

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 191[1,235 words]

Chapter 191: Chapter 191

Liora glanced over at Dante, who was sitting quietly nearby, just watching them.

"Dad, I want to eat here. Can we get the food packed and brought up?"

Dante nodded. "Sure."

Liora's face lit up. She stayed right where she was, curled up against Elodie.

Old Madam Miller and Nonna were deep in conversation now, catching up on everything.

Elodie sat quietly, chiming in every now and then but mostly just listening.

After a while, Liora shifted in her lap, looking up at her.

"Mom, when will you be done with work?"

Elodie didn't want Old Madam Miller to overhear, so she carefully lifted Liora and moved them both over to the small couch by the window.

"I'm not sure, sweetheart," she said softly. "But honestly, I'll probably be even busier soon."

Liora's face fell. "What? But... when will you have time to take me skiing?"

She'd been holding onto that promise.

Elodie thought about it. "Next month, maybe."

"Really?"

"Yeah. When I know for sure, I'll let you know."

"Okay!" Liora perked up again.

Then her eyes went wide like she'd just remembered something.

"Oh! Mom, were you shopping last night?"

Elodie hesitated for half a second. "Yeah."

"I knew it! So that really was you I saw!"

"Maybe," Elodie said quietly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Dante watching them.

Liora kept talking, already moving on to the next thing. "Next time you're free, can we go shopping together again? And go to the arcade? I wanna play bumper cars."

Elodie looked back at her daughter. "Okay."

Liora launched into more plans, but then Dante stood, walked over to the table, and picked up the glass Elodie had been drinking from earlier.

He poured out the cold water, refilled it with warm, and set it down on the coffee table in front of her.

Elodie glanced at it. "Thanks."

Dante nodded. "No problem."

Then he sat down on the couch across from them.

Old Madam Miller and Nonna were still chatting away, but when Nonna glanced over and saw the three of them sitting there... Dante, Elodie, and Liora... she stopped mid-sentence.

Old Madam Miller followed her gaze. Didn't react. Just turned back and kept talking.

Nonna let out a long sigh. "You know—"

"They've made their decision," Old Madam Miller said gently. "We shouldn't force them."

Nonna sighed again, deeper this time.

A little while later, there was a knock at the door. The food Dante had ordered arrived.

It was a lot. Way too much for just two people.

Dante turned to Elodie. "Let's eat together."

Elodie looked at the spread laid out on the table.

Half the dishes were things she liked.

And Dante had made sure to put them on her side of the table.

Then he turned to Liora. "Go tell your great-grandma to come eat."

"Okay!"

Liora hopped off Elodie's lap and ran over to tug on Old Madam Miller's hand.

Nonna waved them over too. "Come on, eat a little. Otherwise I'll feel terrible asking you to come back tomorrow."

Old Madam Miller had no choice. She got up and joined them at the table.

When she sat down and saw that all the dishes in front of Elodie were ones she liked, she paused. Glanced at Dante.

Elodie stayed calm.

It wasn't surprising. Dante had a good memory. Remembering what she liked to eat wasn't some grand gesture.

He'd probably just ordered all this to thank them for visiting Nonna. That's all it was.

After dinner, Elodie and Old Madam Miller stayed for another hour or so before getting ready to leave.

It was getting late. Nonna didn't try to keep them. She turned to Dante.

"You and Liora should head home too."

"I'll come see you in the morning," Dante said.

Elodie, Dante, and the others all left together.

In the elevator, Dante glanced at Elodie. "Did you drive yourself?"

"Yeah."

He didn't say anything else.

But Liora, who'd been quiet, suddenly perked up.

"Mom, are you not going home tonight?"

Elodie shook her head. "I'm taking Grandma back to her place. I'm staying there tonight."

"I wanna stay at Grandma's too!"

Even though Liora was closer to Dante now, in Old Madam Miller's eyes, she'd always be Elodie's daughter.

Before Elodie could respond, Old Madam Miller smiled warmly. "Of course you can, sweetheart."

Elodie didn't want to refuse after that. But she did point out the obvious problem.

"You don't have any clothes at Grandma's house."

Before Liora had gone overseas with Dante, she used to visit the Miller house all the time. Back then, half the closet in Elodie's old room had been full of clothes that she and Aunt Helen had bought for her.

But over the past two years, Liora hadn't been back much. And she'd grown so fast. There weren't any clothes that would fit her anymore.

"Oh..." Liora's face fell. "Then—"

Dante cut in. "I'll have someone bring some over."

Elodie's POV ~

I hesitated for a second but didn't argue.

Liora, on the other hand, was thrilled.

"Yay! I get to sleep with you tonight, Mom!"

After we left the hospital, Liora practically bounced into my car while Dante walked over to his to grab her backpack.

He handed it through the window. Liora took it with a huge grin.

"Thanks, Dad!"

Dante ruffled her hair, then his eyes shifted toward me in the driver's seat.

I didn't look back.

"Say goodbye to your dad," I told Liora.

"Bye, Dad!"

"Goodbye," he said.

I rolled up the window, turned the wheel, and drove off.

By the time we got to Grandma's house, Liora's clothes had already been delivered.

She bolted upstairs the second we walked in.

Grandma looked at me, her expression soft. "He's not keeping her from you. That's something, at least."

I knew what she meant. She'd been worried that since Dante had custody, he might try to cut me out. Make it harder for me to see Liora. And if that happened, over time, the distance between us would only grow.

That would've destroyed me.

I didn't feel like getting into it, so I just nodded. "Yeah."

Then I told her to get some rest and headed upstairs myself.

The next morning, we were all downstairs having breakfast when the security office called.

There was a visitor.

I glanced out the window and saw Dante's car.

Liora ran over to look. "Oh! It's Dad! Mom, let him in!"

I looked down at my plate. "Okay."

Everyone at the table had heard. The moment they realized Dante was here, the room went quiet. But with Liora right there, nobody asked why.

A few minutes later, he pulled up.

I walked outside to meet him.

"Are you here to pick up Grandma?"

"Yeah."

I nodded. "Give me a minute."

"Sure."

He stayed by the car and didn't get out.

It took Grandma more than ten minutes to come down.

When she finally did, Dante got out and opened the door for her.

Liora was getting ready to leave for school too. She waved at him from the doorway.

"Bye, Dad!"

"Bye," he said. Then he exchanged a few polite words with me and the rest of the family before getting back in his car and driving off.

I grabbed my keys and drove Liora to school.

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Elodie's POV~

Exactly at 11:30 AM, I was buried in work when Grandma called.

"The surgery went really well."

Relief washed over me. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding.

I'd barely hung up when my phone rang again and saw it was Dajtw.

I stared at the screen for a second, then let it go to voicemail.

A moment later, a text came through.

Dante: We're going out for lunch soon. Want to join us?

I didn't reply.

He'd figure it out. He wasn't stupid.

Sure enough, no more messages came.

But around noon, my phone buzzed again. This time it was Cara.

"Mag! I just saw your husband... wait, sorry, your future ex-husband... helping your grandmother up the stairs at a restaurant!"

Before I could get a word in, she gasped.

"Hold on. Did you two get back together without telling me?!"

"No." I flipped through some paperwork on my desk, keeping my voice neutral. "Nonna had a fall. She's in the hospital. We went to visit her, and he's just... being polite. Thanking us."

That's why he'd shown up this morning to take Grandma to the hospital too.

Cara sounded disappointed. "That's it?"

"Yeah."

The more polite and considerate Dante was being, the clearer it was... he didn't want to owe me or my family anything. Everything he did was just his way of keeping things clean. Drawing a line.

Only someone completely delusional would think he wanted to reconcile.

That evening, I got off work later than usual. By the time I made it to the hospital, it was past seven.

As soon as I stepped out of my car, I saw Sienna. She was leaning against the side of her car, her arms crossed, staring right at me.

I met her eyes for half a second. She didn't say anything. Just stood there, lips pressed into a thin line, glaring.

I shut my car door, grabbed the flowers I'd brought, and walked past her without a word.

The VIP floor was quiet. Peaceful.

I pushed open the door to Nonna's room and stopped.

Dante was inside. So were Harry and Levi.

All three of them.

After running into Sienna downstairs, it clicked. The four of them must've come together.

Whether Sienna had actually gone inside to see Nonna, I had no idea.

Levi smirked the second he saw me.

Harry stood up from his chair.

But it was Dante who walked toward me.

"You're here."

I didn't answer him. Just looked past him to Nonna, and caught her gaze, and smiled.

"Hi, Grandma."

Dante held out his hand. I had no choice but to pass him the flowers.

I didn't look at Levi or Harry. Just walked over to Nonna's bedside.

"How are you feeling?"

"Still hurts a little," she admitted. She already looked exhausted from the surgery. "But I'll be fine."

She reached out and took my hand in hers. "You've been working all day, haven't you? Are you tired? Have you eaten? Why don't you stay and have dinner with Dante and the others?"

"I already ate at the office before I came," I said gently.

Nonna paused, clearly hoping I'd stay. But she didn't push.

I stayed for a little while longer, chatting with her until I could see she was getting too tired.

When I stood to leave, Nonna asked Dante to walk me out.

Since the others were planning to grab dinner anyway, we all headed downstairs together.

In the elevator, I felt eyes on me. I glanced over only to see Levi was staring at me like I was some kind of puzzle he was trying to solve.

I turned my head and said flatly, "Seen enough?"

He blinked, caught off guard. "...Almost."

I ignored him and stepped out the second the doors opened.

Dante and the others followed.

Elodie was already two or three steps ahead when Levi leaned toward Dante and dropped his voice.

"Her whole vibe toward you has totally changed. Think she's actually over you?" He paused, skeptical. "I just don't buy it."

Dante watched Elodie's back as she walked away. Didn't say a word.

Harry, who hadn't caught what Levi said, glanced over. "What?"

Levi repeated himself.

Harry fell silent too, his eyes following Elodie as she moved farther down the hall.

When they reached the hospital entrance, Dante called out.

"Liora's at your grandmother's house."

Elodie paused mid-step. She didn't turn around. Didn't say anything.

Then she kept walking toward the parking lot.

That's when she noticed Sienna was still there.

The second Sienna saw them coming out, she started walking toward them.

Elodie didn't even glance her way. Just headed straight for her car.

Dante, Harry, and Levi veered off toward Sienna.

Elodie got in, started the engine, and drove off without looking back.

When she got to Grandma's house, Liora was on the floor playing with Xavier and Hugo.

She looked up the second the door opened. "Mom! You're back!"

Elodie shut the door behind her, closing out the cold, and started peeling off her coat. "Yeah."

Liora dropped her tablet and ran over, wrapping herself around Elodie's leg.

"Mom, Dad said I can stay with you for the next two days! And tomorrow after we visit Great-grandma, can we go skiing?"

Before Elodie could answer, Xavier and Hugo jumped in.

"Yeah! Let's all go together!"

Elodie let out a soft sigh. "...Okay."

Liora's face lit up. "I'm gonna call Dad and tell him!"

She grabbed her phone and ran off, already dialing.

Elodie didn't stick around to listen. She headed upstairs.

The next morning at the hospital, Sienna was nowhere to be seen.

But Dante was there, buried in paperwork.

When Elodie and Liora walked in, he was scribbling notes on some document, completely focused.

"Dad!" Liora shouted.

Dante didn't look up right away, but Liora's attention had already shifted.

The table next to him was loaded with fruits. Pastries. Drinks. Bubble tea.

"Whoa! So much stuff! And bubble tea!" Liora ran over, her eyes wide.

"Mm," Dante said. "I had them bring it when I heard you were coming."

He glanced at Elodie as he said it.

She ignored him completely.

He shifted his attention to Xavier and Hugo, giving them a nod. "Sit."

Dante had that kind of presence that made people listen without question. After greeting Nonna, Xavier and Hugo sat down without hesitation, digging into the snacks Dante and Liora handed them.

Once the kids were settled, Dante held something out to Elodie.

"Want some?"

Nonna was watching.

Elodie reluctantly took it. "Thanks."

She took a sip. And realized it was strawberry. Perfectly sweet. Exactly how she liked it.

When Nonna heard they were going skiing, she turned to Dante.

"You should go with them. Skiing's dangerous, and it'll be too much for Elodie to handle three kids on her own. I've got the housekeeper and Aunt Garner here. I'll be fine."

Elodie opened her mouth to protest, but Dante beat her to it.

"Alright."

Liora's face exploded with joy. "Yes! Dad's coming too!"

A little while later, when it was time to leave, Dante finished cleaning up the table and followed them out.

They drove separately. Liora, Xavier, and Hugo piled into Elodie's car.

When they got to the ski resort, Dante crouched down to help Liora adjust her jacket and goggles.

Then his phone rang.

He stepped a few feet away to answer. After a short conversation, he said, "I'll be there soon."

Liora looked up at him. "Who was that, Dad?"

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Dante didn't answer right away. Instead, he asked, "Do you want to have lunch with me, or with your mom and the others?"

Liora looked confused. "Huh? Aren't we all eating together?"

"We were going to," Dante said. "But something came up."

Elodie and the boys overheard but didn't say anything.

Dante ruffled Liora's hair. "Don't worry about it yet. Let's ski first. We'll figure out lunch later."

"Okay!"

The three kids ran off, chattering excitedly.

Elodie pulled on her ski goggles and glanced at Dante. "The divorce still isn't finalized?"

Dante shook his head. "Not yet."

He paused, then added, "If you need money, I can transfer some to your account."

Elodie was about to respond when Liora's voice carried across the snow.

"Mom! Hurry up!"

Before she could say anything else, her phone rang.

She frowned when she saw it was Uncle Jason.

"Hello, Uncle Jason?"

"Someone from Wilson Corp just reached out," he said. "They want to discuss a potential collaboration."

Jason had been around long enough to know that Dante didn't do favors without a reason. He was calling to ask what was going on, whether this project had strings attached, and whether he should even consider it.

Elodie didn't answer right away. After hanging up, she looked over at Dante.

"My uncle said someone from Wilson contacted him. About a project."

Dante started to say something, but she cut him off.

"I know you're probably trying to repay me and Grandma for helping with Nonna. But we didn't go to the hospital because of you. And we don't need the project."

She knew exactly what would happen if they did business with Wilson. The Brown and Green families would make it hell. They'd find ways to sabotage it, twist it, use it against them.

And even if Dante really was trying to thank her, she also knew who he loved.

And it was Sienna.

If Dante changed his mind one day and used this favor to manipulate her, to guilt her into something, it would become a weapon. And the Miller family would pay the price.

She didn't want his project. And she didn't trust his reasons for offering it.

Her voice went cold. "You don't need to worry. After the divorce, we'll go our separate ways. I won't cling to you."

In her mind, this was just another way for him to draw a line. He was afraid she'd hold on. But she'd already let go.

Dante looked at her for a long moment.

Then, quietly, he said, "Okay."

Elodie didn't respond. She pulled out her phone and called Jason back, telling him to turn down the offer.

After she hung up, she went to join the kids.

The rest of the day went smoothly. No drama occurred nor did any surprises.

Most of the time, Elodie was talking to Xavier, Hugo, and Liora. She and Dante barely spoke unless it was absolutely necessary. And he didn't try to start any conversations either.

Around noon, Dante walked over. "I need to head out for a bit."

Elodie glanced up. "Okay."

He turned to Liora. "Do you want to—"

"I'm going to a movie with Mom and the others!" Liora cut him off, grinning.

It wasn't something Elodie had promised. Hugo and Xavier had brought it up, and the three kids had made the plan on their own before telling her.

Dante nodded. "Alright."

He gave Elodie a brief nod, then turned and left.

About ten minutes later, Elodie's phone rang.

Paul. Her divorce lawyer.

"I just got off the phone with Dante," he said. "He's drafting a new divorce agreement today. Different from the last one. He's giving you two or three more properties. Each one's worth over a hundred million."

Elodie's face stayed blank.

So that's what this was. He didn't believe her when she said she wouldn't cling to him. He thought she'd keep circling back, making things difficult.

The extra properties were his way of buying peace of mind. A clean break.

But she didn't want his money. Didn't want anything from him.

"Okay. I understand. No objections. Handle the rest however you need to."

She hung up.

Meanwhile, at the restaurant, Dante walked into a private dining room.

Sienna was already there. So were the Green and Brown families, along with a few others.

The second Dante and Sienna stepped in, the room erupted in smiles and greetings.

Sienna sat down next to her aunt, Tracy.

Dante took a seat and started chatting with a couple of CEOs and some of the other guests.

Tracy leaned in close to Sienna, voice low and urgent.

"I just heard from your uncle that Dante's giving a project from Wilson Corp to the Miller family!"

Sienna stayed calm. "I already know."

Tracy's eyes went wide. "I also heard that over the past few days, Dante and Elodie have been getting awfully close. Someone even saw him having lunch with Old Madam Miller yesterday. What if they're getting back together?"

"They were never together to begin with," Sienna said coolly. "There's nothing to get back."

She didn't like the way Tracy phrased it. Made it sound like Dante had ever actually loved Elodie.

Seeing Tracy still looking anxious, Sienna explained.

"Nonna and the Miller family have a good relationship. Dante needs to stay on good terms with Elodie and Old Madam Miller so they don't pressure Nonna into forcing him to break up with me. That's all this is."

Tracy blinked, caught off guard.

Nonna's fall had already gotten the Brown and Green families kicked off the Wilson Corp project. For days now, both families had been on edge, worried that Nonna would use her injury as leverage... pressuring Dante to break up with Sienna or else.

But now it turned out Dante hadn't caved to any threats. He'd just... handled it. By making nice with the Miller family.

Tracy felt a wave of relief. "So the project is Dante's way of thanking them?"

"Exactly," Sienna said. "It's a thank you. And a way to draw a clear line."

Tracy nodded, impressed. "Dante really thinks of everything. No wonder he's so successful."

She should've felt satisfied. But then another worry crept in.

"But... the Miller family already has a project with Cole. They're starting to bounce back. If they also take a project from Dante, won't they actually recover completely?"

The second she finished, Sienna's expression went cold.

"They didn't take it."

"They didn't?" Tracy's eyes went wide.

Before Sienna could answer, Tracy seemed to connect the dots on her own.

"Oh, I see. They're playing the long game. Trying to make Dante feel like he owes them so Elodie can keep clinging to him. Smart. Manipulative, but smart."

Tracy's jaw set. She was not about to let the Miller family get the upper hand. Not when Dante and Elodie were this close to being officially done.

"We can't let them pull this off," she said firmly.

Sienna stayed calm. "Relax. Dante will handle it."

Tracy thought about that for a second. Dante had never let them down before. If he was offering the project, he must've already anticipated the Miller family's move and had a plan to counter it.

She exhaled, finally relaxing. "You're right."

Then she switched gears. "By the way, have you been to see Nonna lately?"

"No," Sienna said.

Tracy looked a little disappointed, but Sienna continued smoothly.

"Nonna needs to recover without distractions."

Right now, there was no reason to visit. Dante had managed to smooth things over with the Miller family and get Nonna through surgery. But recovery would take time. And during that time, Nonna would still need the Millers' support.

Sienna could afford to wait.

After lunch, Elodie bought movie tickets for herself and the kids. They ate, watched the movie, then wandered around the mall for a bit.

While Xavier was trying on clothes and Hugo was off buying action figures, Elodie sat down with Liora.

"I'll take you home later," she said.

"Home?" Liora looked confused. "I'm not going home. I'm staying at Grandma's tonight. I'll go back tomorrow."

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Elodie took a sip of water, the cool liquid doing nothing to ease the tightness in her throat. "Xavier and Hugo have already spent the whole day with you," she said, keeping her voice gentle. "They need some quiet time to do their homework, and you might distract them if you stay."

Liora barely glanced up from her tablet, her small fingers swiping across the screen with practiced ease. "I don't need them to stay with me. I can play on my tablet by myself."

The words shouldn't have stung. They were innocent enough, just a child being independent. But something about the casual dismissal, the way Liora didn't even look at her when she spoke, settled like a stone in Elodie's chest.

She didn't push it. What would be the point? Instead, she pulled out her phone and typed a quick message to Dante: Can you have someone pick up Liora later?

She stared at the screen for a moment, watching the message shift to 'delivered.' No response. Not that she expected one. Dante was probably busy, he was always busy when it came to anything involving her. She slipped the phone back into her pocket and tried not to think about it.

After Xavier finished his shopping, they wandered through a few more stores, though Elodie's mind was elsewhere. The bright lights felt too harsh, the chatter of other shoppers too loud. She smiled when Xavier showed her something, nodded in all the right places, but inside, she felt like she was watching herself from a distance.

When they finally arrived back at the Cole family house, the atmosphere shifted immediately. Nonna's face lit up the moment she saw Liora, her weathered hands reaching out to cup the little girl's face.

"There's my precious girl!" Nonna said, her voice warm and delighted in a way that made Elodie's heart twist with something she couldn't quite name. Not jealousy, never that. Just... absence. The knowledge that she used to be able to make her daughter's face light up like that, too.

Liora beamed, leaning into her great-grandmother's touch in a way she hadn't leaned into Elodie's in months.

They truly adored Liora. And Liora, to her credit, was sweet with them—spending time with Nonna after dinner, even suggesting a walk around the garden when the evening cooled down. Nonna's laughter echoed through the house as they strolled arm in arm, and for a moment, Elodie could almost forget the hollow ache that had taken up permanent residence in her ribs.

Almost.

Dante still hadn't replied.

That evening, Liora ended up staying at the old house. Elodie tucked her in, smoothing back her dark hair, that was so much like Dante's it sometimes hurt to look at and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Liora was already half-asleep, her breathing evening out as Elodie quietly closed the door behind her.

She stood in the hallway for a moment, her hand still on the doorknob, and tried to remember the last time Liora had hugged her goodnight without being asked.

She couldn't.

The next day, Xavier and Hugo disappeared into their rooms to tackle their homework, their doors firmly shut against any distractions. Liora, true to her word, found things to occupy herself downstairs, coloring quietly at the dining table or sitting beside Elodie on the couch, her tablet balanced on her knees, the glow reflecting off her small, serious face.

She didn't cause any trouble. She never did. Sometimes Elodie wished she would, wished Liora would throw a tantrum or demand attention or something that would require Elodie's presence in a way that mattered.

Elodie's phone buzzed against the coffee table, and she glanced down to see Dante's name flash across the screen.

Dante: I'll send someone to pick up Liora soon.

She stared at the message for a beat too long, her thumb hovering over the keyboard. What was there to say? Okay? Thanks for finally responding after a full day? Why does it feel like pulling teeth to get you to acknowledge your own daughter exists when she's with me?

In the end, she said nothing. She set the phone down and turned her attention back to the book she wasn't really reading, the words blurring together on the page.

A few seconds later, Liora's phone rang, the cheerful ringtone cutting through the quietness of the living room. She looked up at Elodie, her expression shifting into something bright and hopeful in a way that made Elodie's stomach twist.

"It's Dad."

Elodie nodded, forcing a small smile that felt like it might crack her face. "Go ahead, sweetheart."

Liora pressed the phone to her ear, and her whole demeanor changed. She sat up straighter. Her eyes sparkled. Her voice went soft and eager in a way it never did when she talked to Elodie anymore.

"Hi, Daddy!"

Elodie couldn't hear what Dante was saying, but she could see the way Liora's face lit up like someone had switched on a lamp inside her. The way she nodded enthusiastically, her free hand gesturing as she talked even though he couldn't see her.

When she hung up barely a minute later, she was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Mom, Dad said he wants to take me out to play."

Of course he did.

Elodie's smile didn't waver, even though something inside her cracked just a little bit more. "He told me, too. If you want to go, then go ahead."

"Okay!" Liora was already scrambling off the couch, her earlier contentment completely forgotten in her excitement to see her father. She didn't even look back as she rushed upstairs to pack her things.

About half an hour later, a black car pulled up outside, one of Dante's drivers, no doubt. Elodie walked Liora to the door, carrying the small overnight bag her daughter had haphazardly stuffed with clothes and toys.

Nonna appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, her face creasing with concern when she saw the car.

"Leaving already?" She didn't wait for an answer before disappearing back into the kitchen, emerging moments later with two containers of food, a bag of Liora's favorite cookies, and what looked like half a cake wrapped in foil. "Here, bambina. Don't let them feed you nothing but restaurant food."

Liora accepted the bags with a bright smile, standing on her tiptoes to kiss Nonna's cheek. "Thank you, Nonna!"

Nonna watched as the driver loaded Liora's things into the car, her mouth pressed into a thin line. When the car door closed and the engine purred to life, she shook her head, her voice just loud enough for Elodie to hear.

"I thought he was being generous, letting her stay for two whole days. But now look, already rushing to take her back like we're going to keep her hostage."

Elodie opened her mouth to respond but Nonna was already walking away, muttering under her breath in Italian, her disappointment hanging in the air.

Elodie stood at the door long after the car disappeared down the tree-lined driveway, her arms wrapped around herself against a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. The house felt quieter now. Emptier. Like Liora had taken all the warmth with her.

Her phone rang again, jolting her out of her thoughts. She glanced at the screen.

It was Paul.

She inhaled slowly, steadying herself before answering. "Hello?"

"I've met with Dante's lawyer," Paul began to say. "I've received the new agreement. The additional three properties total about a billion in value. Everything looks clean. No hidden clauses, no strings attached."

A billion.

The number should have meant something, maybe security, freedom, the ability to start over without looking back. Instead, it just felt like a price tag. Compensation for years spent trying to make a marriage work that had been dead long before the divorce papers were ever drawn up.

"Okay," she said quietly, her voice sounding distant even to her own ears. "I understand."

Paul hesitated, and she could almost hear him weighing his next words, choosing them carefully. "Dante's lawyer also mentioned that if you need the money urgently, he can arrange to transfer part of the assets to your account in advance. Apparently Dante wanted me to make sure you knew that was an option. What do you think?"

Elodie closed her eyes, her free hand gripping the doorframe until her knuckles went white.

What does she think?

She thought that no amount of money would fill the empty spaces in her life. She thought that Dante could give her every property, every account, every asset he owned, and it still wouldn't make up for the fact that he'd never once looked at her the way he looked at Sienna. That he'd never held her with intention, only by mistake. That he was more concerned about her financial stability in their divorce than he'd ever been about her happiness in their marriage.

But Paul didn't need to hear that.

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Chapter 195: Chapter 195

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

Now?

It just felt like peace.

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

It was beautiful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the line went dead.

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

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

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

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

Harry's thumb hovered over Freya's contact.

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

He hit dial.

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

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

Her voice was... fine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry blinked. Daisy?

Oh. Right.

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

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

"Alright," Harry said weakly.

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

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

And she was asking him about a playdate.

Was she in shock? Was this how people snapped?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A small, sharp smile cut through the numbness.

Career-defining.

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

But not anymore.

She opened a blank document. The cursor blinked.

It sounded like a countdown.

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

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

He hit redial.

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

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

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

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

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

Harry rubbed his temples. "A power move."

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

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

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

"How did Dante look?" Harry asked suddenly.

"Huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What else would it be?"

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

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

"People change, Levi."

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

Harry didn't answer.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 196[1,601 words]

Chapter 196: Chapter 196

"Okay..." Yancy said, stepping into the elevator.

Elodie and Old Madam Miller walked out of the hospital. They'd just reached their car when Elodie spotted movement from the corner of her eye.

Sienna, stepping out of a car parked a few spots away.

Old Madam Miller glanced over, then quickly looked away. "So they haven't left yet."

Elodie had thought Grandma hadn't noticed Sienna earlier. Turns out she had. She'd just chosen not to say anything.

Elodie watched Dante walking toward Sienna and thought back to how long he'd been gone earlier. Half an hour, at least. He'd probably spent that whole time down here with her.

She let out a quiet breath but didn't say anything and just helped Grandma into the car, buckled her seatbelt, and started the engine.

As they were pulling out, Elodie caught sight of Yancy bursting out of the hospital entrance. He looked surprised and then thrilled when he spotted Sienna. He took off running toward her.

Elodie glanced at him briefly, then turned her attention back to the road and drove off.

"Big brother!" Yancy called out to Dante, though his eyes were glued to Sienna. "Wait! You... You really are*CC! I... I thought I was seeing things!"

Sienna had heard about Dante's younger brother but had never actually met him. Now, watching him practically vibrate with excitement, she couldn't help but smile.

Before she could say anything, Yancy kept going, words tumbling out faster and faster.

"CC, hi! I'm your fan! I went to your match a few weeks ago, the one where you overtook that guy at 3:03 on the hairpin turn? That was insane! I've watched the video like a hundred times and I still can't get over it!"

He was mid-sentence when he noticed Dante raising an eyebrow at him.

Yancy froze. Then his brain caught up.

"Wait, wait a minute... Big brother, do you know my goddess?"

Dante didn't answer directly. Just asked, "Is that a problem?"

Yancy blinked. "Uh, no. No problem. None at all."

It wasn't that surprising, really. Dante had connections everywhere. Of course he'd know someone as famous as CC.

Dante's tone shifted. "Why are you still down here? It's late."

Yancy smacked his forehead. "Oh crap, I forgot something! I almost left without it!"

He checked his phone and his eyes went wide. "Oh my God, it's already this late?"

He started jogging back toward his car, still talking over his shoulder. "Big brother, goddess, I gotta go—"

Then he stopped. Spun around. His face flushed slightly as he looked at Sienna, eyes bright and hopeful.

"Uh, goddess... can I have your phone number?"

Before Sienna could respond, he rushed to add, "I swear I won't bother you! I promise!"

Sienna laughed. "Sure."

Yancy practically jumped. He whipped out his phone and added her contact info with shaking hands.

Just as he was about to leave again, he remembered something else and turned back.

"Wait, wait! Can I get your autograph?"

"Of course, but you—"

Dante cut in smoothly. "Go on. I'll bring the autograph to you at the old house later."

Yancy's grin could've lit up the whole parking lot. "Thanks, big brother!"

He waved and took off running.

Dante rarely indulged Yancy's fanboy tendencies. But he'd agreed so easily this time... probably because Sienna was someone he respected. Someone he thought was worth admiring.

Yancy had expected his brother to brush him off or tell him to grow up. But today? Dante had been surprisingly cool about it.

He hadn't expected Dante to say yes so quickly.

But then again, CC was Dante's friend. Someone he clearly thought highly of. Someone he believed was worthy of admiration.

That had to be why, right?

Elodie's POV ~

I'd barely left the hospital parking lot when Grandma suddenly spoke up.

"Dante came to the hospital. But where's Liora? What did he do with her?"

Before I could answer, her expression darkened.

I could tell exactly what she was thinking. She was furious that Dante had left Liora somewhere so he could run off to the hospital with Sienna instead.

"He'll handle it," I said quietly.

Grandma didn't look convinced. "If he keeps this up, Mag, you need to file a lawsuit. I don't care what it takes, you have to get custody of that child."

I paused, then answered calmly. "Alright, granny."

Grandma was still fuming.

When we got back to the house, she got out of the car first, practically stomping up the driveway.

That's when my phone rang.

And I saw it was Liora. I stared at the screen but didn't pick up.

Maybe it was because I'd spent so little time with her these past few months. Maybe it was because I'd ignored so many of her calls. But I could feel it, that she was clingier now than she'd ever been. Like she was trying to go back to the way things were when it was just the two of us.

When I was the only one taking care of her.

My phone rang again.

I glanced at it. Still didn't answer.

Instead, I turned it off completely and headed inside to join everyone for dinner.

But the second I sat down at the table, the house phone rang.

I knew immediately who it was.

I stood up fast. "I'll get it."

I hurried out of the dining room before anyone could say anything.

Sure enough, it was Liora.

"Mom!" she said, bright and happy the second she heard my voice.

"Hey, sweetheart. Have you eaten yet?"

"Not yet," she said, her tone turning a little pouty. "Mom, are you at Grandma's house? I wanna come over. Can we eat together?"

Grandma must've heard me talking because she got up from the table and walked over.

"Is that Liora?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Does she miss you?" Grandma set down her napkin. "If she wants to come, call Dante and have someone bring her over. We'll save her a plate."

I sighed. "...Understood."

I turned back to the phone. "Alright, you can come over."

"Yay!"

Before she could hang up, I added quickly, "Make sure you tell your dad before you leave."

"Okay!"

The Miller family wanted to wait until Liora got there before finishing dinner.

I told them not to bother. They should just eat.

About an hour later, the doorbell rang.

I opened it, and there she was.

Liora practically launched herself at me. "Mom! I'm here!"

"Yeah." I crouched down and straightened her jacket. "Let me heat up your food."

"Okay!"

Liora set down her little backpack and tablet and followed me into the kitchen.

Uncle Jason and his wife had already left to take Xavier and the others to school. Grandma was still home, though.

Seeing Liora stick to me like a shadow, Grandma smiled, clearly delighted, and didn't interrupt. Just let us have our moment.

I told Liora to wait outside.

She obediently sat down at the dining table while I reheated her food.

Liora was a picky eater. Always had been. And reheated food never tasted as good as something fresh. But today, she didn't complain once. Just ate happily, like it was the best meal she'd had all week.

Between bites, she started telling me a story. "Mom, today I went out with Uncle Harry and Daisy."

"Mm."

She paused, like she suddenly realized I might not know who Daisy was. "Daisy's my friend. She calls him Uncle Harry."

"Mm." I could tell she was excited to share, so I asked, "What did you guys do?"

"We went to this huge maze! It was so fun!"

"Mm."

I kept my tone neutral, just listening. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw Grandma's expression darken.

I knew exactly what she was thinking.

When Dante had taken Liora back, Grandma had assumed he'd actually take care of her himself. But now it was clear—he wasn't. He was too wrapped up with Sienna. So instead of letting *me* spend time with Liora, he was handing her off to other people.

Grandma's jaw tightened.

Liora had no idea what was going through Grandma's head. She just kept talking.

"Uncle Harry invited me to have dinner with them, but I wanted to come back and eat with you, so I called."

"Mm."

I asked gently, "Did you thank Uncle Harry?"

"I did!" she said proudly.

I didn't ask anything else.

After she finished eating, Liora stayed in the living room with me and Grandma.

Grandma sat down next to her and smiled. "Would you like to stay at Grandma's house a little longer?"

Before I could say anything, Liora's face lit up. "Yeah!"

Grandma's smile widened. "Good. Since you agreed, you can't back out. You'll stay at least a week."

"Okay!"

I frowned.

Grandma looked thrilled. She reached over and patted Liora's hand affectionately.

While Liora was busy playing a game on her tablet, Grandma turned to me.

"A child you raised is different," she said quietly. "No matter what, Liora still clings to you."

I just smiled and didn't say anything.

Liora looked up from her game and tugged on my sleeve. "Mom, play with me!"

I looked at her carefully. "Are you sure?"

I had a feeling she was agreeing too easily. That in two or three days, she'd regret it and want to go back to Dante and Sienna.

Liora didn't catch on at first.

Then, two seconds later, it clicked. She understood what I meant.

"Of course I'm sure! I already promised Grandma."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 197[1,441 words]

Chapter 197: Chapter 197

Elodie didn't say anything.

Liora suddenly perked up, like she'd just remembered something. "Oh! I haven't told Dad yet. I should call him."

Dante picked up on the first ring.

When Liora told him she was staying at Grandma Miller's for a week, he didn't hesitate. "Dad knows. If you need anything, just call me and I'll send it over."

"Okay!"

She hung up, grinning.

Old Madam Miller had been bracing herself for a fight. She'd even considered stopping Liora from calling him at all.

But common sense told her that would be wrong.

Now, seeing Liora hang up so cheerfully, she couldn't help but ask, "Your dad agreed? Just like that?"

Liora looked confused. "Yeah! Why wouldn't he?"

She tilted her head. "Dad's really good to me. He pretty much agrees to whatever I want to do."

Old Madam Miller opened her mouth. Then closed it.

She had no idea what to say to that.

Elodie stayed quiet.

After a bit, she took Liora's hand and led her upstairs for a bath.

Cole had already locked in partnerships with Rex, Harry, and a few others. But there were still some projects that didn't have the right fit yet.

To speed up the process and to boost the company's visibility, Cole had spent months preparing for a promotional conference. It was officially scheduled for Monday morning.

After dropping Liora off at school that morning, Elodie drove to the hotel where the event was being held. By the time she arrived, Johnny and the others were already there.

She was slated to give a speech as one of the company's core technical leads and field questions from the media.

Elodie and Johnny went over the rundown backstage. Around that time, Harry and Rex both showed up.

About twenty minutes later, Johnny and Elodie took the stage.

Johnny spoke first. Rex listened closely, his arms crossed, and his expression neutral.

But the second Elodie stepped up to the podium, his face shifted. He frowned.

Wasn't product introduction, especially the technical side, too important to leave to someone like her? Shouldn't Johnny be handling this?

Elodie didn't pay Rex any attention. Her voice was calm, clear, and more than steady. Whether she was walking through the company's product line or answering technical questions from the press, she handled it smoothly with no hesitation.

Rex had zoned out the moment she started talking. He wasn't listening to a word she said. When he heard her answering technical questions, he just assumed Cole had prepped her with a script.

As his mind wandered, he noticed something.

Harry was leaning forward slightly, completely focused. His eyes were locked on Elodie, and he looked genuinely engaged, like he was actually listening.

Rex blinked.

He didn't think much of it. Figured Harry was just putting on a good show for appearances.

Rex just stared.

After the press conference, Elodie and Johnny were swamped. Rex had a meeting at Wilson Corp that afternoon, so after a quick word with Johnny, he headed out.

When he got to Wilson, Dante hadn't arrived yet. Rex made his way to the area where Sienna and her team were working. The second he reached the door, he could hear the buzz of excited voices inside.

Seeing him, the General Manager immediately walked over. "Mr. Hardin."

Rex nodded.

Sienna looked up from her desk. "Dante's probably still about ten minutes out. Can you wait a bit?"

Hearing her say that, Rex thought to himself that they must be pretty close. Otherwise, Dante wouldn't keep her updated on his every move.

"I know," Rex said. "His secretary already filled me in."

Then he shifted gears, glancing around the room. "Seems like everyone's in a good mood. Did something happen?"

The General Manager jumped in immediately. "Our project hit a technical wall over a week ago. We were completely stuck. But just now, Director Brown solved the whole thing. So now we can actually move forward. Everyone's thrilled."

Someone else chimed in from across the room. "We really owe it all to Director Brown. A PhD from a world-class university just knows so much more than the rest of us."

Rex already knew Sienna was talented. But now he was seeing it firsthand that people genuinely respected her. Hearing all the praise, he couldn't help but feel proud on her behalf.

"Congratulations," he said.

Sienna smiled. "Thank you."

Then she added, modestly, "But it's not all me. Dante's taught me a lot over the past few months. That's what helped me grow so quickly."

She meant it. But everyone just thought she was being humble.

After a bit more chatter, the team went back to work.

Sienna had known about the Cole press conference that morning but had been too buried in work to check it out. Now, she pulled out her phone and searched for the video.

She glanced at Rex. "Mr. Hardin, did you go to Cole's event this morning?"

"Yeah."

She started watching the video. On screen, Elodie was explaining Cole's products and tech, calmly and articulated.

Rex watched Sienna's face carefully.

She looked completely unbothered. No irritation. No jealousy being displayed. Just had a calm focus on her face.

Thinking back to Christmas when Elodie had practically radiated hostility toward Sienna, Rex felt even more convinced that Sienna's mindset was leagues above hers.

He was about to say something when the General Manager leaned over.

"I watched Cole's conference too," he said. "Have to admit, their tech is seriously impressive."

Sienna nodded. "It is."

Rex didn't know much about the technical side, but even he could tell Cole's work was top-tier. Watching Sienna scroll to the part where Johnny was speaking, he said,

"With you here at Wilson, it probably won't be long before we develop something even more advanced."

Sienna gave a small smile. "You're being too kind, Mr. Hardin. Compared to Mr. Gray, I still have a long way to go."

Rex thought she was just being humble. "There's no need to be modest, Miss Brown—"

"It's not modesty," Sienna cut in. "It's always been my dream to study under Professor Nolan. I met him a while back, but I didn't meet his standards to become his student."

She was being completely honest.

Rex listened and felt like she was genuinely sincere. Driven, but humble about where she stood.

It also clicked for him, why Sienna was so interested in Johnny. Not just because he was brilliant in AI, but because he was one of Nolan's students.

"If you didn't meet the standard, then you just keep working," Rex said. "I believe with your abilities, Miss Brown, you'll get there one day."

Sienna smiled, about to respond, when Dante walked in.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Hardin."

Rex stood. "No need to apologize, Mr. Wilson. I got here early."

After a quick exchange, Dante smiled at Sienna, then headed upstairs with Rex to talk business.

Sienna was about to dive back into work when her phone rang.

It was Logan.

Of course he'd watched the press conference. The buzz Cole had generated caught his attention and made him anxious. He'd done the math. Those two projects Cole was launching would probably bring in billions.

And that ate at him.

The Brown family ran a tech company too. But without any real core technology, their products had zero competitive edge. They'd been bleeding money for years.

They'd been limping along, barely keeping the lights on, with nothing to show for it.

If losing money brought results, fine. But after all this time, their tech division hadn't improved at all. Every day they delayed was more money down the drain. How could he not be anxious?

He'd called Sienna hoping she could help. He knew Dante had been mentoring her lately, teaching her, helping her grow. So he wanted to know if was she good enough now to catch Professor Nolan's eye?

After hanging up, Logan set his phone down.

He rubbed his temples, staring at the large screen in the living room where the Cole press conference was still playing.

Sophia sat nearby, munching on fruit, watching as Elodie took the stage at such a formal, high-profile event. Talking so confidently. So smoothly.

It grated on her.

She grabbed the remote and shut the TV off with a huff. "Why does she get to speak on stage? She's stealing all the attention."

Logan shook her head. "That's not the point."

In his view, Elodie speaking at the press conference wasn't a big deal. She was only up there because Johnny was propping her up anyway.

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Chapter 198: Chapter 198

Those were minor details. What really mattered was Cole's technology. That was what had real value.

Logan understood exactly what Sophia meant. Sure, Elodie had done well during her speech. But when it came to the technical stuff? Both he and Sophia figured Johnny had fed her all the answers beforehand.

There was no way Elodie actually knew that much on her own.

Tracy chimed in. "But she really is relying on Johnny, isn't she?"

No matter how you looked at it, Elodie had been front and center today. And whether they liked it or not, that helped the Miller family. In Tracy's eyes, that showed Elodie had at least some ability.

But Sophia wasn't concerned with any of that. What bothered her was something else entirely.

She'd noticed Harry in the audience during the press conference. Watching Elodie. His gaze had been locked on her, focused, and intent.

He'd never looked at Sophia that way. She couldn't help but think if she'd been the one on stage, Harry's eyes would've been on her instead.

By the time Elodie and Johnny left the hotel, it was nearly ten at night. After a full day of nonstop work, Elodie's head was pounding.

She got in her car and drove on autopilot, only realizing when she pulled into the garage that she'd gone to her own apartment instead of back to the Miller house.

It was too late to turn around now. She wasn't going back tonight.

She got out, pulled out her phone, and scrolled through her messages. The Miller family had called. So had Liora.

There was also a text from Liora, sent around 8 p.m., asking when she'd be home.

Elodie glanced at it, then put her phone away. She went upstairs, took a quick shower, and collapsed into bed.

The next morning, she'd barely opened her eyes when her phone rang.

It was Liora.

Elodie didn't want to answer. But the second her phone went quiet, the landline at the Miller house started ringing.

She sighed and picked up. "Grandma."

"Elodie, you didn't come home last night?"

"Yeah. I was too busy. Didn't make it back."

Hearing that she'd been working, Old Madam Miller softened. She didn't push. Just handed the phone to Liora.

"Mom!" Liora's voice was bright, and cheerful.

"Hey."

Liora sounded surprised that Elodie didn't come back to the Miller house every night. When she'd called last night and gotten no answer, and then woke up this morning and didn't see her, she'd felt a little let down.

"Mom, when are you coming back?"

"Tonight, probably."

"Oh..." Liora's voice dipped.

Elodie remembered something. "Call your dad and have him send a driver to take you to school, okay? I'm too busy today."

"Okay." Then, after a pause, "By the way, Mom, where are you living now? Can I come see you after school?"

"No," Elodie said quickly. "I'll still be at work when school gets out. Just stay at your great-grandma's. If you get bored, call your dad and have him take you out to eat."

"Okay."

"I have to get to work now. I'm hanging up."

"Bye, Mom."

Elodie ended the call.

After breakfast, she went straight to the office.

Even though she'd been swamped yesterday, today was no different. But she left earlier than usual in the afternoon so she could have dinner with Grandma.

When she got to the Miller house, she noticed right away that Grandma seemed off. Upset about something.

Elodie glanced around the living room. There was no sign of Liora.

She guessed Liora had gone out to eat with Dante again.

Elodie wasn't particularly bothered. But Grandma clearly was. She thought Liora was getting way too attached to Dante.

"Elodie," Grandma said seriously, "once you finish up your current work, you need to spend more time with Liora. Otherwise..."

Elodie nodded vaguely. "I know. I will. Let's eat first."

Grandma didn't say anything else.

After dinner, Elodie chatted with her for a bit, then went upstairs to rest.

Around nine, she came back downstairs. That's when the security booth called.

There was a visitor.

Elodie glanced at the monitor and saw Dante's car.

She frowned. Before she could process it, her phone rang. And it was from Liora.

Grandma hadn't gone to bed yet. She came out of her room, saw what was happening, and immediately told security to let the car through.

Elodie answered the phone, talked to Liora briefly, then hung up.

A moment later, Dante's car pulled up outside.

Liora bolted out, grinning. "Mom! I'm back!"

Elodie smiled faintly. Grandma looked pleased.

The car door was still open. Dante was still inside. Then he stepped out, holding Liora's forgotten backpack in one hand and a cake box in the other.

He walked toward them.

Elodie didn't say anything.

Liora suddenly remembered she'd left her stuff and turned around, beaming. "Thanks, Dad!"

"Mm." Dante glanced at Elodie, then at Old Madam Miller. "Old Madam."

Grandma gave him the coldest nod imaginable.

Elodie had no choice but to take the cake box from him.

Liora was about to say how good the cake was, but Elodie cut her off.

"Liora, say goodbye to your dad."

Liora blinked, confused. "Dad's leaving?"

Dante smiled slightly. "Yeah."

Liora had no choice. "Bye, Dad."

"Bye." Dante gave Old Madam Miller a brief nod, then turned and walked back to his car.

Elodie took the cake and Liora's hand and headed inside without a second glance. Without bothering to give him a polite wave. No seeing him off.

Dante's car pulled away moments later.

The second they were inside, Liora started bouncing on her toes. "Mom! Great-grandma! This is a little cake Dad and I got for you! It's strawberry, the kind you like, Mom! You have to try it, okay?"

Liora smelled faintly of perfume. Floral perfume.

Sienna's, probably. Elodie's nose almost wrinkled in disgust.

Elodie set the cake down on the counter. "I just ate dinner, sweetheart. I'm not hungry. We'll save it for later."

Old Madam Miller nodded in agreement.

Liora's face fell a little. "Oh... okay."

After putting the cake in the fridge, Liora ran upstairs to take a shower. She'd just finished when her phone rang.

Dante was calling.

She picked up. "Dad?"

"I just heard your grandfather's coming back tomorrow afternoon," Dante said. "After school, I'll have someone pick you up so you can come home for dinner. Let your mom know."

Dante's father, Felix Wilson, worked in government. High up. He was always busy, barely home more than a handful of days each year. The day Nonna had fallen, Felix had rushed back at dawn only to leave again before sunrise.

Now that Nonna was still in the hospital recovering, Felix had taken a few days off in advance so he could come back and spend New Year's with her.

Liora nodded even though he couldn't see her. "Okay. Got it."

As she hung up, something clicked.

Her dad had said "pick you up." Not "pick *you all* up."

Just her. Not Elodie.

She turned to her mom, confused. "Mom, aren't you coming to dinner with us?"

In the past, whenever Grandpa Felix came home whether Dante was there or not, Nonna always invited both Elodie and Liora to the old house for a family meal.

It happened often enough that even though Liora was young, she'd just assumed: when Grandpa comes back, we all go to the old house.

Elodie opened her mouth to answer, but Dante cut in through the speaker.

"Your mom has something to do tomorrow."

"Oh... okay," Liora said quietly.

Liora had put the phone on speaker, so Elodie had heard the whole thing.

She hadn't known Felix was coming back. Not until just now.

But it made sense. She and Dante were in the middle of divorcing. Given the circumstances, there was no reason for her to visit the Wilson family anymore. No reason to meet Dante's relatives or play the role of dutiful daughter-in-law.

Clearly, Dante felt the same way. He hadn't even waited for her to respond, he just made up an excuse on her behalf so she wouldn't have to come.

He didn't say anything else. Just ended the call.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 199[2,039 words]

Chapter 199: Chapter 199

The next day, in the afternoon, Harry showed up at Cole with his core technical team to go over some work details.

Over the past few days, Harry had been incredibly cooperative. It made Elodie's job easier, saved her a lot of headaches. As a result, she'd warmed up to him a bit, become more polite, more willing to engage.

The second he arrived, she set aside what she'd been working on to meet with him.

They'd been talking for over an hour when Harry's phone rang with Dante's number.

Harry apologized quickly, stepped out of the room, and took the call.

Whatever was said on the other end wasn't entirely clear, but after a brief silence, Harry just said, "Okay."

He was about to hang up when Dante added, "My father's back. We're having dinner at the house tonight. I'll need you to come by."

Harry paused. "Your father's back?" Then, "How long is he staying?"

"Two or three days."

After hanging up, Harry walked back into the meeting room. His eyes found Elodie, who was still deep in conversation with his technical team, completely unaware he was watching her.

When the meeting finally wrapped up and Elodie stood to walk them out, Harry spoke up.

"Are you working late tonight?"

Elodie answered without really thinking about it. "Yeah. I've still got a few things to finish up."

Harry's expression shifted. Something darkened in his eyes.

So she wouldn't be going back to the Wilson house tonight.

His pulse kicked up slightly. He asked, "Do you have time later? Want to grab dinner?"

Elodie shook her head. "I can't. I've got too much to do. I won't be able to get away."

Harry almost offered to have food sent over to her. But she wasn't officially divorced yet. And given where things stood between them, making a gesture like that felt... inappropriate.

After walking Harry and his team downstairs, Elodie headed right back up to her office.

Harry stood there for a long moment, watching the spot where she'd disappeared, before finally turning to Leo, one of the lead engineers on his team.

"I need a favor," Harry said.

Leo looked over. "What's up?"

"I have a friend who wants to go deeper into natural language processing. Right now, they need a top-level mentor..."

Leo caught on immediately. He didn't hesitate but then he paused, thinking it over.

"I'm pretty skilled in that area," he said carefully. "But to be honest? I don't think I'm as good as Mr. Gray from Cole. Or Miss Miller, for that matter... she's been handling most of our technical discussions. If you really want to help your friend, Mr. Becker, I think getting advice from Miss Miller or Mr. Gray would be way more effective."

Harry blinked, caught completely off guard.

He'd studied finance in college. AI wasn't his world. But Leo? Leo was an expert in natural language processing. Well-known across the States. Maybe not the absolute best, but damn close.

Harry hadn't expected him to praise Elodie so highly.

Then again, Johnny had been doing the same thing, singing her praises to anyone who would listen.

Harry knew Elodie was capable. But he'd always figured Johnny's constant praise was just... bias. Exaggeration fueled by personal interest.

But now it seemed like maybe it wasn't.

"Mr. Becker?"

Leo's voice snapped him out of his thoughts.

Harry blinked. "Right. Sorry. The thing is, Mr. Gray and Miss Miller have some personal history with my friend. It wouldn't be appropriate."

"Ah. Got it." Leo nodded, understanding, and didn't push further.

Later that evening, when Harry and Leo arrived at the private dining room, Sienna was already there.

The second she saw Leo, her whole demeanor shifted into being more engaged, and respectful. After a quick round of pleasantries, she dove straight into asking him technical questions.

Harry sat back and listened quietly. Barely said a word. His mind was somewhere else.

After a while, Sienna glanced over at him and smiled. "Bored?"

Harry straightened up. "No. I'm fine. You two keep going."

Sienna didn't hesitate. She turned right back to Leo and kept asking questions.

She was genuinely hungry to learn. She was focused, humble, eager. It made Leo more than willing to help. After getting a sense of where she was at skill-wise, he started mapping out a learning path for her, filling her in on the latest developments in the field.

Dinner came and went. The conversation stayed lively. But it was clear they were only scratching the surface tonight.

Sienna wanted to go deeper, and Leo agreed to meet her again tomorrow, said he could spare half a day to continue the discussion.

Sienna thanked him, clearly grateful.

After they saw Leo off, Sienna turned to Harry, who'd been quiet most of the night.

"Harry, thank you. For tonight."

Harry kept his tone neutral. "I grew up with Dante. This is nothing."

Then, before she could say anything else, he added, "It's late. You should get some rest."

Sienna nodded. "Alright. See you tomorrow."

Harry, catching that, shook his head slightly. "I've got something tomorrow. I won't be around."

Sienna paused, just for a second. Then her expression softened. "That's fine. If you've got things to handle, focus on those."

Harry gave a small nod.

After Sienna got in her car and drove off, Harry climbed into his own. But he didn't start the engine right away. Instead, he sat there, phone in hand, staring at the screen.

After a moment's hesitation, he dialed Elodie's number.

Elodie was still at the office.

Seeing his name pop up, she answered without thinking too much about it. "Mr. Becker?"

Harry was about to speak when he heard sounds in the background, papers rustling, a chair scraping. He paused.

"You're still at work? This late?"

"Yeah."

Since Harry was calling at this hour, Elodie figured it probably wasn't about business. She added, "I've got time tomorrow, though. Did you need something?"

Harry went quiet.

Elodie frowned, pulling the phone slightly away from her ear to check if the call was still connected. It was.

"Mr. Becker?" she tried again, her voice a little softer this time.

She knew she'd been running herself into the ground this week. It was already past nine in the evening, and here she was, still at her desk with files scattered everywhere and her third cup of coffee long gone cold. Exhausted didn't even begin to cover it.

And she knew without having to think too hard about it, that tomorrow would be just as empty. Liora was going back to the Bellini estate. Back to Dante. Back to Sienna, most likely. Elodie wouldn't get to see her daughter at all. Wouldn't hear her laugh or help her pick out clothes or even sit across from her at breakfast.

So now here was Harry, asking her to give up what little free time she had left. For his niece. For someone else's child.

It wasn't that she didn't want to help. She just... she was tired. In more ways than one.

"If you're tired," Harry finally said, and there was something careful in his tone now, almost hesitant, "you should rest this week. We can arrange something another time."

Elodie paused. She could've said yes. Could've told him she needed the break, that she didn't have anything left to give right now.

But she didn't.

"It's alright," she said instead, keeping her voice steady even though her chest felt tight. "We can meet tomorrow."

There was a beat of silence. Then Harry's voice came back, quieter.

"Alright."

The call ended shortly after.

Elodie set the phone down on her desk and stared at it for a long moment. Then she let out a slow breath, rubbed her temples, and went back to work.

Meanwhile, the Bellini family had just finished dinner at one of the nicer restaurants in the Pack territory.

The cool night air hit them as they stepped outside, and Dante led the way toward the cars like he always did, ever calm, composed, completely unbothered by the world around him. The rest followed, talking amongst themselves.

They didn't make it far before they ran into the Harden family coming out of the same restaurant.

Reed Hardin's face lit up immediately when he spotted Felix. The two older men greeted each other warmly, shaking hands and clapping shoulders like old friends who hadn't seen each other in too long.

Rex Hardin stepped forward next, his sharp eyes landing on Dante.

"Mr. Wilson," he said with a polite nod.

Dante returned it, his expression unreadable. "Mr. Hardin."

Then a small, bright voice cut through the formalities.

"Uncle Hardin!"

Liora, still holding tightly to Dante's hand, looked up at Rex with wide, sparkling eyes and the kind of smile that could melt anyone.

Rex's expression softened instantly. He crouched down just a little. "Well, hello there."

But even as he smiled at the little girl, his gaze drifted. He took in the people standing around Dante, Reed, Felix, Amber, Lauren. And Sienna, positioned just a bit too close to Dante's side, like she had every right to be there.

Rex knew all of them.

Except there was one person missing.

The mother of Dante's child.

His brows drew together slightly, though he kept his expression neutral. He'd heard the whispers, of course. Everyone in the Pack had. Dante and his wife were barely a couple anymore. Some said the divorce was already in motion. Others said it was just a matter of time.

But seeing it like this, seeing the empty space where she should've been, where a wife and mother should be standing, it made the rumors feel real.

The polite conversation didn't last long. A few more pleasantries were exchanged, and then the two families went their separate ways.

The Wilson family headed to the hospital to visit Nonna.

Nonna was sitting up in her hospital bed when they arrived, looking far too lively for someone who'd just had surgery. She was already bossing the nurses around and complaining about the food. Felix volunteered to stay the night with her, insisting the rest of them go home and get some sleep.

So they did.

When they got back to the old Bellini estate, the house felt strangely quiet. Too big. Too still.

The second they stepped inside, Yancy turned to his older brother with an eager grin plastered across his face.

"Brother, don't tell me you forgot about the autograph from my goddess..."

Dante didn't even look at him. He just pulled the car keys from his pocket and tossed them in Yancy's direction without breaking stride.

"It's in the car. Go get it yourself."

Yancy caught them mid-air, his grin widening. "Yes! Thanks, Brother!"

He was already turning toward the door when Amber's voice rang out from across the room.

"What's he so excited about?"

Yancy froze like a deer in headlights.

Dante, ever unbothered, glanced at his sister with a blank expression. "Nothing important."

Amber raised an eyebrow but didn't push further.

Yancy didn't wait around to see if she'd change her mind. He bolted outside before anyone could ask more questions.

A few minutes later, he came back inside but his excitement had completely deflated.

In his hands were a few plain notebooks, each one signed with a neat "CC" on the cover. Autographs, sure. But definitely not what he'd been hoping for.

He held one up, staring at it like it had personally betrayed him.

"Brother," he said, and now his voice was filled with genuine disappointment, "what I wanted was one of those signed photos. You know, the kind you can frame and hang on your wall so you can look at it whenever you want."

Dante, who had already settled into the armchair and was scrolling through something on his phone, didn't even glance up.

His voice was cold.

"That's not something you should have."

Yancy opened his mouth to argue, then thought better of it. He knew that tone. That was the end of the discussion.

With a heavy sigh, he dropped onto the couch, clutching his stack of boring notebooks.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 200 [1,644 words]

Chapter 200: Chapter 200

Still, Yancy had gotten his goddess's autograph, and honestly? That was enough. He was grinning like an idiot as he pulled out his phone and typed out a quick thank-you message to Sienna.

He hit send and sat back, feeling pretty good about himself.

Meanwhile, Liora padded across the room with her tablet clutched in both hands. She walked right up to Dante, her little face hopeful.

"Dad, there's a new animated movie coming out tomorrow," she said, turning the screen toward him so he could see the trailer. "It looks really good. Can we go?"

Dante didn't even look up from his phone. "I can't tomorrow."

Liora's face fell a little.

With Felix back home, the old estate would be flooded with visitors in the morning. Pack elders. Business partners. People paying their respects. It was inevitable.

"If you want to go," Dante added, still scrolling, "ask your mom to take you."

Liora let out a small sigh. "Oh..."

She'd been spending more time with Elodie lately, more than she had in weeks, actually, so she wasn't as clingy with Dante as she used to be. Still, it would've been nice if he'd said yes.

Then her eyes lit up again. "What about Aunt Sienna? Maybe I can ask her too..."

Dante finally glanced at her. "Aunt Sienna will be busy tomorrow. She's studying with someone. Don't bother her."

Liora's shoulders slumped. "...Alright. I'll ask Mom then."

"Mm."

Liora picked up her phone and dialed Elodie's number, pressing it to her ear as she waited.

Elodie had just gotten home.

She saw the call come through, but her hands were full and her body was screaming for a hot shower. She set the phone down on the counter and headed straight for the bathroom.

The water was scalding, just the way she liked it. She let it run over her shoulders, washing away the exhaustion that had been sitting on her all day like dead weight.

By the time she came out, wrapped in a towel and smelling like lavender, she'd completely forgotten about the missed call.

Back at the Wilson estate, Liora stared at her phone with a small frown.

"Mom's probably busy too," she mumbled.

Dante glanced over at Yancy, who was still sitting on the couch looking way too pleased with himself.

"In that case," Dante said smoothly, "let your uncle take you."

Yancy's head shot up. "Wait, what?"

He'd already made plans with his friends for tomorrow. They were supposed to hit up that new arcade downtown, grab food, maybe check out the Pack fights if they had time.

But then again... Dante had just gotten him Sienna's autograph. And she'd been so nice to him earlier, smiling and waving like he actually mattered.

He sighed.

"Fine," Yancy said, throwing his hands up in defeat. "I'll take her."

Liora's face brightened immediately. "Really?"

"Yeah, yeah," Yancy muttered. "Just don't annoy me the whole time."

Liora grinned and threw her arms around him. "Thank you, Uncle Yancy!"

Yancy patted her head awkwardly, already regretting his decision.

The Next Day – Around Noon.

Elodie stepped out of her apartment building and into the warm afternoon sun.

It had been a while since she'd seen Daisy. Too long, actually. The little girl had been texting her nonstop for the past week, asking when they could hang out again.

So here she was.

When she arrived at the restaurant and pushed open the door to the private room, Daisy's face lit up like fireworks.

"Aunt Elodie!"

The little girl bolted across the room and threw herself into Elodie's arms with so much force she almost knocked her back a step.

Elodie laughed, catching her easily. "Daisy, long time no see."

"I missed you so much," Daisy said, squeezing her tight.

"I missed you too, sweetheart."

This was Elodie's first time at this restaurant, and honestly? She was impressed. Every single dish that came out was delicious. Perfectly seasoned. Exactly the type of food she liked but never bothered to make for herself.

Harry had clearly put thought into this.

After lunch, they headed to the cinema. Harry had already booked tickets for some animated movie Daisy had been begging to see all week.

As they stood in line to pick up their tickets, Daisy tugged on Harry's sleeve.

"Uncle, can I get popcorn?"

Harry glanced down at her. "You want a large or small?"

Daisy's eyes went wide. "Large! I'm gonna share with you and Aunt Elodie!"

Harry smiled, it was one of those rare, genuine ones that softened his whole face. "Alright then. Large it is."

Daisy beamed.

Elodie stood off to the side, watching the two of them with a small smile tugging at her lips.

For the first time in a long time, she felt... light.

No One's POV

Inside the theater, the lights dimmed just as they found their seats.

Daisy immediately claimed the middle spot, plopping down with the giant bucket of popcorn balanced on her lap. She grabbed a piece, popped it in her mouth, then turned to Elodie with wide eyes.

"Aunt Elodie, you have to try some!"

Elodie smiled and reached over, taking a piece. It was warm, buttery, perfectly salted. "It's good."

Daisy grinned, clearly proud of herself. Then she turned to Harry. "Uncle, you too!"

Harry glanced down at her, amused, and took a piece without arguing.

The movie started—some bright, colorful animated thing that Daisy had been dying to see. Harry had picked it specifically for her, knowing she'd love it.

But honestly? It wasn't half bad.

The story was sweet. Funny in parts, emotional in others. Even Elodie found herself getting pulled in, laughing at the jokes and feeling that little tug in her chest during the sad scenes.

The three of them sat there, munching popcorn and watching the screen.

Everything was easy. Comfortable.

Then it happened.

Elodie reached into the bucket for another piece of popcorn. At the exact same moment, Harry's hand moved toward it too.

His fingers brushed the back of her hand.

Then closed around it.

Elodie froze.

So did Harry.

For a second, neither of them moved. The warmth of his hand was still there, steady against hers. Her heart did this weird little flip she wasn't expecting.

It was an accident. Obviously. Just a random, clumsy thing that didn't mean anything.

Harry pulled his hand back quickly. "Sorry."

Elodie blinked and forced a small smile. "It's fine."

Daisy, completely oblivious, was still glued to the screen, eyes wide as the characters on-screen went through some dramatic scene.

Elodie didn't reach for the popcorn again after that.

Harry noticed. He glanced at the bucket, then at her, then back at the screen. Maybe she was uncomfortable now. Maybe she didn't want him anywhere near her space.

He pulled his hand back into his lap and didn't touch the popcorn again either.

The movie continued.

After a while, Daisy started squirming in her seat. She'd downed way too much soda.

"Aunt Elodie," she whispered urgently, tugging on Elodie's sleeve. "I need to go to the bathroom."

Elodie stood immediately. "Come on, sweetheart."

Harry stood too, polite as ever. "Sorry to trouble you."

Elodie waved him off. "It's no trouble at all."

She took Daisy's hand and led her out of the theater, weaving through the dark aisles toward the hallway outside.

The bathroom was just down the hall.

Elodie waited outside while Daisy did her business, leaning against the wall and scrolling through her phone absently.

When Daisy came out, they started heading back.

That's when a little boy walked out of the men's restroom.

He looked up and stopped.

His eyes landed on Elodie first. Then Daisy.

He recognized them immediately.

Elodie didn't notice him. She was already guiding Daisy back toward the theater, moving through the crowd without a second glance.

The boy watched them disappear, then turned and walked back toward his mother.

"Mom," he said, tugging on her sleeve.

Amber Wilson barely looked up from her phone. She was in the middle of a text conversation and clearly not interested in whatever her son was about to say.

"I'm done," the boy, David, added. "Let's go."

Amber nodded absently. "Alright, just give me a second."

David stood there for a moment, fidgeting. Then, because he was bored and had nothing better to do, he said, "Mom, I just saw Aunt Miller."

Amber glanced at him briefly. "Oh? Really?"

"Yeah," David said. "She was with some other kid. But it wasn't Liora."

Amber's expression didn't change. "Is that so?"

Her tone made it clear she didn't really care.

She assumed it was probably one of the Miller family kids. Maybe a cousin or something. It wasn't her business anyway.

"Come on," she said, slipping her phone into her purse. "Let's go."

David followed her without another word.

Back inside the theater, Elodie and Daisy slipped into their seats just as the movie hit its climax.

Daisy immediately leaned forward, her eyes glued to the screen.

Elodie settled back into her seat, and for the rest of the film, she didn't reach for the popcorn again.

Neither did Harry.

When the credits rolled and the lights came back on, Daisy was practically bouncing in her seat, talking a mile a minute about her favorite parts.

Harry smiled at her, nodding along, while Elodie gathered their things.

They left the theater together, stepping out into the bright afternoon sun.

And later that evening, Amber and David arrived at the Bellini estate.

The old house was already full of family members, visitors, Pack elders who'd come to pay their respects now that Felix was back home.

Amber walked in with David at her side, greeting everyone politely.

She didn't think about Elodie again.

Not even once.