

**This was a very short story written as an extra for *Frostbitten*.
It takes place before the book begins, and launched the investigation that
eventually led Elena and Clay to Alaska.**

Recruit

Have you ever been part of a very small and exclusive club that enriched your life in so many ways? That made you wish you could throw open the doors so others could benefit? Then, one day, you can . . . only to discover that no one else is really all that interested in joining?

After five years of trying to recruit new Pack members, I was getting a little discouraged.

“It’s the recruiting part that’s the problem,” Clay said as he turned off the highway, heading into Buffalo. “Doesn’t matter how discreet we are. If mutts know we need members, do you really think we’re going to get the five percent of werewolves who aren’t man-eaters, murderers or general scumbags? No. We’re going to get the mutts who need our help. Guys in trouble with the law, the mob, their bookie . . .”

“Red—!” I said waving at the red light.

He sped through the intersection. After fifteen years together, you’d think I’d know better than to even try.

“No offense,” Clay continued. “But you and Jeremy are going about this all wrong. The Pack has always let mutts come to us. That takes balls and serious intent, and that’s how we get the kind of guys we need.”

After another block, he glanced over at me. “You’re not arguing.”

“You may have a point.”

“Great. So we can skip this meeting, head back to the hotel—”

“Drive.”

We were in Buffalo to meet our latest potential recruit. Paul Forbes. He’d lived most of his life in Mexico, so I didn’t have a dossier on him. I’d done some digging before this meeting, but found nothing remarkable in his favor or against it.

He’d gotten in touch a roundabout way, making contact with Lucas Cortez, who called me saying Forbes wanted an audience with the Alpha.

Of course he wouldn’t get that audience. No one did. It was just a formality. If they ask for Jeremy, they’ll get me. And if they get me, they’ll get Clay. That’s the part they really don’t like—understandably, given Clay’s reputation. They’ll bully and bluff, trying to wrangle a private audience with me, but it’s a rare mutt who honestly believes he’ll get it.

Forbes hadn’t even tried. Which either meant he was very smart or very stupid.

“My money is on stupid,” Clay said as he pulled over in front of the park.

“It always is.”

“At least I’m consistent. Usually right, too.”

I shook my head and got out.

Werewolves like conformity. “Different” is not conducive to a cohesive pack structure, therefore different is dangerous. So while we were glad this mutt hadn’t argued against Clay coming along, it was unusual enough to make us wary.

I approached him—alone—from the road while Clay parked, then walked around the meeting place, staying downwind as he hunted for signs of an ambush. I found Forbes easily enough—a lone dark-haired man sitting on a picnic table, near a playground. Private yet public. A meeting place we’d used before.

When I was close enough to be heard, I whistled. Forbes looked over, squinting and frowning.

“Paul Forbes?” I called as I approached.

He looked startled and glanced behind me, then scanned the park.

“Clayton’s coming,” I said. “Got caught running a red light and insisted on arguing with the cop. I figured I’d better hike over here before you decide we aren’t coming.”

I sat across the table. He ogled me. I didn’t hold that against him. It’s part of being the only female werewolf. To the guys, I smell really, really good. So I asked him about his trip, chatting him up until he got a grip and relaxed, then I said, “So you want to join the Pack.”

“I’m seriously considering it.”

Considering it?

He continued, “I hear you guys are pretty hard up for recruits.”

I laughed, the sound a little sharper than I intended. “Then you heard wrong. We’re open to *considering* new members. Provided they meet all the requirements.”

“Oh, I meet your requirements. Question is: do you meet mine?”

I tensed.

Before I could say anything, he continued. “I don’t tolerate man-eaters, and I’d always heard the Pack didn’t either, which is why I wanted to join. But after I reached out to you guys, I started hearing stuff that suggests you’re getting a little lax about that.”

“No, we are not,” I said slowly, holding his gaze. “When it comes to man-eaters, Pack Law is clear. We—”

“Hunt down the offenders as soon as you get wind of it. But considering you’re short-handed these days, it’s understandable that you might not hunt out man-eaters the way you used to. That’s what I told the others. If someone brought you a case, you’d investigate. They disagreed. Before I join the Pack, I’ve got to be sure I’m right about that.”

“You are,” I said. “First, we’re not short-handed. We lost two members years ago and have replaced one. Second, when it comes to man-eaters, we’re more vigilant than ever. If you have information about one, I’ll be on the case before sundown.”

He smiled. “That’s what I want to hear. Now, I figure this is valuable information, right?”

“Valuable?”

“Well, I’m saving you a lot of work by just giving you the information. And I’m saving the Pack from the embarrassment of not knowing about this guy. That’s got to be worth something.”

“He’s right, darling.” Clay strolled up behind Forbes. “It’s very valuable information. He deserves something for that.”

Forbes jumped up, but Clay waved him back down. Then Clay walked up behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“So, what do you think it’s worth?” Clay asked.

Forbes squared his shoulders. “At least ten grand.”

Clay snorted. “Hell, no. It’s worth a lot more than that.” He looked at me. “What’s an ear worth these days, darling?”

“Stealing my moves?” I said.

“Borrowing.”

Forbes realized what was going on and started to struggle, but Clay’s grip on his shoulder tightened, holding him down.

Clay took hold of Forbes’s ear. “Tell Elena what she wants to know or you lose this. Then we move on to an eye. Luckily, you have two of each, so that’ll keep me busy for a while . . .”

Forbes got off with a ripped—but still attached—ear.

“Should have taken the whole thing,” I grumbled as we got into the car afterward. “Teach him a lesson about screwing with the Pack.”

Clay laughed. “Isn’t that supposed to be *my* line?”

“Did he really think we were going to pay?”

“I said he’d be stupid. Seems I was right. Happening a lot lately.”

“More than stupid, if he thought we were going to pay ten grand for a lead on a man-killer. And what the hell kind of lead was that anyway? An immigrant mutt from Australia—or maybe New Zealand—killed and ate a couple of people in Texas . . . or New Mexico.”

“Which suggests there isn’t a man-killer. Just a very dumb mutt who’s very hard up for cash.”

I sighed. “Maybe, but I’m still going to have to check it out.”

“We both will.” He grinned over at me. “Who knows. Might lead to an adventure.”