

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha – Mindlinks 11

Chapter 11

Damon's POV

"Damon. Your choice."

Her voice was soft, but every word felt like a blade slipping between my ribs.

I held her wrist. She held Lilith's. The three of us were locked in an absurd, twisted standoff at the center of this circus.

And she—the one who started it all—had the nerve to give me a choice..

Rage burned in my chest. I was about to make her pay for her arrogance.

But in that instant, I met her eyes.

What... was in them?

Not the defiance I expected. Not even anger.

It was a wasteland.

A barren, ash-covered emptiness after a wildfire had torn through everything.

It was so raw, so intense, that for a split second, my heart gave a sharp, unfamiliar pang.

My wolf, Rhein, let out an uneasy whine deep in my mind. He could feel her pain—that death-rattle agony radiating from her soul.

Quick! Comfort her! *Our mate is in pain. I can feel it.*

Mate?

The word hit me like a bucket of ice water, shocking me back to reality.

I saw Lilith's twisted face, saw Claudia nearby, holding her cheek and crying silently.

And this woman in front of me—Aria Grayson—was hurting the two most important women in my life with her crazed stubbornness.

That brief moment of weakness vanished, swallowed by even fiercer anger

I must be losing my mind, going soft because of a look

This woman and her hypocritical father were cut from the **same** cloth!

Liam's face—young, growing cold in a pool of blood flashed before my eyes

Graysons were experts at putting on a show They used fake tears and dramatic poses to hide their innate selfishness and poison

Her father killed my best friend

25 Fit-

Now she wants to hurt my sister right in front of me!

"Last chance. Let her go!"

I ground the words out through clenched teeth, tightening my grip on her wrist.

I could feel the fragility of her bones beneath my palm—like one more ounce of pressure

would snap them.

She looked at me, the corner of her mouth quirking in a faint, mocking smile.

She didn't let go.

Not only did she refuse to let go, but she used those hopeless eyes to silently declare war.

Fine.

Perfect.

If you won't take the easy way out, don't blame me for what happens next.

Raw Alpha power erupted from within me.

More than just presence—this was the absolute authority of my bloodline, enough to force lower-ranked wolves into submission. The air turned thick and oppressive.

Everyone in the shop collapsed to the floor, trembling.

And all of it was focused on Aria.

I could feel my pressure wrapping around her like an invisible net, tightening inch by inch, crushing her spirit, breaking her will.

I wanted to use the most direct, primal way to show her who was in charge here.

I wanted to make her kneel.

Make her beg.

I watched her face.

Her already pale face drained of all color, turning ghostly white.

Her body started shaking violently, trembling like a leaf.

She was just recovering from a serious illness

The thought flickered through my mind, but I crushed it and pressed harder

So what? She brought this on herself

"What are you doing? Let her go! You **bastard**! Astrid screamed

"Damon.. stop you'll hurt her. Claudia pleaded weakly from my arms, her voice full of kindness and **pity**.

Her words only made me more furious

+25 Paints

See? She'd done **it** again.

Made even Claudia plead for her, successfully painting herself as a victim being crushed by my power.

The pressure I released became heavier, more merciless.

"Aria, my patience has limits."

I watched her lips part slightly as she struggled for air.

Rhein raged and slammed against my mind, claw's scraping at my consciousness.

Stop! Stop now! She'll die! You're going to kill her!

I blocked Rhein out.

Kill her?

No way. I knew Aria.

She'd clung to this marriage like a lifeline—just for protection from the Silvermoon Pack. Someone like her would never have the guts to die.

She'd give up. Before I had to kill her.

I believed it.

And I was wrong.

What I didn't expect was that even under this crushing force, her grip on Lilith didn't loosen.

This wasn't a contest of strength.

It was a stubbornness that burned through her soul.

A madness that would rather shatter everything than yield.

What the hell gave her the right?!

Just as my rage was about to spiral completely out of control, to do something irreversible—

Her body finally hit its limit.

She swayed violently, her knees buckling, about to collapse

But **she** didn't

With the last of her strength, she held on

"Apologize

I heard her whisper the word, barely audible

Then, her hand holding Lilith finally went slack

Not because she chose to let go

+25 Frivits

Her body just could no longer support her ridiculous, stubborn pride.

A trickle of bright red blood seeped from the corner of her pale mouth.

That slash of crimson burned—into my retinas like a brand.

My heart clenched, seized by an invisible fist. The pain was sudden, sharp, stealing my breath.

She was like **a** flower wilting in my grasp, and I was the one who'd brought the storm.

Damn it!

What was I doing?

Rhein let out a dying howl in my mind, the pain so real it felt like his claws were shredding my soul apart.

I almost let go.

That strange, unwelcome urge pushed me to pull back all the pressure, to gather her into my arms, wipe the blood from her lips.

I could feel her pain—and... mine.

Aria, I feel everything you feel. Always.

And still—I'll hurt you. And myself. Always.

"Damon! Look at her! She's doing it on purpose! Playing the victim to make you go soft!" Lilith pointed at **Aria**, her voice shrill.

I looked down.

Claudia stared up at me, her cheek already bruising, tears and fear filling her eyes. That vulnerable, terrified look awakened every protective instinct I had as an Alpha.

I had to protect my people. I couldn't let them suffer the way Liam had.

That moment of wavering was replaced by deeper hatred.

I couldn't go soft.

Going soft for a Grayson was cruelty to my family.

I increased the pressure on Aria's wrist, deliberately grinding against the obviously sprained, swollen joint

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LUCK DRAW >

Vole

Chapter 12-1

Damon's POV

+25 Points

She groaned in pain, her body trembling violently, but her eyes meeting mine still held *no* surrender.

"She tried to steal the pendant you gave Claudia! When Claudia refused, Aria had that friend of hers attack her!" Lilith told her version of events, voice shaking with outrage.

Claudia tugged gently at my sleeve, her tone soft and understanding. "Damon, it's fine... really. **Aria**

probably just had a moment. I don't hold it against her."

Her forgiveness only highlighted how irrational Aria had been.

My anger flared hotter.

I looked down at the woman still resisting in my grasp, my voice stripped of all warmth.

"Aria. Apologize to Claudia."

This wasn't a request.

It was an *order*.

"Why should she! They should be the ones apologizing!" Astrid was trembling with rage, pointing at Claudia.

"You disgusting homewrecker! Stealing someone's husband and playing innocent! You-"

"Astrid," I cut her off coldly, my gaze scraping over her like a blade. "If you still want the deal with Hawthorne Group, shut *your* mouth!"

"The deal? Who the hell cares about your deal?! A bastard like you-"

'Astrid!'

A voice cut off the words Astrid hadn't even finished.

It was Aria.

She looked at me, eyes burning with anger and disbelief.

And disappointment

7

Something in my chest tightened A strange **unease**, like something was slipping through my fingers just out of reach, no matter how hard I tried to hold on

I didn't care.

As long as I broke her down Isolated her Made her understand exactly where she stood -everything would go back to the way it was

That's what I told myself.

+25 Founts

Or... what I tried to convince myself of

Aria's POV

"Aria. One last time: Apologize. Or you know the consequences."

His voice was cold. Merciless.

I felt something inside me shatter completely.

The Alpha's pressure felt like countless hot steel needles piercing my limbs. My mouth filled with the metallic taste of blood. The pain in my wrist was almost enough to make me pass *out*.

But none of it compared to the chill his actions sent through me now.

He could humiliate me, hurt me, even kill me.

But he had no right to use the same methods on my friend.

"Astrid," I stopped her before she could argue further, shaking my head slightly. "Don't."

She turned to look at me, her eyes instantly reddening.

"Aria! You can't-"

"It's fine." I cut her off, forcing a reassuring smile, though I knew I probably looked

worse than if I were
crying.

I turned my head to look at Claudia, safely sheltered in Damon's arms.

I saw the flash of triumph in her eyes.

I'd lost this game from the very beginning.

"Ms. Stone," my voice was calm, dead. "If my existence has caused you any displeasure... I apologize."

I said each word clearly.

I didn't look at Damon, but I could feel his grip on my wrist loosen almost imperceptibly when I apologized.

Claudia nestled against him, giving a soft, innocent smile of victory.

"It's alright, Aria. I know you didn't mean it.

I couldn't stand to watch her disgusting act any longer

Raising my head, I looked at the man who held my fate in his hands

"Mr. Hawthorne, I used an unprecedented, polite form of address

"May I have my hand back now?"

I felt Damon's body stiffen slightly. Something flashed in his eyes.

Surprise? Or... displeasure?

25 Points

A

I didn't care.

He was silent for a few seconds, then finally released my wrist.

The moment I was free, before I could even feel relief, I swayed.

Astrid immediately caught me.

"**Let's** go!" She gritted her teeth, supporting me as we turned to leave.

I saw the five clear, already purpling finger marks on my wrist.

Damon's gaze also fell on the injury.

I saw him move slightly.

Just an illusion.

He could never care about me. Never.

Step by step, leaning on Astrid, I walked out.

Just as we were about to leave the shop, something I'd forgotten suddenly hit me.

I didn't look at anyone else. Just looked at Damon and asked clearly in front of everyone:

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Hawthorne. About the divorce—when should we handle the paperwork?"

Damon's face, which had just relaxed a fraction, instantly darkened like a storm cloud. The air seemed to be sucked out of the room.

"Aria, I told you—don't *you* dare think you can—"

"Let's get a divorce."

I cut him off, my voice light, a bitter smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

"Mr. Hawthorne, don't tell me—you can't bear to let me go? You've fallen for me? Or could it be

I dragged out the last words, letting my gaze drift pointedly toward the woman in his arms

"You're planning to keep Claudia as your mistress forever? Hidden away in the shadows?"

Claudia's face went pale. Her fingers tugged gently at **his** sleeve "Damon

Damon patted her hand reassuringly. Then he stepped forward, looming over me

"Aria, you think far too highly of yourself! What part of you could possibly be worth missing?"

"I don't give a damn if you stay or leave Think carefully once you leave the Silvermoon Pack, you'll be nothing but a stray wolf—a rogue, wandering alone with no one to protect you And then

"Yes. That's exactly what I want"

I lifted my head and looked at the face that had once appeared in my dreams more times than I could

+25 Points

count

Even now, standing this close, he felt impossibly far away.

Maybe because—from the very beginning—he was never meant to be mine.

I smiled.

My eyes burned, just slightly.

"I'd like to start my new life as soon as possible."

Even as a stray wolf.

At least then, I wouldn't have to sit alone in that empty bed anymore, counting the hours until dawn, enduring the pain that tore through me every single day.

LUCK DRAW >

Vote

125

Chapter 12-2

Aria's POV

Damon's expression darkened.

"Fine. If that's what you want—then I'll give it to you."

He sounded angry, staring at me like he wanted to burn holes right through me.

Or maybe I just imagined it.

After all, getting rid of me—he should have been more than eager for that.

"Legal is drafting the agreement," he bit out the words.

"You'll be notified when it's ready."

"Good."

I had my answer.

The moment I turned away, my wolf, Lydia, let out a confused whimper in the depths of my

consciousness.

Rhein is whimpering... He seems... really sad...

My heart **gave** an uncontrollable twinge of pain.

That's just *an illusion, Lydia*.

I said to her, and to myself.

He never loved us.

+25 Points

Divorce Agreement.

The sss from Damon's lawyer glowed coldly on my computer screen

I opened the attachment

Dense legal language every clause clearly outlined how to completely strip me of my Mrs Hawthorne identity

A clean break

As soon as I signed my name, every trace of me from the **past** two years in the Silvermoon Pack would be

erased

That was exactly what I wanted

So why—why did my chest hurt this much?

+25 Points

My hand gripping the **mouse** tightened unconsciously.

I tried to pretend I was calm.

My colleagues were still busy outside, the sound of keyboards and hushed conversations blending together. I didn't want anyone to see me like this.

My phone screen lit up again.

The caller ID showed a name I couldn't refuse.

Walter.

Damon's grandfather.

I took a deep breath, grabbed my phone, and slipped into the empty conference room, away from

everyone.

"Walter." My voice was strained.

"Aria." The old man's voice on the other end gave nothing away, but held undeniable authority. "Come to the packhouse. Now."

Damon's POV

'Explain this to me—right now! What does this mean?!" Grandfather's roar filled the study.

A stack of printed documents flew at me, hitting my chest like sharp paper knives before scattering across the floor.

I looked down at the papers at my feet.

Divorce Agreement.

It was Aria.

Her trick, again?

"You've grown bold, Damon." Grandfather's voice turned ice-cold, like the dead calm before a storm. "Taking matters into your own hands now?"

"Yes" I let out a bitter laugh, deciding not to hide it anymore.

"That was my intention"

"You fool" Grandfather slammed his cane on the floor with a heavy thud.

"Withdraw it! Immediately!"

"I won't." I didn't back down. "This marriage was **a** mistake from the start. I'm just correcting it."

"A mistake?" Grandfather laughed bitterly.

"The Moon Goddess's decree, the bloodline legacy of the Hawthorne family in your eyes, that's **just** a 'mistake' to be casually corrected?"

↳

Tapter

"Grandfather, I don't love Aria. I didn't love her two years ago, I don't love her now, and I never will."

Yes. That was the truth.

I ignored Rhein's protest inside me—and that strange, inexplicable unease twisting in my chest.

Everything had to be corrected.

Grandfather's eyes blazed. His voice cut like a whip.

"Then who do you love?! That foster daughter of the Stone family?!"

"Grandfather, why do you always hate her so much?! What did she ever do wrong?!"

+25 Points

"Her only mistake was getting involved with you!" Grandfather snapped. "That girl will never be part of this family! The Hawthornes will never allow someone of uncertain background to marry *into* our name!

"If you keep messing around with her, she'll only be your weakness, a stain on the Silvermoon Pack!"

"I don't care!" I finally couldn't hold back, roaring out the anger bottled up in my heart.

"You don't care?" Grandfather took a step closer, his aged but sharp eyes fixed on me.

"Damon, let me remind you. If you insist on abandoning your fated mate for that woman, I... have ways to make her, and the bastard she's carrying, disappear from this world. Completely."

"How dare you!"

Savage killing intent burst from me.

"See if I dare!" Grandfather's pressure crashed down on me like a mountain. "For a bastard girl, you'd risk your own future, even the peace your best friend bought with his life for this family... is it worth it?"

Our auras collided violently in the small study, invisible sparks crackling in the air.

1

I gritted my teeth, veins bulging at my temples.

Slowly, I came to my senses.

Alpha Responsibility. The so-called greater good—it all came flooding back.

And I couldn't say no. Not anymore.

I'd lost

"Good" Seeing me finally yield, Grandfather withdrew his suffocating pressure

He looked at me with deep disappointment and exasperation

"Move back' He delivered the final sentence

"Live with your mate Fulfill your duties **as** a husband For one **year** During this year, I forbid you from having any contact with that woman"

"After a year, if you still insist on divorce, I won't interfere

apter 12 –

Onc **year**:

To me, it was a one-year prison sentence.

I didn't speak again

I turned and walked out like I was escaping a cage.

Outside, under the dim hallway lights, stood a slender figure. –

Aria.

She stood right by the door, her face pale as paper.

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Damon's POV

She'd heard.

She must have heard everything.

Ran to tattle to Grandfather, hid outside listening to me being forced *to* withdraw the agreement... was she feeling smug now?

Grandpa called her in.

I stood there, watching her walk through that door.

An indescribable wave of disgust surged from my stomach.

That rage–rising from the depths of my gut–rampaged through my veins, howling silently.

It flooded every inch of me.

Moon Goddess...

This is what you give me? A fated mate?

Her. Of all people. Her.

A long time passed. Then the door opened.

Aria stepped out.

I studied her face, searching for a crack–any sign of smugness. But she just walked past me, eyes lowered like a shadow. Silent.

I walked up to her step by step, looking at her fragile, innocent face.

"Watching me get forced to back down.... are you satisfied now?"

"Aria You make me sick."

Ana's POV

Damon yanked me toward his car

The **air** in the car was colder than a Siberian tundra

Silence was worse torture than arguing I couldn't take **this** anymore

"I already made things clear to Waiter I finally spoke, my voice cutting through the dead silent cabin

"I told him I insist on the divorce So that one year deal it's unnecessary

It's unnecessary to imprison both of us in that gilded cage called the one year deal
hating and

happening

terminating each other day after day.

No answer.

Damon's hand on the steering wheel tightened slightly, but he didn't look at me.

I thought this was the answer he wanted to hear.

I thought he'd feel some relief at finally being rid of me.

I was wrong.

SCREECH!

A sharp, sudden braking sound!

The Maybach jerked to an abrupt stop in the middle of traffic..

+75 Pounds

The force of inertia threw me forward—if not for the seatbelt, my head would have hit the windshield.

Before I could recover from the shock, a burning hot hand shot out, grabbing my chin, forcing me to turn and meet his blazing eyes.

"More acting?"

He almost spat the words, his grip so tight I thought my jawbone would crack.

"Aria, you're really getting into character!"

"I'm not..."

"Not?" He let out a cold laugh, full of disdain and violence.

"First, you get the divorce agreement, run straight to Grandpa to complain, get him to force me to take it back."

"Now you put on this 'I insist on divorce' act in front of me, so I'll think you've been wronged and feel guilty?"

"You think I don't know what you're doing? Playing hard to get! You've really mastered this game"

Every word was like a red-hot knife, stabbing into my heart, twisting cruelly

So, in his heart, I was this kind of calculating, despicable woman

My explanations, my pain, all my insistence in his eyes, they were just one carefully staged performance

after another

"I didn't show the agreement to Grandfather Hooked at him, forcing the words out I swear I didn't

"Then how the hell did it end up in his study?" he roared his face flushing red

He released me suddenly, stomping the accelerator to the floor

ROAR—1

dipter

The engine growled like a beast.

+25 Points

The car shot forward like an arrow, weaving madly through the crowded evening traffic, changing lanes, **cutting** off other cars.

The world outside became a blur of lights.

Angry honks and curses were left far behind.

My body was pressed hard against the seat, the force making it hard *to* breathe.

“Damon! You’re insane!” I screamed, gripping the door handle for dear life.

He ignored me, driving with near-destructive frenzy.

His bloodshot eyes were fixed ahead, like a gambler hell-bent on a destination, willing to pay any price to get there.

And I was just an insignificant, expendable chip in his mad gamble.

The shadow of death loomed over me more clearly than ever.

I wasn’t afraid of dying.

I was afraid of dying with this man I’d loved and hated for so long, in such an absurd, pathetic way.

Just then, at an intersection ahead, a truck was slowly turning.

We were going too fast to stop.

Its massive headlights blazed toward *us*, blinding and inescapable.

Time slowed to a crawl.

I could see the truck driver’s panicked face through the windshield.

I could smell Damon’s scent **in** the car, mixed with rage and despair.

My mind went blank.

All pride, all insistence, all resentment crumbled in that instant

Only the primitive desire to live, and fear of death, remained.

“Stop!”

“Damnon! I’m begging you! Stop!

Tears finally broke free Like a child backed into a corner, I cried hysterically

“I was wrong! Okay? I won’t mention divorce again! Ill do whatever you say! Please stop

Looking at his cold profile in the flashing lights, a regret more despairing than death washed over me

I regretted it

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I regretted saving him from the wolves that night in the Northern Wastes.

I regretted foolishly thinking I could trade sincerity for sincerity in that arranged marriage.

I regretted ever loving him.

SCREEEECH-!

2

Comments

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha – Mindlinks 14

Aria's POV

At the very last second, Damon wrenched the steering wheel hard to the right.

The car swerved violently, missing the truck by inches.

Tires shrieked on the asphalt.

Then we slammed into the guardrail and jerked to a stop.

The airbags exploded with a deafening BANG, then immediately deflated with a hiss.

The world went quiet.

All I could hear was my ragged breathing as I tried to process what had just happened.

I slumped in my seat, every muscle gone limp, unable to move.

Damon slowly straightened up.

He didn't look at me, just stared straight ahead, his voice cold as winter.

"Remember how this feels, Aria."

"This is just the beginning."

"You'll pay for everything *you* did today. For every word you said."

He turned his head and looked at me with ice-cold eyes. "Get out."

The door locks clicked open.

The cold asphalt caught my shaking body as I stumbled out.

Before I could even catch my breath, the black Maybach roared to life again, speeding away like a streak of lightning and disappearing into the night.

I knelt by the roadside, my stomach churning violently.

"Urgh-

I couldn't hold it back any longer I collapsed onto the cold ground, retching until I brought up bile, until my vision swam with black spots, until I couldn't feel anything at all

Three days later, I finally understood what Damon meant when he said, "This is just the beginning

"Miss, could *you* come home today?"

It was Lawrence, the only household staff left at Grayson family, calling
His voice was hesitant "Your brother hasn't slept in days I've tried everything, but he won't listen

My heart sank.

"I'm on my way."

+25 Points

"Aria, you're back. The butter, Lawrence, hurried down the main staircase, his face drawn with exhaustion.

"Where's my brother?"

"In his room... He's..."

Before he could finish, I took the stairs two at a time and threw open Joshua's door.

Joshua was in bed, his face flushed with fever, his lips dry and cracked. Even from the doorway, I could feel the heat radiating off him, his breathing quick and shallow.

"**What** happened?" My voice shook.

"He... he hasn't slept properly in three days, just kept trying to work. The fever hit yesterday afternoon." Lawrence's voice was thick with worry.

"The doctor was just here. He put Joshua on an IV—now we wait for it to take effect..."

I stayed by his bed, using a cool, damp cloth to wipe Joshua's face and hands over and over.

An hour later, his eyes fluttered open, hazy at first, then they found me. His cracked lips parted. "Aria... you're... back?"

"I'm back," I said, squeezing his hand and forcing a smile. "The Hawthorne project is fine. I just came to check on you."

"They... they're not giving *you* trouble?" His eyes, glassy with fever, were filled with nothing but concern for

1. me.

"No." I shook my head, *keeping* my tone light.

'Damon's being reasonable. Don't waste your energy worrying about me—just rest and get well

He seemed to believe it, or was too exhausted to question it, and his eyes closed again.

I tucked the blanket securely around him and slipped out of the room.

The moment the door clicked shut, I let the mask fall away. The calm I'd been wearing just crumbled

"What's really going on with the company?" I asked Lawrence

He hesitated, then sighed heavily

"Three days ago, our major partners started pulling out All of them Terminating contracts, willing to pay the penalties. In just a few days the projected losses are

nearing six hundred million

Six hundred million

Each word hit me like a physical blow

I didn't need to ask who was behind it

Lapter 14

25 Points

There was only one person with the power and vindictiveness to orchestrate this level of destruction.

This was his retaliation. Using Grayson Group to punish me.

I took a deep, steady breath and pulled out my phone.

My thumb hovered over his number—memorized despite everything.

I didn't dial.

Begging wouldn't work with him.

I stood up, the last warmth draining from my eyes.

"Lawrence, take care of Joshua."

"Miss, where are you going?"

"Where I have to go."

t

2

LUCK DRAW >

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha – Mindlinks 15 |

Aria's POV

"Sorry, Ms. Grayson. Mr. Hawthorne's in meetings all day. He's not available."

+25 Points

Justin stood in front of the Hawthorne Group building, blocking my way. His tone was polite, but his stance

was firm.

His eyes were as cold as the glass doors behind him.

I stared past him, as if I could see right through all those floors—to Damon, sitting there with that frozen expression on his face.

"When will he be available?"

"Mr. Hawthorne's schedule is fully booked for the next week."

The subtext was clear: Never.

I nodded. "Please tell him I'll be waiting at home tonight."

The midday sun blazed overhead.

I turned to leave—just as a pink Bentley pulled up to the curb.

The door opened, and Claudia stepped out, stunning in a crisp white Chanel dress, a delicate lunch bag in

hand.

“Aria?” She acted surprised, *one* perfectly shaped brow arching. “What are you doing here?”

The way she carried herself—so natural, so confident—anyone would’ve thought she was the real Mrs. Hawthorne.

“None of your business, Ms. Stone.” My voice was cool and distant. “Besides—”

“If anyone should be asking questions, it’s me.”

“I’m here to see my husband.” I put hard emphasis on the last word. “What brings you here, Ms. Stone?”

Claudia’s smile faltered for just a moment before smoothing back into sweetness ‘Oh, I just dropped off lunch for Damon. He’s been swamped lately and totally forgetting to eat

“How thoughtful of you, Ms Stone” I let my lips curve without any warmth, my gaze sweeping over her

“Though such devoted care from the other woman does seem to blur the lines, doesn’t it?”

Her face went pale

Before she could respond, Justin **was** already striding forward, bowing slightly to her

“Ms. Stone, Mr. Hawthorne is expecting you”

He personally escorted her past the gleaming barrier I couldn’t cross Employees in the lobby stood and

hapter

acknowledged her with respect.

+25 Pants

1 stood frozen, watching. It felt like an invisible fist had closed around my heart and was squeezing tight.

One shut out.

One welcomed in.

A bitter smile touched my lips before I turned and walked away.

Back at the Grayson house, Joshua was awake, his fever finally broken.

“Hey,” I said, sitting on the edge of his bed.

“I know about the company,” he said, his voice weak but his eyes clear. “It’s him, isn’t it? Damon.”

I stayed silent.

'I'm so sorry, Joshua. This is all my fault. I dragged Grayson into this mess.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' He tried to lift his hand to ruffle my hair like when we were kids, but didn't have the strength.

'You're a Grayson and my sister. Protecting you is my job. Whatever it takes.'

My eyes burned.

I looked down quickly. "I'll get you some water."

I practically fled the *room*.

On the landing, I forced back the tears.

Inside the room, Joshua's phone rang. He'd just picked it up when his secretary's panicked voice filled the air.

'Mr. Grayson, it's bad. Hawthorne *Group* just issued an official statement through all channels. They're cutting all ties, effective immediately.'

Joshua's heart sank. "And?"

"And our primary creditor is calling in the loan. They're demanding full repayment now. We're facing bankruptcy proceedings. The penalty clauses alone total two point eight billion

I heard the phone slip from Joshua's fingers, landing silently on the plush carpet

Two point eight billion

A mountain designed to crush us

Grayson Group was finished

I didn't stay

I drove back to the Hawthorne Estate

Faster

My gilded, ice-cold prison.

+25 Points

I waited in the vast, empty living room. From dusk until deep into the night. From the dead of night until the first gray light of dawn streaked the sky.

Damon never came home.

As the sun rose, the final, ugly truth crystallized in my mind. Waiting here, *doing* nothing, was a death sentence—for me and for what was left of my family's legacy.

I had to act.

At 9 AM, I was back in the lobby of Hawthorne Group.

"Ms. Grayson," the receptionist said, her tone dripping with barely concealed disdain.

"Mr. Hawthorne has made it clear he doesn't wish to see you. Your persistence is only

making him dislike you more.”

I spotted the high-clearance access card hanging from a lanyard around her neck.

Reserved for top-tier

executive assistants.

The moment she glanced down to shuffle some papers, I moved.

My hand shot out, snatching the card from her neck.

“Hey! What are you-!” she shrieked.

I was already spinning, sprinting toward the elevators, heading straight for the private brass-plated one. Before security could react, I swiped the card.

Beep.

The doors slid open.

I ducked inside, hitting the button for the penthouse as the doors began closing on the stunned faces behind me.

The elevator rose, smooth and silent, numbers flashing by.

Ding

The doors opened onto a world of quiet power

LOCK DRAW