

One

THE ONLY THING worse than being summoned to a pointless meeting? Being summoned three thousand miles away to a pointless meeting when you're about to embark on your annual family vacation.

Clay and the twins were in a lovely log cabin in Vermont. And me? I was sweating in a tiny oven of a meeting room somewhere in London. For absolutely no goddamned reason except that the British Alpha insisted I come, and I was trying to claw my way out of the hole I'd fallen into three years ago when I became Alpha of the American Pack.

"As long as we have your assurances that he'll behave himself, he's welcome in the States," I said. "We won't bother him."

“I should hope not, considering he’s my son.” That was Hollis John Parker, British Alpha, Lord something-or-other. I could never remember his title. Nick called him Lord Asshole. Not exactly poetic, but apt.

“The fact that he’s your son doesn’t mean he isn’t...” I struggled for a polite way to phrase it. “Young and spirited. I understand the French Pack kicked him out of Paris for changing into a wolf in the catacombs?”

“He was a child then.”

“It was six months ago.”

“He’s eighteen now.”

And so it went. Parker’s son had been accepted to Berkeley, and he’d summoned me to England to discuss the transfer, which I’d thought proved he was actually taking me seriously as Alpha, but as it turned out, he’d ordered me there because he seemed to be under the impression America was still a British colony.

He didn’t care to convince me his son could handle life abroad without another “Paris incident.” He expected my Pack to act as bodyguards for the boy. For me to order one of my guys to move across the country to do it.

Two hours later, I was striding down a London street with Nick beside me. When my phone rang, I yanked it out of my pocket so fast it slid from my fingers. Nick managed to grab it before it hit the pavement.

F O R S A K E N

He started to hand it back, still ringing. Then he glanced at the screen and made a face. "Private caller. You want me to—" "Please."

He answered with a, "Hello?" Then another one.

"Hang up," I said. "Bad enough I still get telemarketers when I'm on the do-not-call list. Worse when I get charged international rates for them."

As soon as I took the phone, it rang again, Private Caller flashing on the screen.

"Okay," I muttered. "Someone is about to get the brunt of my very bad day." I answered with a snarled, "What?"

"It's six o'clock," said a sing-song voice. "Do you know where your puppy is?"

Click. I pulled the phone from my ear and stared at it. Then I laughed.

"Not a telemarketer, I take it?" Nick said.

"No, a kid making a prank call. My first in about thirty years, I think."

"What'd he ask?"

"If I know where my puppy is."

Now Nick laughed. "Okay. Well, I think we can declare the fine art of phone pranks has officially died out. That makes no sense."

"Unless I had a puppy."

"Do you want a puppy?"

“No, but I’ll take a drink.”

He smiled. “I have a feeling that’ll cheer you up better than a puppy. And that looks like a pub right there. Shall we?”

“Please.”



ALPHA OF THE American Pack. The only female werewolf in the world, ascending to arguably the highest position in our world. Sounds impressive. The truth? It’s like getting elected town sheriff because no one else wants the damn job. And like taking it—not because you’ve always dreamed of being sheriff—but because, well, someone has to.

I like being Alpha. There are days—hell, even weeks sometimes—where I feel like I’ve found my place. Like I’m blessed with a damned-near perfect life. I’m forty-three, fit and healthy. I’m crazy about my mate, even when he *drives* me crazy. Same goes for my eight-year-old twins. I have great friends and an incredible Pack. And, of course...*Alpha*.

I can say there were no other contenders, but the others would argue that they didn’t want the job because they knew it was mine, that Jeremy had been grooming me since I got my shit together and recommitted to the Pack thirteen years ago. The only other possibility had been Clay, who really didn’t want the job.

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While he'd never admit it, I think Clay removed himself from the running so Jeremy didn't have to make a very tough choice. Clay is perfect twentieth-century Alpha material. He's the best fighter in the country—remorseless and relentless. Also brilliant. But that doesn't fly in the twenty-first century, when Alphahood is more about politics than pugilism. Jeremy says he'd have given me the position anyway, but I'm not sure he could have done that to his foster son. I suspect it would have been a joint ascension—an Alpha pair, like in a real wolf pack.

Sometimes I wish he'd actually done that. Made us both Alpha. Because to most of the world, I'm a figurehead, placed in a false position of power to appease those werewolves who'd freak out if "that American psycho" got the job. We've spent three years unsuccessfully trying to convince the world Clay isn't the real Alpha, and the situation has gone from damned annoying to downright dangerous.

We've made enemies of the Australian Pack, which is a lot scarier than one might expect. It started by us defending our own young Australian member—whose only crime seemed to be his very existence—and had somehow escalated into war-mongering. The Australians wanted our territory, and they used me to gain allies, saying that even pretending to have a woman in charge proved the American Pack was weak.

The Australians have amassed an army of allies from smaller Packs, mostly third-world and developing countries

who'd love a piece of the American dream. On our side, we had the Russian Pack. That's it. Other Packs—French, German, Italian—support us in theory, but in practice, if we're invaded, their troops are staying home and cheering us on from the sidelines.

The biggest problem is the Brits. They're a big Pack and they're spoiling for a fight, and they haven't yet decided whose side they'd take. Parker has said there is a way to secure his help. Just let him deal with the real Alpha: Clay. And if my leadership isn't a ruse, then I should *make* Clay the Alpha and step the hell down. I don't dare tell him what I think of that suggestion, so all I can do is show up here without Clay in tow and try to prove I'm the real deal. So far, I'm failing miserably. ~