



Chapter 35



POV: Draven

The moment I stepped into the cool night air, Raven stirred. This isn't good, Draven.

My wolf did not elaborate. He rarely needed to. Many years of training had taught me to treat Raven's instincts as intelligence rather than noise, and right now his intelligence was saying that what happened in the garden had already happened and I was arriving late.

I moved forward with controlled steps. The garden was dark, the moon doing most of the work, the torches along the stone paths filling in what the moon missed. I kept my breathing steady. My muscles did not.

The scent reached me first. Flowers and damp grass, which was what the garden always smelled of, and underneath that, Isla — but faint. Fading.

Not the warm, specific version of her scent that I had learned to locate in a crowded hall. The trace version. The version left behind by someone who had been here and was no longer here.

My stride shortened. My eyes dropped to the ground before I had consciously directed them there.

A glint in the dirt caught the lantern light at an angle that would have been invisible if I had been walking faster. I stopped.

A chain lay tangled in the grass at the edge of the pathway, its crescent moon pendant catching the light. I crouched and picked it up. My thumb

moved across the clasp before I had decided to examine it.

The clasp was broken, not removed, not set aside carefully. Broken the way metal broke when the chain was pulled from a person who had not agreed to remove it.

I had placed that pendant around her neck two hours ago. I had told her she was mine.

My chest burned with the specific heat of a conclusion that had arrived before I had finished examining the evidence.

A growl moved through my throat, deep and involuntary, the kind Raven produced when the situation had already moved past the point where growling was useful.

Raven prowled inside me, his instincts roaring against the surface of my control. Not panic. Raven did not panic. He calculated at the speed that panic would slow down, and what he was calculating right now was threat, source, and response, in that order.

I straightened with the necklace closed in my fist, the broken clasp pressing into my palm.

Then movement at the edge of my vision caught my attention. Susan, crossing the garden at a run, which was not a thing Susan did without reason.

She skidded to a stop and her breath was short with the specific effort of someone who ran to deliver information, not because pursuit was behind her. "Alpha!"

I was already reading her face. Susan did not run without cause. My muscles coiled. "I found her."

The words should have been relief. They were not. Raven's low warning did not stop. It did not even soften.

Susan turned and gestured toward the packhouse entrance, the motion efficient, certain.

"Luna is here." My eyes moved with the gesture before my body had committed to the direction.

And then I saw her. Isla. Standing in the doorway, bathed in the warm light of the hall, the silver-threaded ceremonial gown flowing softly at her feet. The crescent mark clear on her cheek, catching the lantern light the way it always caught light.

Everything about her looked right. I did not move toward her. Inside me, Raven let out another low, warning growl. Not the growl he produced when a threat was present. The growl he produced when a situation was wrong in a way he could not yet name.

He was not reading her as significant. He was reading her as wrong, and Raven did not make that error.

I looked at the necklace in my closed fist. Then I looked at the woman in the doorway.

Raven's reaction to Isla had never been warning. From the first moment she walked onto my territory, my wolf had treated her with the specific attention he reserved for things he recognized as significant.

Not threat. Significance. The difference between those two registers was precise enough that I had learned to trust it.

I let nothing show on my face. The expression I wore walking toward her was the controlled expression, the one I had put on for two decades when

a room needed to believe I had already processed the situation. The most useful expression I owned, and I owned it completely.

She looked up when I approached. Her eyes found mine with a kind of searching quality, the particular attention of a person waiting for the other person to declare the temperature of the room.

Three seconds of silence. In those three seconds I watched her face for the things I knew it produced: the tightening at the corner of her left eye when she suppressed an emotion, the half-degree drop of her chin when she was uncertain.

The quality of stillness she had when she was choosing her words rather than finding them.

None of that was happening. Her face was very calm, with the specific quality of a surface that has been deliberately arranged rather than simply allowed to settle.

I let the observation settle into the part of my mind that was already building the case, and I kept my face exactly where it needed to be.

"Thank you, Susan." I said first and then looked at Isla. "Are you alright?" My voice came out level. The register I used when a question was also a test.

She nodded, the gesture slightly too smooth. "I think so. I got confused in the garden. I don't know what happened to me."

I studied her for another moment. Raven pushed against my control from the inside, insistent.

I reached out and took her hand, the gesture smooth and without pause, the gesture of a man confirming what he suspects rather than a man who

is surprised.

The contact was the information I needed. Her skin was right. Her temperature was right. The scent coming off her skin, beneath the masking herbs I now recognized for what they were, was close enough that two hours ago it would have fooled me completely. It was not two hours ago.

I kept her hand in mine and kept the controlled expression on my face and kept walking her toward the interior of the packhouse.

What I knew was not yet what I could prove. What I could not prove, I would not act on publicly. Not in a hall full of my pack on the night of the Luna ceremony.

But Raven was not wrong, and Raven had never been wrong about this particular register, in twenty years of running alongside me.

My grip around the broken necklace in my other hand tightened, the clasp pressing into my palm, and the burn in my chest was not confusion.

It was the specific, focused clarity of a man who has understood a situation and is deciding how to respond to it without letting the room see him decide.

I walked her inside and I gave the room exactly what the room expected to see, and my face gave them nothing of what I was already planning.

End *of* *The* **Chapter**

