

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 31

I was yanked around. Damon forced me to meet his eyes.

you-”

“No!” I cut him off reflexively. “I’m not pregnant!”

My voice echoed off the bathroom walls.

He

looked at me, searching for any sign of a lie. Then he straightened up, his face unreadable, it or not, we’ll find out at the hospital.”

He tightened.

I spent all this time trying to forget. Trying to forget that child. Forget lying on that operating table, staring up at the blinding white ceiling, letting the surgeon carve the baby out of me.

And now he wanted to rip open a wound I’d barely managed to seal.

So cruel.

I closed my eyes. When I spoke, my voice was hollow. “I’m not going to the hospital.”

“It’s not your choice!” Damon loomed over me. “Aria, you’d better not be lying to me!”

“I’ve never lied to you!” Even though I knew he wouldn’t believe me, I straightened my spine and met his gaze. “Damon, I know my own body. Besides-I took the morning-after pill.”

“There’s no way I’m pregnant.”

The air around us went still for a moment.

I could feel the suffocating weight of his presence pressing down on me.

The veins in his neck bulged. He slammed me against the wall.

“Aria, are you that desperate not to have my child?” His face was dark, vicious.

I forced a bitter smile.

How could I not want it?

That child-I dreamed every night of having them back. I still remembered the joy when I first knew

they existed. Every moment of haing bound to them by blood...

But that was because of the child. Not Damon.

Damon, I didn't want anything to do with you anymore.

"Isn't that what you wanted? I'm giving you exactly what you asked for-quiet, obedient." My voice was barely a whisper, light as a sigh.

"Good. At least you know your place." His voice was cold, merciless, devoid of any warmth. "Because if you were pregnant, I'd drag you to that operating table myself."

My breath caught.

A chill rose from the soles of my feet, spreading through every limb, seeping into my bones until felt nothing but cold.

"Aria, anyone in this world can carry my child." Damon wasn't done with me. "Anyone. But you-"

His eyes cut into me.

"You don't deserve it."

Snap.

The taut nerve in my mind finally broke.

By the time I realized what I was doing, my hand had already swung up and landed a heavy slap across Damon's face.

"Aria!" Damon's tongue pressed against the inside of his cheek, his eyes blazing with fury. "How

dare you!"

The oppressive aura radiating off him made me take two steps back instinctively.

But he grabbed me. "What? You think you can hit me and just walk away?"

"What are you going to-"

Before I could finish, he threw me onto the sofa.

Ring!

The sound suddenly cut through the silence. His phone.

He glanced at the screen, and in that instant, everything changed.

The aggression drained from his face, replaced by something I knew too well: concern.

For her.

I knew exactly who it was.

even there.

The room felt impossibly quiet.

I sat there, my back against the cold wall, and tried to remember how to breathe.

His footsteps faded down the stairs, yet his scent lingered.

I stared at nothing for a long time.

Then, very slowly, I curled into myself, drawing my knees up to my chest.

It made me feel safe.

Everything will be okay, Lydia whispered to me.

Will it? Maybe.

closed my eyes. And still, the tears fell.

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Chapter 32

Axia's POV

I woke up on the floor.

The hardwood was cold against my cheek, and my body was trembling. A fever, maybe. Or the aftermath of the storm I'd been holding inside for weeks.

I tried to push myself up, but my arms wouldn't cooperate. The room tilted, and I slumped back down, my head hitting the floor with a dull thud.

"Luna?"

Amy's voice came from somewhere far away. Then hands were on me, cool and steady, lifting me. I tried to tell her I was fine, but the words wouldn't come.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was in a white room with fluorescent lights and the sharp, sterile smell of disinfectant.

The pack hospital.

I tried to sit up, but a firm hand pressed me back down. Dr. Sato, the pack's head healer, looked down at me with an expression that could generously be called professional disinterest.

"You fainted," she said flatly. "Low blood pressure, dehydration, and elevated stress markers. Given your recent history, I've ordered a full panel."

My recent history.

The miscarriage.

I nodded slowly, my throat dry. "How long have I been out?"

"A few hours. Your maid brought you in. She was quite concerned." Dr. Sato picked up a chart, her eyes scanning it with clinical detachment. "You're lucky she found you when she did. Another hour, and we might be having a very different conversation."

She didn't say it like she cared-just ticking boxes.

I lay back against the pillows and waited.

The tests took an hour. When Dr. Sato returned, her expression hadn't changed, but there was something in her posture that made my stomach clench.

"Your hemoglobin is critically low," she said, pulling up a chair. "Consistent with the miscarriage and subsequent blood loss. Your uterine lining is thin, and your hormone levels are irregular."

She paused, looking at me over her glasses.

"Given the damage, future conception will be difficult. With medical intervention, I'd estimate your chances at less than thirty percent. Without it..." She shrugged. "Lower."

I stared at her.

“Do you have any questions, Luna?”

the way she said it, Luna was almost mocking. As if we both knew what this diagnosis meant.

a who couldn't produce an heir. A Luna who had outlived her usefulness.

“I said. “Thank you.”

he nodded once and stood. “You're free to go. Take the supplements I've prescribed, and try to avoid stress. It won't change the outcome, but it will make the process easier.”

She left without waiting for a response.

I lay there for a long moment, staring at the ceiling. Then, very slowly, I sat up.

My hands were shaking as I reached for the folder on the bedside table-the one with my name, the test results, and the cold, clinical prognosis.

Less than thirty percent.

I pressed the folder against my chest and walked out.

The hallway was empty. I was halfway to the exit when I heard his voice.

“Aria?”

I stopped.

Damon stood at the other end of the corridor, still in the same clothes from last night, his hair disheveled, dark circles under his eyes. He looked like he hadn't slept.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, closing the distance between us. “Are you following

me?”

The accusation was so absurd I almost laughed.

“I fainted,” I said flatly. “Amy brought me in.”

His gaTM

der in my hands. “What's that?”

ng in it.

“It’s nothing.” I stepped around him, heading for the exit.

He moved to block me. “Show me what’s in the folder.”

“No.”

“I’m not asking-I’m telling you!”

“And I’m telling you no.” I met his eyes, and for once, I didn’t back down. “Whatever you think is in here, it’s my business. Not yours.”

His expression darkened. “You’re my mate.”

“Am I?” I tilted my head.

That was the second time he’d said that to me lately. Not that it meant anything.

“Because last night, you walked out on me for another woman. Again. So forgive me if the definition feels a little flexible.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the words never came.

Because at that moment, a door down the hall opened, and Claudia stepped out. She was wearing a hospital gown with a light robe over it, her face carefully arranged into an expression of gentle

concern.

“Damon?” she said softly. “Is everything okay?”

His attention split. I felt it like a physical blow-the way his focus shifted, the way his posture relaxed slightly when he looked at her.

Protected, I thought. He protects her.

And me?

I was the threat.

I turned and walked away.

“Aria, wait.” Claudia took a step toward me, her hand outstretched. “You look pale. Are you feeling alright?”

I looked at her hand, then at Damon, who was watching us both with that familiar, wary tension. “I’m fine,” I said. “Thanks for the concern.”

I didn’t let her touch me.

trembling slightly, “I think she’s upset with me. Maybe I should explain

“There’s nothing to explain.” I met her eyes. “I know exactly what you are, Claudia. And I know

exactly what you want.”

Her face went white.

Damon’s expression darkened. “Don’t speak to Claudia like that. Apologize to her.”

“Not a chance.”

I turned back to Damon. “You wanted to know what’s in the folder?” I held it up. “It’s a medical report. It says I’m unlikely to ever carry a child to term. So congratulations. You’re free.”

M

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Chapter 33

Aria’s POV

I saw Damon freeze. For a split second, I even saw the blood drain from his face.

Maybe I was imagining things.

But it didn’t matter. A strange, almost cruel satisfaction bloomed in my chest.

“Aria-”

“I’m not finished.” My voice was steady, even as my hands shook.

428 Pare

“You’ve spent years resenting me for a marriage I didn’t choose. You’ve spent years punishing me for being your mate. And now?” I looked at Claudia, then back at him.

“Now you have what you’ve always wanted. A reason to leave.”

I turned and walked toward the exit. I didn’t run. I didn’t cry.

But as I pushed through the glass doors into the cold morning air, I felt something inside me crack.

It was the last thing holding me together.

Damon’s POV

I watched her go.

The glass doors swung shut behind her, and she was gone-just like that. No backward glance. No

hesitation.

You’re free.

Her voice echoed in my head, hollow and final.

I stood in the middle of the corridor, staring at the doors, and I couldn’t move. Couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe.

She’s unlikely to ever carry a child.

Rhein was howling in my chest, a sound of pure, primal grief. Our mate. Our mate is hurting. Go after her. Fix this. Fix it now.

But I couldn’t.

Because what was there to fix? I’d spent years pushing her away. Years choosing everyone else

Chapter 33-1

over her. And now?

Now you have what you’ve always wanted. A reason to leave.

“Damon?” Claudia’s voice was soft, tentative. “Is she... is she alright?”

I turned to look at her. She was standing in the doorway of her room, her hand pressed to her

stomach, her face full of worry.

“She’s fine,” I said.

“She seemed really upset.” Claudia took a step toward me. “Maybe I should go after/her. Talk to her. Help her understand that there’s nothing between us?”

“Don’t.” The word came out sharper than I intended.

She stopped.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to find the thread of control that had unraveled the moment Aria walked out. “Just... give me a minute.”

I walked to the window and stared out at the parking lot. Her car was still there. She was standing beside it, her hand on the door, but she wasn’t getting in. She was just... standing there. Head bowed. Shoulders curved inward.

She’s crying, Rhein said.

No. She wasn’t crying. She never cried.

I pressed my palm against the glass, and for one insane moment, I wanted to go after her.

But I didn’t.

The hollow ache in my chest wasn’t relief.

It was loss.

“Damon?” Claudia’s voice came from behind me, careful. You should go after her. She needs you.”

She needs you.

Did she? Or had she learned, long ago, not to need anything from me?

I turned away and said, “No.”

“She doesn’t.”

Aria’s POV

Chapter 33-1

+25 Port

I almost walked right past him.

In my defense, I was reading a text from Astrid about the project timeline and wasn't paying much

attention to my surroundings.

Then a familiar voice said, "Aria?"

I looked up.

Noah Har

seen in

hospital ID clipped to his coat, smiling at me-that same warm smile I hadn't

"No

at him, the folder slipping from my fingers. "You-how are you here?"

so much, yet the smile was the same gentle one. Even the women passing by/ stealing glances at him.

have sworn he was an Alpha!"

s like he walked off a TV screen!"

whispered to each other.

n didn't so much as glance their way. He only looked at me, his eyes full of concern.

was nearly as tall as Damon, and yet, when he stepped closer, he didn't make me feel crowded. e tilted his head down, leaning in to answer me with the manners of a gentleman. "We moved after my father went back to take over the pack. I ended up in med school. I'm here now for an exchange program. It's good-seeing you again."

He spoke easily about the past, about how, for now, he'd stayed out of running his father's pack and had followed his Beta mother into medicine instead.

CK DRAW



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Chapter 33-2

Chapter 33-2

if we were still close. As if no time had passed at all.

+25 Pa

“I’m glad I chose the way I did,” he said. “If I’d taken over my father’s work, I might never have run into you.”

I studied him, trying to reconcile the thin, timid boy from my memory with the tall, handsome, quick-witted Beta standing in front of me. His shoulders were broad now, soft black curls falling clean across his forehead, his eyes a deep sea blue. It was no surprise he drew so many stares. A genuine smile tugged at my lips at the sight of an old friend. But the moment it did, a sharp pain seized my lower abdomen-so sudden, so fierce that I sucked in a breath.

I felt Noah’s gaze sharpen. He looked me over carefully. “Aria, stop pushing through it,” he said, the humor gone from his voice now. “It’s just me here. Are you really alright?”

It was such a simple question. And no one had asked it in so long that I didn’t know how to answer.

“I’m fine,” I said, before I could stop myself.

He shook his head with a small laugh, then lifted a hand toward a door marked Staff Lounge. “Do you have a few minutes? I was about to grab a hot coffee. I think you could use one too.”

I should have said no. I had a thousand things to do, a thousand reasons to go home and hide under the covers until the world stopped spinning.

But it had been so long since I’d felt this kind of gentleness-wide and accepting as the sea, asking nothing of me-that something in my chest loosened.

“Okay,” I said. “Just a few minutes.”

The lounge was empty. Noah asked carefully what I liked, then brought over two steaming cups and sat across from me, angling his body to shield me from the cold draft of the air conditioning.

He didn't push. He just waited, as patient as he'd been when we were kids and he stood beneath the trees, waiting for me to climb down.

"How long has it been this bad?" he asked eventually.

I wrapped my hands around the warm cup. "The doctors gave me some news today. About my... chances. Of having children."

Sorrow ran deep in his eyes. "I'm so sorry..." he said softly.

"It's not the diagnosis," I said slowly. "It's..." I paused, searching for the words. "It's that it feels like

Chapter 33-2

another sign. Another reason all of this was a mistake."

Noah set his cup down. "Aria, you are not a mistake."

"I know. Intellectually, I know." I smiled bitterly. "But it's hard to feel it when everything around you

keeps proving the opposite."

He reached across the table and put his hand over mine. Just for a moment-solid, warm, holding

nothing back.

"You're going dropped

okay. Trust the medicine they have now. And trust me-your friend." His voice u're the strongest person I've ever known. Everything is going to be alright."

Ther

on his face. Only the concern of a friend.

and in that moment, I believed it.

soft click. Almost imperceptible. The sound of a camera shutter.

ward the door, but there was no one there.

hear that?" I asked.

frowned. "Hear what?"

ared at the empty doorway for a long moment, then shook my head. "Nothing. I'm just... jumpy."

faint unease settled in my chest.

Damon's POV

The photo landed on my desk.

Justin placed it there without a word, which meant he'd read the room well enough to know commentary would not be appreciated.

I looked at it.

Aria sat in a ch

He was lea

in front of her. Across the table, a man had his hand over hers.

Open, warm. And Aria-

Aria

unctions. Not the faint, distracted one she used with

Chapter 33-2

Rhein stirred in my chest, a low, possessive growl I didn't invite and couldn't silence.

Who is he?

"The exchange doctor," Justin said, anticipating the question. "Noah Hargreaves. He grew up in Grayson territory. They were childhood friends."

Childhood friends.

"He's been here for a month," Justin continued carefully. "We cleared him through standard protocol. There's nothing improper about their meeting. They just happened to run into each

other.”

Improper.

The word wa

the way sh

in my c

tinder. I looked at the photo again-at the way he held her hand, at like he was something safe-and felt something dark and unfamiliar co

She’s ours.

ars telling myself she wasn’t. I’d told myself the bond was a mistake, a punishment, break if I tried hard enough.

oking at her smiling at another man, I realized I didn’t want to break it. I didn’t want her one else’s.

know what I wanted. But I knew I didn’t want this.

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Chapter 35

Aria’s POV

Noah walked me to my car, the afternoon light slanting gold through the trees.

“I’m glad I ran into you,” he said. “Truly.”

“Me too.” I meant it. For the first time in weeks, I felt like I could breathe.

He hesitated, then said, “If you ever need to talk about anything, I’m here. I know things are...

complicated.”

“They are,” I admit

He smiled. “Y

kay. I'm figuring it out."

Then my

I gla

A notification from the Pacific Architecture Prize committee.

We regret to inform you that your submission has been withdrawn from iscrepancy in eligibility requirements was identified during our review process.

cy in eligibility requirements? I was a licensed architect. I had three portfolio projects heir criteria. I'd gone through the requirements twice before I even submitted.

one buzzed again. A text from an unknown number.

Aria. We should talk. Just you and me. Call me when you get a chance.

Claudia

I stared at the screen, the two notifications side by side.

One from the c

The timing

I kne

Jdidn't need to.

the passenger seat and looked out the window.

s still gold. The world was still turning.

this city, Claudia Stone was waiting for me to call.

Jidn't reach my eyes.

D

Not today.

+25 Puntut.

Damon's POV

ria wasn't home when I got there.

e house was dark, the front hall empty, silence pressing in from all sides. I stood in the doorway

a moment and listened.

lothing.

Amy appeared from the kitchen, her face drawn with worry. "Luna isn't back yet, sir. She said shed be home by seven, but-" She glanced at the clock. "It's past nine now."

"She didn't call?"

"No, sir. I've tried her phone twice. It goes straight to voicemail."

That photo came back to me. That man.

Is she still with him?

Rhein stirred, restless and uneasy.

"Alpha..." Amy hesitated. "There's a storm coming, and she's been so tired lately, and after everything that happened this morning..." She trailed off, but the implication was clear: You should go find her.

I didn't move.

Go to her, Rhein urged. Our mate is alone. In the dark. With a storm coming.

"She's a grown woman," I said aloud, more to myself than to Amy. "She can handle herself."

Amy looked at me with an expression I couldn't read. Then she nodded slowly and disappeared

back into the kitchen.

I went into the living room and sat down, picking up a report I'd meant to read hours ago. I stared at the first page for a full minute without absorbing a word.

Rhein paced.

The sto

aga

nder rolled low and heavy, shaking the windows. Rain lashed

aming through the trees along the drive.

She was running a fever last week. She fainted this morning, Rhein said.

“She’s fine,” I said through gritted teeth.

What if she’s not?

I set the report down.

426 Posit

“I’m going out for some air,” I said to Amy, grabbing my jacket from the hook. “Don’t wait up.”

The drive took

for exactly

The lob

The

minutes. I parked in the garage below her firm’s building and sat in the ca

ds before I got out.

A power outage-the backup system was running only emergency lighting.

e off.

well door and started up.

ts cut out at 9:11.

moment, I was staring at my monitor, trying to make sense of the competition committee’s ction sss, and the next, darkness.

he emergency exit sign above the stairwell door glowed red, fifty feet away. Everything else was

black.

I sat in the dark for a moment, my hands pressed flat on my desk, and waited for my eyes to adjust. They didn't.

"Great," I muttered.

My phone was down to three percent. I'd meant to get the charger from my bag an hour ago, but I'd gotten too wrapped up in work and completely forgot.

I pushed back

stiffened

I work

T

The bruise on my lower back from this morning's fall had

o move too fast in the dark.

the stairwell, one hand trailing the furniture as I went.

To find the handle. I pushed through into the stairwell and

e kind of darkness that wraps around you, makes every breath sound too feel like something watching.

I found the rail with my right hand and started down.

The bruise ached with every step. I counted under my breath, one, two, three, focusing on the

rhythm, on anything but the weight pressing against my chest.

By the time I reach

ixth floor, something in the air had changed.

I stopped.

It wasn't

unders

pressure. Heavy. Invisible. Crawling over my skin like a warning my body

y mind did.

s not safe.

E

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Chapter 36

Aria's POV

I held my breath and listened.

Nothing.

1425 Pome

But the feeling didn't leave. It grew thicker, closer, until I could feel it pressing against my lungs, my

ribs, my throat.

"Hello?" I called out, my voice steadier than I felt. "Is someone there?"

Silence.

Then a shift in the darkness. A shape emerging from the shadows. Familiar.

My foot slipped.

The step vanished beneath me, and I was falling, my hands grasping for the rail, for anything.

An arm caught me around the waist.

I hit a solid chest hard, my breath punching out of me. For one terrible, weightless moment, I thought I was still falling. Then the arm tightened, pulling me flush against him, and I smelled it:

pine, leather, rain.

Damon.

He didn't move, just stood there, one arm locked around me, the other braced against the wall, holding me against him like I was the only solid thing in the world.

My wolf went still. Then, traitorously, leaned closer.

Safe, she murmured. It's mate-it's safe!

But that wasn't true. It had never been true.

I pushed against his chest. "Let go."

He didn't.

"Damon." I shoved harder, my voice cracking. "I said let go."

He lo

slowly, his hand sliding from my waist. Cold rushed in to fill the space.

distance between us before my body could betray me again.

manded.

S

W

"Amy couldn't reach you."

"So you drove across town in a thunderstorm? To check on me?"

He didn't answer. His face was half in shadow.

I laughed, and it came out bitter. "Let me guess. You were in the neighborhood. Or you had a meeting nearby. Or you just happened to be passing by."

"Aria-"

"You don't get to do this." My voice shook. "You don't get to ignore me for weeks, humiliate me in front of my colleagues, walk out on me for her, and then show up in the middle of a storm acting

like you care."

"I do."

“No.” I stepped back

ting the edge of a step.

The silence stret

Then he mov

His hand s

threadi

“D

us, thick and suffocating.

g my wrist, pulling me back toward him. His other hand came up, fingers ting my head back.

I’m just here to make sure you’re still alive. Dead would be clean-but

e went cold. “Who knows what kind of crap you’d pull to stick around, just so

Luna for another year.”

turning quick and shallow. His arm was wrapped around my waist, pressing right

at this is about. He thinks I’m going to cling to him.

e here to tell you something. There are less than eleven months and fourteen days until ce is final. Until then, you’re still my wife-in name. So you’d better understand a few rules. ance... you keep your distance from other men.”,

ught, suddenly, of that strange little click earlier in the day.

s that one of Damon’s

ou actually had m

*le?”

t you c

I to you, exactly? Do you trust me that

currying

on with some doctor. Can't you stand being

"As for trust?" He laughed, cold and short. "You're not that important. I simply won't have you dragging my Alpha family's name through the mud."

The words landed like a slap. The fragile hope that had bloomed in my chest-the stupid, stubborn

hope that had survived years of neglect-crumbled to ash.

Pain sliced through me, sharp and cutting. I couldn't show weakness. Couldn't look back.

"Mr. Hawthorne, don't worry. I'm not going to break our deal." I forced a smile, swallowing the bitterness in my throat. "Though you're awfully angry for someone who doesn't care. Don't tell me you've fallen for me-is that why you can't stand me getting close to another man?"

Right on cue, Damon scoffed. "Fallen for you? Keep dreaming."

I kept the same faint sm

me now? Otherwise

Damon went still

He stared at

into the spa

"You'd b

Th

Then if you don't love me, why so worked up? And could you let go of

the wrong idea again."

eins on his hand stood out.

on rigid. Then he let go and stepped back, and the cold that rushed

was worse than the darkness.

urself."

The ache in my back eased a little.

e empty stairwell. Then silence.

p, he was already gone, heading down the stairs.

ee was his back... It wasn't the first time. So why couldn't I just get used to it?

yself for that.

on! What are you waiting for?!" His voice snapped from below.

mbered how pitch-black

st the pain and follow

tep felt like s

down

n't want to take my time. I gritted my teeth

the stairs.

was already soaked in cold sweat.

* Chapter 35

I grabbed the railing, stopped, and hung my head.

The stairs started to go dark-then a pair of leather shoes appeared in front of me. And then his voice, cold as ice.

"Aria, I don't have time for you to stand here playing the victim."

I looked up. He was three steps above me, silhouetted against the dim red light of the exit sign his

expression unreadable.

Sharp. Cold.

I pressed my lips together. "Then don't bother."

"Don't bother? So you can run to Grandpa and twist the story?"

I opened my mouth

ething, but nothing came out.

There was no po

uld never believe me anyway.

Then he grabb

“I warned

I pulle

a

ttle games-wait. You’re hurt?”

Didn’t answer. Just held the railing and kept moving down, one slow step at

ng back when he grabbed me. I didn’t have the energy to talk anymore.

rabbed my wrist again. “If you were hurt, why didn’t you say something earlier?”

ked at my wrist in his grip. I didn’t have the strength to pull free-and honestly, I nymore. I gave him a bitter smile.

said, my voice hollow, “would you have believed me?”

ng laugh.

as his answer.

Comm

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[Chapter 37](#)

Aria’s POV

We didn’t speak again.

By the time we got back to the house in his car, the rain had finally let up.

I got out of the car. I’d barely taken a few steps when I heard him behind me.

I stopped. "You staying here tonight?"

He rarely came back. Even fewer were the nights he actually stayed.

Be

sn't Claudia in the hospital? Didn't he have to go take care of her?

your business where I stay." His voice was cold again. "What, you hiding something

Afraid I'll find out?"

ords brought last night flooding back.

Jack. The violence.

And then what came after-the thing he hadn't finished...

The humiliation.

I looked away without a word and walked to my room without looking back.

When I woke up the next morning, there was a box on my nightstand.

Head still thick with exhaustion, I stared at it. A slim black box.

I opened it.

Inside was a tub

boutique

alve. The good kind-the kind my dad used to special-order from a

It v

ed through my mind-then I killed it.

+25 Pomt.

He wasn't concerned with the bruise on my back or the stiffness in my shoulders or any of the

small, accumulating damages of the last five years.

It couldn't be him.

Amy. Of course it was Amy.

She noticed everything without ever making it obvious. She'd seen the careful way I sat, the wince!

tried to hide. She wouldn't say anything. She'd just... handle it. That was Amy.

I set the tube down carefully and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

When I made it downstairs, the dining room table looked like it belonged in a wellness retreat

brochure.

Spread across it

sautéed spina

Greek yogu

Amy sto

fortie

steel-cut oatmeal with berries and chia seeds, poached eggs on cado fanned out like art, a small pitcher of green smoothie, and a uts and honey. A side of quinoa mixed with pomegranate seeds.

of the table, smiling. Next to her was a wornan in crisp white linen, early clipboard in hand.

g." Amy's voice was bright. "This is Dr. Harper. She's a nutritionist. Mr. ed for her to come. She'll be handling your meals from now on. Everything

ou."

pped forward. "Pleasure to meet you, Luna. We're focusing on rebuilding energy ting iron and protein. Today's breakfast is gentle but nutrient-dense: oats fortified with ch for folate, eggs for protein, beetroot and ginger in the smoothie for circulation. Any or preferences?"

k her hand, still processing. "No allergies. This is... a lot."

nodded like she'd heard it before. "We'll start simple and adjust. Shall I go over the week's plan

ter you eat?"

glanced at Amy.

softly. "He said

"Mr. Hawthorne was very specific," she added

wants to make sure you're getting what you

need."

tared

was steaming. The eggs were perfect. The whole thing looked

agazine.

+25 Paint

A gourmet breakfast and a personal nutritionist. Like that was going to fix anything. Like I was

plant he'd suddenly remembered to water after years of drought.

I pulled out a chair and sat. The oatmeal was good. I hated that it was good.

I ate mechanically, nodding at the right places as Dr. Harper talked about portion sizes and micronutrient timing. When she finally left, I pushed back from the table.

"The salve," I said to Amy as I grabbed my bag. "On my nightstand. That was you, right?"

Amy blinked. "Salve?"

"The arnica. For the bruise."

She paused. "No, Luna

Hawthorne go up

that early call. I

We held eye

Damon?

didn't put anything there." Then her expression shifted, "I did see Alpha

m late last night, though. He was only there a minute, then he left for s just checking on you."

eat.

My

?

fway to my mouth.

down.

s endgame? What did he want from me now, after everything?

s for breakfast," I said. "I've got work."

ked out without looking back.

The café was on Meridi

me one Claudia and I used to go to after class, back when

I thought she was

She was alrea

ands wra

there

t right so the afternoon light hit her hair, her something fragile. She looked composed.

om her and sat without ceremony.

? Chapter 36

"Aria." She smiled, sliding a menu toward me. "I'm so glad you came. Coffee? Something to eat

"I'm not here to have coffee with you," I said. "My competition entry got rejected. That was you."

She withdrew the menu smoothly, her expression flickering.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re on the preliminary review panel. You flagged my submission.” I leaned back. “The committee said ‘criteria discrepancy.’ But my credentials checked out. I went through everything

twice.”

She stared at me f

“Yes,” she said.

“I told you, A

both hand

I sho

a

ment. Then she smiled, slow and deliberate.

anel. If I say no, you don’t get in.” She picked up her mug, holding it with

le.”

ked. “You called me here to gloat?”

to make you an offer.” She reached into her bag and slid a slim black card across million. For your share of the marriage.”

M

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 38

Aria’s POV

I looked at the card.

Then at her.

“You want to buy me off.”

+25 Post

make this clean.” Her voice softened, taking on that sympathetic tone I’d heard her use a times. “You know what Damon and I are. What we’ve always been. And now-” Her hand pressed against her stomach, just for a moment.

are changing. This is your graceful exit. Ten million, and I make one call to the committee and my competition entry gets reinstated. You walk away. Everyone wins.”

I picked up the card, turned it over in my fingers.

A bitter laugh slipped out of me.

“You think the Grayson family is in financial trouble,” I said. “You think I’m desperate for cash. You think you can buy me off, and I’ll step aside quietly.”

She smiled, though the confidence flickered. “I’m being generous.

“Then show me your generosity.” I set the card down on the table between us. “Five billion, and I’ll agree to divorce Damon.”

“Five billion?! Aria, you-you’re insane!” Claudia shot up from her seat.

I raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you just say you were being generous? Why so worked up?”

“Five billion is enough to buy two Grayson Groups!”

She took a deep breath, sat back down, and clenched her hands. “Fine. I’ll give you five million. Don’t push it, Aria.”

“Then make it six billion. Not a cent less.”

“You-1”

Is

expected me to raise the price on the spot. “You’re delusional!”

of money.

You really haven’t changed at all.” I watched her like she was an open book.

<Chapter 37

“Always so predictable.”

Her smile stiffened.

425 Poet?

“You think this position is something you can purchase,” I continued. “That it’s a title, a role, something you can inherit if you just wait long enough or pay enough.” I leaned forward. “But it was never for sale. And it was never mine to give away.”

Her composure cracked. “Aria!”

“Six billion. It won’t change anything.”

She stared at me, her hands tightening around her mug. “You’re bluffing.”

“I’m not.” I picked up

insult me by prete

Behind me, he

that prison

“Walter

to yo

nd stood. “You want to be Mrs. Hawthorne? Fine/ Take it. But don’t

n buy it.”

“Enjoy it while it lasts, Aria. Because the minute your father kicks it in

other are finished.”

going to waste his time protecting some convict’s daughter. I’ve never lost Not now. Not ever!”

by the table, chin high, jaw clenched, one hand pressed to her stomach like a

e fear itself-desperate, cornered.

h she tried to cover it up.

‘I said quietly.

inched.

ope that works out for you.”

And... best of luck with your baby. Really.” I let my eyes drop to her stomach. “Assuming Walter

ets it exist, anyway.”

The blood drainer

**

wered to Astrid’s excited voice: “Hey, Aria,

sending you the address right now. I bet you’ll be thrilled!”

eagerly.

“Just look at your phone and come find out!” She laughed and hung up.

Half an hour later, I stood in the middle of the room and let the light fall across my hands.

The fourth apartment had good bones.

+25 Part

High ceilings, original windows that still rattled faintly when the wind picked up, and a back room with perfect north-facing light. Steady, cool, the kind that didn’t lie to you about what you were

drawing.

“That’s the third time you’ve done that,” Astrid said from the doorway, arms crossed, hip cocked against the frame.

“Done what?”

“Stopped dea

I pulled m

She h

had

at nothing like you're solving world hunger."

orry, I got distracted."

gh and came to stand beside me. The realtor, a patient, middle-aged guy, to give us a minute.

ace me fully. "Okay. You've been half in your head all afternoon. Not in a bad way. Returning something over until it clicks. Spill."

against the windowsill. "Claudia called me."

nt still.

ferred me ten million to walk away from the marriage. Said she'd reinstate my competition if I played nice." I shook my head. "I turned her down."

trid's eyes widened. "She actually tried to buy you?"

She thought I'd jump at it. Or at least negotiate." I smiled, and it wasn't bitter this time. "I told her the position was never for sale."

Astrid let out a low v

"And you don't

everyone. Iconic."

"Nothing

Astr

hat kind of person she is." I smiled.

ession hardening. "Yeah, we all knew. She's always been like this. ne never changes."

inued, "she's a straight-up opportunist. She'll cling to anyone who looks like she shook her head, "she thinks money solves everything. Any problem, any

#t

person-just throw cash at it and it'll go away."

"Remember the Harlow competition?" Astrid's voice was sharper now. "The way she sabotaged you? Same playbook, different decade."

E

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 39

Axia's POV

She paused, then added, "But one day, it's all going to come back to bite her."

"What do you mean?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Think about it." Astrid shrugged. "She thinks everything has a price. She thinks if she pays for something, it's hers. But guess what? Someone else can always pay more and take it right out of

her hands."

"She's never found anything in her life that was actually worth holding onto."

I thought about Claudia's face. The desperation behind her composure. The way her hand kept drifting to her stomach, like she was clinging to the only thing she had left.

"You're right," I said finally.

Astrid froze for a second, then just looked at me. "You're different. Than before."

"Different how?"

"Lighter." She smiled. "Like something heavy finally lifted."

"Because I got back into the Pacific Prize," I said. "The same day she disqualified me. Someone

pulled strings."

"Who?"

"Steven Ward."

Astrid's eyebrows shot up. "The Steven Ward? Principal of Ward & Associates?"

"He was the principal when I interned there. He made a call got my entry reinstated." I smiled. "And then he offered me a position. Full-time. After the prize wraps up. He called it mentorship."

Astrid was quiet for a second. Then: “Aria. That’s huge.”

“I know.” I looked back at the north light pooling on the floorboards. “He said I was going to be his

gotégé. Like it was some ancient apprenticeship ritual.”

it.”

impossible.”

urned back to the room. “The light is good.”

“It is.”

“The past is the past,” I said, more to myself than to her. “We move forward.”

Astrid gave a small, fierce smile. “You’re allowed to say she was a bitch, you know.”

“I know.” I shrugged. “But saying it doesn’t make the light any better. Or worse.”

She laughed under her breath. “Fair point.”

We headed toward the door together. The realtor reappeared with perfect timing.

“Any questions about the unit?”

“We’ll take the ap

The apartme

Exactly w

aperwork,” Astrid said, eyes still on me.

start over.

ing even after I walked out of the building.

New life.

t to leave all of it behind.

buzzed. A text from Astrid: Don’t sign anything until I’ve looked at it. I don’t trust that eyebrows.

ed, typing back a reply, and nearly walked straight into someone.

ry,” I said, looking up. “Are you okay? I just... Noah?”

oah wore a well-cut shirt in pale gray, his black hair a little longer now, falling loose in a way that softened the sharp lines of his face. Behind silver-rimmed glasses, his warm eyes caught the light -the kind of eyes that made you want to talk to him.

He was holding a small l

naper bag, and I recognized the logo stamped on it-the dessert

shop I’d loved m

He

I smile

N

you doing here? On a date?”

tease the same way you did as a kid. Just as endearing.”

ighborhood. I wanted to stop by and see how you were healing up-1

here this late.”

< Chapter 38

His eyes held a friend’s concern. “Aria, don’t work yourself so hard. Your health matters more than

anything.”

Warmth spread through my chest at the words. “No, I wasn’t working late. I just came back to pick

up a few things.”

“Then you’re doing it right.” He held the bag out to me. “Here-try one. I remembered you like them- low on sugar. They’re fresh out of the oven, so eat them while they’re warm.”

was taken aback. I hadn’t expected him to remember.

“They look perfect.” I took the bag, wrapping my hands around its warmth. “Thank you.”

We stood there for a mon

“How have you been

The question wa

“Better,” I said

He smiled

We w

late afternoon light slanting gold between the buildings.

a block, talking about nothing-his fellowship, my competition, the market. It was easy. Uncomplicated. The way things used to be, before

ed up.

the fork where our paths split, he stopped.

g people over at the Grayson estate. I was just about to head over.” He leaned in aze settling on me with quiet focus. “The roads are bad tonight. I don’t like the you driving alone-and as it happens, my car has plenty of room.”

was so thoughtful it felt impossible to refuse. I nodded. “That would be nice, actually.”

iled. “Come on, then.”

Bentley was parked just around the corner. I slid into the passenger seat, the leather still warm om the afternoon sun. The air inside carried a soft, calming note of citrus, and I leaned back

+ into traffic. against the headrest

Noah didn’t sa

music, and it eased something in me.

The Bentle

and he

ocks. Then, all at once, Noah’s brow furrowed,

+25 Pont

“It’s fine. Just rest.” But his hands tightened on the wheel. He checked the mirror again, more

deliberately this time.

Turned in my seat. Behind us, maybe two car lengths back, a black Maybach was keeping pace. It’s windows were tinted dark, its presence like a shadow against the golden afternoon light.

Damon.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 40

Damon’s POV

“Justin.” My jaw clenched as I watched the Bentley’s taillights disappear into the sunlight/”Follow

it.”

“Alpha, you have an important dinner coming up-we’re already running late-”

“Cut i

orce it to stop.” My voice was ice.

A

are she.

that car. With him. Again.

the door handle tightened until my knuckles went white.

sure if I wanted to drag her out of that car or drag him out by the throat. Maybe both.

blood ran hot. My vision tunneled.

ein was snarling inside me, clawing to get out. This was the rage of a wolf who’d had what was

is taken.

She wanted to see what happened when I got angry? Fine. She was about to find out.

Aria's POV

My chest tightened.

Damon's Maybach was right behind us. No sign of slowing.

He was closing in.

"It's probably just going the same direction," Noah said, but his voice had lost its ease. He accelerated s

The Ma

No

The Maybach followed. He slowed, letting a delivery Julled around it, closing the distance. ching Palm Street. Noah signaled, preparing to turn.

<Chapter 39

The Maybach surged forward.

Tires screeched.

+25 Pain

The Maybach had swerved hard, cutting Noah off so sharply that if he hadn't reacted fast enough,

we would have slammed right into the median.

Minor injuries at best. Dead at worst.

Damon Hawthorne, you really don't give a damn about me, do you?

Noah slammed on the brakes. The Bentley jerked to a stop.

I got thrown forward, then the seatbelt yanked me back hard.

Everything went

cleared, I saw

The black

An eer

econd. I forced myself to breathe steady. When my vision finally

our path.

across both lanes.

e car.

her hackles raised inside me, ready to defend-even though the threat out there

His voice was tight, controlled-but I could hear the anger beneath it.

p on the window.

Face impassive. Posture caught somewhere between deference and steel.

a." His eyes found me. "Alpha requests your presence."

looked at the car. At the dark windows hiding that man inside.

"Tell him I'll talk to him at home," I said, not moving.

Justin left.

Then the

Mena

hree strides and stopped in front of me.

K," he said.

"Now."

25 Pot

His voice was controlled, but I could hear the edge beneath it. The thing he was barely holding

back.

“Damon-”

He moved before I could finish. His arm slid around my waist, pulling me out of the car and against him. His other hand came up to frame my face. The pose was intimate, almost gentle But his eyes

were anything but.

“What do you

I tried to step back. His arm tightened.

as a whisper against my ear. Cold. A warning. “Unless you want that injury to

“Behave.”

hurt a li

I loo

H

staring straight into those dark, vicious eyes.

e, locked in a standoff-but to anyone watching, we probably looked like devoted ply in love.

everything okay?” Noah was standing a few feet away, his expression wary, his eyes moving n us.

on’s arm tightened.

fine,” I said. “This is...”

hesitated. I didn’t know how to introduce Damon.

“Her husband.” Damon finished. His voice was flat, but his arm was like a brand around my waist. “Mr. Hargreaves, thanks for keeping my mate company. I’ll take it from here.”

My mate...

My chest swelled with

of emotions I couldn’t name.

For the past

times tha

as his

sized about hearing those two words from Damon more nding at his side while he introduced me to someone

d already given up.

is cruel.

for all those years, then turn around and tell someone I'm your mate like it

*Chapter 39

means something.

A bitter laugh escaped my throat.

"Aria and I grew up together. No need to be formal. We're both heading to the same dinner ton

actually."

"Really?" Damon's laugh was cold. "I've been married to Aria for a while now. Strange she never

mentioned you."

Noah smiled. "Aria an

Damon's express

Suddenly, the

felt freezin

They st

w how close we are. We don't advertise it."

ith tension. It was a bright, sunny day, but the temperature around t

d in a standoff, neither willing to back down.

