



Chapter 17



Kieran doesn't ask. Just sends a text Thursday morning: *Dinner at my place tomorrow. 6pm. All of you.*

I stare at the message, thumb hovering over the reply box. Should type out a refusal, something professional about boundaries and appropriate distance. But Phoenix reads over my shoulder and shrieks, "Kieran's house! Can we go? Please?"

Orion appears from nowhere. "Is it the penthouse with the view of Elliott Bay? I read about Fenris Tower's architectural design. Thirty-two floors, steel frame construction—"

"Yes," I hear myself say. "We can go."

Luna just smiles that knowing smile and goes back to her book.

Friday evening finds us in the private elevator that requires a key card to access the top floor. Phoenix bounces on her tocs. Orion reads the safety placard like it's fascinating. Luna presses close to my side, quieter than her siblings but watching everything.

The doors open directly into Kieran's penthouse.

Floor-to-ceiling windows showcase Seattle's skyline turning gold in sunset. Sleek furniture, minimalist design, the kind of space that screams wealth and control. Everything is sharp angles and clean lines except for the massive kitchen where Kieran stands at the stove, sleeves rolled up, completely at ease.

"You came." He grins at the kids. "Hope you're hungry. I made too much."

Phoenix runs to him immediately. "What are you cooking? It smells good. Can I help? Mama never lets me near the stove."

"Because you tried to 'improve' soup by adding hot chocolate mix," I remind her.

"It was an experiment," she protests.

Kieran laughs, lifts her to see into the pot. "Pasta. From scratch. Want to help with the sauce?"

And just like that, he's got all three of them. Phoenix "helps" with sauce under careful supervision. Orion asks questions about business strategy while chopping vegetables with alarming precision for a seven-year-old. Luna sets the table, carefully placing expensive plates and actual cloth napkins like she's done this before.

I stand in the doorway watching an Alpha heir cook dinner for children who might be his, feeling like I've stepped into some alternate reality. This is surreal. Kieran Fenris, co-CEO of a billion-dollar empire, teaching my daughter how to stir sauce without splattering.

"Your mom tells me you're good at math," Kieran says to Orion while they work.

"I'm adequate." Orion's serious face is so much like Kieran's it hurts. "I prefer physics though. Math is just the language physics speaks."

Kieran pauses mid-chop. "That's... actually a brilliant way to frame it."

"Ms. Anderson says I think differently than other kids." Orion arranges tomatoes in precise rows. "Mama says that's good. That different isn't bad."

Something crosses Kieran's expression—pride and pain tangled together. "Your mama's right. Different is powerful."

Luna appears at my elbow. "He likes us." Not a question. Statement of fact in that unnerving way she has.

"He's being polite," I manage.

"No." She watches Kieran laugh at something Phoenix says. "He likes us for real. His eyes go soft when he looks at Orion. Like he's seeing something important."

Seven years old and reading people like books. I don't know whether to be proud or terrified.

Dinner is chaos in the best way. Phoenix talks with her mouth full. Orion explains volcanic activity with hand gestures that nearly knock over water glasses. Luna asks quiet questions that somehow cut to the heart of every topic. Kieran handles all of it with ease—patient with Orion's tangents, gentle when Luna gets shy, laughing at Phoenix's wild energy.

For two hours I watch him play father and something cracks in the walls I've built around my heart.

This is what they deserve. What I couldn't give them alone. A father who shows up, who listens, who makes them feel valued instead of tolerated.

After dinner, the kids crash hard. Too much excitement, too much rich food, too much everything. Phoenix falls asleep on the couch mid-sentence. Orion's eyes droop over dessert. Luna just quietly announces she's tired.

"Guest room's ready," Kieran says casually. Too casually. "If you want to stay instead of driving back tonight."

I should refuse. Should bundle them into the car and drive the forty-five minutes home where things are safe and controlled. But Phoenix is already asleep and moving her means dealing with cranky seven-year-

old rage.

"Just tonight," I hear myself say.

Kieran leads us down the hall to what used to be his largest guest room. I remember it from pack gatherings years ago—one king bed, minimal furniture, designed for occasional overnight guests.

He opens the door and I freeze.

Three beds now. Not one king. Three twin beds arranged in an L-shape, each with different colored bedding. Blue for Orion with space-themed sheets. Purple for Luna with a soft quilt. Red for Phoenix with cartoon characters she loves.

Toys on shelves organized by type. A bookcase with age-appropriate reading—chapter books for Orion, illustrated stories for Luna, picture books for Phoenix. Even a nightlight plugged in near Phoenix's bed because she mentioned once, just once, that she doesn't like the dark.

He'd prepared this. Planned for them to stay. Created a space in his home designed around their needs, their preferences, their comfort.

I stand in the doorway watching my children climb into beds their father bought for them, in a room he designed around their personalities, and something in my chest cracks wide open.

"When did you do this?" My voice comes out rough.

"Two weeks ago." He helps Phoenix under her covers, tucks her in with practiced ease. "Right after the school incident. Figured they should have somewhere safe here."

Orion's already asleep, glasses on the nightstand. Luna watches us with those too-knowing eyes before they drift shut.

The second we're in the hallway with the door closed, the air shifts.

Kieran's hands frame my face, thumb tracing my cheekbone. "I watch you with them and I want everything." His voice is rough, desperate. "You, them, forever. All of it."

"Kieran—"

His mouth crashes into mine and thought evaporates. This isn't gentle or asking permission. This is eight years of denied want compressed into desperation, volcanic heat that should terrify me but doesn't.

His hands slide into my hair, angling my head back as he devours my mouth. I gasp against him and he swallows the sound, pressing me against the wall with his body. Every point of contact burns.

My legs wrap around his waist before I can think. He groans, lifts me easily, one hand fistling in my hair while the other slides up my thigh under my dress.

"Bedroom," I manage between kisses. "Now."

He's walking us down the hall, me wrapped around him, when reality crashes through the haze. We're twenty feet from a door where three children sleep. Three children who could wake up, could need something, could walk out and find—

"Stop." The word tears out of me. "The kids are right there."

He freezes immediately. Sets me down but doesn't step back, breathing hard against my neck. "Fuck."

I'm shaking, straightening clothes with trembling hands. My lips feel swollen, my skin too tight. Want wars with responsibility and responsibility barely wins.

responsibility barely wins.

"I should go." I move toward the guest room. "Check on them, then head home—"

"Stay." His hand catches my wrist, gentle but firm. "Please. They're comfortable, they're safe. Just stay tonight."

The plea in his voice nearly undoes me.

"And tomorrow?" I manage to meet his eyes. "What happens tomorrow when they wake up and we're both here and they start expecting this? Start depending on you being present?"

"Then I'm present." No hesitation. "Every day if that's what they need. What you need."

His thumb strokes the inside of my wrist, over my pulse. "Come back tomorrow. Without them. Let me show you what we could have."

His voice drops, goes rough with want. "Let me prove I'm not going anywhere."

I should say no. Should put distance between us before this consuming fire burns everything down. But I'm staring at the room he built for children who might not even be his, at the careful thought he put into every detail, and something in me breaks.

"Tomorrow," I whisper.

"Tomorrow." He pulls me closer, presses his forehead to mine. "I'll be waiting."

It's not a question. It's a promise.

Commented [Ma1]:

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End *of*