

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 81 - 82 [1,775 words]

Chapter 81: Chapter 82

ELODIE'S POV~

I saw them coming before Johnny did.

The conference hall was filling up with voices bouncing off the high ceilings, chairs scraping, that weird echo that happens when too many people try to talk at once. Johnny was showing me something on his tablet, some note about Professor Nolan's previous presentations, but I wasn't really paying attention.

I felt it first. That pull.

God, I hated that I still felt it.

My wolf perked up, alert, and I wanted to tell her to stop, to just stop because it didn't matter, he didn't want us, but she never listened. She never learned.

Dante walked in.

And right behind him, Sienna's hand tucked into the crook of his arm like it belonged there.

They were headed toward the front. Of course they were. Dante's company had one of the biggest exhibitions here, and he was... he was Dante. Alpha of the Bellini Pack. He could probably sit on the damn stage if he wanted.

My chest hurt.

I looked down at my tablet. Focused on the screen even though the words blurred together into nonsense.

"Elodie?" Johnny's voice, quiet beside me.

"I'm fine."

I wasn't fine.

They were getting closer. Walking down the center aisle, and we were sitting right there, middle section, fourth row, and they were going to pass right by us, and I couldn't...

I couldn't breathe properly.

Sienna's perfume reached me first. That expensive floral scent. Then Dante's scent underneath it, filled with pine and winter and something that used to mean home and my wolf whined so pathetically I wanted to claw her out of my chest.

Stop it. Stop.

I kept my eyes on the tablet.

Johnny shifted beside me. Protective, maybe. Or just uncomfortable. I couldn't tell without looking at him, and I wasn't looking up, wasn't watching them pass, wasn't... didn't even want to.

Sienna's heels clicked against the floor as They passed our row and Kept walking.

They Didn't stop. Didn't pause. Didn't even glance over.

Like we weren't there.

Like I wasn't.

My fingers tightened on the tablet. The edge bit into my palm.

Breathe, Elodie. Breathe.

"Elodie." Johnny again. His hand touched my arm, gentle. "You okay?"

"Yeah." My voice sounded normal. I was getting good at that. "Yeah, I'm fine."

The whispers started a few seconds later, right Behind us. Two rows back, maybe three.

"—sitting in the front row—"

"—of course they are, did you see—"

"— this is the chance to talk to Professor Nolan—"

"God, how lucky is that?"

Lucky. Right.

I watched them take their seats at the Front row, and at the center. The best seats in the hall. Sienna smoothed her skirt as she sat, crossed her legs, leaned slightly toward Dante to say something that made him nod.

They looked... good together.

That's what people would think, anyway. Alpha and his... whatever she was. Mate? No, they weren't bonded. But they looked like they could be. Like they *should* be.

Like they made sense in a way I never had.

Johnny leaned closer, his shoulder brushing mine. "Don't worry," he whispered. "Even if she gets to talk to Professor Nolan, she won't impress him. I've met her before, remember? She doesn't have the technical knowledge to—"

"What if she's better than we think?" The words came out sharper than I meant them to.

Johnny blinked. "What?"

"What if she's just been... hiding it? Playing dumb?" I don't know why I said it. Don't know why the thought even occurred to me except that I was tired... so tired... of underestimating people who kept winning anyway.

Johnny frowned. Opened his mouth and then Closed it.

"I mean..." He shifted. "I guess that's possible, but—"

The host walked onto the stage, and the room started settling. All the voices dropped. And Chairs stopped their scraping.

I looked down at my tablet again. Unseeing everything happening in my surroundings.

Johnny was probably right. Sienna didn't have the background, didn't have the expertise. She was PR, marketing, pack politics. Not tech.

But she was sitting in the front row next to Dante, and I was sitting here in the middle section, and somehow that felt like it mattered more than expertise.

The host was talking. Doing his Introductions, giving his thank-yous, the usual pre-speech nonsense that no one really listened to.

I tried to focus. Tried to care.

My wolf was still whining. Still pulling toward the front row, toward the scent of pine and winter that meant alpha, that meant mate, that meant everything we weren't allowed to have anymore.

He doesn't want us, I told her again. He made that clear.

She didn't believe me.

God, I wished she would.

"—let's welcome Professor Nolan to the stage!"

Applause erupted. I clapped too, automatically, not really thinking about it.

Professor Nolan walked out, and the whispers started up again, filled with excitement this time, even anticipation. He was younger than I expected. Early forties, maybe. Tall, and slim, wearing this frameless glasses that caught the stage lights.

He looked... intimidating, actually. That sharp, analytical expression that some geniuses got. Like he could see through you, see all the ways you were inadequate, and wasn't impressed.

The applause faded.

Silence then settled over the hall.

Professor Nolan stood at the podium, adjusting his glasses. His cold gaze swept the audience, his gaze was extremely detached when it passed over our section that I felt myself wanting to shrink down, to be smaller, less visible.

Then his eyes landed on the front row.

On Dante. On Sienna, sitting beside him.

Something flickered across Nolan's face. I didn't even know what it was.

Professor Nolan cleared his throat, and the room fell silent again.

"Good evening," he began. His voice was calm, measured. "I'd like to start by thanking the organizers for this opportunity..."

SIENNA~~

Professor Nolan's voice filled the hall, and I smiled.

Perfect. Everything was going exactly how I needed it to.

"I'd like to thank the organizers for this wonderful opportunity..."

He was giving a polite speech. The kind of speech important people gave when they were being diplomatic. I wasn't really listening to the words, I didn't need to. What mattered was that I was sitting here, front row, right next to Dante, where everyone could see me.

Where she could see me.

I didn't turn around to check, but I knew Elodie was back there somewhere. Middle section, probably. With Johnny and his little tech team, pretending she belonged at an event like this.

God, the audacity.

She'd looked so calm earlier, explaining those systems to the investors like she actually mattered. Like she was someone worth listening to. It was almost impressive, really, how well she played the part.

But that's all it was. Playing.

I was the one sitting next to the Alpha of the Bellini Pack. I was the one people would remember.

Professor Nolan was answering questions now. Some boring technical thing about encryption protocols that made my eyes want to glaze over, but I kept my expression interested. Engaged. The trick was to nod at the right moments, to look thoughtful when he paused.

People around me were scribbling notes, whispering to each other about algorithm applications or whatever. I just smiled.

Didn't need to understand it. Just needed to look like I did.

Beside me, Dante shifted slightly. His arm brushed mine, and I let it stay there. Didn't pull away.

Half an hour crawled by, Professor Nolan's voice kept droning on about innovation and security measures and then finally, finally, he stepped down from the stage.

This was it.

The organizers had prepared a seat for him. At the Front row, in the center of the hall. Right in the middle of all of us.

As he walked down the aisle, everyone in the front row stood.

I stood too, smoothing my skirt, making sure my posture was perfect. My Shoulders back, keeping my chin up. The kind of confident elegance that photographs well.

The other alphas and executives were already extending their hands, greeting him like he was royalty.

Professor Nolan moved down the line, shaking hands with that cold, detached expression he wore like armor. He didn't smile much. Didn't seem impressed by any of them.

But it was good though. It made it more of a challenge.

Dante stepped forward when Nolan reached us.

"Mr. Nolan." Dante's voice was smooth. "It's been a long time."

Nolan's expression didn't change, but he extended his hand. "It has."

They'd met before, apparently. Years ago. Dante had mentioned it once, briefly, but hadn't elaborated on it.

I didn't waste time wondering about it.

I stepped forward, my hand already extended, my smile already in place. "Hello, Mr. Nolan. I'm Sienna Brown. It's such a pleasure to meet you."

His eyes flicked to me. Cold and Assessing.

For a second I wondered if he'd dismiss me entirely, but then his hand met mine. Briefly and. Professional. His grip was firm but not warm.

"Miss Brown." He gave a nod. Nothing more.

Then he moved on, shaking hands with the others behind me, and I stepped back, satisfied.

Contact made. Impression left.

That's all I needed.

Nolan took his seat between Dante and some oil pack representative from the northern territories. Immediately, the man on Nolan's left started talking, something about collaborative projects and investment opportunities.

Nolan responded barely. He gave Short, clipped answers that didn't invite further conversation, but the man kept trying anyway.

I watched, waiting for my moment.

Dante had sat back down, and I was blocked. Nolan was right there, so close I could reach out and touch his shoulder, but Dante was in the way.

And it was Frustrating.

I leaned closer to Dante, keeping my voice low. "You're not going to talk to him?"

Dante didn't look at me. His eyes stayed on the stage, where the next speaker was setting up. "No."

"Why not? You said you knew each other."

"We do."

That wasn't an answer.

I frowned, glancing at Nolan. He was still half-listening to the northern pack representative, his expression giving away absolutely nothing.

This was a rare opportunity. Professor Nolan didn't attend events like this often, he was too important, too in-demand. Having him here, sitting right next to us, and Dante wasn't even trying to—

"Did you two have a falling out?" I asked, unable to keep the confusion out of my voice.

Dante's mouth twitched. Almost a smile. "No."

"Then why aren't you—"

"He doesn't think highly of me."

I blinked in shock. "What?"

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 82 - 83 [1,760 words]

Chapter 82: Chapter 83

SIENNA'S POV~

I stared at Dante, trying to process what he'd just said.

"What do you mean he doesn't think highly of you?"

That didn't... it couldn't mean what I was thinking, right?

Dante's expression was so calm. Too calm. Like he'd just told me the weather forecast instead of admitting that one of the most influential minds in pack technology basically thought he was... what? Incompetent? Unworthy?

How was he so unbothered by this?

"Exactly what I said." Dante turned his attention back to the stage. He was being dismissive. Entirely done with the conversation.

But I wasn't done.

"But that doesn't make sense. You've built one of the most successful tech companies in the Bellini Pack. You have connections across Europe. Why would he—"

"He doesn't respect how I do business." Dante's voice was quiet. Matter-of-fact. "We have different philosophies. It's fine."

It's fine?

No. No, it wasn't fine.

This was Professor Nolan. Having his approval could open doors that even Dante's alpha status couldn't. And he was just... accepting this? Giving up?

I wanted to say more, but the way Dante's jaw set told me the conversation was over.

Fine.

Whatever.

If he wanted to throw away opportunities, that was his problem.

The conference dragged on. More speakers, more technical jargon that made my eyes glaze over. I smiled and nodded at the appropriate moments, but my mind was elsewhere.

Planning... Calculating.

Finally... finally... it ended.

The host thanked everyone for coming, and immediately the room shifted. People were standing, their voices rising, that chaotic energy of networking was about to begin.

Then someone near the front, one of the German pack representatives, said something that made everyone pause.

"Professor Nolan isn't leaving yet."

The words spread like wildfire.

Within seconds, people from the back rows were pushing forward. They were so desperate and eager. All wanting their moment with the great Professor Nolan.

But by the time most of them reached the front, it was too late.

A wall of bodies had already formed around him. All the important people. The ones who'd been sitting near him, who had proximity and therefore priority.

I was one of them.

I should've been one of them.

Except I was stuck on the outside of the circle, and Dante... Dante was just standing there, not even trying to get closer.

What was wrong with him?

I glanced around, looking for an opening. Some way to push through without looking desperate.

That's when I saw Aunt Lauren.

She was several rows back, waving frantically. At me. Her face was urgent, gesturing for me to come over.

Moon goddess.

Really? Now?

I forced a smile and made my way through the crowd toward her.

"Aunt Lauren."

She grabbed my arm the second I was close enough. "Why aren't you talking to Professor Nolan? This is your chance!"

"I know, but he's surrounded by—"

"Then push through! Make an impression! That's what these events are for, Sienna."

Her voice had that edge it got when she was disappointed. When I wasn't living up to expectations.

My jaw tightened.

"Right now everyone around him is a major pack alpha or company head," I said, keeping my voice level. Patient. "If I force my way in, I'll have maybe thirty seconds before someone more important takes my place. Dante said there will be other opportunities—"

"Dante said." Lauren's eyes narrowed. "And you're just taking his word for it?"

Was she serious?

"He knows Nolan better than we do," I pointed out. "If he says—"

"Sienna." She leaned closer, her voice dropping. "You need to stop relying on Dante for everything. Make your own connections. Show initiative."

Heat crawled up my neck.

I was showing initiative. I was here, wasn't I? In the front row, dressed perfectly, saying all the right things.

But apparently it wasn't enough.

It was never enough.

"I already know most of the people here," I said. Defensive now, hating how I sounded. "Thanks to Dante, they've been very welcoming—"

"Because of Dante." Lauren's smile was tight. "Not because of you."

The words hit like a slap.

I stood there, hand clenched around my purse, trying to breathe through the anger building in my chest.

"I should get back," I managed.

Lauren nodded, but her expression said everything. Disappointment. Frustration. That look that meant you're wasting opportunities.

I turned and headed back toward the front, weaving through the crowd.

People made way for me.

They knew I'd been sitting with Dante. Knew I was... whatever I was to him. And that association meant something here.

I slipped back to Dante's side, and one of the alphas, from the German pack, I think, smiled at me. "Miss Brown is truly talented and beautiful. Dante really has excellent taste."

The compliment landed warmly. Genuine, even.

I smiled back graciously. "You're too kind."

Another alpha chimed in, saying something about my resume, my composure. They meant it. I could tell. These weren't empty platitudes, they actually seemed impressed.

And why shouldn't they be?

I was talented. I was capable.

I'd worked hard to be standing here.

Dante smiled beside me. Didn't say much. Just let them compliment me, letting the conversation flow.

ELODIE'S POV~

The conference was winding down and I watched Professor Nolan leave.

Just like that. One moment he was surrounded by all those important people, alphas and executives and whoever else mattered enough to stand in the front row and the next he was checking his watch, making polite excuses, and walking away.

Everyone let him go. Of course they did.

You didn't argue with someone like Professor Nolan.

Around me, technical staff from other companies were still talking. They were in deep conversations about encryption methods and security protocols and things I actually understood, things I could contribute to without feeling like I was faking my way through.

It helped. For real.

It meant I didn't have to think about the front row. Didn't have to think about how Sienna had tried to talk to professor Nolan and he'd dismissed her with two words before walking away.

I'd seen it. Couldn't help but see it, even from back there.

Johnny suddenly touched my elbow. "Come on."

I blinked. "What?"

But he was already guiding me away from the cluster of tech staff we'd been talking to. His hand firm on my arm, purposeful.

"Where are we—"

"Just trust me."

We slipped out of the conference hall. The noise faded behind us, all those voices, that desperate networking energy. The hallway was quieter now. Cooler.

My heels clicked against the floor as we walked toward the parking lot.

"Johnny, what's going on?"

He checked his phone. "Nolan wants to meet."

I stopped walking.

"He—what?"

"He messaged me while everyone was scrambling to talk to him." Johnny's mouth twitched. Almost a smile. "Asked us to meet him in the lot."

My stomach flipped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now. Come on, we're going to be late."

Late. Right.

Because apparently we had an appointment with Professor Nolan and I looked like...

I glanced down at myself. Wrinkled blazer. The tablet I'd been clutching all day. I probably had coffee breath.

God.

We pushed through the exit doors, and the night air hit me. It cleared some of the fog from my head.

The parking lot was nearly empty. Most people were still inside, still networking, still trying to squeeze value out of every remaining second.

And there, standing next to a sleek black car, illuminated by the harsh overhead lights was Professor Nolan.

He was looking at his phone. Typing something. His expression unreadable behind those frameless glasses.

I froze.

Johnny kept walking, pulling me along.

"Teacher," I heard myself say.

My voice came out smaller than I wanted. Shakier.

Nolan looked up.

His gaze landed on me first. Then Johnny, then back to me.

"Mm."

That was it. Just that sound. An acknowledgment without warmth.

I wanted to say something. Wanted to what? Thank him for meeting us? Ask how he'd been? Tell him it had been too long?

But my throat closed up.

Nolan's eyes swept over both of us, as though he was assessing us.

"I've looked at your exhibits."

Oh goddess. Here it came.

"They're passable."

Those words hit like a slap.

Three years of work. Three years of late nights and failed prototypes and arguments with engineers who didn't understand the vision. Three years of pouring everything into making something that mattered.

"But—"

There was always a 'but' with Nolan.

His gaze sharpened. "It's been three years. This is the best you can do?"

The disappointment in his voice was worse than anger. Worse than anything.

I felt myself shrinking. Getting smaller under that stare.

Beside me, Johnny shifted uncomfortably. "We're already preparing new products. The prototype should be ready by next year."

His voice was confident. I wished I could sound like that.

"Mm." Nolan nodded once and sharply. "Until it's ready, don't come to see me."

"Yes," Johnny said quickly.

"Yes," I echoed. Barely audible.

My chest felt tight. Like something was pressing down on my ribs, making it hard to breathe properly.

This was... we'd been so proud of the security system. The biometric integration, the encryption layers. It was good. It was good.

But Nolan had seen it and found it lacking.

Had seen us and found us lacking.

"Tonight," Nolan continued, his tone unchanged, "send me a review of what you've seen today."

Johnny and I both nodded. "Yes..."

This was standard. Nolan always did this, always made us analyze other people's work, break down the technology, understand what made it succeed or fail.

It was how we learned.

How we got better.

Except—

"Uh, Teacher," Johnny started. His voice was careful. "One night might be a bit... difficult."

I wanted to kick him. Difficult there was the century's most understatement.

Nolan's gaze fixed on Johnny, waiting for him to finish.

"I mean—" Johnny was backtracking now, I could hear it. "There were a lot of exhibits. The technical summaries alone would be, what, tens of thousands of words? Maybe we could have a month? Would that work?"

Silence fell.

Nolan just stared at him.

I'd forgotten what that stare felt like. Like he could see through every excuse, every weakness, every moment of laziness or doubt.

Johnny cracked first. "Got it. We'll make sure to finish the task. Tonight. We'll get it done."

"Good."

Nolan turned back to his phone. His dismissal was clear.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 83 - 84[1,491 words]

Chapter 83: Chapter 84

ELODIE'S POV~

I thought we were done.

Thought I could just escape, maybe. Get back inside. Start working on that impossible review. Drown myself in work until I forgot the look in Nolan's eyes.

But he turned back and looked right at me.

My spine went rigid before I could stop it. "Teacher..."

"So that's who you chose."

It was not a question. It was a statement.

A cold and flat statement. Like he was looking at a failed experiment.

Then he just left. Got into his car. Didn't wait for me to respond, didn't want an explanation. The door shut with this final sound that bounced around the empty parking lot.

I stood there.

Blinking at the taillights.

What just—

"He was asking about your husband." Johnny, who was beside me, said uncomfortably.

I knew that. I knew that.

But hearing it out loud made it worse somehow.

'So that's who you chose.'

Not "congratulations" or "I hope you're happy" or any of the normal things people said. Just... judgment.

Disappointment wrapped up in six words.

My chest hurts.

"Did they say anything?" The words tumbled out. "Earlier, I mean. During the conference. Did you see... when Teacher sat down, did Dante...?"

I'd been too far back to hear. Could only watch Dante and Sienna standing up like everyone else in the front row. Watch them shake Nolan's hand. Watch their mouths move.

Had Dante introduced himself? Said his name?

Had Nolan looked at him and thought this is what Elodie threw everything away for?

Johnny shook his head. "Couldn't hear from where we were."

Right.

Middle section. That's where we sat.

I wrapped my arms around myself even though it wasn't really cold. The parking lot just felt too open. Too exposed.

Nolan knew about my marriage. Of course he did. Probably knew before I'd even told him. Probably already had opinions, already decided I'd made the wrong choice.

And he was right.

goddess, he was right.

"Elodie—"

"I'm fine."

Such an automatic lie.

Johnny didn't believe me. I could tell by the way he just stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, not knowing what to say.

The heavy silence sat between us.

"We should..." He cleared his throat. "We should probably go back in. Get our stuff. That review isn't going to write itself, and if we want any chance of finishing before dawn—"

"Yeah." I said in a hollow tone.

We started walking. My legs felt disconnected from the rest of me.

Through the glass doors I could see everyone still inside. Still talking, still laughing. Still having a perfectly normal evening.

'So that's who you chose.'

Those words continued to follow me with every step that I took.

Elodie and Johnny were still talking, their voices low, in that usual urgent tone of theirs when they were talking about something worth all of their attention, when Sienna and Lauren stepped out into the parking lot. The cold air hit them first.

Then they saw. Three figures clustered near a sleek black car. Elodie. Johnny. And—

Sienna stopped walking.

She squinted her eyes, only to see in disbelief that it was Professor Nolan.

"Is that—?" Lauren's voice trailed off. Her tone was uncertain. But it was. Obviously it was. They were too far away to hear the conversation the three were having. Just far enough that the words got lost in the distance.

But they could see the body language. The way Elodie stood with her spine too straight. The way Nolan's expression remained cold, and detached. The way he got into his car without looking back. How the engine started. The taillights flared red in the darkness, then he was gone.

They watched as Elodie stood there in the empty space he'd left. Just stood there. Like she'd forgotten how to move.

Lauren let out a breath she'd been holding. "Well." Her voice carried satisfaction. "It's fine, really. She doesn't have your level of expertise anyway."

Sienna didn't respond. She kept watching Elodie's silhouette against the parking lot lights.

"So what if she knows Nolan?" Lauren continued. Dismissive now. Sounding even more confident. "It's not like it's useful to her. She can't become his student or anything. Not with her background."

Sienna finally looked away from Elodie. "I know."

Did she sound convinced? She wasn't sure. But it didn't matter.

"Let's go," she said. But she didn't move immediately. Across the parking lot, Johnny had put his hand on Elodie's shoulder for a brief moment, trying to support her, then they started walking back toward the building.

To Sienna, aunt Lauren was indeed right. Elodie was just like the others who had stepped out of the building to have a word with professor Nolan. Either to strengthen her network or was trying to get acquainted. So it was nothing serious.

"Sienna?" Lauren's voice pulled her back. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah." She turned. Forced her attention away from the retreating figures. "Yeah, let's go." They headed back inside where the exhibition hall was emptying now. People filtering out in groups, still laughing, and still networking. The energy had shifted from formal to casual.

>>>>>>>>>

We went back inside after Nolan left. The exhibition hall felt different now. Or maybe I felt different.

Everything looked the same. Same lights, same people, same polite laughter echoing off the walls but something had shifted.

I could feel it in the air like it was settling over me like a heavy weight. Johnny was talking beside me. Something about which exhibits we should prioritize for the review.

His voice was soft, trying to pull me back into work mode. I nodded along. Made sounds like I was listening. But I wasn't really there.

My eyes kept scanning the room without permission. Looking for...There he was.

Dante was near the back now, standing with a group of investors from the German packs. Sienna wasn't beside him anymore. She'd drifted off somewhere, probably networking, doing what she did best. He looked... fine. Completely fine. Like this was just another event. Just another evening of business and politics and all the things that mattered to him.

I waited for something. Some acknowledgment. Some flicker of recognition that his wife was in the same room. Nothing. He didn't even glance in my direction. We might as well have been strangers.

No... we were strangers. That's what we'd become, wasn't it? Two people who shared a last name and a daughter and absolutely nothing else. My chest hurt.

"Elodie?" Johnny's hand touched my arm gently. "You okay?"

"Yeah." The lie came out automatic. "I'm fine."

But I wasn't fine. Heavens knew I wasn't fine at all.

Across the room, I caught sight of Logan. My father. Sienna's father too, though we'd never shared a mother. Never shared much of anything, really, except his DNA and his capacity for disappointment.

He was talking to some alpha from the French delegation, looking perfectly comfortable in his expensive suit with his expensive watch and his expensive everything.

He'd seen me earlier at the jewelry store. Had been so warm, so friendly. Acting like he cared, like he wanted to know how I was doing. "Elodie, darling, how lovely to see you!" That's what he'd said. With that big smile. That fatherly concern.

But now? Now he looked right past me. I watched it happen. Watched his eyes sweep across the hall, land on me for half a second, then move on like I was part of the wallpaper.

No greeting.

No acknowledgment.

Nothing.

Because Sienna was here. Because people knew, everyone knew, that she was with Dante now. And if Logan came over to talk to me, if he acknowledged me publicly, what would that say? How would that look?

Poor Logan, stuck between his precious daughter Sienna and his other daughter who'd somehow ended up married to the same man Sienna wanted.

He couldn't have that conversation. He couldn't risk the gossip. Better to just... pretend I don't exist.

My throat felt tight. It was almost funny. Almost. How quickly people decided you weren't worth the effort anymore. How easily you became invisible when acknowledging you became inconvenient.

Logan had been so kind at the jewelry store. So interested in my life, in Liora, in how I was managing. But that was private. That was just us.

This was public. And in public, I was an embarrassment. A complication. Something to be avoided.

"They're all the same," I muttered.

Johnny looked at me. "What?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

But it wasn't nothing. It was everything. Logan's obvious favoritism toward Sienna.

The way he'd rather ignore me completely than risk his favorite daughter's reputation. The way he could smile at me in a jewelry store and pretend I didn't exist at an exhibition.

At least he was consistent in his inconsistency. At least I knew where I stood.

Nowhere. I stood nowhere.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 84 - 85 [1,130 words]

Chapter 84: Chapter 85

LOGAN~

Logan spotted Johnny across the hall and his jaw tightened. This was the problem with these events. Too many people. Too many connections that needed managing. And Johnny Gray wasn't someone he could afford to ignore, not with the kind of influence the man had in the tech sector. But Elodie was with him.

His daughter. His... other daughter. The one who complicated everything.

He glanced at Sienna beside him, then at Lauren. They were both watching, waiting to see what he'd do.

Sienna's expression was carefully neutral, but he knew her well enough to read the tension in her shoulders. She didn't want him acknowledging Elodie either. Smart girl.

Logan waited and watched. And when Elodie finally excused herself, heading toward the restrooms, thank goodness, he finally made his move. "Come on," he murmured to Sienna and Lauren. They crossed the hall together, and Logan put on his best smile. The one that had closed a thousand deals.

The warm, genuine, and trustworthy smile. But they were all lies, but effective ones.

"Mr. Gray," he said, extending his hand. "Hello. I'm Logan Brown, father of Sienna... and Elodie. It's a real pleasure to meet you." There. He'd acknowledged it. He couldn't avoid it completely, not when Johnny clearly knew about both his daughters.

Johnny shook his hand, politely and professionally. "Mr. Brown. The pleasure's mine."

Good. This was going well.

Logan then gestured toward Sienna. He needed to establish her importance here. Her legitimacy. "You know, my daughters... they've had some difficulties. Misunderstandings." He shook his head, playing the concerned father. "Elodie's mother... Mag... she can be extreme. There's been tension between her and Sienna because of it."

He let out a carefully measured sigh. Made sure his face looked pained. Regretful. "As a father, I've always hoped they could get along. Be sisters, you know? But unfortunately..." He gave another sigh. "Elodie never listens."

Perfect. Blame Elodie. Blame Mag. Make it seem like he'd tried so hard to bridge the gap, but they were the unreasonable ones.

Johnny nodded. "I see."

Was that skepticism in his eyes? It was hard to tell.

The man had a good poker face.

Logan continued to push forward. He needed to end this conversation on a positive note. Needed Johnny to think well of him.

"But you know," he said, injecting warmth into his voice, "Elodie is lucky to know someone like you. Such a talented young man." He smiled. "As a father, I'm really happy for her. I heard she started working at your company, so I'll have to trouble you to look after her in the future."

There. This was the caring father that would leave an effect on Johnny. Concerned but supportive father. A father who was asking a favor without making it seem like a favor. It sounded good. It sounded real.

If he didn't know better, he'd believe himself.

Johnny's expression didn't change. "You're too kind, Mr. Brown. Elodie is an outstanding person. Having her with us is truly a blessing for Cole."

Logan kept his smile in place, but internally he almost laughed.

Outstanding? A blessing?

Please.

What could Elodie possibly contribute to a company like Cole? She had a decent enough resume, sure, but nothing spectacular.

Nothing that would make someone like Johnny Gray actually value her presence. She was probably just doing grunt work. Running errands. The kind of tasks any entry-level programmer could handle. Johnny was just being polite. That's all this was.

Logan could feel Sienna beside him, silent. She was smart enough not to comment. Lauren too. She just stood there with that knowing smile, the one that said she understood exactly what was happening here. They all knew the truth.

Elodie wasn't special. Wasn't valuable. She was just... there. An inconvenience. A complication. And the sooner people stopped pretending otherwise, the better.

But Logan couldn't say that. Not here. Not to Johnny Gray. So he just kept smiling. Kept playing the concerned father. "Well," he said, "I appreciate your kindness toward her. Really." He meant none of it.

Didn't care about Elodie's job or her success or whether Johnny actually looked after her. He just needed this conversation to end before she came back from the restroom.

Needed to maintain appearances. Needed to make sure Sienna stayed the favored one. The important one. The one who mattered. Because that's how it had always been.

Logan shifted gears smoothly, keeping his smile warm.

This was the real reason he'd approached Johnny in the first place. "As for Sienna—" He gestured toward his daughter. "Mr. Gray, you must already know she's very interested in CUAP. She's been studying the field extensively, and she's hoping for an opportunity to work at Cole."

He watched Johnny's face carefully. Looking for any sign of interest. Any opening. Sure, with Dante's arrangement, Sienna would be meeting Nolan soon enough. That door was already opening. She wouldn't lack opportunities to dive deeper into CUAP technology and Dante was making sure of that.

But Cole's development was explosive right now.

Everyone in the industry knew it. And Johnny's family background? Impressive didn't even begin to cover it.

The Gray family had connections that stretched across multiple pack territories. Building a good relationship with Johnny now could pay off in ways Logan couldn't even predict yet.

Who knew what kind of deeper cooperation might be possible with Cole down the line? What kind of doors might open for the Brown family?

It never hurts to plant seeds early.

Johnny turned to Sienna, and Logan felt a flicker of satisfaction.

Good. He was considering it.

"Thank you for the compliment, Miss Brown." Johnny's voice was polite and professional. "You're indeed outstanding. I'd be very happy if you could join Cole."

Yes. Logan's smile widened slightly. This was going exactly—

"However—" Johnny's tone shifted. Still polite, but firmer now. "Elodie is my friend."

Logan's smile froze.

Wait.

What did that—

But the implication hung in the air between them. Unspoken but crystal clear.

'Elodie is my friend, and I know what you're doing.'

'I know you're playing favorites. I know you're using this opportunity to push Sienna while pretending to care about Elodie.'

Logan's mind raced. No. No, this wasn't—

He'd been so careful. So measured in how he'd framed everything.

Acted like a concerned father. A reasonable man. Just trying to help both his daughters succeed. But Johnny saw through it. Of course he did. The young man wasn't stupid. Probably knew exactly what kind of family dynamics were at play here. Probably knew about the tension between Sienna and Elodie, about Dante, about all of it. And he was drawing a line.

'Elodie is my friend. Not just his employee. His friend.'

Logan's chest tightened.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 85 - 86[1,191 words]

Chapter 85: Chapter 86

SIENNA~

I wasn't actually desperate to work at Cole. Not really.

The company was impressive, sure. Johnny Gray's operation was one of the best in the pack territories but I had options. Dante was already arranging for me to meet Professor Nolan.

That door was opening, and it was a bigger door than Cole could ever be. No, this wasn't about the job. This was about not making an enemy out of Johnny Gray. Simple as that.

We might end up as colleagues someday. Senior and junior in the same field, crossing paths at conferences, collaborating on projects.

In this world, in these circles, having one more friend was infinitely better than having one more enemy. Especially an enemy as connected as Johnny. So when he drew that line 'Elodie is my friend'

I didn't push back.

I didn't argue. Didn't let my irritation show even though I could feel it prickling under my skin. Today his attitude was so much better than it had been at that banquet. Warmer. More open.

Was it even sincere? Hard to tell. Maybe he was just being professional. Maybe he had decided I wasn't worth the hostility. Or maybe... and this was entirely possible that he was just pretending. Keeping his enemies close, as they say.

But there was time. Plenty of time to figure out which version of Johnny Gray was real. We might not become good friends, but we didn't need to be. Being cordial was enough. Professional respect was enough. I could work with that.

"I understand," I said, keeping my voice light. "And I won't push you, Mr. Gray. There's no need to worry."

His shoulders relaxed slightly. Good. He'd been tense, probably expecting me to make this difficult. I wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

"Thank you for understanding, Miss Brown." He smiled, and I smiled back. From a distance, I was sure we looked perfectly pleasant. Just two professionals having a nice conversation at an industry event. No tension. No ulterior motives. Just networking.

I was good at this. At making things look easy and effortless even when they weren't. At smoothing over awkward moments and making people think I was reasonable, accommodating, nice.

That's how you won in these circles. Not by forcing things. By making people want to help you. And if Johnny didn't want to help me right now because of his loyalty to Elodie? Fine. That could change. Loyalties shifted all the time in this world.

I just had to be patient. Then suddenly I saw Elodie.

She'd come out of the restroom and stopped dead in her tracks. Just standing there in the hallway, staring at us. At me. At Dad. At Aunt Lauren. At Johnny.

Her face did something complicated. Surprise, maybe. Or hurt. I couldn't quite tell from this distance, and honestly, I didn't care enough to analyze it. But I felt Aunt Lauren shift beside me. Felt her satisfaction radiating off her in waves. She'd noticed too. And she was pleased. Of course she was. This was exactly the kind of moment she lived for, Elodie seeing us talking to Johnny, seeing Dad claim both his daughters in one breath while making it abundantly clear which one actually mattered. Seeing herself on the outside. Again.

I kept my expression neutral. Didn't let anything show. This wasn't personal. This was just... the way things were.

"We have some matters to attend to," I said to Johnny, my voice perfectly pleasant. "So we'll be leaving first. Let's talk next time."

I said professionally and politely, giving him an easy out. Johnny shook my hand, then Dad's, then Aunt Lauren's.

"Alright. Let's talk next time."

I didn't look at Elodie again. Didn't acknowledge her standing there in the hallway. What would be the point? We both knew where we stood. Had known for years. I turned and walked away, Dad and Aunt Lauren falling into step beside me.

Behind us, I could feel Elodie's eyes on my back as we all walked away.

ELODIE'S POV~

It was almost noon when people started circling Johnny.

The big names. Industry leaders. All of them with the same idea... let's do lunch, let's talk business, let's pretend this is casual when we all know it's not.

"Mr. Gray, there's this place nearby..."

"We'd love to have you join us..."

"Mr. Gray if you'd do us the honor of joining..."

I hung back, giving them some distance while messing with my tablet. Pretending I wasn't listening.

But I heard Dante's name. Multiple times.

He'd be there. Of course he would.

All the major players were going to the same restaurant. Same private room, probably. That's how these things worked. The important people always ended up in the same places, making the same decisions that shaped everything.

This lunch would matter. Whatever they discussed, whether it was the AI trends, partnerships, future developments, it would set the direction for months. Maybe longer.

And the relationships built over that meal? Those could turn into real opportunities. Real collaborations.

I could see Johnny was interested. The way he was nodding, asking questions.

Then he looked at me.

Didn't say anything. Just looked.

'You coming?' That's what his look meant.

My stomach dropped.

Did I want to sit in a room with Dante? With Sienna? With Logan pretending I didn't exist? And Lauren's judgmental stare?

Hell no.

But I couldn't say that.

This was work. This was important. And I was so tired of hiding.

"I'll go."

It came out stronger than I felt.

Johnny simply raised a brow a little and didn't argue. Just nodded like it was already decided.

We started moving with the group. My heart was pounding but I kept my face blank.

Dante and I had been strangers all morning. That's fine. That's what we were now, apparently.

But I wasn't going to run away from him. Wasn't going to make myself disappear just because it was uncomfortable.

The group headed toward the entrance where Dante was standing with some French pack alpha. He looked up when we got close and he saw me.

And did nothing. His face showed absolutely nothing.

Just that usual calm, empty look.

My wolf whined and I told her to shut up.

Then I saw Sienna and her face did this thing, this eyebrows pulled together, lips tight gesture before she smoothed it out and looked away.

Like I wasn't worth her attention.

Whatever.

Logan and Lauren came over too and the way they looked at me or didn't look at me said everything.

Nobody said hi. Nobody acknowledged me at all.

Just this heavy silence that felt like judgment.

I stood there holding my tablet too tight.

Dante was so close I could smell him and it made everything worse.

Sienna touched his arm and I looked away.

"Reservation's set," someone said. "Let's go."

Everyone started walking.

I followed because I said I would. Because turning back now would prove them all right.

Johnny walked next to me. "You sure?"

No.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

It was a lie.

But I kept walking anyway.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 86 - 87[1,715 words]

Chapter 86: Chapter 87

The group moved toward Dante like. The Industry leaders, all of them, closing the distance.

Elodie and Johnny followed a few steps behind.

Dante saw them coming. His expression didn't change. It remained calm, and composed, like he was watching people he barely knew approach. Nothing flickered across his face. No recognition. No discomfort. Like his wife wasn't just walking with another man by her side.

Just that blank professional mask.

But Sienna noticed.

Her brow pulled together. Just slightly. A small crease between her eyes that appeared for maybe half a second before she smoothed it away.

She didn't like this. Didn't like seeing Elodie here, walking toward them with the rest of the group.

But she recovered quickly and let her face go neutral. Indifferent.

Looked away like Elodie wasn't worth the mental energy.

Logan and Lauren came over too, drawn by the gathering crowd. The moment Logan's eyes landed on Elodie, something tightened in his expression. Irritation, maybe. Or just general displeasure.

Lauren's mouth pressed into a thin line.

Neither said anything. Just stood there radiating disapproval.

Someone from the group, one of the German pack representatives who hadn't met Johnny yet, stepped forward with an outstretched hand. "Mr. Gray, what a pleasure."

Johnny shook it, smiling professionally and warm.

Then it was Dante's turn.

He extended his hand to Johnny. "Hello."

"Hello," Johnny replied, his smile still in place. "Mr. Wilson. I've heard a lot about you."

"You're too kind, Mr. Gray."

The exchange was polite. Cordial. Perfectly normal.

Like Dante's wife wasn't standing ten feet away watching the whole thing.

Like the tension wasn't thick enough to choke on.

The pleasantries wrapped up quickly, and the group started moving again. Toward the parking lot. Toward lunch.

Dante and Sienna were immediately surrounded by people. Industry leaders gravitating toward them, already deep in conversation about market trends and future developments.

Elodie and Johnny followed at a distance.

That's when Logan and Lauren made their move.

They sidled up to Elodie, quietly. Logan caught her eye, then glanced meaningfully toward the exit, the opposite direction from where everyone else was heading.

The message was clear.

'Stay behind. Don't come with us.'

Lauren's expression reinforced it. A tight, forced smile that said 'please don't make this harder than it needs to be.'

Elodie looked right at them and then looked away. Like they were air and kept walking.

Logan's jaw tightened. Lauren let out a small, frustrated breath.

But what could they do? Make a scene? Grab her arm and physically stop her?

They couldn't do that here. Not in front of all these people.

So they just followed, helplessly and irritated, as Elodie continued toward the parking lot with everyone else.

Dante and Sienna reached a sleek black car. He opened the door for her, such a small gesture, but was loaded with implication and she slid into the passenger seat with graciousness.

Dante got in on the driver's side and the door shut.

And just like that, they looked like exactly what everyone assumed they were. A couple. Partners. People who belonged together.

Elodie watched from a few cars away, her face carefully blank.

Johnny touched her elbow gently. "Come on."

She followed him to his car, got in and the door.

Behind them, Lauren was shaking her head, muttering something to Logan. "This girl, I swear..."

Her voice was low but sharp and frustrated. Like she wanted to badly rip into Elodie.

Logan didn't respond. Just got into their own car, his expression dark.

The convoy of vehicles pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the restaurant.

—

The private dining room was enormous.

It had to be, of course, it was to accommodate over twenty people. A massive round table dominated the center, already set with white linens and expensive-looking place settings.

People filed in, claiming their seats with the kind of casual calculation that came from years of navigating these social hierarchies.

Dante and Sienna sat together naturally, of course.

No one questioned it.

Elodie hovered near the entrance for a moment, scanning the available seats. Trying to figure out where she could sit that would be the least awkward.

Nowhere. The answer was nowhere.

Every seat felt like a trap.

Lauren had been making her way toward the empty chair next to where Elodie was clearly planning to sit. She wanted to be close. Wanted to monitor her. Wanted to make sure Elodie didn't say anything inappropriate or embarrassing during the meal.

It was sort of a damage control.

But Johnny was faster.

He slipped into the seat beside Elodie with easily, already pulling out his phone to check something.

Lauren stopped short when she realized the seat was taken.

"May I, Elodie? Good gracious. I usually like taking positions clearer to the door." Johnny said in a light tone that made Elodie smile or forced a smile. No one knew. But she had a soft smile playing on her lips.

While Lauren stood there for a second, thrown off, her mouth opening slightly like she might say something.

But what could she say? Ask Johnny to move? Make a fuss?

No.

She recovered and smiled tightly and took a different seat across the table.

But her eyes kept drifting toward Elodie.

Watching her.

Waiting for her to mess up.

Everyone settled into their seats and the menus started making their way around the table.

Dante passed his to Sienna without looking at it. "Why don't you order?"

She took it, flipping it open. "What do you want?"

"Whatever you think is good."

Just that simple and easy exchange. The kind of thing couples did without thinking.

Someone nearby, one of the older alphas from the French delegation, smiled at them. "You two work well together."

Sienna's mouth curved up slightly. She didn't disagree. Just went back to the menu, scanning the options with the kind of confidence that came from knowing someone well enough to order for them.

She picked out several dishes. Things Dante liked. Things she'd seen him order before at events like this.

Across the table, Logan and Lauren watched with matching expressions of satisfaction.

See? This is what it should look like.

Johnny had the menu now too. He glanced at Elodie. "What are you in the mood for?"

There was some chatter happening on Dante and Sienna's side, something about the food, about how well they got along and Johnny's eyes flicked that direction for half a second.

Then back to Elodie.

Her face gave nothing away. No reaction to Dante ordering through Sienna. No tightness around her mouth. No hurt in her eyes.

Just blank focus as she looked at the menu Johnny was holding.

"Maybe the sea bass?" she said quietly. "And the spring rolls."

They discussed it for another minute. Decided on two dishes.

Logan and Lauren had been watching her the whole time, waiting for something. Some crack in the facade. Some sign that seeing Dante with Sienna was getting to her.

But Elodie's expression stayed neutral.

Lauren's shoulders relaxed slightly. At least the girl wasn't going to make a scene. At least she had that much sense.

Sienna noticed them watching Elodie. Noticed the tension in the way Lauren sat, the way Logan kept glancing over.

She leaned closer to Lauren, dropping her voice. "Don't worry about her. She won't cause any trouble."

It made sense. If Elodie threw a fit, made things awkward, it would only reflect badly on her. It would only make Dante resent her the more and Elodie couldn't risk it.

From everything she'd heard about Elodie and Dante's marriage, and she'd heard plenty was that Elodie was the one constantly trying not to rock the boat. The one walking on eggshells. The one desperate not to push Dante any further away than he already was.

If Elodie made a scene here, in front of all these people, it would humiliate Dante. And that would only make him resent her more.

She wouldn't risk it.

Sienna was certain.

Lauren seemed to accept this logic. Her posture eased a fraction, though her eyes still drifted toward Elodie every few seconds. With her face softening, she nodded. "You're probably right."

But her eyes never left Elodie. It was still monitoring and waiting.

But Elodie wasn't paying attention to any of them.

She'd turned slightly in her seat, angling toward the man sitting on her other side. And it was Professor Liam.

He'd known Elodie was at the exhibition, had spotted her earlier and made a point to say hello during one of the breaks. They'd had a good conversation at that banquet a few weeks back. Technical stuff, mostly. Algorithm theory. He'd been impressed.

And since then, he'd been meaning to pick her brain again, but both their schedules had been packed.

Now though? It was the perfect opportunity.

"So," he said, leaning in slightly so his voice wouldn't carry. "Did you get a chance to see the German pack's biometric display?"

Elodie's face shifted. Not much, but enough. A flicker of actual interest.

"I did, yeah. The retinal scanning integration was interesting, but I think they're overcomplicating the backend processing..."

They fell into conversation easily. Their voices low. Their heads bent slightly toward each other so they wouldn't disturb the rest of the table.

The table was big enough that their quiet discussion didn't interrupt the broader conversations happening elsewhere.

Sienna noticed and glanced over at them, then dismissed it just as quickly.

Probably just Elodie asking questions. Trying to learn something. That's what people like her did at these events, clung to the experts, hoping some of their credibility would rub off.

Lauren noticed too. Saw Professor Liam smiling, saw Elodie talking animatedly about something technical.

She didn't think much of it either. This was just Elodie being professional. Networking. Doing what she was supposed to do.

Nothing to worry about.

So Lauren turned her attention back to her own conversation. Back to monitoring Dante and Sienna. Back to making sure everything looked the way it should.

And across the table, Elodie kept talking to Professor Liam and kept her back to Dante and Sienna.

Kept her face carefully neutral.

Kept pretending she was fine.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 87 - 88 [1,685 words]

Chapter 87: Chapter 88

Someone from across the table laughed, looking at Professor Liam. "Old Liam, you really can't help yourself, can you? We're supposed to be eating and you're still going on about work."

Another person chimed in, grinning. "He was doing the same thing at the exhibition. Spent forever talking Miss Brown's ear off about encryption protocols or something."

The attention shifted toward their end of the table.

Professor Liam smiled but didn't take the bait. "You all usually shove me off to your engineers the second I start talking technical details. Now I'm having a conversation with someone who actually understands, and suddenly you care?"

A few people chuckled.

One of the older alphas, someone from the French delegation, glanced between Sienna and Elodie. "I have to say, it's refreshing to see young women so interested in AI and programming these days. Times really are changing."

"They absolutely are," someone else agreed. "Old Liam was just saying earlier how impressed he's been with the new generation of talent. Said he's optimistic about the future of the industry."

Another person jumped in, a smile directed at Sienna. "Well, Miss Brown here is a talented graduate from a world-class university. She's definitely part of that rising talent everyone's talking about."

The compliments kept coming. Genuine-sounding.

Sienna smiled, modest but pleased. "You're all too kind."

It made sense that people would focus on her. She was sitting next to Dante, and Dante's status carried weight. People naturally paid more attention to whoever he brought along.

Elodie was just... there. Beautiful, sure... several people had noticed that but she was Johnny's employee. No notable family background. No pack connections worth mentioning.

Easy to overlook.

The food started arriving. Plates and dishes spread across the table, steam rising, the smell of expensive ingredients filling the room.

Sienna picked up her chopsticks and selected a piece of something, fish, maybe and placed it on Dante's plate.

He accepted it without comment. Naturally. Like they'd done this a hundred times before.

The conversations around the table shifted. Opened up and people started discussing the exhibits from earlier. The innovations. The future applications.

One of the German pack representatives leaned forward, gesturing with his chopsticks. "By the way, Mr. Wilson, I have to say, your company's self-driving vehicle technology pairs incredibly well with Mr. Gray's intelligent traffic programming. It's almost too perfect." He paused, grinning. "Are you sure you two aren't planning to collaborate? Because honestly, it's making the rest of us pretty eager to see what that would look like."

They'd been sitting there for a while now, eating and talking, but Dante and Johnny hadn't said a word to each other.

Not directly, anyway.

The question about collaboration hung in the air.

Dante picked up his napkin, wiped the corner of his mouth. Casually and unhurriedly. Then he looked at Johnny and smiled. "I've thought about it, actually. What do you think, Mr. Gray?"

Johnny didn't hesitate. Business was business, and this was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"It would be an honor for Cole to work with you, Mr. Wilson."

He said in a simple and professional tone. The kind of answer that left the door open without committing to anything specific.

Sienna felt a small flicker of satisfaction.

If Dante and Johnny actually partnered up, that would be good for her. The two men working together meant more opportunities for interaction. More chances for her to be involved. More ways to stay close to Dante and prove her value.

She glanced across the table at Elodie in a cold and dismissive stare.

Elodie had been talking to Professor Liam for most of the meal. Barely paying attention to anyone else. She seemed... fine. Unbothered by the whole situation.

It was almost annoying how unbothered she seemed.

But whatever. If Johnny wanted to collaborate with Dante, Elodie wouldn't stand in the way. She had no reason to turn down potential profit for Cole.

The meal was winding down. Plates had been cleared, tea had been poured, and people were starting to shift in their seats. Some stood, stretching. Others migrated toward the sofas on the far side of the room where the real business conversations would happen.

Dante had mentioned the possibility of working with Cole, but whether anything would actually come of it remained to be seen.

Kevin, though, one of the other executives who'd been at the table, seemed genuinely interested.

Before dessert had even been served, Kevin and his management team were already deep in conversation with Johnny. Leaning in and asking questions. Clearly serious about exploring a partnership.

Elodie followed Johnny over to the sofas.

She understood her role here. Technology? That was her domain. She could talk about algorithms and infrastructure and security protocols all day. But negotiations? Deal-making? That was Johnny's thing.

So she sat quietly and listened. Didn't interject unless someone asked her a direct technical question.

At one point, she noticed Johnny's teacup was empty. She reached over, and picked it up. "I'll get you more."

Johnny glanced at her, and smiled. "Thanks."

She stood and headed toward the tea service set up along the side wall.

Across the room, Sienna and Lauren were watching.

Lauren leaned closer to Sienna, her voice low. "Look at that. She's playing secretary."

Sienna's eyes followed Elodie as she refilled Johnny's cup. Watched the way she moved, efficiently, unobtrusively, like someone used to staying in the background.

It confirmed what they'd already suspected.

Elodie's role at Cole wasn't anything important. She was probably just there to assist Johnny. Fetch things. Handle administrative tasks. Maybe do some basic technical work when needed.

Nothing significant.

Nothing worth worrying about.

Lauren's expression relaxed further. "Well. At least she knows her place."

Sienna didn't respond. Just watched as Elodie began to return to the sofa, to hand Johnny his tea.

Elodie, at her end, was walking back with the teacup, not really paying attention to anything except not spilling it, when someone turned around suddenly.

Right into her path.

She didn't have time to stop. The person's shoulder clipped hers and she stumbled, off-balance, the cup tilting in her hand.

She fell forward. Straight into someone.

Not just anyone but into Dante.

The room went entirely quiet.

Not completely silent, but that sudden hush that happens when something unexpected occurs and everyone's attention snaps to it at once.

Elodie's hands had come up automatically, catching herself against his chest. The teacup had fallen, she could hear it hit the floor somewhere, the soft crack of porcelain.

And she could smell him. Pine and winter. That scent her wolf still recognized even though everything else between them had fallen apart.

For half a second she just stood there, frozen, her brain trying to catch up with what had just happened.

Then she felt his hands on her shoulders.

His hands were not gentle. Never gentle. Not comforting.

Just... pushing her away immediately. Creating distance between them.

His expression was cold. Completely detached. Like having her pressed against him was something unpleasant he needed to correct as quickly as possible.

She stumbled back, finding her footing.

Her face went blank. Neutral. Refusing to show anything.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

Then she turned and walked away.

Fast. Before anyone could say anything. Before the moment could stretch out any longer.

Around the room, she could feel eyes on her. People were staring and judging, that's what the world was good at.

Wondering was it an accident? Or had she done it on purpose?

Because what were the odds, really, that she'd fall directly into Dante's arms? Out of all the people in this room, all the different directions she could've stumbled into...

Some of the men were looking at her differently now. She could feel it without even seeing their faces. That particular kind of attention that came from being young and female and conventionally attractive in a room full of powerful men.

She was beautiful. Everyone knew it. Slender figure, delicate features, with pale skin.

And now they were wondering if she'd used that. If she'd thrown herself at Dante deliberately to get his attention.

But Dante hadn't looked interested. Hadn't looked anything except mildly annoyed.

He'd pushed her away immediately, barely even touched her beyond what was necessary to steady her.

No hesitation. No moment of weakness.

Just that cold dismissal. As though she had a disease.

Sienna and Lauren had watched the whole thing.

Lauren leaned closer to Sienna, her voice low but sharp. Impressed even. "See? I told you she couldn't just behave herself."

Sienna's expression was tight. "It doesn't matter. Look at how he reacted."

"Exactly." Lauren smiled, satisfied. "He couldn't have been clearer. That kind of reaction? That's the kind of thing that makes a woman feel secure. You're so lucky that Dante has only eyes for you, Sienna."

Sienna's face softened slightly. She glanced at Dante, who'd already turned back to his conversation like nothing had happened.

Like Elodie hadn't just been in his arms thirty seconds ago.

"You're right," Sienna said quietly.

Logan was frowning, watching Elodie walk away. He'd thought, well, he'd thought she was smarter than this. Quieter. Less prone to these kinds of desperate moves.

But apparently he'd been wrong.

Apparently she had more tricks than he'd given her credit for.

Johnny had been mid-sentence with Kevin when it happened. He'd looked up at the sudden quietness, and saw Elodie stumbling away from Dante, saw the broken teacup on the floor.

He excused himself and crossed the room quickly.

"You okay?"

Elodie nodded but didn't look at him.

"Did you hurt yourself?" He glanced down at her feet, at the way she was standing. "Your ankle?"

"Just a little," she said.

Her voice was flat and empty.

Johnny studied her face. She wasn't meeting anyone's eyes. Just staring at some point on the floor, her expression completely shut down.

He'd seen that look before. Usually right before she disappeared for a while to pull herself back together.

"Come on," he said quietly. "Let's get you sitting down."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 88 - 89[1,416 words]

Chapter 88: Chapter 89

Elodie's ankle was throbbing with a very sharp pain every time she put weight on it.

It was definitely twisted. Maybe worse.

Johnny was looking at her with that concerned expression, and something about it made her chest feel tight. Warm but also... sad. Because he cared. He actually cared.

And she could feel everyone else watching. Could practically hear their thoughts.

'She threw herself at him. She did it on purpose. And now she's hurt and it's her own fault.'

She glanced around without meaning to and saw the looks. Saw the judgment.

And Dante... Dante hadn't even bothered to make sure she was okay. Hadn't asked if she was hurt. Just pushed her away and went right back to his conversation like nothing had happened.

Like she was nothing.

The only person who actually gave a damn was Johnny.

"Should I take a look?" he asked, already moving closer.

"No, it's—" She shook her head. "There's too many people—"

But Johnny wasn't listening.

Before she could protest further, he just scooped her up. Lifted her like she weighed nothing and carried her away from the cluster of people still staring.

He set her down on one of the chairs near the wall and knelt down in front of her.

Her face went hot. "Johnny, you don't have to—"

But he was already removing her heel, gently. His fingers brushed her ankle and she winced.

It was swollen. Visibly swollen already.

Johnny's jaw tightened. He looked up, and caught the attention of one of the waitstaff hovering nearby. "Can you call for a doctor? And we need a pair of flats. Size..." He glanced at Elodie.

"Seven," Elodie said quietly.

"Size seven. Something comfortable."

The waiter nodded and hurried off.

People were still watching. But the energy had shifted.

Some of them looked surprised now. A few were whispering to each other, reassessing.

Because Johnny wasn't acting like someone helping out a casual employee. He was acting like someone who genuinely cared. Like Elodie actually mattered to him.

Maybe she hadn't thrown herself at Dante on purpose. Maybe it really had been an accident.

Maybe they'd been wrong.

The whispers continued, but quieter now. Less certain.

Sienna was watching from across the room. Her teeth caught her bottom lip for a second before she looked away and then looked at Dante instead.

He was still talking to someone from the French delegation. Hadn't even glanced over when Johnny picked Elodie up. Hadn't reacted at all to the scene happening fifteen feet away. He was completely unbothered. Completely indifferent.

Sienna's shoulders relaxed. The tight line of her mouth softened into something almost like a smile.

If Dante didn't care, if he could watch Johnny tend to Elodie like that and not even blink, then there was nothing to worry about.

Whatever bond had existed between them was dead.

Sienna turned back to the conversation she'd been having with Lauren and one of the other guests and then smiled. Laughed at something someone said and stopped paying attention to Elodie entirely.

She didn't matter anymore. Even if she ever had.

ELODIE'S POV~

The restaurant's backup doctor suddenly showed up pretty quickly and checked my ankle, prodded it a bit, which hurt more than I wanted to admit and then handed over some ointment.

"Apply this twice daily. Keep weight off it as much as possible for the next few days."

"Got it. Thank you."

Once the doctor left, Johnny reached for the ointment.

"I can do it myself," I said, already reaching for it.

He gave me a look. That look. The one that said 'sit down and let me help you.'

I raised my hands in surrender. "Fine. Go ahead, sir." I teased him and saw his lips curl slightly.

He knelt back down, unscrewed the cap, and started applying the ointment carefully. His hands were gentle, which somehow made it worse. Made my throat feel tight.

Someone cared. At least one person in this entire mess actually cared if I was hurt.

A waiter came back with the flats. I slipped them on, and tested my weight. The ankle protested but it held.

"It's fine," I said. "I can walk."

"Good." He hummed, his eyes darting to my feet as he rose to his full height.

But walking around an exhibition hall for hours? That wasn't happening. Not with my ankle like this.

Johnny suggested I skip the rest of the event. He'd already asked someone to photograph the exhibits anyway. I could review everything online later, go through the videos and technical specs from home.

It was disappointing. I'd wanted to see everything in person but there wasn't much choice.

Johnny let the others know we were leaving, and then we headed out.

The drive home was quiet. My ankle throbbed with every bump in the road.

Johnny dropped me off at my building and turned to me. "I've got some things to handle, but call me if you need anything."

"I will. Thanks, Johnny."

"Anytime."

He waited until I was inside before driving off.

I made it upstairs slowly, each step that I took seemed to remind me of how stupid I had been. I should've been paying more attention. Should've seen that person turning.

Should've done a lot of things differently.

By the time I got inside, I was exhausted. The plan was simple. Rest, then message Johnny later about the review assignment from Nolan. Figure out how we were going to tackle that impossible deadline.

I set my phone on the nightstand and was about to close my eyes when it rang.

It was an unknown number.

I almost didn't answer. But something made me pick up.

"Hello?"

"It's Harry Becker."

I sat up too fast. My ankle screamed in protest. "Alpha Becker?"

Honestly, with everything that had happened today, the exhibition, Nolan, the lunch, falling into Dante's arms and feeling him push me away like I was contaminated... I'd completely forgotten about this morning. About Harry. About my car getting hit.

"I had someone take care of your car," he said. Straightforward. No preamble. "You can pick it up whenever. Or if it's inconvenient, I can have someone deliver it."

The offer caught me off guard.

"No, that's, you don't need to do that. I'll come get it."

Silence fell on the other end.

Had I been too quick to refuse? Too abrupt?

"Mr Becker?"

"Alright. I'll send you the repair shop's contact information."

"Thank you. Really."

He hung up without saying anything else.

I stared at my phone for a second. That was... strange. But also kind of him. He didn't have to follow up. Didn't have to make sure I actually got the information.

But with my ankle the way it was, I couldn't exactly drive over to pick up the car. Could barely walk to the bathroom without wincing.

I pulled up Johnny's contact and sent a message.

'Hey, any chance you could pick up my car from a repair shop when you're done? Ankle's worse than I thought.'

His response came fast.

'Of course. Send me the address.'

Relief washed over me. At least that was handled.

I ordered takeout, wasn't in the mood to cook, wasn't physically capable of standing that long anyway and ate in front of the TV. Some mindless show I wasn't really watching.

My phone rang again just as I was finishing. And it was Liora.

My chest squeezed. I'd been so focused on getting through today that I'd barely thought about her. About the fact that she was waiting at home. That she'd notice I wasn't there.

"Hi, sweetheart."

"Mom! When are you coming home?"

Her voice was bright and happy. She had no idea that her mother had spent the day being humiliated and dismissed and pushed away.

"I sprained my ankle," I said, trying to keep my voice light. "Can't walk very well right now. So I'm resting at a friend's place. I won't be home tonight."

"What?" Her tone shifted immediately. She was worried now. "You're hurt? Is it bad? Does it hurt a lot?"

"It hurts," I admitted. There was no point lying to her. "But it's not serious. I'll be fine in a few days."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, baby. I promise."

She was quiet for a second. Then, softer, "Okay. But you have to rest, okay? Don't walk on it."

My throat felt tight. "I won't. I promise."

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 89 - 90 [1,433 words]

Chapter 89: Chapter 90

ELODIE'S POV~

Liora seemed to relax a bit after I reassured her, but she wasn't quite done yet. "Where are you right now? When Dad gets home, we can come visit you tomorrow."

My stomach twisted.

Her dad... Dante. He was the last person I ever wanted showing up at my door right now.

"No need," I said quickly. Maybe too quickly. "I can take care of myself. You just focus on your schoolwork, okay?"

"Okay..." She sounded uncertain but didn't push.

We talked for a few more minutes, just about her day, about what she'd had for dinner, normal things that felt almost painfully normal and then we hung up.

I set my phone down and stared at the ceiling.

Liora thought Dante would come check on me. Thought he'd care enough to visit.

She had no idea.

No idea that he'd been right there when I fell. That he'd pushed me away without a second thought. That he hadn't asked if I was okay, hadn't even looked back.

She still thought we were a family.

God, I wished that were true.

LIORA~

Back at the house, Dante had just walked through the door when Liora came running up.

"Dad!"

He paused, already loosening his tie in a tired motion. Ready to be done with the day.

But before he could say anything, Liora was already talking. "Dad, Mom hurt her foot! She's resting somewhere outside!"

Dante shrugged off his expensive, perfectly tailored suit jacket and handed it to the butler. "I know."

Liora blinked. "How do you know? Did Mom tell you?"

He walked into the living room, accepted a glass of water from Sabina, and sat down. "No. I saw it myself."

"You saw it?" Liora's eyes widened. "You were there when she got hurt?"

"Mm. Yeah."

Liora's face shifted as she processed that. "Oh, right. Mom works at your company now, so you must've seen when she got hurt."

Dante took a sip of water and set the glass down carefully. "Not exactly. Your mother doesn't work at my company anymore."

Liora looked confused. "She doesn't? Then where is she working?"

"Somewhere she prefers."

His tone was neutral. Matter-of-fact. Like they were discussing the weather.

"Oh..."

Liora stood there for a moment, clearly trying to make sense of it all. Her mom wasn't working at her dad's company. Her mom had gotten hurt and her dad had seen it but wasn't going to visit.

None of it quite added up, but she was too young to ask the questions that would make it make sense.

Dante finished his water and set the glass aside and reached out and patted her head, his hand large and warm against her hair.

"Go to bed early," he said.

"Okay, Dad."

She headed toward the stairs, glancing back once before disappearing up to her room.

ELODIE'S POV~

Around eight, Johnny showed up with my car.

I heard the knock and limped over to open the door. My ankle was still protesting with every step, but at least the swelling had gone down a bit.

"You're a lifesaver," I said, taking the keys from him.

He shrugged, stepping inside. "It's nothing. Least I could do."

I closed the door behind him. "How much were the repairs? I need to pay you back."

Johnny dropped onto my couch like he owned the place, which, honestly, he kind of did at this point. He'd been here enough times. "How would I know?"

I blinked. "What do you mean you don't know? You picked up the car."

"Yeah, but nobody asked me to pay anything." He stretched his arms over the back of the couch. "They just said it was your car and handed over the keys. That's it."

Oh. Oh.

Harry had paid for it. Already covered everything before I'd even had a chance to ask about the cost.

I stood there holding my car keys, trying to process that. Why would he do that? We barely knew each other. Wasn't even in a good term with each other as he had a softer spot for Sienna. One awkward encounter this morning didn't exactly make us friends.

"Something wrong?" Johnny was watching me now, his eyebrows raised.

"No. It's... nothing." I shook my head, trying to clear it. "Just surprised, that's all."

"Well, save the existential crisis for later." Johnny pulled out his laptop. "We've got homework, remember? And I've been running around all day. I'm exhausted. The sooner we finish this thing, the sooner I can collapse."

Right. The review. The impossible assignment from Nolan that was due by morning.

God, how had I almost forgotten?

"Yeah, okay. Just... give me a second. I need to make a call first."

"Sure."

I pulled out my phone and scrolled to Harry's number. Hesitated for half a second, then pressed call.

He answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

His voice was the same as this morning. Calm and even and giving nothing away.

"Mr. Becker, it's Elodie."

"I know." He paused. "What do you need?"

Straight to the point. No small talk. I could work with that.

"I picked up the car. Thank you for handling everything." I shifted my weight off my bad ankle. "But I wanted to ask about the repair costs. You covered them, right? How much do I owe you?"

Silence fell on the other end.

For a second I thought the call had dropped. Then—

"I'll send you the account details."

"Okay. Thank you. Really, I appreciate you taking care of all this today. I know it was—"

"No need to thank me."

The line went dead.

I stared at my phone.

Well. That was abrupt.

Johnny was trying not to laugh. "Friend of yours?"

"Not exactly." I sat down, carefully, favoring my good ankle. "Just someone who helped me out this morning."

My phone buzzed. A message came from Harry. It was the bank account number and a photo of the invoice.

I opened my payment app and started entering the details. The amount made me wince slightly, although it was not catastrophic, but not cheap either but I transferred it anyway. And added a quick thank-you message.

'Thanks again for everything. I've sent the payment.'

No response came. Not that I expected one.

"The guy who helped with your car?" Johnny asked, still watching me.

"Yeah." I set my phone aside. "Harry Becker."

Johnny's expression shifted. Just slightly. "Wait. Harry Becker?"

"You know him?"

"Know him? Elodie, everyone knows him." Johnny leaned forward. "He's... how do you even know Harry Becker?"

I shrugged. "Dante's friend. Not like we are friends or so. They all prefer to take Sienna's side, you know? We ran into each other this morning. Literally. Someone hit my car and he helped sort it out."

"And he just... paid for your repairs? Out of nowhere?"

"Apparently."

Johnny was looking at me like I'd just told him I'd had coffee with the president. "That's weird."

"Why is it weird?"

"Because Harry Becker doesn't do stuff like that. He's not... I mean, he's not rude, but he's not exactly the helpful stranger type either." Johnny shook his head. "You must've made an impression."

I didn't know what to do with that information. Didn't particularly want to analyze it right now.

"Can we just... let's focus on the homework, okay?"

"Right. Yeah. Homework." But Johnny was still giving me that look. Like he was trying to figure out a puzzle I didn't even know existed.

I ignored it and opened my laptop and started pulling up the notes and photos from the exhibition.

This review wasn't going to write itself. And we had maybe ten hours to produce something that wouldn't make Nolan even more disappointed in us than he already was.

No pressure.

"Okay," I said, fingers already moving across the keyboard. "Let's start with the German pack's biometric system. That was the most innovative exhibit, so it should probably lead the analysis..."

Johnny nodded, opening his own laptop. "Agreed. And then we can move into the French delegation's encryption protocols—"

We fell into it and started working together. We started technical discussions and rapid-fire typing and the occasional argument about interpretation.

It was easier than thinking about Harry Becker and why he'd paid for my repairs.

Easier than thinking about Dante and the way he'd pushed me away like I was contaminated.

Easier than thinking about anything except the work in front of me.

So that's what I did.

I worked.

Because that's all I had left that made sense anymore.

Alpha's Regret: Losing His True Mate - Chapter 90 - 91[1,503 words]

Chapter 90: Chapter 91

ELODIE'S POV~

We worked until past two in the morning.

The PowerPoint was endless. Slide after slide breaking down core technologies from every major exhibit we'd seen. Comparative analyses. Market projections. Technical specifications that made my eyes blur after a while.

When I finally hit send on the email to Nolan, I wanted to collapse right there on the floor.

Johnny was already half-asleep on my couch, laptop still balanced on his knees. "If he writes back saying this isn't good enough, I'm done. I'm retiring. Moving to a cabin in the woods."

"You don't know how to live in the woods." I told him with a smirk.

"I'll learn." He rubbed his eyes. "God, what time is it?"

"After two."

"Fantastic." He closed his laptop with more force than necessary. "I need to go home before I die here."

I would've told him to just crash on the couch. I had blankets, pillows, it wouldn't have been a big deal but he didn't have a change of clothes. Would have to do the walk of shame tomorrow in the same outfit.

So I didn't offer.

He dragged himself to his feet, looking about as steady as I felt. "You gonna be okay?"

"I'll be fine. Just go. Take enough rest and sleep."

"Yeah. You too."

I walked him to the door, limped, really, because my ankle was screaming with every step that I took and locked it behind him once he was gone.

The apartment felt too quiet suddenly. Too empty.

I needed a shower. Needed to wash off this entire nightmare of a day.

The hot water helped. Loosened the knots in my shoulders, made my muscles stop aching quite so badly. But when I got out and caught my reflection in the mirror, me being pale, exhausted, eyes red and puffy, I looked away fast.

Just get to bed. That's all I had to do.

I collapsed onto the mattress and was asleep in seconds.

—

Morning came way too soon.

I woke up to sunlight hitting my face and my ankle throbbing like it had its own heartbeat. I tested it carefully, and realized it was definitely better than yesterday, but still tender. Still swollen and angry-looking.

Johnny had told me to take a few days off, to work from home and let it heal.

So that's what I did.

I set up my laptop on the kitchen counter and started going through emails while the coffee brewed. The client updates. Project reviews. The usual morning routine, just without having to put on real pants.

My phone rang around nine.

Liora's name lit up the screen.

I smiled before I even answered. "Hey, sweetheart."

"Mom! How's your foot? Is it better?"

I shifted my weight, testing the ankle again. But it still hurt, but manageable. "It's getting there. Much better than yesterday."

"Oh, good." I could hear the relief in her voice. Real relief. "I was really worried."

"I know. But I'm okay. Promise."

Silence on the other end. I could hear background noise, dishes clattering, someone talking. Probably Sabina making breakfast.

Maybe Dante.

"Well... that's good then," Liora said.

More silence.

I waited. Waited for her to fill the quiet the way she used to, with stories about school or her friends or some show she'd watched. Anything.

But nothing came.

Just awkward, empty air between us.

"So..." I tried. "What are you up to today?"

"Oh, um. Just school stuff. Homework."

"Right. Of course."

Another pause.

This wasn't how it used to be.

Two years ago, Liora would've had a thousand things to tell me. Would've been talking nonstop about everything and nothing, bouncing from topic to topic the way kids do when they feel safe and loved.

But somewhere along the way, that had changed.

I'd watched it happen. Felt it happening. The conversations were getting shorter. The calls are less frequent. Liora turned to Sienna when she had problems instead of me.

And I'd let it happen.

What else could I do? I couldn't force my daughter to confide in me. Couldn't compete with Sienna, who was there all the time, who didn't carry the weight of a dying marriage into every interaction.

So the distance grew.

And now we were here. Mother and daughter, talking like strangers making small talk.

Liora cared. I could hear it. The concern was genuine.

But it was shallow. Surface-level.

If this had happened two years ago, if I'd gotten hurt back when things were still good, Liora would've been devastated. Would've cried and clung to me and refused to leave my side. Would've been my little shadow, constantly checking to make sure I was okay.

Back then, she'd been my "little cotton-padded jacket." So warm... Protective. Completely devoted to me.

Now?

Now she was just doing her duty. Calling because it was the right thing to do.

Not because the thought of me being hurt was unbearable to her.

My throat felt tight.

But all of that, the worry, the devotion, the desperate need to be close when I was hurting, all of that had gone to Sienna now.

I'd seen it happen before.

Last time Sienna got sick... just a cold, nothing serious, Liora had secretly messaged her during school to check on her. Dante had left the breakfast table mid-meal to go see her. And the second school let out, Liora had the driver take her straight to Sienna's place.

So if Liora had really been that worried about me last night, she could've insisted on knowing where I was staying. Could've had the driver bring her over. Could've shown up at my door with that anxious look she used to get when I so much as sneezed.

But she didn't.

She just... called. Asked if I was okay. And when I said yes, that was enough for her.

"Mom?"

I blinked. "Yeah?"

"Do you... do you want to talk to Dad?"

The question hit me like cold water.

I could hear it in her voice, she'd turned away from the phone, was asking Dante something. Probably if he wanted to talk to me.

Yesterday, when I fell, Dante didn't help me. Didn't even try. Just pushed me away like I was something unpleasant he needed to remove from his personal space.

When I got hurt, he acted like it had nothing to do with him.

There were only two explanations for that kind of indifference. Either he genuinely didn't care if I lived or died. Or he was avoiding any situation that might upset Sienna. And clearly, in his mind, Sienna's feelings mattered more than whether his wife was injured.

Either way, the message was clear.

I didn't matter.

My jaw tightened. I was about to say something, something sharp, something that would make it clear exactly what I thought of his fake concern but then I heard his muffled, distant voice in the background.

"Ask your mother."

Of course. Put it on me. Make it my choice so he didn't have to be the one to reject me.

Liora came back on the line. "Mom? Dad wants to know if you want to talk to him."

My throat felt tight.

Did I want to talk to him?

God, no.

What would be the point? So he could ask how I was doing in that flat, disinterested tone? So I could pretend we were a normal couple having a normal conversation instead of two people whose marriage was rotting from the inside out?

No.

I was done pretending.

"No need," I said. My voice came out colder than I meant it to. "Mom has things to do."

"Oh..." Liora paused. Then, away from the phone, "Dad, Mom says no."

"Mm."

That was it. Just that sound. Acknowledgment without emotion.

And then silence fell.

The conversation was over.

Just like that.

I set my phone down on the counter and stared at it.

That was my marriage. That's what it had become.

Awkward phone calls through our daughter. Polite questions neither of us wanted to ask. Indifference wrapped up in the pretense of concern.

I picked up my coffee. It had gone cold.

—

The next few days blurred together.

I stayed home. Worked remotely. My ankle healed slowly, the swelling went down, the pain faded to a dull ache, and eventually I could walk without limping.

Liora called every day.

Same time. Same question. "How's your foot, Mom?"

And every day, I'd tell her it was better. And she'd say "that's good" and then we'd run out of things to say and she'd hang up.

She never asked to visit.

Never suggested coming over.

Just... called. Did her duty. Then moved on with her day.

And I let her.

What else could I do?

Two days after we submitted the "homework," my phone rang with an unknown number.

My stomach dropped.

It was Professor Nolan.

It had to be.

I stared at the screen for three rings before I finally answered.