

## Chapter One: The Unexpected Encounter

Dominic Black loathed gatherings like this.

At 35 years old, Dominic had experienced his fair share of tedious meetings with other Alphas, but none felt as grating as the ones held in ashly, articial places like this. The shimmering lights of the casino ickered in his peripheral vision, a constant reminder of the gaudy world he was temporarily trapped in. At 6'4", with a commanding presence and a body carved from years of combat and training, Dominic was hard to ignore. His sharp features—high cheekbones, a square jaw, and intense storm-gray eyes—told the world he was not to be messed with. His olive-toned skin, inherited from his mother's Mediterranean roots, glistened under the dim casino lights, making him seem even more imposing.

Dominic ruled his pack, Ironfang, with strength and quiet authority, leading by example rather than words. His pack respected him because he was relentless in his pursuit of protecting them and ensuring their success. Yet behind his stoic demeanor, a weight lingered—a yearning for his mate. It was something he kept buried deep, never revealing the loneliness that came from being the unmated Alpha of one of the most powerful packs in the region. But he couldn't afford to let that distract him now, especially not in a place lled with wolves who'd just as easily take advantage of any sign of weakness.

The buzz of slot machines and the hum of voices surrounded him, punctuated by the occasional cheer from someone winning at a table. The air was heavy with the smell of smoke, alcohol, and desperation—nothing like the clean, crisp scent of the forests surrounding Ironfang territory. As much as Dominic hated these places, this meeting was necessary for pack alliances, and he couldn't ignore the duty that brought him here.

Alphas from neighboring packs had gathered in this neutral zone to negotiate, resolve disputes, and forge new alliances. Despite the importance of the gathering, Dominic had no interest in playing nice with wolves he didn't trust. He'd rather be back in the woods, training, or doing anything that didn't involve smiling through thinly veiled hostility.

"It's always the same," Grant muttered beside him, his dark eyes scanning the crowded casino oor. Grant, Dominic's Beta and best friend since childhood, was his condant and the one wolf he trusted completely. Standing at 6'2" with a lean, muscular build, Grant was every bit the warrior, but his demeanor was far more laid-back than Dominic's. His easy grin and devil-may-care attitude often masked the sharp intellect he possessed. His warm, mocha-colored skin and curly black hair made him stand out, but it was his charm that got him into—and out of—trouble on a regular basis. Grant's playfulness balanced Dominic's seriousness, and though he liked to joke around, he was ercely loyal to his Alpha and the pack.

"They talk, they bicker, and nothing ever really gets done," Grant continued, his deep voice heavy with annoyance. "Then, they'll drink and pretend to be best friends."

"Of course," Mark interjected with a quiet chuckle. Standing at 6'1", the pack's Gamma was the most reserved of the trio. With his undercut dark hair and piercing brown eyes, Mark exuded an air of calm and control, always prepared to step in when things went south. His skin was the same deep bronze as his ancestors, a legacy of his mixed heritage. Mark was only a year younger than Dominic, and though quieter, he was as loyal and ercely protective as they came. Where Grant relied on humor to diffuse tense situations, Mark's approach was methodical and strategic—always thinking three steps ahead, always scanning for threats. "You're just mad because you're stuck in a suit. We could've been training today instead of wasting our time."

Dominic allowed a rare smirk to tug at the corner of his mouth. "You both act like this is the rst time we've had to deal with this. It's always like this. We suck it up, get it done, and then go home."

Grant groaned dramatically. "Yeah, yeah. But tonight, we're blowing off steam. I say we hit up the club. No more meetings, no more politics. Just us, a few drinks, and—"

"A few women?" Mark interjected, his usually serious brown eyes gleaming with rare humor.

Dominic shot him a sideways glance. "I'm not looking for women. I'm looking for my mate. But sure, we'll blow off some steam."

Despite his misgivings about social events like these, Dominic knew it would be better than sitting alone in his hotel room, stewing in his frustration over the day's meaningless negotiations. The casino's nightclub was just downstairs, and after a day of politics, it was exactly what his Beta and Gamma needed—and maybe what he needed too, even if he didn't admit it.

The club was loud, the thumping bass of the music vibrating through the oor. Neon lights cut through the dim room, casting shades of pink and blue over the swaying bodies on the dance oor. Dominic scanned the space, already feeling the tension in his muscles ease slightly at the sight of people laughing, moving, losing themselves in the music. It was a stark contrast to the rigid formality of the alpha meetings.

Grant, always the rst to jump into a good time, led the way to the bar, already calling for a round of drinks. Dominic accepted his, taking a swig and letting the bitter liquid burn its way down his throat. The burn was a welcome distraction, numbing the dull ache in his chest, the one that came from the constant pressure of leadership, of being responsible for every life in his pack. As they stood at the edge of the dance oor, watching the crowd, a sudden, unfamiliar scent hit him like a punch to the gut.

Vanilla and citrus.

It cut through the alcohol, the smoke, and the sweat in the air, a sweet, almost intoxicating scent that had his wolf surging forward in his chest, demanding his attention. Dominic's body stiffened, his grip on the glass tightening.

Dreamsicle. That's what it reminded him of—a cool, sweet dreamsicle on a hot summer day, back when things were simpler. He hadn't smelled anything like it in years, and his wolf was roaring in his mind now, pushing, demanding that he nd the source.

"Dom?" Mark's voice was tense, immediately picking up on the shift in his demeanor.

Dominic barely heard him. His eyes had locked onto the dance oor, where a woman—his woman—moved with uid grace among the crowd. Her back was turned to him, her gure lost among the throng of dancers, but he didn't need to see her face. His wolf knew, with every ber of its being, that this woman was his mate.

But she was human.

He knew instantly, could feel it in the way her energy owed, her lack of a supernatural aura. His mind warred with itself, a battle between the man and the wolf, knowing the complications that came with claiming a human mate. But his wolf didn't care. It howled for her, clawing at his insides with an urgency that made it impossible to ignore.

"What's going on?" Grant asked, his brow furrowing in confusion as he followed Dominic's intense gaze. "What the hell are you looking at?"

Mark, ever observant, had already realized something was up. His sharp eyes tracked Dominic's line of sight, landing on the woman in the crowd. "Who is she?" he asked, his voice edged with concern.

Dominic didn't answer. He couldn't. Every instinct in him was screaming to act, to move before anyone else got too close to her. His wolf was snarling now, as other men—both human and wolf—drifted toward her, their gazes lingering on her curves, their proximity tightening a knot of possessiveness in Dominic's chest.

He slammed the rest of his drink down, his decision already made. Without another word, Dominic pushed off from the bar and wove through the crowd, his heart pounding in sync with the music. As he got closer, her scent grew stronger, wrapping around him like a blanket, soothing and stirring him all at once.

There were too many men, too many eyes on her. That wouldn't do. Not for his mate.

She swayed to the beat, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing behind her. Dominic didn't hesitate. He slid behind her, his large hands resting lightly on her hips as he moved in time with her. For a second, she stiffened, but when she looked over her shoulder, the surprise in her eyes was quickly replaced by something else—curiosity.

Dominic's wolf growled in satisfaction as he felt her body relax into his. Other men, sensing the unspoken claim, quickly backed off, leaving the two of them alone in the middle of the crowded dance oor.

She was his, and even though she was human, that didn't change a damn thing.

He would have her.