

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 71

Aria's POV

Claud

After moving from the Hawthorne mansion, I took two days off work. With the weekend, that meant four days off.

I didn't go back once.

I stayed at the small apartment recently. During the day, I made Astrid help me clean it from top to bottom.

"Finally done!" Astrid flopped backward onto the sofa, completely wiped out. She turned her head to look at me while I was still cleaning the kitchen and whined, "These past few days, I've done more physical labor than a whole year of hip workouts. If I'd known it would be this exhausting, I would've ignored everything you said and hired a cleaning company anyway." She stretched out the last word dramatically. "Aria, can you please get me something to drink?"

I pulled off my gloves, turned around, and grabbed a bottle of water from the cabinet. I walked over and handed it to her.

"Here you go, Your Highness."

Astrid took the bottle, twisted the cap off, and took a big gulp. Then she looked at me with a soft smile in her eyes and said, "This feels so good."

"What?"

"Nothing." Astrid shook her head. "Aria, you don't know how long it's been since I've seen you looking this alive and happy. The way you are right now... It's really, really good."

Suddenly, the phone on the coffee table lit up and started ringing.

Astrid called out loudly, "Aria, your phone!"

I walked over, picked it up, and saw an unfamiliar number. I hesitated for a second, then answered.

"Lu-Miss Grayson."

“Justin? This number...”

When I heard Justin’s voice, I pulled the phone away from my ear and checked the screen. I wondered why he was calling from a strange number when it suddenly hit me.

The night I left the Hawthorne mansion, Astrid had grabbed my phone and blocked every single number connected to the Hawthorne family-except for Walter and the butler.

“Miss Grayson, I tried calling you earlier, but it kept going straight to voicemail.”

I asked, “Justin, what’s this about?”

“Miss Grayson, you and the Alpha aren’t officially divorced yet. But under the agreement you made before, the two of you are to divorce ten months from now-and when that day comes, both you and the Alpha

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will need to be present.”

Claim

“Both present? You mean she has to lay eyes on that heartless cad again in ten months?!” Before I could get a word out, Astrid jumped in.

From the moment she realized it was Justin on the phone, Astrid had been glued to my side, openly eavesdropping. From the look of her, if Justin said anything the least bit suspicious, she was ready to snatch the phone out of my hand and hang up on the spot.

In Ast

ves, Justin was guilty by association as Damon Hawthorne’s special assistant.

As his voice came out of nowhere, Justin paused. “Yes. In ten months, the Alpha will meet with me. I’ll be there on time.” I saw Astrid open her mouth to say something else, so I quickly clapped a hand over it.

“All so complicated?” she complained. “So Aria still has to wait ten whole months before she’s gle again? I’ve already lined up dozens of hot guys for her to choose from. This completely my plans!”

“That’s more or less how it works,” Justin replied awkwardly.

Got it. I’ll wait for your call in ten months, then. I’ll be there on time.” I saw Astrid open her mouth to say something else, so I quickly clapped a hand over it.

Lining up hot guys? i never agreed to any of that!

“If there’s nothing else, then-”

“Wait a second.”

I’d just lowered the phone to hang up when Justin suddenly cut in.

A long silence stretched on the other end.

“Justin? Is there something else?” I couldn’t help asking.

“It’s the Alpha...”

“Miss Grayson, the Alpha asked me to tell you to come collect everything you left at the house today. Otherwise... you’ll have to deal with the consequences yourself.”

“I don’t want any of it anymore. Tell Mr. Hawthorne he can do whatever he likes with it.”

I hung up and let out a long breath. The feeling of freedom was incredible. I was finally going to become

myal

nded.

How voice.

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Justin hadn’t even put the phone down yet. The awkward expression on his face still hadn’t faded.

“Miss Grayson said...” Justin hesitated.

“Tell me!” I snapped.

“She... she said she doesn’t want any of the stuff at the house anymore. She said you can handle it however you like.”

“She dares to say she doesn’t want any of that shit?!”

Clam

I swung my arm in anger and swept everything off the desk. Papers flew everywhere. Justin jumped back against the wall in fear.

“Alpha, please calm down... Luna might just be saying that out of anger...”

I planted both hands on the desk, trying hard to hold back the rage burning inside me.

“Get out! No one comes in without my order!”

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Aria’s POV

Claim

After I left Damon, I let myself enjoy the break completely. And somewhere in those quiet days, I realized

nothing: even with Damon gone from my life, the sun still rose, same as it always had.

Because it had never really been him I couldn’t live without.

The strange thing was, I kept dreaming about the blizzard.

In the dream, unlike in real life, he knew the truth-that I was the one who had saved his life. Not Claudia.

In the dream, there was no Claudia at all. Everyone was alive and whole. My father watched our wedding with his own eyes, and Damon and I built a happy little family, just the three of us.

Even in the dream, I still ached for that child. If only I hadn’t lost the baby. If only.

But every time I woke, I understood all over again: in the waking world, every single thing was the opposite.

It was only that, somewhere deep down, I wanted the happy ending too badly.

Reality asked something different of me. I needed to grow strong. I needed my revenge.

I would find the one pulling the strings-the proof of Claudia’s crimes-and I would fight for myself.

And so, on the last afternoon of my short vacation, after four days of cleaning, moving, and finally catching my breath, I went to the Grayson Group building.

I sat quietly in my brother Joshua's office, waiting for him to finish his meeting.

I sat quietly in my brother Joshua's office, waiting for him to finish his meeting. The room felt familiar yet somehow strange now. After a while, I couldn't sit still anymore. I stood up and wandered around slowly, taking everything in.

My eyes eventually landed on a photo frame carefully placed inside the display cabinet behind his large desk. I walked over, gently lifted the frame out, and cradled it in both hands. My fingertips traced softly over every face in the picture, and suddenly my eyes began to sting with tears.

In the photo, little Joshua was only five years old, standing right in the middle with a bright smile. On his left, Dad held his hand, looking proud and gentle. On his right was Mom, eight months pregnant, one hand resting lovingly on her round belly as she smiled so softly and warmly at the camera.

Even though

when

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ree people in that picture, it was the only real family photo we ever had

just after I was born. I never got the chance to feel her warm

ness.

broken. He cried every single day and drank himself to sleep until the man I remembered became a shadow of himself.

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"Why did you suddenly take this photo out?"

I'd been so lost in memories that I didn't even notice Joshua opening the door and walking in.

I turned around quickly, my eyes still blurry with tears, and looked at my brother.

Claim

“My secretary told me you were here. I was pretty surprised,” Joshua said softly. He gently took the frame from my hands, studied it for a long, quiet moment, then carefully placed it back where it belonged. “Did you suddenly miss Dad? I had a friend check on him a few days ago. They said he’s recovering well. Don’t worry too much, okay?”

“Joshua...” My voice came out shaky. “I divorced Damon Hawthorne.”

Joshua paused while hanging his suit jacket on the coat rack. He turned to look at me, his expression shifting. After a moment, he asked, “So you moved out? Where are you staying now? Should I arrange some bodyguards for you? I’d feel a lot better knowing someone’s watching over you.”

“I’m really fine. I don’t need bodyguards.”

“I came here today because I wanted to tell you something important,” I continued. “I suspect Claudia Stone. Everything she’s done... it’s not just simple jealousy toward me. There’s something bigger going on.

She...”

Joshua’s face grew serious as he looked at me, waiting for me to continue.

“If it was really like Claudia claimed-just because she hated Dad for demanding repayment and ruining her chance to marry Damon-then two years ago, she clearly had other options, right? She didn’t have to do all this.”

“Have you told Dad about any of these suspicions?” Joshua asked, running his hand through his hair as he thought.

“When Dad first got medical parole, I mentioned it briefly. But at that time, I still didn’t know Claudia was behind everything. Dad thought about it for a long time but couldn’t figure out who it might be or what their real purpose was.” I pressed my lips together, feeling helpless.

“I was planning to visit Dad again soon. Maybe then I could finally understand what Claudia’s real motive is. But Noah told me that recently, a prisoner on medical parole tried to escape, so security’s been tightened significantly. Even with his work ID, he can’t come and go freely anymore. I’d rather not get him in trouble because of me.”

Joshua stayed quiet for a moment, resting his palm against his forehead. “I don’t remember Claudia Stone

only recall she used to be your friend back then. Logically speaking, if she had any grudge, it

inst you. Why would she involve Dad at all?”

ut I can't figure out either. The person she's really targeting isn't me... it's Dad."

a knock at the door.

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Aria's POV

"Mr. Grayson, Miss Grayson.

The person who knocked and entered was a young woman carrying lunch boxes. She kept her head down the entire time, looking nervous and shy.

"You-"

I was about to ask who she was when my eyes caught the name on the ID badge pinned to her chest- Jenny Torrie.

That name sounded familiar, but I couldn't remember where I'd heard it before.

I snapped out of it and turned to look at Joshua. He was staring at her without blinking.

There was something off about the way Joshua was looking at her.

"So... who is Miss Torrie?" I couldn't help asking.

"She..." Joshua's answer came slowly, like he had to think first.

"Miss Grayson, I'm Shawn's intern. My name is Jenny Torrie," the woman explained briefly.

"Shawn's intern?" I turned to look at Joshua, who was picking up his coffee from the desk.

He tried to act casual as he explained, "Sometimes I have business dinners, and it's not convenient to bring Shawn. Jenny's pretty capable, so I had Shawn train her to see how it goes."

I smiled and blinked at Joshua a few times. "Oh, really?"

“If you like her, you can have her as your assistant. Come on, let’s eat first.” Joshua pushed one of the lunch boxes toward me.

I took the box. When I saw Jenny turning to leave, I called out to her, “Miss Torrie, you haven’t eaten yet, right? Why don’t you stay and eat with us? There’s way too much food for just me and my brother.”

“I...” Jenny looked surprised. She glanced at Joshua instinctively.

“Just stay and eat,” Joshua said.

Jenny hesitated for a long moment before finally nodding and saying softly, “Thank you, Mr. Grayson. Thank you, Miss Grayson.”

Halfway through the meal, Shawn knocked and walked in. When he saw Jenny eating with us, his face flashed with surprise, but he quickly hid it. He reminded Joshua,

“Mr. Grayson, the video meeting with SK Group starts in five minutes.”

Joshua nodded and stood up to leave.

Jenny stood up right after him.

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“No need to follow me. Come over after you finish,” Joshua said, glancing at her. He nodded at me, then picked up his jacket and left with Shawn.

Jenny remained standing there, staring at Joshua’s back as he walked away. She was so lost in thought that she didn’t even notice when I walked over to her side.

Jenny, what do you think of my brother?”

Jenny jumped in surprise and took several steps back. She looked up with an awkward smile and said,

Miss Grayson, I... I think Mr. Grayson is really nice. He’s very patient and kind with us interns.”

I watched her carefully. Ever since she’d seen me, it felt like she’d been avoiding my eyes on purpose. Or was I just imagining it?

“Jenny, do we know each other? When I first saw you, I felt like you looked familiar.”

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Jenny's head shot up in shock, then she quickly composed herself. "No, we don't know each other. I only started my internship here last month. This is the first time I've met you, Miss Grayson. You must be thinking of someone else."

"Okay... maybe I was wrong. Come on, sit down and finish eating."

After saying that, I turned around and went back to my seat.

"Oh, by the way, you said my brother is really nice to you interns? Does the company hire a lot of interns every year? I don't remember hearing about interns before," I asked casually while glancing back at her.

"Oh, didn't you know, Miss Grayson? Grayson Group gives five internship spots to Pack University every year, regardless of major. Even though Grayson Group hasn't grown as fast as some other big companies, it's still one of the top 100 groups. Plus, since it doesn't limit the major, it still attracts quite a few soon-to-be graduates like us every year."

"No limit on major?" My hand holding the coffee cup froze halfway to my lips.

"Yeah, but it wasn't always like that. My senior told me that two or three years ago, even though they said there was no limit on major, they only took architecture students. It was supposedly..." Jenny paused and swallowed the bite of burger in her mouth, "to prepare for that project back then."

Could she be talking about the same project that caused Grayson Group to crash and landed Dad in jail?

I kept thinking: Two or three years ago... Pack University... interns... architecture department...

I picked up my phone and sent Joshua a text:

Do you

interns from the past five years? I need a copy.

Vote

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Aria's POV

That same night, Joshua sent me the list of interns from the past five years at Grayson Group.

I sat in front of my laptop, staring at the search results on the screen. I kept searching over and over again.

But no matter how many times I tried, the result was always the same:

[No results found for 'Claudia Stone'.]

I pressed my fingers hard against my throbbing temples.

"Want some juice?" Astrid handed me a glass of orange juice. She glanced at the screen and asked, "Aria, do you think Claudia Stone actually interned at Grayson Group?"

I took the glass and nodded slowly. "I'm not sure. I just could never figure out how Claudia got connected to my dad. Today, when I went to see my brother and heard that intern talking about it, I finally learned that Grayson Group recruits interns from Pack University every year."

"So I started wondering-could Claudia have interned there too? If I could confirm that, I might find out what she did during her internship. Maybe then I'd understand why she wanted to destroy my dad so badly."

"But her name isn't on the list at all," I said quietly. "Which probably means my guess was wrong."

"Interns aren't full-time employees. When there are tons of people coming and going, it's easy for HR to miss registering someone on time. I've heard stories from seniors about companies forgetting to add interns to the official list. Plus, Grayson Group is huge-over ten thousand employees. People are joining and leaving every day. The HR team isn't that big, and interns probably aren't their top priority. So mistakes like this could totally happen, right?" Astrid said seriously.

"When you put it that way, I think I should dig deeper." My eyes widened.

I stared at the list, then clicked on the file's update history.

"My dad has always been really strict about keeping personnel records. The chance of careless mistakes is pretty low."

I tilted the screen a little toward Astrid. “But I remember two years ago, right after Dad went to prison, some angry victims stormed into the office and trashed several computers. A lot of files weren’t backed up and got lost.”

Astrid walked over, placed one hand on the edge of the desk, and used the other to scroll with the mouse. She kept scrolling down through the update dates. She finally stopped on October 13th, two years ago.

That was the date this intern list was rebuilt.

“Which means the original file was lost during that chaos two years ago,” I said.

“So Claudia’s information might have been lost back then?” Astrid frowned. “But five years ago, you and Claudia already had a huge falling out. There’s no reason she would still come to Grayson Group for an

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internship, right?”

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“Actually... there could be a reason.” I paused for a long moment before continuing. “Two years ago, before everything blew up, Grayson Group was the top company in the architecture industry. Any architecture student would kill to intern there and get that experience on their resume. If interning at Grayson could help her win the Outstanding Graduate award, knowing her personality...”

Astrid’s eyes lit up. She immediately caught on and continued my thought. “Knowing her personality, she definitely wouldn’t pass up a chance like that, And she probably knew you wouldn’t go around telling people that you two had fallen out. So even if she was interning at Grayson Group, as long as you didn’t know about it, no one would give her a hard time.”

She jumped up from the chair excitedly. “I think that possibility is really high!”

But then her brows quickly furrowed again. “The problem is, the original list is gone, and Grayson Group has had so much staff turnover these past two years. She was just some intern. Finding proof that she once worked there is going to be really hard. If we can’t find anything, this lead might be dead.”

“No, we can’t let this lead die!” I said, my voice rising with emotion. “As long as we don’t know Claudia’s real motive, my dad stays in danger for one more day!”

Just then, my phone screen lit up with a “ding.”

It was a message from Jolly, telling me to get ready for a business trip tomorrow afternoon.

Astrid caught a glimpse of the text and groaned. “Seriously? They’re sending you a business trip notice this late? Do you really have to go? And for half a month? What about your competition?”

I finished replying to Jolly and said, “It’s a Hawthorne Group project. I’m the lead designer, so I have to go. I already have some ideas for the competition draft. I’ll just find time during the trip to finish it. It should be fine.”

“Well... okay,” Astrid sighed.

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Aria’s POV

Claim

“Stop staring at the screen already. You’ve been glued to that computer all night. You’re more focused than when you used to study for finals in high school...” Astrid said as she reached over and gently closed my laptop.

Suddenly, it felt like something slammed hard into my brain.

“Say that again,” I grabbed Astrid’s arm tightly.

“Huh?”

Astrid looked confused but repeated herself, “I said stop looking at it. You’ve been staring at the computer

all night. You’re more focused than when you used to study for finals in high school...”

“High school... how did I forget about that!” I suddenly realized, my eyes widening.

“I know exactly where else we can check to see if Claudia’s name is really on that intern list.”

Astrid paused, then said uncertainly, “The... school?”

“Yes! I remember one of the professors in our department once mentioning that the school keeps archived copies of the Outstanding Graduate Internship Handbooks from every year.”

When she heard that, Astrid jumped up from her seat right away. “Oh, right! I remember now. And Claudia was one of the outstanding graduates that year. Her internship handbook must be stored in the school archives. If we can get our hands on hers, we’ll finally know for sure whether she interned at Grayson Group or not.”

“Astrid, I have to go on this business trip soon, so we can’t waste any time on this. I’m probably going to have to ask you to get the handbook for me.” I put both hands on her shoulders and looked at her seriously.

Astrid’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “You just focus on your trip and don’t worry about anything. Leave this whole thing to me. I’ll find out everything for you!”

She clenched her fists and pumped them in the air a couple of times. “And it better not turn out that Claudia Stone is hiding some dirty secret!”

“Regardless of what we find, Astrid, you have to promise me you’ll stay safe. Be careful, okay?” I was still a little worried. Claudia had already done terrible things to protect her secret. If she found out Astrid was investigating her, who knows what she might try to do?

“Alright, alright, don’t worry so much! Now come play some games with me. You’re leaving tomorrow for two weeks. No one’s going to help me beat these levels while you’re gone.”

Damon’s POV

I drank quite a lot of wine tonight. Once I got in the car, the alcohol really hit me hard. My temples were

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pounding, and my entire head felt dizzy and heavy.

Justin sat beside me and reported quietly, “Alpha, Miss Stone has already gone home.”

Clas

“Hmm... anything else?” Maybe it was the wine, but my eyes felt sore and swollen. I rubbed my temples slowly and asked in a tired voice.

Justin hesitated for a second, then said, “Alpha, there’s one more thing... It’s about Miss Stone.”

“What is it?”

“When our people were contacting the media to take down the photos of you and Miss Stone from tonight, we found out that those photos got pushed to the front page of i*****: because... because...”

“Because what!?” I snapped impatiently.

“Because Miss Stone was the one who arranged it behind the scenes. Those paparazzi shouldn’t have known which restaurant you two were eating at. And those photos were obviously staged. So... do you still want us to send those media outlets legal letters about privacy violations?” Justin asked carefully.

Before I could answer, my phone suddenly rang.

The screen lit up with “Claudia.” I glanced at it and handed the phone straight to Justin.

“I’m sorry, Miss Stone. Alpha had to leave suddenly for an urgent matter.”

Claudia’s voice came through the phone, sounding annoyed and impatient. “That’s impossible, Justin. Stop messing around! Today is my birthday. No matter how busy Damon is, he would never miss it. Tell me where he is right now!”

“Miss Stone,” Justin tried to interrupt her gently.

“Alpha asked me to wish you a happy birthday. He already ordered a special gift and a cake for you...” Justin said, glancing at me nervously.

Suddenly, the other end went completely quiet. Then there was the loud crashing sound of something falling-probably the cake hitting the floor. Justin carefully hung up and handed the phone back to me.

I frowned and tossed it aside.

I was in no mood to coddle Claudia. My head was full of nothing but Aria.

That mate of mine-mine, and mine alone-who had actually dared to talk about separating.

The look on her face when she walked away from me. So light. So free. So happy.

What was I to her? As Alpha of the Hawthorne family, was I nothing more than a tool she used to keep her own family safe?

She had once smiled at that Beta doctor-a soft, gentle smile.

Smiles. Happiness. Joy. All those bright, living things-I had never once seen them in her eyes. Never for

That man had put a light in her eyes.

She smiled at Noah. She never smiled at me.

What she gave me was lies. Deception. Things kept hidden. Hatred.

You're jealous, Rhein drawled:

I'm not jealous. I hate her.

She's our mate. You have no right to hate her-

Shut up. I cut him off, irritated.

Claim

But Rhein wasn't finished. You'd better bring our mate home, I miss Lydia. I don't want to be apart from her.

I shut him out completely.

Just then, Justin drew out a file on Noah and held it toward me in both hands.

"Alpha, I've gone through Noah's records carefully. As you ordered, I sent people to look into his birthplace, his schools, his father's hometown." He paused. "This Noah-his file is flawless."

I took it and flipped through it without much care.

It was true. Noah's records were perfect. Not a single crack, not one flaw to be found.

But when a man's history is too perfect, that is exactly the thing that isn't normal.

I read it again, slower this time, refusing to let a single detail slip past me.

And there it was. Noah's family, the Hargreaveses, had once been bound by marriage to the former Alpha of the Whitemoon Pack.

A man's history can be forged-but most lies are built on a foundation of truth.

Whitemoon. Lately they'd been fighting us, hard, over the land at the port.

And this Noah had appeared in Aria's life-and mine-out of nowhere.

“Dig into it,” I said. “I want to know exactly what ties this Noah to the Whitemoon Pack.”

Justin gave a short nod.

Before long, the car rolled to a stop. Justin looked out the window. “Alpha, we’ve arrived at Green Oak.”

The car stopped. Justin looked out the window and said, “Alpha, we’ve arrived at Green Oak.”

I looked up. It was completely dark outside, with almost no lights on.

“What are we doing here?” I asked, still staring out the window.

“You asked to come here right after you got in the car,” Justin explained. “Isn’t this where Miss Grayson and her friend are staying?”

I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose. “It’s already dark, and there are no lights on in the rooms. Let’s go.”

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Alpha, that looks like Luna and her friend!” Justin suddenly said excitedly, pointing outside.

I lifted my eyes and unconsciously looked in the direction he was pointing.

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Aria’s POV

Claim

“Aria, you’re amazing! There’s no way I would’ve beaten that last level without you. I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight if we hadn’t finished,” Astrid said, pulling a bag of beef jerky out of the shopping bag. She tore it open and started munching away.

“If i’d known beating the game meant you’d drag me to the store to celebrate with snacks, I wouldn’t have tried so hard,” I said with a sigh.

I was supposed to leave for a work trip tomorrow, so I’d only agreed to help Astrid finish the game quickly so we could both get to bed early.

But she got so excited after we won that she insisted we check out the new supermarket nearby. She called it our “reward.”

“You’re going to be gone for two weeks. I’m just getting you prepared.”

I looked at the shopping bags stuffed to the brim. “Astrid, I’m going for work, not on vacation.”

“I know, but that project site you’re going to is in the middle of nowhere. Super remote, hard to get around. There’s probably tons of stuff you can’t buy there. So this is just in case. You have to take it-ahh!” Astrid said.

Suddenly, a dark shape shot out of the bushes, straight toward Astrid.

Astrid screamed and stumbled backward. The beef jerky fell right out of her hand.

The “dark shape” stopped in front of the jerky, sniffed it carefully, then grabbed it in its mouth and darted back into the bushes.

Seeing how pale Astrid’s face was, I set down my bag and patted her back gently. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Just a little stray cat.”

Astrid was still shaken. Why is there a stray cat here?”

“It’s been getting colder. Some kittens crawl into car engines to keep warm. Looking at how small it is, it’s probably only a few weeks old. Must’ve hitched a ride with someone’s car,” I said, turning to look. The little cat had emerged from the bushes again and was boldly putting its front paws on the shopping bag on the ground, peeking inside.

Astrid hopped behind me and peeked out at the kitten. “It’s actually kind of cute. All black-like it would just disappear if it hid in a dark corner,”

The kitten was tiny. The full shopping bag looked enormous next to it. It struggled to keep its paws on the bag but couldn’t quite climb inside to find food.

I thought it was adorable and was about to help it out. But as soon as I reached out, the kitten got spooked, jumped back, and darted into the bushes.

Astrid snorted with laughter. “One second it’s brave enough to steal my jerky and raid our bags, the next it’s so jumpy that just you moving makes it freak out and hide.”

Claim

“Probably been hungry for a long time. Kittens this young are usually with their mom. If it’s out looking for food on its own, either it got separated from her, or... the mom’s already gone.” I crouched down, pulled a few packs of jerky from the bag, and broke them into small pieces on the ground.

Astrid crouched next to me and glanced toward the bushes.

The kitten was huddled at the very edge, its bright green eyes like glass marbles, staring at the jerky, but it wouldn’t come out.

Astrid pushed the jerky a little closer, but the kitten just backed up further.

“Why won’t it eat now?”

I pulled out a pack of wipes to clean my hands and picked up the shopping bag. “Let’s go. It’s on guard now. It won’t come out while we’re still here.”

Astrid had never fed strays before, so she just stood up. “Aria, how do you know all this? Wait-I remember you got scratched by a cat when you were little. You used to be terrified of them.”

“Yeah, I was scared for a while. Pretty embarrassing for a werewolf to be afraid of a cat. But I’m not anymore,” I said.

Astrid didn’t push it. She looked back over her shoulder and said happily, “Aria, look! It’s actually eating the jerky now.”

I followed her gaze. The kitten was crouched there, completely focused on its meal.

The truth is, I lied to Astrid. I didn’t forget that memory. I’ve always hated pain, so I remember every single thing that ever hurt me.

The real reason I’m not scared of cats anymore? Damon Hawthorne.

After we got married, I made him a special lunch, all excited, and brought it to his office.

I thought he’d be happy.

Instead, Damon threw the whole thing in the trash right in front of me. He laughed coldly and said, “The stuff you make is just like you-it makes me want to throw up.”

That was the first time I felt him crush my pride completely.

I wasn't going to leave my dignity there for him to keep trampling on, so later I went back and retrieved the lunch he'd thrown away.

That day, I walked home by myself.

Right before I got home, I noticed a stray cat following me.

Back then I was still scared of cats, but when I stopped, this one just sat quietly a little ways away, staring at the lunch in my hand and meowing softly.

I realized it wanted food. I hesitated, then opened the lunchbox, set it on the ground, and walked away.

After that, the cat seemed to remember me. Every time I worked up the courage to bring Damon food- and every time he humiliated me for it-that cat would show up and follow me, not too close, not too far,

like it was silently comforting me

Eventually, I just wasn't scared of it anymore.

The elevator reaches the first floor

I pushed the thoughts away and pulled Astrid inside.

Damon's POV

The kitten was still in the same spot, chewing the jerky like it was the best thing ever, purring with satisfaction. It had no idea I was there. I quietly reached down and scruffed it from behind.

"Mew!"

The kitten instantly curled up its legs and yowled. A piece of jerky fell out of its mouth, and its tiny green eyes stared at me nervously.

I carried it toward my car.

Justin got out of the car, staring at the little black cat in my hand like he'd seen a ghost. "Boss, I thought you got out to look for Lu..."

He paused, then said carefully, "That stray's pretty dirty. And with you being such a germaphobe..." He pulled out a tissue and held it out to me.

"Get it cleaned up," I said, tossing him the kitten.

Justin scrambled to catch it. “After it’s clean, should take it to a shelter or...?”

I glanced at the kitten in his hands. Smart little thing. It must’ve figured out it couldn’t escape, so it just went limp and stopped fighting.

I hadn’t intended to pick up this cat. I was just curious why Aria was crouched there for so long. She’s a werewolf who’s scared of cats.

“Um... take it to a shelter,” I told Justin,

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Aria’s POV

My phone buzzed twice on the desk. I picked it up. Astrid had texted.

“The forecast says it’s going to pour tomorrow. Stay safe!”

I sent back a cat emoji.

The next afternoon.

Claim

Peggy, my coworker sitting next to me, double-checked the last batch of data and stretched. “Finally done! Aria, we’re all going out to eat downtown to celebrate. You in? We’ll probably walk around after.”

“Nah, I think I’ll head over to Sector F instead,” I said, packing my tablet into my backpack.

“Sector F? The area they want to turn into that hot spring villa zone?” Peggy looked confused. “I thought some villagers there still refuse to move, so they never even started the blueprints. What are you going there for?”

“I want to survey the land ahead of time. That way, when the plans do get drawn up, I won’t have to come back out here. The villagers will come around eventually.” I kept packing as I talked.

Peggy straightened up. “True. In the middle of nowhere like this, the fewer trips, the better. Okay, I’ll come with you. You’ll need a hand.”

“No, I’ll be quick. You’ve been saying all week you wanted to go downtown, right? We head back tomorrow. Go with them while you have the chance.” By now I had my backpack on, ready to go.

Peggy hesitated. “Then I’ll bring you back something good to eat.”

“Deal.”

Sector F was quite a walk from the main office-about half an hour. Luckily, they’d already covered the dirt road with gravel to make transport easier later, so it wasn’t too bad.

BOOM. Thunder cracked right overhead.

I looked up at the sky. Dark and heavy clouds, like it could start pouring any second.

Astrid had said it would rain last night, but it’d been sunny all day. I thought the forecast was wrong.

But now, almost at Sector F, I thought for a second and decided to keep going. Worst case, I’d ask a villager to let me stay at their place for the night and head back in the morning.

I pulled out my phone, texted Peggy my plan, opened my umbrella, and kept walking down the gravel path deeper into the village.

What I didn’t expect was for the rain to keep getting heavier. It poured all night long, nonstop. And then a landslide blocked the only road out completely.

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Damon’s POV

The study door was cracked open. A dark shape peeked around the edge, checked the room carefully, then crept inside.

I was sitting behind my desk. I heard the noise and looked over. That stray kitten I’d picked up the other day had jumped onto my desk like it owned the place. It curled up quietly on my right side, its round little eyes staring at me.

Justin had been about to take it to the shelter when I stopped him.

out!” I snapped, glaring at it.

kitten didn’t seem to understand. It just shifted to a more comfortable position and kept staring at me, meowing.

ached out to grab it by the scruff.

ut the little stray must've thought I wanted to pet it, because it leaned in and rubbed against my palm.

felt the warm, fuzzy softness against my hand and, for some reason, stopped. An image flashed through my head: Aria crouched on the ground, feeding this same cat.

I'd never seen her like that.

I'd always thought Aria Grayson was heartless. Scheming, selfish, manipulative-the whole package. The only reason I stayed and watched that night was to see if she'd feed the cat something rotten.

If she had, I wouldn't have been surprised.

Maybe it was because she signed the divorce papers so easily. Or because I couldn't forget her saying, word for word, "Because I didn't want that baby." I wanted to prove, in every way possible, that Aria was fake-nice on the outside, rotten on the inside. That my judgment of her was right.

But the cat turned out fine. Like our relationship-it wasn't that bad at first. Back before all her lies got exposed, I gave her chances. She just kept wasting them.

"Mew!" The kitten suddenly bit the back of my hand.

I pulled my hand back fast. The cat jumped off the desk and ran out of the study without looking back.

I laughed bitterly, "You're just like her."

Just then, Justin called. "Alpha, there's been an incident at the Seattle project base."

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Chapter

Damon's POV

Seattle, main office area of the project base.

The project team had gotten word early and was waiting at the entrance. The head engineer, Dan Miller, hurried over with an umbrella.

“Mr. Hawthorne, glad you could make it.”

“Mr. Miller, let’s go straight to the meeting room. Mr. Hawthorne needs a full report on the damage, Justin told him.

Dan nodded quickly and gestured for us to follow. “Mr. Hawthorne, the meeting room is this way. The person in charge of each sector is already inside.”

“We made some preparations beforehand, so the damage in Sector A and the newly started Sector B isn’t too bad. Just some equipment that shorted out from water. Sectors C and F had landslides. In Sector C, the landslide hit the worker rest area-five workers got hurt. They’re still in the hospital.” Dan said it all in one breath, then swallowed nervously and looked at me. “That’s the situation so far, Mr. Hawthorne.”

“Justin, check on those five workers. Get them the best medical team. Also, pause all construction. Once the main office’s project department tallies up all the damage, we’ll handle it together,” I ordered.

BOOM. More thunder and lightning.

Suddenly, my chest ached for no reason. Like something important had been ripped out of me. A wave of dizziness and panic hit.

I pressed my hand over my heart. Before I could figure out what was going on, someone burst in from outside.

“Mr. Hawthorne!”

Dan looked at the woman who’d just run in, panicked. “Miss Hopkins, what are you doing here? I told you-

“Don’t touch me!” The woman shoved him off hard. “Mr. Hawthorne, thank God you’re here. Dan lied to cover his own ass!”

Dan grabbed her arm and snapped, “Miss Hopkins, I told you I won’t give in to your ridiculous demands. Now you’re pissed and trying to frame me?”

The woman’s eyes were blazing with anger. Her voice cracked. “I’m not framing anyone!”

Dan turned to me with a sincere look. “Mr. Hawthorne, this is Peggy Hopkins, a designer from Skydreams Design Firm. Ever since she got here, she’s refused to cooperate. She hinted that she’d only help if I paid her off. Of course I said no. Now she’s bitter and making up lies.”

“That’s not true! You’re such a liar!” She tried to yank her arm free. “You didn’t prepare anything! Last night, when you saw the rain was getting out of control, you made the

workers go out in the storm to protect the equipment-and then the landslide happened! Dozens of workers got seriously hurt! And you've been

using your position as head engineer to bully everyone into keeping quiet so you wouldn't get in trouble

"That's not how it happened, Mr. Hawthorne-let me explain

But I wasn't interested in file explanation. 4 looked at Peggy Hopkins. You're from Skydreams?

Peggy broke free from Dan and ran up to me, desperate. "Yes, I'm a Skydreams designer. Mr. Hawthorne. every word I'm saying is true. Dan hid the real number of injured workers. He's keeping them in the farthest container with just two medics watching them! If you don't believe me, go see for yourself?

"Justin." I ordered.

Justin got it right away. "I'll send someone to check now."

Dan's face went gray. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He stumbled back two steps before he could steady himself.

Peggy saw that I believed her and let out a breath. "Mr. Hawthorne, there's one more thing"

She clenched her hands. "Skydreams actually sent more than one designer. The lead designer on this project-yesterday afternoon, she went alone to the village in Sector F to survey the land. But now the road to Sector F is completely blocked by a landslide. I haven't been able to reach her. I'm scared she might be in danger. Can you... can you do something?"

I coldly told Justin, "Contact search and rescue. See if there's any way in."

"Yes, Alpha." Justin turned to grab the phone. As he dialed, he asked Peggy, "What's your coworker's name?"

"Aria Grayson."

"What did you just say?" My eyes locked onto her.

"Alpha, I just called rescue. They said with multiple landslides and the rain still coming down, going in on foot is really dangerous-there could be more slides. The best option is a helicopter, Justin reported, frowning.

"How long for the helicopter?"

Justin thought for a second. “At least two hours to get here. And... even if it gets here, the terrain in there makes landing really hard.”

I looked out the window at the pouring rain. I didn’t know if I was coldhearted-honestly, other people’s lives and deaths never felt like my problem.

But when Peggy said “Aria Grayson,” my chest tightened for no reason. I was actually worried about her safety... An image flashed through my head: that little stray cat that liked to curl up on the corner of my desk. If she died, nobody would feed that cat.

Yeah. That was it.

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Aria’s POV

The rain kept pouring down, and the landslide showed no signs of stopping. Everyone in the village was rushing to evacuate to the temporary shelter halfway up the mountain.

The mountain path was rough and slippery. I stayed behind a group of elderly villagers and small children, making sure no one got left behind.

Suddenly, several rocks came tumbling down with the rushing water. We all broke into a run. When I saw the rocks were about to hit us, I lunged forward and shielded little Cherry, who was walking right in front of me. A jagged piece of stone slammed into my left calf. My leg swelled up almost instantly. Every step felt like someone was driving a nail straight into my bone.

The villagers quickly gathered around me. “Miss, are you okay? Can you still walk?”

I told them I was fine and could keep going.

But honestly, my body was reaching its breaking point. The sharp pain made me wonder if my leg was actually broken.

I don’t know how long we walked, but we finally made it to the temporary shelter halfway up the mountain before complete darkness fell.

The shelter was pretty basic-an old hunting rest stop the villagers had used years ago. Since it hadn’t been maintained in forever, the roof was leaking badly. Rainwater dripped steadily inside, and the whole place reeked of dampness and mold.

“How’s your leg? Thank you so much for saving me back there,” Cherry said, coming over to stand beside me with worry written all over her face.

“It’s nothing,” I forced a smile despite the throbbing pain. “Cherry, go check on your grandma and make sure she made it here safely. She couldn’t see you the whole way up and must be worried sick.”

Cherry still looked hesitant. “But you-”

“I’m staying right here. I’m not going anywhere.” I gingerly touched my calf, which had swollen so much I couldn’t even roll my pant leg down. At this point, even if I wanted to walk, I probably couldn’t.

I moved to a corner, found a slightly more comfortable position for my injured leg, and pulled out my phone.

The screen glowed faintly in the dim shelter. In the top right corner, the signal bar flickered with one weak bar.

There’s a signal! I need to call for help....

I opened my contacts, but the next second, the signal disappeared again.

I raised the phone higher. The weak signal came back, but it kept cutting in and out-totally unreliable.

My phone had been on for over twenty-four hours straight, and the battery was almost dead. I leaned

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against the wall, slowly get to my feet, and limped outside.

† needed to find higher ground with better reception...

Whether it was the cold, rainy night or just my imagination, the silence around me felt absolutely terrifying. The higher I climbed, the more treacherous the path became. One wrong step and I could slip and fall.

But I forced myself to stay focused. Every few yards, I stopped to check my phone for a signal.

I don’t know how far I walked. The pain in my leg grew sharper and sharper. I grabbed a sturdy branch from the side of the path to use as a makeshift crutch. After what felt like an eternity, I finally got a stable signal.

I immediately dialed Peggy's number. It barely rang once before she picked up.

"Aria! Are you okay? I heard there are landslides everywhere. Are you safe? I couldn't reach you, and I was terrified something happened! I-" Peggy's voice sounded extra loud in the dead silence of the night.

"Peggy, I'm fine." I took a deep breath and tried to make my voice sound as normal as possible.

"Thank God you're okay. Listen, do you know a Mr. Hawthorne? He seemed really worried about you. He found out you were in the village and drove straight there this afternoon-didn't even wait for the helicopter. I think he's out there looking for you."

Damon? That doesn't make sense.

The project is important, but not important enough to require Damon Hawthorne's personal attention. Besides... there's no way Damon would be worried about me. The Hawthorne family has more than one person with that last name.

"Are you talking about Caleb, the younger Mr. Hawthorne?" I asked.

Before Peggy could answer, my phone vibrated with a low battery warning.

No time left!

I pushed everything else out of my mind and spoke as quickly as possible. "Peggy, listen carefully. There are landslides all over the village, and the water levels are rising fast. I helped organize the villagers and got everyone to a temporary shelter on the mountain. Most of them are elderly people and children. It happened so suddenly that they didn't bring any food or extra clothes. Please contact the rescue team as soon as possible-"

Before I could finish, the screen went black. The phone died completely. No matter how many times I pressed the power button, it wouldn't turn back on.

I had no idea if Peggy had heard everything I said.

I turned around to head back to the shelter. Suddenly, I heard rustling in the bushes nearby. My heart jumped into my throat as I remembered what one of the village elders had warned me earlier:

"There are snakes in these mountains. When it rains, they come out hunting for food. Everyone needs to be extra careful going up the mountain."

I gripped the branch tighter and froze. I held my breath and didn't dare move.

The Inve bushes suddenly shook violently. I panicked and hurled the branch toward the sound, then spun around to run back down the path. But in my rush, I didn't notice the loose rock under my foot. I stepped on it wrong, slipped hard, and completely lost my balance. There was no time to catch myself.

Suddenly, a strong hand shot out and grabbed my arm, yanking me back from the edge.

My body crashed into a broad, solid chest.

At the same time, a clean, woody scent filled my nose.

Mate! Lydia suddenly perked up excitedly in my head.

In my panic, I looked up. The arm holding me was strong and reassuringly warm.

"Da... Damon..." My voice came out hoarse and still shaking with fear.

Damon looked do throat moved lik

his arms.

d to say something, but instead he just let go, bent down, and swept me up into

uldn't see each other again for nine months. Or was it ten?

I'd thought

I couldn

The e

Be

voice didn't matter to me.

of it-we could never reconcile. Not ever.

dhe come to save me?

t afraid of the headlines, I told myself. The villagers were talking about it earlier-a s could easily make the news.

ely, my arms wrapped around his neck. Tension radiated off his whole body, dark and read.

ent, everything felt completely surreal. Peggy's words from the phone call echoed in my ears.

hed really worried about you... He drove straight there... he's probably looking for you.

Mr. Hawthorne she was talking about really was Damon Hawthorne.

en everything went black.

DRAW >

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 80

Aria's POV

Middle of the night.

Cart

I had a nightmare-I was falling down the mountain. When I woke up with a start, a black suit jacket slid off my body.

I froze, picked up the jacket, and touched the embroidery on the inner collar. It was the letter K.

This was Damon's jacket.

My head felt heavy. I raised my hand to rub my forehead, then looked toward the doorway. That's when I noticed someone standing outside.

The rain had stopped.

Moonlight broke through the clouds and fell on the man, giving him a soft, faint glow. He looked a little less cold and unapproachable than usual.

I tried to push myself up with both hands, but the moment I moved, a sharp pain shot through my calf- even worse than before I fell asleep!

I hissed in pain, gritted my teeth, and looked down at my left leg. Someone had put medicine on it...

I glanced at Damon's back, then forced myself to stand. Step by step, I limped toward him.

Damon heard the movement and turned around. His face was still icy cold. When he saw it was me, his brows furrowed slightly.

I held out the jacket and said softly, "Thank you."

Damon looked down at it. "If you don't need it, just throw it away. I find anything you've touched disgusting."

My fingers tightened on the jacket. The words I wanted to say got stuck in my throat. "Fine."

I crumpled the jacket into a ball and threw it down the mountain.

Damon's eyes darkened. "Aria, you-!"

I stood there staring at him without backing down. For a few seconds, Damon looked stunned. Then his expression turned cold again, and he said mockingly,

"Looks like after leave me, you've gotten a lot braver."

"Hmph," I let out a cold laugh. "I've always been brave. You just think I've changed because I'm tired of pretending."

Damon's face completely darkened. His Alpha pressure started radiating outward. I thought about it—arguing with him here wouldn't help anything. To ease the tension, I said "thank you" again.

"Aria, don't tell me you actually thought I came here because of you?" Damon narrowed his eyes.

I turned to look at him, but didn't answer.

I came here because the villagers refused to move, which delayed the development of Sector F. After this heavy rain, they'll realize how stupid their decision was and take the money to leave as soon as possible."

After hearing that, I understood.

Damon didn't come here to truly help the villagers. Instead, he wanted them to see what would happen without him and the Hawthorne Group. He wanted them to watch their village get destroyed-maybe even lose their lives-so they would feel grateful to him and agree to move quickly.

What a perfect "savior."

Turns out... I was overthinking things again.

I couldn't help laughing softly. "Damon, you always call me hypocritical. Actually... you're pretty hypocritical yourself."

Damon's POV

I got out of the car and started walking up the mountain when I ran into Cherry. She was a village girl. The last time Justin and I came to check on the project, she and her grandma had shown us the way.

"Please come help!"

Cherry saw me and hurried over, grabbing my sleeve. "Aria saved me earlier and hurt her leg. But now we can't wake her up. Grandma says she has a high fever. There's no fever medicine up here. Grandma says we can't let her keep burning like this, or she might pass out."

I reached out and touched Aria's forehead. It was still burning hot.

I looked down at her slightly furrowed brows and suddenly remembered what Justin had said in the car: "Even though the Grayson family isn't what it used to be, Miss Aria was still raised like a princess, spoiled and protected. Yet she went door to door in the pouring rain, patiently trying to convince the villagers."

And... Rhein muttered in my head, Didn't she used to be terrified of pain? How could she risk herself

save someone...

None of this sounded like the Aria I knew.

"Aria, what are you trying to scheme this time?" I stared at her and muttered to myself.

She looked uncomfortable and whispered weakly, "Cold..."

to

"What did you say?" I didn't catch it clearly. She moved her lips again. I leaned closer. Finally, I heard it.

She said, "So cold."

I touched her wrist. Her temperature was still rising fast.

have to save her! Rhein started getting anxious.

front of my shirt. I looked at her trembling body and the way she was clutching my one of my shirt and pulled her against my chest to warm her up.

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Leould clearly feel Aria pressing closer to me in my arms. Her hands instinctively wrapped around me, seeking more warmth.

After a long time, her temperature finally stopped rising. She stopped saying she was cold. She just curled up in my arms and fell into a deep sleep.

For a moment, I thought the quiet, sleeping Aria looked a little like the little wildcat I once brought home.

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Damon's POV

I mixed the medicine with warm water and walked back to the cot.

Aria was still sleeping restlessly. Her brow was furrowed, eyes shut tight, lashes trembling slightly. Cold sweat covered her forehead and dampened the hair around her face.

I checked her forehead again.

Her fever seemed to be coming back.

Looking at the unconscious woman before me, I suddenly felt like I was seeing a stranger. In the past, she used to follow me around no matter what the weather was like, and I'd never seerr her catch so much as a cold. When had her body become so fragile?

I leaned against the wall beside the bed, holding the cup in one hand and pulling the sleeping woman into my arms with the other.

"Mmm..." Aria let out a soft, unconscious sound, like a kitten.

I unconsciously tightened my arm around her so she could lean more comfortably against me.

I pressed the cup to her lips and tilted it slightly, slowly pouring the medicine into her mouth.

Maybe because the fever had lasted so long, the moment she felt the liquid, she obediently opened her mouth. But after only two small sips, she turned her head away and refused to drink more.

I rarely had this much patience. Using the tone I'd use with a child, I coaxed, "Be good, just drink a little

more."

I brought the cup closer to her lips again.

She pressed her lips together and dodged once more. Her voice came out soft and weak: "Bitter..."

Bitter?

I lifted the cup and took a sip. Damn, it really was bitter!

But she'd only had two tiny sips-less than one-tenth of the cup. That wouldn't be nearly enough to bring her fever down.

I never knew this woman could be so delicate...

She turned her head drowsily and burrowed deeper into my arms. Suddenly, I remembered a night about six months after we got married. I'd been drinking and caught a cold, waking up with a headache and low-grade fever.

Under the dim bedside lamp, Aria, wearing her pajamas, kept placing cool towels on my forehead. Then she brought me ibuprofen. Afraid the medicine would taste awful, she tried a sip first. Even though her face scrunched up from the bitterness, she didn't complain at all. Instead, she turned around, grabbed a piece of candy, and told me to eat it before taking the medicine.

Clai

Actually, the old Aria wasn't without her delicate side. After all, she was the cherished daughter of the Grayson family. Any normal girl would have some spoiled traits-how could she not? She only hid them because she became Damon Hawthorne's wife.

Thinking about it, my chest suddenly felt tight, like something was pressing down hard, accompanied by a sharp, prickling pain.

I stood up and walked outside.

I went back to the car and grabbed a piece of chocolate.

Because it had been stored too long, when I opened the wrapper, the chocolate had melted into a messy lump. You couldn't even make out the original shape, but the sweet, milky smell was still strong.

I

Without thinking, I put the chocolate in my mouth, took a sip of the medicine, held her close, gently tilted her chin up, and lowered my head to kiss her.

Her lips were cool and soft, like silk.

Maybe because she tasted the sweetness, Aria instinctively parted her lips and began to respond.

My heart felt like it had been struck-not painful, but tingling and numb.

She's drinking it! She likes the chocolate! Rhein said happily in my ear, his tail wagging in circles.

I don't love her. I even despise her.

But I have to admit that even though we barely had any physical intimacy during our two years of marriage, every single time, my iron self-control would crumble when it came to Aria Grayson.

I pressed the back of her head and deepened the kiss.

The bitterness of the medicine mixed with the sweetness of the chocolate, tangling between our lips. The air around us gradually grew warmer, more intimate. I held her slender, fragile waist tightly.

"... It hurts." She frowned and slowly opened her eyes.

I snapped back to reality, pulled away from her lips, and stared down at her. My c**k was already painfully

hard.

"How could you..."

She looked down and saw her half-open shirt and unhooked bra. She instinctively grabbed the fabric and pulled it together to cover herself. Her face went pale, and her voice trembled.

"We just... this is unbelievable..."

I breathed heavily, trying to calm my aroused body as quickly as possible.

We weren't even officially divorced yet, and she already didn't want any contact with me?

Suddenly, I remembered how she'd thrown my jacket away without hesitation last night.

"You had a high fever and couldn't take the medicine. I was just helping you drink it. Don't read too much into it." I placed the cup in front of her.

She pressed her lips tightly together and didn't say a word.

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Clawn

Aria's POV

"The rescue team is here!"

Someone shouted from outside.

I walked out of the makeshift shelter.

Damon was already standing in the doorway. I gripped the doorframe and stood behind him.

The water level had dropped a little. It only reached my calves now.

"Alpha, Miss Grayson." Justin spotted me from a distance. He quickly handed off the person he was supporting to someone beside him and waded through the water toward us.

"Justin, you made it..."

Maybe the fever medicine hadn't kicked in yet, or maybe I stepped on a rock-before I could finish my sentence, I suddenly stumbled.

Justin's eyes widened in alarm, and he rushed forward to catch me. But Damon was faster, reaching out to grab my arm.

Maybe it was the fever, but I felt extra sensitive. The moment his hand touched me, I instinctively tried to pull away.

“If you want to fall, I don’t mind letting go,” he said coldly.

I turned my head to look away. Only then did I realize we were standing on a slope. If he hadn’t caught me just now, I definitely would have fallen.

I looked up at him, pressed my lips together, and said nothing.

Justin quickly stepped in to break the tension. “Alpha, Miss Grayson, the helicopter can’t hover for too long. Should we head up now?”

Damon took a deep breath and ordered quietly, “Justin, you help her.”

Then he released my arm and strode toward the helicopter.

“Aria!” When Peggy saw me being helped off the helicopter, she rushed over. “Aria, how are you? Are you hurt? You scared me to death!”

Peggy didn’t know about my relationship with Damon. Seeing Justin supporting me, she naturally took my arm from him and said gratefully, “Justin, thank you so much. And... please thank Mr. Hawthorne for me!*

Right after getting off the helicopter, I felt a little dizzy.

I glanced at Justin, then walked with Peggy toward the elevator.

Peggy pressed the button for the third floor and said, “I’ve always heard that Mr. Hawthorne is cold and Tuthless. Yesterday, when I barged into his meeting, I was so nervous. But now that I’ve actually seen him, he doesn’t seem as scary as people say. Mr. Hawthorne is so responsible. He’s basically every girl’s dream guy!”

“Aria, you don’t know how amazing Mr. Hawthorne was yesterday. That Miller guy tried to hide the number of injured workers to avoid responsibility. When Mr. Hawthorne found out, he not only fired him on the spot, but also drove straight into the village despite the danger. And I just heard from the nurse that Mr. Hawthorne even arranged full medical checkups for all the trapped people!”

“By the way, I’ve been wanting to ask you since last night-Aria, do you know Mr. Hawthorne before?

I watched through the closing elevator doors as the helicopter slowly rose. After a moment of silence, I shook my head:

“...No, I don’t know him.”

Peggy looked skeptical. “But yesterday when Mr. Hawthorne heard you were trapped, he seemed really worried...”

“He wasn’t worried about me. He was worried about the villagers. If anything happened to them, the project could be delayed indefinitely. That would mean huge losses. He’s the head of the Hawthorne family. He has to take responsibility.”

Damon’s POV

One hour later.

Justin got out of the passenger seat and opened the back door.

“Alpha, Chief Engineer Simon Schwarz is still assessing the damage with the heads of each project team. It should take about fifteen more minutes.”

I glanced up and said, “Leave the door open.”

Justin hesitated, stopped closing the door, and walked aside to make a phone call.

When Simon Schwarz hurried over, the moment he saw me, a look of understanding flashed in his eyes. He smiled and said,

“Alpha, that’s our lead designer for this project, Aria Grayson. She’s a really talented young woman. I have to say, even well-known designers would struggle to reach her level.”

I let out a cold laugh. “Sounds like you think pretty highly of her.”

Simon was a senior figure in the company. Compared to others, he spoke to me in a much more relaxed and natural way. “I really do admire her. Talented young people in architectural design have become increasingly rare these days. Someone with Miss Grayson’s skill and creativity is extremely hard to find.”

Then he shifted topics with a regretful tone, “It’s a shame that Miss Grayson said she already has a mentor. Otherwise, I would have done everything I could to take her as my apprentice.”

“She has a mentor?” I turned my head and glanced at Justin.

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Justin shook his head, indicating he didn’t know either.

“Yeah, but she didn’t want to say who her mentor was. I’d love to know who’s got a student that good.”

Aria has outstanding talent in design and even has a mentor guiding her... The more I heard, the more like a stranger she sounded to me.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 83

Damon’s POV

The work in Seattle was basically wrapped up. Justin’s voice came from the passenger seat, “Alpha, Mayor Joey just sent an invitation. They want you to attend tomorrow night’s charity auction.”

“Do I need to teach you how to reply?” I shot Justin a cold glance, my voice sharp with irritation.

Justin stiffened. “I’m sorry, Alpha. I know you don’t like attending these auctions, but...”

“But what?” I rubbed my temples impatiently and closed my eyes.

“As far as I know, Joshua Grayson has been trying to secure a partnership with James Donald lately. James Donald is hosting tomorrow’s auction. Joshua Grayson probably won’t miss this chance to meet him. However, he’s still on a business trip and hasn’t returned yet. So,” Justin paused deliberately, as if waiting for my reaction, “he might ask Miss Grayson to attend in his place.”

The car fell into tense silence. Justin watched me nervously through the rearview mirror.

“Whether she goes or not has nothing to do with me,” I said without opening my eyes.

Aria’s POV

That afternoon, when I returned to the company, I received a call from Joshua.

“Aria, there’s something I might need you to handle for me.”

“Okay.”

Joshua paused, then laughed softly. “You agreed without even asking what I want you to do?”

I moved my hand away from my ankle and smiled slightly. “You’re my brother. You wouldn’t hurt me. Since we were kids, you and Dad always handled everything yourselves. It’s rare for you to ask me for help. Of course I’ll say yes.”

Joshua chuckled, then said slowly, “I’d like you to attend tomorrow night’s charity auction in Seattle. The host, James Donald, will also be there.”

“You want me to contact James Donald?”

Joshua didn’t hide anything. “Yes. His family is an old, powerful consortium. Grayson Group has several upcoming projects that will likely involve him. I hope we can get him to join our projects.”

To be honest, I don’t have much talent for business, but from Joshua’s tone, I could tell James Donald was crucial-important enough to affect the future of the entire group.

The next evening at 7 o’clock, I stood at the entrance of the charity auction holding my invitation, but I was stopped by security.

“I’m sorry, Miss Grayson. We really can’t let you in.” The guard handed the invitation back to me. His tone was polite, but there was no room for discussion.

I never expected the entry check for this charity auction to be so strict.

I’m not youd at dealing with these high-society events, and I don’t like them. In the past, if I couldn’t get in, Twould’ve actually felt relieved.

But now...

Thinking about Joshua’s request, I had to get into tonight’s auction no matter what.

I thought for a while, took out my phone from my purse, and scrolled through my contacts. Maybe I could ask someone for help, but I couldn’t let my brother know-with his personality, he would never let me

suffer this kind of humiliation.

At the very end, my finger unconsciously stopped on one name-Damon Hawthorne.

I hesitated for a long time and still didn’t make the call. Just as I was wavering, “Miss Grayson!”

Justin walked toward me from the auction entrance. Without saying a word, he grabbed my arm and pulled me inside.

I didn't understand why Justin was helping me or what Damon's purpose was, but I was grateful. At least I

was in.

Justin led me to my seat and whispered, "Miss Grayson, Mr. Hawthorne's seat is in the first row."

I looked toward the front row. There he was-still that aloof, cold, impossible-to-ignore presence.

I was about to turn and sit down when I collided head-on with a man walking toward me.

I was wearing four-inch heels, and my ankle injury from earlier hadn't fully healed. The impact made me lose my balance instantly.

Just as I was about to fall, a large hand caught my arm in time.

"Oh, sorry!"

I looked up and met a pair of deep blue eyes.

"Are you alright?" the man asked with concern.

I recognized James Donald the moment I saw him. I quickly composed myself. "I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Donald."

The man smiled in surprise. "It seems you know me."

"You are the host of tonight's auction. Who wouldn't know you?" I thought this was perfect timing. I had been wondering how to approach James, and the opportunity had presented itself. I introduced myself, "Mr. Donald, my name is Aria Grayson. I'm..."

"Donald!"

A low, deep voice suddenly sounded behind me, cutting me off.

James turned around and raised an eyebrow. "Ah, Mr. Hawthorne, what's the matter?"

I watched Damon walk closer and closer. My nerves tightened instinctively. I wanted to step away, but my mind told me I couldn't retreat.

Chapter BL-

He stopped beside me and James, his eyes landing on the hand Donald still had on my arm.

“James noticed Damon’s gaze and immediately said, “Mr. Hawthorne, this is Miss Grayson. She’s a

gorgeous and charming young lady”

“You like her?”

Damon asked with a straight face, his voice ice-cold.

James didn’t hide it at all. “Of course.” Then he turned to me, bent down, and made an inviting gesture. “Miss Grayson, would you do me the honor of being my date tonight?”

I really didn’t expect James to be so direct-especially in front of the usually stone-faced Damon. For a moment, I didn’t know how to respond.

“Unfortunately, she can’t be your date.”

The next second, he walked toward me, stretched out his long arm, and wrapped it around my waist.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 84

Chapter 82–

Clasm

Aria’s POV

I stood there frozen, not knowing what to do.

James stared at Damon’s hand on my waist with wide, incredulous eyes. “Damon, what... what’s going on here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? She’s my date tonight.”

James ran a hand over his forehead, still trying to process it. “What a coincidence!”

“If you don’t believe me, you can ask her,” Damon said, his eyes locked on mine.

I gave Mr. Donald an awkward nod.

James let out a disappointed sigh, then spread his hands and said to Damon, “Alright, you win again.”

He took two steps away, then turned back, took my hand, and bowed to kiss the back of it. “Dear Miss Grayson, until we meet again!”

“James!” Damon’s voice carried a clear warning.

James, however, looked like he’d just won the lottery. He didn’t care at all. He raised his eyebrows smugly and walked away.

Once James was gone, I pulled myself out of Damon’s arms.

“Aria, that’s very rude of you.”

I just looked at him calmly. “Damon, we’ve already agreed to separate. You’re free to go looking for a woman-but it won’t be me. Not anymore.”

Damon fell silent, his gaze hooking into me.

“A few days apart, and the way you talk isn’t what it used to be

He bit the words out viciously.

I didn’t argue.

But the truth was, I hadn’t changed at all. I’d simply stopped pretending.

“What a coincidence, Aria. I never expected to run into you here.”

Just then, a man’s voice-low and rich as an accordion-sounded behind me.

I turned, and my eyes widened despite myself.

“God-you, how are you here?”

The source of the voice-Noah.

Chapter 82-

He wore an obsidian-black double-breasted suit, his black curls precisely styled to frame his sharply defined face and those deep sea-blue eyes.

He wasn’t wearing his glasses; his features were on display like jewels for everyone to see.

Behind me, Damon let out a cold snort.

And then it hit me-I was standing right between Damon and Noah.

Like the cherry in the middle of a towering layer cake.

Damon spoke up behind me. "A Beta doctor, at a charity auction. How... unusual."

There was something strange in his tone.

But I couldn't bring myself to care what my ex-husband thought of my friend.

C

I smiled and stepped forward, the admiration coming straight from the heart. "Noah, tonight you're more dazzling than any jewel up for auction."

Noah only smiled gently and asked what I had my eye on tonight.

I told him.

And I told him about my plans for my career, too.

Noah listened closely-even though my construction project had nothing to do with him at all.

And still, he was so patient.

His gaze drifted past me. "Where's your mate? He doesn't seem to like me much. What happened before- that was my offense to him. But as your friend, his favoritism makes me angry."

I glanced back. Damon was nowhere to be seen.

"He isn't my mate anymore. We're getting divorced."

If anything, the smile on Noah's face deepened. "Ending a bad relationship is a good beginning for you."

The lights in the hall dimmed, and the auction officially began.

Every seat had a catalog listing the items' backgrounds and order.

I listened to the auctioneer while flipping through the catalog, but with Damon sitting right beside me- radiating such intense energy-it was really hard to concentrate.

Especially since I still had no idea why he had helped me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, our first item of the evening-the cat’s eye wolf totem platter. Starting bid: nine hundred thousand dollars.”

A spotlight hit the glass case. The room came alive with raised paddles and shouted bids.

At the same time, I spotted the item I’d come for.

of the auction list.



A ceremonial wolf amulet known as “Clear Water Moon.”

“The pendant was carved from aged cedar and set with moorstone and turquoise. Purple and emerald veins threaded through the wood naturally. Two wolves were carved on the front-one bending to drink from a stream, another leaping toward the moon. An inscription on the back read. “By clear water and bright moon, the pack knows peace.

From the information Joshua had sent me about James’s family background, I knew he deeply respected his mother. Every time he returned from a business trip, he would bring her a gift. His mother had been a wartime doctor in her youth, and her greatest wish in life was world peace, which perfectly matched the meaning of this Peace Pipe Amulet.

I wanted to win this pendant and use it as an opportunity to discuss business with James.

Now we come to tonight’s eighth item-the Peace Pipe Amulet, created by the renowned master artist Thomas Real over three years. Starting bid is eight million!”

“Eight point five million!”

“Nine million!”

“Ten million!”

In just twenty seconds, the price had already jumped by two million.

Although I don’t usually deal with art pieces, my dad used to study them extensively. I had estimated the value of this pendant-it shouldn’t exceed twelve million at most.

Two years ago, Dad gave me ten million. In the two years since my marriage, Walter occasionally gave me some spending money, plus the design fees I had saved from work. If I could win it within thirteen million, it would be no problem.

“Any bids higher than twelve million?” The auctioneer raised his hammer and looked around.

Sure enough, once it reached twelve million, the fierce bidding suddenly quieted down. Everyone looked at each other uncertainly.

“Twelve million once, twelve million twice!”

This was it! I raised my hand to bid. “Thirteen...”

“Twenty million.”

My whole body went rigid. I turned my head in shock and stared at Damon.

Chapter 03-

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 85

Aria's POV

At the same time, shocked gasps erupted from the people behind us.

Almost instantly, every eye in the hall turned to Damon.

Ciam

The auctioneer heard the bid and looked at me, my hand still raised. “Miss, would you like to bid higher?”

I swallowed hard, stayed silent for two seconds, then said, “...I pass.”

I never saw this coming. I had considered the possibility of miscalculating, but I never thought it would be because of Damon.

In all my memory, he had never once shown the slightest interest in auctions.

Damn it. My whole plan-winning James over with something he'd like-had just fallen apart completely. I'd have to think of another way.

“Thirty million.” Noah, seated beside me, placed his bid in a voice that left me stunned.

“Oh, no, Noah, it isn't worth that.”

“Forty million.” Damon pressed on.

A gasp rippled through the crowd.

“For you, it’s worth it.” Noah turned and smiled at me.

“We’re friends, yes, but-”

Noah didn’t waver. “Fifty million.”

“Fifty million, going once.”

“Fifty million, going twice.”

Suddenly, a staff member stepped up and whispered something to the auctioneer.

“Ah-ladies and gentlemen! Word has just reached us that this lot has been claimed by Mr. Hawthorne, with no ceiling on his offer.”

I knew it then. It was over.

I clearly caught the way Noah’s smile froze.

Applause and gasps broke out all around.

They were calling it unprecedented.

Everyone was marveling at Damon’s wealth.

But all I felt was loss.

Chapter 83-

Without the pendant, it’ll be hard for me to get close to James at all.

Maybe my period was coming soon-a dull ache had started low in my abdomen. I set down my paddle and headed for the restroom.

“Excuse me,” I said to Noah.

I sat in the stall for a while, until the pain eased a little, then pushed the door open and stood at the sink to wash my hands.

Someone came out from another stall behind me, talking on the phone while turning on the faucet next to

Six hundred million! That's insane! Oh my God!" The woman said in shock to whoever was on the phone. I shouldn't have gone to the restroom. I missed such an incredible moment! That's six hundred million, not Monopoly money! Who do you think 'Luna's Tear' will end up with?"

"Ugh... no matter who it is, I'm going to be so jealous..."

The woman couldn't wait to get back to the hall. She washed her hands quickly and left in her high heels, without even turning off the faucet.

I casually turned off the faucet beside me and pulled out two paper towels to dry my hands.

Unlike her, I wished the auction would end soon so I wouldn't have to face Damon again.

But then I remembered what the woman had said: "Luna's Tear."

I had seen the "Luna's Tear" earrings in the catalog. Just from the photo, it was obvious how exquisite they were. The pink diamonds had a deep, rich color, and the design was incredibly clever.

Still, I had no interest in them.

Not because I didn't like them, but because six hundred million was something I simply couldn't afford

right now.

Besides, what I really needed to focus on was how to get James to cooperate with Grayson Group.

I took one last look at myself in the mirror, touched up my lipstick, and turned to leave.

The moment I opened the restroom door.

"Aria!!"

A figure suddenly appeared in my sight. Before I could react, the person grabbed my wrist forcefully and yanked me back into the restroom.

The restroom door slammed shut.

My body was pressed against the wall by the door. The cold tiles seeped through my thin dress and into my skin, making me shiver involuntarily. At the same time, it snapped me back to reality.

I struggl

wome

and glared at him. “Mr. Hawthorne, what are you doing! This is the

Chapter 83-

Chero

He had pulled me with quite a bit of force, causing the strap on my left shoulder to slip down, exposing my showilder.

I noticed his gaze and quickly turned my body to cover myself.

But Damon didn’t stop staring at me. His gaze drifted downward.

His grip was so strong I couldn’t break free no matter how hard I struggled. Swallowing my anger, I asked, “Damon, what do you want?”

His eyes finally focused on my right hand. Something seemed to click in his mind. Without a word, he grabbed me and dragged me toward the sink.

“Splash!”

He cranked the faucet to full blast, shoved my hand under the rushing water, and started scrubbing the back of my hand

“Ow!” The m

“Give me

I thou

and

sthumb. Within seconds, my skin turned red and burned like fire.

osened his focus, I jerked my hand back and stepped away.

commanded, his expression dark.

completely unreasonable and felt my temper flare. “Mr. Hawthorne, if you hate me

e me, just say so. You don’t have to resort to this.”

hear a single word. He just raised his voice again.

bing to repeat myself. Give me your hand.”

and behind my back and retreated step by step until I reached the door. I grabbed the handle, sh it open and escape.

ke one step out that door, I’ll break your leg,” Damon said coldly, his eyes locked on mine. and stared at him in disbelief.

pproached slowly, anger radiating off him. “Aria Grayson, we’re still married. No divorce papers yet. So atch you with someone else, you’ll regret it. I don’t mind being a widower.”

as he serious?

He was the one who cheated, and now he had the audacity to say that to me?

Lydia was pacing anxiously in my head.

When he saw I’d stopped resisting, he dragged me back to the sink and started scrubbing my hand again.

I don’t know how long he kept at it. At first it stung, then felt ice-cold, and finally went completely numb.

Finally, he released me, satisfied. “Aria, as long as we don’t have those divorce papers, you’re still Mrs. Hawthorne. Keep your wandering thoughts in check.”

I looked at him ca

“As long as

can get you whatever you want-within reason.” With

apter 81-

that he casually pulled out a small square jewelry box, opened it, and a pair of pink diamond earrings Timmediately caught my eye.

It was “Luna’s Tear.”

So Damon was the one who spent six hundred million to buy them.

“Do you like them?” he asked in a low voice.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 86

Chapm

Claim

Aria's POV

I didn't want to speak, but I was afraid of setting off this unpredictable man again, so I looked away and gave a soft "Mm."

"Luna's Tear" really was breathtaking.

Damon's throat bobbed. He took out the earrings, then lifted my chin with one hand. He used his cool thumb and index finger to pinch my earlobe, found the piercing, and unconsciously rubbed it with his fingertip.

"Ah..." I couldn't help shivering. A strange tingling sensation spread from my ear down through my entire body.

My earlobes are so sensitive! I quickly tried to pull back.

"Don't move," Damon said, as if fighting some internal battle. He tried several times but couldn't get it lined up right.

"...Let me do it," I couldn't help saying.

"If you don't want it to hurt worse, stop moving." He ignored me, keeping his expression cold as he pinched my earlobe with one hand and held the earring with the other, completely focused.

It looked like I'd have to wear these earrings if I wanted to get out of here tonight. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and resigned myself to it.

About ten minutes later, the thin post of the right earring finally slid through the hole, and the back clicked into place. The left one went on more smoothly after the practice round.

The moment both earrings were secure, I let out a long breath. Damon finally released me.

I walked to the sink and looked in the mirror. The pink diamonds of “Luna’s Tear” sparkled brilliantly. My earlobe throbbed slightly, so I raised my hand to touch it and check for blood.

But Damon caught my wrist. “Those earrings-you don’t take them off without my permission.”

I quietly pulled my hand back.

His phone suddenly rang.

He glanced at the caller ID, seerning to consider whether he should answer.

From the corner of my eye, I clearly saw the name flashing on the screen-Claudia.

“The auction should be almost over. This is the women’s restroom. People will come in soon. It won’t look good if they see you here,” I said calmly. “Let’s go.”

Before he could speak, I turned around, walked past him, and headed out.

Just as I’d guessed, the auction was already winding down.

stopped at the entrance of the hall and touched the pink diamond on my earlobe. After a moment’s Thought, Het my hair down to cover my ears.

Everyone in the hall had seen Damon spend six hundred million to buy “Luna’s Tear” if they noticed it was now on my ears, it would definitely cause a stir.

Damon and I would be officially divorced soon. The fewer people who knew about our relationship, the

better.

I smoothed my hair a few times and made sure my ears were completely covered before walking back in.

I found Noah’s seat empty.

When I asked the staff, they frowned the moment they heard the name I gave.

“I’m sorry, miss, but the gentleman you’re describing isn’t on the public guest list.”

I was startled. “How can that be? The private list... could he be on that one?”

The staff member’s eyes flicked to my earlobe, as if he’d caught sight of the Luna’s Tears.

His manner turned even more careful.

“Miss, it’s possible Mr. Noah was admitted through the undisclosed VIP list-if he happens to be a pack Alpha.”

My first thought was that the staff had simply made a mistake.

How could Noah possibly be an Alpha?

But I didn’t press further. The staff worked hard enough as it was.

Soon, a message came from Noah, full of apology-an emergency patient had been rushed into the hospital, and he’d had no choice but to leave in a hurry.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t help you win the pendant. But as your friend, I’d gladly help you through this rough patch. I have some resources for construction projects-renovation work for care homes. If you need them, I’d be more than happy to refer you.”

Noah’s concern left a warmth glowing in my chest.

He was my Beta friend-nothing like Damon, an Alpha who radiated nothing but pressure.

Damon’s POV

I sent Claudia a perfunctory reply to her text.

In the garden outside the auction hall, I crossed paths with that Beta.

Noah. That was the name.

My wolf suddenly snarled.

“Mr. Hawthorne. Congratulations on being single.”

One sentence, and my fury caught light.

I looked at him with contempt. “Taking such an interest in an Alpha’s family affairs-is that the kind of

breeding the Hargreaves family gives you?”

“Or should I call you the Alpha of the Whitemoon Pack instead-Noah?”

Noah didn’t answer. He only smiled. “As expected of Damon Hawthorne. My most respected rival. And-”

He stepped closer-and he carried Aria's scent on him!

That's right. The two of them had just been sitting together.

My rage ignited in an instant.

"If you don't mind, I'm also your rival in love. Aria-I'm very fond of her."

Noah sighed. "Noble Mr. Hawthorne. What a shame. You let a good girl slip away, and mistook a glass bead for a pearl."

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

I despised this affected, cryptic posturing of his.

Noah held my gaze for a long moment. "Nothing, Mr. Hawthorne. I'm simply offering you a courteous reminder-you're surrounded by a great many lies."

"My affairs are none of your business!" I turned and walked away.

Not far off, the bell rang to mark the end of the auction. And beneath it, behind me, came Noah's strange, mocking laugh.

T

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 87

Chapter 85.

Aria's POV

With the final strike of the auctioneer's hammer, the last item was sold.

Mayor Joey and James went up on stage together to give their thanks.

Chaton

Even after the speeches were over and guests started leaving in small groups, Damon still hadn't returned.

I waited for a while. When I saw James getting ready to leave, I stood up and walked toward him. "Mr. Donald."

James stopped and turned around, looking pleasantly surprised. “Oh! Miss Grayson! I almost forgot-thank you for the gift! I’m sure my mother will love it!”

“Gift...?”

“Yes.” James smiled. “You might not know this, but that was actually one of my mother’s collection pieces. She really loved it, but when she heard I was hosting a charity auction, she donated it. I was planning to have someone buy it back for me at fifteen million, but I never expected the final price to go way over my budget.”

When I heard that, I froze.

Fifteen million...

So even if Damon hadn’t bid, I still couldn’t have afforded it...

And because Damon bought it at such a high price and gave it to James in my name, I now had the chance to stand here and talk to him face-to-face.

‘As long as you behave like a proper Mrs. Hawthorne, I can help you get whatever you want-within reason.’

So that’s what he’d meant by helping me.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Donald,” I said, looking at him seriously. “I did think about buying that pendant for you, but unfortunately... Mr. Hawthorne was the one who bought it. And I didn’t know he gave it to you in my name. The person you should thank isn’t me.”

James looked confused. He stood there stunned for several seconds before saying, “So... you came to find me because...?”

I took a deep breath and extended my hand. “Mr. Donald, please allow me to reintroduce myself. My name is Aria Grayson. I’m the younger sister of Joshua Grayson, President of Grayson Group in the capital.”

“Grayson Group... Joshua Grayson... Oh, I think I’ve heard of it.”

“That’s great. I came to this auction on behalf of my brother. I hope you can give Grayson Group a chance to discuss possible cooperation.” I enunciated each word clearly.

James looked down at my outstretched hand and hesitated. “I saw the cooperation proposal Grayson Group sent me, but you should know why I didn’t reply.”

My fingers curled slightly. “Yes, because of the accident two years ago, right?”

“Miss Grayson, I appreciate your honesty, but I’m sorry-I can’t help you. Cooperation isn’t a small matter. It

involves many stakeholders. The accident that happened to Grayson Group two years ago had a huge impact. As the person in charge, I have to be very careful when choosing partners.”

With that, James left with his assistant, who had come to collect him.

I stood there for a long time before I could accept the result.*

Although James’s rejection was within my expectations-Joshua had told me on the phone yesterday,

“Just do your best. No matter the outcome, it’s fine”-I still couldn’t accept that Grayson Group had suddenly been given a death sentence. I wasn’t willing to give up.

Suddenly, something on the ground caught my attention.

It was a drawing that must have accidentally fallen out of James’s assistant’s folder.

I picked it up and looked at it. To my surprise, it was an architectural blueprint. I couldn’t help studying it more carefully.

Those few extra glances made me chase after Donald in the direction he’d left.

But even after running all the way to the exit of the hall, I didn’t see Donald. Instead, I saw Damon walking down the steps from another exit.

I looked down at the drawing in my hand again, feeling torn.

As Damon was about to get into his car, I stopped overthinking and ran toward his Maybach.

Justin was opening the back door for Damon. He noticed me from the corner of his eye and said to the person inside the car, “Alpha, it’s Miss Grayson.”

“...Close the door. We’re going to the airport.”

Justin looked a little surprised, gave me a small bow, and said “Yes,” then closed the car door.

“Wait, Da-”

The Maybach drove right past me, just like before.

The memory of being coldly left on the mountainside three months ago during the family dinner suddenly flooded back like a breaking dam, threatening to drown me completely.

A sharp pain shot through my right earlobe. I kicked off my high heels and started running after the departing Maybach.

Just when I thought I couldn't catch up, the Maybach suddenly stopped.

My eyes lit up, and I ran faster.

Justin got out

I was bre

cked.

stin, I... I have something I really need to say to Damon."

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 88

Chapter 86-

Aria's POV

"I..." I opened my mouth, my hands unconsciously clenching into fists. Then I remembered the drawing I was holding and handed it to him. "This is a drawing that James's assistant accidentally dropped earlier."

Damon looked down at the drawing.

I continued, "There's a serious problem with this architectural design. I have to see James. Otherwise... if this design goes into construction, it could cause a major safety accident."

"So what?" Damon cut me off coldly.

My body froze.

"Aria, even if there is a problem with this drawing, that's James's problem. What does it have to do with me, or with you?" His expression was ice-cold. "Besides, how can you be so sure he doesn't already know about the design flaw?"

I was stumped by his question. I had to admit he wasn't wrong.

“I also can’t be sure that James knows about the problem. I’ve personally seen accidents caused by design flaws. I’ve seen happy families completely destroyed because of it. So...” I paused and gripped the drawing tighter. “Even if there’s only a one-in-ten-thousand chance, I can’t take that risk.”

Seeing that he still didn’t seem willing to agree, and remembering how he used to look at me with disdain whenever I discussed architectural design, I added,

“If you don’t trust my professional judgment, you can have other designers take a look...”

About five seconds passed before Damon finally spoke, his voice lazy,

“I can let you see James.” His tone was low.

“But you need to give me a reason.”

I was stunned and didn’t understand what he meant. I blurted out, “What?”

“Aria Grayson, there’s no such thing as a free lunch in this world. You’ve said all this just to get me to help you, but helping you brings me no benefit at all.”

I stared at him. “... Then what do you want?”

“Sit on my lap and kiss me.”

My mind went blank. I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard, but right now, I felt like a trapped animal with nowhere to run.

“Aria, I don’t have much patience to wait for you to think about it.”

“If I do it... will you take me to see James?” I asked, my voice shaky.

just stared at me without answering.

Chum

!bit my lip, in just three seconds, all kinds of images flashed through my mind-the crying families of victims in front of the cameras when the accident was exposed two years ago, Dad being taken away in a police car, and how Joshua had been struggling to keep Grayson Group alive these past two years. I really didn’t want to see the same tragedy happen to other people again.

I took a deep breath, slowly moved over, half-stood up, and sat sideways on Damon’s lap. I placed my hands on his shoulders, closed my eyes, and teaned in little by little.

Finally, my lips touched his-cool, with the clean, woody scent of his body.

Mmm, Mate's scent. Lydia started dancing happily in my head.

Shut up! I immediately tried to pull back and get off his lap, but he wrapped one arm tightly around my waist and held the back of my neck with the other. He parted his lips, caught my lower lip with practiced ease, and didn't give me any chance to retreat.

I opened my eyes in shock. Damon's eyes were still open. My heart sank.

Damon bit my lower lip hard. The more I tried to dodge, the more he refused to let go. He tangled with my tongue, deepening the kiss in a dominating and forceful way.

I don't know how long it lasted. I was starting to feel like I couldn't breathe when Damon finally let me go.

I scrubbed hard at my lips with my sleeve.

Damon spared me one cold, indifferent glance.

He pressed the button to lower the soundproof partition, "Justin, go to Moonlight Valley."

"Alpha, if we go to Moonlight Valley now, we might miss the flight back."

Damon was silent for a moment. "Change the flight."

"Yes."

Moonlight Valley was a seven-star hotel, famous for its top-level privacy.

James had been staying there these past few days.

The weight in my heart finally lifted, but then I suddenly realized I was still sitting on Damon's lap!

"Damon! I thought you had something urgent to rush back for. I didn't think we'd have time to catch up like this." James personally opened the door to his presidential suite.

Damon stepped aside. "Someone wants to see you."

James paused, followed his gaze toward the doorway, and when he saw me, he looked both surprised and unsurprised. "Miss Grayson, I thought I made myself clear."

I walked inside. "Mr. Donald, I'm here to return this to you."

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

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Damon's POV

E

James took the paper from Aria's hand. The moment he saw what it was, his eyes went wide. "This is the architectural drawing we've been working on? How did you get this?"

"I picked it up at the auction."

James frowned, still looking skeptical, and turned to me for confirmation.

I nodded silently.

James picked up the drawing again, studying it carefully before finally letting out a relieved breath. "This is a confidential file. If this had leaked widely, it would've caused massive losses. Thank you, Miss Grayson. What would you like as a reward? Though if you're still going to ask for that partnership opportunity, I'm really sorry-I still can't agree to that."

"Even if it wasn't me, someone else would have picked it up and returned it to you, so don't worry about it. I don't need any reward," Aria said with a small smile, straightening up.

At that, James looked at her with newfound appreciation.

Rhein grumbled angrily in my head. He should be grateful, not checking her out!

Aria continued, "Mr. Donald, actually... besides returning this drawing, there's something else I need to warn you about."

James looked puzzled. "Warn me?"

"The design in this drawing has a serious flaw. It could very likely cause a major safety accident."

"That's impossible!" James shook his head in shock, then looked at me in disbelief. "This drawing was done by a senior architect we've worked with for years. There's no way there's a problem. Miss Grayson, you must be misreading something."

“The Donald family has considerable influence worldwide. Our standards for every aspect of construction projects are even stricter than Grayson Group’s. Miss Grayson, what exactly are you trying to say?” James continued, his tone brooking no argument.

“Mr. Donald, may I speak with the designer of this drawing?” Aria stepped closer to James.

James had expected his firm words to make her doubt herself, but instead she stepped forward. He glanced at me thoughtfully, then reluctantly nodded. I pressed my lips together and met his gaze.

He pulled out his phone, called the designer, and put it on speaker before handing it to Aria.

She took the phone. “Hello, I’m Aria Grayson, currently a building designer at Skydreams Design.”

The architect on the other end sounded irritated when he heard his work being questioned. “I don’t care who you are. You say my design has a problem-what’s your proof?”

Aria didn’t react to his sharp tone. She unfolded the drawing and said, “If I’m not mistaken, the clever part

of your design is placing the entire building on the ground in a unique ‘stilt’ formation. So you moved the columns from around the building to the center, and drew inspiration from tree branches to use V-shaped trusses to support the weight of each floor. Is that correct?”

The other end went quiet, clearly surprised she could analyze his design so easily.

“I have to admit, your design is very interesting and quite brilliant,” Aria said calmly. “But I also noticed that in the V-shaped trusses you designed, the 45-degree diagonal becomes the most vulnerable point for structural stress. When the wind direction runs parallel to the building’s diagonal, the internal forces will be higher than in the vertical plane, and it won’t be sufficient to resist the load caused by diagonal wind pressure...”

When the designer heard this, his tone became serious. “My God, Miss Grayson, you’re a lifesaver! I apologize for being rude earlier. I’m so sorry! If there’s ever a chance, I’d really love to talk with you in person. You’re incredibly professional. Thank you! I hope we can meet someday!” The designer ended the call.

Aria confidently handed the phone back to James, then glanced at me-who had been watching the whole time-and the corners of her mouth lifted slightly.

“Miss Grayson, thank you! Even though I couldn’t follow all those technical terms you two were discussing, your expertise really impressed me.” James gave her a deep bow.

Aria bowed back in response.

James put away the drawing. “Miss Grayson, if you’re willing, you can come work for me. I’ll offer you the highest salary possible.”

“Thank you for the generous offer, Mr. Donald, but I’m very happy with my current position.”

“What a shame. I was hoping you could join our design team!”

Now that the weight had lifted from her heart, Aria’s mouth curved into a relaxed smile. “Mr. Donald, joining your project design team isn’t completely out of the question.”

“You mean partnering with Grayson Group?”

“Exactly.” Aria nodded. “Mr. Donald, I sincerely hope you’ll give Grayson Group a chance. I believe you won’t be disappointed once you learn more about what we can offer.”

James paused, clearly considering it. “I understand. I’ll think this over carefully.”

Hearing that, Aria didn’t push any further.

“Mr. Donald, I still have some work to handle and need to head back this morning.”

“Can’t you stay a little longer?”

Aria shook her head.

He turned to look at me.

“No time.”

James spread his hands. “Alright then. Looks like we’ll have to wait for next time. Miss Grayson, I look forward to seeing you again! Would you mind if I gave you a hug?”

Cla

What? He’s still not done? Now he wants a hug? Rheid scratched at the ground impatiently through our link.

Aria hesitated for a second, then kept her polite smile and extended her hand instead. “Mr. Donald, I look forward to seeing you again too!”

James smiled knowingly, lowered his arms, then leaned close to her ear. “The earrings look beautiful on you!”

I couldn't stand watching this for another second. "Justin, escort her back to the project base."

"No need

an-" Aria started to refuse, but then she met my gaze.

She

kwardly to Justin. "Thank you."

mes and I remained in the room.

ed at me with interest. "Damon, I thought you had no interest in other women."

my cuff and met his gaze. "Stay away from her."

raised an eyebrow. "I understand. I only admire her-I won't try to steal her from you. After all, we're ds. I would never go after a friend's woman."

aring James say that actually made me feel somewhat better.

pulled out a contract and handed it to him. Confusion flashed across his face, but the next moment he opened it and his expression turned to shock. "The ownership transfer agreement for Central Square?! You're finally willing to transfer it to me?"

Central Square is the heart of the entire city. Owning even one shop there guarantees profit. It's no exaggeration to say every inch of land is worth its weight in gold. I bought the full ownership rights at a steep price long before the square was developed.

The Donald family has many heirs fighting for power internally. After James took over part of the family business, he'd been hoping to buy Central Square from rne to gain more support from other family

members.

But I'd never agreed.

James finally recovered from his shock. "Damon... you're doing this for Miss Grayson? My God, this is unbelievable! How much you care about her is way beyond what I imagined!"

"Agree to partner with Grayson Group, and Central Square ownership is yours. If there's no problem with that, just sign it." I stated my terms simply.

"No

no problem!”

ally, even without this transfer agreement as incentive, I would have yson Group anyway. Miss Grayson’s professionalism really impressed

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Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 90

Aria’s POV

It was already eleven o’clock when I got back to the project base. The entire office area was dark.

“Justin, you can drop me off here.” I glanced out the car window. We were still about three hundred meters from the apartment and office building.

“Of course.” Justin stopped the car, got out, and walked around to open my door.

Justin lingered by the door for a moment, hesitating, then called out to me. “Miss Grayson. I know I probably shouldn’t say this as an outsider, but... maybe you and Alpha could have a real conversation.”

I picked up my bag and pressed my lips together. “Justin, I still have a lot of things to handle...”

Before I could finish, Justin continued. “Miss Grayson, I know I shouldn’t comment on your private affairs with Alpha, but ever since the day you two signed the divorce agreement, I’ve clearly noticed that Alpha’s mood has become more unpredictable than usual. He says he doesn’t care, but deep down he actually cares a lot. The moment he heard you were trapped in the village, he drove there without a second thought about the danger. He also kept delaying the work in Seattle because he knew you were staying at the construction site... And although Alpha didn’t show it, I know he only accepted the invitation to the charity auction because he knew you’d be there. It shows that Alpha cares about you, at least a little.”

I lowered my head and stayed silent for a few seconds before saying, “Justin, the project base should be finished in about three more days. By then, the one-month period will be over too.”

“Miss Ste...”

“Please remind Mr. Hawthorne when the time comes. Let’s set a time to finalize the divorce.” I quickly cut him off, leaving no room for discussion. “It’s late. Drive safe on your way back.”

“And... even though the Alpha told me not to tell you, I still want to warn you-be careful of the people around you...” Justin was nervous, the words tumbling out fast.

Out of politeness, I gave him a nod.

But inwardly, I wondered. Be careful of the people around me? Who? Astrid? Peggy?

Or Noah.

They’re all friends who’ve been nothing but sincere with me.

The one I really should be guarding against is Claudia.

On the way back to the office, I was distracted and didn’t notice that the light in my office was on.

The moment I pushed the door open, Peggy looked up from her desk in surprise. “Aria, you’re back! I thought you wouldn’t come to the office tonight.”

I smiled and took the coffee she offered me, then opened my laptop.

There were two unread emails. One was a reply from the Pacific Architecture Design Competition

Caple &

organizers after receiving my preliminary design draft. The other was from Astrid, forwarding materials from the university archives.

The attachment was titled: 2020 Architecture Design Major Graduate internship Registration Form.

I opened it immediately and scrolled through. There were only two Outstanding Graduates from the architecture department that year, listed at the front of the file. It didn’t take long before I found Claudia Stone’ name, along with her internship placement:

Grayson Group.

Just then, my phone rang and interrupted my thoughts.

did you see the list I sent you? Astrid asked.

w you were right. Claudia Stone really did intern at Grayson Group two and a half years ago. How else can she be! Aria, what do you want to do next? Do you need me to check anything else?"

rid..."

What's wrong?" Astrid asked anxiously.

opened my mouth but didn't know how to tell her. The words stuck in my throat, and my chest felt tight. Astrid, you don't need to check anything else."

"What exactly is going on?" Astrid's voice suddenly rose several octaves, turning serious. "Aria, didn't we agree a long time ago that we'd face everything together? The way you're acting now makes me even more worried. Did you think of something?"

"Actually, I hid something from you, Astrid. The reason I wanted to check Claudia's internship records wasn't just to find out how she got involved with my dad-" I took a deep breath to keep myself as calm as possible. "I also suspect... that Liam's death, that accident, is connected to Claudia too."

Two years ago, the main cause the Grayson accident investigation found was cutting corners on building materials, and Dad had confessed to it. Logically, there shouldn't be anything left to question. But never forgot what Dad told me when I got accepted into the architecture design program at university.

He said, "Aría, no matter what kind of designer you become in the future, never forget that architectural design doesn't exist for art-it exists for people. Any design that sacrifices safety should never exist."

How could someone who repeatedly emphasized that and treated life safety as the bottom line ever cut corners on materials?

I had asked Dad about it, but he wouldn't say anything more. I knew he stayed silent mostly out of guilt and self-blame for not catching what his subordinates had done. So he accepted responsibility and chose to bear it all himself.

Astrid gasped loudly on the phone. "If it really has something to do with her, then that woman is... terrifying."

"I hope none of this is true either. By the way, honey, I have to board my plane now. See you when I get

back." I comforted Act

ung up.

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Chapter 91

Clate

He immediately called Joshua. Since I had now confirmed that Claudia really did intern at Grayson Group Two years ago, the most urgent thing was to find out exactly what she was responsible for at that time.

Joshua picked up quickly. "I was just about to call you, Aria."

I let out a confused "Huh?"

"James replied to the cooperation invitation I sent him."

I was surprised. I thought James would need more time to consider, but he replied so quickly.

"What did he say?" I asked nervously.

Joshua

"No

trep

silent for a moment. My heart sank little by little, and I said guiltily, "I'm sorry."

He cut me off and laughed. "Aria, this time, you didn't just help me-you helped me

refused. "Tremendously?"

He underestimated you. Actually, I should be the one apologizing to you!" Joshua's voice was full of

James agreed to cooperate with Grayson Group. He'll come in mid-next month to discuss the Cooperation terms."

My chest widened. My emotions went up and down like a roller coaster.

Alright, I've said everything on my end. Now it's your turn. Why did you call me?"

two years, I had rarely heard Joshua sound this happy. I really didn't want to ruin the little bit of relief

e had just gained and burden him again, so I simply made an excuse. "It's nothing. I'll tell you when I come over for dinner in a couple of days."

When I got home, Astrid had gone back to her family for dinner and left me a note and some pizza. I quickly washed up and collapsed onto my long-missed bed to sleep. In my dream, Grayson Group returned to its peak because of this cooperation with the Donald family. Dad was released from prison, and our family of three went back to the peaceful life we'd had two years ago.

The sound of my phone ringing woke me up. I answered groggily. "Hello?"

"Luna, if you have time, please come back as soon as possible. Alpha Walter has been hospitalized."

Aria's POV

"He's in the inpatient ward at Pack Hospital," the old butler said over the phone.

Claws

The elevator stopped at the VIP floor. Before the doors fully opened, I rushed out and headed straight for Walter's room.

Before I even got close, I could see a crowd of people waiting outside his room, including Damon's mom. She looked anxious and worried.

When she looked up and saw me, her expression changed instantly. "What are you doing here? Get out! I don't want to see you!"

I'd already expected to run into Mrs. Duran, so I just gave everyone a calm fook and said, "I'm here to see Walter, not you."

"Aria Grayson, you and Damon are divorced! You're no longer part of the Hawthorne family. What right do you have to see the old Alpha?" She pointed at me and shouted, "I'll say this one last time-you're not welcome here. Get out, or don't blame me for what happens next!"

I didn't budge. "I'm not leaving until I know Walter is out of danger."

Mrs. Duran's face went cold as she ordered the bodyguards, "What are you all standing around for? Get her out of here. Now!"

The bodyguards exchanged glances, hesitated for a moment, then started walking toward me.

I clenched my fists and quickly tried to figure out how to get past them.

That's when the ward door opened from the inside.

"I'd like to see who dares to chase Luna Aria away!"

Everyone turned toward the doorway in shock.

I looked up to see the butler walking out with a stern expression. His eyes were sharp enough to silence everyone instantly.

The bodyguards who'd been about to grab me immediately stopped and respectfully stepped aside.

"Luna, I apologize for the trouble. Alpha Walter hasn't woken up yet. Please come inside and wait with me." The butler stopped in front of me and gestured for me to follow.

I followed him into the ward.

The butler had been Walter's trusted aide for years. Most of the time, his words and actions represented the old Alpha's will.

But Mrs. Duran stepped forward, blocking his path. "Aria Grayson is no longer the Luna of our Hawthorne family! It's one thing if you won't let us in, but why are you bringing an outsider in while the old Alpha is

unconscious? What if she does something and makes his condition worse? Can you take responsibility for Thrafy

The butler looked at her calmly. After all, he was an old man who'd fought alongside the old Alpha for years. Just one look from him carried serious authority.

Mrs. Duran couldn't hold his gaze and looked away. Her voice clearly lost some of its confidence.

"I... I'm just thinking about the old Alpha's safety!"

"Mrs. Duran, you can rest assured about that. I'm doing this because Alpha Walter specifically told me before he lost consciousness that he hopes the first person he sees when he wakes up is Luna Aria."

Mrs. Duran opened her mouth to say more, but the butler didn't give her the chance. He continued, "As for whether Aria is still the Luna of the Hawthorne family, neither you nor

I get to decide that. Only the old Alpha does. As long as he acknowledges her, even after the divorce, she can still be considered the Luna of the Hawthorne family.”

Mrs. Duran’s eyes widened and she staggered back two steps. “That’s impossible... How can you say that... How could the old Alpha say something like that... Damon is his eldest grandson. How could he choose an outsider over...”

The butler looked at the others. “Does anyone else have objections?”

When no one spoke, he turned back to me and made a “please” gesture, leading me straight into the ward.

I expected to see Walter lying in bed with his eyes closed.

But when I looked around, the large bed was empty. Walter was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window in blue-and-white hospital scrubs, leaning on a cane. When he heard us come in, he turned around. He looked energetic and healthy-nothing like someone who’d been hospitalized after fainting.

I hurried over. “Walter, are you... are you okay? How do you feel? Should I call the doctor to check on you?”

“No need, no need. I’m fine.” Walter waved his hand and smiled.

“But the butler said you suddenly fainted...” I said, confused.

“That was fake-just to fool the people outside.”

I turned to look at the butler. He smiled and nodded.

The heavy worry I’d carried the whole way here finally lifted. I let out a long breath. Thinking back to the panic and anxiety I’d felt when I got the butler’s call, and now seeing Walter safe and sound, my eyes suddenly welled up with tears.

“I’m fine. Why are you crying?” Walter tried to comfort me.

“I’m happy. Seeing that you’re okay makes me happy.” I wiped my tears.

Walter laughed and looked at the butler. “See? I was right. Compared to those vultures outside who are probably worried they’ll get less inheritance when I die, Aria is the one who truly cares about my health.”

“You are absolutely right. Earlier, even when Mrs. Duran was giving her a hard time, Luna refused to leave.

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She said she wouldn't go until she knew you were safe," the butler agreed.

Co

"When the butler mentioned Mrs. Duran, Walter's face darkened and he snorted. "Send that woman home. I

don't want to see her until I'm discharged!"

The butler nodded.

"What's really going on? If you're fine, why did you..."

I didn't finish the sentence.

Walter sat down the sofa with his cane's help.

The butle

learne

alter, then said to me, "It was Mrs. Duran. After the old Alpha came back and

d you to sign the divorce papers, he asked her what happened..."

ather died in that accident and she couldn't accept reality, she abandoned her

t without looking back. She only came to see him a few times in over ten years. That's was selfish and irresponsible! I knew she blamed me for forcing Damon to marry you and down on you. But since she never thought about remarrying all these years, I turned a er little schemes against you. But she went too far this time-actually forcing you to get ust thinking about it makes my chest tight with anger."

brought him a glass of water.

the main reason I asked you to come is to put your mind at ease. That divorce agreement doesn't nt. Tomorrow I'll have someone withdraw your divorce application." Walter took the water, patted the ck of my hand, and said.

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Chapter 90-

Aria's POV

Withdraw the divorce application...?

Chen

I stood there, completely stunned. I never expected Walter would do something like this. I pressed my lips together and said quietly, "Walter, I signed that divorce agreement because I wanted to."

"Aria, didn't we agree it would only happen after nine months?"

I gently pulled my hand back and lowered my head, a heavy wave of guilt washing over me. "I've already proposed a separation to Damon. I swore it by the Moon Goddess."

"I'm sorry. I can't go on living with Damon anymore."

"And nine months from now, we'll formally dissolve the marriage."

Walter's brows furrowed. He stood up slowly, looking down at me as if searching my face for answers. Then, suddenly, he pressed his hand against the left side of his chest.

"...Why? Aria, didn't you love Damon so much?"

My hands clenched into fists. My palms were sweaty. I stayed silent for what felt like forever before I finally found the courage to lift my head and meet his eyes.

In a soft, steady voice, I answered, "We all have to move forward with our lives. In the past, I was so naive. I thought that if I just stayed in the same place and waited long enough, Damon would eventually turn around and come back to me. But these past few weeks, I suddenly realized something important-no one can wait forever in the same spot. Not other people... and not me either."

Walter looked at me for a long, quiet moment. Then he let out a deep, tired sigh.

"Walter..." Maybe it was just my imagination, but after I finished speaking, the strong, energetic Walter suddenly seemed to age several years in an instant. The hair at his temples looked even whiter than

before.

"I understand what you mean, Aria. You don't have to say anything more." Walter slowly sat back down on

the sofa.

I knew this conversation had to happen eventually. I just didn't expect it to come so soon.

Thinking about how he had stood up for me and defended me earlier, I felt even more guilty. Once again, I whispered, "I'm sorry. I've let you down."

Walter shook his head gently. "Aria, you did very well. You have never let me down-not once."

When I heard those kind words, I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. They rolled down my cheeks. I bowed deeply to Walter, my voice breaking slightly.

"Alright, alright, stop crying now. You don't look pretty when you cry." Walter smiled at me with warm, gentle eyes. He asked the butler to help me stand up straight and said, "I'm tired after all this drama. Aria, you should go back and rest. Go on, let those troublemakers waiting outside come in too."

Walter's original plan had been to use this one year to give Damon and me time to truly get to know each other. How that divorce had become inevitable, he needed time to accept it. I didn't say anything else. I turned around and walked out of the room. Behind me, I thought I heard Walter let out a long, heavy sigh that seemed to carry all the weight in the world.

Damon's POV

"Did you all hear that clearly?" Walter slammed his cane hard against the floor and spoke suddenly, his voice sharp. I pushed open the bathroom door and stepped out. As someone trained to move silently, I

fectedly the entire time, so Aria never realized! was there listening to every

had hidden my pres

word.

The butler

"Gran

lea

and bowed respectfully. "Alpha Damon."

portant matters at the company waiting for me. Since you're feeling fine now, I'll st to keep my voice steady and hide the infitaton building inside me.

old, mocking laugh. “What’s the hurry? Before Aria came in, weren’t you so confident w the divorce application could be withdrawn, she would agree without hesitation?”

thdraws the application, I’ll still go through with the divorce,” I said without missing a beat. t she didn’t try any tricks actually works out perfectly for me.”

eyebrows shot up in anger. He raised his cane and pointed it straight at me. “Good. Very good. k it works out perfectly. After the divorce, don’t come crying to me when you start to regret it!”

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Chapter 93

Aria’s POV

After I left the inpatient department at Pack Hospital, I didn’t leave right away I stood on the steps, pulled out my phone, and let my finger hover over the name “Damon”

These past few days, I’d been waiting for Justin to call or text me about when we should go to the courthouse to get our divorce finalized. Tomorrow was the day Damon and I had agreed on, but there was still no word from Justin. I wasn’t even sure if he’d reminded Damon

Just as I was thinking about it, a heart-wrenching cry suddenly cut through my thoughts.

It was the sound of a small child crying

I followed me sound down the steps and walked along the garden path beside the hospital building. After a short dance, I saw a little girl who had fallen on the pebble path. Her two small pigtails were loose and

looked about one year old-just old enough to walk steadily.

messy

round. There was hardly anyone in this area. How could such a small child be here alone?

ink twice about it. I hurried over and gently picked her up, “Sweetie, are you hurt? Let me take a

kay?

moment I lifted her, the little girl's small hands clutched tightly onto my sleeve, then on my lap and carefully checked for injuries.

Happily, it looked like she'd only taken a tumble. Her palms were a little scraped, but there were no serious wounds,

"Sweetie, where are your mommy and daddy?" I asked gently, seeing the tear stains all over her little face, my heart melted. I reached out to brush the hair from her forehead and used my sleeve to wipe away her

tears,

Maybe she was exhausted from crying so much. Her sobs grew quieter. But when I said "mommy and daddy," her tiny pink mouth turned down and she started wailing again. I quickly pulled her into my arms and patted her back softly.

"It's okay, don't cry"

No matter how I tried to comfort her, the little girl wouldn't stop crying.

Hearing her cry like that made my chest ache, like something was squeezing my heart.

"Don't cry, okay? You want to find mommy and daddy, right? I will help you look for them. Be good, don't cry anymore?"

The little girl looked small and thin, but after holding her for a while, my arms started to ache,

I wanted to put her down and hold her hand while we walked, but she clung tightly to my neck. If I tried to pull away even a little, she'd start crying.

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Claim

had no choice but to grit my teeth and keep holding her. I tried to figure out which direction to go to find her parents, or maybe take her to the information desk.

"Wait, don't cry. Hold on a second. I have some candy for you, okay?"

I usually kept mint candies in my bag for when I worked late on drawings and needed a little energy boost.

"I know I had a few left..." With the little girl still crying in one ear and me unable to find the candy with my free hand, I started to feel completely overwhelmed.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over me.

Then I saw a pair of shiny black dress shoes in front of me.

I looked up quickly. The sunlight was a little blinding, so it took me a few seconds to see clearly. When my vision finally focused, I froze.

From this low angle, the man looked tall and imposing. The sunlight filtering through the tree leaves made his already handsome features look even sharper and more defined, like a god.

“You...”

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Chapter 92.

Aria's POV

Earlier, outside Walter's ward, I hadn't seen Damon and thought he wasn't coming.

The man in front of me had a dark, brooding look in his eyes. He glanced at me, then bent down and scooped up the little girl.

Claim

The moment she saw Damon, she stopped crying. When he lifted her into his arms, she curled up against him obediently.

“What are you just standing there for?” Damon's deep voice suddenly snapped me out of my thoughts. I blinked back to reality and realized he'd already walked several steps away with the little girl in his arms.

I quickly grabbed the bag that had slipped off my shoulder and hurried after him.

The walk from the side garden to the information desk wasn't far. I deliberately stayed two steps behind him, following quietly.

A light breeze stirred the air, sending yellow leaves from the trees above drifting down onto his broad shoulders.

The little girl had fallen asleep in his arms at some point.

For a moment, I felt dizzy. I remembered how three months ago, right after I found out I was pregnant, I'd imagined a scene just like this—a family of three, living peacefully together.

A sharp pain stabbed through my chest. I unconsciously pressed my hand to my lower belly, sadness flickering across my face.

Soon, we reached the information desk.

People bustled around us in the busy, noisy lobby. I hung back to the side, looking for a chance to speak.

Suddenly, “Baby!” A frantic woman’s voice cut through the crowd as she ran toward us.

The little girl’s eyes flew open. When she saw the woman, she immediately burst into loud sobs. “Mama!”

“Don’t be scared! Mama’s here!”

Hearing her child cry, the woman didn’t care about anything else. Panicked, she shoved me hard out of the

way.

I wasn’t expecting the push and stumbled backward. Just as I was about to fall, Damon stepped forward, caught my arm, and pulled me against his chest.

With a dull thud, my forehead smacked into his solid chest. The impact wasn’t too hard, but it still stung

The woman clutched the little girl tightly, tears streaming down her face. “Baby, my sweet baby, I finally found you! You scared me to death. I thought I might never see you again! Let me check if you’re hurt!”

“Auntie..”

Claum

The little girl wriggled out of her mother’s arms, toddled over on her short legs, and hugged my leg. She wasn’t crying anymore.

The woman looked shocked and quickly tried to pick her up again.

“Auntie...” the little girl called to me again when I didn’t respond. Her voice was unclear but soft and sweet, enough to melt anyone’s heart. I remembered the mint candy I’d

finally found in my bag after Damon had taken the girl. I pulled it out, crouched down, and opened my palm.

“Candy!” The little girl’s eyes lit up with pure joy. She reached out and took it without hesitation.

Fear flashed across the woman’s face. “You can’t eat that!”

od up and said calmly, “It’s just a mint soft candy. It’s perfectly safe.”

wrapped the other piece right in front of everyone, popped it in my mouth, and showed them the empty pper.

pha!” Four or five people in white coats hurried over. The man in front looked anxious and flustered.

He smiled apologetically and extended his hand to Damon. “Alpha, do you have time to join us for coffee?” he asked respectfully.

“I have other business to attend to. Maybe another time, Director.”

“Of course... next time then. I’ll take you to dinner next time.”

Even after being turned down, the director didn’t look upset at all. He was completely understanding.

No matter how oblivious the woman had been, she finally realized who Damon was. Remembering how she’d pushed me, her face went pale. She stammered,

“I... I... I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to... I was just terrified. I’m sorry! Alpha, please... please forgive me!”

She paused, then quickly turned to me and bowed. “I’m sorry, miss. Please forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. Your reaction was understandable. She’s so little. In the future, try not to leave her alone when you use the restroom. You think she won’t wander off, but with so many people around, you can never be completely sure.”

The woman hung her head in shame. “You’re right... it was my fault. Thank you. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

The little drama ended and everyone dispersed. The woman left, carrying her child.

I watched them go and suddenly thought of my unborn baby. I wondered if it would have been a little girl

too...

If that baby were still with me, I'd probably be showing by now, wouldn't I?

A bitter ache rose in my chest.

"Aria, it's a little too late for me now, Damon said mockingly from beside me.

My whole body

et his eyes.

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"What? Did I say something wrong?" He reached out and gripped my chin, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Aria, drop that innocent, pitiful act. Or do I need to remind you that you were the one who killed your own child?"

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

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Aria's POV

I killed my own child with my own hands?

The moment those words left Damon's mouth, it felt like a knife had been driven straight through my chest. The pain was so sharp I could barely breathe.

Clairo

I bit down hard on my lip, forcing the hurt back down as deep as I could. I jerked my head away to break free from his grip and said in a hoarse, shaky voice, "Don't worry. I don't regret it any more now than I did before."

Damon's face darkened like a storm cloud. The veins on his forehead bulged. "Aria!"

I took two steps back, putting some distance between us, and said quietly, "Tomorrow at nine in the morning, let's meet at the courthouse and finish the divorce paperwork."

He marrowed his eyes. The cold aura radiating off him was so intense it made me shiver.

I stood there and looked straight at him, my expression calm and resolute.

“You’re in such a hurry,” he said with a cold laugh. “Already found your next guy? If you have, then Miss Grayson had better come collect her things from my house promptly-before your new lover starts suspecting you of being unfaithful. And tell me is that man Noah? You know his real identity-”

“Ending it sooner is better for both of us,” I cut in quickly “No point dragging it out and making things more complicated than they need to be.”

“Aria, how dare you!” His throat worked. His eyes were ice-cold. Before I could respond, he stepped closer, his voice full of accusation. “You answer so decisively-don’t tell me you and Noah have been carrying on behind my back all this time?!”

His Alpha pressure suddenly crashed down on me like a tidal wave. My legs started shaking and I could barely stay upright. I clenched my fists so tight my nails dug into my palms. I took a deep breath and asked, “Does it really matter?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he sneered at once. “I’m just curious whether Noah would really man the trash I threw away.”

Slap!

I raised my hand and slapped him hard across the face.

The sound cracked through the air.

Damon pressed his left hand to his cheek. For a moment, he looked like he couldn’t believe it. This was only the second time I’d ever slapped him.

The two of us stood locked in place, the air itself seeming to freeze.

“So this is how Mr. Hawthorne speaks of his own Luna. Oh-forgive me. His former Luna

Noah stepped out from the corner in his doctor’s coat, his gentle voice cutting through the tension.

~”Let me tell you something, Mr. Hawthorne. If Aria is willing, I would gladly make her the Luna of the

Whitemoon Pack.”

I couldn’t help it-my eyes went wide.

Luna? The Luna of the Whitemoon Pack? What did he mean?

I thought back to certain details. The auction. The undisclosed VIP list. And the strangers' murmuring from before-"Is he really not an Alpha?"...

Claim

Noah stood beside me, the most sincere apology in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Aría. My family is... complicated. I was afraid my identity would put pressure on you. Forgive me for keeping it from you."

There was something beguiling about Noah's eyes.

But

"Alright, Noah," I answered softly. "I forgive you. You never did anything to hurt me. A white lie-I know that's a normal thing."

Noah smiled. Damon, on the other hand, flew into a rage.

Aria!"

His roar came at me together with the crushing force of his Alpha power.

Noah stepped in front of me, shielding me, taking the pressure in my place.

"Aria! Well done!" Damon's voice was as cold as a serpent's glide. "Just like that, you forgive him! Then what gives me-"

"Damon! This is a hospital-not a wolf den!"

I shouted, my wolf Lydia roaring inside me, trying to jolt Damon back to his senses.

Mercifully, Damon slowly calmed.

"Damon, I told you long ago-we're over."

Damon went completely still.

"At nine tomorrow, I'll come collect the things left at your house."

"Damon, I want to cut every last tie between us."

"Nine o'clock tomorrow morning. I'll be waiting for you at the courthouse." My hand was still clenched in a fist as I spoke. I forced myself to turn and walk away.

After Damon left, Noah drove me home.

“Aria, the moment you’re willing, I can protect you and take you away from all this. The Whitemoon Pack needs an architectural genius like you. Believe me-I’ll always be the one standing behind you.”

I couldn’t help recalling what he’d said earlier that day-that if I was willing, I could become his Luna.

Clam

It was a bold declaration, made right out in the open.

But it left me uneasy, my heart pounding.

I hadn’t even fully ended my marriage to Damon yet. This... this wasn’t right.

And besides, I had long since lost any longing for the position of Luna.

After a long moment, I finally spoke. “Noah, I’m sorry.”

Noah froze for an instant. Perhaps realizing he’d been turned down, a faint flicker of disappointment passed through his eyes.

“It’s alright, Aria. I won’t force you the way Damon did. I can spend my whole life waiting for your choice- until the day I die.”

“No-don’t say things like that.” I was taken aback.

I didn’t want Noah to be like this. Not at all.

Besides, I didn’t want to think about romance right now. I needed all my energy for my career-and my revenge.

But Noah didn’t seem to take my words to heart.

I couldn’t sleep at all that night.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the same scene playing over and over-me lying on that cold operating table, terrified and desperate, calling out Damon’s name again and again while the pain tore through my body.

But he never answered.

At the same time, he was with Claudia, taking her to the hospital for a prenatal checkup-fretting over a child that wasn’t even his.

This was a hatred I would never be able to set down. No matter how much time passed, I would carry it with me, always.

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 96

Aria's POV

When morning finally came, felt exhausted but strangely calm. Nine o'clock. In just a few hours, I could finally say goodbye to the past.

Astrid and I had breakfast together before her family trip. We sat at the dining table, and I pushed the toast around on my plate before finally telling her what happened yesterday-how I slapped Damon.

Astrid's eyes went wide. Then she grinned and gave me a thumbs up. "You should've slapped him a long time ago! That guy had it coming. I'm proud of you, Aria."

After breakfast, I watched her get into the car and waved goodbye.

It was just past eight. I'd told Damon we would meet at nine. Going now felt a little too early.

Just as I was standing there debating, my phone rang. It was Joshua.

"Hey, why are you calling me so early?" I asked, trying to sound normal.

"Aria..." Joshua's voice was hoarse and strained. "Dad collapsed last night. He still hasn't woken up."

The phone slipped from my hand and clattered to the floor.

Joshua's voice kept coming faintly through the speaker. "Aria? Aria? Are you okay?"

I pinched my arm hard, picked up the phone, and forced myself to sound steady. "I'm heading to the hospital right now."

At the hospital, outside the ICU.

I stood behind the thick observation glass, tears blurring my vision as I looked at Dad lying unconscious with an oxygen mask covering his face. "Dad..."

Joshua said he got a call from the lawyer in the middle of the night and rushed over. He'd been awake for hours during the emergency.

"Aria, don't worry too much," Joshua said, gently placing his hand on my shoulder. The words seemed to stick in his throat.

"Dad's treatment was going so well. How could he just collapse like this?" My heart was in complete chaos. We were so close to having our family together again, and now Dad's condition had suddenly gotten worse. How was I supposed to accept that?

"Noah said it might be a side effect from the new medication," Joshua explained.

"...New medication?"

Joshua nodded and continued, "We didn't tell you before because we didn't want you to worry, but before Dad got medical parole, his heart failure had already reached the late stage. Even with the top cardiology team treating him after his release, the results weren't great. Those medicines could only give Dad."

more years at most."

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"So Dad asked for the new drug?" I asked, my voice breaking.

"The new drug has shown promising results for late-stage heart failure like Dad's, but it's still in clinical

trials. The doctors were hesitant to use it at first. They only agreed after asking for Dad's consent."

"Aria... it was Dad who requested the experimental drug."

Tears I couldn't hold back anymore fell from my eyes. I turned my head and looked back into the ICU.

After a long moment, I asked again, "Did the doctor say how long it would take for him to wake up? Since it's an experimental drug already in clinical use, the side effects shouldn't be too severe, right?"

Joshua didn't answer.

My heart sank. It felt like all the strength was draining from my body. My voice trembled. "Joshua..."

“The doctor said if Dad doesn’t wake up by this afternoon, we can’t rule out...” Joshua’s voice also became choked. He looked at me steadily and said,

“We can’t rule out the possibility that he might slip into a coma.”

The last bit of hope was crushed.

I couldn’t stand anymore. I crumpled to the floor, buried my face between my arms and knees, and cried softly, trying to muffle the sound. “No... Dad, please don’t leave us. I’m begging you!”

Damon’s POV

11:45 a.m., outside Alpha Villa.

“I’m sorry, the number you dialed is busy, Please try again later.”

Justin dialed Aria’s number for the tenth time. He got the same automated message again.

“Alpha...”

Justin swallowed hard. He looked at the entrance of the civil affairs office, then at me, his eyes uncertain. “Alpha, maybe Miss Grayson overslept and her phone is on silent. Should I go check her apartment?”

I held back my rage and didn’t say a word. I raised my fist and slammed it hard against the wall behind me. Chunks of concrete flew off. Justin jumped back two steps in alarm, eyes wide, pressing his body against

the wall.

Comme.its

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 97

Aria’s POV

Dad finally woke up after being unconscious for nearly fifteen hours.

VIS Ports

After Noah finished his routine check-up and confirmed there were no immediate problems, they moved Dad back to the monitored ward. The doctor came out and explained his condition to Joshua and me:

“From the test results, the new drug did help Mr. Grayson’s heart failure significantly. However, his body may not be suitable for continued use. I will let the expert team will discuss a new treatment plan soon.”

“You can set your mind at ease. Mr. Grayson’s condition is stable for now.”

It was only then that I learned the team of specialists had been hand-picked by Noah himself from the Whitemoon Pack-the finest medical team there was.

Hearing Noah say it, Joshua and I let out a breath at the same time.

“Noah, thank you. Truly.”

Noah’s deep sea-blue eyes crinkled with a smile.

“Don’t thank me, Aria. I’ll look after your father as if he were my own family. Please, don’t worry. I need to run some further examinations on him now.”

I watched as the nurses and Noah wheeled my father out of the ICU.

My expression was complicated and sad. I really wanted to go over and see him, but I knew I still couldn’t.

Joshua noticed what I was thinking and patted my shoulder.

“By the way, you said you had something to tell me the day before yesterday. We still have some time now. Go ahead.”

Joshua and I walked toward the elevator. After a few steps, I stopped and said, “Joshua, what I’m about to say might shock you, but I hope you’ll listen carefully.”

Joshua saw how serious I looked and stopped smiling. “Okay.”

I organized my thoughts, looked straight into Joshua’s eyes, and told him everything-how I had checked the intern list from two years ago at Grayson Group and all my suspicions about Claudia.

“...I don’t have solid evidence yet that Claudia was involved in the accident two years ago, but I hope you can trust me this once.”

Joshua’s face turned serious. His brows furrowed tightly. He stayed silent for a long time.

*Joshua?"

Joshua looked down at me and said, "Ever since we were little, whenever you suspected something, it always turned out to be true. Besides, you're my little sister-my only blood relative in this world besides Dad. If I can't trust you, who can I trust?"

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"I'm just worried that if this is really true, investigating Claudia will be too dangerous for you. So don't get involved. Let me look into her and the accident."

"But..."

"No buts." Joshua's tone was firm. "Aria, you used to know her, and she's still tangled up with Damon now. If she finds out you're investigating her behind her back, with her ruthless personality, she won't let you off easily."

"I'm different. I've had no contact with her. Even if she suspects someone is looking into her, she won't suspect me right away."

"If you find out anything, you have to tell me immediately."

Joshua agreed and checked the time. "It's already noon. Let's go. I'll drive you back. I have to get back to the company this afternoon to prepare for the detailed cooperation talks with James next month, so I won't have lunch with you."

I nodded and quickly took out my phone. The screen showed more than ten missed calls-all from Justin

Oh no!

Dad had just fainted. I was so worried I completely forgot about meeting Damon at the Pack civil affairs office to finalize the divorce papers. I didn't even call him.

I said to Joshua, "You go back to work first. I... I still have something to take care of."

After watching Joshua leave, I opened my contacts and dialed a number.

The mechanical ringing sounded twice and then stopped.

The call connected.

But except for faint static, there was no sound from the other end.

I tightened my grip on the phone. "Damon, something urgent came up this morning, so..."

“Aria Grayson, aren’t you tired of putting on these little acts?” Damon’s mocking voice, wrapped icy coldness, slammed into my ear.

“I know it was wrong to stand you up, but I really had an emergency. It wasn’t on purpose. If you don’t believe me, we can meet at two o’clock this afternoon. I’ll come find you and we can go to the court.” I tried to explain.

“Aria, what makes you think I’ll believe you won’t pull another trick? If you’re not tired of this game, I’m tired of playing along.” Damon said coldly.

Listening to his sarcasm, my throat felt like it was stuffed with cotton. “We can go this afternoon.

Commenta

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 98

Aria’s POV

“Enough.” Damon cut me off impatiently. “Aria Grayson, I don’t have time to waste on you.”

“I have a business trip this afternoon. We’ll talk about it after I get back.”

I stayed silent for a few seconds, then asked, “So when will you be bac-”

Before I could finish the word “back,” he hung up on me. The sharp busy tone rang in my ear.

28 Pow

I lowered the phone and stared at the ended call screen. My mind went completely blank. It took me a long time before I put the phone back in my pocket and walked out of the hospital.

On the last day of my break, I got a call from Walter. He said he wanted to eat the cheesecake I made.

The last time Walter was hospitalized and “woke up,” Damon had arranged a full check-up for him. There was nothing seriously wrong, and he could have been discharged to recover at home. But the old Alpha refused and stayed in the hospital for seven full days.

I knew that when Walter said he wanted cheesecake, he was really just looking for an excuse to see me.

After hanging up, I went to buy all the ingredients for the cheesecake, made it, packed it up, and headed to the hospital.

Just as I reached the door of the ward, Walter's energetic voice came through:

"Go check if Aria is here yet. It's been two hours already."

The butler replied and turned to open the door.

I happened to push the door open with the cheesecake in hand. "Surprise."

"Aria? Come here, come here. I have something good to show you." The moment Walter saw me, his half-gray eyebrows perked up. He waved me over excitedly.

I looked at the butler in confusion.

The butler didn't explain. He just smiled at me and said, "Luna, go on. The old Alpha has been wanting to give you this gift for a long time."

I nodded and walked over, sitting down across from Walter.

As soon as I sat down, Walter mysteriously took out a book about half an inch thick and placed it on the coffee table between us.

I looked closely and my eyes widened in shock. "This... this is the original design manuscript by Master George Famo?"

"Do you like it? It's yours!"

"I love it."

+25 Pom

George Fanto was a genius in architectural design. He had over a hundred buildings around the world, and every single one of his designs could be called a masterpiece. He was a legend in the architecture world!

After the genius designer passed away, his family donated his design manuscripts for publication.

The versions available on the market now are all printed copies. The originals were returned to George Famo's family after being reproduced.

When I was in college, the first time I saw George Famo's original design manuscripts, I was completely amazed. I had always hoped to one day see the real handwritten drafts of that design genius.

"I knew you would like it," Walter said, looking proud.

"How did you get the original version?"

"I have my ways."

Hearing him talk like a little kid showing off candy, I couldn't help laughing. I turned to look at the butler.

The butler understood and said, "While the Alpha Walter was recovering abroad these past two months, he happened to learn that George Famo's son was in the same sanatorium. The old man loved chess, so the old Alpha went to play chess with him and made a bet.

"If he won, George Famo's son would have to give him the original design manuscript. In the end, the old Alpha played chess day and night for several days and actually won the original manuscript."

My eyes widened in shock. "Walter..."

Walter frowned and grumbled at the butler, "You talk too much."

Then he turned to me with a kind, gentle smile and said softly, "Don't worry. I won the bet fair and square. That old guy's chess skills aren't as good as mine."

"I thought you were angry with me and didn't want to see me anymore," I said, lowering my head and pressing my lips together.

"I'm not like that blind boy Damon. I've seen everything you've done these past two years. And I promised your father I would take care of you. Even if you're no longer the Luna of the Hawthorne family, I'm still your Grandpa Walter."

I smiled and nodded.

When Walter saw that, he laughed heartily.

A knock sounded at the door. The butler glanced at Walter, then turned to open it.

Outside the door, Claudia stood there in an elegant outfit. When she saw the butler, she put on a smile and casually lifted the gift box in her hand. "I heard that Grandpa Walter wasn't feeling well and was

hospitalized a few days ago, so I came to visit him.”

The butler was momentarily stunned when he saw Claudia.

“Who is it?” Walter asked.

The butler turned toward the room. “It’s-”

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“Grandpa Walter, it’s me, Claudia.” Claudia smiled. Before the butler could finish, she slipped past him, walked through the living area into the inner room, and greeted him directly.

When Walter saw Claudia, the smile that had been on his face disappeared instantly. He looked past her and shot the butler a sharp look

The butler knew it was his mistake for not stopping her. “I’m sorry, Alpha.”

Claudia stood there. She hadn’t expected Walter to ignore her completely. The smile on her face stiffened, especially when she saw that I was also there. She tightened her grip on the gift box and stood straighter, pressing her legs together.

She forced an awkward smile and said to me, “Aria, so you’re here too.”

The look Claudia gave me was obviously darker, though it disappeared in a flash. I still caught it.

I gave Claudia a calm glance and didn’t say anything.

Claudia walked over and placed the gift box in front of Walter. “Grandpa Walter, I brought some supplements. They’re specially for people your age, and most of them are imported from abroad...”

“I’m not dying anytime soon. I don’t need them,” Walter said coldly, not appreciating it at all. “You should take these supplements back to the Stone family and give them to your adoptive parents.”

Then his tone turned gentle as he asked me, “Aria, I remember you know how to play chess?”

“I learned a bit, but I’m not very good.”

Walter smiled and tried to stand up with his cane. I immediately stood up too and reached out to help

him.

Claudia saw this and quickly stepped forward as well.

Walter glanced dismissively at Claudia's outstretched hand, turned slightly so I could support him, and continued, "Perfect. I've been stuck in this damn hospital room for six or seven days. If I don't get out and move around, people are gonna think this old bag of bones is ready to kick the bucket."

Vole

+25 Punt

Unbonding the Ruthless Alpha

Chapter 99

Aria's POV

I knew Walter was saying this for Claudia to hear.

Claudia, being as sharp and calculating as she was, naturally caught the sarcasm. The smile on her face became stiff and forced.

Claudia tried to intercept us. "Grandpa Walter, I know how to play chess too. How about I play a few games with you?"

"No need. I'm old now. Playing chess takes energy and time. A few games to pass the time is enough. Aria is my granddaughter-in-law. Having her keep me company is all I need. I don't need outsiders." Walter shut her down without leaving any room for argument.

Being rejected again and again by Walter, even someone as patient as Claudia couldn't keep smiling.

"I heard you lost a child recently? You should take better care of yourself. Standing here like this must be exhausting. You should go home and rest." Walter directly ordered her to leave. Before taking me away, he didn't forget to add,

"Oh, and don't forget to take your things with you when you go."

Claudia's face turned deathly pale. It took her a moment to force another smile. "I'll come visit you again next time."

With that, she grabbed the gift box and practically fled,

The moment Claudia left the room, Walter pulled his hand away from my support, leaned on his cane, and slowly sat back down on the sofa.

The butler and I exchanged a knowing look.

“Grandpa, weren’t we going to play chess?” I teased.

Walter scoffed. “I already played chess with that old guy overseas for two whole months. I’m sick of it. Whoever wants to play can go ahead. I’m not doing it.”

So the whole performance earlier was just to get Claudia to leave.

“She fell down by herself and lost the child, but she refuses to explain anything. What exactly is she planning? I can see right through her. Only Damon is blind enough to be fooled by that woman.”

Walter looked at me with sympathy and said, “Aria, you’ve been through so much.”

I just smiled and changed the subject. “Grandpa, come try the cheesecake I made for you.”

*All right

I said goodbye to Walter and walked out, approaching the elevator. Someone was standing there, clearly waiting for me

Chapter 97-

paused for a second, then continued walking naturally, passing right by her.

Claudia’s face darkened. She grabbed my wrist. “Aria Grayson, what do you think you’re doing?”

+25 From

“Miss Stone, that’s a very interesting question. I haven’t said a single word, but the moment you open your mouth you’re attacking me. If anything, I should be the one asking what you think you’re doing.” I calmly pulled my hand back and pressed the elevator button.

Claudia gritted her teeth, her eyes blazing. “Aria, it’s just the two of us here now. What’s the point of pretending? Walter treated me so coldly. Are you really going to tell me you didn’t do anything behind my back?”

When she said that, I thought it was such a joke that I couldn’t help laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” Claudia glared at me and continued self-righteously, “You knew I was coming to visit Walter today, didn’t you? You knew, so you came earlier on purpose just to make Walter humiliate me! Aria Grayson, you and Damon are already divorced. You’re no longer the Luna of the Hawthorne family. How do you still have the nerve to come here and cause trouble!”

I stopped smiling and stared at her quietly. “Go on.”

Claudia took two steps back, caught off guard. “What?”

“Good. Since you’re done, it’s my turn now.” I took a step closer to her and said word by word,

“Claudia Stone, first of all, I didn’t know in advance that you were coming to visit Grandpa Walter. Even if I had, I wouldn’t change my plans just to avoid you.”

“Second, you should reflect on what you did to make Walter treat you so coldly instead of blaming others. I don’t have time to gossip about someone who means nothing to me. Not everyone is like you, and not everyone can be fooled by your pathetic acting.”

“Finally, even though I divorced Damon, it doesn’t change the fact that I was once Walter’s

granddaughter-in-law. He treats me like family, and I treat him like my own grandfather. He’s sick and in the hospital. Why wouldn’t I have the right to visit him?”

The elevator arrived.

After saying that, I didn’t want to waste any more words on Claudia. I stepped toward the elevator.

Claudia refused to let me go. She rushed forward and grabbed me. “Aria, we’re not done talking. You’re not going anywhere!”

I yanked my arm free. “Claudia Stone, there’s nothing left to say between us.”

“I said you’re not going anywhere!” Claudia looked like she’d lost her mind. She blocked the elevator door and glared at me fiercely.

Suddenly, Claudia’s expression changed dramatically. She took a big step toward me, reached out, and yanked my hair aside, revealing Luna’s Tear.

Chapter

Max

Where did you get that Claudia pointed at the Luna's Tear on my earlobe, her voice sharp and demanding

I fanned my head to avoid her hand and followed her gaze. I touched the earring and finally understood what she was asking about

I should have taken these earrings off ages ago, but I hadn't worn earrings in so long that Damon had to soke my ediches several times that night at the auction before they finally went in. My ear holes had gotten inflamed, and when I got home, I tried a few times to take them off but couldn't. Eventually, I just

I don't like going to social events, and the only friend I have in high-society circles is Astrid. The Luna's Tear & spod because of the rare pink diamonds, but the design is simple enough that I could wear them with drawing much attention.

Now, seeing Claudia's reaction, she clearly knew where these earrings came from. There was no point in

"You should ask Damon about that, I said.

"That's impossible! Damon would never give those to you! Claudia's voice turned shrill. "Those were supposed to be for me! How could he give them to you? They belong to me! You must have used some dirty trick to steal them! That's the only explanation!"

Claudia's chest rose and fell faster with anger. Finally, she lunged at me, trying to rip the earrings off. "They're mine, Ana! Give them back! Give them back!

I never expected Claudia to suddenly rush at me like a madwoman. "Claudia Stone, listen carefully. Damon put these earrings on me himself. Even though I don't care about them, if you want them, you can ask him if he's willing to give them to you."

"Anal

From the corner of my eye, I saw the other elevator arrive. I immediately let go and turried to walk toward #.

But Claudia wouldn't let me go. The moment I released her, she raised her hand and tried to scratch my

face and neck.

I'm going to ruin your face! You won't be able to seduce Damon anymore!" I turned my head and saw Claudia screaming. Her long manicured nails were inches from my face. I instinctively raised my arm to block her

Her nails were long and sharp. With one vicious swipe, red scratches appeared on my arm.

“Ana, go to hell” Claudia failed to scratch my face and tried again. Her eyes flashed with malice as she suddenly grabbed the injured part of my arm.

I yanked my arm free hard.