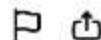




## Book 2, Chapter 31



**POV: Lysander**

"Won't you come with me?"

Claire's leaning in my doorway like she owns it, twisting a pen between her fingers. Two years and I still haven't broken her of that anxious tell. She smiles too bright, the kind that's trying to convince both of us this is no big deal.

It is, though. We both know it.

I look up from my laptop, brows lifting. "Come where?"

She steps inside, closes the door with her hip. The casual intimacy of the movement reminds me we've been doing this dance for eighteen months now—sleeping together, eating breakfast in my apartment on some weekends, pretending we're not circling the same conversation we keep avoiding.

And I love her in my own split way.

"My brother's birthday party. Tomorrow night." Her voice goes softer, more careful. "Just cake and dinner. Nothing formal. Small family thing."

The pen keeps spinning. Click, click, click against her palm.

"My parents will be there." She says it like an afterthought, but it lands like a weight. "I'd really like you to meet them."

Fuck.

The words hang between us, fragile and hopeful. I should say yes. After eighteen months of dating, meeting parents is the natural progression. Claire's brilliant and funny and completely uncomplicated in ways I desperately need. She doesn't come with pack politics or mate bonds or brothers who got everything I wanted.

She's just... Claire. Human, normal, safe.

Two years in Colorado should've been enough time to build something real with her. Two years of distance from Seattle, from watching Kieran play father to kids I loved first, from being Uncle Lysander instead of Dad. Two years of telling myself I've made peace with how things turned out.

Mostly I have. The sharp ache of losing Thalia dulled into something manageable. I can think about the mate bond choosing Kieran without wanting to break things. Can see photos of their family without feeling like I'm drowning.

But meeting Claire's parents means permanence and choosing this life instead of staying tethered to the one I left behind.

"Lysander?" Her voice pulls me back.

"I—" The excuse catches in my throat because I've used too many already.

She deserves better than this. Deserves someone who wants to meet her family, who doesn't flinch at the word "future," who can give her more than convenient affection between business trips.

"You don't want to meet them." Claire's smile goes brittle around the edges. "That's okay. I just thought after a year and a half—"

"I have plans this weekend." The words come easier than honesty.

"Already committed."

She freezes. Just for a second, but I catch it. Her hand stops mid-twist, pen going still. "What plans?"

I should've seen that coming. "The kids are visiting. Flying up tomorrow afternoon."

Her expression softens immediately. Claire adores the triplets even though she's met them once —just knows them through my stories and the photos on my desk. Orion explaining quantum physics at nine years old. Luna reading college-level literature. Phoenix bench-pressing weights that would crush most adults.

But the softness fades into something uncertain. "Are they the only reason you're here?"

"What?"

"In Colorado." She sets the pen down on my desk, stops the nervous fidgeting. "Working late every night. Coming home to me but never really *with* me." Her eyes meet mine, too knowing. "Are you building something here? Or just avoiding your life back there?"

The question hits exactly where she aimed it.

I lean back in my chair, buying time. Two years of therapy taught me to recognize my patterns. Running from intimacy. Keeping everyone at arm's length. Building refuge instead of home.

Doesn't mean I've figured out how to stop.

"It's complicated."

"I know complicated." She crosses her arms, not hostile but guarded.

"I've been your girlfriend for a year and a half. I've watched you be

complicated the entire time. But at some point, complicated just becomes an excuse for not committing."

Christ. She's not wrong.

I've been telling myself Colorado is a fresh start. That leading the expansion gives me purpose beyond being the brother who lost. That I've accepted my role as Uncle Lysander, that I'm fine with the kids calling Kieran "Dad" and Thalia "Mom" while I'm just the guy who visits sometimes.

All true enough to justify the distance.

Also complete bullshit.

"My work here isn't just expansion," I admit, the words coming out heavier than I intended. "It's refuge. Building something that doesn't remind me of—" I stop, can't finish that sentence without explaining things I'm not ready to explain.

Pack dynamics. Mate bonds that chose wrong. Loving a woman who was never meant to be mine.

Loving kids who were never meant to be mine either, no matter how much I wish DNA had said different.

"Remind you of what?" Claire's voice goes gentle, the way it does when she's trying not to spook me.

"Long history I'm still making peace with." I stand, needing movement, needing space. "That's not fair to you. I know that. You deserve someone who can show up, who wants to meet your family, who—"

"Who doesn't spend every free weekend entertaining his ex's kids?"

The words aren't cruel, just honest. And accurate enough to sting.

"They're not—" I start, then stop. Because what are they? Not my kids biologically. Not my ex's kids technically—Thalia was never mine to begin with. Not even part of my daily life anymore except for these visits I can't quite give up.

They're the family I almost had. The future biology chose for someone else.

Two years and I still can't let go.

"I'm not asking you to stop seeing them," Claire says quietly. "I'm asking if you're planning to keep your life divided like this forever. Work in Colorado. Heart in Seattle. Sleeping in my bed but never really here."

Fuck, that hurts.

She's not trying to be cruel. She's just tired of being the woman who gets my body but never my commitment. Tired of competing with a past I can't change and a family that exists perfectly well without me.

And I can't even argue because she's completely right.

"Thank you for the invitation." My voice comes out more formal than I mean it to. Professional distance creeping back in. "But I can't come tomorrow. The kids—"

"Right. The kids." She picks up her pen again, starts twisting. "They're a convenient excuse, aren't they? For why you can't commit to anything here. To me."

I don't answer. Can't answer without admitting she's right.

She studies my face for a long moment, then nods once. "Okay. I get it." She moves toward the door, pauses with her hand on the frame. "For what it's worth? I think you're punishing yourself for something that

what it's worth? I think you're punishing yourself for something that wasn't your fault. But that's your choice to make."

The door closes with a soft click.

I stand there in my too-quiet office, surrounded by furniture that still doesn't quite feel like mine after two years. Building a life that looks successful from the outside while feeling hollow inside.

My phone buzzes. Text from Orion: *Can we visit the planetarium when we come? They have a new exhibit on dark matter.*

I type back: *Absolutely. I'll get tickets.*

Three dots appear, then Luna: *Uncle Lysander, I finished the book you sent. Can we talk about the ending?*

My chest tightens. Uncle Lysander. The role I've finally accepted, the only piece of that family I'm allowed to keep.

Two years of acceptance doesn't make it hurt less.

I don't know how to belong to anyone. Not Claire, who deserves a future I can't give her. Not the kids, who already have everything they need without me. Not even myself, stuck between a past I can't change and a present I don't know how to fully inhabit.

## End of *The* Chapter

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