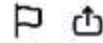




Chapter 9



Two days of working remotely and dodging calls buys me exactly nothing except delayed inevitability. I know they're coming for me. Know Lysander told Kieran everything about those emergency contact forms, about the three children I've been hiding.

Thursday morning, I walk into the office because hiding makes me look guilty. Also because rent doesn't pay itself and I have three kids who eat constantly.

Kieran's waiting at my desk.

One look at his face and I know this conversation is happening now, whether I want it or not. His expression is controlled—that CEO mask he wears in board meetings—but his eyes are pure fury barely leashed.

"My office." Two words. Not a request.

"I have a deposition at nine—"

"Now."

The elevator ride up feels like a death march. I keep my spine straight, eyes forward, refusing to let him see my hands shaking. He's standing too close, taking up too much space, and I can feel the anger radiating off him in waves.

The second his office door closes, he explodes.

"Lysander told me about the emergency contact forms." His voice is low, controlled, absolutely lethal. "Three children. Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

I stay silent. Anything I say right now will be used against me.

Before I can formulate a defense, Lysander walks in. Of course. They coordinated this ambush, cornered me between them.

Kieran slides a printed copy of the forms across his desk. My own handwriting stares back at me: Orion, Luna, and Phoenix Blackwood.

"Born March 15th." His finger taps the date with deliberate precision.

"Seven years and six months ago."

My throat goes dry.

Lysander picks up the thread, voice quiet but intense. "We spent that night with you in early July, eight years ago." He moves closer and I force myself not to back away. "You disappeared two months later in September. Right after my brother's engagement was announced."

Kieran's eyes bore into mine. "March birth means June conception." Each word lands with prosecutorial weight. "You were already pregnant when you ran."

The math is irrefutable. Laid out for me in black and white, no room for lies or deflection. I feel the walls closing in, the trap I've been running from for eight years finally springing shut.

"That doesn't mean—" I start, but Kieran cuts me off.

"Three children. Triplets from one heat." His voice goes rough, something raw bleeding through the control. "From two Alphas. Those kids are ours, Thalia. Mine or his."

I try to deflect, desperate. "You're making assumptions. I could have been with someone else—"

"Don't insult us both." Lysander's closer now, close enough I can smell

wild pine and rain. "You were nineteen, wolfless, terrified of your own shadow. You weren't sleeping around."

He pauses, lets that truth settle. "That night was your first heat. Your first time. And you got pregnant."

Kieran's barely holding himself together. "I want names. Ages. Everything about them." His hands flatten on the desk. "And then I want a DNA test."

The demand makes my blood run cold. Every protective instinct I have roars to life.

Lysander adds, gentler but just as firm: "We have a right to know which of us is their father. To be part of their lives." His expression almost pleads. "You can't keep them from us now that we know."

They're not asking. They're telling me how this is going to go, treating this negotiation as already won.

I'm backed into a corner, panic rising in my throat. But panic made me run eight years ago. Panic made me survive.

My voice comes out cold, steady, laced with the threat I've kept in reserve for exactly this moment.

"If either of you tries to force a DNA test, if you make any legal moves to establish paternity, if you so much as hire an investigator to find out where I live—" I let the silence stretch, watching their faces. "I disappear with them. Forever. And this time, you'll never find us."

Both brothers freeze.

The threat lands because they know I'm capable. I've done it once already, vanished so completely even pack trackers with supernatural senses couldn't find me.

Kieran's face does something complicated—pain and fury and something that looks suspiciously close to fear. "You'd take them away? Keep us from our own children?"

"To protect them from you? From the pack? From what you'd turn them into?" My voice doesn't waver even though my hands are shaking. "Absolutely."

Lysander's expression cracks, something raw and desperate showing through. "We're not trying to take them from you. We just want—"

"What? To claim them? Make them pack heirs? Use them for bloodline politics?" I laugh and it comes out bitter, sharp. "I've seen what this pack does to powerful children. I won't let that happen to mine."

The silence that follows is suffocating. I watch Kieran's jaw clench, watch him fight some internal battle I can only guess at.

Finally he forces out words that clearly cost him everything: "Fine. No test."

Lysander's head whips toward his brother in shock. "You're serious?"

Then to me: "You'd rather we never know?"

"I'd rather my children stay safe," I say flatly. "One of you is their father. One of you is their uncle. You can both be in their lives or neither of you can." I meet their eyes. "Your choice."

Kieran's jaw clenches so hard I can see the muscle jump. Agreeing is killing him—I can see it in every line of his body. But he nods.

Lysander agrees too, though his acceptance comes easier. Maybe he's relieved to avoid the answer, to preserve the possibility of fatherhood without the certainty.

"We want to meet them." Kieran's voice drops to Alpha command.

Not a request. Never a request with him.

I set brutal conditions: slow integration on my schedule, they stay in their designated lanes or I'm gone. "And if either of you ever tries to take them from me, use pack law against me, claim parental rights—"

I leave the threat hanging. Crystal clear.

Kieran moves into my space before I can step back. Close enough I can smell cedar and smoke, close enough I have to tilt my head to meet his eyes.

"We're not your enemy." His voice drops lower, intimate and dangerous. "Not anymore."

His hand comes up, stops just short of touching my face. "But make no mistake, Thalia—I'm not letting you run again. From me or from this."

The possession in his tone should terrify me. Should make me bolt for the door and start packing.

Instead my stomach does this stupid flip that has no place in a professional confrontation about custody rights.

Instead my traitorous body leans toward him—just a fraction, just enough to prove I'm losing this war with myself.

He notices. Of course he notices.

And the way his eyes darken tells me everything I need to know about how dangerous the next few weeks are going to be.

End *of*