

Sienna had known the deal fell apart before because Rex had pissed off Elodie, and Johnny had backed her up. Johnny had flat-out refused to work with Rex after that.

But now? Rex had gotten what he wanted.

Which meant that even though Elodie mattered to Johnny, when it came down to it, business came first.

Maybe she wasn't that important after all.

Sienna smiled. "Congratulations."

Rex nodded. "Thanks."

Then he turned to Dante. "By the way, there's a project your company's working on that I'm interested in. When are you free? I'd like to sit down and talk about it."

Dante didn't hesitate. "I've got time this week. Just let me know when works for you."

"Will do."

They got off the elevator on different floors. Rex headed to his private room.

When he walked in, Johnny and Elodie were already looking at menus.

Johnny glanced up. "Oh, Mr. Hardin. Done catching up?"

Rex sat down, deliberately choosing a seat farther from Elodie. He ignored Johnny's tone and asked casually, "Is there some kind of issue between you and Mr. Wilson?"

Johnny didn't even look up from the menu. "Not an issue. An old grudge."

Rex blinked. "...Right."

Nobody just casually dropped the phrase "old grudge" like that.

Deciding it wasn't worth digging into, Rex changed the subject. "This meal's on me. Order whatever you want. Don't hold back."

Johnny still didn't look up. "We weren't planning to."

Rex... simply opened his mouth and then clamped it shut.