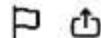




Chapter 25



Two days after the bond completes, Kieran brings it up over breakfast. I'm in his kitchen wearing one of his shirts, watching him make coffee with the kind of domestic ease that should feel wrong but doesn't.

"We need to do the DNA test."

My hand freezes halfway to my mug. "What?"

"Not because I doubt they're mine." He turns to face me, expression serious. "I know they are. The bond wouldn't have chosen me otherwise. But for pack law, for their inheritance, for making this official—we need documentation."

The mate mark on my throat pulses. Two days of being claimed, of learning what it means to have every cell in my body attuned to another person, and he's already thinking about legal structures.

"You want to claim them publicly." Not a question.

"I want to give them everything they deserve. My name, my protection, their birthright as Alpha heirs." His voice goes rough. "I want the pack to know they're mine. That you're mine. That anyone who threatens my family answers to me."

The possessiveness should grate. Instead the mate bond hums approval.

"Okay," I hear myself say. "Let's do it."

The private lab Kieran chooses is discreet, expensive, the kind of place that caters to people with secrets. We bring the kids that afternoon—Orion curious about the process, Luna quiet and watchful, Phoenix bouncing with energy she can't contain.

Three days of waiting. Three days of Kieran being intensely present in ways that should feel suffocating but don't. He's at my apartment for breakfast, drives the kids to school, shows up for dinner. Sleeps at his place but calls before bed like he can't stand going hours without hearing my voice.

The mate bond pulls at me when he's gone. Not painful, just... aware. Like part of me is missing when he's not close.

Lysander keeps his distance. My texts go unanswered. His office door stays closed when I'm at work. The few times I see him in the hallway, he nods politely and keeps walking.

It hurts in ways I didn't expect. I chose Kieran—or biology chose for me—but losing Lysander still feels like losing something important.

Day three arrives with an email notification at 2 PM. Kieran's in his office when I get it, and I don't open the attachment. Just text him: *Results are in.*

He responds immediately: *Coming to you.*

Two minutes later he's at my desk, ignoring the associates pretending not to watch. "My office. Now."

We close the door and he pulls up the email on his computer. The lab's letterhead fills the screen, professional and clinical.

DNA Paternity Test Results

His hand hovers over the mouse. "Ready?"

I nod, throat too tight for words.

He clicks.

The results load. Three separate analyses—one for each child.

Test 1: Alleged Father (Kieran Fenris) and Child (Orion Blackwood)

Probability of Paternity: 99.9%

Test 2: Alleged Father (Kieran Fenris) and Child (Luna Blackwood)

Probability of Paternity: 99.9%

Test 3: Alleged Father (Kieran Fenris) and Child (Phoenix Blackwood)

Probability of Paternity: 99.9%

Kieran just stares at the screen. Doesn't move, doesn't speak, barely seems to breathe.

"All three," I whisper. "You're the father of all three."

His hand finds mine, grips it so tight it almost hurts. "All three. From one night. One impossible connection."

I watch his face process it—the reality of what the mate bond already told him, now confirmed by science. Three children. Three impossible, powerful children born from a heat that should have destroyed me.

He turns to look at me and his expression cracks open. Everything he's been holding back—the fear, the wonder, the desperate need—floods his face.

"I'm a father." His voice breaks on the word. "Of three cubs. You gave me everything and I didn't even know."

Then he breaks. Pulls me against him and I feel him shaking, feel the emotion radiating through the mate bond. Not just his own—he's feeling mine too. The relief, the terror, the grief for eight years he missed.

"I'm sorry." The words choke out of him. "I'm so fucking sorry you did this alone. That you had to run pregnant and terrified because I was too blind to see what you were to me. That they grew up without me because I..."

I—"

"Stop." I frame his face with my hands. "You didn't know. We didn't know. The bond couldn't complete until my wolf woke up."

"But they're seven years old." His voice is wrecked. "Seven years of first words and first steps and everything that mattered, and I missed it. Missed them. Because I was too busy destroying you instead of protecting you."

The mate mark on my throat pulses and I feel his anguish like it's my own.

"You're here now," I tell him. "That's what matters. You're here and you're not running and you're claiming them publicly. That's everything."

He presses his forehead to mine. "I'll spend the rest of my life making up for those seven years. I swear it."

That evening we tell Lysander.

He comes to my apartment at seven, looking like he hasn't slept much. The kids are in their rooms doing homework, giving us privacy for whatever this conversation needs to be.

Kieran hands him the printed results without preamble.

Lysander reads them slowly. His face does something complicated—pain and acceptance warring for dominance, maybe relief underneath it all.

"All three," he says quietly. "Your biological children."

"Yes." Kieran's voice is careful, watching his brother's face.

Lysander sets the paper down, looks at me with eyes that hold too much.

"I'm their uncle."

The word hangs between us.

"I can live with that." He manages a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "Love them like my own, be present in their lives as family. But..." He looks at Kieran, then back to me. "You're not mine, Thalia. You never were."

The finality in his voice makes my chest tight.

"The bond chose." He says it like he's been repeating it to himself for days. "The DNA confirms it. She's yours. The kids are yours." His voice cracks. "And I need some distance to process this."

"Lysander—" I start.

"Don't." He holds up a hand. "I'm not angry. I'm not even surprised. The bond doesn't lie. But I need time to adjust to being the uncle instead of..." He doesn't finish.

He moves toward the hallway where the kids' rooms are. "Can I say goodbye?"

"Of course."

He hugs each of them—Orion first, holding him a bit too long. Luna wraps her small arms around his neck and whispers something I can't hear. Phoenix clings and asks when he's coming back.

"Soon, firecracker. I promise. Your uncle Lysander isn't going anywhere."

Uncle. The word settles like finality.

He leaves without looking back, and I watch from the window as he gets

in his car and drives away. The man who could have been theirs, who wanted to be, stepping aside for biology and destiny.

Kieran's arms come around me from behind. "He'll be okay. Lysander's stronger than he looks."

"He loved them." My voice breaks. "Loves them. And he's walking away because the DNA said they're not his."

"No." Kieran turns me to face him. "He's stepping back because the mate bond chose me. Because staying close would hurt more than distance. But he'll come back. Family doesn't disappear just because biology says something different than we hoped."

The mate mark pulses and I feel his certainty through the bond.

Kieran is the mate. The father. The choice made by biology and destiny that neither of us could fight even if we wanted to.

And somehow, that's going to have to be enough.

End *of* *The* Chapter

Chapter 25



Comments

22



Gifts

47