

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 151

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Aria's POV

Claim

My steps faltered. For a brief second... neither of us spoke. I slowly looked away. "Noah... you know I..."

"I know." His voice remained as calm as ever. "You don't have to explain."

"I don't have room for love. My father needs me. My daughter needs me. And Claudia..." My eyes hardened. "I still have debts to collect."

Noah nodded. "I know. I've never asked you to love me." He smiled softly. "I only hope you'll let me stand beside you. Use every resource I have. My pack. My influence. My strength. If it helps you achieve your revenge... then it's worth it."

I stared at him. "Noah..."

"And if one day..." He paused briefly. "You find room in your heart for someone... I hope you'll look back and see that I've always been here."

My chest tightened. I didn't know what to say. Because he deserved an answer. And I couldn't give him

one.

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Don't be. Just don't push me away."

Lydia sighed quietly. He's a good Alpha.

He is. Just not our mate.

I pushed the thought aside.

The ballroom glittered beneath enormous crystal chandeliers. Music floated softly through the hall.

The moment Noah and I entered... every conversation stopped. Hundreds of eyes turned toward us. My sharp ears caught their whispers.

“Who’s that woman?”

“I’ve never seen her before.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“She’s with Alpha Noah.”

“They must be mates.”

“Is she really the future Luna of the Whitemoon Pack?”

I ignored every whisper. My eyes calmly scanned the room. There were business leaders, pack elders, investors, politicians. Exactly the people I needed.

Then... the ballroom doors opened again. A powerful Alpha scent instantly swept across the room.

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Aria’s POV

Clam

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<Chapter 148-

Lydia froze....Rhein.

My heart skipped. I slowly turned.

Damon walked inside Five years later... he looked slightly different. He wore a black suit that perfectly framed his powerful build.

His face had grown colder. Sharper. Every step carried overwhelming Alpha dominance. The room instinctively made way for him.

Beside him... Claudia stood. Her hand rested lightly on his arm. The sight pierced through me before I could stop it.

So... I had been right. Five years later... she was still beside him. My fingers unconsciously tightened around my champagne glass!

Lydia surged forward.

Rhein... her emotions crashed against me. It was a mix of longing, pain, and anger. I quickly strengthened my mental walls.

Calin down.

He chose someone else. Lydia whimpered softly.

I forced myself to look away. Whatever had happened during these five years... no longer concerned me. Still... something felt different about Damon.

It wasn't my problem, though. I had my own battle tonight.

Claudia spotted me. A smug smile spread across her face as she moved toward me.

"Well... if it isn't Aria." Her voice immediately attracted attention. "I almost didn't recognize you."

She glanced toward Noah. "No wonder. With Alpha Noah supporting you, even someone like you can attend this banquet."

Several guests exchanged awkward looks.

I smiled politely. "You're mistaken."

"Oh?"

i

"I received my invitation because of any company." I slowly looked her up and down. "But since we're discussing invitations... I heard every major design association blacklisted you years ago."

Her smile stiffened.

I continued pleasantly. "What was the reason again? Oh, right. Plagiarism."

The surrounding guests immediately began whispering.

“I remember that scandal. Wasn’t she accused of stealing multiple designs?”

“I heard there was overwhelming evidence.”

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Claudia’s face paled.

I smiled. “I merely provided the investigation board with some forgotten evidence. After all... I dislike

seeing thieves rewarded.”

“You...” Her expression twisted with rage. Her breathing became uneven. “At least I’m still important enough to attend banquets like this.”

Ctum

“Not exactly, my dear.” I smiled coldly. “You are here only because of Damon. I came because I earned my place.”

Her entire face darkened. For a moment... I expected Damon to defend her. Like he always used to.

Instead, he said nothing. He didn’t even look at Claudia. His eyes... never left me. The intensity unsettled

Lydia shifted uneasily. He’s staring.

Ignore him.

I turned away. “Noah. Let’s...”

Before i could finish... a warm hand suddenly wrapped around my wrist. I froze. Every nerve in my body

tightened.

It was Damon. His grip wasn’t painful. Just... unyielding.

Slowly... I looked at him. Five years hadn’t softened those Alpha eyes. If anything... they looked far colder and more dangerous.

“Let go.”

His voice was rough. "Aria." The sound of my name on his lips after so many years sent an unfamiliar ache through my chest.

"I said..." I pulled once. He didn't move. "Let go."

Before Damon could answer, Noah stepped between us. His expression remained calm. But his-Alpha aura burst outward. "Release her."

Damon's gaze shifted to Noah. "No." The single word landed like thunder.

A second later... another Alpha aura exploded. Two top-tier Alphas with overwhelming bloodlines. The pressure collided violently in the center of the ballroom.

Crystal glasses shattered. Several wolves staggered backward. Some dropped to one knee, unable to withstand the crushing force. The air itself became heavy.

Lydia growled. Hiots. Not here.

I yanked my hand with all my strength. This time... Damon's fingers loosened. I immediately stepped backward.

"Damon," My voice was calm. Almost emotionless. "We're divorced. You no longer have the right to touch

me"

There was silence.

"I didn't come back for you or for Claudia. I have more important things to do."

For the first time... something flickered across his cold face. Pain. Raw. Unhidden. I forced myself to

ignore it.

I turned away. Noah caught up with me. "Are you alright?"

"I'll manage. I need to meet someone."

He nodded reluctantly before several business leaders surrounded him. "Don't go far."

"I won't."

Claim

I slipped away into the crowd. Tonight... I wasn't here as Damon Hawthorne's ex-wife. I was here as Eira, founder of one of the fastest-growing architectural firms in the world. And I had come for one reason.

To meet the businessman, Sterling.

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Ava's POV

Clar

Five years ago... when the Grayson Group collapsed after Joshua's death and Dad's sickness, Sterling had seized the opportunity to acquire the Old Town redevelopment project for almost nothing.

That land wasn't just real estate. It was Joshua's dream. It was the Grayson family's legacy.

Tonight... I was taking it back. I had five years of accumulated capital. An international reputation. The backing of Noah's resources. Everything I needed.

After searching through the crowd for several minutes, I finally spotted Sterling speaking with another businessman. Perfect.

I walked over. "Mr. Sterling."

He turned with a polite smile. "Ms. Eira."

"I've heard impressive things about your company."

"I appreciate that. I'd like to discuss the Old Town redevelopment project."

His smile became awkward. "I'm afraid..."

My heart sank slightly. "What is it?"

He sighed. "I've already reached an agreement in principle."

"With whom?"

He hesitated, then answered quietly. "Alpha Damon Hawthorne."

My entire body went still.

Sterling's words echoed inside my head. For a second, I thought I'd misheard him.

"...What?"

He gave me an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Ms. Eira. We haven't signed the final contract yet, but we've already agreed on the major terms."

My fingers slowly tightened around my wine glass. "Since when?"

"Alpha Damon contacted me not long ago."

Not long ago. Meaning... he had only just learned I was back. Yet somehow, the first thing he did was go after the project Joshua had died trying to protect.

Lydia let out a low growl. He knows. He knows exactly what this land means to us.

Heat rose in my chest. No... this wasn't a coincidence. Damon had done it on purpose.

He wants to stop us.

My jaw clenched. Even after discovering Claudia's true colors... even after learning everything she had done... was he still protecting her?

Class

Was he trying to stop me from taking revenge? The anger came so suddenly that even I was startled by it.

"I understand." I forced a polite smile. "Thank you for your honesty."

Sterling nodded apologetically before excusing himself. The moment he disappeared into the crowd, I stood frozen. My chest rose and fell unevenly.

Calm down, Lydia urged.

I'm calm.

You're lying.

I closed my eyes briefly. Five years. Five years of rebuilding my life. Five years of convincing myself Damon Hawthorne no longer had any influence over me. Then why... why did one move from him still throw my emotions into chaos?

Because you love him.

Past tense, I corrected immediately.

Then prove it.

I slowly exhaled. Lydia was right. I couldn't allow this. I refused to become that woman again. The woman whose entire world revolved around Damon.

The woman who cried because of every cold glance he gave her. The woman who waited endlessly for scraps of affection. That Aria had died five years ago. I wasn't going to resurrect her tonight.

"No." I straightened my shoulders. "This changes nothing."

If Sterling was no longer an option... I'd find another way. There was always another way. First I needed to find Noah. We could discuss another strategy after leaving the banquet.

I turned and began weaving through the crowd. Everywhere. Mooked, people chatted in elegant circles. There was no sign of Noah.

I took another step. Then another. Something felt... wrong.

Lydia's ears suddenly perked up. Behind us.

I barely had time to react. A large hand closed around my wrist. Before I could pull away, I was drawn backward.

"What-"

The world spun. A door opened, then slammed shut behind me. The music outside became muffled. I stumbled forward.

A strong arm wrapped around my waist to steady me before I could fall. My back hit the wall. A broad chest blocked every escape.

Hooked up.

Damon.

My breath caught.

Claim

The room was dimly lit, separated from the ballroom by heavy wooden doors. His scent surrounded me instantly. A scent my wolf had once considered home.

Lydia surged forward. Mate...

The bond that had lain quiet for years suddenly trembled. My body betrayed me before my mind could catch up.

My heartbeat quickened. My breathing became uneven. Every nerve beneath my skin awakened at once.

Five years... and my body still remembered him. For one dangerous heartbeat... I almost leaned toward him. Almost.

Then my mind slammed back into place. No. I shoved Lydia back with every ounce of will I possessed.

She whimpered softly beneath my skin.

I lifted my head and met Damon's gaze. His golden wolf eyes were fixed entirely on me, as though he were afraid that if he blinked, I'd disappear again.

Neither of us spoke. The silence stretched unbearably. Finally... I pushed against his chest.

"Move."

He didn't.

"Damon." My voice turned colder. "Move."

His fingers loosened from my wrist, as though he feared gripping me too tightly. But he still didn't step aside.

"You disappeared, Aria." His voice was low and rough. "You left"

A bitter laugh escaped me. "I divorced you, Damon."

"They're not the same."

"They are to me." I stared at him. Was he serious? "You lost the right to question where I go five years ago."

His jaw tightened. "I looked everywhere for you."

I suddenly felt exhausted. "What exactly do you want from me?"

His answer came immediately.

"I want you."

I almost smiled. It was unbelievable.

“You have Claudia.”

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“I don’t. It is you that I want.”

Lydia’s voice became unusually quiet. He looks... broken.

Don’t say that.

I’m only saying what I see.

Clam

I forced myself to look away from him. My body had finally stopped trembling. The warmth his touch had awakened faded little by little.

Coldly, I looked at him.

“I didn’t return for you, Damon. I returned here for business.”

i

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Damon’s POV

I never came here for the banquet. I never came here for networking. I certainly didn’t come here for Sterling. The Old Town redevelopment project... it was only bait.

Claity

From the moment Justin reported that Aria had returned under the name Eira, I had already investigated everything.

I tried to figure out why she had returned. Then one name surfaced. The Grayson family’s Old Town redevelopment project. Joshua Grayson’s final dream.

I knew she would come for it. So I reached Sterling first. I offered him terms he couldn’t refuse. Not because I wanted the land. I wanted her. Nothing else mattered. Y

The first moment she stepped into the ballroom... everything else disappeared. The music. The

conversations.

The dozens of Alphas gathered under one roof. None of them existed anymore. There was only... Aria.

Five years, Five unbearable years. She looked even more beautiful than the memories I couldn't recover. Her scent reached me before the rest of her did.

My wolf exploded awake. Mate! For the first time in years, Rhein's voice wasn't distant. It roared through my head.

She's here! His emotions slammed into me. Longing, possession, and relief.

Then... I saw him. Noah. Standing beside her. His arm resting naturally around her shoulders.

I nearly lost control. My fingers twitched. I wanted to kill him and take my mate.

The scent of another Alpha lingering around my mate pushed every instinct inside me toward violence.

I dug my nails into my own palm until blood dripped onto the floor.

"Not here."

Every ounce of self-control I possessed went into keeping Rhein chained. The banquet hall wasn't a battlefield.

I waited patiently. Watching. Until Noah finally walked away. Until she stood alone. Then... I took her.

For a few brief moments... she was in my arms. The hollow inside me.. filled. Not completely, but enough to remind me what I'd been missing.

It feels like home... Rhein whispered.

I told Aria how much I wanted her, and she rejected me.

Then she confronted me, anger burning in those eyes I'd dreamed about for years as she snarled.

"You deliberately took on the Old Town redevelopment project, didn't you?"

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“Yes, I did.”

Claim

She looked momentarily stunned by my honesty. “You knew I wanted that project and approached Sterling before I could.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

“Because it brought you to me.”

There was silence. She stared at me as though I’d lost my mind.

“You’ve become shameless.”

“Probably.” I didn’t care. Pride had already cost me five years. I had no use for it anymore.

I stepped closer. “The project, I am willing to give it to you.”

She frowned. “I don’t want charity.”

“It’s not charity.”

“What, then, is it?”

“I will give it to you if you come back.” The words left my mouth without hesitation.

“Leave Noah. Return to me. I’ll give you that project and any other project under Hawthorne Holdings that you might want.”

She looked at me as though i were insane. “You think you can buy me?”

“No. I know I can’t.”

“Then what makes you think I’d agree?”

“Because you’re my mate.”

Her eyes turned ice-cold.

“No.” She shook her head firmly. “I was your mate. Now...” She smiled. It wasn’t a happy smile, “i love Noah.”

The world stopped. Even Rhein fell silent. Then... pain. Raw and violent pain coursed through me. My chest tightened until breathing became difficult,

She continued mercilessly. “We’re deeply in love, Noah and I. I’ll never leave him. I’ll never return to you.”

She stepped even closer. “So stop wasting your time. I’ll reclaim that project. I’ll rebuild my family’s name. And Claudia...” Her eyes hardened. “I’ll make her pay for everything.”

Then... she turned and walked away. Again. Five years ago... I’d watched her back disappear. Tonight... history repeated itself.

Only this time... I didn’t stop her. I couldn’t. Not while she’d looked at me with those eyes. Eyes that held nothing but resolve.

Without realizing it... I raised my hand again. The one that had touched her. Her warmth had long since faded. But I remembered it. Again. And again.

I rubbed my thumb slowly across my fingertips, as if I could somehow summon that feeling back.

Our mate hates us... Rhein’s voice had become quiet once more.

Hatred still meant emotion. Hatred meant she remembered me. Hatred meant I still occupied a place in her heart. Indifference... that was what truly terrified me.

I slowly closed my hand into a fist.

“Hate me all you want, Aria.”

My voice barely rose above a whisper. “But don’t ever stop feeling something for me. Because the day you become completely indifferent... I’ll have truly lost you.”

M

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Aria’s POV

Clam

The drive back was unusually quiet. I rested my head against the seat and closed my eyes. The banquet replayed inside my mind.

Damon's hand around my wrist. His eyes. His voice. "Come back to me." I clenched my fists.

Noah's voice broke the silence, pulling me out of my thoughts. "I'll speak to Sterling on your behalf."

I turned toward him. "You don't have to."

"I want to." His hands remained steady on the steering wheel. "There are still people Sterling answers to. I'll find another way."

A faint ache settled in my chest. For five years... Noah had quietly solved countless problems before they ever reached me.

When Dad needed specialists... he found them. When my company needed investors... he introduced them.

He had provided for and protected my family and me. He had never once asked for anything in return.

I lowered my eyes. "Noah..."

"Hm?"

"I'm starting to feel guilty."

He smiled without looking at me. "Why?"

"You've done too much for me. For my father. For Elona. For my company. And..." I laughed bitterly. "I don't have anything to repay you with."

He was silent for a moment. Then he spoke softly. "You do."

I looked at him.

"Your happiness." He finally turned, meeting my eyes for the briefest second before looking back at the road. "That's all I've ever wanted."

My heart tightened. I didn't know how to respond. There were some debts that couldn't be measured in money. This was one of them.

Lydia sighed quietly. He's asking for so little.

And I still can't give it to him.

The silence returned. Trying to lighten the mood, I asked casually, "By the way... the urgent pack matter you left to deal with yesterday... was everything resolved?"

Noah's expression changed. His jaw tightened. His eyes darkened only for a heartbeat.

"It's handled." His answer was flat. Then he immediately changed the subject. "Elona called me earlier to remind me of her birthday and how she was expecting a gift."

I laughed despite myself. "That sounds exactly like her."

But something lingered in the back of my mind.

He's hiding something, Lydia murmured

I know.

Will you ask?

I looked out the window. No. Whatever had happened... if Noah didn't want to tell me, there was probably a reason. Besides... I had enough problems of my own.

The next morning... I sat across from Sterling in his office. Unlike the banquet, today's atmosphere was entirely professional. He folded his hands on the table.

"Ms. Eira. I've reviewed your proposal, and it's excellent. But..."

My heartbeat quickened. There it was. The word I didn't want to hear.

"Alpha Damon has offered something your company simply cannot."

"What is that?"

"Port resources."

I frowned. "The Hawthorne shipping ports?"

He nodded. "If this redevelopment succeeds, logistics will determine everything. With Hawthorne Holdings controlling regional ports..." He spread his hands apologetically. "No developer could compete."

My stomach sank. Damon... he hadn't simply made a better offer. He had blocked every possible route before I'd even arrived.

Sterling continued gently, “Honestly... if I were you... I’d consider partnering with Alpha Damon. You both have exceptional resources. The project would benefit from both sides.”

I almost laughed. Partner with Damon? If only he knew. “I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

Sterling nodded understandingly “i had a feeling you’d say that. I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

When I left his office... the disappointment hit me harder than I expected,

He’s cornered us. He has made this an impossible fight to win, Lydia growled.

Flooked up at the towering Hawthorne Holdings building in the distance. “Damon... what are you trying to

do?”

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I went back to the hotel... Shortly after I returned, I video called my little pup. She answered.

“Mummy!” Elona’s cheerful voice filled the room. “There’s only a day until my birthday!”

My smile faltered. Right... her birthday.

“Mummy? You’ll be here, right?”

Clam

My chest tightened painfully. I forced a smile she couldn’t see through the screen. “I’m afraid... I need to stay a few more days.”

The excitement on her face faded. “Oh...”

My heart broke. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I know I promised.”

She looked down. For several seconds... neither of us spoke. Then she looked back up. “It’s okay.”

I blinked.

“I know Mummy is working. You’ll come when you’re finished.”

“I will, my princess. I will send your birthday gift.”

She smiled bravely. "Alright, Mummy. Don't worry about me. Take good care of yourself, okay?"

I laughed through the sting in my eyes. "When did you become the mother?"

She giggled. "I love you."

"I love you more, my princess."

She grinned. "Bye, Mummy."

The screen went dark. I stared at it for a long time.

Lydia pressed gently against me. She's trying to be strong.

I know.

I slowly wiped away the tear I'd failed to stop. "I'm sorry, baby. But Mummy has to finish this. For Grandpa, for Uncle Joshua, and for our future."

My resolve hardened all over again. I picked up my phone. The first call went to Noah.

"I'm staying a little longer."

"I expected that. Don't worry, I'll make arrangements and ensure Elona has a great birthday celebration."

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. "Thank you, Noah. You are the best."

After ending the call, I contacted my assistant. "Reschedule next week's meetings. Extend my stay here."

"Alright, Ms. Aria."

After handling everything, I finally left the hotel. There was one more person I needed to see.

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Clasm

It was Astrid. We met up at a quiet cafe.

Astrid hadn't changed much. The moment she saw me, she hugged me tightly. "You idiot. You disappeared for five years. You could've visited."

“I know, and I am sorry about that.”

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I replied.

We sat across from each other. After exchanging updates for a while... I finally asked the question I’d avoided. “Damon...”

Astrid looked at me carefully: “What about him?”

“What happened after the accident?”

M

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Chapter 155

Aria’s POV

Claim

Astrid sighed. “A lot happened. He was unconscious for months. When he finally woke up... he wasn’t the

same.”

I stayed silent.

“He became cold. Completely unreachable. Even Alpha Walter could barely speak to him. He shut everyone out.”

“What about Claudia?”

Astrid frowned. “That’s the strange part. She’s still hanging around the Hawthorne family. But... I’ve never heard anything about them getting married. They’re hardly ever seen together.”

She thought for a moment. “Actually... last night’s banquet was the first public event they’ve attended together in years.”

I frowned. “Really?”

Astrid nodded. “And there’s something even stranger. I searched online out of curiosity. There isn’t a single gossip article about Damon’s love life. Nothing. It’s like every media company has been warned not to touch the subject.”

Silence settled between us.

Lydia slowly lifted her head. Then... he wasn’t with Claudia.

Maybe not. The question was... why?

I didn’t know. It had been five years. If Damon truly wanted Claudia... why hadn’t he married her? Why hadn’t he chosen a Luna? Why hadn’t anyone dared report on him? None of it made sense.

“What is he doing...?” I whispered.

Astrid shrugged helplessly. “I wish I knew.”

After leaving the café, I walked aimlessly for several minutes. Questions circled endlessly inside my head. Until... Dad’s face appeared in my mind. Then Joshua’s.

My confusion disappeared. None of this changed why I’d returned. I had come back for revenge, justice, and my family’s future. If reclaiming Joshua’s project required dealing with Damon... then so be it.

I stopped walking. Slowly... I pulled out my phone.

Lydia watched silently. Are you sure?

I looked at the number that I had never deleted. Five years... and I still remembered it by heart. “I’m sure”

Without allowing myself another second to hesitate... I pressed call.

The call lasted less than two minutes. No greetings. No pointless conversation. Just business.

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“We need to meet, Damon,” I said.

“When?” His deep voice came through the receiver.

“Tomorrow.” I swallowed hard.

“What time?”

I thought about it and responded. “7 p.m.”

“I’ll send the address.”

Then... the line went dead. I slowly lowered the phone.

Lydia paced restlessly inside my mind. He’s planning something. Don’t go alone.

I know. I won’t be careless.

That night, I barely slept. Every possible outcome ran through my mind.

Clates

If Damon wanted revenge... how would he do it? Would he use the project to humiliate me? Threaten me? Or perhaps... he intended to make me beg.

I made contingency plans for every possibility.

The next day, I was surprised by the address Damon sent me. It was not Hawthorne Group or even his home, but a restaurant, One of the city’s most exclusive private restaurants.

Lydia frowned. This doesn’t feel like a business meeting.

She was right. I stepped inside. The hostess immediately bowed. “Miss Grayson. This way, please.” She led me through a quiet corridor.

There were no other guests. No voices. No staff beyond a few discreet servers. The entire restaurant... was empty. He’d booked the whole place.

I frowned. “What is he doing?”

The doors opened. I froze. Damon was already there, standing beside a candlelit table. Everything had been prepared. Every dish. Every dessert. Every drink,

My eyes slowly moved across the table. There was braised lamb, creamy mushroom soup, rose honey cake, fresh berries, and moonflower tea.

One after another... every single dish had once been my favorite. A lump formed in my throat.

He remembered, Lydia whispered softly.

I looked away immediately. “It doesn’t matter.”

Damon pulled out a chair. "Please sit."

"I didn't come here to eat."

I folded my arms. "What are you actually after, Damon?"

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Coming

"This. "I gestured around the restaurant. "The food. The flowers. The empty building. What game are you playing?"

His expression didn't change. "I'm not playing any game." He looked directly into my eyes. "I'll transfer the project to you."

I blinked. "...What?"

"The old-town redevelopment project. I'll give it to you, but I have a condition."

Here we go again. Was he about to ask me to leave Noah for him again?

Before I could speak, he said, "All I need is for you to meet me one day every week. I'll consider it our date."

I stared at him.

There was silence. For several long seconds... I honestly thought I had misheard. Then I laughed because it was unbelievable.

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

My laughter disappeared. "So... this entire project. Joshua's dream. My family's future. You're using all of it... so I'll date you?"

"Yes."

Something inside me snapped. I took one slow step toward him. "Tell me something, Damon."

He remained silent.

"Is this revenge for leaving you?"

His brows drew together. "No."

"Then what? Because I divorced you?"

"No."

"Because your pride can't accept that I was the one who walked away?"

His jaw tightened. "It isn't about pride."

Really?" I let out another bitter laugh. "I actually thought... I thought after five years... you might finally

st me. I thought maybe... the Damon standing before me would have changed."

head "I was wrong. You're exactly the same. So arrogant. So convinced you know what's best

You still think people's lives can be negotiated like business contracts"

left mine.

ply. "This conversation is over."

<Chapter 152

Htook two steps toward the door. Then... a hand wrapped gently around my wrist.

"Damon."

"I said we're done." tried pulling free. He didn't move. My anger flared. "Let go."

Still nothing. I spun around, "Did you hear me?"

His eyes held mine. "I don't want to let you go, Aria."

Clair

I shoved him hard. Instead of releasing me... he pulled me forward. My balance disappeared. I crashed straight into his chest.

"Damn you!" I struggled fiercely.

His arms tightened around me.

"Damon! Let me go!"

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Aria's POV

I raised my hand.

Crack!

The slap echoed loudly through the private dining room. His face turned slightly with the impact.

Silence followed. I breathed heavily, waiting for him to retaliate. He didn't. Instead... he slowly turned. Then he took the hand that had slapped him.

Before I could pull away... he guided it toward his chest.

"Whale you..." My palm landed against him. I immediately tried to yank it back. He held it there.

Aria."

thing in his voice made me pause. Reluctantly... I focused. At first... I felt only the steady beat of

en... my wolf suddenly froze.

Aria... Lydia's voice turned sharp. Something's wrong.

I frowned. Slowly... I extended my senses. Something was wrong with Damon's Alpha aura. It was supposed to be especially powerful, steady, and dominant, but it wasn't.

It was... chaotic and violent. His wolf energy crashed wildly beneath his skin, surging and collapsing in uneven waves. It felt unstable and fractured. It was even worse than when he lay comatose after the accident five years ago.

My eyes widened. "What happened to you?" I instinctively looked up at him.

His gaze wavered. "My wolf..." He spoke quietly. "has not fully woken up."

I stared. "What?"

“The day you left... the day you rejected us... Rhein went to sleep. No healer could wake him. No physician No wolf therapist. They all failed.”

I slowly lowered my hand. His heartbeat remained steady.

“The longer Rhein remains dormant... the weaker my instincts become. I’ve started losing control over my Alpha aura. My healing has slowed. My wolf senses fade a little more every month.”

He looked down at me. “If this continues... I may eventually lose my standing as Alpha.”

The words hung heavily between us. I searched his face for deception or manipulation. I found none.

Lydia

He’s telling the truth.

ution? How do you solve this?”

25 Pe

His answer was barely above a whisper. “You. My wolf reacts only to you. When you’re close... for a little while... I can feel him. He can even speak to me.” His eyes never left mine.

“I need you, Aria. I need my mate close enough that my wolf remembers how to stay fully awake.”

The room fell silent. My heart hammered like a war drum in my chest. Damon’s wolf is failing.

The words echoed in my skull. It was because of me. The thought clawed at my throat, threatening to choke me.

Lydia stirred inside me, her presence a restless shadow. He needs us. Rhein is fading. You feel it too.

I shoved her back, hard. No. I don’t believe it. I won’t. Damon and I hadn’t been true mates in years, not since the bond snapped like a brittle bone during that first nightmare of a rejection.

And what had he done then? He’d turned straight to Claudia, hadn’t he? If our bond breaking hadn’t hurt him then, why would it now?

This had to be the accident. Some complication from the crash that nearly killed him. It had nothing to do with me.

I wasn't important enough to unravel an Alpha like Damon Hawthorne.

"Aria." His voice pulled me from my thoughts. Those storm-gray eyes locked on me.

"I know what you're thinking," he murmured. "That this isn't your fault. That it can't be. But, Aria... I'm lowering every defense right now. Come see for yourself."

My breath caught. For werewolves, especially an Alpha, opening the inner sanctum of your mind was sacred. Forbidden, even to a fated mate.

It was raw vulnerability, a risk no leader took lightly/The fact that he offered it so freely stunned me into silence.

"I... I can't," I whispered, even as my wolf surged forward, pressing against the cage of my ribs.

Lydia ached. Please, she begged. He is ours. Rhein is suffering

Damon's hand lifted, hovering near my cheek without touching. "You can. I trust you."

Swallowing hard, I reached out, not with my hands, but with that invisible thread of the mate bond that still flickered between us like a dying ember.

I slipped into the edges of his mind, tentative as a fawn in the woods. Chaos. That's what I found. A storm of fractured power bleeding from every corner.

Rhein's presence was a shadow of its former glory. He was wounded, snarling in pain, barely holding the Alpha essence together. It was worse than I'd imagined. My heart twisted.

But the instant my awareness brushed his, something shifted. Rhein surged. A desperate, eager howl

through the link, wrapping around Lydia like a starving wolf finding prey.

thundered in the shared space, rich and commanding even in his frailty. Lydia. Come

Chapter 153.

Rhein. Lydia's response was a joyful whine, her essence twining with his instinctively. I've missed you. Fight. Come back.

I gasped and tried to yank back, but the connection held. Without either of us moving, our bodies drifted closer until mine brushed against his.

His warmth seeped into me, igniting sparks along my skin.

No. This isn't right. I wanted to push him away, but my body betrayed me. Heat bloomed low in my belly, unbidden and fierce, like the early stirrings of a mating heat.

My pulse thrummed in my ears. Damon's arms came around me slowly, carefully, as if I were made of glass. His breath ghosted over my neck.

"Aria," he growled softly, the sound vibrating through me. "Feel that? He's alive again because of you. We are."

His teeth grazed my spine.

I arched against

I was drawn

My fingers

clutched at first, then a deliberate nip that sent liquid pleasure shooting down my spine. I couldn't stop myself, a soft whimper escaping my lips.

Against his chest, the heat, the way our wolves tangled and strengthened each other.

His shirt, pulling him closer even as my mind screamed warnings.

Something snapped, shattering the moment,

Vote

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 157

Aria's POV

As soon as my phone rang, reality crashed back like ice water.

I shoved at Damon's chest, panic flaring "Stop. Let go. I have to..."

25 Povits

He didn't release me. If anything, his grip tightened, locking me against the solid wall of his body. His eyes burned with intensity.

"No, Aria," he said, his voice low and rough with need. "Not this time."

Before I could protest, his mouth claimed mine in a kiss that stole every objection, his tongue sweeping in like he owned every part of me.

My wolf howled in triumph inside, Rhein echoing her.

For one treacherous second, I kissed him back, hard.

The phone kept ringing.

Heat flooded every inch of me, the mate bond flaring like wildfire in my veins. I tasted salt and storm on him, felt the hard press of his body molding against mine.

My hands fisted in his shirt, pulling him impossibly closer as desire coiled tight in my core.

Lydia howled with triumph. Rhein! Yes! Her voice merged with his in the link, a symphony of wolves reuniting, power surging between us.

My skin burned where his fingers traced, every nerve alive after years of numbness.

"Aria," he rasped between kisses, nipping my lower lip. "You are mine."

I should have pulled away. Instead, I arched into him, a soft moan escaping as his hand slid beneath the hem of my shirt.

His palm was hot against my stomach, then higher, callused fingertips brushing the underside of my breast. For a dizzying moment, I let myself drown in it, the safety, the pull, the way our wolves twined like they had never been apart.

The phone wouldn't stop ringing. It vibrated angrily on the table, but we ignored it, lost in the haze.

Damon's touch grew bolder, slipping further under my clothes, drawing shivers and gasps I couldn't

suppress.

Then the phone slipped from the edge and clattered to the floor.

The screen lit up with the caller ID.

Elona.

Reality slammed into me like a silver blade. I shoved Damon with every ounce of strength I had, my wolf lending power as I broke free.

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He stumbled back a step, his eyes wide with surprise and lingering heat.

“Aria...”

I snatched the phone and stabbed the end call button, my heart thundering.

My daughter. My secret. The one person I would burn the world for. No one could know about her, especially not him.

Damon dragged a hand through his hair, breathing hard as his senses snapped back into focus.

“Who was that? It was Noah, wasn’t it?”

I let the lie sit between us, saying nothing. Better he believe it was Noah circling like a vulture than the truth.

Elona’s existence was mine alone to protect. If Damon ever learned about her...

Cold resolve settled me like frost on fur. I straightened my clothes, ignoring the way my body still ached for his touch.

“I will never

inside. “Y

straight

“We

a

ver demand you’re making,” I said flatly, my voice steady despite the chaos raging inside me because your wolf is weak. The second Rhein stabilizes, you’ll run like you always do.

ch other now, Damon. Nothing. And you're still with her. What right do you have to ur broken wolf? I came back for revenge, not to play Luna to your wounded pride."

his jaw tight, but didn't deny Claudia. Didn't explain. Typical of him. His silence spoke n't agree?" A dangerous smirk tugged at his lips, those gray eyes flashing with challenge. 'll fall for me all over again, mate?"

ovocation hit like a spark on dry tinder. I wanted to snarl, but I bit it back, flinging his words aside sharp glare.

leep dreaming, Alpha." I turned on my heel and walked away. My steps echoed down the corridor, fast and purposeful, but my thoughts were a whirlwind.

Rhein needs us, Aria, Lydia murmured. We should do all we can to bring him back.

I won't do that, I told her firmly.

Back in the safety of my hotel room, I locked the door and dialed my daughter. She picked up on the second ring.

"Mommy!" Elona's, bright, energetic voice flooded the line.

"I miss you so much! When are you coming home? The house feels empty without you."

Tears prick

More th

S

into the bed, cradling the phone like a lifeline. "I iniss you too, sweetheart

little princess doing?"

jagged inside me. "I am doing great, Mommy. When's your work

<Chapter 154

trip over? I am still sad you won't be able to make it to my birthday, but I understand."

+ closed my eyes, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I will be back soon, baby. I promise. In fact, I'll be

back in time for your birthday. No more long trips after this, okay? Mommy's got you."

“Yayyyy! I am so excited, Mommy. Thank you so much. Love you to the moon and back,” she said enthusiastically, using our secret phrase.

“Love you more, my pup. Stay safe.”

We lingered a moment longer before I hung up, pressing the phone to my chest. The weight of secrets, revenge, and this fractured mate bond pressed down on me.

I barely slept that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Rhein lying broken in endless darkness.

Then I remembered

Damon had instin

You’re thinkin

I’m thinki

The n

ment Lydia reached him. The way life had rushed back into him. The way him.

ain, Lydia murmured.

ppened.

ked my suitcase.

en me more than I wanted to admit. Damon was far more dangerous than he had been

that somehow... he could still make my heart lose control. That terrified me. I refused to eat itself.

Vote

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 158

Aria's POV

I walked downstairs with my suitcase. Noah was already waiting in the living room with a cup of coffee in

hand.

He looked up as I approached. "Everything packed?"

I nodded. "My company overseas has been calling for days. There are contracts waiting for my approval."

I forced a smile. "And I don't want to stay away from Elona any longer than necessary."

The th

from

of my daughter immediately softened the knot inside my chest. I missed her. Every hour away too long.

Don't worry about the Sterling project. I'll keep watching it. His voice turned serious. "I've told people around the project. The moment there's an opening, I'll let you know

ratefully. "Thank you."

kled. "You've thanked me enough over the past five years."

ore I could answer, his phone vibrated sharply. Noah frowned. He glanced at the screen. Then his entire expression changed.

Gone was the easy smile. Gone was the relaxed businessman. For one brief second... I caught a glimpse of the Alpha hidden beneath his carefully crafted mask

My heartbeat slowed. "What happened?"

He stood immediately. "I have to leave."

"So suddenly?"

"The Whitemoon Pack needs me." The words slipped out naturally before he seemed to realize what he'd said. He paused, then gave me a resigned smile. "My people have run into a problem."

I frowned. Over the past few months... something had felt different. Every few weeks, another urgent matter called Noah away. Meetings. Emergencies. Unexpected crises.

At first, I'd accepted his explanations. Now... I wasn't so sure.

I stood. "Noah." He looked at me. "Is everything really alright?"

His smile returned, gentler this time. "It will be."

"You've been leaving more often lately."

His eyes

imperceptibly. "I know."

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"Then what is it?"

He hesitated, just long enough for me to notice. Finally, he shook his head. "Nothing you need to worry about."

I crossed my arms. I hated that answer, but I remained quiet.

Lydia frowned. He's hiding something.

I know.

Noah stepped closer. "Aria." His voice became unusually earnest. "If anything happens..." He waited until I met his eyes. "Anything at all. You call me first before anyone else." His tone left no room for argument.

"I don't care where I am. I don't care what I'm doing. I'll come." His eyes held mine with absolute certainty. "I'll drop everything."

Emotion tightened my throat. I nodded and promised to call.

Moments later, he was gone. I stood at the doorway long after his car disappeared.

Lydia shifted uneasily. Something feels wrong.

"I know." I couldn't explain it. But the uneasy feeling refused to leave.

The drive to the airport was unusually quiet. Then my phone buzzed. A breaking news notification appeared across the screen. My heart skipped. I tapped it open.

The news anchor's voice filled the car. "We've just received reports that Hargreaves Group is under investigation for suspected involvement in multiple illegal business

operations. Authorities have begun searching several company offices this morning, Financial accounts have reportedly been frozen pending further investigation..."

My eyes widened. "What?"

The screen showed Noah's headquarters surrounded by police vehicles. Employees poured out of the

building.

Reporters crowded the entrance. Questions flew from every direction. The headline burned into my eyes. HARGREAVES GROUP UNDER CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION.

"No..."

Without thinking, I hit Noah's contact. The call rang and rang. No answer. I tried again. Still nothing.

se climbed higher. "Noah, please answer."

private number. Then another. Nothing. A cold feeling settled in my stomach.

wed suddenly. I frowned. "Why are we stopping?"

looked ahead nervously. "Ms. Grayson... there seems to be someone blocking the road."

ked through the windshield. A black luxury SUV sat across the exit, completely cutting us off. The rear door opened. A familiar figure stepped out. My blood ran cold. Damon Hawthorne.

He wore a perfectly tailored black suit. He approached the vehicle.

The driver swallowed. "Should I turn around?"

+25 Ports

Before I could answer. Damen was already beside my door. He tapped lightly on the window once, calmly and patiently.

I pushed the door open and stepped out "What are you doing here?"

His eyes met mine. "I came to stop you from leaving."

My jaw tightened. "I don't have time for this." I tried to walk past him. He shifted only half a step. Enough to block my path.

“The investigation into Noah’s company, I ordered it.”

Ice spread through my veins at his confession.

I stared at him in disbelief. “Why would you target Noah’s company?”

His gaze never left mine. “Because you keep choosing him.”

Anger exploded inside me. “Have you lost your mind, Damon?”

“Maybe.” His answer came without hesitation. “But I’m done watching another man take what’s mine.”

“Mine?” I laughed bitterly. “We are divorced, Damon, in case you have forgotten.”

Pain flashed across his face, gone as quickly as it appeared. “I know, but I want you back. You are still my mate.”

“I can’t come back to you, Damon. I have moved on/Stay away from Noah.” My voice hardened. “He has nothing to do with this.”

“He has everything to do with it.” The air around Damon thickened with Alpha pressure. “If you leave this city today,” he said quietly, “the investigation won’t stop.”

My heart pounded. “What are you saying?”

His eyes darkened. “The moment you board that plane...” He held my gaze without blinking. “I’ll make sure Noah Hargreaves walks straight into prison.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

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Aria’s POV

I stared at Damon, barely recognizing the man standing before me.

“You’ve become despicable.” My voice came out colder than I expected.

His expression didn’t change. “If that’s what it takes, then it’s fine by me.”

Anger flared inside me. “You’d frame Noah just to keep me here?”

+25 Pointa

“I didn’t frame him.” His golden eyes never left mine. “I simply uncovered what already existed. Now, get in the car.”

I clenched my jaw. If Damon truly intended to ruin Noah, arguing here wouldn’t accomplish anything. I opened the rear door myself. “I’m only getting in because this concerns Noah.”

The door closed behind me. Damon reached beside him and picked up a thick document folder. Without a word, he placed it in my lap.

“Read this.”

I opened it. The first page made my stomach tighten. Financial transfers. Shipping permits. Harbor acquisition records. Every page carried Noah’s signature.

My heartbeat quickened as I continued reading. Five years ago... the same year I disappeared... Noah had been fighting for control of the eastern harbor. The competition had been ruthless. Several rival companies had vanished almost overnight.

Then I reached the documents near the middle. My fingers froze. Bribery. Forged customs approvals. Falsified land ownership records. Witness statements. Bank transfers. Every accusation was backed by

evidence.

“No...” I whispered. “This...” I looked up at Damon. “Where did you get this?”

“I’ve had it for years.”

My eyes widened. “You’ve been sitting on this?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you use it?”

“Because it wasn’t necessary.” His answer chilled me. “Until now.”

I looked back down. If these files reached a human court... Noah would face criminal prosecution. But that wasn’t even the worst part.

Werewolves who held positions as Alphas or pack leaders were bound by laws beyond human courts. A conviction would immediately trigger an investigation by the Werewolf Council.

If the charges were upheld... Noah could lose everything. His company. His authority. His standing among the packs Perhaps even his title as Alpha.

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Lydia whimpered. We can't let this happen to Noah.

+ slowly closed the folder. Silence filled the car. Outside, traffic continued as though nothing had

happened.

Inside... my world was collapsing.

I gripped the file tightly. "What do you want?"

"You already know." His gaze settled on mine. want you to stay."

"No, I won't."

His eyes hardened. "Then Noah falls."

Rage surged through me. "You think this will make me love you?"

"I don't expect love." He stared at me. "All I want is to have you close. Just agree to my terms, Aria."

I closed my eyes. Joshua... Dad... Elona... Noah... everyone who had sacrificed for me flashed through my mind.

Noah had given me shelter. Protected my pregnancy. Helped me rebuild my life. I couldn't repay that by letting him lose everything because of me.

Lydia's voice softened. We can't let him fall.

My nails dug into my palms. I know. Every path ended with someone getting hurt. If I left... Noah paid the price. If I stayed... I walked straight back into Damon's control.

The choice wasn't a choice at all.

I opened my eyes. "Fine, I will stay." The words tasted like poison. "What now?"

Damon's shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly. "The investigation ends. I will make a call to the prosecutors, asking them to withdraw. No charges will reach court."

Relief surged within me.

He reached for his phone. My pulse eased slightly. Then he paused. Instead of dialing... he looked at me. One corner of his mouth lifted into the faintest smile.

“I want something first.”

Every instinct inside me sharpened. “What?”

“A gesture of good faith.”

I folded my arms. “What exactly are you talking about?”

He held my gaze for several long seconds. Then, in a low voice, he said, “Come here.” He patted his thigh. “Sit on my lap, Aria.” His voice was low and velvet rough.

“Give me a little sweetener. Only then will I call the prosecutor and drop the charges against your Noah.”

Rage ignited in my chest, hot and blinding. My hands clenched into fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms.

“You’re despicable,” said coldly. “Is your wolf so weak that you need to beg for scraps?”

Damon’s gray eyes darkened with hunger and triumph. A slow, predatory smile curved his lips. “Careful, mate. Insult me again and I might demand more than a kiss. Sit.”

I trembled with rage, every muscle screaming to lunge at him. How much more of this humiliation would I get?

Lydia’s fury mixed with reluctant heat. He pushes too far. But we chose this path.

I drew a deep breath, clawing back my composure. I had imagined this exact scenario. Revenge demanded sacrifice. I would use everything, including Damon Hawthorne.

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I moved forward and lowered myself onto his lap, straddling one powerful thigh. His body heat burned through our clothes, and the solid muscle beneath me reminded me just how dangerous he was.

Damon’s large hand settled possessively on my hip, fingers digging in just enough to anchor me.

“Good girl,” he murmured, his voice thick. “Now the sweetener. Kiss me like you mean it.”

I cupped his face and pressed a light, deliberate kiss to his lips.

Damon growled softly into the kiss, his free hand sliding up my back. I pulled away just enough to meet his

eyes.

“There,” I whispered, my voice steady. “Your sweetener, Now keep your word.”

M

Chapter 157-

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 160

Damon’s POV

Ever since Aria and Noah returned, I’ve been laying my pieces perfectly.

Every calculated move I made had funneled Aria exactly where I wanted. Into my grasp.

Yet earlier, in that car, when she agreed to my terms just to protect Noah Hargreaves, fury exploded within

My claws dug into the wooden railing, splintering it. She would do this? Agree to do whatever I wanted just to shield that Whitemoon bastard?

Rhein exploded inside me, a feral roar tearing through our link. Mark her! Claim her again now! She is ours! No one else’s!

Easy, I growled back at him, though my blood boiled white-hot. She despises me. Yet she’d let me touch her, take her, if it saves him? How deep do her feelings for Noah run?

The thought gutted me. My mate, carrying herself with that defiant grace, offering her body as a bargaining chip for another Alpha.

My wolf surged again, flooding me with images of pinning her down, my teeth sinking into her neck to renew the mate bond, filling her until there was no room for doubt.

I turned sharply and descended the stairs, needing some fresh air.

If I wanted Aria to be mine forever, perhaps I needed to get her pregnant with a pup.

Rhein howled beneath my skin, pacing restlessly. Yes! She belongs here with us. Breed her. Fill her with our pup. Then she'll never leave. She'll never choose another.

I smiled grimly. One way or another, Aria Grayson would be bound to me forever. No more pieces on the board. This time, it is checkmate.

Aria's POV

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to attend my daughter's birthday the next day. I sent gifts instead.

Damon offered me a partnership contract. I was to help his wolf heal. He was to refrain from destroying Noah and help me get back my father's company.

I didn't trust him, not even a little. So before I signed the contract, I had my lawyer comb through every

clause.

Then I read it myself. Again and again. I searched for loopholes, for buried conditions, for the kind of trap the Damon Hawthorne I remembered would leave behind with a satisfied smile.

"There has to be something," I muttered, rubbing my aching temple.

Lydia stirred inside me. He's an Alpha. Cunning wolves always leave themselves an escape route.

Exactly.

I

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My lawyer adjusted his glasses before sliding the contract back toward me.

"Miss Grayson, I've checked it three times. It is okay."

Peints

I looked up. "There are no hidden clauses? No conditions that favor the Hawthorne family? Nothing that could later be interpreted against me?"

"Not at all." He smiled helplessly. "I wish could find something. It would justify the number of hours I've spent on this contract."

I blinked, still surprised.

sighed. “This agreement is... surprisingly fair.”

wined hard. “Fair?”

fact...” He tapped one paragraph. “Several clauses lean in your favor.”

brows knitted together. “You’re telling me Damon Hawthorne voluntarily gave me the better deal?”

I don’t know his reasons.” My lawyer shrugged. “But legally speaking, you’re well protected.”

That made even less sense.

Something’s wrong, Lydia whispered. No Alpha willingly gives away leverage.

I know. I read every page one last time before finally picking up the pen. If there was a hidden trap, I’d find it eventually. I signed.

The partnership officially began two days later. I walked into Hawthorne Group headquarters fully prepared for war.

I was prepared for Damon to corner me, to remind me of our agreement, to demand payment in the form of those ridiculous “dates.” Instead, nothing happened.

Our first meeting lasted nearly two hours, and every discussion revolved around construction timelines, investment projections, pack territory development, and security for the joint project.

Not once did Damon steer the conversation elsewhere. Not once did he mention our mate bond. When the meeting ended, he simply closed his file.

“We’ll reconvene on Thursday.”

I stared. “That’s it?”

His eyes met mine. “For today.” He nodded politely. “Have a safe trip home, Ms. Grayson.”

Ms. Graves not Aria. I watched him leave the conference room. “What the hell just happened?” I

ansion route,” he said during one presentation, pointing toward the projected sportation costs by twelve percent.”

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I studied the figures. He was right.

“What do you think?” he asked, wanting to hear my opinion.

I forced myself to focus. It’s better than my original proposal.”

He nodded once. “All right. I’ll have the engineering team proceed.”

No smirk, no smug look, no attempt to use my admission against me. Just work, only work.

A few more days passed. I hated admitting it, but Damon was exceptional. Every problem had already been anticipated. Every risk had three backup plans. Every decision was calculated without being reckless.

Watching him command an entire room of senior executives was nothing like the man I’d known five years

ago.

No unnecessary cruelty, no explosive temper, no humiliating anyone to prove his authority. It unsettled me because this version of Damon didn’t fit the monster I’d spent five years hating.

Lydia watched silently. He’s changed.

Maybe he has.

Unfortunately, working beside him came with its own problems. One afternoon, I reached across the conference table to retrieve a file. At the exact same moment, so did he.

Our fingers brushed. A tiny spark shot through my skin, and my breath caught. The mate bond pulsed deep inside my chest.

Lydia purred. Mate...

His fingers froze against mine for barely a heartbeat, then he calmly withdrew.

“You first.” His voice was low and controlled, as though he hadn’t felt anything.

I quickly grabbed the folder. “Thank you.”

But my ears were burning. Why was my heart beating so fast? Why did his scent suddenly seem stronger?

Lydia sighed dreamily. He smells wonderful.

You're impossible.

You're lying if you disagree.

I clenched my jaw.

During another meeting, we stood shoulder to shoulder, studying a three-dimensional map of the project

site.

His arm brushed mine. Heat spread through my entire body.

Damon glanced at me, and our eyes locked.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

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K Chapter 158

Aria's POV

Damon looked away and stepped back on his own. The warmth disappeared.

It kept happening. Sometimes our eyes met across the conference room, and the air would suddenly become unbearably heavy.

The mate bond would hum between us like an invisible thread pulling tighter. My pulse would race. I would feel Rhein's presence lingering deep inside Damon. Then Damon would be the first to look

away.

Every single time, he always stepped back first, always restored the distance, always left me standing there with emotions I didn't want to examine. It was infuriating.

He'd been the one insisting he needed my presence to stabilize Rhein. He'd been ... one who proposed those absurd dates. So why wasn't he asking for them?

Had he changed his mind? Found another way? Or had he simply decided I wasn't worth the effort anymore?

The last thought lingered in my mind. I froze. "Why does that bother me?"

Lydia's voice was maddeningly gentle. Because part of you expected him to ask.

"I absolutely didn't."

Then why are you disappointed?

"I am not disappointed."

Liar.

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Lydia was right, and I hated that she had noticed before I

did.

Because buried somewhere beneath my anger, beneath five years of resentment, was a tiny,

ridiculous disappointment that Damon Hawthorne hadn't asked me for a single date.

One day, after the meeting ended later than usual, I closed my laptop, expecting Justin to walk me to the entrance as always.

Instead, Damon stood. "I'll take you somewhere."

I looked at him cautiously. "Where?"

"You'll know when we get there."

crossed my arms. "If this has anything to do with your so-called dates..."

"It doesn't." His answer came so quickly that I paused.

I searched his face for deception. His scent remained steady, with no spike in his heartbeat, no flicker of guilt, just certainty. "Fine."

An hour later, the familiar iron gates came into view. My breathing stopped.

He had brought me to the Silvermoon Pack Estate. My old home. The place I'd fled five years ago. The place I had sworn never to return.

The guards immediately straightened. “Alpha.” Their fists landed over their chests before they bowed deeply.

Then they looked at me. Recognition flashed across their faces.

“Luna...” One guard instinctively blurted it out before quickly correcting himself. “Ms. Grayson.”

I lowered my gaze. Luna. That title no longer belonged to me. Damon didn’t correct them, nor did he acknowledge it.

The estate hadn’t changed, not even a little.

We went in through the front doors.

The moment I stepped inside, my heart lurched. Everything was exactly the way it was before I left. The cream-colored sofa, the carved wooden table, the crystal vase I had loved so much.

Nothing had moved. Nothing had been replaced. I slowly walked farther inside.

Lydia was stunned. Nothing changed...

I stared at the fireplace. The silver candleholders still stood on the mantel.

I wandered toward the bookshelf, my footsteps becoming slower. There, wedged between two history volumes, sat an old novel.

My novel. I carefully pulled it free. A dried maple leaf marked the page, the same page I’d stopped reading five years ago. My breath caught. “I forgot this here...”

Lydia whispered softly. It still smells like us.

The book trembled in my hands. Five years. Five whole years. No one had touched it.

I looked around again. The embroidered blanket I’d thrown over the armchair, the moon-shaped wind chime hanging beside the window, the hand-painted ceramic mug with tiny wolves chasing

stars around the rim.

+25 Pom

Everything remained exactly where I’d left it. I slowly turned toward Damon. “You never changed anything?”

He followed my gaze across the room. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why?”

His eyes lingered on the bookshelf. “I just didn’t want to.”

My chest suddenly felt unbearably tight.

A familiar laugh echoed down the hallway. My eyes widened.

Grandpa Walter.

He hurried toward us far faster than anyone his age should have managed. “Ariel”

My eyes stung. “Grandpa...”

Walter reached me and immediately took both my hands in his weathered ones. “My child.” His voice shook. “You’ve finally come home.”

For a second, I almost forgot everything. I smiled despite myself. “It’s been a long time, Grandpa.” He looked me over from head to toe. “You’ve gotten thinner.”

I laughed softly. “I’ve been busy.”

“You must have been working too hard, my child.”

“Something like that.”

He clicked his tongue. “I always told Damon work wasn’t everything. Now I am telling you the same. Please take it easy on yourself.”

“I will.”

Walter smiled before patting my hand affectionately. “I’ve missed you terribly.”

The warmth in his eyes almost broke me. Unlike everyone else in this family, Walter had always protected me, even when everyone else misunderstood me.

Lydia sighed happily. He still loves us.

I know...

Walter led me to the sitting room himself. Tea was quickly prepared, and he insisted on pouring my cup despite the servants hovering nearby.

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“So.” He smiled. “Tell me everything. What have you been up to these past few years?”

carefully chose my words. “I built an architectural firm and have been managing it.”

“I heard.” He nodded proudly. “You’ve done remarkably well.”

“It’s been... challenging.”

“And your father?”

The smile faded from my face. “He is still recuperating.”

Walter sighed heavily. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“He will be fine.” I smiled weakly.

“I am sure he will. He is a strong man.”

+25 Posts

His words made my eyes sting again. We talked about work, about business, about changing balance among the packs, about ordinary things.

I carefully avoided mentioning my daughter.

Throughout the conversation, I kept feeling Damon’s eyes on me. He hardly spoke. He simply sat nearby, listening, completely focused.

Every time I casually mentioned work, his attention sharpened and he contributed a little.

Why is he looking at us like that? Lydia wondered.

I don’t know.

It’s almost like he actually cares.

My grip tightened around my teacup. Impossible.

Walter suddenly laughed. “You know...” His eyes moved between Damon and me. “It makes this old

wolf happy seeing you two sitting together again.”

My shoulders stiffened. Walter smiled hopefully.

“Now that the Moon Goddess has guided you back to each other... have you considered reconciling?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 162

Aria's POV

There was silence. I slowly placed my teacup onto the table. “I'm not here because we've reconciled.”

Walter's smile faltered. “Aria...”

“I haven't forgotten what happened.”

The room became deathly still.

“I haven't stopped searching for the truth behind Joshua's death.” My voice remained steady. “And I haven't given up on finding justice for my father.”

Walter's expression turned sorrowful. “My child...”

“I can work with Damon.” I met his eyes without hesitation. “But that's all.”

Lydia whimpered quietly inside me. I ignored her.

Walter looked at me for a long moment: There was guilt in his eyes, and something that looked like

regret.

His lips parted. “Actually... there's something you...”

Before Walter could continue, Damon spoke. “Grandfather...”

Walter looked toward him. Damon's expression was calm. “Let's not talk about that.”

Walter fell silent, his shoulders slumping. After several seconds, he sighed. “Okay.”

Confusion twisted inside me. What were they hiding? I looked between the two men. Neither spoke. The silence only deepened my suspicion.

I waited for Damon to seize the opportunity and have Walter persuade me again to come back to him the way he had done before, but he did none of that

Lydia sounded just as confused as I felt. He stopped Walter from saying something that could be important.

I noticed. The question, though, was why?

I had no answer to that. It was becoming harder and harder to predict the Alpha sitting across from me. And somehow, that frightened me more than the Damon I used to know.

Walter slowly rose from his chair. His kind smile returned, though sadness still lingered in his eyes.

“Aria.”

“Yes, Grandfather?”

“Would you mind taking a walk around the gardens for a little while? I need to have a private conversation with this stubborn grandson of mine.”

He shot Damon an exasperated look. Damon merely rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Walter squeezed my hand gently. “I won’t keep you waiting long.”

I hesitated before standing. “All right.”

Damon’s POV

The office door clicked shut behind Aria. Her scent lingered. I closed my eyes for one dangerous second, breathing her in until my chest hurt.

A cane struck the marble floor. Tap. Tap. Tap. Grandfather Walter stood behind me, his eyes fixed

on my back.

“What exactly are you doing, Damon?”

His voice wasn’t angry. It was tired.

I turned slowly. “What does it look like?”

It looks like you’re playing with fire.”

A humorless smile tugged at my lips. “I made a deal with Aria.”

“A deal?”

“Yes. She heals my wolf. I help her take back her father’s company.”

Walter stared at me for several long seconds. “Is that all?”

I nodded. “That’s all.”

! He snorted. “You expect me to believe that?”

I said nothing. He walked toward the window overlooking the Silvermoon Pack estate, where guards trained below.

“You were never a good liar, Damon.”

“I wasn’t lying.”

“No.” He looked at me. “You simply left out the truth.”

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Silence settled between us. Finally, he sighed.

“Damon... think about this carefully. Think as an Alpha and stop acting like a lovesick pup.”

My jaw tightened.

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Walter continued. “The Silvermoon Pack needs stability. Your wolf is barely standing. The elders are watching every move you make.”

“I know.”

“And Aria...” He paused. “She has already left you.”

The words landed harder than I wanted to admit.

“I will make her mine again.”

“No.” Walter shook his head slowly. “She survived you, Damon.” His gaze hardened. girl. Let her be!”

oroke that

Each word struck like a blade. I remembered the day she left, the look in her eyes. It was not hatred or anger. She was just fed up with being unwanted.

Rhein whimpered inside me. We hurt our mate.

I know, and we will fix it.

Walter's voice pulled me back. "I love that child too."

I looked up. He wasn't speaking as the former Alpha. He was speaking as the man who had watched Aria grow into the woman she was.

"I want her to be happy, and if that happiness isn't with you..."

"It will be, Grandfather."

His brows furrowed. I met his eyes without hesitation.

"What I want..." I spoke quietly. "I get."

Walter stared at me. "You sound just like your father."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It wasn't a compliment."

Another heavy silence stretched between us.

Finally, he asked, "Have you told her yet?"

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I looked toward the door she'd just walked through. Tell her I still loved her? Tell her every heartbeat belonged to her? Tell her that not one sunrise had passed without regretting letting her

My fingers curled into fists. "Not yet. The time isn't right."

Walter folded his arms. "And when will it be?"

"When she's safe."

His expression softened slightly.

“I love her, and until I am finally able to make her understand that, I’ll do everything it takes to protect her.”

Walter studied me for a long moment. “You have been investigating Claudia for a wh

My expression remained unreadable.

“When are you going to tell Aria the things you have found?”

I held his gaze. “I am still gathering evidence, Grandfather. I will tell her when I have obtained everything that is needed to put Claudia exactly where she belongs.”

The truth is, my investigation into the case has gone deeper than I imagined.

I’ve been tracing how Claudia framed Ronan Grayson for years. Every lead I have obtained points to the same wall. Someone powerful is shielding her.

I do not know who it is yet, but this person has been directing Claudia. That’s why I’ve never gathered enough clean evidence for the Council. It’s also why keep her close. Better a snake in plain sight than one in the grass.

Also, now that Aria is back, I fear that if she starts digging into the case, she might force the powerful shadow backing Claudia to strike at her directly.

My jaw tightened. I won’t let that happen. I will always protect her.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 163

Damon’s POV

My thoughts drifted to the past few days, working beside Aria day in and day out. Her scent filled the conference rooms. The way the fractured mate bond hummed every time our eyes met.

Rhein had been in constant agony, aching for his mate, for the completion only she could bring, and I had done nothing to ease it.

I throttled my own hunger deliberately every single time. Part of it was fear that pushing too hard would send her running again. But the darker truth ran deeper, and I admitted it only to myself.

I didn't want to heal Rhein too fast, because as long as my wolf stayed wounded, Aria staved! For now, I would keep slowing down the healing. Keep Aria close under the guise of

Aria's POV

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I paced around the garden. Birds sang somewhere overhead, but even that couldn't calm the restless knot in my chest.

I exhaled slowly. These past few days had been exhausting. Work, meetings, contracts, and waiting. Waiting for Damon to bring up the so-called treatment for his injured wolf.

Every day I expected him to corner me and say it was time. But he never did, not once. It shouldn't have bothered me. Yet somehow, it did.

clenched my fists. Ever since I'd agreed to stay beside Damon, the mate bond had become impossible to ignore,

It was faint, damaged, and broken in places. Yet every now and then I felt it, a sudden ache, a wave of yearning, an overwhelming need to protect.

None of those emotions belonged to me. They belonged to Rhein, his wolf. It made no sense that Damon himself did nothing. No flirting. No touching. No suggestive remarks. Nothing.

It was as if his wolf was desperately reaching for me while the man himself kept pulling away.

Maybe he's respecting your boundaries, Lydia whispered hopefully.

Or maybe he's planning something.

You always expect the worst from him, Lydia said.

Because experience taught me to.

C

Lydia fell silent. She couldn't argue with that. I couldn't read Damon. I never could, not in the past

not even now.

He had been indifferent and distant in the past. His choices had shattered my heart.

Now he suddenly acted differently. He acted gentler, patient, and protective. I didn't know what to

believe anymore.

So I chose the safest option: believe nothing. If I convinced myself every act of kindness had another motive, then he couldn't hurt me again.

I rubbed my temples and wandered deeper into the courtyard, letting the breeze cool my skin.

Then bright, artificial laughter reached me.

I looked up and saw Claudia. She walked arm in arm with Lilith Hawthorne as though lifelong sisters.

Claudia wore an elegant white dress that screamed innocence.

My sharp ears caught their words.

"You're worrying too much," Lilith said between giggles.

"I can't help it." Claudia sighed. "I'm not even sure Damon wants to marry me."

My fingers tightened around my dress.

Lydia let out a low growl beneath my skin.

"I mean it, Claudia continued, her voice losing its usual confidence. "He hasn't outrightly accepted me. I just can't tell what he's thinking."

Lilith laughed again, completely unconcerned.

"That's because Damon doesn't know what he wants yet." There was complete certainty in Lilith's voice. "Just look at him. If he truly didn't want you around, would he have kept you by his side all this time?"

There was silence.

My chest tightened, Lydia's claws scraped against the floor of my mind.

Then Claudia spoke quietly.

"I suppose you are right."

“Of course I am. Now come, let’s head inside. My mother is waiting for you,” Lilith continued cheerfully. “She wants to continue your bridal lessons.”

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The words landed like tiny needles beneath my skin. A bittersweet ache spread through my chest.

They hadn’t noticed me yet. I considered walking away.

Then Lilith finally looked up. Her smile disappeared. She blinked. “Aria?”

Recognition came slowly. I could see the shock on her face. I’d changed. I didn’t look like that timid

girl she once knew.

Lilith looked me up and down. “You...” She frowned. “You look different.”

“Lilith, it has been a while.”

Before she could respond, Claudia’s expression shifted flawlessly. There it was. The victim mask

“I didn’t know you were coming here today, Aria.” Her voice trembled just enough. ” w come if I knew, to avoid making things awkward.”

Lydia snorted. Here she goes.

“I know you are now working with Damon at the office,” Claudia continued softly. “I understand. I hope we can all get along.”

almost admired how convincing she sounded.

Lilith immediately stepped beside her protectively. “You’re unbelievable, Aria.”

flooked at her. “Excuse me?”

“You left my brother. You chose Noah over him.” Her voice grew sharper. “So why are you back? Why are you back after rejecting him?”

“I think you are...” I wanted to explain that she was misunderstanding the situation, but she cut me

off.

“You already have another Alpha!” Her wolf aura flared. “So why keep seducing my brother?”

I stared at her. Then at Claudia, Claudia lowered her eyes/perfectly, pretending to be embarrassed. “Don’t say that...”

Lilith ignored her. “You’ve already made your choice, Aria! Leave my brother alone.”

“I came here for business.”

Lilith scoffed. “Business? Of course that is what you will say.” She folded her arms. “You’ve always been selfish.”

Something inside me waited for pain, for heartbreak, for humiliation. Instead, there was nothing.

I felt calm. The old Aria would have lowered her head, apologized, and endured. Not anymore.

You’ve grown, Lydia said proudly.

had to. I looked directly at Lilith. “Are you done?”

frowned. “Excuse me?”

ou’re done saying your mind, I’d like to continue my walk.”

th looked stunned. Claudia quickly stepped forward. “Aria, please don’t misunderstand. I never anted to come between you and Damon.”

laughed. “You came between us years ago.”

Her face stiffened. “But that’s in the past.”

1 smiled faintly. “Yeah, and unlike you, I’ve moved on.”

Claudia’s eyes flashed, only for a second.

Then footsteps echoed from the mansion. Every instinct inside me recognized them.

It was Damon.

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Here it comes, Lydia muttered. She's about to put on a performance

I knew that look too well.

Just as I expected, Claudia held me, wanting to pull me to the ground with her and act as though I

had pushed and hit her. Scenarios like that had played out in the past over and over again. Everyone always believed Claudia.

This time, I wasn't going to give her the chance to accuse me wrongly. Before she could act, I grabbed her wrist hard.

ly carry

She stared at me in shock. She hadn't expected me to interrupt her performance. Neither had

Lilith.

"What are you doing?" Lilith shouted.

I smiled coldly. "If she's planning to accuse me anyway, I may as well earn it."

Crack! The slap echoed across the courtyard. Claudia's head snapped sideways. She screamed.

"You..."

Crack!

I gave her another slap, then another, and yet another.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Her perfectly styled hair came loose. More tears streamed down her face. She struggled wildly. "Let go of me!"

I tightened my grip. "No, I won't."

"Aria!"

"You've framed me in the past, you've lied, you've manipulated everyone, you've cried fake tears for years. So cry for real."

Each time I spoke, a slap landed on her face.

Claudia shrieked. “Alpha Damon!” She cried desperately. “Help me!”

I didn’t stop. For once, every slap carried years of humiliation, years of betrayal, years of

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 164

✓Chapter 161

swallowing my pain in silence. I wasn’t going to do any of that anymore.

No one was going to make me the villain without paying the price first.

Claudia’s hand was raised, her face turned in shock from the force of my strike.

I could see the disbelief in her eyes, the way she stared at me as if she couldn’t understand how I, Aria Grayson, had dared to touch her.

For years, Claudia had believed she could do anything she wanted, and Damon would always stand behind her. She had believed she was untouchable. This time, that had changed.

My breathing was heavy as I stared at her. I had spent years learning how to survive in a world where power was everything.

Running a business had taught me patience, strategy, and how to read people.

I had also learned how to fight. How to protect myself. How to strike when someone threatened

me, and right now, every instinct inside me was screaming that Claudia deserved to know I was no longer the same woman she had pushed around before.

She hurt us. She threatened our pup. Lydia’s growl vibrated through my mind. She thinks we are weak because we carry life inside us,

I clenched my fists. I know. Let’s make her learn.

Lilith cried out. “Aria, what are you doing?” She reached for me, but I stepped back before she could touch me. Her hand stopped halfway. She looked surprised.

Then she turned toward Damon. “Damon, she is attacking Claudia. Please help!”

My eyes moved to him. There it was. The moment I had been expecting. The moment when Damon Hawthorne would defend Claudia like he always did. The moment when he would look at me like I was the problem.

Lydia bared her teeth. He will choose her again, just like he had done in the past.

My heart tightened. Because no matter how angry I was, a part of me was still waiting and hoping.

lowly and calmly. He pulled me back. I let him.

<Chapter 161

Damon looked directly at Claudia. "I saw everything."

The garden went silent.

Claudia blinked. "What?"

Damon reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "I saw what happened."

My eyebrows furrowed. He pressed the screen and turned it toward everyone.

The recording played. The angle was perfect. It showed Claudia stepping toward me aggressively. tshowed her hand moving toward me first, and it showed me reacting, defending myself, not

attacking.

Claudia's face drained of color. "That's not what happened," she whispered.

Damon's expression remained cold. "The footage says otherwise."

"But Damon, you know me," Claudia pleaded. "You know I would never do something like that."

Damon looked at her with no warmth or sympathy. "You should apologize."

Claudia stared at him. "Damon..."

"You heard me. Apologize to Aria, right now."

Her lips trembled. Slowly, she turned toward me. "I'm sorry, Aria." Her voice was broken.

I said nothing. I didn't need to.

Damon looked at Lilith. "Take Claudia away and have someone look at her injuries."

Lilith looked stunned. "But Damon..."

"Now!" The command of an Alpha filled his voice.

Lilith lowered her head immediately. "Yes, Alpha."

Claudia looked at him one last time, as if waiting for him to soften, to call her back. He didn't. Damon turned away from her and turned toward me.

I couldn't move. I couldn't understand what had just happened. Damon Hawthorne had protected

not Claudia?

hand lightly on my arm. "Come with me."

lead me away, but my mind was already racing. This wasn't the Damon I knew. man who had always found a reason to excuse Claudia. Something had changed.

e into a quiet room away from the garden. The moment the door closed, I pulled my

r

arm from his grasp.

"What was that?"

Damon looked at me silently.

I stepped closer. "Why did you do that?".

Still, he said nothing.

My anger rose. "You spent so much time believing Claudia over me. You let her hurt me. You let everyone think I was the problem." My voice shook. "And now you suddenly defend me?"

His jaw tightened. "Aria..."

"No. I want an answer."

His eyes met mine. For a second, I saw pain there.

Then suddenly, his expression changed. His hand flew to his chest. I froze.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 165

Aria's POV

"Damon?"

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His breathing became uneven. His face twisted as if he was fighting something inside himself. A low, broken growl escaped his throat.

It was not his human voice. It was his wolf.

"Rhein?" My eyes widened.

Damon staggered backward. His wolf's presence slammed into my mind.

I felt Lydia react instantly. Something is wrong with Rhein, Aria.

I reached for him. "Damon!"

His body suddenly lost strength. I barely caught him before he hit the floor. His weight crashed against me, and panic exploded through my chest.

"Damon!"

There was no response. His eyes were closed. His breathing was shallow.

pressed my hand against his face. "Please, wake up."

There was nothing. My heart pounded violently. This wasn't an ordinary collapse. I could feel it. I wrapped my arms around him, every muscle in his body locked. His breathing became ragged. His heartbeat pounded wildly. His Alpha wolf was spiraling, trapped somewhere between instinct and nightmare.

Lydia lifted her head inside me. He's drowning.

I know. It wasn't the first time I'd seen this.

Years ago, when Elona had been born, she'd suffered a terrifying fever. She'd slipped into a trauma response, causing her little body to shake helplessly.

I'd nearly lost her. The pack physician had guided me through it.

"Use your blood bond," he'd told me. "A mother's wolf can soothe what medicine cannot."

That day, I'd learned to quiet another wolf's pain. Now... I did the same.

I tightened my embrace around Damon. Closing my eyes, I let Lydia step forward. Our wolf aura flowed through my body, slipping into his.

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The invisible thread brushed against Rhein. For a heartbeat, his massive wolf snarled in panic.

Then Lydia nudged him gently. You're safe, she whispered.

Rhein stopped shaking. His frantic growls slowly faded into exhausted whimpers.

I felt Damon's heartbeat become steadier until the terrifying rhythm finally settled into something

normal. His breathing evened out.

The nightmare released him. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"It's over," I murmured.

When I was certain he was stable, I tried to pull away. I barely moved an inch. Strong arms

tightened around my waist. Damon held me firmly against him.

"Stay." His voice was hoarse and low, almost pleading. "Just... a little longer."

I froze. For reasons I couldn't explain... I didn't push him away.

The room became quiet. So quiet I could hear both our heartbeats.

Lydia sighed softly. He needed this.

Don't sympathize with him.

I'm sympathizing with Rhein.

I closed my eyes in frustration. Even our wolves refused to stay enemies. Several minutes later, Damon slowly loosened his hold. His eyes searched mine.

“How did you know?”

I frowned. “Know what?”

“How to save me from a trauma response.” His voice remained calm. “You reacted immediately.” His gaze sharpened. “You knew exactly how to calm me.”

I looked away. “I’ve done it before.”

His expression changed. A dangerous silence filled the room.

“When?”

I didn’t answer.

His jaw tightened. “Aria.” Then he asked the question. “You soothed another wolf before?”

I nodded once. “Yes.”

His eyes darkened. “The kind of soothing you just used... only wolves with the deepest bonds can perform it.”

My pulse skipped.

His voice became quieter. “You did that... with Noah?”

My eyes snapped to his. For a second... neither of us spoke. Then I shoved him backward.

“My private life is none of your business.”

His shoulders stiffened. “So you’re really together?”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“Answer me, Aria.”

“No.” I folded my arms tightly. “You lost the right to ask questions about my life a long time ago.”

His eyes narrowed. A cold smile tugged at one corner of his lips.

“As things stand,” he said evenly, “we’re partners.” His voice grew colder. “Our cooperation involves Silvermoon territory. Noah Hargreaves once plotted against my harbor operations.”

He didn’t blink. “If you’re involved with him... I need to know whether the two of you intend to use this partnership against me.”

The accusation hit like a slap.

“You think I’d betray our agreement?”

“I think,” Damon answered quietly, “you’ve deceived me before, His gaze never left mine. “So tell me, why would I believe you wouldn’t do it again?”

Anger exploded inside me. “I never worked with Noah against you.”

He remained silent.

“I lied because I wanted to leave.” My throat tightened. “I never worked with Noah to scheme against you.”

The room fell completely still. Damon didn’t move. Didn’t interrupt. Several long seconds passed. Then... the corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly. Not mockery. Relief.

“You finally admitted it.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I investigated it long ago.” His eyes softened. “I already knew.”

!

I stared at him. “You knew?”

“Ldid.” His voice was calm. “I only wanted to hear you say it yourself.”

I opened my mouth... then closed it again.

Lydia muttered, What a stubborn, insufferable Alpha.

I ignored her. Instead, I folded my arms. “About earlier...” I met his eyes. “...why did you defend me?”

His expression didn’t change.

“You humiliated Claudia in front of everyone.” I searched his face. “Isn’t she the one you care

about?”

Damon actually looked confused. “Claudia?”

“Yes. You’ve protected her for years.”

His brows slowly knitted together. “I never cared for Claudia. I never slept with her.”

laughed bitterly. “Right. You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

“If you truly never slept with her, why then did you once believe the pup she was carrying was yours?”

Damon’s voice was perfectly steady. “I never once claimed the child was mine.”

I frowned.

“I believed Claudia had saved my life.” His eyes grew distant. “I owed her. So when rumors spread... I allowed them to continue.”

His expression hardened. “I thought protecting her reputation was repayment for saving me.”

I stared at him, unable to speak.

“But I never touched her. Never.” The certainty in his voice left no room for doubt. “I never crossed that line.”

Everything I’d believed... everything I’d hated him for.. suddenly felt unstable.

He stepped closer. Close enough for our wolves to sense each other again. Rhein stirred quietly beneath his Alpha. Lydia answered with a cautious breath.

Damon’s voice dropped to almost a whisper. “From the beginning...” His eyes locked onto mine. “there has only ever been one woman.”

His gaze burned with an intensity that stole my breath. “You.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 166

Aria's POV

Damon's words echoed through the room. My chest tightened.

He's telling the truth, Lydia whispered.

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I forced Lydia back before she could soften any further. The past wasn't something a few heartfel

words could erase.

I took a firm step backward. Then another, putting distance between us.

"Damon." My voice came out calm. "I couldn't care less."

His brows drew together.

"I don't care who you love. I don't care whether it's Claudia or someone else."

His expression stiffened.

I folded my arms over my chest. "Whatever relationship the two of you have is none of my business.'

He opened his mouth. "Aria..."

And I don't want to hear another word about it." I cut him off before he could continue. "So from now on... let's keep things strictly professional."

His eyes never left mine. I ignored the uncomfortable weight of his stare. "Today's incident could disrupt the entire project."

"It won't happen again."

"You don't know that." I shook my head. "Your wolf isn't stable."

Rhein stirred uneasily beneath Damon.

Lydia sighed. He's exhausted.

I continued before my wolf could distract me again. "If another trauma episode happens during an important meeting, we'll lose time, money, and credibility. So here's how we'll handle it."

He remained silent.

"From now on, we will have one fixed soothing session every week."

His brows lifted slightly. "Every week."

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I kept my voice completely emotionless. "Yes, once every week. This arrangement exists solely to keep the project on schedule." I emphasized every word. "Nothing else."

Stence stretched between us. Damon watched me for several long seconds. There was disappointment in his eyes.

Finally... he gave a slow nod. "All right, I agree."

I nodded once. "Good."

Without another word, I turned around and walked away.

When I got home to my rented apartment, I dropped my bag onto the sofa and leaned against the wall. Only then did I finally breathe.

Lydia curled into herself. That hurt him. We could have given him more sessions a week or four.

I closed my eyes. Don't start.

A sharp knock interrupted my thoughts. Three quick knocks. I already knew who it was. Opening the door, I found Noah standing outside. The moment he saw me, his face darkened. "What happened? I have been away for days due to the lawsuit. I finally got cleared today."

"I'm glad you are free. Don't worry about me. I'm fine." I smiled weakly.

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"You don't look fine." He stepped inside before I could object. "How dare that bastard threaten you and stop you from traveling?" His Alpha aura leaked into the room despite his obvious effort to suppress it. "I should've been there."

“Don’t worry. It’s over.”

“It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.” His jaw clenched. “I swear, if he tries anything again...”

“He won’t.” I cut him off. “I handled it pretty well. Besides, I am also gaining from this new partnership I have with him.”

Noah studied me for a long moment before exhaling, “Fine.” His anger faded slightly. “That’s not the only reason I came. I have come bearing news.”

Something in his expression made my stomach tighten. “What is it?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Damon made his move.”

My heartbeat skipped. “What move?”

+25 Fonts

“The harbor resources Whitemoon controlled... Silvermoon has already seized them back. He

reclaimed everything.”

A cold feeling spread through my chest.

I stared at him. “So quickly?”

Noah smiled without humor. “He waited until the lawsuit was settled, then he struck. In one day.”

My fingers slowly curled. That was exactly who Damon Hawthorne was. If someone struck him once... he struck back twice. Every debt, every betrayal, every slight had to be paid back with

interest.

Then a terrifying thought crashed into me. Elona. My precious little daughter. The blood drained from my face.

Noah immediately noticed. “Aria?”

I barely heard him. If Damon ever discovered the truth... if he learned Elona was his pup... he wouldn’t hesitate. He would take her

Not because he wanted to hurt me, but because as an Alpha... as a father... he would believe she belonged with him.

My knees suddenly felt weak. I hadn't seen Elona for so long. Every night, I'd fallen asleep remembering her tiny fingers wrapped around mine. Her bright laugh.

My chest ached so fiercely I could barely breathe.

miss our pup, Lydia whispered brokenly.

I know...

She's probably wondering where we are.

The thought nearly shattered me.

Noah stepped closer. "What's wrong, Aria?" he asked.

"Elona... what if Damon finds out about her? What if he takes her from me?" I managed to say, my voice breaking with emotion.

"We'll protect her." I looked at him. "I promise." His voice was firm. "I won't let Damon take her." I wanted to believe him. I truly did. But Damon wasn't just another Alpha. He was the Alpha of Silvermoon. A strategist. A man who could overturn entire territories with one command.

Now Noah had become his target too. One Alpha wasn't enough to protect us anymore.

!

I slowly shook my head. "Noah... we need more help."

+25 Pomy

Understanding flashed across his face. I pulled out my phone. There was only one person I trusted enough. My finger found Astrid's number. She answered almost immediately.

"Aria?"

"Astrid." My voice was quieter than I intended. "I need to see you."

Her tone turned serious at once. "What happened?"

"I'll explain everything when we meet."

"Where?" she asked.

I named a private location.

“I’ll be there,” she replied without hesitation.

The call ended. I lowered the phone slowly.

Lydia lifted her head. We’re expanding the circle.

We have to... Because Noah and I... we were no longer enough to keep Elona safe.

If Damon ever learned he had a daughter... a storm unlike anything our packs had ever seen would

begin.

M

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 167

Damon’s POV

The weekly soothing session began. Aria’s presence filled the private chamber, her voice soft but steady as she guided the energy between our wolves.

I could feel Rhein becoming stronger and steadier, the fractures in my essence slowly knitting together.

The partnership project advanced without a hitch, designs sharpening into reality with every meeting.

Yet my mood only darkened.

She’s hiding something, I thought, watching her across the table during the session. I can feel it in the bond. At any moment, she’ll run again.

Rhein paced restlessly inside me. Keep her close. She belongs here. With us.

I clenched my jaw and said nothing, letting the session end with professional courtesy.

“Good work today,” I told her, my voice controlled. “The eastern wing design is approved. We’ll

review the next phase tomorrow.”

Aria nodded, her expression guarded. “Alright.”

She left quickly, and the emptiness she left behind gnawed at me.

That evening, I met Tim and Marcus at the Moonlit Tavern, a secluded pack owned bar on the edge of Silvermoon territory.

The scent of aged whiskey and grilled meat filled the air as we claimed our usual corner booth.

“Damon,” Tim greeted with a grin, clapping me on the shoulder. “Heard Aria’s back in the country. How are things between you two? For real.”

Marcus leaned forward, his eyes curious. “Yeah, spill it, Alpha. You two back together or what?”

I didn’t explain much. I poured another glass and drank deeply, the burn doing little to ease the smoldering fire lodged in my chest.

“It’s complicated,” I muttered. “She’s here for the project. Helping with my wolf. That’s all for now.”

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The unease wouldn’t lift. Every instinct screamed that she was plotting her next escape.

I turned to Marcus. “Has Astrid been in contact with Aria lately?”

Marcus shrugged, swirling his drink. “My sister calls her often. You know how close they were. But I don’t know the details, what they talk about and all that. Why?”

I kept my tone casual. “Just checking.”

Marcus took another sip, then added offhandedly, “Actually, Astrid booked a flight abroad recently. Some kind of trip. She’s been secretive about it.”

My hand tightened around the glass. The country he named was exactly where Aria had spent the last five years.

Rhein snarled, hackles rising. She’s planning something. They’re planning.

I forced a nod, but inside, the banked fire roared higher. I had avoided digging into her life overseas before. Afraid it would send Rhein into a frenzy I couldn't control. Afraid of what I might find.

I won't do that any longer.

"Tim, Marcus," I said, my voice dropping low. "I need you to look into what Aria was doing all those years abroad. Everything. Contacts, routines, anyone close to her. Look into it discreetly."

Tim raised an eyebrow but didn't question me. "Alright, buddy."

Marcus hesitated. "You sure about this? Digging into her past might blow up in your face."

"It already is," I replied, finishing my drink in one burning swallow. "I need answers. Now."

As

my friends made calls and sent messages, I stared into the amber liquid at the bottom of my empty glass.

Don't let her leave us, Rhein said.

I won't let that happen again, I vowed silently to Rhein. Whatever she's hiding overseas, I'll uncover it, and I'll make sure she stays right where she belongs.

The hunt for the truth had begun. And this time, I wouldn't hold back.

Aria's POV

I stared at the project timeline on my laptop. I had three more reports, one final contract review, and a presentation to the Silvermoon board.

If I could finish everything before Friday... I could leave and spend three days with my daughter.

Lydia wagged her tail excitedly. I can't wait to see our pup again. She'll be waiting for us.

My chest ached. "I know."

Every night, I imagined her tiny face. Her bright laugh. The way she'd throw herself into my arms, yelling, "Mommy!"

I'd missed too much already. I missed her birthday. No matter what... I needed to go and make it up to her.

So I worked. Morning until midnight. Meeting after meeting. File after file. Every urgent task that could wait until next week... I finished this week instead.

Justin looked genuinely shocked when I handed him the completed reports. “You’ve finished everything?”

“I said I would.”

“This is almost a week’s worth of work.”

“Yeah... about that, I won’t be here next week.”

He blinked. “What?”

“I’ll be away for three days.”

He nodded without questioning it. “I’ll inform Alpha Damon.”

“No.” I stood. “I’ll tell him myself.”

I went straight to Damon’s office. He looked up the moment I entered. His sharp eyes settled on me immediately. “What is it?”

“I need to adjust tomorrow’s session.”

One dark eyebrow lifted. “Our weekly soothing?”

“I’d like to do it today instead.”

He leaned back slowly. “Why?”

H

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 168

Aria’s POV

I’d rehearsed the answer dozens of times. “My father. He’s unwell.”

Damon’s expression shifted slightly. It wasn’t entirely a lie. My father was still unwell.

“I want to spend three days with him.”

Damon studied me in silence. His Alpha instincts were impossible to fool. For one nerve racking moment, I thought he'd refuse.

Lydia held her breath. Don't let him scent your nerves.

I'm trying.

Finally... Damon nodded. "All right."

I blinked. "That's it?"

"Yeah... that's it."

I was utterly surprised. "You are not going to ask any further questions?"

"You said your father needs you." His voice remained calm. "I believe you."

Guilt flickered through me. I hated lying. Especially now. But I couldn't tell him the truth. I couldn't tell him about Elona.

"Thank you," I muttered.

We completed the soothing session in silence.

Rhein greeted Lydia quietly through the bond. You'll return, right?

Lydia hesitated. Of course I would come back to you.

I immediately shut the connection before either wolf could say more.

When I left the building... I didn't look back.

The flight felt endless. Every minute stretched like an hour. Until finally... the plane landed.

The moment I stepped into the arrivals hall... I saw them. Astrid and... my little girl.

"Mommy!" Elona's tiny voice rang across the terminal.

She broke into a run. My heart nearly burst. I dropped my bag and knelt just in time for her to crash into me. The force almost knocked me over. I laughed through tears.

"My baby..." I wrapped both arms around her. She smelled like baby shampoo, sunshine, and

home.

Lydia whimpered happily. Our pup...

I buried my face in Elona's soft hair. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you more!" She squeezed my neck with surprising strength.

"I am so sorry I missed your birthday, but I will make it up to you tomorrow, all right?"

She nodded, her beautiful eyes sparkling with joy. "All right, Mommy."

I kissed her forehead again and again. She giggled before suddenly stopping. Then she sniffed me. Once. Twice. Her little nose wrinkled.

"Mommy."

"Hm?"

"You smell funny."

My heartbeat skipped. "What do I smell like?"

She sniffed again. "Like..." She tilted her head innocently. "A big wolf."

Ice slid down my spine.

Lydia immediately stiffened. Rhein.

My stomach dropped. Of course. The weekly soothing sessions. Our wolves had been in direct contact. His Alpha scent had lingered on me.

Elona smiled. "It smells very nice."

My smile almost cracked. No... I whispered inwardly. She can't remember it. If Damon ever stood close enough... if Elona scented his wolf... everything would be over.

Astrid noticed my expression immediately. "What is it?"

"I'll explain later." I forced a smile for Elona. "But first..." I pinched her tiny nose playfully. "Someone needs a bubble bath."

"Aww..." She pouted dramatically. "I already had one yesterday."

"You're having another."

She sighed like the most put upon pup in the world. "Okay."

Astrid laughed quietly. “You’ve missed this.”

“I really have.”

As soon as we got home, I gave Elona a bath. The main reason was because I didn’t want her to remember Damon’s scent. I wanted to erase every trace of it lingering on her after she hugged me.

Next, I paid my father a brief visit. This time, he didn’t mistake me for anyone else, but he asked why my brother wasn’t back from school yet.

My chest ached as it always did whenever I interacted with him. After spending quite some time with him, I left.

The next morning belonged entirely to Elona. The amusement park was bursting with children. Bright balloons floated overhead. The smell of popcorn drifted through the air.

Elona laughed so hard on the carousel that people nearby smiled just watching her. She dragged Astrid and me onto every ride she could find.

“Again!” She bounced excitedly.

“We just rode it,” I would say.

“Let’s ride it again!”

Astrid groaned dramatically. “I’m too old for this.”

“No, Auntie Astrid!” Elona grabbed her hand. “You promised!”

Astrid looked at me helplessly. “I did promise.”

I burst into laughter. “You brought this on yourself.”

For hours... I forgot about Silvermoon, Damon, projects, and secrets.

I was simply... Mom.

Lydia stretched lazily. This is where we belong.

Yes. Watching our daughter laugh beneath the afternoon sun... I almost believed life could stay this simple.

Later, while Astrid and Elona waited near a snack stand, I excused myself. “I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry!” Elona called. “I want cotton candy!”

“I know.” I smiled. “Don’t run off.”

“I won’t!”

I headed toward the restroom. It only took a few minutes. When I returned... something felt wrong. Astrid wasn’t smiling anymore. She stood frozen. Her face had gone completely white.

My heartbeat stumbled. “Astrid?”

She didn’t answer. I walked faster. “Astrid.”

She slowly turned toward me. Her lips trembled. Fear radiated from her wolf.

Lydia shot upright. Something’s wrong.

My stomach twisted violently. “Where’s Elona?”

Astrid looked around frantically, tears already filling her eyes. “I...” Her voice broke. “I only looked away for a second.”

The world seemed to stop. My pulse roared in my ears. “Astrid.” My voice came out barely above a whisper. “Where... is my daughter?”

She covered her mouth with shaking hands. “I’m sorry...” A tear rolled down her cheek. “I’m so sorry.”

Her next words ripped the air from my lungs.

“Elona... is gone.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 169

Aria’s POV

My legs nearly gave out.

“Elona is gone.” Astrid’s words echoed over and over in my head until they became meaningless noise.

“What do you mean gone?” I grabbed her shoulders. “What happened?”

She was trembling so violently her wolf aura was spilling into the air. “I... I only looked away for a second.”

“Astrid!”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “You went to the restroom. Elona wanted pictures with me.” Her voice cracked. “So we took selfies.”

She showed me her phone with shaking hands. The last photo showed Elona grinning brightly, rabbit ears on her head, clutching a giant pink balloon.

My throat tightened.

Astrid swallowed hard. “Then the parade started.”

I looked toward the main avenue. Music still blasted from giant speakers. Performers in colorful costumes danced through the streets.

“The crowd rushed forward. People started pushing. There was some kind of fight.”

I could already hear distant shouting. “Move! Watch the child!” someone screamed. A tray crashed onto the ground. Children began crying. “I grabbed Elona’s hand,” Astrid whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I swear I did. But someone slammed into me. I lost my footing. My hand...” She looked down at her empty fingers. “Slipped.”

Lydia growled. No...

“I fought through the crowd.” Astrid was sobbing openly now. “I called her name. I searched everywhere. But when the parade passed...” Her voice broke completely. “She was gone.”

For one terrifying second... I couldn’t breathe. Then instinct took over.

“No.” I spun toward the nearest amusement park employee. “My daughter is missing.”

The young man behind the information desk paled. “How old is she?”

“Four. She has brown hair and grey eyes. She’s wearing a yellow dress with little white flowers and wolf-ear hair clips.” My words came so fast I was barely breathing. “Please... Please help

me.”

The employee immediately grabbed a radio. “Security, Code Amber. Missing child.”

The entire park sprang into motion. Within minutes, security wolves were running in every direction. Announcements echoed through loudspeakers. “If anyone has located a young girl matching the description...”

Lydia paced frantically inside me. Find our pup. Find her!

“I’m trying!”

I was already running. Every little girl in yellow made my heart leap before crashing again. I searched every ride, every food stall, every gift shop. Nothing.

Every passing second felt like another knife twisting into

my

chest.

Then... my phone rang. I answered before the first vibration ended.

“Hello, is this Miss Grayson?”

“Yes, it is me!” My words rushed out.

“This is park security. We’ve located the child.”

My knees nearly buckled. For one glorious second, the world became bright again.

“Where is she?”

“A guest found her near the east parade entrance. She’s safe.”

Safe. The word hit me so hard tears filled my eyes. “Thank you. I’m coming.”

I didn’t even wait for Astrid. I ran. Faster than I had in years. Ignoring every stare. Ignoring the pain in my lungs.

Lydia kept urging me forward. Faster. Our pup is waiting.

I rounded the final corner. There was already a crowd. A tall man stood with his back toward me. He had broad shoulders that looked oddly familiar and was wearing a black coat.

No. My heart stopped.

No... The world seemed to fall silent.

The man slowly turned. Strong arms cradled my daughter securely against his chest. Elona rested comfortably against him, one tiny hand curled around his collar. She looked perfectly safe. Perfectly content.

My blood turned to ice. It was Damon.

Damon's POV

The moment Aria left, I knew something was wrong.

My wolf had been restless ever since she walked away.

She is hiding something from us. Rhein's voice echoed in my mind, low and impatient.

I know.

Then let's find out what it is.

I clenched my jaw. That was exactly what I intended to do.

I immediately sent for Justin, my assistant.

"Alpha... you sent for me," he said the moment he came into my office.

"Yes, Justin. Book me the earliest flight."

His brows furrowed. "Where are you going?"

I told him to book me tickets to Aria's destination.

Within minutes, everything was arranged. I didn't care about meetings. I didn't care about the reports waiting for me. I didn't care about the enemies watching Silvermoon Pack's every

move.

There was only one thing on my mind. Aria and the secret she was hiding.

The journey took longer than I expected. By the time I arrived, more than ten hours had passed.

Ten hours of my wolf pacing inside me. Ten hours of imagining every possible reason Aria had hidden something from me. And none of those reasons were good enough.

By the time I landed, it was already morning the next day. I traced Aria and Astrid to an amusement park with a small child.

For a moment, I simply stood there, staring at the colorful signs, the screaming children, and the endless crowd moving around me.

Immediately, I attracted attention. My height, my dark expression, and the natural dominance radiating from me made people move aside without realizing why.

A few children stared at me with wide eyes. One little boy hid behind his mother's leg. "Mommy, he looks like a ruthless Alpha."

I ignored the whispers and continued searching. Then I caught it.

The scent of a small pup.

My steps slowed. My wolf went completely still.

Damon. Rhein's voice changed. There was something in it I had never heard before. Shock. Do you smell that?

I swallowed. I did. It was a child carrying Aria's scent.

My heart began pounding harder. No. It couldn't be. My mind refused to accept the possibility. But my wolf already suspected.

Before I could move, the sound of music grew louder. A parade was passing through the center of the park, blocking my path. People gathered around, cheering. I cursed under my breath.

Then suddenly... something small crashed into my legs.

I looked down. A little girl stood there. She had probably been running too fast to notice where she was going.

The moment I saw her face, everything inside me stopped.

Comments

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 170

Damon's POV

The little girl had Aria's eyes and her delicate features. My breath caught. This wasn't a guess anymore. This was confirmation.

This little girl was connected to my mate.

She looked up at me with wide, curious eyes. She wasn't afraid, not even slightly.

Most children could sense the Alpha aura around me. They usually became nervous, hiding behind their parents. But this little girl only tilted her head, studying me carefully.

She smiled at me. A strange warmth spread through my chest. I had no idea what to do with

I had never held a child. I had never imagined myself wanting to, but the moment I reached out and lifted her into my arms, it felt natural. Like some part of me had been waiting for this

moment.

The little girl didn't resist. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my neck. My entire body

froze.

She trusted me. A total stranger. An Alpha she had never met. Somehow, my screamed that I would destroy anyone who dared hurt her.

Protect her, Rhein's voice was softer now.

I stared at the little girl. "What is your name?"

"Elona."

Her voice was small and sweet.

"Elona," I repeated. The name settled somewhere deep inside me.

instincts

Then I felt it. Aria's scent. My head lifted past the girl's shoulder and landed on Aria. She was standing a short distance away.

A mix of fear and pain flashed through her eyes.

My gaze moved back to Elona. Then it returned to Aria.

My voice came out low and controlled. "Aria."

She didn't answer. I tightened my hold on the child, careful not to frighten her.

"Give me an explanation. Whose child is she?"

The question ripped out of me before I could stop it. The entire world seemed to narrow until there was only Aria and the little girl in my arms.

I think she might be our pup, Damon, Rhein said.

I think so too, I growled inwardly.

Aria's expression barely changed. For one heartbeat, her scent spiked with a mix of panic and guilt.

Then, a familiar scent drifted toward us. Noah Hargreaves. He stepped between us as naturally as breathing before sliding one arm around Aria's waist.

The movement made every instinct inside me snarl.

Rhein slammed against the walls of my mind. Take our mate back. He has his hands on her. Rip them off.

I clenched my fists until my nails dug into my palms. Noah looked me straight in the eye in a calm, confident, almost challenging manner.

"The child is mine, Damon. Hand her over."

There was silence. Even the breeze seemed to stop. I looked from Noah to Aria. She didn't deny it. Instead, she leaned ever so slightly into him. It was a tiny movement, but it landed like a knife in my ribs.

"Yeah..." she said quietly before lifting her chin. "That's right."

Rhein roared. Liar. She's lying.

I had a feeling that was true. My gaze shifted to Noah. He wasn't nervous or defensive. He looked like someone carrying out a plan.

This is probably part of their scheme, Rhein muttered.

Exactly. I lifted a brow.

“You expect me to believe that?” I asked coldly.

Noah didn’t even blink. “You can believe whatever you want.” His voice remained maddeningly even. “It doesn’t change the truth.”

My eyes returned to Aria. “Look at me, Aria.”

She hesitated. Just enough for me to notice.

“Aria!” I snapped.

Finally, she met my eyes.

“Tell me yourself. Tell me that this child isn’t mine.”

“The child is Noah’s.” The words hit me square in the chest.

Rhein snarled. It is a lie, Damon. Don’t believe her. She’s lying to us.

Just then, a tiny voice broke through the tension.

“Daddy!”

Little Elona wriggled right out of my arms. She landed surprisingly steadily on her tiny feet and ran straight toward Noah with both hands raised.

“Daddy!”

A warm smile immediately spread across Noah’s face as he bent and lifted the little girl into his arms. “There you are, my little princess.”

Elona giggled and wrapped both arms around his neck. “I missed you, Daddy.”

Noah chuckled. “Daddy missed you too.”

They looked...perfect together. Like a real family. My stomach twisted.

Rhein went eerily quiet. The child had called another Alpha “Daddy.” What more proof was there?

Yet, in the half second before I set her down, a faint scent brushed against my senses.

It felt...familiar, but then it was gone, buried beneath Aria's scent. She smelled overwhelmingly like her mother.

I frowned. I must have imagined that familiar scent. My instincts had been wrong before. They could be wrong again. Couldn't they?

I stared at the little girl. A strange ache settled inside my chest.

As Noah adjusted her in his arms, Elona turned toward me. Our eyes met for less than a second. Then she smiled politely before burying her face against Noah's shoulder.

Noah shifted Elona higher against his shoulder. Aria stared at me without warmth.

"Damon." Her voice was calm and cold. "You shouldn't be here." She folded her arms. "This is our family outing. You weren't invited."

Family. The word echoed through me. Not ours... theirs. Noah, Aria, and the little girl were a family.

Rhein whimpered within me. Our mate has a child for another man...

I couldn't even answer him. I didn't know what to say.

Noah glanced at me with a triumphant expression on his face. "We will get going now."

He turned and walked away, with Aria by his side.

I stayed where I was, watching their retreating figures. Aria never looked back. Noah carried Elona with one arm while the other rested naturally around Aria's waist.

They disappeared farther down the path, laughing softly together, looking...whole. The distance between us grew with every step.

The mate bond still pulsed relentlessly inside my chest.

Rhein refused to accept what my eyes had just seen. Our mate chose him. This can't be happening to us. He whimpered.

I didn't answer. There was nothing to say that would make either of us feel better.

I turned sharply and stalked back toward the main house, fists clenched at my sides.

The investigation into Aria's years away suddenly felt more urgent than ever.

Something wasn't right, and I would find out what it was.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 171

Aria's POV

The moment Damon left the amusement park, the breath I'd been holding escaped in one long, shaky exhale. My knees nearly gave out.

Lydia let out a low whine inside my head. He's gone now. You can relax.

I tightened my arms around Elona until she squeaked.

"Mama."

I immediately loosened my grip.

"I'm sorry." I kissed the top of her head. "Mama held you too tightly."

Noah noticed the tremor in my hands. "Let's go home."

I nodded without another word. The amusement park suddenly felt too crowded. Too exposed. Every stranger's scent felt overwhelming after Damon had stood so close.

The mate bond still hummed beneath my skin despite everything that had happened between us. I hated that it still affected me.

You don't hate it, Lydia murmured softly.

Don't start, Lydia.

That's the truth. You hate what he did, not him.

I closed that door in my mind before she could continue. I couldn't afford to think about Damon. Not today. Today belonged to Elona.

By the time we reached home, the tension inside me had eased enough that I could smile again. We were throwing a small second birthday party for Elona.

Noah and I had missed her first birthday. This was just a way to show her how much she mattered to us.

The apartment smelled of cake, balloons, fresh flowers, and vanilla candles.

Astrid immediately disappeared into the kitchen.

“I’ll get everything ready.”

“I’ll come help you,” Noah offered.

“I’ve got it.” She waved him away. “You two spend time with Elona, our birthday girl.” Elona laughed as Noah chased her around the living room, acting as a giant wolf.

“I’m going to catch you!”

“You can’t. I’m faster than you!”

She dissolved into giggles before diving straight into my arms. I hugged her tightly.

She tilted her head. “Mommy, are you alright?”

I brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Can I ask you something?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

I smiled gently. “At the amusement park, why did you suddenly call Uncle Noah ‘Daddy’?”

Noah froze where he stood. Elona blinked once. Then twice. She frowned thoughtfully. Then her tiny shoulders lifted.

“I felt you were scared. I’ve never seen you that scared before.”

My heart stopped. She reached out and touched my cheek with her tiny fingers.

Her little face became serious. “I didn’t like it.” Elona looked toward Noah. “So when Uncle Noah came and said he was my father, I decided to play along.”

My throat tightened. She smiled innocently.

“I thought...” She looked down at her little shoes. “If he thought Uncle Noah was my daddy...” She looked back up. “He wouldn’t bother Mommy anymore.”

Tears blurred my vision. She had... she had done all that... to protect me. I pulled her into my

arms.

“Oh, sweetheart...”

She wrapped both little arms around my neck.

“I’m sorry if I did something bad.”

“No.” My voice broke. “No, baby.” I kissed her forehead again and again. “You did nothing wrong.”

My tears soaked into her soft hair.

“Thank you for playing along.” I swallowed hard. “Also, I’m sorry.” The words scraped against

my throat. “I’m so sorry.”

She pulled back just enough to blink at me.

“What are you sorry for?”

“I’m sorry,” my voice cracked, “that you had to protect me.”

Her tiny hands cupped my cheeks, exactly the way I’d done to her countless times before.

“It’s okay.” Then she smiled. The sweetest smile in the world. “I’ll always protect Mommy.” Lydia broke. Our pup... she is just a child but already acts like an adult.

I couldn’t stop crying. Neither could my wolf.

Elona leaned closer until our foreheads touched.

“I don’t know who that man is.” She spoke so quietly. Her little face scrunched up into a determined frown. “But whoever made Mommy cry, I’ll hate him.” She puffed out her tiny chest. “And I’ll protect you.”

I stared at her. More tears escaped. I hugged her so tightly she squealed again.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mommy!”

Noah quietly looked away, giving us the privacy to collect ourselves. Even Astrid sniffled as she pretended to rearrange the plates.

Lydia whispered through our bond. She’s becoming such a brave little wolf.

She shouldn’t have to be.

No. She should only be worrying about birthday cake.

Thankfully, children recovered faster than adults. Within minutes, Elona had completely forgotten the tension at the amusement park.

She proudly wore the tiny birthday crown Astrid had bought for her. We sang. She laughed. She blew out every candle in one determined puff.

“I wished for something!”

Astrid grinned. “You can’t tell us, or it won’t come true.”

Elona immediately slapped both hands over her mouth. “I almost did!”

We all burst into laughter. For a few precious hours... everything felt normal. Like we really were a family.

Much later, after the celebration, Elona finally curled up against Astrid on the sofa. Within minutes, both of them were asleep.

Astrid had one arm draped around Elona protectively while Elona clutched her new stuffed animal against her chest. The apartment had finally fallen quiet.

I carried two mugs of coffee onto the balcony. Noah accepted one with a grateful smile. “Thank you for everything you did today.” I looked down at the steaming cup.

He leaned against the railing. “You’ve thanked me enough already, Aria.”

I shook my head and met his eyes. “No, I haven’t. You let Damon believe Elona is yours. You played it so convincingly that there was no room for doubt.”

He chuckled softly. “It was easy because I’ve always let people believe that, and I’ll keep doing it.”

His voice carried no hesitation. Emotion tightened my chest.

“You’ve done so much for us.”

He smiled faintly. “I haven’t.” He looked through the glass doors toward Elona. “I simply did what I thought was right.” His expression grew gentle. “She deserves a father.”

He smiled. “I’ve loved that little troublemaker since the day she was born.”

A warm silence settled between us. Then, his expression changed. He looked past me toward the street below. His smile disappeared.

“Aria.”

I turned. My heartbeat stumbled.

Standing beneath my apartment building, hands shoved into the pockets of his coat, head tilted upward, was Damon.

M

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 172

Aria’s POV

I stiffened. Noah stepped beside me until our shoulders almost touched. He leaned in and whispered.

“Looks like the Alpha of Silvermoon still has doubts.”

A chill ran down my spine. “What do we do?”

Noah was silent for a long moment. Then the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

“There is one way to end those doubts.”

I looked at him. “What are you thinking?”

His gaze remained fixed on Damon below. “We give him exactly what he expects to see.”

My pulse quickened. He finally looked at me.

“Let’s give him a convincing performance.”

Lydia immediately understood. He’s asking us to make Damon believe we’re truly mates.

I swallowed. Noah’s voice was quiet.

“Should we put on one final show and lay Damon’s suspicions to rest once and for all?”

His eyes searched mine.

Damon’s POV

The drive back from the amusement park was silent. I sat in the back seat, staring out the window while the city blurred past.

I shut my eyes. The image refused to leave my mind. Noah's arm around Aria. The little girl calling him Daddy. Aria standing beside him without denying it.

I opened my eyes. "Justin."

"Yes, Alpha." Justin replied.

"I want everything you can find about Aria's child. Bring me every record that exists. I need to know who that child is." My voice was flat.

"Alright, Alpha." His expression hardened. "I'll have the intelligence division start immediately."

By nightfall, the reports began arriving. Justin came to me carrying a thick folder.

"Alpha, I've verified everything three separate times." He laid it on my desk. "I even had independent investigators repeat the search."

I picked it up. It contained birth records, medical files, vaccination history, school registration, and even travel records.

Every document appeared authentic. My eyes stopped on one line. Date of Birth. I calculated automatically. Conception, months, and dates. My jaw tightened.

The timing didn't fit. On paper, the child had been conceived after Aria walked away from me. After our separation. After she'd disappeared. Meaning she couldn't be mine. Every document pointed to the same conclusion.

Justin watched me carefully.

"The records are clean. I checked for alterations. There were no inconsistencies." He hesitated. "It appears the child truly isn't yours."

There was silence. The study suddenly felt suffocating. I should have felt relieved. I should have accepted it. I should have let go.

Instead, something twisted violently inside my chest.

Rhein surged forward. They are wrong.

I rubbed a hand over my face. The paperwork says she's Noah's, I replied.

Paper lies, Damon. Don't believe everything you see.

I slammed the folder shut. The sound echoed through the room. Justin flinched.

"Leave."

"Alpha..."

"I said leave." I snapped.

He bowed slightly. "Yes, Alpha."

The door clicked shut. I was alone again.

She's ours. Rhein paced restlessly inside me. You smelled it.

"Whatever I smelled disappeared before I could fully tell what it was."

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It felt familiar, Damon... remember.

I leaned back in my chair. Why couldn't I let this go? The evidence was overwhelming. The birth certificate, hospital records with dates.

Everything lined up. Everything except me. Every instinct screamed that something wasn't right. I hated instincts. Facts mattered. Proof mattered. Not feelings. Yet why couldn't I

believe them?

Rhein stopped pacing. They're hiding something. I am sure of it.

"What are they hiding?"

He had no answer. Neither did I.

Then another thought struck me. I sat upright.

"If they're really a family, why aren't they mates?"

Rhein immediately understood. Exactly.

Noah Hargreaves was an Alpha. Aria was still mated to me. If they'd built a family together, why hadn't she broken our bond and let Noah mark her?

Why hadn't he claimed her? Why hadn't she accepted? There was no formal mating ceremony. No public announcement. Only a child. It didn't make sense.

Unless...

I stood abruptly. My chair scraped across the floor.

Justin appeared almost instantly outside the room. "Alpha?"

"I'm going out."

"Should I prepare security?"

"No. I'll drive myself."

The engine roared beneath me as I sped through the city. Every kilometre tightened the knot inside my chest. I wasn't thinking anymore. I needed answers.

I needed to see her. Needed to look into her eyes again. The mate bond pulled harder the closer I came to her apartment.

Rhein lifted his head. She's close.

"I know."

+25 Point:

I parked across the street. The building rose above me, lights glowing warmly against the dark sky. I stepped out. Cool night air filled my lungs.

Then movement above on the balcony caught my eye.

Aria. She stood outside wrapped in a light cardigan. Noah stood beside her. Neither of them had noticed me. I remained perfectly still.

They were talking quietly, too far away for even my Alpha hearing to catch any words. Then Noah smiled and reached toward her. My muscles locked. His fingers brushed a loose strand of hair away from her face.

A simple, gentle, possessive gesture.

Rhein exploded. Kill him.

My claws slid from my fingertips.

Rip his throat out!

My heartbeat thundered. Noah's hand lingered briefly against her hair. Aria didn't pull away. Instead, she looked up at him.

Then slowly, she rested her head against his shoulder. Then the two of them stepped back inside and drew the curtains.

Everything inside me stopped.

Rhein howled so violently my ears rang. She's our mate! We need to take her back!

"I can't!"

Why not?

Because she would hate us forever.

I wanted nothing more than to storm up there, kill Noah, and take Aria by force. I didn't mind starting a war with the Whitemoon Pack if that was what it took.

But I couldn't do that because forcing Aria would only prove every terrible thing she believed about me. Because I wanted more than her body. I wanted her heart.

I flexed my hands until my claws finally withdrew. I looked up at the darkened balcony one

last time.

"This isn't over."

Rhein's breathing gradually steadied. What now?

I slipped my hands into my pockets. "We do this properly."

What is that supposed to mean?

"We will make Aria belong to us, step by step."

H

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 173

Aria's POV

The rest of the holiday passed quietly. Damon never appeared again. No unexpected encounters, no phone calls. But somehow, that frightened me more.

Lydia paced uneasily inside me. He's too quiet. He is probably hunting.

I sighed. I know.

Damon wasn't the type of Alpha who admitted defeat. He investigated, planned, waited...

Then he struck. The silence wasn't surrender. It was preparation.

Before now, Elona had been a secret. Hidden. Protected. Now Damon had seen her with his

own eyes. He knew she was real.

Which meant that if suspicion consumed him enough, he wouldn't hesitate. He could have her taken. Run a DNA test. Use his influence to force every door open. My blood ran cold.

My chest tightened.

"No." I whispered the word aloud. "No one is taking my daughter."

Lydia growled. Then keep her where even an Alpha cannot reach.

My thoughts immediately turned to Noah. To the Whitemoon Pack. Their borders were among the most heavily guarded in the country. Even Damon couldn't simply walk in.

The decision settled inside me instantly.

Two days later, our plane landed back in the States. Instead of returning to my apartment, our convoy drove straight toward the Whitemoon Pack territory.

The massive iron gates slid open after the guards recognized Noah's vehicle.

Elona pressed her face against the window. "There are so many trees here!"

Noah smiled. "Wait until you see the training grounds."

Her eyes sparkled. "Can I really see it?"

"If your mother agrees."

She immediately looked at me. "Please, Mommy?"

I couldn't help smiling. "No problem, as long as you wait until Uncle Noah can take you there

himself."

She squealed happily. "Thanks, Mommy. You are the best!"

I was relieved Elona was finally safe.

That night, I called the hospital where my father was admitted and spoke with his doctor.

I couldn't take my father with me due to how much his health was failing. The doctor said he wouldn't survive being moved to another hospital in his state. Leaving him behind wrenched

I stared at the photograph beside my bed. A photograph of Dad, Joshua, and me. Taken before everything fell apart.

"I'm sorry, Dad." My voice barely rose above a whisper. "I had to bring Elona away."

Lydia lowered her head. I am sure he would understand.

years

Noah's people still guarded the hospital around the clock. No one would get close to him. But he was alone. I wiped away a tear.

"When all of this is over..." I swallowed hard. "We will all be together again."

However much time he had left, I'd spend it with him. That was a promise.

Three days later, I walked into Hawthorne Group. Justin was already waiting.

"Miss Grayson." His smile remained polite. "Alpha Damon is expecting you."

I followed him upstairs. When the office doors opened, I immediately noticed Damon. He looked exhausted. Dark circles shadowed his eyes. Even his wolf scent felt restless.

He dismissed Justin with a nod. The door closed behind us. Damon studied me.

"You and Noah seem very close." His jaw tightened. His fingers tapped once against the desk. "Our project requires discretion. It also requires professionalism."

He frowned. "If Noah remains involved in your daily life, conflicts of interest become unavoidable."

I almost laughed. “So that’s what concerns you?”

“It should concern you too.”

“No.” I folded my arms. “My priority is my daughter and her father.”

His eyes darkened. “I see.”

The room grew noticeably colder. Alpha pressure rolled from him instinctively. Most wolves would’ve lowered their heads. I didn’t. Not anymore.

He spoke again.

“Speaking of your daughter, if Noah is really her father...” He watched every reaction on my face. “Why aren’t the two of you formally bonded?”

There it was. The real question.

Lydia smiled faintly. He couldn’t let it

I knew he wouldn’t. Fortunately, I’d prepared for this long before stepping into this office. I slowly took a seat opposite him.

“My father was dying five years ago.”

Damon remained silent.

“I wasn’t thinking clearly.” My fingers tightened together. “I’d already lost Joshua. After finding out, my father collapsed. My whole world had fallen apart.”

I looked directly into his eyes.

“Noah stayed. He kept me from breaking.”

The words weren’t entirely lies. Only incomplete truths. “We found comfort in one another and I became pregnant.”

Damon’s jaw flexed.

“That doesn’t explain why you never completed the mate bond.”

“It does.” I shook my head. “I don’t believe in mate bonds anymore.”

His expression changed. Something painful flashed across it. I felt good about that. He deserved to feel at least a fraction of what I’d lived through.

“My mate taught me exactly how fragile that bond can be.”

Every word landed like a blade.

“I have no intention of marrying again. I don’t want another mate. I have no intention of stepping into marriage again. What I have with Noah is exactly what I want, purely physical. We take what we need, when we need it. Nothing more.”

The words tasted like ash, but I held his gaze without flinching.

Lydia whimpered softly. The lies burn. Rhein is listening. He’s hurting.

Damon moved faster than I expected. His hand shot out, catching my wrist in a firm, burning grip. Heat flared between us instantly, the mate bond sparking like a live wire.

His voice dropped, rough and intense. “When you have a need, Aria... I can accommodate it too.”

His thumb stroked the inside of my wrist, sending unwanted shivers racing up my arm. “I can do it better than Noah. You know I can.”

My breath caught.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 174

Aria’s POV

Damon didn’t let go of my wrist. The office fell into a suffocating silence. His golden Alpha eyes searched mine as though he could peel away every lie I’d told him.

Lydia stirred uneasily.

Then I felt it. Damon’s scent. It bloomed suddenly, rich and commanding. His raw Alpha pheromones wrapped around me like invisible chains. My body reacted before my mind could stop it. My pulse skipped.

Heat flared low in my belly.

Lydia surged forward with a needy whine. Rhein... Mate. Yes...

No! I snapped at her, but my wolf was already reaching, eager and traitorous.

The mate bond blazed to life beneath my skin. Every nerve suddenly became painfully aware of how close Damon was. He noticed. The corner of his mouth lifted just slightly.

“Your wolf yearns for me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I forced the words out through clenched teeth.

He took another slow step closer.

“There has only ever been one woman for me, Aria.” His voice was quiet and steady. “You.”

I laughed coldly. “It’s funny you expect me to believe that.”

“It’s the truth. I never touched another woman.” His eyes locked onto mine. “I never gave another she-wolf what belonged to you.”

Lydia whimpered. He’s telling the truth... Listen to him.

Damon’s thumb brushed lightly against the inside of my wrist. “If you have needs...” His voice grew lower. “Come to me. Not another man.”

My jaw tightened. “I don’t need you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I feel nothing for you anymore.” The words came out sharp. I shoved against his chest. “Let go of me.”

He didn’t resist. But as I pushed, my knees suddenly weakened. The room tilted. The mate bond pulsed so violently that heat rushed through my body before I could suppress it.

Lydia let out an embarrassed growl. Our body wants him.

Be quiet. I snapped inwardly.

I can’t.

I caught myself against the edge of his desk before I stumbled. Damon saw everything.

A dark, satisfied gleam lit his eyes. “You still feel it. I know you do.”

“I don’t.”

“You do.” His gaze never left mine. “The bond doesn’t lie.”

Anger flared inside me. “The bond is only there because we are mates. It doesn’t signify love.”

For a moment, something painfully vulnerable crossed his face. “That night when I stood outside

your apartment, I saw you.” His jaw tightened. “I watched you lean against Noah.”

His fingers curled into a fist. “I watched you smile at him. I watched you disappear inside with him.” His voice became rough. “I wanted to kill him.”

There was silence. The confession hung heavily between us.

Rhein’s emotions bled faintly through the mate bond, raw enough that even Lydia felt them. His wolf was furious.

“I imagined tearing his throat out.” His eyes burned into mine. “I imagined challenging the Whitemoon Pack. I imagined starting a war.”

He closed his eyes briefly before opening them again.

“But I didn’t. Do you know why?”

I didn’t answer.

“Because if I did...” He took a slow breath. “I was afraid I’d lose you forever.”

Something inside my chest tightened despite myself.

“I don’t just want your body, Aria. I want you. All of you.”

I forced myself to harden. “You already lost me.” The words were deliberate and cruel. “I have Noah now. He gives me everything I need.”

Damon’s laugh was low and dangerous. “No. I can feel the truth. There’s no real fire in you for him. He doesn’t satisfy you the way you need... the way I can.”

I denied it, stubborn to the last. “You’re wrong.”

But under his provocation, the first treacherous signs of heat stirred deep inside me. My skin flushed.

My pulse thundered. The scent of my own arousal betrayed me, mixing with his in the charged air. I couldn’t hide it completely.

Lydia was panting now. Let him. We need this. We need him.

It's a game. We can't play into his hands. I told her desperately.

Damon's eyes darkened further, reading every shift in my body. "If you don't want this," he murmured, leaning in until his lips hovered near my ear, "then push me away."

I was lucid enough to know exactly what he was doing. He was handing me the illusion of choice while closing every exit around it.

I held onto that clarity like a lifeline. I'm only playing him. I will keep my guard up and protect Elona.

But then Damon bent his head and put his mouth to my neck, his lips brushing the sensitive spot where a mate mark should sit. A single, deliberate kiss, hot, open mouthed, teeth grazing just enough.

The desire I had buried for more than five years finally, completely, broke loose.

A soft, broken sound escaped my throat. My hands fisted in his shirt, no longer pushing him away but pulling him closer.

Heat crashed over me in waves, the mate bond roaring to life as Lydia howled in triumph inside my chest. My body arched into his without permission, every nerve screaming for more.

Damon growled against my skin, the sound vibrating through me. "That's it," he rasped. "Come back to me, Aria."

My mind spun, caught between revenge, fear for my daughter, and the overwhelming need that threatened to drown everything else. For one shattering moment, I stopped fighting.

And I let myself burn.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 175

Aria's POV

We were a tangle of limbs and desperation, clothes scattered across the floor like fallen leaves.

Damon's mouth was everywhere, hot and demanding. He was claiming my neck, my breasts, the curve of my stomach.

His hands gripped my hips with bruising strength as he moved above me, inside me, driving us both toward the edge.

The mate bond blazed between us, wild and consuming.

Lydia howled in ecstasy. Yes! Rhein, mate! More...

My back arched off the table, a broken moan tearing from my throat. I was so close, teetering right there...

"Aria..." My name left his lips like a prayer. "I've missed you."

Before I could answer, my phone rang. The shrill ringtone shattered everything. The screen lit up: Video call from Elona.

Reality crashed over me like ice water. I shoved Damon hard, my wolf strength surging as I scrambled away. "Stop!"

He growled in protest but released me. I snatched the phone and bolted to the window, answering with trembling fingers. Elona's sleepy face filled the screen, her little eyes rubbing tiredly.

"Mommy..."

Every instinct inside me softened. "Baby."

Her tiny lips trembled. "I had a bad dream."

My heart broke. Without another word, I hurried toward the window, putting as much distance between Damon and the camera as possible. I lowered my voice.

"What happened?"

"There were monsters everywhere."

I smiled gently. "It was only a nightmare, my princess. They can't get you. Mommy is here to

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protect you."

She responded with a small, shaky voice. “It wasn’t me they were after. It was you. They chased you.”

My heart clenched. Behind me, I felt Damon watching silently. I ignored him.

“I looked everywhere,” Elona whispered. “You disappeared.”

“I’m right here. I will always be with you, baby.”

She sniffled. “You promise you’ll never leave me?”

The question stabbed straight through my chest.

“Yes, I promise, sweetheart. Mommy will never leave you.”

You already know how abandonment feels, Lydia whispered sadly. She’ll never experience that.

“I just needed to hear your voice,” Elona mumbled. “Can you sing for me?”

I began humming the old lullaby Joshua used to sing to me when thunderstorms frightened me. The familiar melody floated through the room, and Elona’s eyelids grew heavier.

“Love you, Mommy...”

“Love you more, sweetheart. Sleep tight.”

A sleepy smile spread across her little face. Then she drifted back to sleep. I waited a few more seconds before quietly ending the call.

Silence settled around the room once again. Only this time, reality came crashing back. I looked down at my naked body. My pulse was still racing because of Damon.

Disgust at myself twisted in my stomach.

We almost forgot everything.

We almost chose our mate, Lydia corrected softly. He’s still our mate.

Ignoring her, I bent down and gathered my clothes without saying a word. The room remained painfully quiet.

I put on my undergarments. Then I wore my blouse and buttoned it. I picked up my jacket and skirt and put them on too.

Every movement was mechanical, every second placing another wall between us. Damon didn't interrupt, didn't apologize, didn't move. I could feel his gaze following every motion.

My skin still burned where he'd touched me. The scent of us, sex, pheromones, and the mate bond, hung thick in the air.

When I finally spoke, my voice was flat. "Tonight never happened."

The words echoed between us. I refused to look at him. If I did, if I saw those eyes, I might weaken again.

I couldn't afford that. Not with Elona waiting for me. Not after everything he'd done.

I picked up my handbag and headed for the door. My fingers had barely touched the handle when Damon finally spoke.

"Aria." His deep voice stopped me in place.

Against my better judgment, I paused. He didn't come after me. Didn't try to grab my arm.

Didn't block the exit.

Instead, he leaned against the wall, his arms folded loosely, watching me with those maddening golden Alpha eyes. There was no arrogance in them, only exhaustion, only longing.

"You can pretend tonight didn't happen."

His voice was quiet. "You can keep running."

My grip tightened around the doorknob.

"But you can't deny the truth."

My heartbeat quickened. "What do you mean?"

A long silence stretched between us. Then he spoke the words I had feared hearing most.

"Admit you still have feelings for me, Aria. You can't run from it forever."

I froze. My pulse thundered.

Lydia whimpered inside me, torn between triumph and shame.

He's right, she whispered. The fire is still there.

I didn't answer. I yanked the door open and fled down the hall, my legs unsteady, my heart racing. The taste of him still lingered on my lips. The ache between my thighs refused to fade.

Tonight had been a mistake. A dangerous, devastating mistake.

But as I slipped into the night air, Damon's words echoed in my head like a challenge I couldn't escape.

We're in trouble, Lydia murmured.

Yes. We were.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 176

Aria's POV

A week passed. Seven days of pretending Damon Hawthorne didn't exist. Seven days of burying myself in work until exhaustion drowned out every memory of that night.

Every time my mind wandered back to the warmth of his body or the ache of the mate bond, I forced myself to focus on contracts and meetings.

It was easier that way. Or at least I kept telling myself it was.

You're lying to yourself, Lydia muttered.

I'm surviving.

Today, however, I stole an hour from my schedule and took Elona to the city park.

The afternoon sun warmed my skin while a gentle breeze carried the scent of fresh grass, wildflowers, and dozens of wolves enjoying the day with their families.

Children laughed as they chased each other around the lawn. Adults chatted.

Elona squealed with delight. "Mommy! Bigger bubbles!"

"I'm trying!"

I dipped the wand into the bottle and blew. Hundreds of shimmering bubbles floated into the air.

“They’re everywhere!” she giggled.

She chased after them with her tiny arms stretched wide, bursting each one with infectious laughter. I laughed too. We were both very happy.

Lydia sighed contentedly. We really needed this.

Elona suddenly changed direction.

“Mommy, look at those pigeons!”

Before I could stop her, she raced toward a flock pecking at breadcrumbs. The birds exploded into the sky.

She clapped excitedly. “I scared them!”

“You certainly did.”

She ran back toward me, her cheeks pink with excitement.

O

“You look prettier when you laugh, Mommy.”

blinked. Children had a way of saying things that pierced straight through the heart.

“In that case, I’ll try to laugh more.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” I chuckled.

Then Lydia’s ears flattened. Someone’s coming.

I froze. A scent drifted toward me. My smile disappeared instantly.

It was Damon.

425 Pom

I turned. There he was, walking across the grass as though this were the most natural thing in the

world.

His dark shirt hugged his broad shoulders, and in one hand he carried a beautifully wrapped gift

box tied with a silver ribbon.

Our eyes met.

Lydia stirred. Mate...

Behave. I cautioned.

He stopped a few feet away. "There you are."

I folded my arms. "What are you doing here? Did you follow us?"

His lips curved faintly. "No, I didn't."

"Then how are you here?"

"Well, I knew you'd be here. I was nearby and decided to make a stop."

At least he wasn't lying anymore. My jaw tightened. "What do you want?"

His gaze shifted to Elona. "I heard someone had a birthday recently."

My body moved before I even thought about it. I stepped directly between Damon and my daughter.

"You've seen her. You can leave."

His expression remained calm. "I brought a present."

"We don't want it."

O

Γ

A shadow crossed his face. "It's only a gift, Aria." He looked past me. "Hello, Elona."

She peeked around my leg. "Hi..."

I gently nudged her back behind me.

Lydia growled softly. Protect the pup.

Damon slowly crouched until he was at Elona's eye level. He made no sudden movements, no

attempt to approach.

"I missed your birthday." His voice softened. "So... happy birthday."

He held out the gift box. "I hope you'll like it."

Elona stared at it with wide eyes, then looked at me as if questioning whether to accept it.

"Mommy?"

My stomach twisted. I hated this. I hated that Damon looked so... harmless. I hated that he wasn't

forcing anything. I hated that refusing a simple birthday gift would only confuse my daughter.

Most of all, I hated that I knew Damon. When he decided on something, he never gave up.

He's relentless, Lydia sighed. Like every Alpha.

I knelt beside Elona. "You can accept it."

Her face lit up. She took the neatly wrapped box with both hands. "Thank you, Mister."

Something flickered in his eyes. "You're welcome, little one."

For one heartbeat, he looked at her as though she were the most precious treasure in the world.

He rose to his feet. "I'll leave now."

No demands, no conversation, no lingering. He simply inclined his head toward me.

"Take care of yourselves."

Then he turned and walked away. I watched until he disappeared beyond the trees. Only then did I finally breathe.

Open it, Lydia urged. Let's see what he brought.

I sat on a nearby bench.

“Open it, Mommy. I want to see what’s inside.”

Elona eagerly handed me the box. I carefully peeled away the ribbon, removed the wrapping paper,

and lifted the lid.

O

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+25 Paint

Inside rested a delicate silver bracelet. A tiny moonstone pendant hung from its center, glowing softly beneath the afternoon sunlight.

so pretty!” Elona gasped. “It sparkles!”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I examined every inch of it. I turned it over repeatedly, looking for a hidden compartment, a tracker, a listening device. Anything, but there was nothing.

I slowly released the breath I’d been holding.

It was clean, yet somehow, that made me even more uneasy. Because if Damon wasn’t trying to track her, then what was he doing? Was this really just a birthday present?

My fingers unconsciously tightened around the bracelet. My forged records had been flawless. Elona’s birth certificate, hospital documents, every trace connecting Damon to her had been

erased.

So why did Damon keep finding reasons to appear?

Lydia’s answer came quietly. She is his daughter, Aria. They are bound to each other by blood.

I looked at Elona. She had already slipped the bracelet onto her tiny wrist. The moonstone caught the sunlight as she waved it happily.

“Mommy! Look! It’s beautiful!”

She smiled so brightly that my heart ached. Then, without warning, she looked in the direction Damon had disappeared.

“I like that Mister.”

The words hit me harder than they should have.

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Lydia lowered her head. No forged document can erase what their wolves feel. The bond between a father and his pup runs deeper than paper.

I stared at the tiny bracelet glinting on Elona's wrist, and fear settled deep inside my heart. Because I was no longer certain I could keep father and daughter apart forever.

Comments

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 177

→25 Port

Damon's POK

I didn't start the car after leaving the park. I remained behind the steering wheel, staring through the windshield.

The park was alive with laughter. Children chased each other, parents called after their pups, life

carried on. Mine didn't.

I leaned my head against the seat and closed my eyes. Immediately, her face appeared. Not Aria's. Elona's. The way she'd looked at me before accepting the gift.

"Thank you, Mister." She had said.

A strange ache settled deep inside my chest.

She smells familiar. Rhein's voice was low and thoughtful.

I know. I clenched the steering wheel.

You felt it too? The moment we got close.

His growl rumbled through my mind.

There was... a pull. Not the mate bond. Not exactly. Something deeper, as if every protective instinct inside my wolf had awakened the second she stood before us.

I exhaled slowly.

“Noah isn’t her father.”

The words left my mouth before I realized I’d spoken them aloud.

Rhein immediately agreed. He is not. You are.

I remembered Noah holding Elona. Anyone could do that. Anyone could love a child. But today, standing only a few feet away from her, my wolf had reacted in a way he never had before.

It wasn’t attraction. It wasn’t curiosity. It was possessiveness, the protective urge to stand between her and every danger in the world.

Rhein growled again. She is... ours.

I opened my eyes.

“No.” I refused to let instinct cloud judgment. “A birth certificate says Noah is her father.”

Paper lies, Rhein snorted. Blood doesn’t.

O

+25 Ports

My fingers slowly opened. Resting on my palm was a single strand of silky black hair. I’d lifted it carefully from Elona’s sleeve while handing her the gift. She’d never noticed, neither had Aria.

I stared at it.

“A forged birth certificate proves nothing. I need certainty, not guesses. I need absolute proof.”

I picked up my phone. Justin answered before the second ring.

“Alpha.”

“I need a confidential assignment. I have a DNA sample. I need you to take it to the most secure testing facility available. No one else touches it.”

Justin immediately understood. “Understood, Alpha. I know one. I’ll deliver it personally.”

“Also, make sure there are no names attached, no electronic trail. No reports entering public databases.”

Justin didn’t hesitate. “I’ll make sure it disappears from every system after testing.”

“Good.”

The call ended. Soon, I would find out the truth.

Later that day, I returned to the Silvermoon Pack estate from work. I was exhausted.

“Welcome home, Alpha.” The guards greeted.

I acknowledged them with a nod and headed inside. Justin intercepted me before I reached the

stairs.

“The sample has already been sent, Alpha.”

“Good.”

He hesitated. “Lady Duran is waiting for you.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “How long has she been waiting?”

“Almost an hour. She is in the drawing room.”

I sighed. “I’ll deal with it.”

The moment I stepped inside, Mother rose gracefully from her chair. “There you are, son.”

“Mother.”

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She smiled, though I immediately noticed the worry hidden beneath it.

“You’ve become impossible to find.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“So I’ve heard.”

A servant poured tea. Neither of us touched it. Mother folded her hands together.

+25 Pom

“Damon...” Her tone told me exactly where this conversation was heading. “I won’t waste your

time.”

“That’s a first.”

She

my comment.

“The elders are becoming restless. They’re worried about the future of the Silvermoon Pack. You

have no heir.”

There it was. I remained silent.

“You don’t have to marry Claudia.”

That caught my attention because all she had done was try to force Claudia on me. “I don’t?”

She shook her head. “I never said it had to be her. I only want the Hawthorne bloodline to continue.”

Her eyes softened. “Find another woman. Choose anyone. All I want is for you to give this pack an

heir.”

Rhein scoffed. There is only one Luna.

I know.

I looked at my mother quietly. Then I spoke. “I already have a plan.”

There was silence. She blinked. "You... what?"

"I said I have a plan."

She stared at me as though I'd suddenly grown another head.

"For years I've begged you and you refused, and

w you suddenly have a plan?"

"I do."

Hope flooded her face. "Oh, Moon Goddess. You've finally come to your senses."

If only she knew, Rhein murmured.

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My mother smiled broadly. "I'll stop worrying then."

As she stood to leave, she paused.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Have you seen your pendant? The moonstone pendant, you wore it every day

as a pup. I wanted to have it polished. I searched everywhere. I can't find it."

My heart skipped. I had just given the same pendant to Aria's daughter.

"It doesn't matter, Mother. I can always get another one."

She looked surprised. "You treasured it so much."

"Not anymore."

She studied my face for several seconds, then nodded. "If you say so."

I opened the door. "A servant will escort you."

She smiled. "Don't work too late."

"I'll try."

After she left, I went to my study and crossed to my desk. A thick folder waited there. It contained Justin's latest investigation.

I opened it. Every page made my chest heavier. The more I read, the uglier the truth became.

Claudia hadn't acted alone. The evidence surrounding Ronan Grayson's imprisonment years ago, the accusations, the fabricated testimony, the missing funds, the forged documents, every trail pointed toward one man.

My father.

My jaw tightened.

"No..." I turned another page. Then another. Liam. My best friend. Even his death wasn't an accident. It had been orchestrated, manipulated.

Every thread, every lie, every ruined life eventually led back to Alpha Victor Hawthorne. My own

father.

Rhein released a furious growl. He destroyed everything.

I closed the file. My hands were shaking. Aria's father had been innocent. Her family had suffered because of sins they never committed, because of crimes committed by my blood.

A bitter laugh escaped me.

O

"I wanted her forgiveness."

Now I wasn't even sure I deserved the chance to ask for it. Because if Aria ever learned the full

truth, she wouldn't just hate my father.

She would hate every part of the Hawthorne name. Including me. And this time, she would have

every reason never to forgive me again.

M

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 178

Aria's POV

I was making progress. At least, that's what I kept telling myself. The project I was working on with Damon advanced faster than anyone had expected.

Contracts were finalized, construction began ahead of schedule, and every meeting ended with

another problem solved.

On paper, everything was perfect. In reality, every day became harder to survive. Because every

Thursday, I still had to see Damon.

"Your pulse is already racing Lydia teased.

"I'm irritated."

Liar.

I snapped at her. "Stop it, Lydia! I'm only here for the soothing session."

Nothing more, nothing less.

Ever since the night we'd crossed a line neither of us could come back from, everything had

changed. No... not everything. We had changed.

The moment I stepped into the room where the session would take place, I could already feel him.

The mate bond pulsed beneath my skin like a living thing. It was warm, hungry, and waiting.

Rhein is close. I can feel him, Lydia whispered, her tail already wagging inside my mind.

Behave.

Why should I?

Because we're here to carry out our weekly healing session, nothing else.

She snorted. Liar.

I ignored her. Damon sat opposite me. His eyes lifted to mine.

"There you are, Aria. You certainly took your time."

Just a few words. Yet my heartbeat stumbled.

"Traffic was bad," I answered shortly, walking towards him.

He smiled. "For some reason, I don't believe you."

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r

"I wasn't asking you to."

Justin quietly left the room as usual, closing the heavy doors behind him. Silence settled between

"Let's begin."

He nodded in response and got into position.

I placed my palms against his. The instant our skin touched, heat exploded through me. My breath

caught.

Images flashed uninvited across my mind. His lips, his hands... That night. The way our bodies had

intertwined. My fingers twitched.

Lydia purred shamelessly. Rhein misses us... I want him.

Don't.

Energy flowed between us in shimmering silver threads. Normally, the transfers felt calming. Now they felt dangerously intimate.

Damon's thumb slowly brushed over the back of my hand. My pulse raced. It wasn't accidental. He

knew exactly what he was doing.

"You've been avoiding me," he said quietly.

"I've been busy."

"Busy enough to leave every session early?"

I didn't answer. His thumb continued its slow, deliberate movement.

"You barely look at me anymore, Aria."

"I look when I have to." I sighed.

"Hm." His deep chuckle vibrated through our joined hands. "You are one stubborn lady. With you, I

certainly have my hands full."

"You think too highly of yourself if you really believe I am yours."

His eyes searched mine, and his smile widened.

"We are mates, Aria. Of course you are mine." His smile became even more mischievous.

"Do you

ever think about that night I made love to you?"

Heat rushed into my cheeks. My jaw tightened. "I don't know what you are talking about."

MS

4 Chapter 175

He leaned slightly closer. "Oh, I certainly think you do." He smirked. "As a matter of fact, I do too i can't seem to get the image of you under me out of my head."

My heartbeat stumbled. The mate bond surged. My wolf nearly pushed forward.

Rhein is calling. Let me answer him. Lydia begged.

Absolutely not.

The session finally ended.

“I have another site inspection,” I said, getting ready to leave.

He folded his arms. “So soon? I was hoping on taking you to lunch.”

“I am sorry. I am a little too busy for that.” I grabbed my bag. “I’ll see you at the office tomorrow,

Damon.”

I turned and walked out before my resolve cracked.

The following week wasn’t any easier. Every soothing session became another battle. Every

accidental touch lingered longer. Every glance lasted just a little too long.

Sometimes his hand rested against the small of my back while guiding the energy flow.

Sometimes his fingers tucked loose strands of hair behind my ear. Sometimes he simply stood

close enough that I could smell cedarwood and rain on him.

Lydia adored every second. She always wanted us to be intimate, but I fought her desires every

time.

Avoiding Damon wasn’t enough. If this project ended, so would the sessions with Damon. So I

buried myself in work, morning meetings, afternoon inspections, and late-night reports. If someone needed overtime, I volunteered.

Work wasn’t my only focus. There was still Claudia. I hadn’t forgotten, not for one second. Father

was still sick. Joshua was dead. Someone had to answer for it.

Late one evening, after everyone had gone home, I sat alone inside my temporary office. The only

light came from my laptop. I entered another encrypted database. There was nothing.

I tried financial records connected to Claudia. It was restricted. Old surveillance reports... restricted. Travel records... restricted. Communication logs... restricted.

Every road ended exactly the same.

🔒

ACCESS DENIED

+25 Ponds

frowned. I opened the authorization details. The approval signature appeared across the screen.

Authorized by Alpha Damon Hawthorne.

Everything inside me went cold. For several seconds, I simply stared, unable to breathe or blink

I clenched my fists. The realization burned. All those confessions, his regret, his promises to make things right, his insistence that he'd changed, was it all another lie?

Because when it came to Claudia, he was still protecting her. Just like before. Just like always.

I closed the file with more force than necessary.

"I was an idiot."

Aria...

"I actually believed him."

for "Maybe there is another explanation," Lydia said.

"There always is." I laughed bitterly. "Until the truth comes out."

I looked out the office window toward the distant Silvermoon territory. For one foolish moment, I'd

let his words reach my heart.

THE

I'd almost believed the Alpha who claimed he would choose me over everyone else. Now, staring

at another wall of sealed records, that fragile hope crumbled.

Whatever Damon had confessed that night, whatever emotions still lingered between us, one fact

remained impossible to ignore.

When it came to Claudia Stone, he was still keeping secrets. And I hated myself for ever letting his apology make me believe otherwise.

AMA

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 179

Claudia's POV

+25 Printa

I had spent years learning exactly how to please Lady Duran. She liked her tea with a slice of lemon. She preferred white roses over red. She appreciated humility in public and elegance in private.

Every smile, every compliment, every thoughtful gift, I'd perfected them all. Because one day, she was supposed to become my mother-in-law. Today, none of it mattered.

I placed the porcelain teacup in front of her with my sweetest smile.

"I remembered this is your favorite blend."

Lady Duran barely glanced at it. "Thank you."

Her voice was polite, but cold. A far cry from the warmth she'd once shown me.

She is a bit different today, Claudia, my wolf snarled.

I noticed. I sat across from her.

"Is everything alright, Lady Duran?" I asked in a concerned tone.

“Is there a reason it shouldn’t be?” she asked. Her tone was cold again.

“No, it is just that you sound stressed. Also, I have been trying to see you for the past few weeks to no avail.”

“Well, my dear, I have been busy.” She checked her wristwatch, then lifted her gaze to me. “State your reason for coming all the way here, Claudia. I have some matters to attend to soon.”

Why is she being so hostile to us? My wolf snarled. She’s acting as though we are strangers.

I was confused as well. I drew in a deep breath and spoke, “I wanted to know if you have spoken to

Damon about our future.”

She sighed. “Claudia.”

The way she said my name

“Damon has made a decide my stomach tighten.

My smile widened instinctively. “He has?”

“Yes, he has.”

Finally, after all these years, after everything I’d sacrificed.

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“He intends to have a child.”

Joy exploded inside me. “I knew he’d eventually understand!”

“But...” Lady Duran interrupted calmly, “...it won’t necessarily be with

The smile froze on my face. “What??”

you.”

She folded her hands. “You’ve tried for years to win his affection, but it hasn’t worked.”

My nails dug into my palms.

+25 Port

“At this point, if another she-wolf gives the Silvermoon Pack an heir, I’ll gladly welcome her.”

There was silence. I stared at her, waiting for her to laugh, to tell me she was joking. She didn’t.

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.” She took a sip of her tea gently.

“I’m the future Luna of the Silvermoon Pack!”

“No.” Her answer came so quickly it almost knocked the breath from my lungs. “You were the most suitable candidate.”

“Were.” The word echoed inside my head.

She replaced us, my wolf whimpered.

I forced a smile. “Damon wouldn’t choose another woman.”

“He already has.”

My heartbeat stumbled. “What?”

Lady Duran stood. “I don’t know who she is. But for the first time, I believe my son truly intends to become a father, and that’s enough for me.”

She smoothed the wrinkles from her dress. “If you cannot earn his heart, someone else will.”

Then she walked away, leaving me sitting there. Humiliated, forgotten, and discarded.

The moment the door shut, I slammed the teacup onto the floor. It shattered into dozens of pieces.

“Damn it!”

My wolf howled inside my head. Who is she? Who dared?

I paced furiously. “No. This makes no sense.”

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Damon hated every woman who approached him. He'd rejected countless daughters of powerful

Alphas. He'd barely tolerated me. So who? Who had changed his mind? There was only one Possibility.

Aria.

My breathing quickened. "No. She hates him. She'd never forgive him. She'd never willingly carry his pup."

Would she?

Find out, my wolf hissed. Immediately.

I grabbed my phone and sent Charlie, my contact, a text.

[I need everything on Damon and Aria. Everywhere they've been. Everything they've been doing.]

His reply came almost instantly.

[Already on it. Sending files now.]

A minute later, my phone vibrated. Several photographs appeared. I opened the first, and my blood

ran cold.

It was a picture of Damon, Aria, and a little girl.

I zoomed in. The child was laughing while holding a gift box. Damon was looking at her the way

wolves stared at their own pups.

"What..." I whispered. "Who is she?"

Another text from Charlie popped up.

[Girl's name is Elona. Officially Alpha Noah Hargreaves' daughter.]

I frowned. Officially?

Three dots appeared before his reply arrived.

[I got access to a private DNA comparison submitted a few days ago. Paid someone in the lab very well for it.]

My fingers froze over the screen.

[Between who?]

His reply appeared almost immediately.

[Damon Hawthorne and Aria's daughter, Elona.]

My heart lurched.

Another message came.

[Result: 99.9% probability. Biological father-daughter match.]

The phone nearly slipped from my fingers.

"No..."

It couldn't be. It simply couldn't. Damon had a daughter with Aria, not me.

Impossible! My wolf snarled. He belongs to us!

Rage exploded through my veins. "I'll kill her."

Kill them both, my wolf growled.

+25 Ponty

Then another thought hit me. If Damon learned the truth, everything would change. He would

claim his daughter. He would take Aria back, and I would lose him forever.

My breathing turned shallow.

[Charlie.]

He replied instantly.

[Yes?]

[Change the report before Damon sees it.]

There was a pause, then he replied.

[It is expensive. I'll need to pay off several people.]

[Do it. I don't care how much it is. I will pay.]

Three dots flashed across the screen.

[Consider it done.]

Only then did I release the breath I'd been holding.

I walked toward the mirror. My beautiful reflection stared back at me. A terrifying realization

settled deep inside me. If Damon wanted an heir, then I needed to give him one before Aria

reclaimed her place.

I slowly rested my hand over my flat stomach.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 180

Aria's POV

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The project had finally entered its last stage. Standing before the floor-to-ceiling windows of the office, I watched dozens of workers move through the construction site below.

A small smile touched my lips.

"We're almost there. Father... you did it."

No. We did it, Lydia corrected gently.

My fingers rested against the glass. This project had been Father's greatest dream. It was the very thing he had wanted to accomplish, believing it would secure the Grayson Pack's future for

generations.

Then he was arrested, and a few years later, Joshua died, and everything fell apart after that. Father's mind broke under the grief, leaving him trapped in a world that no longer recognized reality.

He should have been standing here today. He should have been the one overseeing this project. Instead...

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

He would be proud of you, and so would Joshua, even in the afterlife, Lydia said.

"I hope so."

Joshua's face appeared in my mind. His smile... His laughter, Claudia had stolen everything from us. She had manipulated people, destroyed lives, and somehow escaped every consequence. But not forever.

My eyes slowly hardened. "I'll find the evidence. I will make sure she pays dearly."

I already had a plan in mind. I had no doubt that Damon had the evidence I needed. The more I

thought about it, the more convinced I became.

Damon had been investigating Claudia behind everyone's backs. If he had uncovered anything substantial, he wouldn't have trusted anyone else with it. He would have hidden it himself. And the safest place was his own study.

I picked up my phone and called Damon. There was no need to waste time. I told him I would

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come to his house for the soothing session. He immediately agreed.

Several hours later, I arrived at Hawthorne Estate. Justin greeted me at the entrance.

"Miss Grayson..." he greeted.

I offered him a small smile. "I'm here for Damon's therapy."

He nodded. "Alpha Damon has been expecting you."

That sentence felt strangely intimate. I pushed the thought away.

Damon was already waiting in the living room. His eyes softened the instant they landed on me.

"You are here. Welcome." He smiled.

"Thank you."

I began preparing for his soothing treatment. The sessions had become routine. His wolf, Rhein, stirred beneath the surface as usual.

Mate...

Lydia lifted her head immediately. Our mate is calling.

Ignore him.

She reluctantly lowered her head.

After nearly an hour, the therapy session was done. Damon looked noticeably more relaxed.

"I had the kitchen prepare dinner for both of us."

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

"I know, but I wanted to."

I hesitated before nodding. "Alright."

It would help my mission after all.

Dinner turned into drinks. One glass, then another, then another. I deliberately made him drink and refill his glass each time it was empty.

You're trying to get him drunk, Lydia noticed.

"I need answers, and I will do anything to get them.

This feels cruel.

"I know, and frankly, I don't care."

TAON

+26 Powrite

The wine continued flowing. My cheeks warmed naturally. Damon's face became slightly flushed, but frustratingly, he remained perfectly composed. I frowned inwardly.

His alcohol tolerance was absolutely ridiculous. It seemed as though the more he drank, the more alive he became.

His gaze lingered on me for far too long.

"Aria... I am sorry for everything I did to you in the past." His words were laced with sincerity.

I stayed silent.

"I know I don't deserve forgiveness." He laughed bitterly. "But I still want it." His fingers tightened around the wine glass. "I love you."

Everything inside me froze.

"I know I hurt you deeply. I know I don't deserve another chance." His voice cracked. "But I love you! I have always loved you."

My breathing became uneven. Lydia whimpered softly.

He's telling the truth.

I ignored her. Damon leaned closer.

"If there is even the smallest possibility..."

"No, there isn't."

The words came out before I could stop them. His entire expression fell. I forced myself to continue.

"My brother is dead. I can't forget that. I can't pretend none of it happened. I can't."

Pain flashed through his eyes. He looked as though I had driven a blade directly into his chest. Joshua had never been given the chance to speak another word. I would not let grief soften my resolve.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "But I can't."

Damon lowered his head briefly. "I understand, but I won't stop trying to win

Just then, his phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen. "I need to take this."

you back."

I nodded. "Alright."

He stepped onto the balcony. The moment the glass doors closed behind him, I moved.

MON

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+28 Paints

My pulse thundered. Every instinct screamed that I had very little time. I hurried to his study. I slipped inside and quietly shut the door.

The computer sat on the desk. I powered it on.

Password required.

Of course. I quickly connected a small encrypted flash drive Noah had secretly prepared for me days earlier.

Lines of code flashed across the screen.

Bypassing... Decrypting... Verifying.

Seconds felt like hours. Then, Access granted.

I exhaled sharply. "Thank goodness."

Hurry before he notices you are gone, Lydia urged.

"I know."

Folders filled the monitor. Business records, bank finances, security reports, council communications. I searched every directory. There was nothing.

Then, a folder marked with encrypted initials.

C.S."

My heartbeat quickened. "Claudia Stone."

I clicked it. Just before it opened, a notification appeared.

New sss Received.

I almost ignored it. Then the sender caught my eye.

Silver Crest DNA Laboratory.

My breathing stopped.

“A DNA lab?”

Confused, I opened it. A report immediately downloaded. My fingers trembled as I clicked the attachment. Two names appeared at the top.

Sample A: Damon Hawthorne

Below it...

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Sample B: Elona

The room suddenly spun. Cold swept through every inch of my body. “No...”

Lydia gasped inside me.

Aria...

+2" Ports

I stared at the report in disbelief. The conclusion was unmistakable. There was only one reason

Damon would secretly submit blood samples. Only one question he wanted answered. The color

drained from my face.

“Damon...” My voice barely existed anymore. “He secretly ordered a DNA test on Elona.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 181

Damon's POV

I stepped onto the balcony with my phone and answered the call.

"Alpha Damon."

"Did it go through?" I immediately asked.

"Yes, it did. The board has reviewed the business proposal you submitted. There are a few adjustments we'd like to discuss, but overall, we're interested."

A small part of me should have been pleased. Weeks of negotiations, countless revisions, a deal worth billions, but none of it moved me the way it should have.

"I'll look over everything tonight," I replied calmly. "Send me the updated documents."

"We already have."

"Alright, I'll get back to you by tomorrow."

"We look forward to hearing from you, Alpha."

The call ended. I lowered the phone slowly, but instead of opening the sss, I thought of Aria.

She had rejected me. Again. Not with anger. Not with hatred, but with certainty. It somehow hurt

even more.

She still loves us, Rhein said quietly.

No, she doesn't. It is Lydia that loves us.

That doesn't matter.

I closed my eyes.

Footsteps echoed behind me, and my wolf immediately stiffened. I didn't even need to turn around. The perfume reached me first, sweet, artificial, strong enough to mask her natural scent.

It was Claudia.

I slowly looked over my shoulder. She stood at the balcony entrance, dressed in a fitted cream. dress that hugged every curve of her body.

Her hair flowed over one shoulder, and a practiced smile spread across her lips.

"What are you doing here?" I asked coldly.

MON

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+75 Poin

She didn't seem offended. Instead, she smiled wider. "I just got back from shopping with Lilith. We

spent the afternoon together. She insisted we visit a few boutiques."

I simply stared.

"So I thought," she continued, taking another step closer, "I'd check on you."

"I'm perfectly fine."

"I know." She leaned against the balcony railing beside me.

"I've noticed you've been under a lot of pressure lately."

There was silence.

"Lilith said you hardly eat or sleep." She sighed dramatically. "You don't have to carry the world alone, Damon."

"I wasn't aware I asked for company."

Her smile faltered, only for a second, then returned.

"I just care about you."

"I don't need you to."

She laughed softly. "You've always been difficult."

She slowly reached for my arm. I stepped away before her fingers could touch me, and her hand

froze in midair.

"Damon... You've really changed. You used to love me... why did you ever stop?"

I looked straight into her eyes. "I finally saw you for who you really are."

Something flickered across her expression, just for a heartbeat, then disappeared. "I don't know

what that means."

"It means stop pretending."

She frowned. "Pretending?"

I folded my arms. "If you have something else to say say it or get out of my sight."

She took another slow step. "I've loved you for years. I have stayed by your side, waiting for you to finally accept me."

I snarled coldly. "I never asked you to."

Her lips tightened. "I can make you happy, Damon. I understand you. I can be the Luna this pack

O

deserves."

+25 Pointer

scoffed. This time, my answer came harder, sharper, colder. "No, you can't, Claudia, because I don't love you, and I never will."

Her smile disappeared completely. Then she forced out a laugh. "You're only saying that because

of Aria..."

"I'm saying it because it's the truth."

The air around us shifted. My Alpha aura leaked out instinctively, and the pressure made her breathing hitch.

“You need to stop this. Aria is the only woman I love and will ever love.”

She stared at me. “Aria doesn’t love you anymore. You know that.”

“I don’t care. I’ll keep choosing her. I will keep trying to win her heart back.”

Claudia’s eyes darkened.

“I don’t care if she continues to reject me.” I took one deliberate step toward Claudia. “I don’t care how long it takes for her to finally accept me back.”

I took another step. “There is only one woman who belongs beside me, and that’s Aria.”

She instinctively stepped back.

My wolf growled inside me. That’s right, Damon. Make that very clear to her.

“There never has been another. Now get out of my sight!” I growled.

Claudia’s jaw clenched. She turned and walked away. The moment she disappeared down the

hallway, Rhein spoke.

She reeks of lies, and she’s dangerous.

I know that very well.

Go back to our mate.

I didn’t argue. I was already moving. “I’ve kept Aria waiting long enough.”

The moment I entered the living room, I frowned. It was empty.

“Aria?”

There was no answer. I checked the dining room. Nothing. The kitchen. Nothing. A strange

uneasiness crawled beneath my skin.

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<Chapter 178

Has she left already?

dialed Justin, and he answered immediately.

“Alpha?”

“Did Aria leave?”

He blinked. “No, Alpha. I haven’t seen her since she went in.”

Rhein growled. Find her.

I immediately followed her scent. It lingered in the hallway leading upstairs. My heartbeat slowed.

“She’s upstairs.”

I followed the trail. Each step strengthened her scent until I reached my study. I stopped.

The door wasn’t completely closed.

Rhein immediately surged forward.

She is inside your study.

I pushed the door open. Aria stood frozen beside my desk. My computer screen glowed behind

her. For one long moment, neither of us spoke.

Then my gaze dropped to the unlocked monitor. Understanding struck instantly.

“You hacked my computer.”

Her chin lifted defiantly. “Yes, I did.”

“You broke into my study, Aria, the one room I kept closed.”

She didn’t flinch. “You’ve been keeping secrets. I needed answers.”

My jaw tightened. “So this is what tonight was? The drinks. The conversation. You were distracting

me.”

She laughed once. A humorless sound. “You think this is about deceiving you?”

“It isn’t?”

“No, it isn’t.” She stepped toward me. Her eyes burned with accusation. “This is about getting the

answers I needed!”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused.

She turned my monitor toward me. “What is this?”

O

J

Only then did I notice the sss already open.

Silver Crest DNA Laboratory.

My pulse stopped.

“No...”

+25 Fairy

Aria looked furious. Her voice trembled: “Why? Why did you secretly run a DNA test on Elona?”

My entire body froze.

MON

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 182

Arja’s POV

+25 Por

Damon quickly recovered and rushed to the monitor. He immediately opened the sss containing the DNA results.

His fingers moved almost frantically over the mouse as the report loaded on the monitor.

“No biological relationship detected.”

His face went completely pale.

Rhein’s scent became restless. Even Lydia could feel it.

He’s shocked, she murmured.

He wasn’t the only one shocked. I was too when I saw it. If he had truly run a test with a sample of his blood and Elona’s, the result should have come back positive... unless someone had tampered

with it.

The question is who?

Damon slowly lifted his head to look at me. His eyes were filled with disbelief.

“This isn’t possible.” His voice was barely above a whisper. “I know what I felt. This report...” He turned back to the screen. “...it’s wrong.”

I folded my arms. “It is right, Damon. Elona is not your daughter.”

His jaw tightened. “No, she is my daughter. I know what Rhein sensed.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “So now wolves are more reliable than DNA laboratories?”

Silence settled between us. Then his gaze sharpened.

“You touched my computer. You were alone in here before I came back, Aria. Did you do anything?”

The meaning behind those words hit me instantly. My eyes narrowed. “You think I altered the report?”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. His silence accused me loudly enough.

Anger flared inside me. “You actually believe I’d fabricate something like this?”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“Then let me make it simple for you.” I took a step closer until we were barely an arm’s length

apart.

3 Chapter 179

+29 Porta

“I touched nothing except opening the sss. I didn’t edit a single file. I didn’t replace anything. I didn’t

even know the results existed until they appeared on your screen.”

His expression remained conflicted.

“You can verify the truth yourself,” I continued. “Go to the laboratory.”

I pointed directly at the report. “Ask for the original records. Ask who submitted the samples. Ask

who processed them. If you think I somehow hacked an accredited DNA facility within five minutes, then you’re giving me far too much credit.”

Damon looked uncertain.

I clenched my fists and looked Damon straight in the eye.

“I will tell you this one last time, Damon. Elona isn’t your daughter. Noah fathered her.”

His breathing became uneven.

“I...” He couldn’t finish.

I wasn’t interested in hearing what he had to say. There was only one thing left to say.

“If you ever come anywhere near my daughter again,” my voice turned dangerously authoritative, “I

will make you pay.”

Damon fell silent. I turned without another word and left. I curled my fingers tighter around the

small USB drive hidden in my sleeve. During my search, I had copied everything inside the folder

marked with Claudia’s initials.

Whether it contained the evidence I needed or not, I would find out later. For now, I had to leave

Damon's estate and get home.

The drive back felt unusually long. Rain had begun falling. My thoughts refused to settle.

If you didn't alter the report... Lydia broke the silence first. Who did?

"I don't know."

One thing was clear, though. Someone wanted Damon to believe Elona wasn't his.

The moment I stepped inside the house, tiny footsteps echoed through the hallway.

"Mommy!"

Elona ran toward me with a bright smile. Without thinking, I dropped to my knees and opened my arms. She crashed into me with enough force to nearly knock me backward. I laughed softly.

"Easy."

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"I missed you." She giggled.

I missed you too."

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I buried my face in Elona's soft hair and held her tightly. Perhaps tighter than usual. She noticed.

"Mommy? You look sad."

Children always knew, even when adults believed they had hidden everything. I kissed her forehead.

"Can I ask you something?"

She nodded obediently. "What is it?"

I hesitated. The question felt unfair, but I needed to hear her answer.

"Have you ever..." I swallowed. "Wanted to know who your father is?"

She blinked, her little brows knitting together as she thought seriously. Then she smiled. It wasn't forced. It wasn't hesitant. It was simply honest.

"I already know."

My heart skipped. "You do?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "My daddy is whoever Mommy wants him to be."

She continued innocently. "If Mommy loves someone, I'll love him too. If Mommy doesn't..." She

wrapped her tiny arms around my neck. "Then I don't need him."

The words shattered something inside me. Tears burned my eyes before I could stop them.

"Oh, my poor little princess." I hugged her so tightly she giggled.

I kissed her cheek over and over.

Lydia's voice trembled inside me. She's so precious.

She is, and I will continue to protect her with everything I have.

No matter what the truth behind that DNA report was, no matter who had manipulated it, no matter what Damon believed, one thing would never change: Elona was my daughter.

She was mine to love, mine to protect, and mine to fight for. I closed my eyes and held her closer.

Whether Damon shared Elona's blood or not, he had done nothing to earn the right to call himself

her father.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 183

Aria's POV

The moment Elona fell asleep, I locked myself inside my study. The USB drive sat on my desk. A tiny piece of metal. Yet it might contain enough evidence to destroy Claudia Stone forever.

Open it, Lydia urged.

I inserted it into my laptop. Hundreds of files appeared. I searched everything connected to Claudia's name. Most of it was encrypted.

Then one file caught my attention. There wasn't much in it, just a series of dates, several cash transfers, and one location that appeared over and over again.

Midnight Eclipse Nightclub.

My eyes narrowed. "A nightclub?"

Lydia sniffed.

It is not the sort of place Claudia would visit for fun.

She was right. Also, the cash transfers had all occurred after midnight. There were no names or explanations, just coded references. It smelled like an illegal exchange.

I copied the address onto my phone.

"I'm going there."

Alone? Lydia asked.

"Yes."

Noah won't like that.

I ignored her. If Claudia was hiding something there, I wanted to find that out myself.

Nearly an hour later, I stood outside Midnight Eclipse. Music thundered through the walls. The scent of alcohol, perfume, sweat, and wolves crowded the air. I pulled my jacket tighter around myself.

I don't think this is a good idea, Aria. I have a bad feeling about this, Lydia warned.

"I'm not going to do anything. I'm only looking."

Famous last words, Lydia inutted.

Ignoring her, I stepped inside. The nightclub pulsed with flashing lights. Dozens of wolves danced beneath shifting colors. I kept my head down. My eyes searched every corner. Then I froze.

Claudia was there. She sat in one of the darkest corners of the VIP section.

Unlike everyone else, she wasn't drinking. She looked... focused. Across from her sat a man dressed entirely in black, black gloves, black coat, even his face hidden beneath a cap and mask.

Chapter 180-

He slid a thick envelope across the table. Claudia pushed a small metallic case toward him.

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"What are they exchanging?" I wondered.

We can't tell from here.

"I need to get closer."

Keeping my head lowered, I slowly moved through the crowd: The music helped hide my footsteps. Little by little, their voices became a bit clearer.

"This is payment for the next phase..."

Before I could hear more, someone crashed into me.

"I'm sorry!"

A drunken wolf stumbled sideways. Another shoved him. "What did you say to me?"

“I said watch where you’re going!”

Within seconds, punches started flying. Tables overturned, bottles shattered. The entire dance floor erupted.

“Oh no.”

Move! Lydia shouted.

A massive Alpha slammed into another warrior. Both crashed straight toward me. I dodged instinctively.

By the time I regained my balance, Claudia was gone

“No!” I shoved through the crowd. “Where did she go?”

Every exit looked the same. Bodies blocked my view. Security men rushed in to stop the fight. The man in black had disappeared too.

“Damn it!”

Lydia growled. She planned an escape route.

“I’ve lost them.”

Still, I refused to give up. If Claudia had left, she couldn’t have gotten far. I slipped through a side corridor leading toward the back exit.

The hallway was almost empty. Only dim lights and concrete walls.

Aria... Lydia started.

“I know.”

Something felt wrong. The hairs on the back of my neck rose as I sensed several unfamiliar male scents behind me. Before I could turn, a rough hand clamped over my mouth.

“What-”

Chapter 180-

A dark hood dropped over my head. Everything went black. I reacted instantly, my elbow slamming backward. Someone grunted.

Another grabbed both my wrists. “Hold her!”

Lydia snarled.

Fight them, Aria!

I kicked hard. My heel connected with someone's knee.

"Agh!"

"Careful! She's stronger than she looks!"

I struggled to break free, but there were too many of them. Four, maybe five. Something sharp jabbed against my neck.

A needle.

"No..."

Cold liquid entered my bloodstream.

Lydia roared. We have been drugged!

Heat spread beneath my skin almost immediately. My heartbeat stumbled for a second before racing again.

My limbs didn't go numb, but they suddenly felt heavier, as though invisible weights had been tied around

them.

The drug was working. Just... not fast enough.

I clenched my teeth and slammed my head backward, earning another curse from one of my attackers.

"She's still fighting!"

"The sedative should've kicked in already!"

"Hold her down!"

My wolf growled. We can fight against this, Aria, Let's keep resisting.

My vision blurred for a heartbeat before clearing again. My muscles protested every movement, but I refused to stop struggling.

I drove my knee into someone's stomach.

He doubled over with a groan. Another person grabbed my arm, but I tore it free and shoved him into the wall.

“Damn it!”

The drug continued spreading through my veins, making every breath feel heavier than the last.

But I was still standing.

One man stepped in front of me while the others circled behind.

He looked me over with a slow, disgusting grin.

“So... the famous Aria Grayson.”

I glared at him. “What do you want?”

He reached for my face. His filthy fingers barely brushed my cheek before I jerked away.

“Don’t touch me.”

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He chuckled. “Our client only told us to do as we please with you.” His grin widened. “First, I’ll have some fun with you. You have a great body.”

Every instinct inside me screamed.

Lydia bared her teeth.

Kill him.

Gladly. I forced myself to remain calm despite the drug slowly dulling my reflexes.

“Who was it?” I said evenly. “Who paid you?”

He snorted. “What makes you think I’ll tell you?”

I let out a cold laugh. “You’re nothing but hired dogs doing someone else’s dirty work.”

His face darkened. “Watch your mouth.”

“Am I wrong?” I shot back. “Someone points a finger, offers you money, and you come running. Tell me, how much are they paying you to make fools of yourselves?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 184

Aria's POV

The man's jaw tightened. "We're getting paid more than you'll ever see.

"Really?" I smirked. "Whoever hired you must be desperate if they had to buy your loyalty."

One of the men shifted uneasily, but the one in front of me stepped closer.

"Our employer is rich enough to make it worth our while."

"So who is it?" I asked casually. "I'm curious who thinks I'm worth all this effort."

He scoffed. "Claudia Stone. She promised to pay us handsomely."

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A slow smile spread across my face. "Claudia Stone," I repeated, savoring the name.

Perfect. Lydia's eyes gleamed. You got what you wanted.

The man's expression froze. His eyes widened as realization hit him.

"Wait." His gaze locked onto mine. "You tricked us."

The smugness vanished from his face, replaced by pure rage.

"You were trying to find out who sent us!"

I shrugged, unable to hide my smirk. "Took you long enough."

His face twisted with fury. "Bitch!"

He lunged toward me, grabbing a fistful of my hair.

"You think you're clever?" He yanked my head back. Pain shot across my scalp. "You should've kept your mouth shut."

His free hand reached for my face. That was a big mistake.

The drug was still spreading through my body. My muscles felt sluggish, my vision blurred around the edges, and every movement demanded twice, the effort.

But my wolf was fighting it with everything she had.

I ignored the burning in my wrists as I twisted against the restraints and drove my forehead straight into his nose.

Crack!

“Agh!” Blood gushed instantly as he staggered backward, clutching his face.

“You bitch!”

“I wamed you not to touch me.”

Lydia snarled. Do it again!

+ threw my weight sideways, catching another attacker off guard and knocking him into the wall.

Two more men rushed toward me.

I ducked beneath one swinging arm and slammed my shoulder into his chest. The drug made me slower than usual, but adrenaline and instinct kept me moving.

“Grab her!”

One of them caught my arm. I spun and drove my knee into his stomach. He doubled over with a curse.

I didn’t wait. I ran.

The empty hallway stretched endlessly ahead. Every footstep echoed through the deserted corridor.

Behind me came the pounding of boots.

“Catch her!”

“Don’t let her get away!”

The sedative continued coursing through my veins. My breathing grew heavier. My legs felt as though they were dragging through mud, yet each passing second brought a little more strength back.

Our body is burning out, Lydia said.

Just keep us moving.

The hallway opened toward the building's exit.

Hope surged inside me. I pushed harder despite the weakness threatening to pull me down.

I had almost reached the exit when someone suddenly grabbed my arm.

"No!"

I spun, ready to strike. Instead of another thug, I found myself staring into a pair of striking steel-blue eyes.

The man was impossibly handsome.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dark hair fell carelessly over his forehead, and despite the tailored black suit he wore, there was something untamed about him.

His scent stopped Lydia cold.

It wasn't like any werewolf she'd ever encountered.

What is he?

"I... don't know."

The stranger immediately loosened his grip the moment he saw the fear in my eyes.

"Easy," he said calmly. "I'm not here to hurt you."

I tried to pull away. Behind us, angry voices echoed through the hallway.

"There she is!"

The stranger looked past me toward the charging men. His expression hardened in an instant.

"I heard a lot of footsteps approaching and wondered what the commotion was... now I see."

Without another word, he stepped in front of me. The first thug charged. The stranger sidestepped with effortless grace and drove a single punch into the man's stomach.

The thug flew backward several feet before crashing into the ground. The others froze. Even I blinked. That wasn't normal. Whoever this stranger was, his strength rivaled an Alpha's.

He looked at the remaining men.

"You have ten seconds." His tone remained almost lazy. "Leave or die."

The men exchanged uneasy looks. One muttered, "Forget it... I am not ready to die today."

Within moments, they scattered into the darkness.

The stranger didn't bother chasing them. Instead, he turned back to me.

"You need medical attention."

"I'm fine."

"You can barely stand."

He reached for me, but I knocked his hand away. "I said I'm..."

Before I could finish, the world tilted violently. My knees buckled. Before I hit the ground, strong arms caught me.

"Careful."

His scent surrounded me. It wasn't the scent of a full werewolf. Nor was it entirely human. It was...

different.

Lydia grew restless. His blood is unusual.

The stranger studied me carefully.

"You do not need to be scared of me. My name is..."

I didn't hear the rest. The drug surged through my bloodstream again. His face blurred. The men from earlier, their laughter... Everything mixed together.

"No... leave me alone."

“Listen to me.” His voice sounded distant. “I think you’re drugged. I can help you.”

“No...” I shoved him away with every bit of strength I had left. “Stay away from me!”

His eyes widened. “I’m trying to help you.”

Liar I stumbled backward. “You’re one of them!

“I’m not.”

“Don’t touch me!”

He frowned, genuine concern crossing his face.

“The drug is affecting your judgment.”

“I said...” I turned and ran before he could finish.

“Stop! I’m not chasing you!” His voice followed me through the darkness. “You need treatment!”

But I couldn’t trust anyone. Every face looked like an enemy. Every shadow hid another trap. I just kept

running.

My vision blurred again. The streets became impossible to recognize. Then a familiar scent slammed into

“Damon...”

Before I even saw him, Lydia lifted her head.

He’s here.

A black SUV screeched to a stop beside the road. The driver’s door flew open. Damon stepped out. His silver eyes swept across me frantically.

“Aria!”

Relief flashed across his face. Then he stopped. His nostrils flared. I watched the exact moment everything changed. His expression darkened. His Alpha aura exploded outward so violently that nearby streetlights flickered.

Damon’s gaze fixed on my clothes. On my wrists. On the bruises. Then his nose lifted slightly. He inhaled again. Damon’s jaw clenched so hard I thought his teeth might crack.

“Who touched you?”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 185

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Aria’s POV

Damon’s voice was terrifyingly quiet. I blinked, still struggling against the lingering effects of the drug.

“Damon...”

He took one step closer. The air around him crackled with Alpha dominance. His pupils had narrowed into a wolf’s.

“Whose scent is on you?”

My vision refused to stay steady. The world swayed around me as the drug continued to course through my veins. Every shadow looked unfamiliar. Every sound echoed.

I blinked hard.

Was it really Damon?

One second, I was certain I was looking at Damon. The next, I wasn’t.

What if this was another trick? What if they had sent someone wearing his face?

Lydia growled weakly beneath my skin. The man in front of me took a cautious step closer.

“Aria.”

His voice... It sounded like Damori. But I couldn’t trust my own mind.

“No, don’t touch me.” The words came out hoarse.

He stopped immediately. His hand had been reaching toward me, but it froze in midair.

His expression tightened.

“It’s me.”

I shook my head, stumbling backward until my shoulders hit the cold wall.

“No... Stay away.”

The drug blurred everything together. The hallway... The attack... The men... Their laughter.

Every memory crashed into the present until I couldn’t tell what was real anymore.

“Aria, look at me. It is me, Damon.”

He took a step closer.

“Stay away! I said don’t touch me!”

Lydia whimpered. Is it... him?

I don’t know. I honestly didn’t know. One heartbeat I recognized his scent. The next, all I could smell was

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the drug clouding my senses.

The man didn’t move another inch.

Instead, he slowly lowered both hands.

“Alright.” His voice remained calm. “I won’t touch you.”

For several long seconds, neither of us spoke.

Then he pulled out his phone. “I need a healer. Immediately.”

His voice changed. It was cold and authoritative.

“She’s been drugged.”

He ended the call without another word.

I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the cold pavement, wrapping both arms around my body.

The drug burned through my veins like liquid fire. My heartbeat refused to settle. My vision kept swimming.

The man never came closer.

He simply stood a few feet away, watching me with an expression I couldn't make out.

Minutes later, hurried footsteps approached.

An older she-wolf rounded the corner carrying a leather medical bag.

"Alpha Damon."

She gave him a brief nod before turning to me.

"Ms. Grayson."

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She crouched several feet away instead of approaching immediately. "Aria," she said gently. "I'm going to help remove the drug from your system."

I looked between her and Damon.

Was this real? Or another trap?

The healer seemed to read the uncertainty in my eyes. "I'm a pack healer."

She opened her bag slowly so I could see every movement.

"No one's going to force you."

Damon remained exactly where he was. "I'll stay back."

After a long moment, I gave the smallest nod.

The healer moved closer. She rested two fingers lightly against my wrist before placing her other hand over the side of my neck.

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25 Powers

Warm energy flowed through my body. I felt it searching through my bloodstream. Finding the foreign substance.

Then... a sharp burning sensation spread through every vein as the healer forced the drug out of my

system.

I gasped.

"It'll pass," she murmured. "Your wolf has been resisting it this whole time."

The burning intensified for several agonizing seconds before suddenly easing. The fog inside my head began to lift. The dizziness faded.

The strange confusion disappeared. Colors sharpened. Scents became clear again.

I inhaled the scents around me deeply. This time there was no mistake. It really was Damon.

Lydia relaxed. It's our mate. It's really him.

The healer smiled faintly. "The drug is gone."

My heartbeat finally slowed.

Damon's gaze remained fixed on me, his expression carefully controlled. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

His eyes swept over me, checking for injuries before he finally let out a slow breath.

"I know who did this," I said.

His expression hardened. "Who?"

"It is Claudia."

The name alone changed the atmosphere. Damon's Alpha aura flared for the briefest moment before he reined it in.

"Tell me everything."

So I did. I told him everything that had happened. How I'd followed a lead while, investigating Claudia. How I'd seen her meet with the mysterious man inside the nightclub.

Then I told him about the attack in the empty hallway while I was trailing her. About the drug. About the men she'd hired. And finally, how one of them had admitted Claudia was the one who sent them.

When I finished, silence settled between us.

Damon stared at the pavement for a long moment before speaking.

"I already suspected she was involved."

My brows drew together.

"What?"

sent people to retrieve the nightclub's security footage." His expression darkened. "It was destroyed."

I frowned, "Destroyed?"

"Every camera inside the club and around the building was wiped clean."

My stomach tightened. "She's covering her tracks."

I looked back at Damon.

"Claudia was planning something with that mysterious man. I don't know what it was, but it wasn't a casual meeting. They're definitely working on something, and I need to find out what."

Damon's jaw tightened, "Aria... I need you to stop investigating this."

The words made my temper flare instantly. "What did you just say?"

"I said stop investigating."

I stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. This isn't just about gathering evidence anymore," he continued. "These people drugged you. They ambushed you. If I hadn't found you..."

"I handled it."

His eyes flashed. "Barely. You were attacked. You shouldn't have been there alone. Stay away from this, Aria. Leave everything to me."

“I lost Joshua because people like Claudia keep getting away with everything.” My voice trembled despite my best efforts. “I’m not standing by while she destroys someone else’s life.”

His expression fell slightly.

“Aria...”

“I need to go,” I said. “I need time to think.”

I walked past him without another word and went straight to my car.

Claudia Stone had declared war, and I wasn’t going to hide, not even for Damon.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 186

Aria’s POV

The project was finally over. Weeks of negotiations, endless revisions, construction inspections, meetings, and sleepless nights had all led to this evening. The joint completion ceremony.

Hemsworth Group and my company had completed one of the biggest commercial developments in the country, and tonight’s gala celebrated that success.

I smiled as I looked at myself in the mirror. The silver evening gown hugged my figure gracefully.

I slipped on my heels before leaving.

The ballroom glittered beneath enormous crystal chandeliers. Pack leaders, business tycoons, and political figures filled the room. Everyone who mattered had gathered.

The moment I entered, conversations paused. Eyes followed me. Some smiled politely. Some whispered. Others openly stared.

“That’s Aria Grayson.”

“I heard she personally led the entire project.”

“No wonder Hawthorne Group insisted on partnering with her.”

I ignored every word. I maintained a professional smile. Then the familiar scent reached me.

Damon.

Without thinking, I looked across the ballroom. He had just entered.

He wore a black tailored suit. His expression was cold. His posture, perfect. Every movement carried the natural authority of an Alpha.

Despite being surrounded by executives, he stood above them all.

Our eyes met. For one brief second, the mate bond tugged. I looked away first. My chest tightened.

I don't think it is fair for you to keep ignoring him, Aria, Lydia said quietly.

I don't care what you think, Lydia.

Before Lydia could answer, the entrance doors opened again. Gasps spread across the ballroom. I frowned.

Then I saw her.

Claudia Stone.

She walked in confidently with a smile worthy of a movie star. But that wasn't what made everyone stare.

She was wearing my dress. The exact same silver gown I wore. Same neckline, same embroidery, same flowing skirt.

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For a second, I wondered if I was looking into a mirror.

Someone nearby whispered, "They're dressed exactly alike."

"Was it planned?" another asked.

"No... I think one copied the other"

Lydia growled.

That snake did it on purpose.

Of course she had. Claudia's eyes found mine immediately. Her lips curled upward in a mix of victory, challenge, and mockery.

She slowly walked toward Damon. Then, without hesitation, slipped her hand around his arm.

I froze.

Damon's brows furrowed. "Let go of me."

My sharp ears caught his words. His voice was cold enough to freeze water.

Claudia laughed softly. "Oh, Damon." She leaned closer. "So many reporters are watching. We should look united."

"I said," his tone dropped another degree, "let go."

She ignored him.

For a heartbeat, I almost expected him to push her away. He didn't. He also didn't move. He simply allowed her hand to remain there.

He didn't accept her, neither did he reject her. He just remained indifferent. And somehow that disgusted

me more.

If he hated her, then push her away. If he wanted her, then admit it. But this constant wavering, this refusal to draw a line, it made my stomach churn.

He is a coward, Lydia snarled.

No. I swallowed painfully. He isn't a coward. The Damon I knew would never have tolerated someone forcing themselves into his personal space, not even for appearances.

I turned away before he could catch me looking. Business. I was here for business, nothing else.

The host soon stepped onto the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, we celebrate the successful completion of the Silver Horizon Project'

That was what we had named the Old Town redevelopment project.

Applause erupted. Awards were presented. Executives gave speeches. Investors toasted. Everything proceeded exactly as expected.

Until the emcee smiled brightly.

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“We also have a special surprise tonight. Ms. Claudia Stone, you wished to unveil your newest design to

everyone.”

The spotlight immediately shifted. I blinked. That wasn’t listed in the program.

Claudia gracefully walked onto the stage. Her smile was flawless.

“Thank you.” She accepted the microphone with practiced elegance. “As many of you know, I stepped away from the fashion world for some time.” She paused dramatically. “But true talent never disappears.”

Polite laughter echoed through the room.

“My newest work represents my rebirth.”

Several assistants rolled out a covered mannequin. Claudia placed one hand over the cloth.

“I call this piece...” She smiled. “Moonlight Rebirth.”

The cloth fell. Time stopped.

Every muscle in my body froze. My breathing halted.

Lydia exploded inside me.

The gown beneath the spotlight shimmered beautifully. It had silver thread, moonstone embroidery, and layered crystal vines. I knew every single stitch and every single detail because I had created them.

Five years ago, it was this very design that had won/me the International Golden Laurel Award overseas. It was the dress that launched my career.

My fingers curled into fists. That design had never been released commercially. Only the judges, my mentor, and a handful of people had ever seen it.

My heartbeat thundered.

She stole it. Lydia's voice shook with fury. She stole your work.

Around me, applause erupted.

"This is beautiful."

"It is absolutely magnificent."

"No wonder Claudia was once called a genius."

"What gorge craftsmanship.

th the lights. "As expected... this design reflects everything I believe fashion

She hadn't created it. She had stolen it, and now she was accepting

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praise that belonged to me.

Somments

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

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Aria's POV

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Claudia smiled gracefully and continued, "Five years ago, I stepped away from fashion to focus on family matters. Tonight marks my official return."

Polite applause spread across the hall.

"My newest masterpiece represents rebirth. I poured my heart into every stitch."

Another round of applause followed. My fingers slowly curled into fists: Heart? She didn't even know the meaning of that word.

Claudia continued smiling at the audience. "This dress represents my growth as a designer."

Enough. I had had enough. I stepped forward and made my way toward the stage. My heels echoed across the hall, drawing everyone's attention. One by one, heads turned in my direction.

Claudia's smile barely faltered. "Ms. Grayson."

I stopped beside the mannequin. "You call this your design?"

She folded her arms. "Of course, it is mine. Why do you ask?"

I looked around the ballroom, meeting the curious gazes of the guests. "I know this dress."

A few guests exchanged confused glances.

"I know every seam because I created it."

Silence filled the room.

Claudia let out a soft laugh. "What an interesting joke."

"It isn't a joke, and you know that."

I reached out without hesitation and grabbed the side panel of the gown.

Rip.

The sound of tearing fabric echoed through the ballroom. Gasps erupted from every corner.

"What are you doing, Aria? You've gone insane!" Claudia snarled.

Security instinctively stepped forward, but several guests quickly stopped them, their curiosity overpowering their concern. Everyone wanted to see what would happen next.

The torn lining was supposed to reveal something hidden beneath: a hand-stitched signature with two initials. A.G. The secret signature I had embroidered into my design.

Instead, my breath caught.

The exposed fabric revealed the initials C.S.

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Claudia hadn't just copied my design. She had copied the secret signature I had personally embroidered

onto it.

I turned toward the crowd, fury burning through me. "This is my work. I won an international award with this exact design five years ago."

The audience immediately erupted into whispers, speculating about whether I was truly the designer.

Claudia slowly clapped her hands. "Wonderful imagination."

I stared at her in disbelief. "You copied every detail. You even copied my hidden signature."

She looked down at the exposed embroidery without the slightest trace of panic. Instead, she smiled calmly.

"Stop making a fool out of yourself, Aria. This is my design, and I can prove it."

Something inside me tightened.

She turned toward her assistant. "Bring it."

The assistant immediately handed her a leather folder. Claudia opened it calmly before holding several documents toward the audience.

"This is the original ownership certificate."

Several distinguished guests stepped closer to examine the documents.

They had official seals, international authentication stamps, legal registration, and notarized confirmation

Every page declared Claudia Stone the original designer.

The atmosphere shifted. Just like that, they went from believing me to doubting me. My chest tightened. No. No... These papers couldn't exist.

Lydia's voice turned cold. Someone is helping her. She couldn't have done all this alone.

I understood immediately. Claudia hadn't acted alone. She never had.

Someone had protected her from the very beginning, someone with enough power and influence to erase evidence, forge international certifications, and make lies look like truth.

I slowly exhaled. Then that's who we hunt.

Yes, Lydia agreed. Cut off the hand that shields her.

I looked into Claudia's eyes. She smiled wider.

"You seem disappointed, Aria."

"You forged those documents, and you know it."

"Can you prove it?" Her smile became even crueler. "I suppose jealousy makes people do irrational things"

The whispers around us grew louder.

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"What a shame."

"I thought Miss Grayson had evidence."

"Perhaps she is truly jealous of Ms. Stone."

My nails dug into my palms. Claudia walked closer until only a few feet separated us. Her perfume made my stomach churn. She lowered her voice so only I could hear.

"You know... this reminds me of what happened to Joshua."

My entire body froze. Lydia went utterly still.

"What did you say?"

She smiled sweetly. "Joshua, your big brother."

My brother's name felt like a knife through my chest.

"It's sad the poor guy had to die the way he did."

I couldn't breathe. My nails dug into my palms.

"You should stop."

“No, Aria, you should be the one to stop.” She leaned closer. “That way you won’t end up like your brother.”

Something inside me snapped completely. I didn’t think. I moved. My wolf instincts took over. In one second, my hands slammed against Claudia’s throat.

Gasps erupted throughout the ballroom.

“Enough!”

The command cracked through the ballroom with unmistakable Alpha authority. Every head turned. It was Damon. For one impossible second, my heart stopped.

Lydia stirred uneasily. Rhein is furious.

Before I could react, Damon was already beside us. His hands wrapped firmly around my wrists, forcing them away from Claudia’s throat.

“Aria.” His voice was low. “Enough.”

Vote

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 188

Aria’s POV

Claudia collapsed onto the floor, coughing violently while clutching her neck.

The room erupted into chaos.

“Someone call a doctor!”

“Miss Stone is injured!”

“Cameras! Keep filming!”

Damon didn’t spare Claudia another glance. Instead, his gaze remained fixed on me. His eyes carried exhaustion, relief, and something dangerously close to desperation.

He looked at the security team. “Take Ms. Stone to the medical room.”

Claudia immediately protested between coughs. "Alpha Damon... she attacked me..."

"I gave an order." His voice became colder. "Take her."

The guards hesitated only briefly before helping Claudia to her feet. She looked at Damon in disbelief, then at me. Hatred burried in her eyes.

As she was escorted away, I folded my arms across my chest. "So this is how it's going to be."

Damon frowned. "What do you mean?"

I laughed bitterly. "You come up just in time to save her, as always. Why do you always protect her?"

His expression darkened. "I stopped you from committing murder. You were the one I protected."

"Oh, please."

I wasn't going to believe his lies.

Damon glanced around the crowded room. "We're not discussing this here." He gently reached for my arm. "Come with me."

I jerked away. "I don't want your pity."

His jaw tightened. "Aria."

"No, I am not going anywhere with you."

Before I could walk away, he stepped in front of me. The guests wisely pretended not to watch. I could tell they were all listening.

Damon lowered his voice. "Please, Aria."

That single word caught me off guard. He hardly ever begged. Against my better judgment, I followed him

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He led me onto a quiet terrace overlooking the estate gardens. The music from the ballroom became distant. Only the night breeze remained. For several long seconds, neither of us spoke.

Finally, Damon broke the silence. "I need you to trust me, Aria. I will handle Claudia myself."

I stared at him. "Trust you? A cold, disbelieving laugh escaped me. "You've got to be kidding."

His brows drew together. "I know what you're thinking, but you are wrong. I am not protecting Claudia. I just don't want you to get into danger."

The memories came flooding back so violently that my chest hurt. Claudia framing me. Damon believing her. Him throwing me out. The divorce. The loneliness.

Every time I begged him to believe me. Every single time, he chose Claudia.

"You said that before," I whispered.

His shoulders stiffened. "I know."

"You said you'd handle her."

"I know."

"You said you'd investigate."

"I know."

"You said you'd protect me." Each sentence came out louder than the last.

I looked directly into his eyes. "Have you forgotten so soon how things used to be? Have you forgotten how quick you always were to believe and protect Claudia over me?"

His face filled with regret. "I was wrong, Aria. But things have changed now. I am different."

Damon took one careful step toward me. "I'll make things right."

I smiled bitterly. "You can't. You can't bring back the years I lost. You can't erase the nights I cried. You can't erase what happened to Joshua and my father."

His breathing became uneven. "I know."

"You can't erase the fact that every time Claudia cried..." I swallowed hard. "...you believed her."

His fists clenched. "I promise I won't make that mistake again."

I looked at him for a long moment. Then something caught my attention. His scent. It was different. It had become stronger and steadier.

The violent instability that had surrounded him since the accident was gone.

Lydia noticed it too. Rhein's aura is so much better now. It is so strong...

I focused on him just to be absolutely sure. His Alpha scent no longer fluctuated. His wolf energy flowed smoothly beneath his skin.

h

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My heart slowly sank. The treatment had worked. All those weeks, the calming sessions, the mate bond, my presence beside him: they had healed him. Rhein had recovered.

He doesn't need us anymore, Lydia whispered quietly.

She was right. For weeks, I'd stayed because Damon would have died without treatment, because Rhein had been collapsing, because despite everything, I couldn't watch someone die.

But now his wolf had stabilized. There was no reason left.

I looked up at Damon. "You've recovered."

He frowned. "Yes, I have gotten better. Thanks to you."

"Exactly."

His expression slowly changed. Understanding dawned. "No. Aria!"

"Yes. I won't be giving you any more soothing sessions."

His face turned pale. "Aria..."

"I promised to do that only until you recovered."

He reached for my hand. I pulled it away. "Our arrangement is over. Also, I want every last thread between us cut."

His breathing stopped. "What?"

"You heard me. I don't want this bond anymore."

Lydia spoke quietly. I will miss Rhein. We're finally choosing ourselves.

Damon suddenly grabbed both my shoulders. "You don't mean that."

"I do."

His Alpha aura burst free. "So that's it?" His voice became rough. "You heal me... and then leave? You think I'll allow that?"

Anger flashed across his face. "No, I won't."

Before I realized what he intended, his eyes turned bright silver. Rhein surged forward.

He's trying to mark us! He wants to make the mate bond even stronger, Lydia shouted.

Damon suddenly lowered his head toward my neck.

My eyes widened. "Damon!"

His canines lengthened. Instinct took over. I shoved him backward with every ounce of strength I had.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not letting you leave me." His voice had become half growl. "If the bond isn't enough... I'll remark you."

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Shock froze me. "You've lost your mind."

"won't lose you again." He reached for me once more.

"No!"

My hand moved before I could think.

Smack!

\$25 Paints

The sharp sound echoed across the empty terrace. Damon froze. A bright red mark spread across his cheek.

His eyes slowly lifted to mine.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 189

Aria's POV

Points

My hand trembled. "You don't get to force me." Every word came out cord. "You lost that right a long time ago."

For a long second, he simply stared. Then his shoulders slumped. I didn't wait.

I turned and ran.

"Aria!"

I ignored him. The ballroom had become impossible to navigate. Guests crowded every corridor. Reporters were everywhere.

I pushed through unfamiliar hallways, desperate to escape. My breathing became ragged.

"Excuse me!"

I rounded another corner, then another, and yet another. The music disappeared behind me. The elegant decorations gave way to quiet, carpeted corridors lined with expensive artwork.

I finally slowed. My heartbeat thundered in my ears.

Lydia looked around uneasily. This isn't the main hall.

I frowned. It wasn't. The signs on the wall read: VIP Priváte Suites. My stomach tightened.

In my panic, I'd run into a part of the estate reserved for only the most important guests, and judging by the silence surrounding me, I wasn't supposed to be there.

I leaned against the wall, trying to steady my breathing. The slap still stung my palm. Damon's stunned expression refused to leave my mind.

Don't think about him right now, Lydia muttered.

I'm trying not to. I rubbed my temples. Everything had spiraled out of control. It felt suffocating.

“I just need to get out of here.”

I glanced around the corridor. The hallway was lined with identical mahogany doors, each bearing elegant silver plaques. There were no stairs, roamed around but couldn't find an exit.

“This isn't where I came from,” I muttered when I reached another dead end.

We've wandered deeper inside, Lydia observed.

Wonderful. I let out a frustrated sigh and picked a direction. My heels echoed through the eerily quiet VIP wing.

“Excuse me?” I called softly.

There was no answer. I reached another intersection. Left? Right? “This place is a maze.”

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Follow the scents.

+ closed my eyes. The air carried dozens of overlapping scents. Expensive wine. Fresh flowers. Alpha wolves. Perfume. None of them pointed toward the ballroom. I chose another hallway.

A few steps later, I noticed one of the suite doors standing slightly ajar. Light spilled through the narrow opening. Relieved, I hurried over.

“Hello?”

There was no response.

“I... I'm sorry. Could someone tell me where the exit is?”

Still nothing.

I tried another door, hoping for a balcony or side stairwell. Instead, I stumbled into a dim, lavish bedroom.

Moonlight filtered through heavy curtains, casting silver across silk sheets. A half-naked man lay sprawled on the massive bed, his bare chest revealing well-defined muscles, his dark hair tousled.

Before I could back out, he moved like lightning. Strong arms caught me around the waist and pulled me closer.

“Well, hello there,” he drawled, his voice lazy and amused. “You’re early, beautiful. I like eager ladies.”

My instincts exploded. I attacked outright, my elbow slamming into his ribs, my knee driving upward. He grunted but twisted, using werewolf strength to flip our positions.

In the scuffle, his elbow hit the lamp. Light flooded the room.

I froze.

It was him. The half-blood from the club weeks ago.

“You! You are the half-blood from the other night.”

He pinned my wrists above my head with one hand, his body hovering over mine. Recognition dawned on

him.

He gave an exaggerated sigh. “I have a name.”

“I don’t care what it is.”

“Ouch.” He placed a dramatic hand over his chest. “That hurts.”

I snarled, struggling beneath him. “Same trick again? Trying to force yourself on me?”

A cocky grin spread across his face, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Easy, wikicat. I mean you no harm. The first time outside the club? That was a coincidence. Tonight? Maybe fate’s got a sense of humor. By the way, I’m Ryder, and it is nice to meet you.”

His flippant tone disgusted me. Frivolous men like him, who were charming, careless, and dangerous in their own way, were exactly what I loathed most.

Lydia bared her teeth. Snap his neck. He’s too close.

“Get off me, I hissed as I tried to force him off me.

He chuckled, but his gap loosened slightly. “You are feisty, I like that. But really, I was just waiting for someone else. You barged in on me.

I stopped fighting and let my body go Thap, feigning compliance. A sweet, deceptive smile curved my lips. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it is fate.”

His eyes darkened with interest. “Now we’re talking...”

In one fluid motion, I twisted, slammed my heel into his side, and shoved hard. He rolled off balance. I lunged for the door and threw it wide open.

A burst of light from the hallway spilled in. Guests passing by turned at the commotion, then screams and gasps erupted as Ryder stood stark naked, fully exposed.

“Pervert!” someone shrieked.

Chaos exploded in the corridor. Ryder cursed, grabbing for a sheet. In the frenzy, I slipped through the crowd like a shadow, my heart pounding with dark satisfaction.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

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Aria’s POV

The morning after the gala, sat down in front of my laptop, my fingers resting on the keyboard.

“I need to investigate and find the person who’s shielding Claudia.

The hidden wolf behind the hunt, Lydia murmured.

+25 Fonts

Exactly. For years, I had tried to identify the mysterious hacker who cleaned up Claudia’s tracks. Every investigation ended the same way: dead ends, erased servers, burned records, fake identities.

The man existed only in cyberspace. No photograph, no name, no mistakes.

I finally had something new that would help me find him... the stolen award.

Unlike everything else Claudia had stolen, this involved an international committee: official records, archived submissions, judging panels.

Someone, somewhere, had altered history, and altering records always left fingerprints, no matter how

careful the hacker was.

I opened my sss. Then I began typing.

[To the International Golden Laurel Design Committee,

Five years ago, I received the Golden Laurel Award for my design titled Moonlight Rebirth.

Yesterday, another designer publicly claimed ownership of the same work while presenting documentation that appears to supersede the original records.

I formally request a complete investigation into the award archives, all submission records, ownership transfers, authentication logs, and any digital access involving my file since the date of the competition.

I believe the official database has been manipulated.

I am prepared to provide every sketch, draft, timestamp, and supporting witness available.

Sincerely,

Aria Grayson]

I read it twice before pressing send. The sss disappeared. Now I waited.

Three days later, my phone vibrated. It was a call from an unknown international number.

“Hello. This is Aria,” I greeted.

“Miss Grayson?” The voice spoke fluent English. “This is Elaine Foster from the Golden Laurel Award Committee.”

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straightened immediately. “Thank you for calling.”

-“We’ve completed an initial review.” There was a pause. “You were correct.”

My heartbeat quickened. My fingers tightened around the phone.

“The original archives were altered approximately four years ago. Someone hacked your records. This did not happen directly.”

“What do you mean?”

“The intrusion was... unusual.” She sounded genuinely unsettled. “The intruder entered without leaving conventional logs. Our own team found nothing.”

I frowned. “Then how do you know all this?”

“We hired a private cybersecurity firm after the breach. Their experts found traces of him. A digital signature.”

“A signature?”

“Not a real signature. A pattern. His tools, his methods, the way he erases his tracks. It’s like handwriting.”

Lydia growled. Someone professional did it.

“Did the firm identify this person?” I asked.

“No, they didn’t. But they recognized the signature. They have seen his work before. Many times, over many years. They keep a file on him.”

My pulse quickened. “What’s in the file?”

“He works almost exclusively for extremely wealthy individuals through private referrals. He doesn’t advertise or negotiate. He accepts only a fixed list of clients.”

I frowned. “A fixed list?” My fingers tightened around the phone. “Can you send me the file?”

“Most of it is damaged. The firm’s archive was breached two years ago. They believe he did it himself to destroy their records. Only fragments survived.”

He covered his own tracks, Lydia muttered.

“Send me whatever is left,” I said.

“All right. We’ll send it to you right away.”

“Thank you.”

A few minutes later, the file arrived. I opened it immediately. Most of it was corrupted. Entire sections had been wiped clean.

Even so, one page remained partially intact. According to the firm’s note, the hacker never met his clients directly. A broker handled all his introductions, and years ago, that broker had leaked part of his files. This

page came from that leak.

It contained client references. No real names, mostly initials. A few aliases.

Then one name wasn't hidden... Ryder.

I stared at the screen. "Ryder?"

Lydia immediately reacted. The half-blood. The guy you met in the VIP suite yesterday.

I groaned. "Oh no."

Surely not.

"He told me his name was Ryder." The name couldn't be a coincidence. I immediately picked up my phone again. There was only one person who might know him.

Noah.

An hour later, I met Noah at a restaurant. He arrived wearing a simple charcoal coat despite the expensive watch peeking from beneath his sleeve.

As always, he was calm and composed. He sat opposite me.

"You sounded serious over the phone."

"I found something," I slid the printed page across the table.

He glanced at it. Then his eyebrows lifted. "Where did you get this?"

"The Golden Laurel Award Committee sent it to me."

He read it again. His expression slowly hardened. "You've been investigating Claudia's hacker."

"Yes, I finally found a lead. Do you know who this guy is?" I pointed at the name on the list. "He goes by the name Ryder."

Noah's eyes landed on the single visible name.

He leaned back. "This is interesting. I actually know him."

"Who is he?" I asked eagerly.

Noah was silent for several seconds, long enough to make me nervous. Finally, he spoke. "He isn't someone ordinary."

“I gathered that much.”

“He owns one of the largest entertainment conglomerates in the world.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... Film, music, streaming, luxury resorts, media. He has investments everywhere.”

I blinked. “How wealthy is he?”

Noah gave a faint smile. “Let’s just say money stopped being relevant to him years ago.”

I stared at him. “He’s one of the wealthiest men alive.” The image of the half-dressed flirt from the hotel

suite refused to match Noah’s description. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.” Noah hesitated. “And he’s a human-werewolf half-blood.”

Lydia lifted her head. That explains his scent.

“He spent most of his life overseas. He only returned recently.”

Pieces slowly began fitting together. “The hacker...”

Noah nodded. “If Ryder’s name appears among those clients... he probably hired him or knows how to reach him.”

Exactly. Finally, I have a doorway. Maybe the first real one in years.

I looked down at Ryder’s name again.

Lydia sighed dramatically. Of all the wolves...

“I know.”

Noah studied me carefully. “You aren’t thinking about approaching him, are you?”

“I am.”

“No, you can’t.” His answer came far too quickly.

I looked up. “Why?”

“Because Ryder is...” He searched for the right word. “...complicated.”

“Meaning?”

“His family background is tangled. He has enemies everywhere. He trusts almost no one. And his personal life...” Noah rubbed his forehead. “It is an absolute disaster.”

I couldn’t help asking, “You mean the women, don’t you?”

He laughed once. “Yes. His name appears constantly in headlines, rumors, and scandals. He enjoys attention.”

I sighed. “That part, I noticed.”

Noah’s expression became serious again. “Stay away from him.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. I need information.”

“There are safer ways to get it.”

“I’ve spent years looking for this hacker.” I tapped Ryder’s name. “This is the first real lead I’ve ever had.”

Noah remained unconvinced. “Aria...”

“know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” he asked, his brow raised.

M

+25 Pants

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 191

Aria’s POV

I fell silent. Images from the previous night resurfaced: me attacking him, throwing open the suite door, leaving him standing naked in front of an entire hallway. Heat crept into my face.

“I may have... handled our first meeting badly.”

Noah raised an eyebrow. “You met him already? What exactly happened?”

“Nothing worth discussing,” I said quickly.

Lydia burst into laughter. Nothing? We nearly strangled him before humiliating him in front of dozens of people.

You are not helping.

Noah could tell I was hiding something. He sighed. “I’ve never seen you look guilty.”

“I’m not guilty. Just... slightly regretful.”

Maybe Ryder hadn’t deserved quite everything I’d done to him. Maybe. But if getting close to him was the only way to uncover the man protecting Claudia, then I had no choice.

It was a day later. I stared at the business card in my hand.

RYDER ASHFORD

There was no title, no phone number. Just an embossed silver wolf’s head and a QR code. For someone supposedly running an entertainment empire, it was strangely mysterious.

Lydia huffed. He does enjoy making people curious.

“I noticed,” I replied.

Noah had managed to obtain the card through one of his business contacts. According to him, Ryder didn’t publish personal contact information.

If someone wanted to reach him, they had to be invited or be fortunate enough to possess one of these

cards.

I scanned the code. A secure messaging page opened. No social media, no profile picture. Just one blank message box. I typed:

I need to speak with you. Aria Grayson

I pressed send. Less than five seconds later, a reply appeared.

Meet me at Suite 88, Ashford Tower. One hour. Don’t keep me waiting, Wildcat.

I blinked. “He knew it was me.”

Lydia groaned. He’s insufferable.

“I agree.

Exactly one hour later, I stepped out of the elevator onto the top floor of Ashford Tower. The entire floor belonged to him,

Luxury barely described it. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the city. Original paintings lined the walls The scent of cedarwood mixed with expensive whiskey lingered in the air.

Before I could knock, the door opened. Ryder leaned casually against the frame. Unlike our last meeting, he was fully dressed.

“Disappointed?” he asked with a grin.

“What do you mean?”

“You seem relieved I’m wearing a shirt today.”

I rolled my eyes. “I came here to talk business.”

“I know.” He stepped aside. “Come in.”

I entered cautiously. Lydia remained alert. Don’t trust him.

I don’t.

The door clicked shut behind me. Ryder wandered toward the living room without the slightest concern.

He poured himself a glass of sparkling water. “So what made you miss me?”

“I didn’t. I am here because I need information.”

“I know.”

I frowned. “You know?”

He smiled. “I knew you’d come eventually.”

“How?”

He shrugged. "You can call it intuition." He sat comfortably on the sofa. "I've been waiting for you."

I sat down across from him. "I don't understand."

His smile became annoyingly smug. "People don't usually storm into my bedroom, expose me half-naked to strangers..." He looked directly into my eyes. "And disappear forever."

Heat crept into my cheeks. "I already said I wasn't here to discuss that."

Ryder chuckled, raising both hands in mock surrender.

"Alright then." His smile lingered as he settled back on the sofa. "Tell me why you're here."

I didn't bother dancing around the issue. I told him about the hacker and how I'd traced one of the hacker's client lists back to him

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Then I explained that I needed to find the hacker's identity and that he was the only lead I had left.

+25 Pants

He listened without interrupting once, his attention fixed entirely on me. By the time I finished, the teasing

in his eyes had been replaced with quiet thoughtfulness.

"I see," he said after a brief pause. "I do know the man you're talking about. He has worked for me before."

Hope flickered inside me.

"I need access to him."

A soft laugh escaped him as he slowly shook his head. "No."

My patience evaporated.

I frowned at him. "No?"

"You skipped something."

I narrowed my eyes. "What did I skip?"

“The negotiation.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Fine. What do you want?”

“There we are.” He leaned back comfortably, a satisfied smile tugging at his lips. “Now we’re talking.”

Most of his playful demeanor disappeared, replaced by the sharp, calculating businessman Noah had described.

“I could introduce you to him,” Ryder said. “I could even convince him to hear you out.”

My pulse quickened. “Then do it.”

“But...” He held my gaze, completely unfazed. “It has to be worth my while.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What exactly do you want?”

He studied me quietly, long enough to make me uncomfortable. Then he smiled.

“I’ve spent years searching for a muse.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“A real one. The kind who inspires ideas. The kind every artist searches for.” He tilted his head slightly. “When I saw you at the club, I knew you were a perfect fit.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

Lydia snorted. What a flirt.

I stared at him. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, here’s my condition.” He stood and walked toward the window.

“I attend dozens of elite events every year. Charity galas Private auctions. Film premieres. Fashion

launches.” He looked over his shoulder, “I want you to accompany me to some of them.”

I frowned. “As your date?”

His eyebrows shot upward: never said that.”

“Then what?”

“My guest. My artistic inspiration. My muse. I will create best when you’re nearby.”

“Are you insane?” I asked.

Lydia snorted. I was about to say exactly that.

Ryder laughed. “I’ve been called worse.”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. I think I’ll have to find another way.”

“Will you?” His calm confidence irritated me. “You’ve spent years chasing that hacker. You found nothing. Now you’re finally one step away.”

He walked closer. “I can open the door. But only if you give me something equally valuable.”

I clenched my jaw. “This sounds ridiculous.”

“It probably does. But it’s my condition.”

UCK DRAW >

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 192

Aria’s POV

Silence stretched between us. I hated the fact that without him, I had no way of finding out who the hacker was. No path to exposing whoever kept saving Claudia.

Lydia sighed. We don’t have many choices.

“I know.”

I looked back at Ryder. “Fine. We have an agreement.”

His eyes brightened slightly. He extended his hand. After a brief hesitation, I shook it. His grip was warm and firm.

“Pleasure doing business with you, Wildcat.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“We’ll negotiate that later.”

I withdrew my hand immediately. “This is strictly temporary.” I turned toward the door. “We’ll speak again.”

“I’ll contact you.”

I had almost reached the exit when his voice stopped me.

“Aria.”

I glanced back. His gaze rested on me with strange intensity.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look like someone?”

I frowned. “That’s a terrible line.”

“It isn’t a line.” Something moved behind his eyes and was gone before I could name it. “Forget it i’ve been chasing the same face for eighteen years. Sooner or later a man starts seeing it everywhere.”

He shrugged, the flippant mask sliding back into place. “Doesn’t matter. The present is much more fun.”

I left without another word, the night air cool against my flushed skin. An alliance with Ryder was risky, but

necessary.

He could be useful, Lydia murmured as I walked away. Or he could burn us both.

I clenched my fists. The certainty in Ryder’s eyes haunted me all the way outside.

No matter how hard I searched my memories, I couldn’t remember him. Yet somehow... he remembered

Noah came to my apartment after I returned. Lydia lifted her head. He’s upset. I didn’t need my wolf to tell

Targeting –

me that

Noah’s jaw was clenched so tightly that the muscles along his face twitched.

His eyes searched me from head to toe as though making sure I hadn't been hurt. "Did Ryder touch you?"

I blinked, "What?"

"I asked if he touched you." His voice was calm, but I could hear the anger simmering underneath.

I sighed and crossed my arms. "No."

"Did he threaten you?"

"Noah."

He fell silent. I walked closer, studying his face. "I'm perfectly fine!"

His shoulders refused to relax. "You shouldn't have gone to meet him alone. You should have gone with

me."

"I know. You have done enough for me already."

Silence stretched between us. Then Noah let out a frustrated breath and dragged a hand through his dark

hair.

"I should've gotten the information for you." His voice had become quieter. "If I had more influence, more people working for me, you wouldn't have had to rely on someone like Ryder. I failed you."

His guilt hit me unexpectedly. "Noah... you didn't."

"I did." He looked away. "Ryder Ashford isn't a good man, Aria. He has women throwing themselves at him everywhere he goes."

"I've noticed."

"He never helps anyone for free."

"I know that too."

His eyes met mine again. "Which is why I'm terrified he's after you."

Lydia growled softly inside me. What a protective man.

I smiled faintly. “He isn’t getting anything from me. I know where the line is with him.” I stepped closer until we were standing barely an arm’s length apart. “I appreciate your concern, Noah. I really do.”

His shoulders finally loosened a little.

“I just...” He exhaled heavily. “I don’t want anyone taking advantage of you. I couldn’t forgive myself if something happened.”

“Nothing will happen. Trust me.”

I reached out and pulled him into a hug, trying to offer comfort the way I always had

* Chapter 189

Bad idea. Noah’s arms wrapped around me instantly, tighter than usual. His body responded, warm, solid, and unmistakably aroused.

I felt it clearly against me. He froze. Heat flooded my cheeks. Oh. Oh, Moon Goddess...

Lydia stirred, surprised. He wants you. More than before.

Confused, I instinctively shifted back slightly.

Noah immediately stepped away as though he’d been burned. “I’m... sorry.” His ears had turned bright red. “I didn’t...”

He couldn’t even finish the sentence.

“I know,” I said quickly.

The embarrassment between us became almost unbearable. Noah rubbed the back of his neck and avoided my eyes. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“You already apologized.”

Lydia sighed. Poor Alpha. He can’t control how he feels.

That was exactly the problem. I’d always treated Noah like family, like my older brother after losing Joshua. But somewhere along the way, his feelings had changed. Mine hadn’t. And that made this even more awkward.

Noah finally forced out an uneasy laugh. “I should leave.”

“That might be a good idea.”

His expression became apologetic again. "I'll continue looking into Claudia. Also, be careful with Ryder.

Please."

"I will. I promise."

Only then did Noah leave. A few minutes after he left, I sank onto the couch with an old box of childhood keepsakes I'd brought back.

"I haven't opened these in a long time."

Lydia stretched lazily. Maybe we'll find something interesting in it.

I smiled. "Maybe."

Inside were faded drawings, broken toy wolves, tiny wooden carvings Joshua had once made for me.

Underneath them lay an old photo album. Most of the pictures had faded with time. Birthday celebrations. Pack gatherings. Children running around the Grayson estate during festivals. I slowly turned another page. Then stopped.

There, near the corner of one photograph, a chubby little boy with kind eyes stood behind me. He looked

no older than seven.

A blurred memory of him surfaced. He was a half-blood playmate from long ago, constantly bullied by the

+25 Points

stronger pups. I had protected him once, standing between him and a group of snarling kids.

I remembered hearing adults whispering weeks later. The half-blood child... there had been an accident. A vehicle crash. He hadn't survived. I'd cried for days because he had been kind, gentle, and timid.

I stared blankly at the photograph. Then Ryder Ashford's face appeared in my mind.

I snorted. "Impossible."

Lydia looked amused. What is?

“Ryder can’t be that little boy.”

Why not?

“Because the child I remember was sweet. So timid he could barely speak. He’d blush if someone looked at him.”

I shook my head. “But Ryder?” I couldn’t help laughing. “That man is the biggest flirt I’ve ever met.”

Lydia huffed. People do change.

I closed the album gently. “The little half-blood boy died years ago.” There was no room for doubt. Ryder Ashford could never be him.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 193

Aria’s POV

Ryder invited me to a restaurant to introduce me to his social circle. The restaurant he chose wasn’t just exclusive. It was hidden.

The moment I stepped out of the car, Lydia’s ears perked up inside me. I can smell several dominant

wolves.

“So can I.”

Ryder came around the car and opened my door himself. “You look beautiful tonight.”

I rolled my eyes. “I am sure you say that to every woman.”

He grinned without the slightest bit of shame. “Only the beautiful ones.”

“I’ve already told you flirting won’t work.” I shut the car door and looked up at the elegant building. “So this is where your mysterious friends gather?”

“My favorite people.”

“I’m sure that’s debatable.”

He laughed. "I like you more every time you insult me."

Lydia snorted. He's impossible. Completely.

The private dining hall overlooked a lake. Only about a dozen wealthy people were inside. Every single one carried the scent of a werewolf.

One of them glanced at Ryder before looking at me.

"So this is the famous Miss Grayson."

Ryder smiled. "It is."

The room immediately became interested. A middle-aged Alpha raised an eyebrow. "I thought you didn't date."

"I don't." Ryder looked at me and smiled, "I'm just trying something different."

I nearly kicked him under the table. "This isn't a date."

"You don't think it is?" He acted surprised. "That's unfortunate."

Everyone laughed. I forced a polite smile. He's making this difficult.

Smile, Lydia advised. Pretend you aren't imagining biting him.

Tempting.

Ryder Introduced me to everyone. Dinner moved quickly. Conversations shifted from business to pack

politics and back again. I listened far more than spoke.

Information flowed more freely when people believed you were only there to smile. Ryder, meanwhile,

seemed perfectly content playing host.

By the time dessert arrived, soft music drifted across the ballroom next door. Ryder stood. "Let's have one dance."

"No."

"I wasn't asking." He extended his hand anyway. "I promise not to step on your feet."

"I was more worried about stepping on yours."

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll survive.”

Everyone around us started watching.

Lydia sighed dramatically. If you refuse now, they’ll stare even harder.

I stood. “Just one dance.”

His smile widened. “I’ll treasure the memory.”

The dance floor wasn’t crowded. A slow melody echoed beneath crystal chandeliers. Ryder placed one hand lightly against my waist. The other held mine.

His touch remained respectful. No wandering hands. No inappropriate closeness. Almost gentle. That surprised me.

We moved across the polished floor. He was an excellent dancer. Unfortunately.

“I’ve been wondering,” I said casually.

“That’s a dangerous habit.”

“You know a hacker.”

His eyes flickered. Barely. But I caught it.

“What about him?”

“Have you gotten any information?”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t.” His thumb tapped lightly against my hand as we turned. “He’s difficult to find. No

one knows.”

I frowned. “What do you mean no one knows?”

“He disappears for months.”

“Does that mean he has no permanent base?”

“No, he doesn’t. He simply contacts clients when he chooses.”

Lydia growled softly. He is professional.

kept my expression calm. “Then how does anyone hire him?”

“You don’t. He chooses who he works with. He only accepts requests from a very small circle.”

That wasn’t the answer I’d expected.

“How small?”

Ryder smiled. “Old clients. People he’s trusted for years. He refuses everyone else.”

Interesting. Very interesting.

“So if someone new wanted his services...”

“They’d be rejected.”

“What if they offered more money?”

“He’d refuse.”

My pulse quick

He smiled

I studie

“Th

matters more than payment?”

Someone outside that circle needed his help...”

ugh one of those clients.”

ening. I tilted my head innocently. “That sounds inconvenient.”

shifted into another song. Ryder looked down at me. “You’ve been interrogating me since we ncing.”

no idea what you’re talking about.”

ughed. “I suppose you’ve earned something.” His free hand slipped into his suit jacket. He pulled out olded piece of paper.

My heartbeat accelerated. “What’s that?”

“A headache.” He handed it to me.

I unfolded it carefully. It was a list of names. About twenty of them. No addresses. Just names.

“What is this?”

“It is a list of the only people who still have direct access to him.”

My eyes widened

“More or

You’d just hand this over to me?”

“I trust you.”

Lydia whispered, Besareful with him.

I already knew that. I folded the paper slowly. “Thank you”

“You’re welcome.”

The dance ended. We stepped away from each other. I casually glanced down the list. Then froze.

Claudia Stone wasn’t there. I read every name again. Still nothing.

My mind immediately began fitting the pieces together. If Claudia wasn’t one of the hacker’s approved clients, th e couldn’t have hired him herself.

Whi

C

someone else had. Someone on this list. Someone powerful enough to keep cleaning up mes. Someone operating from the shadows.

owl deepened. The real puppet master.

gers tightened around the folded paper.

teresting? Ryder asked.

1 looked up at him. Very carefully. Very slowly. “You’ve given me something much bigger than you realize.”

His smile became unreadable. “Have I?”

“Yes,”

Our eyes met. Neither of us looked away. Another possibility quietly crept into my thoughts, one that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

What if...

The man standing in front of me wasn't merely connected to the hidden hand? What if Ryder himself was the one pulling the strings?

His smile never faltered, as though he already knew exactly what I was thinking

Vote

< Chapter 191

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 194

Aria's POV

The dinner finally came to an end. Guests slowly filtered out of the private hall, exchanging handshakes and promises to meet again.

I slipped the folded client list safely into my handbag.

That list changes everything, Lydia murmured.

If it's genuine.

You don't trust him.

r

“I don't trust anyone anymore.” Especially not men who smiled as easily as Ryder Ashford.

“Ready?” Ryder asked as he came to my side.

“I've been ready to leave for ten minutes.”

He laughed. “I'll take that as a compliment.”

I rolled my eyes at him. We walked through the grand entrance together, the cool night breeze immediately wrapping around us,

Lydia inhaled deeply. Fresh air. Much better than that room full of expensive perfume.

I smiled. The valet pulled Ryder's sleek black car to the entrance.

He opened the passenger door. "Come on."

I stopped walking. "I'm taking my own car."

He looked genuinely surprised. "I was planning to drive you home."

"That's kind of you, but no."

He leaned against the car door, crossing his arms. "Why do you reject every offer I make?"

"I only reject the questionable ones."

"Ouch."

"Don't worry, you'll survive."

"I hope so." He placed a hand dramatically over his heart. "I've been wounded several times tonight."

"I somehow doubt that."

His grin only widened. "You know, Aria..." His voice softened. "I don't think you realize how fascinating you

are."

Lydia immediately became alert. Be careful.

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"think I understand perfectly."

"No." He slowly walked closer. "You assume every compliment is another trick."

"Isn't it?"

"Not this time." His amber eyes searched mine. "I've met countless women. They laugh at my jokes. They accept expensive gifts."

“I can imagine.”

“They usually end up in my bed.”

“There it is.”

Ryder chuckled. “I am being direct, Aria.” He tilted his head. “Come home with me.” The words came so casually they almost sounded harmless. Almost.

I stared at him. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’ve never been more serious.”

“We’ve known each other for what?”

“A few days. And that’s enough for me to know I want you.”,

I couldn’t help laughing. “You really do have confidence.”

“I’ve never lacked it.” His gaze didn’t waver. “You’d enjoy yourself.”

“I’m sure many women have.”

“They have.”

The shameless honesty almost caught me off guard.

“But I’m asking about you.”

The mate bond stirred painfully in my chest. Damon was still my mate.

Lydia’s voice turned gentle. Our Alpha still breathes, Our heart already belongs somewhere.

Ryder noticed my silence. “What are you thinking?”

“That you’re wasting your time.”

“I don’t think so.”

He reached out slowly, brushing an escaped strand of hair away from my face. His touch was feather-light, gentle, and deliberately intimate. “I could make you forget your worries for one night.”

For one tiny moment, I hesitated. Not because I wanted him, but because Ryder possessed a dangerous kind of beauty. Moon Goddess, the man looked as though he'd stepped out of an artist's imagination.

He had a sharp jaw. Beautiful golden eyes. That effortless confidence. He knew exactly how attractive he was. He wielded it like another weapon.

Lydia huffed. Don't be fooled by a pretty face..

"I'm not.

Ryder smiled, clearly noticing the brief hesitation. "I almost had you."

"No."

"I saw it."

"You imagined it."

"I don't think I did." He leaned in just enough that I caught the scent of cedar and rain clinging to him. "I could kiss you right now."

My heartbeat skipped. I planted a hand firmly against his chest before he could move any closer. "Don't."

His eyes flickered down to my hand. "You really are going to reject me."

"Yes." I gently but firmly pushed him back. "You've helped me tonight, and I'm grateful, but don't mistake gratitude for interest."

His smile faded slightly. "I see."

Silence stretched between us. Then Ryder slowly stepped back. He opened his palms in surrender. "I'll stop... for tonight."

I narrowed my eyes. "For tonight'?"

"I didn't promise forever."

I sighed. "Goodnight, Ryder."

I turned and walked toward my own car without looking back.

I got into my car and drove away. Even through the rearview mirror, Ryder Ashford never moved. He simply stood beneath the moonlight, watching until I disappeared.

Ryder's POV

The taillights vanished around the bend. I remained exactly where I was. The night wind tugged at my jacket, carrying away the lingering scent of jasmine that clung to the air after Aria left.

I laughed quietly to myself. I couldn't remember the last time a woman rejected me. Actually, no, I could remember. It had never happened.

Women usually approached me before I even noticed them. Some wanted my face. Others wanted my money. Others simply wanted the thrill of being seen beside Ryder Ashford.

They flirted. They chased. They surrendered. I had never needed to convince anyone.

Tonight, Aria Grayson had pushed me away. Again, again, and again.

A slow smile spread across my face. Good.

+25 Fonts

I don't remember being a boy. I've told no one that, and I never will. My life starts at twelve, in a bed I didn't recognize, with an old man telling me I'd been in an accident and lucky to wake at all. Everything before that is a bricked-over door. Devin gave me back a name, a body that already knew how to fight, and eighteen years of patience. He never gave me the one thing I actually wanted, which was the boy who came before.

All I kept from that boy was a single scrap that survived whatever took the rest, a summer somewhere green, a crowd of pack children running, and a girl who stopped to stand with me when the bigger ones didn't want me there.

I don't know if it happened or if my mind stitched it together from nothing. I've never been able to prove I was ever that boy at all. But I've spent my whole life looking for the face that goes with it. Every woman afterward had merely been a substitute, someone who vaguely resembled the impossible memory I could never let go of. None of them stayed. None of them satisfied whatever emptiness I had been trying to fill.

Then Aria appeared.

She wasn't identical. But she was closer than anyone else had ever been. Close enough that the old obsession stirred again. My wolf, who has never once cared about a woman in eighteen years, refused to let her leave.

"I've spent eighteen years chasing a face I couldn't name," I murmured. My mouth curved. "I'm not losing you a second time, Aria Grayson... whoever you turn out to be."

The thought lingered. I'd only been back in the country for a short time. Long enough to settle my affairs. Not long enough to reconnect with everyone I needed.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. There was one person I needed to speak to.

The call connected after two rings. "It's me," I said.

A familiar voice answered. "You finally remembered your old friends."

I smiled faintly. "I've been busy."

"So... what do you need?"

My gaze drifted toward the empty road where Aria had disappeared. "I need information, and I need a favor."

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 195

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Damon's POV

The café overlooked the river that cut through the city. It was quiet and private. Exactly the kind of place Ryder would choose when he wanted a conversation that wouldn't be overheard.

I spotted him immediately. He lounged in the opposite chair like he owned the room, legs stretched out, that same cocky grin he'd worn back in college.

We hadn't seen each other in years, yet the familiarity settled over us like a second skin.

"Still brooding like the weight of the world's on your shoulders, Hawthorne?" he teased, swirling his glass. "Some things never change."

I managed a rough chuckle. "Some things shouldn't. How the hell have you been, Ryder? Last I heard, you were chasing skirts across three continents."

Ryder laughed. "Chasing more than skirts these days, actually. Met a woman recently. Singular. The kind that gets under your skin and stays there. Beautiful, stubborn as hell, carries herself like she was born to rule."

I raised an eyebrow, genuinely surprised. Ryder, the eternal playboy, sounding almost... serious? “Didn’t think I’d live to see the day. You, pinned down by one woman? I’ll have to meet this miracle someday.”

He grinned wider. “I’ll introduce you when the chance comes. Promise.”

The easy conversation reminded me why we’d become friends in the first place. Despite Ryder’s reputation, he’d always been intelligent, observant, and strangely loyal to the people he considered his

own.

Eventually, he leaned back in his chair. “So.” His grin returned. “Enough about me. I heard you got divorced.”

The words landed quietly. “It was years ago.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve survived.”

He studied my face for a second but didn’t push further. “Any chance of getting back together?”

“No.” At least, that was what I believed then. Or what I forced myself to believe. The mate bond pulsed faintly beneath my Alpha instincts.

Rhein’s voice grew quieter. You’re lying.

It doesn’t matter.

It matters to us.

I ignored him.

Ryder nodded slowly. “Fair enough.” He never asked who my ex-wife had been. Never asked why we’d

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separated, and I didn’t volunteer the answers.

The conversation drifted elsewhere until my phone vibrated. I thought it might be a message from Aria. My heart immediately tightened. It wasn’t.

She had been avoiding my calls for days. I decided to call her again. I pressed the call button. It rang once, twice, three times. No answer.

The call disconnected. I stared at the screen. Still nothing.

Rhein whimpered. Mate...

I rubbed my aching forehead. The headache I'd been carrying for days returned with full force. Why wouldn't she answer me? Was she still angry?

Had something happened? Or had she simply decided she wanted nothing more to do with me? The last thought hurt more than I cared to admit.

"Damon?"

I looked up. "You disappeared for a second. Is everything all right?"

"No." I slipped the phone back into my pocket. "There is... something I wanted to ask you."

Ryder's playful expression became serious. "Shoot."

"I need your help finding someone."

"Who?"

"A hacker you once worked with."

His eyebrows immediately rose. "Interesting."

"I've heard you're connected." I hesitated. "I need information about someone's past."

"A man? A woman? Your ex-wife?"

"No." He accepted that answer without questioning it further.

"What exactly are you trying to uncover?"

"The truth about something."

He tapped his fingers thoughtfully against the table. Then his smile disappeared completely. "That's going to be difficult."

"Why?"

"Because lately..." He sighed. "Everyone seems to be looking for him."

I frowned. "Everyone?"

"Yes. Business rivals, private investigators. People with too much money."

Rhein became alert. The hacker must be scared right now.

Ryder leaned forward. "He vanished."

"Gone?"

He nodded. "Completely. No one knows where he is."

"Not even you?"

"I'm one of his oldest clients. And even I can't reach him. It's like he knew people were closing in, so he disappeared before anyone could find him."

Frustration settled heavily inside me. I had been so close. "So there's nothing you can do?"

"Not yet." He paused, then looked at me carefully. "I do have one request."

"What is it?"

"Keep this inquiry between us."

I frowned. "Why?"

His expression became unreadable. "There is someone I can't let know about the hacker's disappearance. She'd bolt like a spooked deer if she caught wind of that."

Rhein narrowed his eyes. He's hiding something.

That much was obvious.

I studied Ryder for a long moment. Then I clapped him on the shoulder as I stood. "You have my word."

The movement sent fresh pain lancing through my skull, but I masked it.

"And seriously, bring this mystery woman around sometime. Anyone who can tame you deserves a medal. Or at least a decent drink."

Ryder laughed again, but it carried a strange edge. "Yeah. When the chance comes. You two might even get along."

We parted with the easy promises of old friends, but as I stepped back into the night air, the gate bond tugged painfully in my chest. I dialed Aria's number one more time.

It went straight to voicemail.

"Come back to me, Aria," I thought fiercely, sending the words down the fraying bond like a prayer. "Whatever shadows you're hiding from, we face them together."

Rhein's voice echoed mine, heavy with Alpha command. She is our mate. She'll come back to us.

Vote

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 196

Aria's POV

The client list lay open across my desk. Twenty names... Twenty possible answers... Or twenty dead ends.

I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my tired eyes.

Lydia rested her head on her paws inside my mind. You have been on this for three hours. You have barely

moved.

"I know. I can't afford to stop."

The hidden hand behind Claudia had to be somewhere on this list. If Ryder hadn't lied. That thought lingered in the back of my mind.

Could I even trust the names he'd given me? Or had he deliberately fed me false information?

I picked up my pen again. The first name, a real estate tycoon. I'd already investigated him. There were no obvious ties to Claudia. Crossed out.

The second, a powerful and influential Alpha from the western territories. He was currently recovering from injuries sustained during a rogue wolf attack months ago. No connection. Crossed out.

Third. Fourth. Fifth. One after another. Every trail ended the same way... Nothing.

I sighed. "This is impossible."

Lydia's ears twitched. Not impossible. Just hidden. Whoever's protecting Claudia is careful.

Very careful. I looked down at the remaining names. Only a handful were left, including Ryder Ashford. My fingers tapped slowly against his name. "I still don't trust you."

Neither do I, Lydia agreed.

"He handed me this list too easily."

Exactly.

"Either he's incredibly confident, or he wanted me looking exactly where he wanted."

The possibility made my stomach tighten.

What if Ryder wasn't merely one of the hacker's longtime clients? What if he was the one orchestrating everything from behind the scenes?

He had the wealth, the connections, the intelligence. Enough influence to bury evidence. Enough charm to keep suspicion away.

I frowned. "But why would he help me?"

Lydia was quiet for a long moment. Because he wants something from you.

I immediately thought back to the night before. His hand brushing my hair, his invitation, the confidence in

his voice when he'd asked me to go home with him.

I shook my head. "No."

What?

"If he's manipulating me, then he's better than I thought."

A different question slowly replaced the first. Who was the hacker? I stared absentmindedly at the list. Nobody knew where he lived. Nobody knew his real name. He accepted only longtime clients.

It almost sounded like a ghost, someone who existed only behind screens and encrypted messages.

Lydia tilted her head. I'd like to meet him.

"So would I. If I find him, I may finally expose everyone."

The room fell silent again. I reached for another file. Then a knock sounded at the door.

Before I could answer, the study door slowly opened. Noah peeked inside. "Busy?"

"A little bit."

He smiled. "I thought so." Then he stepped fully into the room.

My entire expression softened. Little Elona was perched comfortably on his shoulders, giggling as she tugged gently at his hair.

"Noah!"

"She refuses to let me put her down," Noah said with exaggerated resignation.

Elona immediately pointed at me. "Mommy!"

I laughed. "My sweet girl."

The moment Noah lowered her, Elona ran straight toward me on her tiny legs. I bent and caught her in my arms. She wrapped both little arms around my neck and planted a loud kiss on my cheek.

Lydia practically melted. Our pup. Our precious girl.

Noah looked between us. "I hear you've been hiding in here all afternoon."

"I've been working."

He glanced meaningfully at the mountain of files covering my desk. "You need some time off. So I have come with a proposition."

He looked at Elona. "Would you like Mommy to play with us?"

Elona gasped dramatically. "Yesss!"

“You heard the lady.”

I couldn't help laughing. “Noah...”

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“No investigations, no paperwork. Give yourself a break for just one hour.”

He looked toward the files. Then at Elona's hopeful little face. Then back again.

Lydia nudged me gently. Choose wisely.

I sighed. “Alright.”

The next hour disappeared faster than I expected. We built castles from wooden blocks. Elona insisted every stuffed wolf in the room needed a blanket, She declared Noah the scary Alpha wolf.

“Uncle Noah!” She pointed an accusing little finger. “You bad wolf!”

He widened his eyes dramatically. “Oh no. I've been discovered.”

He dropped onto all fours and growled playfully. “I'll catch you both!”

Elona shrieked with laughter. “Mommy! Run!”

I laughed harder than I had in a long time as we scrambled around the sitting room.

Lydia wagged her tail. It's been too long since you laughed like this. You needed this.

“I really did,”

Noah eventually allowed Elona to tackle him onto the carpet. “Oh no. I've been defeated. I surrender to Alpha Elona.”

Elona giggled so hard she nearly fell over. For a little while, there were no conspiracies. No Claudia, no revenge, only laughter and family.

After Elona fell asleep curled against one of the cushions, Noah quietly carried her upstairs and tucked her into bed.

When he returned, the house had become peaceful again. We stood together on the balcony. Neither of us spoke for several minutes.

Finally, I broke the silence. “You know...”

He looked at me.

“I’ve lost so many people.”

His expression softened. “I know.”

“My brother is gone. My father lies barely conscious in the hospital. My mother died long ago.” I swallowed hard. “Sometimes it feels like everyone eventually leaves.”

Noah remained silent.

I turned toward him. “You’re the only one who’ll stay by me forever... aren’t you?”

For a brief moment, pain flickered across his face.

He slowly reached for my hand. His fingers were warm and steady.

Without a single word, he lifted my hand and gently pressed a kiss against the back of it. The gesture was respectful and tender, never crossing the boundary I had drawn between us.

He lowered my hand carefully. “I will never betray you.” His voice was quiet. “I will always protect you. I promise you that.”

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 197

Aria’s POV

With the project finally complete, I decided it was time to travel overseas to visit my father in Asterfell. I packed a small bag for Elona and booked our tickets.

If

my father’s health allowed, I wanted to bring him home so he could see the rebuilt Grayson land with his own eyes. Noah insisted on coming along for protection.

The airport was crowded with travelers rushing in every direction. Elona held one of my hands while Noah carried our luggage. Soon, we were on the plane.

The flight had barely settled into cruising altitude when Lydia stirred. Someone familiar is here.

I frowned. Who?

Before she could answer, a scent reached me.

It was Ryder.

I looked across the aisle.

He was leaning comfortably in his seat, watching me with an infuriatingly amused smile.

“Oh,” he said. “What a coincidence. Fancy seeing you here, Wildcat.”

I stared at him. “Coincidence?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

His smile only deepened. Noah followed my gaze. The moment he saw Ryder, his expression turned guarded.

“Ryder Ashford.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Ryder’s face. “You know who I am?” He laughed quietly. “That’s impressive. Noah Heagraves.”

“I could say the same for you.”

Ryder inclined his head. “Well, you’re the Alpha of the Whitemoon Pack. It would be difficult for someone of my standing not to know who you are.”

“And yet we’ve never met,” Noah retorted.

“Seems fate finally arranged the introduction.”

The two men held each other’s gaze. The cabin grew noticeably quieter.

Lydia shifted uneasily. They’re measuring each other.

Leo would feel it too.

+25 Ponty

The pressure rolling off them wasn’t enough to trigger panic, but it was enough to make every werewolf nearby instinctively tense.

“Enough, both of you!” I snarled in a low voice.

Ryder’s aura vanished almost instantly. Noah glanced at me before withdrawing his own Alpha pressure.

I looked back at Ryder.

“So,” I said, “what brings you to Asterfell?”

“Business.”

“What kind of business?”

“The private kind. I don’t feel comfortable sharing it with you,” he said with a smile.

A small tug interrupted us.

“Mommy?” Elona looked curiously across the aisle. “Who’s he?”

Ryder’s expression softened immediately.

He unbuckled his seatbelt long enough to crouch beside her seat, keeping a respectful distance.

“I’m Ryder. What is your name, little moon?”

Elona looked at me. I gave her a small nod.

She smiled.

“My name is Elona. It’s nice to meet you, Uncle Ryder.”

Ryder smiled back. “It is nice to meet you too, little moon.”

Elona giggled.

Lydia smiled. She likes him already.

Halfway through the flight, Elona slumped into her seat. “I’m bored.”

Ryder reached into his carry-on. “There is a game I love to play whenever I am bored.”

He produced a small wooden wolf puzzle. “I carved it myself.”

Elona gasped. “You did?”

“Mhm.”

Her eyes sparkled, “Can we play?”

He looked at me first. “If that’s alright with your mother.”

I nodded

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For the next hour, he patiently guided Elona through every piece. He praised every correct placement, never once sounding impatient.

When she finally finished, she threw both hands into the air. “I did it!”

“You certainly did.” He gently ruffled her hair. “It’s very impressive.”

Lydia fell strangely quiet. He’s good with pups.

I noticed.

That’s dangerous.

Why is that?

Because kind men are much harder to hate.

I hated how much I agreed.

I glanced briefly at Noah. He wasn’t watching Elona. He was watching Ryder with caution.

As though he were trying to see past the easy smile and discover what Ryder Ashford really wanted.

When the plane landed in Asterfell, Ryder retrieved his bag before any of us.

He smiled at Elona. “It was nice meeting you, little moon.”

She waved enthusiastically. “Bye, Uncle Ryder!”

He looked at me. “Looks like fate keeps putting us in the same place, Wildcat.”

“Or you’re following me.”

He chuckled. “I suppose you’ll believe whichever version you prefer.”

Then he met Noah's eyes. Neither of them spoke. Neither looked away.

Ryder adjusted his bag and started toward the exit. "I'll see you again back home."

I watched him disappear into the crowd.

Lydia broke the silence. He wasn't on this flight by accident.

I had the unsettling feeling she was right.

A few minutes after we arrived, I went with Noah straight to the private medical facility where Dad had been receiving treatment. The familiar antiseptic scent hit me as soon as I entered.

My heart clenched. It had been too long.

The attending physician greeted us. "Ms. Grayson."

"How is he?" I asked.

+25 Ponty

A

The same overall. He has occasional periods of awareness."

My heartbeat quickened. "Today?"

The doctor nodded. He's been more responsive than usual."

Hope exploded inside me. I hurried toward his room, silently pleading. Please... please let this be real.

When I pushed open the door, Dad was sitting upright in bed. His eyes were focused and clear.

"Dad..."

His gaze slowly found mine. "Aria..."

Tears immediately filled my eyes. "You know me."

He smiled weakly. "My daughter."

I rushed forward and hugged him carefully. "I've missed you so much."

His hand trembled as it rested against my hair. “My precious child...”

Lydia whimpered softly. He knows us. He remembers.

Noah quietly stayed near the doorway, giving us privacy. I wiped my tears. “Dad... the reconstruction is finished.”

His expression remained peaceful. “The Grayson land...”

I smiled through fresh tears. “It’s beautiful again. You’d love it.” I swallowed hard. “I came because, if your health allows it, I want to take you home.”

For a heartbeat, everything was normal. Then his expression changed. His pupils suddenly dilated, and his breathing became uneven.

Lydia instantly stood. Something’s wrong.

Dad’s hands began shaking violently. “No...” His voice cracked “No...”

“Dad?”

His eyes widened with absolute terror. “Don’t go...”

I frowned. “What?”

“Don’t go near that place!” He suddenly grabbed my wrist with surprising strength, his nails digging into my skin. “Promise me!”

“Dad, calm down.”

“No!” His voice rose into a desperate shout. “Don’t go near it!” His entire body trembled. “The altar..”

{froze. “What altar?”

“The altar..” His breathing became ragged. “The sacrifice...”

Every hair on my body stood on end What sacrifice?

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 198

Aria's POV

"Dad?" I tightened my grip on his trembling hand. His eyes were wide with terror, staring at something only he could see.

"The altar..." he gasped. "The sacrifice... Don't go there..."

"What altar?" I asked desperately. "Dad, what sacrifice? Tell me!"

Lydia was pacing frantically. His scent is changing. He is terrified.

Dad's breathing became increasingly ragged. His fingers dug painfully into my wrist.

The door burst open. "Aria." Noah rushed inside with the doctor and two nurses. The doctor immediately assessed the situation. "What happened?"

"He suddenly became like this!" I cried. "He was talking normally, then I mentioned the Grayson land and..."

Before I could finish, Dad struggled violently. "No!" He tried to sit up despite the tubes connected to his body. "You can't go!"

The heart monitor began screaming. The doctor quickly prepared a syringe. "We have to sedate him."

"No, wait!" I protested. "He's trying to tell us something!"

"He'll hurt himself if we don't."

"Dad!"

He ignored everyone except me. His cloudy eyes locked onto mine with heartbreaking desperation. "Joshua..."

The name hit me like a physical blow. I froze. "What?"

"Joshua..." he cried. His body jerked violently as the doctor injected the sedative into his IV.

"No!" I reached toward him. "Please don't!"

The medication worked quickly. Dad continued struggling for a few more seconds. "Joshua..." His voice became weaker. His eyelids slowly drooped. His grip loosened.

Then he went completely still. The room fell silent except for the rhythmic beeping of the

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monitor. I stared at him, unable to breathe.

Joshua. My brother. The brother who had died years ago. Why had Dad called his name?

Lydia's voice was barely above a whisper. He was trying to tell us something. He knows something.

The doctor let out a weary sigh as he adjusted Dad's blanket. "This happens sometimes."

I looked at him sharply. "What does?"

Claim

"Patients with prolonged neurological impairment often experience episodes of confusion. Memories become mixed together. Past and present overlap."

"He wasn't confused."

The doctor offered me a sympathetic smile. "I know that's what you'd like to believe."

"I heard him," I insisted. "He mentioned Joshua. He warned me not to go near the Grayson land. He talked about an altar and a sacrifice."

The doctor nodded patiently. "Ms. Grayson, emotional fixation is quite common in patients with his condition. He has significant brain trauma. Old memories often resurface in fragmented ways."

"No." I shook my head firmly. "That's not what happened."

The doctor exchanged a brief glance with Noah before speaking gently. "I recommend you don't place too much meaning on isolated statements."

I looked at Noah. He walked over and rested a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Aria..."

"You heard him, Noah. He wasn't making things up."

Noah remained silent for several seconds before answering. "I think your father believes what he was saying."

I frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means..." Noah chose his words carefully. "...that the mind can replay old fears as though they're happening all over again."

“He specifically reacted when I mentioned the Grayson land. He warned me.”

“I know.” His expression softened. “But your father is elderly, Aria. He has suffered years of illness. The doctor isn’t entirely wrong.”

I stepped away from him. “No.”

Noah sighed quietly. “I’m only asking you not to jump to conclusions.”

Claim

The following days blurred together. Every morning I arrived before sunrise, and every night I left long after visiting hours ended.

Every day I sat beside Dad’s bed. Every day I held his hand and hoped that he would speak to me again. But that never happened.

His mind never surfaced again. Only scattered murmurs escaped his lips during restless sleep, words too broken to understand.

One evening I stood alone outside the hospital overlooking the city. The cool wind carried distant scents of rain and pine. I closed my eyes. Joshua... Dad... the Grayson land... what connected them?

Everyone believed Dad’s words were nothing more than the ramblings of an old wolf trapped inside a broken mind.

Everyone except me. Because I’d seen the fear in his eyes.

Lydia stood beside me. He was warning us.

Yes. The question is... warning us about what?

I slowly opened my eyes. “I’ll find out what it is.”

How?

“I’ll investigate the Grayson land myself.”

Before I could think any further, my phone vibrated. It was Ryder. I answered, “Hello, Ryder.”

His familiar, amused voice came through the speaker. “Aria. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“What is it?”

There was a brief pause. “I’ve got something you’ll want to hear.”

My heartbeat quickened. “What happened?”

“I received fresh intelligence.” His tone became noticeably more serious. “It’s about the hacker.”

Lydia instantly lifted her head. Things are moving.

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I tightened my grip on the phone. “What did you find?”

Ryder chuckled softly. “I’d rather tell you in person.”

“I don’t have time for games.”

Claim

“This isn’t a game.” His voice turned unusually firm. “The information is important. I’ll send you my location.”

The call ended before I could ask another question.

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 199

Aria’s POV

The address Ryder sent led me to a restaurant. It wasn’t crowded. A handful of people occupied the tables, speaking in hushed voices while soft music drifted through the room.

Ryder was already waiting in a private booth. He looked up as I approached, a lazy smile spreading across his face. He studied me for a moment. “You look tired.”

I slid into the seat opposite him. “I am dealing with some personal stuff.” I went straight to the point. “What did you find?”

His expression turned serious. “The hacker resurfaced.”

Every muscle in my body tightened. “What happened?”

Ryder reached into his jacket and pulled out a tablet. He turned the screen toward me. Lines of encrypted records filled the display. “I’ve been monitoring unusual network activity.”

His finger tapped one particular entry. “This caught my attention.”

I frowned. “What am I looking at?”

“Someone accessed government geological archives.”

“So?”

“They weren’t looking at random locations.” He zoomed in. A familiar set of coordinates appeared. It was the Grayson land.

My breath caught. “No...”

Lydia’s ears shot upright. That’s our land.

Ryder nodded slowly. “Someone has been quietly pulling geological survey reports.”

I stared at the coordinates. My father’s warning echoed inside my head. Don’t go near that place. The altar... The sacrifice.

A cold shiver ran through me. “Why would a hacker care about that?”

“I don’t know.” He folded his hands. “But hackers don’t waste time stealing useless information. They steal information that’s valuable.”

Lydia growled softly. Someone is searching for something valuable.

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My thoughts drifted backward to my father. “When I was little...” I said quietly, “my father always talked about rebuilding that land.”

Ryder listened without interrupting.

“He invested a fortune into planning. But every time he tried to begin...” I frowned. “Something happened.”

“What kind of something?”

“The permits would suddenly disappear. Contractors backed out. Investors changed their minds.”

I shook my head. “I thought it was just terrible luck. But he never gave up. He eventually handed the project to Joshua.”

The words caught painfully in my throat.

“My brother was supposed to continue everything.”

Ryder remained silent.

Claim

“But then Joshua died.” I lowered my eyes. “And after that... no one touched the project for years until now. I just finished rebuilding it.”

The realization slowly settled over me. The reason my father and Joshua were unable to rebuild that land for years was because someone was keeping them away from it.

The thought made my blood run cold. I looked back at Ryder.

“You think this is connected?” he asked.

“I don’t believe in coincidences. It has to be connected.”

“I think so too.”

For several moments, neither of us spoke. The waiter arrived. “Would you like anything?”

Ryder glanced at me. “You should avoid alcohol.”

I nodded. “Fruit juice.”

“And for you, sir?”

“Red wine.”

The drinks arrived a few minutes later. I slowly sipped my juice while Ryder swirled the wine in his glass.

Claim

After finishing his first glass, he leaned back comfortably. “You know...” He smiled. “I wasn’t always buried in the entertainment business. I used to be an athlete when I was a boy.”

I looked up. “What kind?”

“Track.” He chuckled. “I ran and even swam. I liked competing.”

“You don’t seem the type.”

He leaned forward. “What type do I seem?”

“The type who enjoys provoking people.”

He laughed. “I do enjoy that too.”

Lydia snorted. At least he’s honest.

Ryder lifted his glass again. “I was pretty strong back then. I trained almost every day. My coaches thought I’d compete professionally.”

“You?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“What?”

“You don’t look disciplined enough.”

He placed a hand dramatically over his heart. “I’m wounded.”

I laughed despite myself. The sound surprised even me. He smiled as though that alone had made the evening worthwhile.

Something inside me quietly relaxed. For days, a tiny suspicion had lingered in the back of my mind. The childhood friend. The boy who had been bullied.

my

The one who had supposedly died. Ryder’s age matched. His familiarity sometimes matched. But an athlete? I remembered that chubby little boy. There was no way they could

be the same person.

Maybe we’ve been overthinking it, Lydia said. It can’t be him.

Yeah, right.

Ryder finished another sip of wine. “I’ve talked enough. What about you?”

“What about me?”

“I want to know what makes you smile.”

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Claim

I thought for a moment. “Elona.”

His expression softened. “I expected that answer. I didn’t know you had a daughter. It was a pleasure meeting her the other day.”

“Yeah. She is adorable. Also, I would add my father and my work. They all make me happy.” I smiled faintly.

Ryder’s eyes remained on mine. The warmth in them made me strangely uneasy.

The restaurant slowly emptied around us. Ryder absentmindedly rolled the stem of his wineglass between his fingers.

Then he looked at me differently, more intensely. “Can I tell you something strange?”

I hesitated. “Go ahead.”

“I’ve met countless people and worked with dangerous people, but I’ve never met anyone who makes me feel the way you do.”

My heartbeat stumbled. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” His voice had become almost thoughtful. “When I’m near you...” He frowned slightly. “I feel different.”

Lydia immediately became alert. Be careful, Aria. Be careful of the playboy.

He leaned forward slowly across the table. “So I have a request.”

I instinctively leaned back. “What request?”

His gaze remained locked on mine. “I want to kiss you.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“I have a feeling.” He smiled faintly. “And I think...” His voice dropped lower. “If I kiss finally understand what it is.”

you,

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 200

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Aria's POV

I looked at Ryder across the table, turning his words over in my mind.

Claim

Then I leaned back in my chair. "If you want something from me, then it's only fair that I ask for something in return."

He raised an eyebrow. "And what do you want?"

I held his gaze before giving him a vague explanation about Claudia. I told him she had someone pulling her strings, the same person who had used a hacker to steal my work from the Award Committee.

"If you promise to help me bring down Claudia and the person behind her, then in return..." I let the words hang for a moment, watching his expression. "You'll get the kiss you've been angling for."

His eyebrows shot up.

Then he burst into laughter. When he finally managed to compose himself, he wiped the corner of one eye and looked at me with amused admiration.

"Aria," he said with a chuckle, "you're an incredibly cunning businesswoman."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is." He pointed at me with his wineglass. "I admire women who negotiate instead of panicking."

"I'm glad."

"Fine." He extended his hand across the table. "You've got yourself a deal."

I didn't take it. "Not yet."

His smile faded into curiosity. “You don’t trust me.”

“I trust evidence.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“A wolf oath.”

His expression immediately became serious. The teasing vanished from his eyes. “You know

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what you’re asking?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t know.”

Among werewolves, a wolf oath wasn’t a simple promise. It was a vow sworn upon one’s bloodline and wolf spirit. Breaking it carried consequences that could cripple a wolf’s

strength or even sever them from their inner wolf forever.

Claim

Lydia stood tall inside our shared consciousness. If he accepts, then we have one name off our list.

Ryder looked at me for several moments. Then he slowly nodded. “Very well.”

He picked up the small fruit knife from the table and, without hesitation, nicked his thumb. A bead of crimson blood welled up. I did the same. Our blood carried the scent of our wolves.

Ryder extended his hand. I pressed my thumb against his. The instant our blood touched, silver light flared between our joined hands.

Ryder spoke first. “I, Ryder Ashford, swear to aid Aria Grayson in uncovering Claudia Stone and the true enemy behind her to the best of my ability.”

The light brightened once before fading into our skin. The oath was accepted.

Lydia relaxed. He’s clean, at least regarding Claudia.

She was right. He wouldn’t accept the oath if he were the one behind Claudia.

I let out a slow breath.

Ryder smiled softly. “Now it’s your turn.”

I nodded. “I, Aria Grayson, acknowledge this oath and accept Ryder Ashford as my ally until our shared objective is fulfilled.”

The bond settled. Then the glow disappeared completely.

Neither of us spoke for several seconds. Finally, Ryder leaned back. “I suppose I’ve earned my reward.”

I stood. Ryder rose with me. He stepped closer. Then his mouth was on mine.

He was good at it. Confident, hungry, one hand sliding to the small of my back while the other cupped my jaw like I was something precious and breakable.

For a moment, I slipped under, the heat of him pulling at the lonely edges of me.

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I broke the kiss, breathing hard, and planted a hand on his chest. “That’s enough.”

Ryder’s eyes were dark, his pupils blown wide. His usually composed expression looked strangely shaken.

Claim

He ran a hand through his hair before laughing softly at himself. He shook his head. “This has never happened before.”

“What hasn’t?”

“I’ve never reacted to anyone like this.” His eyes searched mine with complete sincerity. “I’m

certain now.”

My stomach tightened. “Certain of what?”

“You’re my fated mate.”

The words landed heavily between us.

Lydia stiffened. He can’t be right about that.

I slowly shook my head. “No.”

Ryder frowned. "You don't believe in the mate bond?"

"I do."

"Then why do you doubt it?"

"Because I've experienced it." I looked Ryder in the eye. "A fated mate isn't just attraction, curiosity, or chemistry. It's recognition. It comes from the deepest part of your blood. My wolf recognized her mate. So did I."

I placed a hand over my chest. "What I feel with you... isn't that."

Genuine disappointment crossed his face. He lowered his eyes briefly. "So... you still love your former mate?"

My expression cooled. "That's none of your business."

"Why did you separate?"

I stared at him. "Ryder."

"If he was your mate, why isn't he with you?"

"Enough." My voice sharpened. "You're crossing a line."

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Claim

His jaw tightened. For a moment, neither of us spoke. Finally, he exhaled. "You're right. I'm sorry."

I picked up my handbag. "I should go."

As I walked past him, his voice stopped me. "I won't give up, Aria." I turned slightly. "I'll make you fall in love with me."

I couldn't help letting out a small laugh. "You're very confident."

"I have to be."

I studied him for a moment. "You know... I won't pretend your pursuit leaves me completely unaffected."

Hope flickered briefly across his face.

“But,” I held his gaze, “for now, I have no need for love.”

He smiled sadly. “I’ll wait.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“I probably won’t listen.”

I shook my head with a faint smile. “Goodnight, Ryder.”

Lydia spoke quietly as I left the restaurant. He’s very persistent.

I agree.

Do you think he’ll stop?

I glanced back once. Ryder was still standing where I’d left him, watching me disappear into the night.

No, I admitted. I don’t think he will.

By the time I reached my apartment building, the city was quiet. I walked toward the entrance.

Lydia suddenly became alert. Aria... someone’s here.

My instincts immediately sharpened. I looked toward the lobby. A tall figure stood near the entrance, his broad shoulders silhouetted beneath the dim lights.

My heart skipped. That build. That familiar Alpha aura. It couldn’t be.

My pulse thundered as I took another step forward.

“Damon...?” I whispered.