



## Chapter 32



### POV: Lysander

Saturday afternoon belongs to chaos wrapped in nine-year-old bodies.

Phoenix hits my penthouse like a natural disaster, immediately racing for the window seat with her overnight bag. "MINE! I called it in the car!"

Luna follows with her stuffed animals, arranging them on the couch with quiet precision that somehow still takes fifteen minutes.

Orion's already commandeered my kitchen counter, unpacking a portable robotics kit while muttering about "inefficient wiring standards in residential buildings."

Two years of these visits and I still can't predict what'll break first—my furniture or my heart.

"Uncle Lys!" Phoenix bounces on the window seat hard enough to test the structural integrity. "Did you get the planetarium tickets? Orion's been talking about dark matter for three weeks."

"Got them yesterday." I lean against the counter, watching them settle into my space like they own it. "But we're eating first. What sounds good?"

Phoenix's eyes go wide. "PIZZA!"

Luna nods enthusiastically, clutching her favorite stuffed rabbit. Orion doesn't look up from his circuit board but I catch the slight smile. "That establishment allows observation of kitchen machinery. Acceptable choice."

They're older now, sharper, more independent than they were at seven. Phoenix's strength is more controlled. Luna reads emotions with terrifying accuracy. Orion builds functioning robots in his spare time.

Still mine in all the ways that don't legally matter.

"Pizza it is," I say. "But if you break anything at the restaurant, I'm making you explain it to your mother."

Phoenix grins. "Deal."

So we got there. The pizzeria knows us. The staff doesn't ask why a single guy brings three kids every month. They just seat us at our usual corner booth and pretend not to notice when Orion sneaks glances at the industrial ovens.

Phoenix orders pepperoni with extra cheese. Luna gets Margherita because she's convinced herself she's sophisticated. Orion requests "whatever has the most efficient protein-to-carbohydrate ratio" and the server just brings him veggie supreme.

We're waiting for food when I notice the shift.

All three kids go quiet at once—that sibling telepathy thing they do that's honestly creepy. Phoenix glances at Luna. Luna nods almost imperceptibly. Orion adjusts his glasses in what I've learned is his tell for nervousness.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing," Phoenix says too quickly.

Luna's knee bounces under the table. Orion studies the salt shaker like it holds the secrets of the universe.

"Guys," I keep my voice level. "What's going on?"

They have a full silent conversation in the span of three seconds. Luna mouths something at Phoenix. Phoenix makes a face. Orion tilts his head in that calculating way that means he's running probability assessments.

Finally Phoenix leans in, voice dropping to a stage whisper that could probably be heard in Wyoming. "Uncle Lys... don't tell Mom, okay?"

My spine goes rigid. Every protective instinct I've spent two years pretending I don't have comes roaring back. "What happened?"

Luna glances around the restaurant like we're about to discuss state secrets. Her fingers twist in her napkin. "Some kids in the pack say we're... weird."

The word lands wrong. Too careful. Too practiced. Like they've been holding this for a while.

"Weird how?"

"They call us 'triplet freaks,'" Orion says flatly, still focused on the salt shaker. "Wolves don't typically produce multiples. We're a statistical anomaly that makes them uncomfortable."

Phoenix scowls with her whole face, that fierce expression that's pure Kieran. "But we don't CARE. We're gonna handle it ourselves."

Every muscle in my body wants to stand up, drive to Seattle, and have a very pointed conversation with whatever punk kids think they can bully my—

Luna's small hand grips my sleeve. Her eyes are too knowing, too aware of exactly what I'm thinking. "Please don't tell Mom. She worries too much."

Phoenix nods fiercely. "She'll make it a whole THING. With the pack council and everything. We just wanted YOU to know."

The trust in their faces nearly breaks me.

They came to me. Not their parents—their actual, biological parents who have every right and responsibility to handle this. They came to Uncle Lysander because I'm the one they can tell secrets to, the one who won't overreact, the safe adult who exists in the space between parent and friend.

It's a gift. Also a fucking burden.

"How long has this been happening?" My voice comes out rougher than I intend.

The kids exchange another look. "A few weeks," Luna admits quietly. "Since the new cubs joined the pack school."

"And you haven't told your mom or dad because...?"

"Dad would go full Alpha mode," Orion says matter-of-factly. "Challenge their parents. Make it a dominance thing. Statistically, that escalates playground conflict by seventy-three percent."

"And Mom would cry," Phoenix adds. "Not like, in front of us. But we'd hear her later, talking to Dad about how she was bullied too and she doesn't want that for us."

Luna's voice goes small. "We don't want to make them sad."

Christ. They're nine years old and already protecting their parents from their own pain.

"Okay," I manage. "I won't tell your mom. But if it gets worse—"

"We'll tell you first," Luna promises. "Then you can help us figure out what to do."

Phoenix grins. "See? We have a PLAN. We're very strategic."

Orion finally looks up from the salt shaker. "Actually, Phoenix's initial proposal was to 'punch them in the face until they stop.' This represents significant emotional growth."

"I STILL think that would work—"

"Violence is not optimal—"

"YOU'RE not optimal—"

I let them bicker while something cracks open in my chest. They trust me. Need me. In this specific way that doesn't belong to Kieran or Thalia, this is mine.

Just not in any of the ways I actually wanted.

The pizza arrives and they dive in with that single-minded focus kids have when food appears. The secret sits between us—acknowledged, shared, mine to carry now.

I take a bite of pizza that tastes like ash and responsibility I have no legal right to feel.

Then we got to the planetarium.

The lights dim as we settle into our seats. The dome ceiling comes alive with stars drifting across manufactured cosmos. Phoenix tucks against my left side. Luna against my right. Orion sits stiffly between his sisters but his hand finds mine in the darkness.

And I sit there with three kids who aren't mine pressed against me, successful and respected and absolutely hollow where it counts.

I have everything. Corner office, public recognition, financial security most people can only dream about. Built something meaningful in Colorado, something that's mine instead of living in Kieran's shadow.

Colorado, something that's mine instead of living in Kieran's shadow.

Everything except the one thing I actually want.

Real permanence. Real belonging. Real home.

The stars drift overhead while something aches in my chest that two years hasn't managed to touch.

Phoenix's breathing evens out against my shoulder. Luna's hand finds mine. Orion whispers something about celestial mechanics that I don't quite catch.

I close my eyes and pretend this is enough.

## End *of* The Chapter

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Comments

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Gifts

51

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