

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 211[1,934 words]

Chapter 211: Chapter 211

Elodie and Johnny clearly had no intention of engaging with him.

Johnny didn't waste time being polite about it either.

"Mr. Hardin," he said smoothly, already turning away, "we'll go greet some old friends. You take your time."

Before Rex could even respond, the two of them had already walked off.

Rex stood there, watching them go, his jaw tight.

He knew. Of course he knew.

They didn't want to talk to him. Didn't want to engage. Didn't want anything to do with him beyond the bare minimum required by professionalism.

And honestly? It bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

He'd been trying to build a better relationship with Johnny for months now. Their companies had worked together before. Multiple times. Had successful projects, several solid partnerships.

But Johnny had never once warmed up to him.

The dislike was so obvious it was almost painful. Johnny didn't even try to hide it.

Rex pressed his lips together, feeling that familiar sting of frustration settle in his chest.

But he didn't say anything. He just stood there, watching them disappear into the crowd.

Over the past two or three months, Cole Technologies had been attracting a lot of attention.

And wherever Elodie and Johnny went, people noticed.

Tonight was no different.

Several business partners...CEOs, executives, investors, walked over to greet them the moment they spotted them across the room.

Most of them had worked with Cole recently. And a good number of those collaborations had been handled directly by Elodie.

Which meant they knew.

They knew how sharp she was. How capable. How she could break down complex systems in minutes and offer solutions that most people wouldn't even think of.

Over the past few months, more than a few of these CEOs had quietly reached out to her. Discreetly, trying to poach her.

Offering her positions. Higher salaries. Better benefits. More freedom.

She'd turned down every single one.

But that didn't stop them from trying.

And tonight, one of them, President Serena, a woman in her fifties with sharp eyes and an even sharper business sense, decided to take another shot. This time right in front of Johnny.

"Miss Miller," Serena said with a warm smile, stepping closer. "Our company is one of the top manufacturers in the Pack territories. We offer excellent benefits, a high degree of creative freedom, and honestly? Whatever conditions you have, we can negotiate."

Johnny's expression didn't change, but his eyes narrowed slightly.

Really? Right in front of me?

Elodie smiled politely, her tone was still calm and professional.

"I'm not planning to leave Cole at the moment. But thank you for the offer, President Serena."

Serena let out a long, dramatic sigh.

"Well," she said, shaking her head, "can't blame a woman for trying."

She walked off a few minutes later, rubbing her chest like she'd just lost something valuable.

A little while later, someone noticed her standing off to the side, still looking frustrated.

"Serena, what's going on with you tonight?" they asked, half-laughing. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you just lost out on a billion-dollar deal."

Serena let out a dry laugh. "It's almost the same."

The other person raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Serena glanced around to make sure no one was listening too closely, then leaned in slightly.

"I found a truly rare talent," she said quietly. "But no matter what I offer, she won't budge."

"Oh? Who?"

"That Miss Miller from Cole."

The other person blinked, clearly surprised. "Her? She looks so young. Is her professional ability really that strong?"

Serena nodded firmly. "She really is."

She paused, then added, "The core technical staff at my company, people who've worked with her, they won't stop talking about her. They say she's one of the best they've ever seen."

The other person let out a low whistle. "Damn."

"Yeah," Serena muttered, rubbing her temple. "Damn is right."

The core technical staff at Serena's company, people who had worked directly with Elodie, hadn't stopped praising her since.

And that meant something.

Because these weren't just any employees. They were some of the brightest young talents in the industry. Handpicked by Serena herself. Sharp. Ambitious. Hard to impress.

If they were singing Elodie's praises, then her abilities had to be the real deal.

Serena sighed again, shaking her head like she'd just watched a fortune slip through her fingers.

Sienna had no idea about any of this.

She was too busy chatting with Leo, her posture relaxed and confident as they discussed her recent progress. She smiled at all the right moments, asked thoughtful questions, and made sure he knew how much she valued his time.

After a while, Rex stepped out of the crowd.

He glanced around, noticed that Sienna wasn't standing with Dante anymore, and walked over.

Sienna saw him coming and smiled politely. "Mr. Hardin."

Rex nodded, then glanced at Leo. "Who's this?"

Sienna introduced him smoothly. "This is General Gray. He's been teaching me recently. I've learned so much from him, it's been incredibly rewarding."

Rex raised his eyebrows slightly, clearly impressed.

He already knew Sienna wanted to become Professor Nolan's student. She'd mentioned it before. And she'd been working toward it relentlessly, never giving up.

But hearing this, hearing how seriously she was taking her studies, made him respect her even more.

She wasn't just talk. She was putting in the work.

Rex stepped back a little. "Well, I'll leave you two to it."

Sienna nodded, already turning her attention back to Leo without missing a beat.

Rex stood there for a moment, watching her.

She was so focused. So driven. So completely absorbed in what she was doing.

It was hard to look away.

But then someone came over to greet him, so Rex excused himself and walked off.

A little while later, Rex was heading toward the restroom when he caught sight of something that made him stop in his tracks.

Elodie and Dante. They were standing off to the side, away from the crowd. Just the two of them.

Rex's mind flashed back to a month or two ago, when he'd seen them at that event. When Dante had caught Elodie as she stumbled. When they'd been so close, for just a moment, that it looked like something more.

Rex had wondered then if maybe there was still something between them.

And now, watching them again, he couldn't help but wonder the same thing.

Dante was holding a small plate with a slice of cake on it. He was offering it to Elodie, his expression was unreadable.

Rex pressed his lips together and started walking toward them.

Elodie didn't reach for the cake.

She just stood there, her arms folded loosely in front of her, her face blank.

As Rex got closer, Dante noticed him and turned.

"Mr. Hardin," he said smoothly, nodding in greeting.

Rex forced a polite smile. "What are you two talking about?"

Dante let out a quiet chuckle. "We haven't had the chance to talk yet."

Before Rex could respond, Elodie moved.

Without a word. Without even glancing at Rex. She just turned and walked away. Bypassed him completely. Like he wasn't even there.

Rex stood there, watching her go, his jaw tightening slightly.

Dante didn't seem fazed. He just set the plate down on a nearby table and adjusted his cufflinks like nothing had happened.

Rex looked at him. Then back at where Elodie had disappeared into the crowd.

And he couldn't shake the feeling that something was very, very off.

Just as Rex watched Elodie walk away, then his gaze shifted back to Dante, who was still holding two drinks in his hands.

"What's this?" Rex asked, nodding toward the glasses.

Dante glanced down. "Specially made cocktails. Would you like to try one, Mr. Hardin?"

Rex hesitated. "Is the other one for Miss Brown?"

"Yes."

Rex opened his mouth, about to say something, when Dante cut him off.

"I'll be over there for a moment, Mr. Hardin. Feel free to do as you wish."

And just like that, he was already walking away.

Rex frowned, watching him go.

That's when he noticed, Sienna had somehow ended up talking to Johnny. And Elodie was heading straight toward them.

Rex froze.

Oh.

Dante was rushing over because he was worried. Worried that Sienna might get cornered. Maybe even humiliated by Elodie and Johnny.

Rex's frown deepened, and he started walking in that direction too.

Sienna had only just gotten there. She hadn't even had time to say much to Johnny when Elodie appeared beside him.

But Sienna didn't let it faze her. She acted like Elodie wasn't even standing there and turned to Johnny with a polite, professional smile.

"Mr. Gray—"

"Back already?" Johnny didn't even glance at her. He turned to Elodie instead, his tone immediately warmer. "You okay?"

He'd seen Dante walking toward her earlier. He'd wanted to go over and intervene, but Sienna had intercepted him on the way. Convenient timing.

Elodie shook her head. "I'm fine."

And she was. Like Dante had said, they hadn't even had the chance to speak before Rex showed up and interrupted.

So nothing had happened.

At that moment, Dante and Rex walked over.

Dante handed the second drink to Sienna without a word. She took it with a soft smile, her fingers brushing his briefly as she did.

"What were you talking about?" Dante asked, his tone calm.

Sienna's eyes softened when she looked at him. "I was hoping to ask Mr. Gray for some advice, but I haven't had the chance yet."

Dante nodded, then turned his attention to Johnny.

"I was wondering," he said smoothly, "when you might be free to have a meal together, Mr. Gray?"

It sounded polite. Casual, even.

But everyone standing there knew what it really was.

Dante was trying to arrange a private meeting between Sienna and Johnny. Trying to smooth things over. Build connections. Get her closer to the people who mattered.

Elodie's expression went cold.

Johnny, on the other hand, let out a short, sharp laugh.

"Sorry," he said flatly. "I'm not free. Ever."

Before Dante could say anything else, Johnny turned to Elodie.

"Elodie, let's go."

Elodie nodded without sparing any of them a second glance and turned to leave.

Rex stood there, watching the whole exchange unfold.

He'd been worried, maybe even a little suspicious, that there might still be something going on between Dante and Elodie.

But now he realized he'd completely misread the situation.

Dante wasn't concerned about Elodie at all. He was focused entirely on Sienna. Trying to help her. Trying to get her in with Johnny so she could build her own reputation. Her own network.

Rex finally understood.

There had never been any real bad blood between Johnny and Sienna. Right now, Johnny was Elodie's greatest support. Her ally. Her friend.

If Dante managed to break the ice between Sienna and Johnny, then Elodie would lose that advantage. That sense of security.

And for Sienna? That would be a major win.

Rex's jaw tightened as he watched Elodie and Johnny walk away together.

After they'd put some distance between themselves and the others, Johnny let out a long breath and glanced sideways at Elodie.

"You alright?" he asked, his tone lighter now but still concerned.

Elodie shook her head. "It's nothing."

And she meant it.

Compared to everything she'd endured over the past few years, Dante's little power plays didn't even register anymore.

They were just... noise.

She'd learned to tune it out.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 212[1,825 words]

Chapter 212: Chapter 212

Johnny glanced at Elodie. "Should we head back?"

They'd originally planned to leave early anyway. But then all that had happened, and now they were both just done.

Elodie nodded. "Let's go."

Before leaving, they went over to say goodbye to Harry.

Harry looked genuinely surprised. "You're leaving already?"

But he didn't push. He could tell Elodie wasn't the type who enjoyed these kinds of events. And honestly? He didn't want to make her stay if she didn't want to.

"Let me walk you out," he said.

They nodded, and Harry escorted them to the entrance, exchanging a few words before they left.

Three Days Later - The Cole Cocktail Party.

Harry arrived early that evening. Earlier than most guests. Earlier than he probably needed to.

But he was there. Without Sienna, Dante, Rex, and the others in attendance, the night went smoothly. There was no tension and there was no drama. Just business as usual.

There were plenty of guests that evening, partners, investors, colleagues all in the party. The room continued to buzz with conversation and clinking glasses.

Elodie and Johnny were both running around nonstop, greeting people, making introductions, handling a dozen things at once.

They didn't have much time to pay attention to Harry.

By the time the party was halfway through, Johnny happened to glance across the room and noticed Harry deep in conversation with one of their senior developers.

Johnny blinked.

Wait.

He'd assumed Harry would leave early. After all, the Brown family's cocktail party was also being held tonight. Johnny had fully expected Harry to show up at Cole's event for appearances, then slip out halfway through to attend theirs.

But here he was still here.

Johnny couldn't help the grin that spread across his face. He nudged Elodie and nodded toward Harry.

"Now this is what it means to value a partnership," Johnny said, clearly pleased. "See? This is how it's done. Unlike Rex... ugh, I'm not even gonna waste my breath on that guy."

Elodie glanced over at Harry, a little surprised herself.

She hadn't expected him to stay either.

Harry was being considerate and respectful. And honestly? It meant something.

So Elodie and Johnny decided not to be rude. They made their way over to him, weaving through the crowd until they reached his side.

"Mr. Becker," Johnny said warmly, raising his glass. "There are quite a few guests tonight. If we've been inattentive, please forgive us."

Harry smiled and raised his own glass. "We're all friends. There's no need for formality."

Johnny didn't actually consider Harry a true friend. Not yet, anyway. But he appreciated the gesture. Appreciated that Harry could set aside personal history and focus on business.

That was rare.

Harry clinked glasses with both of them, took a sip, and nodded.

But even as he spoke to Johnny, his attention kept drifting to Elodie.

Tonight's event was being hosted by both Johnny and Elodie.

And even though Johnny had been doing his best to shield her from the worst of it, Elodie had still ended up drinking quite a bit throughout the evening.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed now. Her eyes had a soft, glassy sheen to them. The usual sharpness in her gaze had dulled just slightly, giving her a softer, almost... vulnerable look.

She wasn't drunk. Not yet. But she was getting there.

Harry's grip on the stem of his wine glass tightened. He forced himself to look away. Forced himself to focus on Johnny's voice instead of the way Elodie's hair had come slightly loose from its pin, framing her face in a way that made his chest feel tight.

Get it together.

He took another sip of his drink and nodded along to whatever Johnny was saying.

But he couldn't stop himself from glancing back at her. Just once. Just to make sure she was okay.

As the evening was winding down, Elodie walked Harry to the door.

He stopped just before stepping outside.

The cold wind outside was sharp and biting. Harry glanced down and noticed the small section of pale skin exposed beneath the hem of her gown, on her ankle, her calf and frowned slightly.

"Let me take it from here," he said quietly.

Elodie nodded. "Alright. Take care."

Harry looked at her for a moment, like he wanted to say something. His mouth opened slightly, then closed again.

Whatever it was, he decided against it.

He just nodded once more and turned to leave.

After all the important guests had left, Elodie finally got into the car with Johnny and left the hotel.

But Harry hadn't actually left yet.

He was still standing near his car, his hands in his pockets, watching the entrance.

He was worried. Worried that Elodie might run into trouble after drinking. Worried that something might happen on the drive home.

Only after he saw her safely get into the car and drive off did he finally turn to his driver.

"Let's go."

The Next Day.

Elodie woke up late, her head a little foggy from the night before. She showered, dressed, and came downstairs for breakfast.

Helen and Old Lady Miller were already at the table, deep in conversation about preparations for the New Year.

Tomorrow was New Year's Eve, and the company had officially gone on holiday today.

Elodie sat down and poured herself some tea. "I'll go with you both."

Old Lady Miller's face lit up. "Good, good. We'll go together."

Then her smile faltered just a little. She hesitated before asking, "Elodie... is Liora celebrating the New Year at the Wilson estate this year?"

Elodie's expression softened at the mention of her daughter.

"She probably is."

On the day she'd met with Mr. Taylor, Dante had briefly mentioned Liora, subtly hinting that Elodie should make time for her. But after that day, neither Dante nor Liora had reached out.

No calls. No messages. Nothing.

So it seemed likely that Liora would spend the New Year with the Wilson family.

Old Lady Miller's heart ached. She missed Liora terribly, but she also felt deeply for Elodie.

Still, Elodie remained calm. She smiled gently and reached over to pat her grandmother's hand.

"Grandma, I'm fine. As long as Liora is happy."

Old Lady Miller didn't believe her. She could see the sadness Elodie was trying to hide. But she didn't push.

She just sighed quietly and let the subject drop.

After breakfast, Elodie and Helen went out to buy New Year's goods.

The shopping streets were alive with color and several noises. Bright red lanterns hung from every storefront. Familiar New Year songs played on loop, filling the air with a festive energy that was hard to ignore.

Helen had already done most of the shopping, so today they were just checking for anything they'd missed.

The streets were packed with families. Children ran around in brightly colored cotton outfits, clutching little tiger lanterns that bobbed and glowed as they skipped along.

Elodie stopped walking.

Her eyes landed on a little girl hopping excitedly beside her mother, her lantern swinging wildly in her hand.

Elodie's chest tightened.

Before Liora had left to study abroad with Dante, Elodie used to buy her two or three traditional cotton outfits every year for the New Year.

Liora had loved them.

She'd also adored the little tiger lanterns.

In the days after New Year's Eve, those lanterns had been her favorite toys. She'd light the candles inside and play with them for hours, completely mesmerized.

But that had been two years ago.

In the two years since Liora had left, one year had been spent abroad with Dante. And the following year, when Liora came back, everything had already changed.

But by then, Liora didn't care for those things anymore.

She thought they were tacky. Childish. She refused to wear them.

Elodie didn't force her. If Liora didn't like them, she wouldn't push.

So she tried picking out other clothes instead, modern ones, stylish ones, things she thought Liora might prefer.

But Liora didn't like those either.

At first, Elodie thought maybe she just couldn't keep up with her daughter's tastes. That maybe Liora had outgrown her sense of style.

But eventually, she realized the truth.

Liora simply didn't want to wear anything she picked out.

It wasn't about the clothes.

It was about her.

Elodie slowly pulled her gaze away from the little girl and her lantern, swallowing down the ache in her chest. She caught up to Old Lady Miller and Helen, who were a few steps ahead.

Knowing that Elodie and Helen were out shopping for New Year's goods, Hugo and Xavier had secretly messaged her earlier that morning.

"Buy lots of fireworks so we can set them off in the garden on New Year's Eve!"

Elodie had smiled when she saw the message and replied simply:

"Alright."

She thought about the past few years.

Since marrying Dante, he was rarely in the capital during the holidays. He was always flying somewhere, business trips, Pack meetings, conferences across the territories.

Even so, every year after their marriage, Elodie had still returned to the Wilson family's old residence for New Year's. Even when Dante wasn't there.

Because that's what was expected of her.

But now, thinking about it... it had been seven years since she'd last spent New Year's with her own family.

Seven years.

Elodie tucked her phone back into her pocket, a faint smile tugging at her lips. She was just about to head toward the fireworks stall when her phone rang.

It was Johnny.

"Hey," he said cheerfully. "I just bought a ton of fireworks. Like, way too many. I'm sending some your way."

Elodie blinked, caught off guard. "Johnny, you really don't have to—"

"Too late. Already done. They'll be at your place this afternoon."

She couldn't help but smile. "Thank you."

From the sound of it, Johnny had bought a lot. So she didn't need to buy any herself.

After finishing the rest of the shopping and heading back home, Elodie's phone rang again.

This time, it was Harry.

She hesitated for just a second before answering.

"Mr. Becker?"

"I ordered a small batch of fireworks a while ago," Harry said, his tone was casual but it was warm. "Daisy asked me to send some to you. Could you send me your address so I can have someone deliver them?"

Elodie paused.

Her first instinct was to refuse.

"Mr. Becker, it's really not necessary—"

"Then can you call Daisy later and tell her that yourself?"

Elodie went quiet.

She could already picture Daisy's disappointed little face. Her wide eyes. The way she'd pout and ask why Aunt Elodie didn't want her fireworks.

Elodie let out a soft breath.

"...Please thank Daisy for me."

There was a brief pause on the other end.

Then Harry's voice came back, quieter this time.

"I will."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 213 [1,744 words]

Chapter 213: Chapter 213

Elodie's POV

Johnny had been to the Miller family house before, so he just delivered the fireworks directly to the residence.

As for Harry, I didn't want to cause any unnecessary trouble, so I gave him an address near the Miller villa instead.

Around 2 p.m., I drove over to meet him.

On the phone, Harry had said he'd have someone deliver the fireworks. So when I pulled up and saw him standing there in person, I was genuinely surprised.

"You're here?" he said, straightening up when he saw me.

"Mm."

"Open the trunk."

I popped it open, and Harry started loading fireworks into the back. Then I noticed he was adding other things too, wrapped gifts, neatly tied with ribbon.

I frowned slightly. "The New Year gifts aren't necessary..."

Harry didn't even look up. "Daisy asked me to give them to you."

I went quiet.

Of course she did.

I walked back to my car and pulled out a small gift bag I'd prepared earlier—a decorative thousand-knot charm and a few other little things I'd picked up that morning. I handed them to Harry.

"I also bought a few things for Daisy," I said.

Harry's expression softened. He smiled faintly. "Alright."

As he set the bag down in his car, something caught his eye. He reached in and pulled out one of the lanterns I'd bought, a cute, chubby fabric rabbit with a little handle.

He held it up, inspecting it. "What's this?"

"A rabbit lantern," I said. "I bought two. One's a rabbit, the other's a snake. I thought the kids might like them."

Harry looked at both lanterns, the rabbit and the snake, turning them over in his hands. They were bright and festive, the kind of thing kids would go crazy for.

He smiled. "I think Daisy will love it. Thank you."

"Gift for gift," I said lightly. "It's nothing."

Harry carefully placed the lanterns back in the bag, then glanced toward the nearby coffee shop.

"Want to sit for a while?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I can't. I still have things to do. I need to head out again soon."

Tonight, Nonna was being discharged from the hospital. I had to go visit her with Grandma.

Harry nodded slowly. "Alright."

I didn't say much more after that. Just got back in my car and left.

Not long after I got home, Grandma and I headed out again.

We brought New Year gifts for Nonna, traditional things, and carefully wrapped. Grandma had insisted on picking them out herself.

We'd called ahead to let Nonna know we were coming.

But when we got to the hospital and walked into her room, it was just her and Aunt Amy, her caretaker.

No one else.

Grandma's face fell slightly. I knew she'd been hoping to see Liora.

But she didn't say anything.

Nonna noticed. I could see it in her eyes. But she didn't bring it up either.

Everyone had known for a while now that Dante and I were getting divorced.

And since Felix had come back to visit Nonna during the New Year and I hadn't shown up, Nonna had already figured it out.

I was distancing myself from the Wilson family.

She'd probably already guessed that I wouldn't be spending New Year at the estate this year.

As for Liora's custody, I knew Nonna had brought it up with Dante a few days ago.

But he'd refused to compromise.

Of course he had.

I stood there quietly, my hands folded in front of me, watching Grandma chat softly with Nonna.

I didn't say much. Just smiled when I needed to. Nodded when it was appropriate.

But inside?

Inside, I felt hollow.

Because I knew.

This was the last time I'd be here like this.

The last time I'd pretend everything was fine.

The last time I'd smile through the pain.

After this, I was done.

When Nonna had asked Dante where Liora would spend the New Year, he'd given her the same answer he always did.

"It depends on what Liora decides."

But Liora had been abroad on a trip. She'd only just gotten back tonight, so Nonna hadn't had the chance to ask her yet.

Seeing how disappointed her old friend was, Nonna felt guilty.

But the truth was, Liora had been clinging to Dante more and more lately. And without knowing what Liora wanted, Nonna couldn't make any promises.

She didn't say anything, but Old Lady Miller and Elodie both understood.

They didn't bring up Liora after that. Instead, they shifted to lighter topics, how Nonna's leg was healing, how the physical therapy was going, when she'd be able to walk without the cane.

Since Nonna was being discharged soon anyway, Elodie and Old Lady Miller didn't stay long. After about half an hour, they said their goodbyes and left.

Not long after they were gone, Dante appeared at the hospital.

Nonna knew immediately why he'd waited.

He was avoiding Elodie.

She didn't say anything about it. Just watched him walk in, calm and composed as always, like nothing was wrong.

The divorce between Elodie and Dante was already a done deal. Nonna knew she couldn't stop it.

But still...

She watched Dante sit down beside her bed and start peeling an apple with ease. His movements were smooth, unhurried. Like he had all the time in the world.

Nonna pressed her lips together.

"Dante," she said quietly, "Liora was born after Elodie went through so much. Can't you at least give her custody?"

Dante didn't stop peeling. His voice was calm. Indifferent.

"Liora is my daughter too."

Nonna's jaw tightened. "You didn't care about Liora for years. And now you have the nerve to fight for custody?"

Dante smiled faintly. He set the peeled apple slices on a plate and held it out to her.

"I've changed, haven't I?"

Nonna turned her face away, refusing to take the plate. She didn't respond.

Dante set it down on the table beside her.

"Nonna," he said gently, "this is between us. Don't involve yourself."

Nonna said nothing.

After handling the discharge paperwork, Dante took Nonna back to the Wilson estate.

Later that evening, he left to pick up Liora from the airport.

"Dad! Aunt Sienna!"

The moment Liora spotted Dante and Sienna waiting for her outside the terminal, she let go of Aunt Sabina's hand and took off running.

She threw herself into their arms, beaming.

Once they were in the car, Liora dug through her little backpack and pulled out a handful of trinkets she'd bought during her trip.

"Dad, Aunt Sienna, I bought gifts for you!"

Sienna took them with a warm smile, gently ruffling Liora's hair. "Thank you, sweetheart."

Tonight, Nonna was being discharged, so Dante and Liora were heading back to the estate for dinner.

After leaving the airport, they dropped Sienna off at her place first. Then Dante instructed the driver to turn around and head to the family home.

In the car, Dante was on his phone, handling work emails and messages.

Liora didn't bother him. She just sat beside him, swinging her legs and playing with one of the toys she'd brought back.

When they finally arrived at the estate, Liora hopped out of the car, her little backpack bouncing on her shoulders.

She ran toward the front door, calling out excitedly.

"Mom! Mom!"

Dante, having finished packing up his laptop, got out of the car.

When he heard Liora calling out, he glanced up and said calmly, "Your mom isn't here."

Liora stopped mid-step. She turned around, her little face confused.

"Huh? Mom isn't here?"

"Mm."

"Is Mom still busy?"

Dante walked over and gently patted her head. "Maybe you can call her and ask."

"Oh..."

Liora's voice trailed off.

Lately, whenever she tried calling her mom, Elodie didn't answer.

At home, it was fine. But these past few days while she'd been abroad, even though Dad and Aunt Sienna had called and video-chatted with her every day, they weren't physically there. And being alone overseas, even with Aunt Sabina, she'd felt lonely. Homesick.

In those first few days, the person she'd missed the most was actually her mom.

She'd called her every single day.

But her mom never picked up.

Eventually, Liora stopped trying. She told herself that Mom was probably just busy. That she didn't have time to answer.

Before flying back, Liora had secretly hoped her mom would be at the airport to pick her up.

But when Dad and Aunt Sienna said they'd be the ones coming, she didn't mention it. Didn't call.

She'd thought that at least when she got home, Mom would be there waiting.

But now...

Liora's chest felt tight. She didn't feel like calling anymore.

She figured even if she did, Mom would still be too busy to answer anyway.

The excitement she'd felt about coming home drained out of her all at once.

Dante crouched down in front of her, gently pinching her cheek. He raised an eyebrow.

"Crying?"

Liora pouted and turned her face away. "No, I'm not!"

Dante chuckled softly. "Giving up already? Not going to call Mom anymore?"

Liora didn't answer right away. She stared at the ground, her little hands clenched into fists.

Finally, she mumbled quietly, "I... I didn't give up."

She still wanted to call.

Dante's smile softened. He didn't say anything else. Just reached out and scooped her up into his arms.

"Let's go inside first."

Liora wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into his chest. It was warm. Solid. Familiar.

She felt a little better.

The Wilson family was waiting for them to start dinner.

When Dante and Liora walked in, everyone turned to look.

Nonna's face lit up the moment she saw Liora. "There's my girl! Come here, let Grandma get a good look at you."

Liora wiggled out of Dante's arms and ran over to Nonna. "Grandma!"

Then she turned and greeted the others politely. "Grandma Stella. Aunt Amber. Uncle Yancy."

Stella and Amber responded, but their voices were faint and distant.

Just enough to be civil.

Liora didn't seem to notice. She was already chattering away to Nonna about her trip, showing her the little souvenirs she'd brought back.

Nonna smiled warmly, asking questions, admiring everything Liora showed her.

But across the table, Stella exchanged a brief glance with Amber.

Neither of them said a word.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 214[1,859 words]

Chapter 214: Chapter 214

Yancy, on the other hand, was thrilled.

He got up from his seat, walked over to Liora, and scooped her up with a grin, teasing her about the silly hat she'd brought back from her trip.

Liora giggled, squirming in his arms.

Then Yancy suddenly turned to Dante and asked casually, "By the way, where's my sister-in-law?"

When Stella and the others had arrived earlier, they hadn't seen Elodie. They'd just assumed she'd gone with Dante to pick up Liora from the airport.

But now both Dante and Liora were back, and Elodie was still nowhere to be seen.

It was a little strange.

Still, none of them cared enough to ask.

Dante's expression didn't change. "She's busy."

Yancy shrugged and went back to teasing Liora, already forgetting about it.

Nonna, sitting quietly at the head of the table, knew the truth. But she didn't say anything.

After dinner, Liora played for a while, running around the estate with Yancy and showing off her souvenirs to anyone who'd listen.

But eventually, she got bored.

She missed her mom.

So she decided to call her.

Even though it was technically a holiday, Elodie had no intention of resting.

When Liora's call came through, Elodie was sitting at her desk, reviewing materials Professor Nolan had sent her earlier that day.

She glanced at the screen and saw it was Liora.

For a moment, she just stared at the name.

Then, remembering they hadn't seen each other in nearly a month, she picked up.

"Hello."

Liora hadn't actually expected her to answer.

So when she heard her mom's voice, her entire face lit up.

"Mom!"

Elodie's eyes stayed on the computer screen. Her tone was flat. Distant.

"Mm."

Liora didn't notice. She was too excited.

"Mom, I'm back!"

Elodie hadn't known she'd gone abroad. No one had told her.

She just replied, "Mm," acknowledging it without emotion.

But to Liora, the fact that her mom had answered at all was enough.

She started bouncing on the bed, her voice bright and eager.

"Mom, when will you be done with work? Will you come home tonight? I want you to hold me while I sleep. I have so many fun things to tell you! And I want to eat the breakfast you make tomorrow morning. When will you be back?"

Elodie's hand froze on the mouse.

She didn't tell Liora the truth, that she wouldn't be going back to the Bellini estate. Not tonight. Not ever again.

Instead, she said quietly, "I'm really busy right now. I won't be back for a while. Maybe next month. I'll take you out to play then."

Liora's excitement faltered, but only for a second.

She hadn't been out with her mom in so long. The idea of even if it was next month made her happy.

But still...

"Next month?" Liora's voice was small now. "That's so far away..."

There were only a few days left until next month, but to a kid, it felt like forever.

She didn't say that out loud, though. Instead, she asked hopefully, "When next month?"

Even through the phone, Elodie could hear the longing. The need. The quiet desperation in her daughter's voice.

Elodie's grip on the mouse tightened.

She stared at the screen in front of her, the words blurring together.

After a few long seconds, she finally spoke.

"We'll see. I'll let you know once I've decided."

Her voice was calm, controlled.

But inside, something was breaking.

"Okay..."

Elodie's voice was quiet. Then she asked, "Have you taken a shower yet?"

"Not yet. But I will soon."

"Go take a shower first. I still have work to do, so I'm going to hang up now."

Liora's face fell. "We just started talking and you're already hanging up?"

She glanced at the call timer on the screen.

"Mom, we've only talked for two minutes. Can we talk a little longer?"

Elodie closed her eyes briefly. "Next time when I'm free, if you want to chat, we'll talk more."

Liora's shoulders slumped, but she didn't argue. "Okay... but you have to keep your word."

"I will."

"Then... Mom, goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The line went dead.

Liora stared at the phone in her hand, her chest tight.

She'd forgotten to tell her mom about the gift she'd bought for her. She'd been so excited to show it to her, but now the call was over and it was too late.

Disappointed, she set the phone down and headed to the study to find her dad.

Dante was in the middle of a video conference when Liora walked in.

The moment he saw her, he turned off the camera and muted his microphone.

"What's wrong? Did she not pick up?"

Liora shook her head. "No, she picked up."

Dante pulled her into his lap, his thumb gently brushing over her forehead. His gaze softened as he looked at her eyes, her brows, the features that mirrored his own.

"You got through to her, but you're not happy?"

Liora's brows furrowed slightly. "I'm happy, but..."

She trailed off, unsure how to explain it.

She hadn't talked to her mom in so long. She was happy. But something still felt... off.

"But what?" Dante prompted gently.

Liora's voice was small. "But I feel a little unhappy too."

Dante propped his chin on his hand, smiling faintly. "That's probably because you haven't seen her in a long time. You miss her. Once she's less busy, she'll spend more time with you."

Liora nodded, but her pout remained. "But Mom's so busy. She said she won't be able to see me until next month..."

"Then you'll wait until next month," Dante said simply. "Dad will keep you company until then."

"Mm."

Liora was tired. After chatting for a few more minutes, she yawned, slid off his lap, and padded back to her room to rest.

The Next Day – New Year's Eve.

Almost the entire morning had passed, and neither Stella nor Yancy had seen Elodie.

Stella had noticed yesterday, of course. Felix had come back to visit Nonna during the New Year, but Elodie hadn't shown up even once.

At first, Stella had assumed something must have happened in the Miller family. Maybe an emergency. Maybe someone was sick.

Even after Nonna was discharged from the hospital, Elodie still hadn't come.

Dante had said she was busy, and because Stella knew how Elodie felt about her son, how devoted she'd always been, she hadn't thought too much about it. She figured Elodie would show up eventually.

But today was New Year's Eve.

Elodie didn't have the same kind of demanding career Dante did. Even if she was busy, even if there were major issues in the Miller family, there was no reason for her to not come back even once over the past two days.

So...

Stella's eyes narrowed slightly as she stood in the hallway, staring at the empty guest room that used to be Elodie's.

Something was off.

Around eleven o'clock, Dante came downstairs.

Stella, who had been sitting in the living room with a cup of tea she hadn't touched, couldn't hold back anymore.

"Did you and Elodie get divorced?"

Yancy, who was lounging on the couch scrolling through his phone, froze.

Over the past two days, he'd genuinely thought Elodie was just busy. That she'd show up eventually.

But now, hearing his mother's question, he was completely stunned.

Dante paused mid-step. He walked over to the tea table, poured himself a cup, and took a slow sip before answering calmly.

"Not yet. But we're going through the process."

Yancy's eyes went wide.

So they were actually getting divorced?

He'd always known Dante didn't love Elodie. Everyone knew. But he'd just assumed they'd keep going like this, just being married on paper, distant in reality.

He didn't expect them to actually go through with it.

Stella looked at Dante, her expression unreadable.

They had no feelings for each other. In that sense, a divorce made sense. It would be better for both of them.

But if Dante was divorcing Elodie just so he could marry Sienna—

Her face darkened.

She opened her mouth, about to say something, but Dante, clearly anticipating it, stood up.

"I have a meeting to attend," he said smoothly. "Excuse me."

Before Stella could get a word out, he was already heading upstairs.

Meanwhile, at the Miller Family Home.

After a busy day filled with cooking, cleaning, and preparing for the evening, the Miller family had just finished their New Year's Eve dinner.

It was completely dark outside now. The streets were alive with fireworks popping in the distance, children laughing, music drifting from neighboring houses.

Elodie and Hugo were just about to head out into the garden to set off fireworks when her phone buzzed.

She glanced down at the screen.

Harry Becker – Video Call.

Elodie froze.

It was unusual for Harry to call her via video.

So... She answered.

The first thing that appeared on the screen was Daisy's little face, bright and beaming.

"Aunt Elodie!"

Elodie couldn't help but smile. "Happy New Year, Daisy."

"Happy New Year!"

Daisy was clearly in a garden somewhere. She held up the little rabbit-shaped lantern Elodie had given her, glowing a warm orange-yellow in the dark.

"The lantern is so pretty! I really, really like it. Thank you, Aunt Elodie!"

"I'm glad you like it," Elodie said softly. "You don't need to thank me."

Daisy grinned. "Aunt Elodie, Uncle Harry and I are going to set off fireworks later. Do you want to come?"

Elodie assumed she meant at the Becker family estate.

"I can't tonight, sweetheart. I have other plans. Maybe next time?"

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

She and Elodie chatted for a little longer, about the trip Daisy had taken with her uncle, about the snacks she'd eaten, about the cartoons she'd been watching.

Then something in the background caught Daisy's attention, and she wandered off, still holding the phone.

A moment later, Harry's face appeared on the screen.

"Happy New Year," he said.

"Happy New Year."

Now that Daisy was gone, Elodie felt a little awkward. She wasn't used to video calls with Harry. Didn't really know what to say.

Harry seemed to sense it. He kept his tone light.

"Do you have any plans later? Setting off fireworks? Going out to celebrate?"

Elodie nodded. "I'll probably go out for a bit."

Hugo and Xavier had been begging to go out and see the big public fireworks display in the city square. She'd likely tag along.

She figured Harry was just making small talk, so she didn't think too much of it.

Still, she felt like the conversation had run its course.

"I should go," she said. "Let's talk later?"

Harry nodded. "Alright."

Elodie gave him a small smile, then ended the call.

She set her phone down on the table and headed out into the small garden, where Hugo and Xavier were already lighting sparklers and laughing loudly.

She smiled despite herself.

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

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 214 [1,859 words]

Chapter 214: Chapter 214

Yancy, on the other hand, was thrilled.

He got up from his seat, walked over to Liora, and scooped her up with a grin, teasing her about the silly hat she'd brought back from her trip.

Liora giggled, squirming in his arms.

Then Yancy suddenly turned to Dante and asked casually, "By the way, where's my sister-in-law?"

When Stella and the others had arrived earlier, they hadn't seen Elodie. They'd just assumed she'd gone with Dante to pick up Liora from the airport.

But now both Dante and Liora were back, and Elodie was still nowhere to be seen.

It was a little strange.

Still, none of them cared enough to ask.

Dante's expression didn't change. "She's busy."

Yancy shrugged and went back to teasing Liora, already forgetting about it.

Nonna, sitting quietly at the head of the table, knew the truth. But she didn't say anything.

After dinner, Liora played for a while, running around the estate with Yancy and showing off her souvenirs to anyone who'd listen.

But eventually, she got bored.

She missed her mom.

So she decided to call her.

Even though it was technically a holiday, Elodie had no intention of resting.

When Liora's call came through, Elodie was sitting at her desk, reviewing materials Professor Nolan had sent her earlier that day.

She glanced at the screen and saw it was Liora.

For a moment, she just stared at the name.

Then, remembering they hadn't seen each other in nearly a month, she picked up.

"Hello."

Liora hadn't actually expected her to answer.

So when she heard her mom's voice, her entire face lit up.

"Mom!"

Elodie's eyes stayed on the computer screen. Her tone was flat. Distant.

"Mm."

Liora didn't notice. She was too excited.

"Mom, I'm back!"

Elodie hadn't known she'd gone abroad. No one had told her.

She just replied, "Mm," acknowledging it without emotion.

But to Liora, the fact that her mom had answered at all was enough.

She started bouncing on the bed, her voice bright and eager.

"Mom, when will you be done with work? Will you come home tonight? I want you to hold me while I sleep. I have so many fun things to tell you! And I want to eat the breakfast you make tomorrow morning. When will you be back?"

Elodie's hand froze on the mouse.

She didn't tell Liora the truth, that she wouldn't be going back to the Bellini estate. Not tonight. Not ever again.

Instead, she said quietly, "I'm really busy right now. I won't be back for a while. Maybe next month. I'll take you out to play then."

Liora's excitement faltered, but only for a second.

She hadn't been out with her mom in so long. The idea of even if it was next month made her happy.

But still...

"Next month?" Liora's voice was small now. "That's so far away..."

There were only a few days left until next month, but to a kid, it felt like forever.

She didn't say that out loud, though. Instead, she asked hopefully, "When next month?"

Even through the phone, Elodie could hear the longing. The need. The quiet desperation in her daughter's voice.

Elodie's grip on the mouse tightened.

She stared at the screen in front of her, the words blurring together.

After a few long seconds, she finally spoke.

"We'll see. I'll let you know once I've decided."

Her voice was calm, controlled.

But inside, something was breaking.

"Okay..."

Elodie's voice was quiet. Then she asked, "Have you taken a shower yet?"

"Not yet. But I will soon."

"Go take a shower first. I still have work to do, so I'm going to hang up now."

Liora's face fell. "We just started talking and you're already hanging up?"

She glanced at the call timer on the screen.

"Mom, we've only talked for two minutes. Can we talk a little longer?"

Elodie closed her eyes briefly. "Next time when I'm free, if you want to chat, we'll talk more."

Liora's shoulders slumped, but she didn't argue. "Okay... but you have to keep your word."

"I will."

"Then... Mom, goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The line went dead.

Liora stared at the phone in her hand, her chest tight.

She'd forgotten to tell her mom about the gift she'd bought for her. She'd been so excited to show it to her, but now the call was over and it was too late.

Disappointed, she set the phone down and headed to the study to find her dad.

Dante was in the middle of a video conference when Liora walked in.

The moment he saw her, he turned off the camera and muted his microphone.

"What's wrong? Did she not pick up?"

Liora shook her head. "No, she picked up."

Dante pulled her into his lap, his thumb gently brushing over her forehead. His gaze softened as he looked at her eyes, her brows, the features that mirrored his own.

"You got through to her, but you're not happy?"

Liora's brows furrowed slightly. "I'm happy, but..."

She trailed off, unsure how to explain it.

She hadn't talked to her mom in so long. She was happy. But something still felt... off.

"But what?" Dante prompted gently.

Liora's voice was small. "But I feel a little unhappy too."

Dante propped his chin on his hand, smiling faintly. "That's probably because you haven't seen her in a long time. You miss her. Once she's less busy, she'll spend more time with you."

Liora nodded, but her pout remained. "But Mom's so busy. She said she won't be able to see me until next month..."

"Then you'll wait until next month," Dante said simply. "Dad will keep you company until then."

"Mm."

Liora was tired. After chatting for a few more minutes, she yawned, slid off his lap, and padded back to her room to rest.

The Next Day - New Year's Eve.

Almost the entire morning had passed, and neither Stella nor Yancy had seen Elodie.

Stella had noticed yesterday, of course. Felix had come back to visit Nonna during the New Year, but Elodie hadn't shown up even once.

At first, Stella had assumed something must have happened in the Miller family. Maybe an emergency. Maybe someone was sick.

Even after Nonna was discharged from the hospital, Elodie still hadn't come.

Dante had said she was busy, and because Stella knew how Elodie felt about her son, how devoted she'd always been, she hadn't thought too much about it. She figured Elodie would show up eventually.

But today was New Year's Eve.

Elodie didn't have the same kind of demanding career Dante did. Even if she was busy, even if there were major issues in the Miller family, there was no reason for her to not come back even once over the past two days.

So...

Stella's eyes narrowed slightly as she stood in the hallway, staring at the empty guest room that used to be Elodie's.

Something was off.

Around eleven o'clock, Dante came downstairs.

Stella, who had been sitting in the living room with a cup of tea she hadn't touched, couldn't hold back anymore.

"Did you and Elodie get divorced?"

Yancy, who was lounging on the couch scrolling through his phone, froze.

Over the past two days, he'd genuinely thought Elodie was just busy. That she'd show up eventually.

But now, hearing his mother's question, he was completely stunned.

Dante paused mid-step. He walked over to the tea table, poured himself a cup, and took a slow sip before answering calmly.

"Not yet. But we're going through the process."

Yancy's eyes went wide.

So they were actually getting divorced?

He'd always known Dante didn't love Elodie. Everyone knew. But he'd just assumed they'd keep going like this, just being married on paper, distant in reality.

He didn't expect them to actually go through with it.

Stella looked at Dante, her expression unreadable.

They had no feelings for each other. In that sense, a divorce made sense. It would be better for both of them.

But if Dante was divorcing Elodie just so he could marry Sienna—

Her face darkened.

She opened her mouth, about to say something, but Dante, clearly anticipating it, stood up.

"I have a meeting to attend," he said smoothly. "Excuse me."

Before Stella could get a word out, he was already heading upstairs.

Meanwhile, at the Miller Family Home.

After a busy day filled with cooking, cleaning, and preparing for the evening, the Miller family had just finished their New Year's Eve dinner.

It was completely dark outside now. The streets were alive with fireworks popping in the distance, children laughing, music drifting from neighboring houses.

Elodie and Hugo were just about to head out into the garden to set off fireworks when her phone buzzed.

She glanced down at the screen.

Harry Becker – Video Call.

Elodie froze.

It was unusual for Harry to call her via video.

So... She answered.

The first thing that appeared on the screen was Daisy's little face, bright and beaming.

"Aunt Elodie!"

Elodie couldn't help but smile. "Happy New Year, Daisy."

"Happy New Year!"

Daisy was clearly in a garden somewhere. She held up the little rabbit-shaped lantern Elodie had given her, glowing a warm orange-yellow in the dark.

"The lantern is so pretty! I really, really like it. Thank you, Aunt Elodie!"

"I'm glad you like it," Elodie said softly. "You don't need to thank me."

Daisy grinned. "Aunt Elodie, Uncle Harry and I are going to set off fireworks later. Do you want to come?"

Elodie assumed she meant at the Becker family estate.

"I can't tonight, sweetheart. I have other plans. Maybe next time?"

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

She and Elodie chatted for a little longer, about the trip Daisy had taken with her uncle, about the snacks she'd eaten, about the cartoons she'd been watching.

Then something in the background caught Daisy's attention, and she wandered off, still holding the phone.

A moment later, Harry's face appeared on the screen.

"Happy New Year," he said.

"Happy New Year."

Now that Daisy was gone, Elodie felt a little awkward. She wasn't used to video calls with Harry. Didn't really know what to say.

Harry seemed to sense it. He kept his tone light.

"Do you have any plans later? Setting off fireworks? Going out to celebrate?"

Elodie nodded. "I'll probably go out for a bit."

Hugo and Xavier had been begging to go out and see the big public fireworks display in the city square. She'd likely tag along.

She figured Harry was just making small talk, so she didn't think too much of it.

Still, she felt like the conversation had run its course.

"I should go," she said. "Let's talk later?"

Harry nodded. "Alright."

Elodie gave him a small smile, then ended the call.

She set her phone down on the table and headed out into the small garden, where Hugo and Xavier were already lighting sparklers and laughing loudly.

She smiled despite herself.

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

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 215[1,730 words]

Chapter 215: Chapter 215

Harry had just hung up the phone when Daisy came running toward him, her little rabbit lantern bouncing in her hand.

"Uncle! I want to video call Liora!"

Harry blinked, a little caught off guard. "Okay."

He pulled up Liora's contact and hit the call button.

It rang twice before she picked up.

The moment Liora's face appeared on the screen, Daisy practically shoved the lantern toward the camera.

"Liora, look! A little lantern!"

But the video quality wasn't great up close, so Daisy turned to Harry.

"Uncle, hold the phone!"

Harry sighed but did as he was told, holding the phone steady while Daisy ran a few steps back into the garden. She held the lantern up high, letting it glow brightly against the dark evening sky.

They were in a small garden area behind the Becker estate. The lighting was dim, which made the warm orange glow of the lantern stand out even more.

Liora stared at the screen, her eyes widening slightly.

Before she could say anything, Daisy ran back over, breathless and grinning.

"This is my aunt's New Year gift to me! Isn't it beautiful? So cute?"

Liora blinked.

A lot of things from two or three years ago had become blurry in her memory. But seeing Daisy holding that lantern sparked something, faint images, half-forgotten moments.

She nodded slowly. "Yes. It's very beautiful. Very cute."

Then, after a pause, she added quietly, "I think I used to play with little lanterns too."

Daisy's eyes lit up. "Really? You don't have one now?"

Liora shook her head. "No."

But watching Daisy run around the garden at night with that glowing lantern looked really fun.

Before she could stop herself, Liora said, "I'm going to ask my dad to buy me one! Don't hang up yet, let's talk again in a bit!"

Before Daisy could even respond, Liora had already bolted off-screen, phone still in hand.

It was New Year's Eve, and a small group of extended family and business associates had been invited to celebrate at the Wilson estate.

At the moment, Dante was in the main hall, making conversation with some of the guests.

When he saw Liora come running over, he excused himself smoothly, then crouched down and picked her up, carrying her a few steps away from the crowd.

"What's wrong?"

"That aunt gave Daisy a little lantern, and I want one too."

Dante raised an eyebrow. "A little lantern?"

"Not the red ones that hang on the walls at home," Liora clarified quickly.

She held up her phone and turned it toward him.

"Daisy, show my dad the lantern!"

"Okay..."

On the screen, Daisy stepped back again, holding up the glowing rabbit lantern so Dante could see it clearly.

Dante looked at it for a moment, then nodded.

"Got it. Thank you, Daisy."

Daisy beamed. "You're welcome!"

Then Dante's gaze shifted to Harry, who was still holding the phone on the other end.

"Do you have any plans later?" Dante asked casually.

Harry paused, then answered, "I might go out to celebrate the New Year. What about you?"

"I'll be going out later too."

Harry figured it was probably to see Sienna. After all, it was New Year's Eve. Dante couldn't exactly avoid spending time with her tonight.

He didn't ask where Dante was going. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Were you still busy earlier?"

"Mm. There are still guests at the house."

Harry nodded. He knew how things worked at the Wilson estate. Ever since Dante had taken over as head of the family, his New Year's Eve had stopped being about rest or celebration. It was just another night of work.

Another night of keeping up appearances.

Harry glanced at the screen one more time, then said, "Alright. I'll let you get back to it."

Dante nodded. "Alright."

Before handing the phone back to Liora, he paused for a moment, glancing at Harry on the screen with a faint smile.

"Happy New Year."

Harry's expression softened slightly. "Happy New Year."

Dante handed the phone back to Liora and ruffled her hair. "You can keep chatting with Daisy. I'll have someone get you a lantern."

Liora's face lit up. "Okay!"

Dante walked away, already pulling out his own phone to send a quick message to one of his assistants.

Meanwhile, Harry handed his phone back to Daisy so she could continue talking to Liora.

Earlier, when they'd asked each other about their evening plans, Harry hadn't asked where Dante was going. And Dante hadn't invited him to join.

It was clear enough. Dante didn't want company tonight.

Harry didn't take it personally. He knew how these things worked.

After setting off fireworks in the garden, Elodie and Xavier said their goodbyes to Old Lady Miller and Helen, then headed out.

They were going to the broadcasting and TV tower in the capital city.

It was one of the best spots in the city to see the full nightscape, glittering lights stretching out in every direction, the skyline sharp against the dark sky.

On New Year's Eve, the tower also hosted light shows and performances. It was always packed.

By the time they arrived, the area was already crowded with people. Families. Couples. Groups of friends. The air buzzed with laughter and excitement.

The light show hadn't started yet.

Hugo had made plans to meet up with some of his classmates at the tower to ring in the New Year together.

As soon as they arrived, Hugo spotted his friends and jogged over to join them.

When a few of his classmates noticed Elodie and Xavier standing nearby, they politely called out, "Hello, sisters!"

But their eyes lingered on Elodie.

One of them leaned toward Hugo and whispered, "Your sister is so beautiful. Like, seriously beautiful."

Hugo grinned proudly. "I know, right?"

The group of teenagers quickly descended into chaos, taking photos, recording videos, laughing loudly, completely absorbed in their own world.

Elodie and Xavier didn't interrupt. They just stood off to the side, watching with amusement.

That's when Elodie's phone buzzed.

She pulled it out.

A message from Harry.

[Are you going to the broadcasting tower to watch the light show tonight?]

Elodie blinked, a little confused about why he was asking. Still, she replied.

[I've already arrived. Why?]

Harry's response came almost immediately.

[Daisy and I are also on our way.]

Elodie stared at the screen for a second, genuinely surprised.

[Oh...]

What a coincidence.

Harry didn't reply after that.

Elodie slipped her phone back into her pocket and glanced around the crowded plaza, wondering if she'd run into them.

A little while later, the light show began.

The tower lit up in brilliant, sweeping colors- blues and purples and golds, shifting and swirling against the dark sky. Music played through the speakers, perfectly timed with the lights.

Elodie smiled as she watched, mesmerized by the display.

Then she heard it.

"Aunt Elodie!"

She turned around, and sure enough, there they were—Harry and Daisy, weaving through the crowd toward her.

Daisy's face was glowing with excitement. The moment she saw Elodie, she stretched out her little arms eagerly.

Elodie squeezed through the crowd with Xavier and made her way over. She bent down and scooped Daisy up into her arms.

Daisy immediately wrapped her arms around Elodie's neck, her eyes glued to the lights above.

"Auntie, look!" she squealed, pointing at the tower.

Elodie laughed. "I see it, sweetheart."

Daisy kept chattering nonstop, giggling and gasping at every color change, completely enthralled.

There were so many people around, families, couples, kids running around with sparklers. The festive energy was infectious. Elodie's smile stayed soft.

Harry watched her. Watched the way her expression had lightened. The way she laughed at Daisy's excitement. The way she seemed, for just a moment, unburdened.

After a while, he reached over gently. "Let me take her. Your arms are probably getting tired."

Elodie handed Daisy over without protest.

Harry adjusted Daisy on his hip, then glanced around. "Where's Hugo? Didn't he come with you?"

"He's over there with his classmates," Elodie said, pointing toward a cluster of teenagers taking selfies and laughing loudly.

She started to look away, but then something or rather, someone caught her eye.

Her smile disappeared.

Three familiar faces stood not far away.

Logan. Janice. Landon.

Logan was ruffling Landon's hair affectionately, smiling down at him. Janice stood beside them, her expression warm and content. The three of them looked happy. Close. Like a perfect little family.

Elodie's face went cold.

Harry noticed immediately.

He followed her gaze and saw them too.

Before he could say anything, Landon spotted them.

His face lit up. In the middle of all the noise and celebration, he raised his hand and waved enthusiastically.

"Harry!"

At the sound of his voice, Logan and Janice both turned.

When they saw Harry, they smiled.

But when they saw Elodie standing next to him, their smiles faltered.

Especially Janice.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she took in the sight of Elodie and Harry standing together. Her brows knitted, and her expression hardened.

It was clear she didn't like what she was seeing.

Since they'd already been spotted, it would be awkward not to acknowledge them.

Harry hesitated for a moment, then turned to Elodie.

"I'll go say hello."

Elodie's voice was calm. Detached. "Do whatever you want."

Harry studied her face for a second longer, then nodded and walked over with Daisy still in his arms.

Xavier had been standing quietly beside Elodie the whole time.

He'd noticed the sudden shift in her expression. The way her face had gone still and cold.

He didn't have many memories of his former uncle. But seeing the way his aunt had reacted, he could guess who those people were.

His chest tightened.

He reached over and squeezed Elodie's hand gently.

"Aunt, should we leave?"

Elodie didn't want to ruin his night. Or Hugo's. They'd been so excited to come here.

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

But she wasn't.

The sudden shift in her mood wasn't because she still had feelings for Logan, didn't care about him anymore as her father.

It was because seeing him, seeing Janice standing beside him, smiling like she belonged there, made her think of her mother.

Of everything her mother had lost.

Of everything she had lost.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 215[1,730 words]

Chapter 215: Chapter 215

Harry had just hung up the phone when Daisy came running toward him, her little rabbit lantern bouncing in her hand.

"Uncle! I want to video call Liora!"

Harry blinked, a little caught off guard. "Okay."

He pulled up Liora's contact and hit the call button.

It rang twice before she picked up.

The moment Liora's face appeared on the screen, Daisy practically shoved the lantern toward the camera.

"Liora, look! A little lantern!"

But the video quality wasn't great up close, so Daisy turned to Harry.

"Uncle, hold the phone!"

Harry sighed but did as he was told, holding the phone steady while Daisy ran a few steps back into the garden. She held the lantern up high, letting it glow brightly against the dark evening sky.

They were in a small garden area behind the Becker estate. The lighting was dim, which made the warm orange glow of the lantern stand out even more.

Liora stared at the screen, her eyes widening slightly.

Before she could say anything, Daisy ran back over, breathless and grinning.

"This is my aunt's New Year gift to me! Isn't it beautiful? So cute?"

Liora blinked.

A lot of things from two or three years ago had become blurry in her memory. But seeing Daisy holding that lantern sparked something, faint images, half-forgotten moments.

She nodded slowly. "Yes. It's very beautiful. Very cute."

Then, after a pause, she added quietly, "I think I used to play with little lanterns too."

Daisy's eyes lit up. "Really? You don't have one now?"

Liora shook her head. "No."

But watching Daisy run around the garden at night with that glowing lantern looked really fun.

Before she could stop herself, Liora said, "I'm going to ask my dad to buy me one! Don't hang up yet, let's talk again in a bit!"

Before Daisy could even respond, Liora had already bolted off-screen, phone still in hand.

It was New Year's Eve, and a small group of extended family and business associates had been invited to celebrate at the Wilson estate.

At the moment, Dante was in the main hall, making conversation with some of the guests.

When he saw Liora come running over, he excused himself smoothly, then crouched down and picked her up, carrying her a few steps away from the crowd.

"What's wrong?"

"That aunt gave Daisy a little lantern, and I want one too."

Dante raised an eyebrow. "A little lantern?"

"Not the red ones that hang on the walls at home," Liora clarified quickly.

She held up her phone and turned it toward him.

"Daisy, show my dad the lantern!"

"Okay..."

On the screen, Daisy stepped back again, holding up the glowing rabbit lantern so Dante could see it clearly.

Dante looked at it for a moment, then nodded.

"Got it. Thank you, Daisy."

Daisy beamed. "You're welcome!"

Then Dante's gaze shifted to Harry, who was still holding the phone on the other end.

"Do you have any plans later?" Dante asked casually.

Harry paused, then answered, "I might go out to celebrate the New Year. What about you?"

"I'll be going out later too."

Harry figured it was probably to see Sienna. After all, it was New Year's Eve. Dante couldn't exactly avoid spending time with her tonight.

He didn't ask where Dante was going. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Were you still busy earlier?"

"Mm. There are still guests at the house."

Harry nodded. He knew how things worked at the Wilson estate. Ever since Dante had taken over as head of the family, his New Year's Eve had stopped being about rest or celebration. It was just another night of work.

Another night of keeping up appearances.

Harry glanced at the screen one more time, then said, "Alright. I'll let you get back to it."

Dante nodded. "Alright."

Before handing the phone back to Liora, he paused for a moment, glancing at Harry on the screen with a faint smile.

"Happy New Year."

Harry's expression softened slightly. "Happy New Year."

Dante handed the phone back to Liora and ruffled her hair. "You can keep chatting with Daisy. I'll have someone get you a lantern."

Liora's face lit up. "Okay!"

Dante walked away, already pulling out his own phone to send a quick message to one of his assistants.

Meanwhile, Harry handed his phone back to Daisy so she could continue talking to Liora.

Earlier, when they'd asked each other about their evening plans, Harry hadn't asked where Dante was going. And Dante hadn't invited him to join.

It was clear enough. Dante didn't want company tonight.

Harry didn't take it personally. He knew how these things worked.

After setting off fireworks in the garden, Elodie and Xavier said their goodbyes to Old Lady Miller and Helen, then headed out.

They were going to the broadcasting and TV tower in the capital city.

It was one of the best spots in the city to see the full nightscape, glittering lights stretching out in every direction, the skyline sharp against the dark sky.

On New Year's Eve, the tower also hosted light shows and performances. It was always packed.

By the time they arrived, the area was already crowded with people. Families. Couples. Groups of friends. The air buzzed with laughter and excitement.

The light show hadn't started yet.

Hugo had made plans to meet up with some of his classmates at the tower to ring in the New Year together.

As soon as they arrived, Hugo spotted his friends and jogged over to join them.

When a few of his classmates noticed Elodie and Xavier standing nearby, they politely called out, "Hello, sisters!"

But their eyes lingered on Elodie.

One of them leaned toward Hugo and whispered, "Your sister is so beautiful. Like, seriously beautiful."

Hugo grinned proudly. "I know, right?"

The group of teenagers quickly descended into chaos, taking photos, recording videos, laughing loudly, completely absorbed in their own world.

Elodie and Xavier didn't interrupt. They just stood off to the side, watching with amusement.

That's when Elodie's phone buzzed.

She pulled it out.

A message from Harry.

[Are you going to the broadcasting tower to watch the light show tonight?]

Elodie blinked, a little confused about why he was asking. Still, she replied.

[I've already arrived. Why?]

Harry's response came almost immediately.

[Daisy and I are also on our way.]

Elodie stared at the screen for a second, genuinely surprised.

[Oh...]

What a coincidence.

Harry didn't reply after that.

Elodie slipped her phone back into her pocket and glanced around the crowded plaza, wondering if she'd run into them.

A little while later, the light show began.

The tower lit up in brilliant, sweeping colors- blues and purples and golds, shifting and swirling against the dark sky. Music played through the speakers, perfectly timed with the lights.

Elodie smiled as she watched, mesmerized by the display.

Then she heard it.

"Aunt Elodie!"

She turned around, and sure enough, there they were—Harry and Daisy, weaving through the crowd toward her.

Daisy's face was glowing with excitement. The moment she saw Elodie, she stretched out her little arms eagerly.

Elodie squeezed through the crowd with Xavier and made her way over. She bent down and scooped Daisy up into her arms.

Daisy immediately wrapped her arms around Elodie's neck, her eyes glued to the lights above.

"Auntie, look!" she squealed, pointing at the tower.

Elodie laughed. "I see it, sweetheart."

Daisy kept chattering nonstop, giggling and gasping at every color change, completely enthralled.

There were so many people around, families, couples, kids running around with sparklers. The festive energy was infectious. Elodie's smile stayed soft.

Harry watched her. Watched the way her expression had lightened. The way she laughed at Daisy's excitement. The way she seemed, for just a moment, unburdened.

After a while, he reached over gently. "Let me take her. Your arms are probably getting tired."

Elodie handed Daisy over without protest.

Harry adjusted Daisy on his hip, then glanced around. "Where's Hugo? Didn't he come with you?"

"He's over there with his classmates," Elodie said, pointing toward a cluster of teenagers taking selfies and laughing loudly.

She started to look away, but then something or rather, someone caught her eye.

Her smile disappeared.

Three familiar faces stood not far away.

Logan. Janice. Landon.

Logan was ruffling Landon's hair affectionately, smiling down at him. Janice stood beside them, her expression warm and content. The three of them looked happy. Close. Like a perfect little family.

Elodie's face went cold.

Harry noticed immediately.

He followed her gaze and saw them too.

Before he could say anything, Landon spotted them.

His face lit up. In the middle of all the noise and celebration, he raised his hand and waved enthusiastically.

"Harry!"

At the sound of his voice, Logan and Janice both turned.

When they saw Harry, they smiled.

But when they saw Elodie standing next to him, their smiles faltered.

Especially Janice.

Her eyes narrowed slightly as she took in the sight of Elodie and Harry standing together. Her brows knitted, and her expression hardened.

It was clear she didn't like what she was seeing.

Since they'd already been spotted, it would be awkward not to acknowledge them.

Harry hesitated for a moment, then turned to Elodie.

"I'll go say hello."

Elodie's voice was calm. Detached. "Do whatever you want."

Harry studied her face for a second longer, then nodded and walked over with Daisy still in his arms.

Xavier had been standing quietly beside Elodie the whole time.

He'd noticed the sudden shift in her expression. The way her face had gone still and cold.

He didn't have many memories of his former uncle. But seeing the way his aunt had reacted, he could guess who those people were.

His chest tightened.

He reached over and squeezed Elodie's hand gently.

"Aunt, should we leave?"

Elodie didn't want to ruin his night. Or Hugo's. They'd been so excited to come here.

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

But she wasn't.

The sudden shift in her mood wasn't because she still had feelings for Logan, didn't care about him anymore as her father.

It was because seeing him, seeing Janice standing beside him, smiling like she belonged there, made her think of her mother.

Of everything her mother had lost.

Of everything she had lost.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 216[1,935 words]

Chapter 216: Chapter 216

Especially during such a festive time.

Why were they a happy family of three, while her mother... Oh, wait. It was actually a family of four.

Sienna was probably off on a date with Dante right now, wasn't she?

They had ruined her mother's life so completely, destroyed everything she had, and yet their own family of four was thriving. Laughing. Celebrating.

It was laughable.

Xavier squeezed Elodie's hand tighter but didn't say anything.

He'd known for a long time that their family was different from others.

For them, New Year's wasn't a time of joy. It was a time of pain.

Because going to the nursing home to visit their aunt was painful. But not going was just as painful.

Every visit brought their past into agonizing focus. It made it harder to find peace. Letting go hurt. But not letting go hurt just as much.

Their family's life had always been... okay. Not too good. Not too bad.

But then that woman's daughter had reappeared after all these years and taken her ex-husband away. And now they'd all moved to the capital, just to add more weight to the burden they were already carrying.

Hugo noticed the change in Elodie and Xavier's expressions.

He excused himself from his friends and jogged back over.

"Sister, what's wrong?"

Before Elodie could answer, Xavier glanced in Logan's direction and said quietly, "Those people talking to Harry are from the Brown family."

Hugo's face went stiff. His jaw tightened.

He didn't say anything. Just stood there, his fists clenched at his sides.

Harry and Logan had already exchanged pleasantries. When Harry finally turned around, he noticed that Elodie and Xavier were gone.

The Miller family didn't have a habit of staying up late.

By the time Elodie and Xavier got home, Old Lady Miller and Helen were already asleep.

Elodie went upstairs to her room. It was just past midnight now.

Her phone buzzed repeatedly.

New Year's messages were flooding in.

Johnny. Harry. A few colleagues from Cole. Even Reed Hardin and some other business acquaintances.

Elodie read through them one by one, replying to each with a polite, and yet brief message.

She replied to Harry's too. Then she took the initiative to send New Year's greetings to Professor Nolan and Cara.

A moment later, Reed sent another message.

[Do you have time in the next few days? I didn't get a chance to properly thank you for your help last time because of work. But I'm free now. I'd like to invite you to dinner.]

Elodie stared at the message for a moment, then typed back a polite response.

After chatting with Reed Hardin for a few more minutes, she set her phone down and headed into the bathroom to take a shower.

The hot water felt good against her skin. She stood there for a long time, letting it wash over her, trying to let the tension drain away.

But it didn't.

Because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop seeing Logan. Janice. Landon. Smiling. Laughing together.

While her mother lay in a nursing home, barely aware of where she was anymore.

Elodie closed her eyes and let the water run down her face.

She didn't cry. She was too tired to cry.

Visiting Sally at the nursing home was a painful experience for the Miller family.

Especially during the New Year.

But on such an important day, they could hardly avoid it.

Every year on the first day of the New Year, Elodie and Old Lady Miller would prepare a feast for Sally and bring it to the nursing home. Dishes she used to love. Recipes passed down through the family.

This year was no different.

So early on New Year's Day, Elodie woke up.

When she came downstairs, Old Lady Miller, Helen, and Xavier were already up, moving quietly around the kitchen.

The moment Old Lady Miller saw her, she walked over with a small red envelope in her hand. Helen did the same.

Old Lady Miller gently touched Elodie's cheek, her expression soft and full of warmth.

"In the new year," she said with a kind smile, "may our Elodie be smooth and successful in everything."

Elodie smiled back, her chest tight. "Thank you, Grandma."

After a simple breakfast, Elodie and Helen went into the kitchen to start preparing the ingredients.

Old Lady Miller and Xavier were both decent cooks, but when it came to cooking for Sally, they could only assist. Because Sally could taste their food. And if she did, it could easily trigger her and send her spiraling.

So in the early years, this task had been handled mainly by Helen.

Later, when Elodie learned to cook, she started helping. They divided the work between them.

Elodie had wanted to learn to cook for Sally when she was very young. But Old Lady Miller had stopped her.

She didn't want Elodie to take on that burden so early. Didn't want her childhood weighed down by the past.

Elodie's childhood had already been hard enough.

Old Lady Miller had hoped desperately that she could have at least a few more years of peace. Of joy. Without being constantly affected by what had happened to her mother.

Two hours later, the table was covered in beautifully prepared dishes.

Xavier and Hugo helped pack everything carefully into containers, making sure nothing spilled.

Along with the food, they'd prepared New Year's red envelopes and small gifts for the doctors and nurses who took care of Sally.

The Miller family of six set off for the nursing home.

Sally still looked the same.

Thin and frail. Her eyes were vacant, staring at nothing.

Elodie and the others stood in a corner of the room where Sally couldn't see them, watching quietly.

The doctors brought in the gifts first. Flowers. A small stuffed animal. A red envelope from Old Lady Miller.

Sally barely glanced at them.

The nurse gently placed the red envelope in her hands, but Sally let it drop to the floor without a second thought.

Then the food was brought in.

A full table of dishes, that was beautifully arranged, still warm, filled with the scents of home.

But Sally didn't react.

She didn't seem to have any appetite. The nurse had to coax her, putting small portions into her bowl, guiding the spoon to her mouth.

Sally took a few bites. Mechanically. Like she didn't even taste it.

Before she could try all the dishes, she lost interest. She set the spoon down and withdrew into herself again, staring blankly at the wall.

The nurse sighed quietly and took the food away.

Elodie's eyes had turned red a long time ago.

But she didn't let it show. She didn't let the tears fall.

She was afraid of affecting everyone else's mood.

But the truth was, Old Lady Miller and the others felt the same.

They just hid it better.

After staying at the nursing home for almost half an hour, they finally left.

It was close to noon now.

The sun was bright. The streets were filled with people celebrating. Laughter echoed from nearby houses.

But inside the car, no one spoke.

They just sat in silence, staring out the windows, each lost in their own thoughts.

Elodie pressed her forehead against the cool glass and closed her eyes.

This was always the hardest part.

Not the visit itself. But the leaving.

Because every time they left, it felt like they were abandoning her all over again.

They didn't feel like cooking lunch at home.

Honestly, no one really felt like eating at all.

But food had to be eaten. Life had to go on.

Elodie broke the silence first. "Let's eat outside."

Old Lady Miller nodded quietly. "Alright. You pick the place, Elodie."

At the restaurant, after they parked and got out of the car, they saw the Brown and Green families.

They were also there to eat.

Just as they arrived, someone, a middle-aged man in an expensive suit, recognized Sienna and Logan. He approached them enthusiastically, smiling wide, clearly hoping to score an invitation to join them for lunch.

The Brown and Green families noticed the Miller family at the same time.

Old Lady Green sneered openly, her lips curling in disdain.

Janice glanced at them once, then looked away like they were beneath her notice.

Sienna did the same. She didn't even acknowledge their existence.

At that moment, the restaurant manager came rushing out, practically tripping over himself to greet Sienna.

"Miss Brown," he said, bowing slightly, "the private room that Mr. Bellini always reserves has been prepared for you. Please, follow me."

Sienna nodded gracefully. She didn't spare a glance for the Miller family.

She turned to the man who'd been trying to join them. "I'm sorry, Mr. Liam. Today is a family gathering. Let's have a meal another time."

Mr. Liam immediately backpedaled, nodding quickly. "Of course, of course. I won't disturb you, Miss Brown. Enjoy your time."

Sienna didn't look at him again. She just followed the manager inside, her family trailing behind her like an entourage.

Elodie hadn't expected to run into them.

She held Old Lady Miller's hand a little tighter, hesitating for just a moment.

Old Lady Miller patted her hand gently. "Let's go in."

Elodie nodded. "Okay."

They stepped toward the entrance.

But before they could get inside, a staff member appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

"I'm sorry," the staff member said stiffly, not quite meeting their eyes. "Our restaurant's private rooms have all been reserved, and there are no available seats. Please leave."

Elodie had been to this restaurant before.

It was rare for them to have *no* available seats. Especially on a weekday like this.

So...

Elodie's jaw tightened.

She immediately suspected the Brown and Green families were behind this.

It wasn't just her. Xavier and Old Lady Miller had clearly come to the same conclusion.

"Miss Miller."

Elodie turned around.

Standing a few feet away was Jimmy Hall.

She nodded politely. "Mr. Hall."

Jimmy glanced at the increasingly uneasy staff member, then back at Elodie.

"What happened?" he asked. "Why aren't you going in?"

Elodie's tone was calm. Light. Like it didn't bother her at all.

"The staff said all the private rooms are reserved. They asked us to leave."

Jimmy's expression didn't change, but his eyes sharpened.

He looked directly at the staff member. "Oh? Is that so?"

The staff member paled.

They clearly recognized Jimmy. More importantly, they knew that Jordan Hall, Jimmy's father, was currently dining in their restaurant.

Seeing that Jimmy was ready to speak up for Elodie, the restaurant manager came rushing out again, his face flushed.

"We've just received word," he said quickly, practically stumbling over his words, "that one of the reserved tables will no longer be coming. A private room has opened up. Please, come in."

Elodie didn't move.

She looked at Old Lady Miller instead.

Old Lady Miller's voice was quiet. "Let's go to another restaurant."

Elodie nodded. "Okay."

She turned back to Jimmy and gave him a small, grateful smile. "Thank you, Mr. Hall."

Jimmy shook his head. "No need to thank me."

He paused, then greeted Old Lady Miller and the others politely.

The Miller family turned and left.

The staff and manager stood there, watching them go, unsure whether to feel relieved or ashamed.

Jimmy stayed a moment longer, his gaze lingering on the restaurant entrance.

Then he turned and walked back inside, his expression unreadable.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 217[1,531 words]

Chapter 217: Chapter 217

Jimmy entered the restaurant and shot a glance at the manager.

The manager was visibly sweating now, his smile strained and uncomfortable. But he didn't say a word.

Jimmy waited. Just a beat. Giving him the chance to explain. To offer up the name of whoever had given the order to turn the Miller family away.

But the manager stayed silent.

That told Jimmy everything he needed to know.

Whoever was behind this had enough pull, enough power, to make the manager too terrified to talk.

Jimmy didn't push it. Just turned and walked further into the restaurant, his expression unreadable.

After switching to another restaurant, Elodie had just started her meal when her phone buzzed twice on the table.

It was a message from Cara.

Elodie picked it up casually and opened it.

Two photos. The people in them were Dante and Sienna.

Elodie's lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't zoom in. Didn't study the details. Just closed the message immediately.

But the second she exited, her phone rang.

It was Cara calling.

Elodie hesitated, then stood up from the table and stepped outside to answer.

"Cara."

"Elodie, did you look at the photos I sent you?" Cara's voice was urgent. Almost frantic.

Elodie had only glanced at the first one. She had no intention of opening the second.

"I saw it," she said quietly.

"The first one was sent to me by a friend last night," Cara said, the words were spilling out fast. "They saw them at a hotel. I swear, on New Year's Eve, can you believe they went and booked a hotel room? How shameless can they be?!"

Elodie's expression didn't change. Her face stayed perfectly still.

She just gave a faint "Mm."

"The second one is even worse," Cara continued, her voice rising with indignation. "It's a screenshot. Sienna posted photos of the roses and New Year's gifts Dante gave her. And it was taken in the hote. She was practically showing off how happy they were. It made me sick!"

Elodie said nothing for a moment.

Then, quietly, "Mm."

There was a pause.

Then Elodie asked, her tone was still calm and even, "Did you eat yet?"

Cara blinked, clearly caught off guard by the sudden change in topic.

"Not yet. I went out with some friends for New Year's Eve, drank way too much, and just woke up. I forgot to send you New Year's wishes."

"It's okay," Elodie said. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year to you too, Elodie."

Cara started to bring up Dante and Sienna again, but something stopped her. Maybe it was the tone in Elodie's voice that was way too too calm, too controlled.

She hesitated. "Elodie... what are you doing right now?"

"I'm eating out with my grandmother and the others."

"Oh..." Cara winced, suddenly feeling guilty. "Sorry. I didn't mean to ruin your mood. If I'd known, I wouldn't have brought it up."

Elodie closed her eyes briefly, standing alone outside the restaurant with the cool air brushing against her face.

"It's fine," she said softly. "You didn't ruin anything."

But that wasn't true.

Because even though her voice was calm and steady without shaking and her face hadn't changed, something inside her had twisted painfully the moment she saw those photos.

She just wasn't going to let Cara or anyone else, see it.

Elodie's POV~

"It's fine," I said softly. "Go wash up and eat something. Otherwise, your stomach will hurt."

"I know, I know."

We talked for a little longer before hanging up.

After dinner, since it was still early, I took Grandma out for a walk and some light shopping.

This time, we didn't run into anyone that would bring awkward encounters. It was just us.

By the time we got home, my mood had lifted a little.

The Miller family didn't have many relatives in the capital, so New Year's was never particularly busy for us. It was quiet. Peaceful, even.

By the second evening of the New Year, I had free time again.

I opened my laptop and went back to studying the materials Professor Nolan had given me. The work was challenging, but in a good way. It kept my mind occupied. Kept me from thinking too much.

Around 10 p.m., I was just about to close my laptop and take a shower when my phone rang.

I glanced at the screen. It was Dante.

I stared at it for a second, then set the phone down without answering.

I wasn't in the mood.

I grabbed a towel and headed into the bathroom.

After my shower, I sat back down at my desk to review some materials. I was just finishing up my notes when I heard it.

The sound of a car pulling up outside.

I froze, my hand stilling on the mouse.

Then I remembered. The call from Dante.

My stomach twisted.

I stood up, walked over to the window, and looked down.

Sure enough, I saw Liora jump out of the car, her little voice ringing out clearly in the quiet night.

"Great-grandma!"

I pressed my lips together and turned away from the window.

I grabbed my phone and checked.

Dante had sent a message after I didn't pick up. [I have to go abroad for work tomorrow. I'll be gone for a few days. Please take care of Liora.]

I stared at the message for a long moment.

Then I set the phone down without replying.

A minute later, I heard the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs.

My door burst open.

Liora came running in, her face lit up with excitement.

"Mom!"

She threw herself at me before I could even react.

I had no choice but to stretch out my arms and catch her, steadying her so she wouldn't fall.

But the moment she pressed against me, I smelled Sienna's perfume.

The same scent I'd smelled on her before.

My chest tightened, but I didn't say anything. I just gently set Liora down and took a step back.

She was already running toward the bed, ready to jump on it, when I stopped her.

"Have you showered?"

Liora turned around, blinking. "I showered already."

But if she'd showered, why did she still smell like her?

That meant Sienna had been with her after the shower. Or that Dante and Sienna had brought her here together just now.

They just hadn't come inside.

I kept my expression neutral. My voice calm.

"You're dirty. Go change into fresh clothes."

Liora glanced down at herself, then nodded obediently. "Okay."

She ran off to the small dresser where I kept some of her things and started pulling out a clean set of pajamas.

I watched her for a moment, then turned away and walked back to my desk.

My hands were shaking.

I pressed them flat against the surface of the desk, willing them to stop, and I forced myself to continue organizing my materials.

After Liora had changed and come out of the bathroom, she pulled something out of her little bag, her face glowing with excitement.

"Mom, look! A little lantern!"

I glanced over at it and froze.

"This is—"

"Dad bought it for me!" she interrupted, practically bouncing. "Isn't it cute and beautiful?!"

I swallowed the tightness in my throat. "Mm."

Then she ran over to the light switch, flicked it off, and opened the lantern so it glowed softly in the dark.

"Isn't it more beautiful when the lights are off?!" she asked, her voice filled with pure joy.

I looked at the warm orange glow lighting up her face. "Mm. It is more beautiful."

I paused, then asked quietly, "Do you like it a lot?"

"Yeah, I love it!" She reached into her bag again and pulled out another one. "Dad bought two for me. Here, you can have the other one. Mom, do you want to take a walk with me downstairs holding the lantern?"

My chest ached.

"I already took a shower," I said gently. "Maybe tomorrow."

I added, hoping it would soften the blow, "And you just changed clothes. It's better not to get them dirty."

The excitement on her face dimmed.

Her smile faltered. "Oh..."

She hadn't seen me for a whole month.

And here I was, turning her down.

I saw the disappointment settling into her little shoulders. But she didn't push. She just put the lantern down quietly and ran over to me instead, wrapping her small arms around my waist.

"Mom..."

I set down the materials I'd been holding. "Mm. What's wrong?"

She didn't answer right away. Just kicked off her shoes, climbed into my lap, and buried her face against my shoulder.

"I missed you so much."

Then she pulled back and kissed my cheek twice, giggling softly. "Mom, you smell so nice."

My arms tightened around her for just a second.

I gently stroked her face, but I didn't say anything.

Because I didn't trust my voice right now.

I looked down at her. She'd changed. Grown a little. Her face had matured slightly, and now she looked even more like Dante.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 218[1,543 words]

Chapter 218: Chapter 218

Elodie's POV~

I noticed her feet were bare.

I lifted her carefully and set her back on the bed, tucking the blanket around her legs.

"How many days will you be staying this time?" I asked.

Liora shook her head. "I don't know. Dad didn't say. He just told me to wait here until he comes back."

I nodded quietly. "Mm."

I didn't ask anything else.

But then Liora suddenly remembered something. She scrambled off the bed and ran to grab her bag.

"Mom! I bought you a gift when I went abroad!"

She pulled out a small crystal ball and held it out to me, her eyes wide and hopeful.

My heart squeezed.

It had been so long since she'd thought to buy me a gift.

I took it from her, keeping my expression calm. "Thank you. I really like it."

The Next Day.

After breakfast, I went upstairs and found Liora on a video call with Dante.

When she saw me come in, she looked up and smiled. "Mom!"

"Mm."

I walked over to my desk and opened my laptop, intending to review the materials I'd organized yesterday.

On the screen, I heard Dante's voice. "Do you have any plans today?"

Liora lay on the bed, swinging her legs happily. "I want to watch a movie! And Mom's going to take me out for lunch!"

I stilled.

I hadn't agreed to that yet.

A moment later, Liora walked over holding the phone.

"Mom, Dad said I should give the phone to you."

I hesitated, then took it from her.

I didn't want to video chat with him.

So I placed the phone face down on the table, the camera pointing uselessly toward the ceiling, and asked flatly, "What's the matter?"

"It's been hard on you with Liora these past few days," Dante said.

I didn't respond. Just kept my eyes on my computer screen, typing in the ideas I'd missed yesterday.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No," he said. Then, almost like an afterthought, "Happy New Year."

I gave a short "Mm" and hung up without another word.

I handed the phone back to Liora, who took it with both hands and skipped back to the bed.

Around noon, just as I was getting ready to take Liora out, my phone rang.

It was Johnny.

I smiled faintly and answered. "Hey."

"Damn it, I ran into them *again*!" Johnny's voice was low, frustrated, like he was trying not to yell.

I froze for a second, then immediately understood who he meant.

Before I could say anything, I heard him mutter under his breath, "They're looking at me. Shit. They're coming over. I'll call you back."

I replied calmly, "Okay."

The line went dead.

I'd just ended the call when I imagined what was happening on the other end.

Dante and Sienna walking up to Johnny at the airport. His jaw tight. His patience wearing thin.

"Mr. Gray, where are you headed?" Dante would ask, polite as ever.

Johnny wouldn't answer. He'd force a smile and say something like, "Mr. Bellini, Miss Brown, we're not that close. So if you run into me again, feel free to pretend you didn't see me."

Sienna would smile sweetly. "Mr. Gray, you're really funny."

Johnny would probably smirk, about to fire back, when Sienna would notice his suitcase and ask, "Mr. Gray, are you traveling abroad too?"

And Johnny, being Johnny, would laugh and say, "Sorry. We're not close. No comment."

Then he'd grab his suitcase and walk out of the VIP lounge without looking back.

I could picture it all so clearly.

A few minutes later, my phone rang again.

I picked up. "What are you doing now?" Johnny asked.

I'd just finished changing my clothes. I glanced at myself in the mirror. "I'm about to go out and watch a movie."

"Sounds like a good plan," he said. Then, more carefully, "Are you going by yourself?"

"With Liora."

Silence fell.

Then— "Wait. Weren't you guys supposed to be celebrating New Year at the Bellini house this year? Why is she suddenly with you now?"

I was touching up my makeup, keeping my voice light. "She was brought over last night."

Johnny let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "So Dante's planning to go on a honeymoon with Sienna, and since your daughter was in the way, he just dumped her on you? Ha. They really have no shame."

I didn't react. Didn't say anything.

Because what was there to say?

He was right.

At that moment, Liora came running over, freshly dressed and ready to go. She grabbed my hand, her face bright and eager.

"Mom, I'm ready! Let's go!"

I smiled down at her. "Okay."

Then I spoke into the phone. "Don't worry about them. Just enjoy yourself."

Johnny sighed. "...Got it."

He paused, then added, "I'll be back soon. I won't leave the company to you alone."

I smiled softly. "Okay."

After we finished dinner and the movie, we walked past the arcade on our way back to the car.

Liora spotted it immediately. Her steps slowed, and I felt her tug gently on my hand.

"Mom..." She looked up at me with those big, hopeful eyes. "Can we go in? Just for a little bit?"

I glanced at the flashing lights, the sounds of games beeping and music playing. It had been forever since we'd done something like this together.

"Okay," I said.

Her whole face lit up, and she practically dragged me inside.

The arcade wasn't anything special. Just rows of games, claw machines, racing simulators, basketball hoops. For Liora, this kind of thing was normal. She did it all the time.

But she hadn't done it with me in so long that even something this simple made her glow with happiness.

I watched her run from game to game, laughing when she won a tiny stuffed animal from the claw machine, pouting when she missed a shot at the basketball game.

And I just... followed. Smiled and let her be happy.

I'd made plans to have dinner with Reed that evening.

So after we left the arcade, I figured I'd drop Liora off at home and then head out to meet him.

But the second I mentioned it, Liora's smile disappeared.

She looked up at me, her bottom lip sticking out just a little. "Can't I come with you?"

I paused.

Reed had only invited me out for a casual dinner. Nothing serious. Just a thank-you for helping him out before. It probably wouldn't be a big deal to bring her along.

I pulled out my phone and called him.

"Reed, do you mind if I bring someone with me? My daughter."

There was a beat of silence. Then Reed laughed, warmly. "Elodie, of course not. Bring her. I'd love to meet her."

He hesitated, then added gently, "I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Yeah," I said simply. "I do."

"Well then, I'm looking forward to it."

Half an hour later, I walked into the restaurant holding Liora's hand.

Reed was already there, standing when he saw us. His eyes went straight to Liora, and he smiled warmly.

"So this is your daughter." His expression was kind, genuine. "She's beautiful. Looks just like you."

I felt a small, real smile tug at my lips. "Thank you."

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Reed asked gently.

Liora glanced up at me first, like she was checking if it was okay to answer. I gave her a small nod.

"Liora," she said quietly. "Liora Wilson."

Reed's smile didn't falter, but I saw something shift in his eyes.

"Wilson," he repeated thoughtfully, straightening up. His gaze moved back to me. "Your husband... is Dante Wilson?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He went quiet for a second.

I could see him working it out in his head. He'd probably wondered before, when I told him I was married, why someone like me had settled down so young. I was good at what I did. I had a career. A future.

But if my husband was Dante Wilson, then yeah, it made sense. On paper, at least, we were a good match.

Then something else seemed to click for him.

Maybe he was remembering the way I'd sounded when I mentioned my marriage before, so distant, and detached. Or maybe he was thinking back to New Year's, when he'd run into the Wilson family and I wasn't there.

Either way, I could see it in his face.

He understood now.

Things between Dante and me weren't just strained. They were broken.

He gestured toward the table with a warm smile. "Please, sit."

I guided Liora to a chair and helped her settle in before sitting down myself.

Reed reached into a bag beside him and pulled out two neatly wrapped gifts. He set one in front of me and one in front of Liora.

I shook my head. "Uncle Reed, you didn't have to—"

He waved me off gently, his tone fatherly and kind. "It's New Year. It's tradition for an elder to give gifts to the younger generation. It's nothing big. Just a small gesture."

I hesitated, then reached out and accepted both gifts. "Thank you."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 219[1,543 words]

Chapter 219: Chapter 219

Elodie's POV~

I noticed her feet were bare.

I lifted her carefully and set her back on the bed, tucking the blanket around her legs.

"How many days will you be staying this time?" I asked.

Liora shook her head. "I don't know. Dad didn't say. He just told me to wait here until he comes back."

I nodded quietly. "Mm."

I didn't ask anything else.

But then Liora suddenly remembered something. She scrambled off the bed and ran to grab her bag.

"Mom! I bought you a gift when I went abroad!"

She pulled out a small crystal ball and held it out to me, her eyes wide and hopeful.

My heart squeezed.

It had been so long since she'd thought to buy me a gift.

I took it from her, keeping my expression calm. "Thank you. I really like it."

The Next Day.

After breakfast, I went upstairs and found Liora on a video call with Dante.

When she saw me come in, she looked up and smiled. "Mom!"

"Mm."

I walked over to my desk and opened my laptop, intending to review the materials I'd organized yesterday.

On the screen, I heard Dante's voice. "Do you have any plans today?"

Liora lay on the bed, swinging her legs happily. "I want to watch a movie! And Mom's going to take me out for lunch!"

I stilled.

I hadn't agreed to that yet.

A moment later, Liora walked over holding the phone.

"Mom, Dad said I should give the phone to you."

I hesitated, then took it from her.

I didn't want to video chat with him.

So I placed the phone face down on the table, the camera pointing uselessly toward the ceiling, and asked flatly, "What's the matter?"

"It's been hard on you with Liora these past few days," Dante said.

I didn't respond. Just kept my eyes on my computer screen, typing in the ideas I'd missed yesterday.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No," he said. Then, almost like an afterthought, "Happy New Year."

I gave a short "Mm" and hung up without another word.

I handed the phone back to Liora, who took it with both hands and skipped back to the bed.

Around noon, just as I was getting ready to take Liora out, my phone rang.

It was Johnny.

I smiled faintly and answered. "Hey."

"Damn it, I ran into them again!" Johnny's voice was low, frustrated, like he was trying not to yell.

I froze for a second, then immediately understood who he meant.

Before I could say anything, I heard him mutter under his breath, "They're looking at me. Shit. They're coming over. I'll call you back."

I replied calmly, "Okay."

The line went dead.

I'd just ended the call when I imagined what was happening on the other end.

Dante and Sienna walking up to Johnny at the airport. His jaw tight. His patience wearing thin.

"Mr. Gray, where are you headed?" Dante would ask, polite as ever.

Johnny wouldn't answer. He'd force a smile and say something like, "Mr. Bellini, Miss Brown, we're not that close. So if you run into me again, feel free to pretend you didn't see me."

Sienna would smile sweetly. "Mr. Gray, you're really funny."

Johnny would probably smirk, about to fire back, when Sienna would notice his suitcase and ask, "Mr. Gray, are you traveling abroad too?"

And Johnny, being Johnny, would laugh and say, "Sorry. We're not close. No comment."

Then he'd grab his suitcase and walk out of the VIP lounge without looking back.

I could picture it all so clearly.

A few minutes later, my phone rang again.

I picked up. "What are you doing now?" Johnny asked.

I'd just finished changing my clothes. I glanced at myself in the mirror. "I'm about to go out and watch a movie."

"Sounds like a good plan," he said. Then, more carefully, "Are you going by yourself?"

"With Liora."

Silence fell.

Then— "Wait. Weren't you guys supposed to be celebrating New Year at the Bellini house this year? Why is she suddenly with you now?"

I was touching up my makeup, keeping my voice light. "She was brought over last night."

Johnny let out a sharp, disbelieving laugh. "So Dante's planning to go on a honeymoon with Sienna, and since your daughter was in the way, he just dumped her on you? Ha. They really have no shame."

I didn't react. Didn't say anything.

Because what was there to say?

He was right.

At that moment, Liora came running over, freshly dressed and ready to go. She grabbed my hand, her face bright and eager.

"Mom, I'm ready! Let's go!"

I smiled down at her. "Okay."

Then I spoke into the phone. "Don't worry about them. Just enjoy yourself."

Johnny sighed. "...Got it."

He paused, then added, "I'll be back soon. I won't leave the company to you alone."

I smiled softly. "Okay."

After we finished dinner and the movie, we walked past the arcade on our way back to the car.

Liora spotted it immediately. Her steps slowed, and I felt her tug gently on my hand.

"Mom..." She looked up at me with those big, hopeful eyes. "Can we go in? Just for a little bit?"

I glanced at the flashing lights, the sounds of games beeping and music playing. It had been forever since we'd done something like this together.

"Okay," I said.

Her whole face lit up, and she practically dragged me inside.

The arcade wasn't anything special. Just rows of games, claw machines, racing simulators, basketball hoops. For Liora, this kind of thing was normal. She did it all the time.

But she hadn't done it with me in so long that even something this simple made her glow with happiness.

I watched her run from game to game, laughing when she won a tiny stuffed animal from the claw machine, pouting when she missed a shot at the basketball game.

And I just... followed. Smiled and let her be happy.

I'd made plans to have dinner with Reed that evening.

So after we left the arcade, I figured I'd drop Liora off at home and then head out to meet him.

But the second I mentioned it, Liora's smile disappeared.

She looked up at me, her bottom lip sticking out just a little. "Can't I come with you?"

I paused.

Reed had only invited me out for a casual dinner. Nothing serious. Just a thank-you for helping him out before. It probably wouldn't be a big deal to bring her along.

I pulled out my phone and called him.

"Reed, do you mind if I bring someone with me? My daughter."

There was a beat of silence. Then Reed laughed, warmly. "Elodie, of course not. Bring her. I'd love to meet her."

He hesitated, then added gently, "I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Yeah," I said simply. "I do."

"Well then, I'm looking forward to it."

Half an hour later, I walked into the restaurant holding Liora's hand.

Reed was already there, standing when he saw us. His eyes went straight to Liora, and he smiled warmly.

"So this is your daughter." His expression was kind, genuine. "She's beautiful. Looks just like you."

I felt a small, real smile tug at my lips. "Thank you."

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Reed asked gently.

Liora glanced up at me first, like she was checking if it was okay to answer. I gave her a small nod.

"Liora," she said quietly. "Liora Wilson."

Reed's smile didn't falter, but I saw something shift in his eyes.

"Wilson," he repeated thoughtfully, straightening up. His gaze moved back to me. "Your husband... is Dante Wilson?"

I nodded. "Yes."

He went quiet for a second.

I could see him working it out in his head. He'd probably wondered before, when I told him I was married, why someone like me had settled down so young. I was good at what I did. I had a career. A future.

But if my husband was Dante Wilson, then yeah, it made sense. On paper, at least, we were a good match.

Then something else seemed to click for him.

Maybe he was remembering the way I'd sounded when I mentioned my marriage before, so distant, and detached. Or maybe he was thinking back to New Year's, when he'd run into the Wilson family and I wasn't there.

Either way, I could see it in his face.

He understood now.

Things between Dante and me weren't just strained. They were broken.

He gestured toward the table with a warm smile. "Please, sit."

I guided Liora to a chair and helped her settle in before sitting down myself.

Reed reached into a bag beside him and pulled out two neatly wrapped gifts. He set one in front of me and one in front of Liora.

I shook my head. "Uncle Reed, you didn't have to—"

He waved me off gently, his tone fatherly and kind. "It's New Year. It's tradition for an elder to give gifts to the younger generation. It's nothing big. Just a small gesture."

I hesitated, then reached out and accepted both gifts. "Thank you."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 220[2,144 words]

Chapter 220: Chapter 220

Elodie's POV

Then I turned to Liora and nudged her gently. "Liora, say thank you to Uncle Hardin."

Liora looked up at Reed with her big eyes. "Thank you, Grandpa Hardin."

Reed chuckled warmly, waving his hand. "No need to be so polite."

He looked at her for a moment longer, his expression softening. "She really does look more like Dante, doesn't she?"

I nodded. "Yes. She does."

Reed smiled again, his tone kind. "Whether she looks like Dante or you, she's a wonderful child."

I lowered my eyes and smiled faintly, but I didn't say anything.

There wasn't much I could say to that.

Reed shifted the topic then, his tone turning a bit more casual. "Have you and that troublesome son of mine made up yet?"

I shook my head, a small smile tugging at my lips despite myself. "It seems the conflict has only deepened."

Reed let out a short laugh. "Good."

I blinked, a little surprised.

He leaned back in his chair, unbothered. "He's had an easy life. A little lesson won't hurt him. Honestly, I'm looking forward to seeing how it plays out."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just smiled and let the conversation move on.

We talked about other things after that, work, the New Year, nothing too heavy.

After dinner, Reed and I talked for over an hour before finally parting ways.

In the days that followed, I spent most of my time at home.

I'd fulfilled my dinner appointment with Reed. I'd spent time with Liora when she needed me. But otherwise, I buried myself in the materials Professor Nolan had given me.

Liora was surprisingly well-behaved during this time. She didn't complain or demand attention. She'd go out occasionally with Hugo and Xavier, but most of the time, she stayed in her room playing quietly by herself.

Every day, though, she'd video call Dante.

And every time Dante called, Sienna was usually there.

I wasn't trying to eavesdrop. But Liora knew I didn't like Sienna, so whenever she was on the screen, Liora would take her tablet and go outside to talk. She wouldn't stay in the room.

I noticed. But I didn't say anything.

After two or three days of intense focus, I finally had a breakthrough.

It was the first time I'd felt this kind of clarity since I'd started studying Nolan's materials. Ideas were clicking into place. Patterns were emerging. I could see it now.

That day, I worked from morning until night.

I didn't move when Grandma called me down for lunch. Didn't even register that she'd called at all.

Eventually, aunt Helen brought food up to my room and set it on the desk beside me.

I muttered a quiet "thank you" without looking up.

The food sat there, untouched, until it went cold.

Liora came over at some point and tugged gently on my sleeve.

"Mom, you need to eat."

I hummed absently, my eyes still glued to the screen. "Mm."

But I didn't move.

Liora frowned and called me a few more times before I finally blinked, pulled myself out of the work, and took a few bites.

She watched me carefully until I'd eaten enough, then went back to playing.

At night, it was the same.

I couldn't find time to eat. Couldn't find time to do anything except work.

Liora had wanted to ask me to help her with her bath, but after calling my name several times and getting no response, she gave up.

I heard her little footsteps pad out of the room and down the stairs. A few minutes later, I heard Xavier's voice helping her instead.

I should've felt guilty.

But I was too deep in the work to process it.

By the time Liora came back from her bath, I was still sitting in front of my computer, my fingers flying across the keyboard.

She climbed into bed quietly, pulling the blanket up to her chin.

I didn't notice when she fell asleep.

Didn't notice the way she glanced over at me one last time before closing her eyes.

I just kept working.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of soft footsteps.

I blinked, my eyes burning from staring at the screen for so long. My neck ached. My back was stiff.

Liora was standing beside me, clutching her little stuffed rabbit, her hair still messy from sleep.

"Mom," she said quietly, her voice small. "Have you not slept at all?"

I glanced at the clock. Morning already.

I rubbed my eyes and nodded absently. "Mm. You go back to sleep. Don't worry about me."

Liora just stood there, staring at me.

She didn't move.

"Mom, you're not going to sleep? Aren't you tired?"

"Mm."

I was tired. Exhausted, actually. But I was so close to finishing this section, and if I stopped now, I'd lose my train of thought.

Liora's face scrunched up a little, like she wanted to say something else. I could feel her hesitation.

I glanced at her briefly, and I must've been frowning because she bit her lip and looked away.

She'd probably wanted to ask if I was hungry. Or if I needed anything.

But she didn't.

Instead, she just turned around quietly and padded off to the bathroom to wash up.

I went back to my work.

After more than a day and a night of nonstop focus, I finally finished.

I leaned back in my chair, my hands trembling slightly from exhaustion, and sent everything to Johnny.

Then I stood up, my legs shaky, and went downstairs for breakfast.

My phone buzzed almost immediately.

Johnny had already read through what I sent.

"This is it. EXACTLY. Brilliant. Brilliant. BRILLIANT."

I smiled faintly, rubbing my aching forehead.

"I'm going to sleep for a bit. Talk later."

"Go. Rest. You earned it."

I set my phone down, ate a little, then dragged myself back upstairs and collapsed into bed.

When I woke up, it was after 5 p.m.

The room was dim, the curtains still drawn. My body felt heavy, like I'd been asleep for days instead of hours.

I blinked slowly, letting my eyes adjust.

That's when I saw Liora was sitting on the carpet in my room, quietly working on a Sudoku puzzle. Her little tongue was poking out in concentration, her pencil moving carefully across the page.

She must've heard me stir because she looked up immediately.

"Mom, you're awake?"

I pushed myself up slowly. "Mm."

"Are you thirsty? Do you want some water?"

I paused, a little surprised.

"...Thank you."

Liora got up without hesitation, grabbed the glass on my nightstand, and went to refill it. She came back a moment later and handed it to me carefully, making sure I had a good grip before letting go.

Then she went right back to her puzzle like it was nothing.

I watched her for a moment, guilt settling heavily in my chest.

I'd been so consumed by work these past few days that I'd barely even looked at her.

And today was the last day of her break.

Tomorrow, I'd have to go back to Cole. And I'd have even less time.

I set the glass down and spoke quietly.

"Liora."

She turned around. "What's up, Mom?"

"When is your dad coming back?"

She tilted her head, thinking. "Dad said not for a little while." Then she asked, "Do you need something from him?"

I shook my head. "No. Go ahead and play."

"Okay."

I picked up my phone and typed out a message to Dante.

[When will you be back? I have to go back to work tomorrow and won't have time to take care of Liora. Can you come pick her up?]

I sent it and waited.

More than half an hour passed before he finally replied.

[I'll be back in two days.]

I stared at the message for a moment, then set my phone down without responding.

Two days.

That meant I'd have to bring Liora to work with me tomorrow. Or leave her with Grandma all day.

I rubbed my temples, already feeling the exhaustion creeping back in.

After dinner, Liora went out for a walk with Grandma.

I went back upstairs, intending to rest a little more, when my phone rang with Johnny.

Johnny and I began discussing and organizing some ideas. I had him on speakerphone.

I was jotting down notes, half-listening, half-thinking through the next steps, when I heard the front door open downstairs.

Liora was back from her walk with Grandma.

A moment later, I heard her little footsteps on the stairs. She came into my room quietly, her eyes immediately going to my phone.

She tilted her head, listening to Johnny's voice coming through the speaker.

Then she frowned slightly. "Mom, who are you talking to?"

I glanced at her briefly. "A friend of mine."

"Oh..."

Her voice was small. A little flat.

I could tell she wasn't thrilled, but she didn't push it. Just stood there for a second longer before turning and leaving the room.

On the other end, Johnny had clearly heard her, but he didn't say anything.

He didn't mention that he'd met her before. That he'd held her when she was just a baby.

We kept talking until after 10 p.m. before finally ending the call.

The next day, I officially went back to work at Cole.

The office felt almost foreign after being away for so long. But the moment I sat down at my desk and opened my laptop, it all came rushing back.

We were short-staffed.

Ever since we'd started developing the two projects I'd been working on last year, we'd been stretched thin. At the end of the year, Johnny and I had already planned to start recruiting more people.

But we'd both been so swamped that we hadn't had time to follow up.

Now, it was urgent.

So on my first day back, I immediately started arranging interviews, reviewing applications, coordinating with HR.

Dante had told me he'd be back in two days.

But three days passed. Then four.

Still nothing.

It wasn't until the fifth day, while I was still at the office, buried in work, that I got a call from Liora.

"Mom, Dad's back! He sent someone to pick me up."

I paused, my fingers stalling on the keyboard. "Okay. Make sure you pack everything. Don't leave anything behind."

"I won't!" she said happily. Then, after a beat, "Mom... will you come see me off?"

I glanced at the stack of files on my desk. The emails I still hadn't answered. The meeting I had in an hour.

I wanted to say no.

But recently, I'd barely spent any time with her. I'd been so consumed by work that I'd barely even looked at her properly.

And after this, she'd go back to the Bellini estate. Back to Dante. Back to Sienna.

Who knew when I'd see her again?

"Okay," I said quietly. "I'll come right away."

"Yay!" Liora's voice was bright, full of excitement. "See you soon, Mom!"

I hung up and stared at my screen for a moment.

Then I stood up, grabbed my coat, and walked over to Johnny's office.

Johnny had just gotten back from his business trip. He was at his desk, scrolling through something on his laptop, looking as tired as I felt.

When I knocked, he looked up.

"Hey. What's up?"

"I need to leave early," I said. "Just for a bit. Liora's being picked up, and I want to see her off."

Johnny leaned back in his chair and waved his hand. "Yeah, go. You've been working nonstop anyway. Take a break."

I nodded. "Thanks."

But before I could leave, Johnny let out a sharp, humorless laugh.

"You know what's funny?" he said, his tone bitter. "Dante dumps his kid on you so he can go off on his little honeymoon with *her*. Delays coming back by several days. Doesn't even bother to feel guilty about it."

He shook his head, his expression darkening.

"But you? You neglect her for a few days because of work, and you feel guilty as hell. You see that, right?"

I didn't say anything.

"He's relying on your soft heart," Johnny continued, his voice sharper now. "That's why he thinks he can do whatever he wants. Break his promises. Leave his daughter with you whenever it's convenient for him. Because he knows you'll take care of her. You always do."

I stood there, my hand still on the doorframe, and I couldn't find the words to argue.

Because he was right.

Johnny sighed and waved me off again. "Go. But don't let him walk all over you, Elodie. You deserve better than that."