

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 51 - 52 [887 words]

Chapter 51: Chapter 52

ELODIE'S POV~

I hadn't eaten, and honestly, something warm sounded good right now. So I nodded.

The moment I sat down, my stomach growled. Loud.

York's eyes went wide. "Wait, you didn't eat dinner?"

"No."

"God, I'm sorry. I didn't even think, this is my fault for dragging you out here—"

"It's fine, York." I managed a small smile. "I wasn't hungry before anyway."

He stared at me for a second, and something in his expression shifted. Like he could see right through the lie but didn't know how to call me on it.

By the time Dante got back to the estate with Liora, it was nearly 1 AM. They'd gone out to celebrate with Sienna after her win, and the night had stretched longer than he'd expected.

The butler was waiting in the foyer, concern flickering across his weathered face when he saw them. "Alpha, it's quite late. Is everything alright?"

Dante gave a brief nod, not bothering to explain. He didn't owe anyone explanations for his time.

He walked Liora to her room, watching as she practically bounced inside, still buzzing with excitement from the evening. "Night, baby girl."

"Night, Daddy!"

When he returned to the master bedroom and flipped on the lights, the space felt... empty. Hollow. He glanced around, noting the untouched bed, the absence of any sign that Elodie had been there.

He turned back to the butler who'd followed him upstairs. "She didn't come back tonight?"

“The Luna? No, Alpha. She hasn’t returned.”

Dante paused, something like surprise flickering through him before he could stop it.

That was unusual. Elodie was always home. Always there, like a piece of furniture he’d stopped noticing. Her recent absences were... different. Frequent.

He wondered briefly if something had happened with her family. But then he shrugged it off and headed to the bathroom. Whatever it was, she’d handle it.

Morning came bright and early, and Liora woke up with the kind of energy only a child could have after staying up past midnight. She’d had so much fun with Sienna lately, her new favorite person in the whole world and the happiness from last night still clung to her still.

She grabbed her stuffed wolf and bounded toward the master bedroom, her voice ringing through the hallway. “Mommy! Mommy!”

The door was open. The room was empty.

Her smile faltered.

Dante emerged from the walk-in closet, already dressed for the day, working on his tie with practiced efficiency.

“Daddy, where’s Mommy?”

He didn’t look up from adjusting his collar. “She’s not home.”

“Not home? Why not?”

“If you want to know, ask her yourself.”

Liora’s face scrunched up in thought for a moment before she nodded decisively. “Okay!”

She plopped onto the massive bed, the one that belonged to both her parents but somehow never felt like it belonged to them together and pulled out her phone.

The call connected quickly.

“Mom! Where are you?” Liora’s voice was bright, eager.

There was a pause on the other end. Then Elodie’s voice came through, so carefully like she was trying to hide something in her tone. “What’s wrong, sweetheart? Do you need something?”

Dante continued getting ready, only half paying attention. But something in Elodie’s tone made him pause.

She hadn't answered the question.

Liora, oblivious, flopped onto her back dramatically. "I miss you! Can you take me to school today? Please?"

Another pause. Longer this time.

"Baby, I'm a bit far from your school right now. I won't be able to make it in time this morning. Maybe another day?"

Dante's hands stilled on his watch.

Far from the school? The estate was fifteen minutes away at most. Where the hell was she?

"Oh..." Liora's disappointment was palpable. Her bottom lip jutted out in a pout. "Okay... but you *have* to take me tomorrow morning, okay? Promise?"

Silence.

Dante's eyes narrowed. That hesitation, it wasn't like Elodie at all. She never denied Liora anything, especially something as simple as a ride to school. No matter what was happening between them, she'd always put their daughter first.

So why was she hesitating now?

"How about you let Daddy take you instead?" Elodie finally offered.

Liora's eyes immediately welled with tears. "No! I want you to take me! You haven't taken me in forever except yesterday!"

Dante watched his daughter's face crumple, that wounded expression that always made something in his chest twist uncomfortably.

"Okay," Elodie said quietly. "I'll take you tomorrow."

She didn't sound happy about it. She sounded... resigned. Like it was an obligation she was forcing herself to fulfill.

Dante felt that flicker of surprise again, sharper this time.

Liora's face lit back up instantly. "Really? You promise?"

"I promise."

"Yay! I—"

Dante glanced at his watch and cut in. "If you don't get downstairs for breakfast soon, you're going to be late."

“Ah! I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet! Mom, I gotta go! Talk later!”

She hung up before Elodie could respond, scrambling off the bed and racing toward her bathroom.

Dante stood there in the quiet room, staring at nothing in particular.

Where was Elodie staying that was “too far” from the school?

And why did she sound like coming home even just to drop off their daughter was something she was dreading?

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 52 - 53[1,319 words]

Chapter 52: Chapter 53

Elodie’s POV

I set my phone down after Liora hung up and stared at the breakfast I’d made for myself. Toast. Eggs. Coffee. The same thing I’d been eating alone for days now.

It tasted like nothing.

I forced myself to eat anyway, then headed to the office. There was a big meeting this morning. One Dante would be attending.

My stomach knotted at the thought, but I pushed it down. Professional. I could be professional.

When I got to the conference room, I took my usual seat near the back and opened my laptop. Other team members filtered in, chatting quietly. Sherry sat beside me, scrolling through her phone.

We waited. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen.

Then the door opened, and Dante walked in.

The air shifted. It always did when he entered a room, that Alpha presence that demanded attention whether he wanted it or not. He moved with that effortless confidence, his suit perfectly tailored, his expression unreadable.

Sherry actually gasped beside me.

I glanced up briefly, just long enough to register that he was there, then immediately looked back down at my screen.

“Oh my God,” Sherry whispered, leaning close to me. Her eyes were practically sparkling. “He’s so hot. Like... ridiculously hot.”

I made a noncommittal sound and opened the meeting agenda on my laptop.

The meeting started, and I focused on taking notes. Detailed ones. It was easier than thinking about the fact that Dante was sitting twenty feet away from me and hadn’t even glanced in my direction once.

Not that I expected him to.

Not that I wanted him to.

Sherry, meanwhile, was completely useless. She kept staring at Dante like he was some kind of movie star, her pen hovering uselessly over her blank notepad. Every time he spoke, her breath caught slightly.

I wanted to tell her that he wasn’t worth the daydreams. That underneath all that polished perfection was someone who could look right through you like you didn’t exist.

But I didn’t say anything. I just kept typing.

When the meeting finally ended, Dante left first as he always did. The rest of us gathered our things more slowly.

Albert came over to collect the notes I’d taken. He scanned through them quickly, then nodded with what might have been approval. “Good work.”

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

He left, and Sherry finally seemed to snap out of her trance. “Wait, can you send me those notes? I... wasn’t really paying attention.”

“Sure.”

I sent them over without comment.

She stared at her screen for a moment, scrolling through the document. Then she looked at me, confused. “Did you study architecture before this?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know all these technical terms? Half of this stuff went completely over my head.”

I shrugged. “I taught myself. Found books, read articles. It’s just the basics.”

That was a lie. I'd spent years learning about the industries Dante and the company invested in. Architecture, medicine, tech, real estate, anything and everything so I could do my job properly. So maybe, just maybe, I could be useful enough that Dante would notice.

He never had.

"Wait, you know about medical stuff too?"

"Yeah."

Sherry looked stunned. "What books did you read? Can you send me a list?"

"Of course."

At lunch, I went through my collection and put together a list for her. Forty-seven books. The ones that had helped me the most, the ones that were actually readable.

When I sent it to her, she stared at her phone like I'd just assigned her a thesis.

By three o'clock, Albert asked me to make coffee for Dante's client meeting. Several cups, one for Dante, the rest for his guests.

I went to the small kitchen area we had and started brewing. I'd made Dante's coffee so many times I could do it in my sleep. He liked it a specific way, dark roast, no sugar, just a splash of cream. Not too hot.

I used to think it meant something, that I knew these little details about him. Now I realized it just meant I'd been paying attention while he hadn't.

When the coffee was ready, I set the cups on a tray. Albert appeared before I could take it anywhere.

"I'll bring it over," he said, already reaching for the tray.

Of course he would.

Sherry had been watching from her desk. After Albert left, she turned to me, curious. "Have you ever delivered coffee to the Alpha directly?"

The casual way she said it, "the Alpha," like he was just our boss and nothing more made something twist in my chest.

"Sometimes," I said. "When Albert or the others are busy."

"Elodie," Sherry said suddenly, her eyes lighting up with that eager spark I'd seen all day. "How do you make coffee the way the Alpha likes it? Can you teach me?"

I could see exactly what she was thinking. The same thing every new assistant thought when they started, that maybe, if they learned his preferences, paid attention to the little details, they'd get noticed. That maybe he'd see them.

I used to think that way too.

"Sure," I said. "I can show you."

What did it matter anymore? Why would I keep something like that to myself when I'd already let go of everything else?

Sherry beamed at me, and I felt nothing. Just that same hollow emptiness that had been living in my chest for weeks now.

Albert appeared in the doorway of the break room, and I saw him freeze. His eyes darted between Sherry and me, something like confusion flickering across his face.

I knew what he was thinking. He and Chad had probably been waiting for me to crack, to do something desperate to cling to my position here. To sabotage Sherry, maybe. Make her look incompetent so I could keep my place close to Dante.

But I didn't care anymore.

Let Sherry make his coffee. Let her learn all his preferences, memorize his schedule, anticipate his needs before he voiced them. Let her waste years of her life hoping he'd notice.

I was done.

When my shift ended, I declined Sherry's dinner invitation with a polite smile and headed to my car. I had plans tonight, research I wanted to do on AI integration in Pack businesses, articles I'd been meaning to read.

My own plans. For myself.

My phone rang before I even got the car started. It was Liora.

I answered, already pulling out of the parking lot. "Hey, baby. What's up?"

"Mommy! Are you done with work?"

"Just leaving now. Why?"

"I want crab cakes!" Her voice was bright, excited. "And sushi! Can you come home and make them for me? Please?"

My hands tightened on the steering wheel.

Home. She said it so easily, like that place was still mine. Like I still belonged there.

I hadn't officially divorced Dante yet. The papers weren't signed, the bond wasn't severed. Technically, I could go back to the estate whenever I wanted. He probably wouldn't even care, wouldn't even notice I'd been gone.

But going back there... cooking in that kitchen, being in that house where I'd spent so many years invisible...

"I can't tonight, sweetheart," I said quietly. "I have something I need to do."

Silence on the other end.

I'd said no to her twice now. Twice in one day. That had to be some kind of record.

"But... Mommy, you've been so busy lately." Her voice was small now, wounded. "I miss you. I don't care about your plans, I want crab cakes and sushi!"

Something in my chest cracked.

She was my daughter. My responsibility. I'd brought her into this world, and I owed her everything.

But I was so tired.

Tired of bending. Tired of sacrificing. Tired of making myself smaller and smaller until there was almost nothing left.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 53 - 54[1,176 words]

Chapter 53: Chapter 54

Elodie's POV

"Liora—"

The line went dead.

She'd hung up on me.

I sat there in my car, parked on the side of the road, staring at my phone screen. My throat felt tight. My eyes burned.

She was angry. My baby girl was angry at me because I'd said no. Because for once in my life, I'd tried to put myself first.

And I couldn't even do that right.

I pressed my palms against my eyes, trying to hold it together. Trying not to fall apart right here in public where anyone could see.

But it hurt.

Everything hurt.

After a few minutes or maybe longer, I wasn't sure, I finally pulled myself together enough to drive. But I didn't go to the estate.

I went back to my apartment instead.

The place was quiet when I walked in. Empty. Just me and the silence and this crushing weight on my chest that wouldn't let up.

I made myself eat something just instant noodles, nothing fancy. I barely tasted it. Just forced it down because I knew I needed to eat, needed to keep functioning even when everything felt pointless.

I'd just opened my laptop, trying to focus on the research I'd planned to do, when my phone rang again. It was Johnny.

I answered, grateful for the distraction. "Hey."

"Elodie, there's a banquet coming up in a few days," he said. "Important people from several Packs will be there. I'd like you to come with me. I want to introduce you around, start building your network for when you officially join the firm."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be there."

"Perfect." He paused. "How's the handover going at Wilson Group? Any issues?"

"No, it's going smoothly. Should be done in the next few days."

"Good. I'm looking forward to having you on the team, Elodie. I think you're going to do great things."

His confidence in me felt foreign. Strange. Like he was talking about someone else.

"Thanks, Johnny."

Isabella hung up the phone and stood there in the hallway, waiting.

Any minute now, her mom would rush through the door, apologizing for being late, already heading to the kitchen to make her favorite crab cakes and sushi.

That's what always happened.

She waited.

An hour crawled by. It was nearly eight o'clock, and there was still no sign of Elodie.

The butler approached cautiously, concern etched on his weathered face. "Miss Liora, perhaps you should eat something now? Just a little something to tide you over until your mother arrives—"

"No!" Liora's bottom lip jutted out stubbornly. "I don't want anything else!"

The reality of the situation was starting to sink in. Her mother hadn't called. Hadn't sent a message. Hadn't come.

The moment the butler tried to persuade her again, something inside Liora cracked. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I only want Mommy's food! I only want Mommy!"

The butler shifted uncomfortably, torn between his duty and his genuine affection for the child. He glanced toward the stairs, then back at Liora's tear-stained face.

Finally, he pulled out his phone and dialed the Alpha.

It rang several times before Dante picked up. Background noise filtered through, voices, laughter, the clink of glasses. He was at some business dinner.

"What is it?"

The butler quickly explained the situation. Liora was refusing to eat, asking for her mother, and Elodie's continued absence.

"Put her on," Dante said after a pause.

The butler handed the phone to Liora. She took it with trembling hands. "Daddy?"

"Eat something."

Liora sniffled but said nothing, her silence its own form of protest.

Dante didn't push. He just waited.

The tears came harder now, rolling down her cheeks in streams.

His voice remained calm, unbothered. "I'll take you somewhere fun this weekend. Your choice."

The crying stopped abruptly. "Really?"

"Yes. Now eat."

"Have you eaten, Daddy?"

"I'm at a dinner meeting."

"Oh..." Her voice was small.

"Go eat."

"Okay..."

Liora's mood had shifted completely. She handed the phone back to the butler and headed toward the dining room, her earlier tantrum forgotten.

Dante returned to the private dining room where several business associates waited. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and took his seat.

One of the men chuckled. "You're always on that phone, Alpha. Important business?"

Dante lifted his wine glass, swirling the dark liquid. "My daughter was refusing to eat. Had to talk her down."

The comment landed like a stone in still water.

For years, rumors had circulated about Dante Bellini's personal life. Some said he was married. Others insisted he was single, that the wedding had never happened. No one had ever seen his wife at public functions. No one knew her name.

And now, casually, over wine and business talk, he'd mentioned having a daughter.

The others exchanged glances but said nothing. No one dared ask follow-up questions. Not to an Alpha like Dante.

After dinner, Liora kept vigil by the window, watching for headlights.

Nine o'clock came and went. She'd already had her bath, changed into her pajamas, but she refused to go to bed.

Any moment now. Any moment, her mother would come.

Around ten, she heard the sound of tires on gravel. Her face lit up instantly.

“Mommy—!”

She bolted down the stairs, nearly tripping in her excitement.

But when the door opened, it was Dante who stepped through.

Her expression fell. “Oh. Daddy.”

Dante handed his jacket to the butler, noting the disappointment written all over his daughter’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought you were Mommy...”

He didn’t react to the clear preference in her voice. “She’s probably busy. But she promised to take you to school tomorrow morning, didn’t she? Get some sleep. You’ll see her then.”

That seemed to pacify her somewhat. “Okay.”

She trudged back upstairs, and Dante headed to his study.

Work consumed the next few hours, contracts to review, emails to answer, reports to read. When he finally glanced at the clock, it was nearly midnight.

He assumed Elodie had come back while he’d been working.

But when he entered the master bedroom, it was empty. Untouched.

She still hadn’t returned.

Dante stood there for a moment, something like curiosity flickering through him. It had been days now. Whatever was happening at her family’s place must be serious.

He didn’t dwell on it. Just headed to the bathroom to shower before bed.

The next morning, Elodie woke before dawn.

She’d barely slept, but that was nothing new. She got ready quietly, mechanically, showered, clothes, minimal makeup. Then she forced down some toast and coffee even though she wasn’t hungry.

By the time she got in her car, the sun was just starting to rise.

The drive to the Bellini estate felt surreal. As her car passed through the gates and wound up the familiar driveway, she had this strange, detached feeling like she was watching someone else’s life.

This place had been her home for years.

Now it just felt like somewhere she used to live.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 54 - 55[1,388 words]

Chapter 54: Chapter 55

Elodie's POV

I'd lived here for almost seven years.

Seven years of waking up in these rooms, walking these hallways, trying to make this cold, massive place feel like home.

But as I drove through those gates after only three weeks away, it felt like I'd been gone for a lifetime. Like I was visiting a museum of someone else's life.

Nothing had changed. The trees were the same. The perfectly manicured lawns. The fountain in the courtyard still running like it always did.

But I felt like a stranger.

The butler spotted me as I parked and hurried over, his face lighting up with what looked like genuine relief. "Luna Elodie, you're back."

Luna?

The title made my chest tighten, but I didn't correct him. Just nodded. "Where's Liora?"

"Still asleep, I believe."

It was getting late. If she didn't come down soon, we'd be rushing. But I couldn't bring myself to go upstairs, to walk through those halls, to be in spaces that used to be mine.

"Could you ask Sabina to wake her?" I said quietly.

"Of course. And Luna, have you had breakfast? We have—"

"I already ate. Thank you."

I hadn't, really. Just coffee and half a piece of toast. But the thought of sitting at that table, in that dining room, made my stomach turn.

The butler nodded and disappeared inside.

I stood there in the foyer, feeling awkward and out of place in a house I'd lived in for years.

Then I heard footsteps on the stairs.

I looked up and it was Dante.

He was already dressed for work, wearing his perfectly tailored suit, hair styled, every inch the powerful Alpha he was. He looked like he'd slept well. Looked completely unbothered.

Our eyes met for a brief second.

I gave him a small nod. Nothing more.

He paused on the stairs, like he was about to say something.

But before either of us could speak, Liora came barreling down the stairs behind him, her face lighting up the moment she saw me.

"Mommy!"

She launched herself into my arms, and I caught her automatically, holding her tight. She buried her face in my neck, and I felt her breathe in deep, taking in my scent the way wolf pups do when they need comfort.

"Good morning, baby," I said softly, smoothing down her hair. "It's getting late. You need to eat breakfast."

"Okay!" She was practically vibrating with happiness.

She'd been so sure I'd come. That I wouldn't let her down.

The thought made my throat tight.

She grabbed my hand, tugging. "Come sit with me while I eat!"

"I already ate, sweetheart."

"Then just sit with me! Please? We can talk!"

I didn't want to. God, I didn't want to go into that dining room and sit at that table and pretend everything was normal.

But she was looking at me with those big eyes, so full of hope and love, and I couldn't say no.

“Okay,” I whispered.

She dragged me into the dining room, chattering excitedly about something that had happened at school yesterday. I let her pull me to a seat, and I realized too late that Dante had already sat down. Right across from me.

The butler poured me a glass of water without asking. I accepted it with a quiet thank you and took a sip, focusing entirely on Liora as she talked.

She was telling me about a game she’d played with her friends, about how she’d won at something, about a drawing she’d made that her teacher had loved.

I smiled and nodded and made all the right sounds, but I could feel Dante’s presence like a physical weight across the table.

I didn’t look at him. Didn’t acknowledge him. Just kept my attention on our daughter like he wasn’t even there.

Because in all the ways that mattered, he wasn’t.

I noticed when he stopped eating, though. Noticed the way his fork paused halfway to his mouth, the slight frown that crossed his face.

He’d realized. Realized I wasn’t playing the role anymore. Wasn’t smiling at him or trying to engage or pretending we were a happy family.

I just... didn’t care anymore.

And maybe that was what surprised him.

His phone rang suddenly, the sound cutting through Liora’s story.

I glanced over reflexively.

The screen lit up with the caller ID.

‘BABY’. Those Two words. One little heart emoji.

Something inside me shattered.

I’d thought I was past this. Thought I’d built up enough walls that things like this wouldn’t hurt anymore.

But God, it hurt.

He’d saved her as “Baby.” With a heart. The kind of casual intimacy that spoke of inside jokes and late-night conversations and a closeness I’d never had with him.

I looked away quickly, my hand tightening around the water glass.

Liora was still talking, oblivious, and I forced myself to focus on her words even though I couldn't hear them anymore over the ringing in my ears.

Dante reached for his phone. And yet, of course, the pain in my eyes didn't escape his sharp eyes, but then again he ignored me... just like he always did. Like I was some trash that didn't matter.

And the way he was talking, God, the way he was talking... His voice was soft. Gentle. The kind of tone I hadn't heard directed at me in years. Maybe ever.

"What's wrong?" he said into the phone, and there was actual concern there. Worry. Like whoever was on the other end mattered.

I sat back down next to Liora, my movements mechanical, and tried to pretend I couldn't hear him. Tried to pretend it didn't feel like someone was slowly carving out my insides with a dull knife.

Liora looked up from her breakfast, her eyes lighting up. "Daddy, is that Aunt Sienna?"

Aunt Sienna.

Of course she called her that. Of course they were close enough for that.

"Yeah," Dante said simply.

Liora opened her mouth like she wanted to say something else, probably wanted to talk to Sienna too but then she glanced at me and stopped. Her little face scrunched up, conflicted.

She knew. Even at six years old, she knew there was something wrong between her Aunt Sienna and her mother.

I took a sip of water and stared at my glass like it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

Dante's expression changed as he listened to whatever Sienna was saying. His brow furrowed, his jaw tightened. He looked worried.

He stood abruptly, phone still pressed to his ear. "I'm coming now."

Just like that.

He didn't finish his breakfast. Didn't even look at Liora or me. Just grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and walked out.

For Sienna, he dropped everything.

For Sienna, he ran.

I watched him go, and I felt nothing. Just that same hollow emptiness that had taken up permanent residence in my chest.

Liora stared after him too, her breakfast forgotten. She looked anxious now, her little hands fidgeting with her fork.

She wanted to know what was wrong. Wanted to follow him, maybe. Wanted to make sure Aunt Sienna was okay.

But she didn't say anything. Because I was sitting right there.

After a moment, she tugged on my sleeve. "Mommy, I'm done. Can we go now?"

I looked at her plate. She'd barely eaten half of it.

"You haven't finished, baby. Do you want me to pack some for you to eat in the car?"

"No, I'm not hungry anymore."

Her voice was small. Distant.

I wanted to push. Wanted to tell her she needed to eat, that she was still growing, that skipping meals wasn't good for her.

But I was so tired.

And I knew why she'd lost her appetite. Knew she was worried about Sienna. Knew that the moment we got in the car, she'd probably ask me what I thought was wrong, and I'd have to pretend I cared.

"Okay," I said quietly. "Let's go then."

She slid off her chair immediately, practically running toward the door.

I followed more slowly, grabbing my purse and keys.

Sabina appeared with a container of food anyway, probably some pastries or fruit for Liora to eat later. "Just in case she gets hungry, Luna."

"Thank you."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 55 - 56 [1,306 words]

Chapter 55: Chapter 56

Elodie's POV

The second Liora buckled herself into the backseat, her phone was out.

I watched her in the rearview mirror, her little fingers flying across the screen as she typed out a message. Her face was pinched with worry, the same expression she'd had since Dante walked out of breakfast.

I knew who she was texting. Of course I knew.

A minute later, her phone buzzed with a reply. Liora's face relaxed slightly as she read it, but the worry didn't completely disappear.

She started typing again, faster this time.

I turned my eyes back to the road and said nothing.

What was there to say? That I didn't want my daughter worrying about the woman who was slowly erasing me from my own life? That it hurt to watch her care so much about someone who'd taken everything from me?

She was six. She didn't understand. And I wouldn't make her choose.

When we pulled up to the school, Liora threw her arms around me from the backseat, squeezing tight. "Love you, Mommy. See you later!"

"Have a good day, baby."

She was already halfway out the door when guilt seemed to flicker across her face. She hesitated, glancing back at me.

But then she just waved and ran off.

I watched her go, and I knew. I knew she'd made plans to see Sienna after school. Knew she'd chosen to spend the evening with her instead of me.

And I couldn't even be angry about it.

I drove to the office in silence, that familiar numbness settling back over me like a blanket.

Around mid-morning, a notification popped up on my work email. The 10 AM meeting had been postponed to the afternoon due to an urgent matter.

Urgent matter.

I stared at those words, and I knew exactly what they meant.

Dante had gone to take care of Sienna. Probably sitting by her bedside right now, bringing her soup or medicine or whatever she needed. Being the kind of attentive, caring partner I'd always wished he'd be with me.

I closed the email and went back to work.

At two o'clock, Albert sent out another message. Meeting at 3 PM. And could I please prepare coffee for the Alpha?

Of course.

I made it the way he liked, dark roast, splash of cream, not too hot. My hands moved on autopilot, muscle memory from years of doing this exact thing.

When I walked into the conference room at three, Dante was already there.

And he was wearing different clothes.

Not the suit he'd left the house in this morning. A different shirt. Different tie.

I stopped typing mid-sentence, my fingers frozen over my laptop keyboard.

He'd changed. At her place. Which meant he'd been there long enough to need to change. Long enough that—

My mind went places I didn't want it to go. Images I couldn't stop from forming. Dante holding Sienna. Comforting her. Maybe more than that. Maybe crawling into bed with her because she was sick and needed him, and he'd never been able to say no to her.

The room tilted slightly.

God, I was pathetic. Sitting here imagining the details of my husband's affair like some kind of masochist who couldn't look away from her own destruction.

When I finally dragged my eyes away from his clothes and back to my screen, I realized he was looking at me.

His expression was cold. Irritated, almost. Like he was annoyed that I'd noticed. Like I'd done something wrong by existing in the same room as him.

I thought about the way he'd sounded on the phone this morning. That gentle tone. That immediate concern.

And then I thought about the way he looked at me now with nothing. Not even anger. Just... indifference.

My hand curled into a fist under the table.

I turned my gaze back to my laptop and didn't look at him again for the rest of the meeting.

Afterward, as people filtered out, Albert appeared at my desk.

“Elodie, your handover is basically complete,” he said, his tone businesslike. “You won’t need to come in tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. My last day was today, then.

“Understood,” I said quietly.

I’d known it was coming. Had actually been looking forward to it, in a way, no more pretending, no more seeing Dante every day, no more reminders of everything I’d lost.

I held out my hand to Albert. “Thank you for everything over the years.”

He stared at my outstretched hand like it was something foreign, something he couldn’t quite process. Then, slowly, he shook it.

“You don’t need to thank me.”

His voice was stiff. Uncertain.

I gave him a small smile, probably didn’t reach my eyes and turned to gather the last of my things. My desk was already mostly empty. I’d been clearing it out bit by bit over the past few days, taking things home so this moment wouldn’t feel so final.

But it still felt final.

I walked out of the company without looking back, and I didn’t let myself think about the fact that I might never walk through those doors again.

Behind me, I heard Chad’s voice. “What are you standing there for?”

“Elodie just left the company.” Albert replied him.

“Wait, really? She actually left?”

I didn’t stick around to hear the rest of their conversation. Didn’t want to know what they were saying about me, what theories they were spinning about why I’d given up so easily.

Let them think whatever they wanted.

The next two days passed in a blur of silence.

Liora didn’t call. Didn’t text. Nothing.

I told myself it was fine. She was busy with school and friends and probably spending time with Sienna. She was a kid. Kids got distracted.

But it still hurt.

On the third night, Cara called me, her voice weak and scratchy. “Elodie? I’m sorry to bother you, but I have a really bad fever and I can’t—”

“I’m coming,” I said, already grabbing my keys. “Don’t worry. I’ll be there soon.”

The rain had been falling all day, turning the streets into rivers of dark water. By the time I pulled up to the pharmacy near Cara’s neighborhood in the old part of the city, it was nearly ten at night. The area was practically deserted had just a few flickering streetlights and the endless sound of rain.

I bought medicine and some electrolyte drinks, then ran back to my car, fumbling with my umbrella as I slid into the driver’s seat.

I was setting the bag of medicine on the passenger seat when the door suddenly opened.

My heart stopped.

A man, tall, broad-shouldered, dressed entirely in black dropped into the seat beside me.

Before I could scream, before I could even move, I saw A gun. The barrel pointed directly at my chest.

“Don’t move.”

His voice was low, cold. Absolutely devoid of emotion.

I froze, my hands still on the steering wheel, my whole body going rigid with terror.

He was wearing a mask and a low hat that shadowed most of his face, but his eyes, God, his eyes were sharp and predatory. Wolf eyes, even in human form.

My wolf whimpered inside me, sensing the danger, but she was too scared to even think about shifting.

The man reached over and grabbed my purse, then my phone from the cup holder. He pocketed both without taking his eyes or the gun off me.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said flatly. “You drive me where I need to go, and then you can leave. That’s it.”

My mouth was dry. My heart was slamming so hard against my ribs I thought it might break through.

“I—” My voice came out as barely a whisper. “Where—”

“Just drive.”

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 56 - 57[1,204 words]

Chapter 56: Chapter 57

Elodie's POV~

The pharmacy was too far away to run to. The streets were empty, not a single car, not a single person who might help.

And then I smelled Blood. Heavy and metallic, filling the small space between us.

He was hurt.

Something in my chest loosened just slightly. Injured meant he was vulnerable. Meant maybe I had a chance if I stayed calm.

I turned the key and started the engine. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "Where do you need to go?"

"Straight ahead. To Santa Pier." His breathing was shallow now. "I'll tell you when to turn."

"I know the way."

I did. I'd been there before, back when things were different.

I pushed the memory down and focused on the road.

The rain kept hammering against the windshield. The gun stayed pointed at me, unwavering. And the silence was so thick I could barely breathe through it.

I drove carefully. No sudden movements. No mistakes. Just smooth, precise turns, following the route I remembered.

Half an hour to the pier.

Half an hour of thinking about Liora waking up and realizing I never came home. Half an hour of wondering if Dante would even notice I was gone, or if he'd be too wrapped up in Sienna to care.

Half an hour of realizing that if I died tonight, my daughter would grow up thinking I'd abandoned her.

The thought made my hands tighten on the wheel.

I couldn't die here.

"Pull over there," the man said finally, his voice rougher now. "Under that tree."

The massive banyan tree loomed ahead, its branches spreading like dark fingers against the rainy sky.

I stopped the car smoothly and put it in park.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

The gun was still pointed at me, but his hand was shaking. The blood smell had gotten so strong I could taste it.

I reached slowly for my bag where he'd dropped it. "I have first aid supplies. If you're injured—"

"I'm fine," he cut me off.

He wasn't fine. Anyone could smell that he wasn't fine.

But he opened the door and stumbled out into the rain, disappearing into the darkness before I could say another word.

I sat there for a long moment, my heart still racing, before I finally put the car back in drive.

My hands were shaking again as I pulled away from the pier.

By the time I got back to Cara's apartment, it was almost midnight.

I'd tried to wipe the blood off my bag and phone in the car, but I must not have done a good enough job because the moment I walked through her door, she wrinkled her nose.

She was sitting up on the couch, wrapped in blankets, looking slightly better than she had on the phone. But when she saw me, her eyes narrowed.

"Why do you smell like blood? Elodie, are you hurt?"

"No. I'm fine."

"You don't smell fine—"

"Cara, please. I'm just tired. Let me help you with your medicine, okay?"

She studied me for a long moment, her fever-bright eyes seeing too much. But eventually she nodded and let me help her.

I gave her the medicine, made her eat some porridge, sat with her while she slowly started to feel better.

And the whole time, my mind kept replaying those thirty minutes in the car. The gun. The blood. The way that man had looked at me before he disappeared.

The next day, after Cara's fever finally broke and she was able to eat something solid, I left her apartment and headed home.

Home. That word still felt strange.

I had Johnny's banquet tomorrow night, and I'd been so wrapped up in everything else that I'd completely forgotten about finding something to wear.

By afternoon, I was standing outside one of the high-end boutiques in the shopping district, staring through the windows at gowns that looked extremely expensive but desperately needed.

When I walked in, nobody noticed me at first. The manager and several salespeople were clustered around a dress form, carefully adjusting the most beautiful gown I'd ever seen.

It took a full minute before the manager glanced up and spotted me hovering near the entrance.

"Oh! I'm sorry, miss. How can I help you?" Her smile was polite but distracted, the kind you give to customers you don't think will buy anything.

"I'm just looking," I said quietly.

"Of course. Take your time."

She turned right back to the gown.

I'd been married to the Alpha of the Bellini Pack for seven years, but I'd barely attended any formal events. Dante never brought me to them. Never wanted me standing next to him where people might see. Might ask questions.

And Nonna had stopped going to these things years ago, so there'd never been anyone to take me.

I didn't know much about high fashion. Cara had taught me some basics over the years, how to spot quality fabric, what cuts worked for what body types but walking into a place like this made me feel small.

There were so many gowns. Racks and racks of silk and chiffon and sequins, all beautiful, all far more elegant than anything I'd ever worn.

I wasn't going to be picky. I just needed something decent. Something that wouldn't embarrass Johnny when I stood next to him.

And then I saw The gown the salespeople were working on.

It was stunning, light purple, almost lavender, made of this delicate semi-sheer chiffon that seemed to float. The waist was cinched perfectly, and there were these hand-embroidered flowers cascading down one side. The mannequin wearing it had a matching necklace, something antique and expensive that caught the light every time someone moved near it.

It was the kind of dress you wore when you wanted to be seen. When you wanted to matter.

I couldn't help myself. I walked closer, drawn to it like a moth to flame.

My hand reached out, almost unconsciously, just wanting to feel the fabric. To see if it was as soft as it looked.

Before I could touch it, the manager's hand clamped down on my wrist.

Hard.

I gasped, pain shooting up my arm.

She released me immediately, her eyes wide. "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just, this gown is a custom piece for one of our VIP clients. It's one of a kind, extremely expensive, and if anything happened to it before the client picks it up..."

She trailed off, but the message was clear.

'You can't afford this. Don't touch things that aren't for you.'

My wrist throbbed where she'd grabbed me. I rubbed it slowly, not meeting her eyes.

"I understand," I said softly.

I felt every pair of eyes in that boutique turn toward me—the salespeople, the other customers browsing nearby.

"Is there something else I can show you?" the manager asked, her tone gentler now. Pitying. "We have some lovely options over here that might be more in your price range..."

She gestured toward a rack in the corner. The dresses there were nice enough, I guess. But they weren't that dress.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 57 - 58 [1,308 words]

Chapter 57: Chapter 58

Elodie's POV

"It's fine," I said quietly, pulling my hand back and cradling my wrist.

I hadn't known it was a custom piece. Hadn't known it was one of a kind.

But now that I did, the disappointment settled in my chest like a stone.

I looked around at the other gowns in the boutique, they were all beautiful things, expensive things, ranging from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Some were probably worth more than what most people made in a year.

But after seeing that purple dress, everything else just looked... ordinary.

Eventually, I settled on a simple off-white silk gown with delicate floral embroidery along the hem. It was elegant. Understated. The kind of dress that wouldn't draw too much attention but wouldn't embarrass me either.

It was Safe.

While the salesperson was wrapping it up and processing my payment, I overheard two of the staff talking nearby.

"Can you believe it? That necklace and gown together are over three million dollars," one whispered.

"Three million for one outfit. It's like wearing an entire house."

"Right? And she'll probably only wear it once..."

Three million dollars.

I felt sick.

Even if I could afford something like that, I'd never be able to justify spending that kind of money on a single dress. It was obscene. Wasteful.

I thanked the salesperson, took my garment bag, and left.

That evening, Cara called. "Dinner! My treat! You saved my life the other night, and I need to properly thank you."

“You don’t need to thank me—”

“Too late, I’m already making reservations. Tomorrow night?”

“I can’t tomorrow. I have that banquet with Johnny.”

There was a pause. Then Cara squealed so loud I had to pull the phone away from my ear. “The banquet! Oh my God, I’m coming over tomorrow afternoon. I’m doing your hair and makeup, and I don’t want to hear any arguments.”

“Cara—”

“No arguments!”

The next afternoon, Cara showed up with what looked like an entire salon’s worth of supplies.

She worked on me for over an hour, curling my hair, doing my makeup with a careful hand, making small adjustments and stepping back to assess her work like I was a painting.

When she finally let me look in the mirror, I barely recognized myself.

I looked... good. Really good. The gown fit perfectly, and Cara had done my makeup in a way that highlighted my features without being too much. My hair fell in soft waves over my shoulders.

I looked like someone who belonged at a high-society banquet.

I looked like someone who mattered.

“You’re gorgeous,” Cara breathed. “Johnny’s going to lose his mind.”

I smiled, but it didn’t quite reach my eyes.

When Johnny arrived to pick me up, his reaction was immediate. His eyes widened, and he actually stopped mid-step. “Wow. Elodie, you look... you look beautiful. That dress is perfect on you.”

“Thank you.”

Something warm flickered in my chest at his genuine compliment. It had been so long since anyone had looked at me like that.

We got into his car, and as he pulled out onto the road, he said, “So you’re officially starting at the firm tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect timing.” He glanced over at me with a smile. “There’s someone else joining tomorrow too, the algorithm specialist I mentioned. I’ll introduce you. Her name is—” He paused, seeming to

realize something. “Actually, you might not know her. Her name’s Sienna. She just got back from the Packs in Europe. Brilliant woman. PhD from—”

The world stopped.

“Sienna?” My voice came out strangled. “Sienna Brown? Like Sienna Logan Brown? The one who was racing the other night?”

Johnny’s smile faltered. “Yes... do you know her?”

“She’s my half-sister.”

The words tasted like poison.

Johnny’s hands tightened on the wheel. “Your... what?”

“My father’s daughter. From his affair.” I stared straight ahead, my voice flat. Emotionless. Because if I let myself feel anything right now, I’d shatter. “She’s also Dante’s mistress.”

The car lurched as Johnny slammed on the brakes.

We sat there in the middle of the road, the engine idling, and I could feel him staring at me.

“Elodie—”

Johnny said nothing for a long moment.

“I’m fine,” I said, keeping my voice steady even though I wasn’t fine at all. “I just don’t want her joining the company. Call it whatever you want, nepotism, personal bias but I can’t work with her.”

Johnny’s expression shifted, becoming serious in a way I’d never seen before. “I respect your decision completely.”

The relief that washed over me was so sudden it almost hurt. “Thank you.”

He deserved to know what he was giving up. “But you should know you’re losing someone brilliant. She really is a genius.”

Johnny shook his head, and when he glanced at me, there was something fierce in his eyes. “She might be good at algorithms, but compared to you? She’s worthless.”

I blinked, caught completely off guard.

He meant it. The weight in his voice, the way he looked at me, he actually meant it.

“Johnny—”

“I’m serious, Elodie.” He turned his attention back to the road. “I’ve seen your work. I know what you’re capable of. She doesn’t even come close.”

I didn't know what to say to that. Didn't know how to explain that I'd spent so long being told or shown, that I was less than everyone else that hearing the opposite felt almost painful.

After a moment, curiosity got the better of me. "She's been interviewing with you for a while now, hasn't she? Why hasn't she started yet?"

Johnny shrugged. "She said she had some things to handle first. Personal matters. I didn't push for details."

Personal matters.

Like taking care of Dante when he rushed to her side. Like going to dinner with him and Liora. Like slowly, methodically taking over every piece of my life.

We drove in silence for another ten minutes before pulling up to the venue, a beautiful historic building lit up against the evening sky.

But I barely saw it.

"What are you thinking about?" Johnny asked gently.

"I just don't understand why she wants to join your company specifically." The words came out quieter than I meant them to. "I mean your company is doing well, very well but... There are bigger firms. More prestigious ones. With her credentials, she could go anywhere. Why yours?"

Why was she everywhere I turned? What did she want from me that she hadn't already taken?

Johnny was quiet for a moment, thinking. Then his expression shifted, like something had just clicked. "When we were talking during her interview, she mentioned CUAP. Said she was really interested in it."

My blood ran cold.

CUAP.

The programming language I'd designed when I was seventeen. The one I'd built with a small team, working late nights in my dorm room, fueled by cheap coffee and the desperate need to prove I was more than just some girl who'd gotten lucky marrying into the Bellini Pack.

At the time, people had dismissed it. Called it a pet project. Nothing special.

But over the years, it had become popular in the tech industry. The thing that set them apart from everyone else in the industry.

My creation. My work. The one thing I'd made that no one could take from me because no one even knew it was mine.

Except now Sienna knew about it.

And she was interested.

“She knew about CUAP?” My voice sounded strange. Distant.

“Yeah. She seemed pretty fascinated by it, actually. Asked a lot of technical questions about its architecture.” Johnny glanced at me. “Why?”

And now she wanted my work too.

Was there anything she wouldn't take from me?

Was there any part of me she'd let me keep?

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 58 - 59[1,086 words]

Chapter 58: Chapter 59

Elodie's POV

CUAP had become something of a legend in the tech world.

Professional teams had tried for years to reverse-engineer it, to crack its architecture and figure out how it worked. None of them had succeeded. It had become this untouchable thing, brilliant and mysterious and it was mine.

Even if no one knew it was mine.

When we walked into the banquet hall, I felt eyes turn toward us. Toward me, specifically. I wasn't used to that kind of attention anymore. Wasn't used to being looked at like I was someone worth noticing.

Johnny stayed close, introducing me to people, and I tried to focus. Tried to smile and be present.

The host of the banquet, a Pack Alpha from the eastern territories, spotted Johnny and started making his way over, his face lighting up with recognition.

But then he stopped mid-stride.

His expression changed completely. Shock, maybe. Or excitement. I couldn't tell.

Other guests nearby had similar reactions, heads turning, conversations stopping, everyone suddenly fixated on something behind us.

Johnny and I exchanged a confused glance before turning around.

The host brushed past us without another word, heading straight for the entrance.

“Alpha Dante! Harrison, Levi, what an honor!”

My stomach dropped.

I turned fully, and there they were.

Dante. Harrison. Levi. And Sienna. Of course, Sienna.

The world tilted sideways.

She was wearing that dress. The purple one from the boutique. The one I’d reached for and been told I couldn’t touch because it cost three million dollars and was custom-made for a VIP client.

For her. Of course it was for her.

The dress looked even more stunning on her than it had on the mannequin. She was tall, perfectly proportioned, and the way she carried herself, the way she moved, made the gown look like it had been designed specifically to showcase how untouchable she was.

She looked like royalty. Like something out of a dream.

And I was standing here in my simple off-white dress that I’d bought because it was safe and wouldn’t draw attention.

I felt sick.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd around us.

“Is that really Dante Bellini? He never comes to these things—”

“Who’s the woman with them? She’s gorgeous—”

“That’s got to be his mistress, right? I mean, look at her—”

“That dress alone probably costs more than my car—”

Someone nearby let out a low whistle. “If I could have a woman like that, I’d give up ten years of my life. Did you see her? She’s on another level.”

Each word was a knife.

Another voice chimed in, softer. "I don't know, I think the one in the beige dress is prettier. More elegant. She's got this quiet beauty, you know? Refined."

They were talking about me.

Comparing us.

Johnny's hand found my elbow, steadying me. "Elodie—"

"Oh my God," a woman nearby gasped. "That gown! I saw it at the boutique yesterday, it's that custom piece! The one that cost over three million!"

"Three million? For a dress?"

"Alpha Dante Bellini must really love her to spend that kind of money—"

Love. The word echoed in my head, hollow and mocking.

I lowered my gaze slowly, staring at the champagne glass in my hand like it held answers I desperately needed.

The moment I'd seen Sienna in that dress, I'd known.

Dante had bought it for her.

The Brown family was doing well enough. Sienna's father had built a decent business over the years but dropping three million dollars on a single gown? That wasn't something they could afford right now. Not without it hurting.

But for Dante? Three million was pocket change. Less than that, even.

And the dress had been custom-made. Which meant he'd ordered it at least two weeks ago.

Two weeks ago, he'd already been planning to bring her here. To this banquet. As his date.

While I'd been at home, taking care of Liora, working at Wilson Group, trying to hold together the scraps of our marriage, he'd been planning this.

Planning to show her off.

Planning to parade her in front of everyone like she was his.

Maybe she was.

"Elly." Johnny's voice was gentle, concerned. He only ever called me that when he was worried. "We can go. Right now."

"I'm fine," I said automatically, forcing a small smile.

The lie tasted bitter.

I wasn't fine. I was so far from fine I couldn't even see it anymore.

But what else could I say? That watching my husband walk in with another woman, with her wearing a dress that cost more than most people made in a year, made me want to scream? That every single person in this room was now comparing us, and I was losing?

That I'd already lost?

A crowd had formed around Dante and his group. Everyone wanted to be near them, to be noticed by the Alpha and his inner circle. Harrison and Levi were used to the attention, handling it with practiced ease.

And Sienna, Sienna looked like she'd been doing this her whole life. Smiling, charming, fitting in so perfectly it made my chest ache.

They hadn't seen me yet. The crowd was too thick, and I was standing far enough away that I was invisible.

Story of my life, really.

"Elodie." Johnny touched my arm gently, pulling my attention back to him. His eyes were full of understanding and something that looked like anger on my behalf. "You don't have to stay here and watch this."

"I'm not watching anything," I said quietly. "I'm here for work. To network. To build connections for when I start at your firm."

"Bullshit."

I blinked, surprised. Johnny rarely swore.

"You're hurting," he said bluntly. "And I hate seeing you hurt. Especially because of him."

Something in my throat tightened. "Johnny—"

"I know you, El. I've known you for years." His voice dropped lower, more intense. "You're one of the strongest, most brilliant people I've ever met. You've built several strong sites, introduced several technologies even while being seventeen. Seventeen*. You've created things that tech giants have been trying to replicate for over a decade and failed. You're incredible."

The words should have felt good. Should have lifted me up.

Instead, they just made me feel more broken.

Because if I was so incredible, why wasn't I enough?

Why had Dante looked at me for seven years and decided I wasn't worth keeping?

“I appreciate that,” I whispered. “But it doesn’t change anything.”

“It should.”

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 59 - 60 [1,414 words]

Chapter 59: Chapter 60

Elodie’s POV

Johnny knew me too well.

He’d watched me throw myself into my work over the years, seen me stay up nights coding, building, creating things just to see if I could. Just to prove to myself that I was capable of something.

And he’d watched me do the same thing with Dante.

I’d loved him with everything I had. Given up my scholarship opportunities, turned down offers from top tech companies, let my own dreams get smaller and smaller because I thought maybe, if I just tried hard enough, he’d love me back.

It had cost me everything.

But Johnny had never once heard me say I regretted it.

Maybe because I was too proud. Or maybe because admitting regret would mean admitting I’d wasted seven years of my life on someone who was never going to choose me.

So when I told him I was fine now, that I could let it go, he believed me.

God, I wished I believed me too.

“Want a drink?” Johnny asked, his tone lighter now.

I nodded. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

We moved through the crowd, away from where Dante and Sienna were still holding court and headed toward the refreshments area.

“Wine?” Johnny offered.

“Just a little.”

I wasn't much of a drinker, but tonight I needed something to take the edge off. Something to make standing in this room, breathing the same air as them, slightly more bearable.

We clinked glasses, and I took a sip. The wine was expensive, smooth and rich, the kind of thing I'd never have bought for myself.

We stood there quietly for a while, and I focused on the taste, the warmth spreading through my chest, anything but the ache that wouldn't go away.

“John!”

A voice called out, and I looked up to see an older man approaching us. He had kind eyes and graying hair, and the way Johnny's face lit up told me this was someone important.

“Professor Nolan!” Johnny stepped forward, shaking the man's hand warmly. “I was looking for you earlier.”

“Were you now?” Professor Nolan smiled, but there was teasing skepticism in his voice.

“I'm serious. I came tonight specifically to introduce you to someone.”

The professor's gaze shifted to me, and I felt myself being evaluated. His expression was appreciative but confused like he couldn't quite figure out why Johnny was so eager to introduce us.

For a horrible second, I wondered if he thought I was Johnny's girlfriend or something.

“The language programming system you're developing,” Johnny continued, gesturing toward me with that easy confidence he always had. “I know it's hit a bottleneck. This is Elodie, my colleague and one of the most brilliant programmers I've ever worked with. I guarantee she can help you.”

Professor Nolan's eyebrows rose. “Your colleague?”

He'd clearly never heard of me. Why would he have? I'd spent the last seven years hiding behind Dante's shadow, letting all my work stay anonymous, never taking credit for anything because I didn't want to make waves.

“CUAP,” Johnny said simply. “She developed it eight years ago with her team.”

The professor's expression changed completely. Shock. Disbelief. “CUAP? The CUAP?”

“The one and only.”

Professor Nolan stared at me like I'd just told him I could walk on water. “You created CUAP?”

I nodded, suddenly feeling very exposed. “Yes.”

“My God.” He laughed, the sound full of wonder. “I’ve been trying to understand the architecture of that system for years. It’s brilliant. Absolutely revolutionary. And you, how old were you when you built it?”

“Seventeen.”

He looked like he might fall over. “Seventeen. Unbelievable.”

Then he launched into questions, technical ones about the system’s design, about the algorithms I’d used, about problems he was facing in his own work.

And for the first time all night, I felt like I could breathe.

This was familiar territory. And it was Safe. I knew this language, the language of code and logic and problem-solving. Here, I wasn’t the rejected wife or the forgotten Luna. I was just... me.

We talked for what felt like hours but was probably only twenty minutes. The professor was brilliant, asking exactly the right questions, pushing me to think deeper. And the more we talked, the more animated I became.

For those twenty minutes, I forgot about Dante. Forgot about Sienna and her three-million-dollar dress. Forgot about everything except the work.

Johnny stood off to the side, sipping his wine and watching us with this satisfied smile, like he’d orchestrated exactly what he’d wanted.

“This is remarkable,” Professor Nolan said finally, shaking his head in amazement. “Ms. Elodie, I would be honored if you’d consider consulting on my project. Your insights are exactly what we need.”

“I’d love to,” I said, and I meant it.

This was what I needed. Work that mattered. Work that was mine.

“Wonderful. John has my contact information, we’ll arrange a time to meet properly.” He smiled at me warmly. “It’s been a genuine pleasure.”

I was still smiling from the conversation with Professor Nolan when I sensed her approaching. It was Sienna.

Johnny noticed first, his eyes flicked over my shoulder, and something in his expression hardened.

I turned just as she reached us.

“Mr. Gray,” she said, her voice smooth and polite. Professional.

For a brief second, she had this pleasant smile on her face, the kind you give to important business contacts.

Then her eyes landed on me. The smile vanished.

Her expression went ice-cold, like someone had flipped a switch. She looked at me for maybe half a second before deliberately turning her gaze away, acting like I wasn't even standing there.

Like I was invisible.

My chest tightened, but I kept my face neutral.

She turned back to Johnny, the pleasant mask sliding back into place. "I wanted to thank you again for the opportunity. I'm really looking forward to—"

"This is Ms. Brown," Johnny cut in smoothly, looking at me with deliberate warmth. "El, would you like to meet her?"

The air shifted.

I understood immediately what Johnny was doing. He was making his position crystal clear not just to Sienna, but to anyone watching. He was telling her, and everyone else, that he and I were close. That he knew exactly what the situation was between us.

And that he was choosing my side.

Sienna's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

She wasn't stupid. She knew exactly what Johnny meant.

"So," she said, her voice dropping a few degrees. "Does this mean I shouldn't bother showing up at Cole Corporation tomorrow?"

Johnny smiled, but not warmly, but with a kind of sharp appreciation. "You're very perceptive, Ms. Brown. I admire that."

He could have been subtle about it. Could have let her down gently later with some excuse about budget constraints or a change in direction.

But he didn't.

He wanted her to know that this was about me. That he was standing with me, and there was no negotiating around it.

I felt a rush of gratitude so strong it almost hurt.

Sienna looked at me then, really looked at me and there was something in her eyes I couldn't quite read. Anger? Contempt? Pity?

Whatever it was, it made me feel small.

“I see,” she said coldly. Then, without another word, she turned and walked away.

Her posture was perfect. Confident. Like this was just a minor inconvenience rather than a humiliation.

Of course it was. What was Cole Corporation to her when she had Dante? When she had the Bellini Pack’s resources, their connections, their everything?

Johnny wasn’t even a blip on her radar.

But he’d made his point.

I watched her walk back toward where Dante stood, and that’s when I realized they were all looking at me now.

Dante. Harrison. Levi.

They must have been watching Sienna, and now their eyes had landed on me standing next to Johnny.

Harrison and Levi looked surprised like they genuinely hadn’t expected to see me here.

But Dante...

Dante’s face was completely blank. Expressionless. Like he was looking at a stranger he’d passed on the street and would forget about in five minutes.

Not his wife. Not the mother of his child.

Not someone he’d known for seventeen years.

Just... nothing.

Seven years of marriage, and he looked at me like I didn’t exist.

“What’s wrong?” Johnny’s voice broke through my thoughts.

I realized I’d gone completely still, my wine glass frozen halfway to my lips.

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Chapter 60: Chapter 61

Elodie's POV

"It's nothing," I said, shaking my head and forcing a smile.

By the time I looked back, Sienna had already returned to where Dante stood, and they'd all turned their attention away from me.

Like I'd never existed in the first place.

I went back to talking with Professor Nolan, throwing myself into the conversation about algorithms and system architecture because it was easier than thinking about anything else.

But eventually, he had to leave, someone else needed his attention and I was left standing there with Johnny, sipping my wine and trying to look like I belonged.

That's when I caught Levi staring at me.

He had this strange smile on his face. Knowing. Almost mocking.

Dante had his back to me, engaged in conversation with someone I didn't recognize.

When Levi saw me looking, he raised his eyebrows and lifted his wine glass in my direction. Like a toast. Or a threat.

I frowned, confused.

Then he smirked, this cold, dismissive expression and turned away.

It hit me then.

He thought Johnny and I had ganged up on Sienna. Thought we'd bullied her or humiliated her on purpose. And that little gesture? That was Levi's way of telling me this wasn't over. That there would be consequences.

My stomach twisted.

Of course they'd take her side. Of course they'd see me as the villain.

I'd always been the villain in their story.

About thirty minutes later, the host of the banquet finally made his way back to us. He'd been working the room all night, but now he looked relaxed, a little tipsy.

After some small talk, he leaned toward Johnny with a curious expression. “So, do you know Ms. Brown? The one who was just here?”

Johnny’s smile was polite but guarded. “Somewhat. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I was talking to some people earlier and found out she’s not from around here, originally from a smaller Pack territory. Her family’s doing well there, fairly established, but here in the capital?” He shrugged. “They’re small fish. Nothing compared to the Bellini Pack, the Crane Pack, or the Shaw Pack.”

Johnny raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“And families like that usually can’t break into our circles. The big Pack families wouldn’t even look at them twice.” The host took a sip of his drink, his eyes gleaming with interest. “But Ms. Brown? She’s somehow gotten right into the inner circle. Became close with them. That’s impressive.”

My hands tightened around my glass.

“I was actually surprised when Alpha Bellini showed up tonight,” the host continued. “He almost never comes to these things. But then I realized, he came to introduce Ms. Brown around. To help her build connections.”

He gestured across the room toward where Dante and his group had been standing earlier.

“When an Alpha personally paves the way for someone like that, brings his closest allies along to support her, it means something. It means she’s not just some passing fling. If she were just a mistress or a temporary thing, he wouldn’t go this far.”

Each word felt like a knife sliding between my ribs.

“With Alpha Bellini backing her, the Brown family is about to skyrocket. Their business, their status, everything.” The host laughed, shaking his head in admiration. “To have a daughter like that? The Browns hit the lottery. Truly enviable.”

I felt Johnny stiffen beside me.

I couldn’t look at him. Couldn’t look at anyone.

The host kept talking, oblivious to the way his words were tearing me apart. “It’s rare to see that kind of loyalty from someone like Alpha Bellini. She must be really special.”

Special.

Yes. She was special.

And I was... nothing.

The wife he kept hidden. The Luna no one knew about. The woman he’d never once introduced to his friends or brought to events like this.

Seven years of marriage, and he'd never done for me what he was doing for her in a matter of months.

I glanced automatically toward where Dante and his group had been standing.

They were gone. The spot was empty.

They'd left. Probably took Sienna somewhere nicer. Somewhere more exclusive. Another event where Dante could parade her around and make sure everyone knew she belonged with him.

Even though I'd been standing right there in that ballroom, Dante never looked at me once.

Not once.

Johnny and I left about thirty minutes after they did. The drive back to my apartment was quiet. Johnny kept glancing at me like he wanted to say something but didn't know what.

I was grateful for the silence.

When he dropped me off, I thanked him and headed upstairs, my whole body feeling heavy. Exhausted in a way that had nothing to do with being tired.

I'd just kicked off my heels when my phone rang.

Awfully it was Dante.

My heart stuttered, and for a second I just stared at his name on the screen.

Was this it? Was he calling to yell at me for what happened with Sienna? Had Levi already told him that Johnny and I had "bullied" her?

I took a breath and answered. "Hello."

"Come back." His voice was cold. Flat.

I hesitated. "If there's something you need to say, just say it."

"Liora has a fever. She's asking for you."

Then he hung up.

Just like that.

I stood there for a second, phone still pressed to my ear, and then I was moving. Grabbing my keys, shoving my feet back into my shoes, racing out the door.

Liora was sick.

Nothing else mattered.

When I got to the estate, I didn't see Dante anywhere. Didn't care. I went straight upstairs to Liora's room.

She was lying in bed with an IV drip in her hand, her face flushed with fever, her little body looking so small and fragile under the blankets.

The second she saw me, her face crumpled. "Mommy..."

She reached for me with her free hand, and I was there immediately, carefully gathering her into my arms while making sure not to disturb the IV.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here."

She buried her face in my neck, and I could feel how hot she was. Too hot.

Sabina, who'd been sitting nearby, stood up quickly. "Luna, she ate a little earlier but threw it all up."

My chest tightened. "How long has she been like this?"

"A few hours. The doctor's been here, started the IV about forty minutes ago."

I looked at the doctor standing quietly by the door. "What's wrong with her?"

"Just a fever, Luna. Probably viral. The IV is fluids and fever reducer. She should start feeling better soon."

I nodded, then turned my attention back to Liora. She was still clinging to me, her little fingers gripping my dress.

"Are you hungry, sweetheart?" I asked gently, brushing her damp hair back from her forehead. "Once your IV is done, Mommy will make you some porridge. The kind you like."

She nodded weakly against my shoulder. "Kay."

Whenever she was sick, I was always the one who took care of her. Always. She'd only eat the porridge I made, no one else's tasted right to her.

It was one of the few things that made me feel like I was still needed.

She pulled back slightly, her feverish eyes searching mine. "Where's Daddy? Is he not home yet?"

The question hit me like a punch to the gut.

I didn't know.