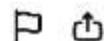




## Chapter 15



The depositions blur together after three hours. My phone's face-down on the conference table, silent, until it starts vibrating.

Once. Twice. Three times.

Portland Elementary flashes across the display and my stomach drops.

"I need five minutes." I'm already standing. "Family emergency."

The principal answers on the first ring, voice tight with fury. "Ms. Blackwood, your daughter physically threw a desk across the classroom. We need you here immediately."

The hallway tilts. "Is she hurt—"

"Phoenix is fine. But this behavior is unacceptable and we need to discuss—"

"Twenty minutes." I'm running for the elevator. "Don't do anything until I get there."

My phone rings again before I reach the parking garage. Kieran.

"Where are you going?" His voice cuts through my panic. "You left the deposition."

"School emergency. Phoenix did something, they won't tell me what—"

My throat closes. "I have to go."

"I'm coming with you."

"You don't need to—"

"You don't need to—"

He's already hung up.

The drive to Portland is forty-five minutes of breaking every traffic law. My mind conjures worst-case scenarios with each mile—Phoenix hurt, Phoenix's strength finally manifesting in ways I can't explain. Seven years of keeping them hidden and one phone call might unravel everything.

I park crooked across two spaces and run inside.

Phoenix sits in the principal's office in a chair too big for her, knees pulled to chest, face buried. She looks so small that something in my chest cracks. Ms. Johnson stands with arms crossed, face red. Principal Morrison looks grim. Another mother occupies the chair beside Phoenix, expression twisted with outrage.

"Ms. Blackwood." Morrison's voice could freeze fire. "Thank you for coming. We need to discuss Phoenix's behavior."

I move toward my daughter but Ms. Johnson blocks me. "Perhaps we should talk first. Without the child present."

"I'm not going anywhere without my daughter." I keep my voice level. "What happened?"

Ms. Johnson's fury finds its target. "Your daughter got into an argument during free time. When I intervened, she threw a full-size desk across the classroom." Her voice climbs. "A seven-year-old shouldn't have that kind of strength. It's not natural, and the violence—"

"Where was the argument?" I cut through. "What were they arguing about?"

"That's not the point—"

"It's exactly the point." I move past her to Phoenix, crouch down. "Baby, look at me."

Phoenix lifts her head. Her face is blotchy, eyes red-rimmed. "I'm sorry."

entire demeanor shifts. The polished CEO veneer vanishes, replaced by something cold and lethal. This isn't the man who kisses me in dark offices.

This is the Alpha who destroys threats without hesitation.

He doesn't acknowledge me. Just studies each person with calculating intensity. Ms. Johnson's fury falters. The other mother shifts. Morrison straightens.

Morrison's expression goes carefully neutral. "Mr. Fenris, threats aren't appropriate—"

"Not a threat. Observation." He pulls out his phone. "Though while we're discussing appropriateness, let's talk about your anti-bullying policy. The one on your website promising immediate intervention when students are harassed about their family structure."

Ms. Johnson goes pale. "We take bullying seriously—"

"Clearly not seriously enough, since Phoenix was being taunted when you

Phoenix. Perhaps we were hasty."

"Excellent." Kieran's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "My assistant will coordinate details. Phoenix will take the rest of the week off. Excused absence for emotional health." He pulls out his phone again. "I have several board members on speed dial if you need clarification on student welfare policies."

The meeting ends in under ten minutes. Every person has been bought, threatened, or both. Morrison promises follow-up, Ms. Johnson mutters about misunderstanding, and we're ushered out with apologies.

Phoenix stays pressed against my leg until we reach the parking lot.

Then she launches herself at Kieran, claws out and baring teeth and relief.

"Is Mr. Kieran mad at me?" she asks.

"No, baby. He's proud of you for defending yourself." I kiss her forehead. "We'll work on controlling your strength, okay? You didn't do anything wrong."

Kieran finishes his call and walks back. "Psychologist will contact you tomorrow. Behavioral plan drafted by next week. Morrison's already walking back the expulsion." He leans against my car. "She won't have problems there anymore."

"You didn't have to do that." My voice comes out rough. "The donation, the threats—"

"Yes, I did." He cuts me off. "She's mine to protect. So are you. And anyone who threatens what's mine—" He doesn't finish but the promise is clear.

