



MICHELLE MARQUIS

WEREWOLF
MAFIA 1:
No Laughing Matter

WEREWOLF MAFIA
BOOK 1:
NO LAUGHING MATTER

by

Michelle Marquis

WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052

Casper, WY 82605-1052

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Copyright © 2011 by *Michelle Marquis*

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 (five) years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Names, characters and incidents depicted in this book are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author or the publisher.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-60313-949-6

Credits

Cover Artist: Nancy Donahue

Editor: Elise Dee Beraru

Printed in the United States of America

**Other Books by Author Available at
Whiskey Creek Press:
www.whiskeycreekpress.com**

Siren Warrior Chronicles Series

Hungry Planet

Ava's Obsession

Scorched Earth

Nemesis

Incubus Nights

Midnight Becomes You

The Love Machine

Over the Moon

Machine Lust: Black Copper

Dedication

To all those who like their men on the wild side

Prologue

The room was small and hot. Two narrow windows above him were covered with dark, musty blankets. Jack Heckle stood before his peers, naked and shaking. The cement floor was cold and unforgiving under his feet. A deep, profound sickness coursed through his veins, not unlike a case of malaria. He wanted to close his eyes, let go, and pass out.

Jesse James McHenry, the pack alpha, leaned forward in his folding chair. "Change."

"No." The word came out weak, timid. The hated and feared Black Jack Heckle, one of the most lethal werewolf mafia enforcers, couldn't raise his voice above a whisper. What was happening to him? It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Jesse's dark brown eyes looked almost black in the dim overhead light. He pulled out a Glock .45 and pointed it at Jack's head. "Change, Jack, or so help me God..."

Jack ran trembling fingers through his hair. His head pounded like it was going to explode. "I can't. I'm too sick. This shit is killing me."

"You already agreed. There's no going back. Now do it."

What could he say? Jesse was right. He had agreed. Jack clenched his teeth and tried to summon the change. A few moments later, the laughing started. It was a deep, demonic

chuckle that bounced off the walls and filled the room with a menacing chill. Some of the spectators slipped out, their flesh stinking of fear. Pain, scalding hot and sharp, radiated out from his back and shoulders. Jack tried to stop the laughing but it only grew louder. It rumbled from his chest in hard, catching notes like the soundtrack to a nightmare. He opened his mouth and gulped in air.

The laughing stopped.

Jack's stomach twisted in his gut so hard he thought he was going to vomit. Every organ seemed to be in revolt. The agony was all-consuming, a baptism in the fires of hell. He fell to his knees and collapsed on his side so hard it momentarily knocked the air from his lungs.

The only part of him unaffected was his hearing. He heard the spectators gasp and whisper among themselves. What a sight he must be, what an abomination.

His suffering ratcheted up a notch. Every human thought, dream or desire was stripped from his brain, leaving little behind but mortal residue. He had a vague memory of being human but no emotion behind it. His vision changed from pure color to a more vivid grayscale. And then the pain stopped, as if someone had just stopped a soundtrack in mid-song.

Jack pulled back his lips and let out a series of heavy, savage cackles.

Several women in the room screamed and ran for the door. But Jesse didn't. Instead he stood up, grabbed a bucket of bloody meat next to his chair, and approached Jack. The scent of fresh food fired Jack's hunger. He lowered his head and stalked forward. They met in the middle of the room.

Jesse emptied the bucket onto the floor and stepped back.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

Jack's mouth watered so profusely, saliva ran down his jaws in long, silver strands and dripped onto the ground. He dove into the offering, wolfing down huge chunks in a few swallows. When he'd completed the offering, Jack eyed the spectators still there and bared his teeth. Panic spiked the air. Everyone pushed and shoved in their haste to get out.

Everyone except Jesse.

Jesse took several steps back from his new creation and smiled. His dark eyes sparkled with sadistic joy. "Good boy, Jack. That's a very good boy."

Chapter 1

Violet Malone drove her Honda Civic into the parking lot of the Scarlet Mansion feeling a little nervous. She twisted her rearview mirror around and stared at her reflection. As usual, her wavy brown hair was a mess. In a hopeless attempt to tame it, she raked her hand through the thick mane several times. All she did was make it worse. Then her rearview mirror, which was *supposed to* be attached with Gorilla Glue, fell off onto the floorboard. *Whatever.* She abandoned both the mirror and the hair fix. *They'll just have to accept me as I am.*

Violet stepped out of the car and stared up at the mansion. Somewhere in the darkness a hawk screeched as if on cue. The house looked more like a museum than someone's residence. But then, that was the vampires; most were all pretension and flash with little substance. The house belonged to Victor Lee Scarlet, the vampire High King who was rumored to be over two-thousand years old. Violet wondered what it would be like to be that old. Had he met any famous people from history? She imagined him shaking hands with George Washington or Benjamin Franklin and thought that would have been very cool indeed. But this wasn't a social trip. She had business. No time for chitchat this time.

The door was opened by some lady who looked like the femme fatale in any B horror movie, take a pick. She had curly

dark hair, large brown eyes and a body that was on the skinny side of anorexic. The woman wore a long, blue dress with a plunging neckline showing off lots of boob. Violet had good boobs, too, but she never saw the need to show them off. The dress almost seemed to scream, “Here are my boobs! Make sure to ogle them!”

“Yes?” The woman had the same ugly tone Violet imagined people used with vacuum salesmen.

“My name is Officer Violet Malone. I’m here for a meeting with Victor.”

The horror movie chick eyed her up and down, but kept blocking the door.

Violet figured this woman was a *kink*, one of the people who weren’t vampires themselves, but hung out with them. These hangers-on always thought they were all that just because they were banging the undead.

Violet wasn’t about to be treated like a garbage collector by this *thing*. “Get the fuck out of the way.”

The kink moved back and made a sweeping gesture with her hand. All she needed was a candelabrum in the other. “By all means, come in.” She left Violet at the door and marched off to a side room. Violet wondered if she was going to tell on her.

Did I hurt your feelings? Well boo-fucking-hoo.

Out back some people were talking. She followed the sound through the house to the large stone patio. Three vampires sat around a round table sipping something from silver goblets. One was a narrow-faced woman with moon-white hair, the second a man who looked more like a lumberjack than a vampire and the third was Victor. She recognized him from a small painting that hung in her

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

supervisor's office. Although High King of the Vampires, Victor wasn't one to flaunt his position with fancy dress or haughty manners. He wore black jeans, combat boots and nothing else, at least not tonight. He had an impressive amount of chest hair with a thick trail of it running down his belly until it ended at the border of his jeans. Victor was oh-so-very-yummy in a chocolate cake kind of way.

Having never met a High King, Violet had no idea how to address him. So she settled for the awkward, "You wanted to see me, your Highness?"

"Funny," he said. She guessed he wasn't into fancy titles either. He pushed a vacant chair away from the table with his boot. "Sit."

Violet sat, feeling like the first course at a banquet. She gave the woman a tense smile that wasn't returned.

"Just for the record," the white-haired woman said, "when you address Victor in public, it's your Majesty."

Now that Violet was closer, she noticed that the woman's face was a perfect elongated oval—and not a flattering one at that. She was just short of attractive but her exotic features made her interesting to look at. She was probably stared at a lot even when she was alive. But as a vampire, her brand of weird fit right in.

Victor waved a hand dismissively. "You can just call me Victor, Officer Malone."

Violet glanced from the High King to the woman. The female vampire seemed to have given up the fight and was staring off as if Violet had just disappeared.

Time to get down to business. "Thank you, sir, and if it's okay with you, you can just call me Violet. My superior said you wanted to talk about the Werewolf Mafia?"

Victor sprawled in his seat. “Yes, I have a recruitment job for you.”

Recruiting disgruntled mafia members was pretty routine work. Every few months or so, the vampires would tip the cops off to a potential defector and then her department would take it from there. It was how paranormal law enforcement kept the mafia from getting too troublesome. “Who’s the mark, one of their girlfriends?”

“No. This is a bigger fish. You’ve probably heard of him. This mark is one of their top enforcers, Black Jack Heckle.”

An icicle of dread froze in her heart. Black Jack had gotten his nickname because of his habit of wearing black all the time. No one had ever seen him in any other color and besides being odd, he was also notoriously dangerous. *What is this, a joke? I haven’t dealt with a werewolf enforcer since...* She interlaced her fingers until the knuckles turned white.

“Are you okay?” the white woman asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Just a little surprised you’ve gotten intelligence on such a high profile enforcer. What makes you think he’d be interested?”

“He’s dropped out of the mafia and is hiding out at home. Our informants tell us that he *was* a werewolf. “But now he’s something else.”

“Something *else*?”

Victor scratched his chest. “That’s right.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The white-haired woman leaned forward and placed her goblet on the table. “Something else means the mafia has managed to turn him into a different *kind* of shifter. Witnesses have only seen him shift once. They describe an animal bigger and far more dangerous than any ordinary werewolf.”

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

Violet didn't like the sound of this *at all*. "Like one of the big cats? Is that what you mean?"

Victor frowned. "Honestly, Violet, we don't know what he is. All we can be sure of is the Zombie King Seth is also behind this. He's been helping Jesse by doing the research and providing the experimental drugs to change these werewolves into more lethal animals. I'm not going to lie to you. This is as risky an assignment as it gets. One of our last informants was murdered by the mafia a few days ago for asking too many questions." Victor sipped from his goblet. "I can't stress enough how badly we need Heckle. We *need* to know what's going on. You're the most decorated law enforcement officer on the force. If anyone can turn him, it's you."

"Even if he does go for it, he's not exactly going to be easy to control."

Victor stroked the razor stubble along his cheek. "Maybe you can help with that. Heckle has apparently become a very lonely man and—"

Oh, here we go. "Listen, I'm as dedicated to the force as the next shifter, and God knows I've slept with my share of creeps for the job, but I don't do werewolves. Period."

Victor shifted in his chair. "Honestly, I don't care how you turn him, just as long as it gets done *reliably*. But turning Heckle is only half the job. We also have intelligence the mafia is planning to use these new animals on an attack against the Scarlet Mansion. We need you to use Heckle to infiltrate them and find out as much information as you can."

There was a long, tense pause in the conversation. *I'm not ready for this. I should have had someone else take this fucking assignment.*

"Someone told me you were a Zombie POW during the

Winter War,” the white woman said.

Images flashed through Violet’s mind: a coffin; darkness; cold. Even though they were outside, she felt enclosed and confined. She gulped down some air. She could almost feel the lid of that pine box closing... Violet blinked several times to clear her head. “I was.”

“How long were you captive?” Victor asked.

She swallowed, trying to moisturize her parched throat. “Thirty days.”

Everyone stared at her. She *really* wanted to change the subject. “So, you still think I’m the right one for the job?”

“I think you’re perfect. I understand your sister dated Jesse James some years ago,” Victor said.

She forced herself to relax. *It’s okay. Your captivity was a long time ago.* “That’s right. But there won’t be any way to infiltrate the mafia through her. She’s dead.”

The lumberjack vampire brought his heavy eyebrows down so they shadowed his eyes. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure. She was always emotionally fragile. My sister was one of those people who depended too much on others for her happiness. She and Jesse dated for a few months. He got bored and broke it off. She committed suicide that night.”

Victor’s gaze searched her face. He didn’t seem to find what he was looking for. He made a steeple with his fingers and tapped the tip against his lips. He reminded Violet of a psychiatrist listening to a patient. “Even though she’s passed on, your sister can still be your way in. You just say she talked about the life and you grew curious and wanted to see for yourself.”

Violet leaned forward and traced a pattern on the iron

table. “How many werewolves has Jesse changed anyway? I mean, are we talking a few or a lot?”

“We don’t know,” Victor said.

Violet tried not to look panicked. “If they have a bunch of these things, could we be talking about another Winter War here?”

The white woman stiffened. “We might be.”

Violet nodded digesting everything. “So who do I report to?”

“You report directly to me,” Victor said. He reached across the table and handed her a piece of paper with an address on it. “This is Jack’s address. You’re going to have to convince him to not only get back into the mafia, but to help you get in, too. Do you think you can do it?”

Violet stood up. “I can’t make any promises, but I’ll do my best.”

“The future stability of the Vampire Kingdom rests on your success,” the vampire woman said. “Don’t fuck this up.”

Violet pocketed the address. *Yeah, nothing like a little pressure to make me feel at ease.* “Thanks for the vote of confidence. I’ll be in touch.”

She showed herself out and made her way back to the Honda. She climbed into the car, stepped on something hard, and heard a loud crunch. She reached down and grabbed her broken rearview mirror. *Well isn’t that just great? Seven years of bad luck. I wonder if that takes effect immediately.*

Chapter 2

What the hell was he going to do now?

Jack sat on the couch sipping a beer and watching the football game but couldn't remember the score. He didn't even care what teams were playing. All he could think about was finding a way to get free of the mafia once and for all without getting himself killed.

For the fifth time, he rehearsed his "I'm quitting for good" speech but couldn't get the words to ring true. Finally, he leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. Who was he fooling? There was no way out for him but death. He'd known that from day one and it was as true now as it had been seventeen years ago. The only way out was a casket.

A knock on the front door tore him from his brooding.

Jack grabbed his Browning Mark III off the side table. He glanced through the peephole and was surprised to see an attractive woman standing there. At first he thought it might be a neighbor upset he was blocking their driveway but then he reconsidered. His neighbors never talked to him. No, this woman had the hard, no-nonsense look of a cop.

Jack opened up, but kept the hand with the gun behind the door out of sight. "What?"

"I'm here to speak to Jack Heckle. Are you him?"

Definitely a cop. Only a cop would ask for him using both

his first and last names. He glared at her. "Who the fuck wants to know?"

She flashed a badge. "I take it you're Heckle. I'm Officer Violet Malone. I'd like to speak to you for a few minutes."

He went to close the door in her face, but she blocked it with her hand. He scowled. "That's not a very smart thing to do. You're screwing with the wrong guy, lady."

"This isn't exactly official police business, and what I have to say won't take but a minute."

Against his better judgment, Jack flung the door open and let her in. She came into the living room and stood next to the couch. Jack grinned despite how annoyed he was. She looked as if she was ready to jump right out of her skin. She was also very good-looking for a cop. Most of the lady cops he'd been arrested by were a little hard on the eyes. He felt his cock stiffen. He hoped it didn't show.

He sat on the couch and sipped his beer. "Start talking, I'm listening."

"Put the gun away."

Jack glanced at the Browning. He'd forgotten all about it. He put the weapon on the side table and stared up at her. "Better?"

She pulled in a deep breath through her nose and her shoulders lowered a little. "Much. Do you live here alone?"

"Yeah," he said, running his gaze up and down her body. Officer Malone was definitely pretty, but with a razor edge. She wore a dark gray blazer and black pants. The blazer was so big it was hard to see what lay beneath. He wondered if she was married or screwing another cop. "Want a beer?"

She blinked at him and her brow wrinkled. "No, thank you." Her gaze swept the room and settled on the closed

drapes. "Could we open those?"

He took a sip of his beer. "No. I like my privacy. Sit."

Officer Malone lowered herself to the couch as if it was a bed of hot coals. She made sure to stay at the farthest corner from him she could. She was so tense he had to stop himself from deliberately spooking her for fun.

"I'll get right to the point," she said. "Are you still a member of the werewolf mafia?"

A fireball ignited in his belly. Typical fucking cop question. "Never heard of that organization."

She nodded as if she already knew he was going to say that. "Don't bother with that bullshit, Heckle. I have a file on my desk back at the office overflowing with your criminal exploits."

Pretty or no, Jack was quickly getting sick of her company. His erection softened a little as he stared at the TV. "Good for you."

"Word on the street is you've been trying to get out for a few months. I can help."

"Can you, now?"

"Interested?"

"Let's just say I'm still listening."

"Well, listen real close. We know something happened between you and your alpha Jesse James McHenry and we know you're dying to get out of the life. If you really want out, we can make it easy for you. We can wipe your criminal record, relocate you, and even help you get a legitimate job."

Jack glanced at her. He liked her scent. It was sweet and tempting without being too flowery. He imagined her sweating beneath him while he fucked her. He wished she'd move closer. "In exchange for?"

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

“In exchange for helping me get into the mafia. We know Jesse James is planning an offensive against the vampires. Only we need better intelligence if we’re going to prevent another Winter War.”

Jack stared into her eyes to see if she was bullshitting him, but her gaze never wavered. He gave her a mocking laugh. “There’s not going to be another fucking Winter War. Besides, you’ve got the wrong guy. I’m already out of the life.”

“Since when?”

“Yesterday. I quit after the last job I did.”

Officer Malone got up. Her movements were stiff and angry. “You won’t be out for long. Sooner or later they’ll seduce you back in.”

He let her get close to the front door. “You need me, don’t you?”

The lady cop stopped and shrugged.

“Are you part of the deal?”

She frowned and shifted her weight to the other foot. “No. I’m off the menu.”

“What about if I’m *real* helpful?”

“We’ll just have to see how helpful you are. So far you don’t impress me much.”

Jack got up and stalked closer. He stopped when she folded her arms. “I can be *very* helpful, lady cop. I know every dirty secret Jesse James has.” He locked his gaze with hers. “In fact, I’m one of his dirty little secrets.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ll tell you when I get to know you better. You know, *much* better.”

“Yeah, I get you. What happened to your loyalty to the

mafia brotherhood?”

He gave her an acid grin. “That doesn’t mean shit anymore. I’m no longer a werewolf.”

That got her. Her eyes widened ever so slightly. “What do you mean, you’re not a werewolf? How do you *stop* being a werewolf?”

“Never mind that. So the deal is, I get a new life and if I’m a good boy and play nice, I get a piece of you, too. That right?”

Officer Malone sighed. “It’s up for discussion.”

“Don’t fuck me over, lady cop. I hold a grudge.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then you’ve got yourself a deal.”

* * * *

By the time Violet got home it was almost eleven. She dressed in her favorite sweats and a white T-shirt that said *Shifters do it in any form they want* and downed a couple glasses of vodka and pineapple juice. She normally didn’t drink before going to bed, but all that talk about the mafia and the Winter War had made her edgy. She hated being reminded of the war. It had been almost seven years since her captivity, but it lingered in her memory despite all the counseling she’d undergone.

She had been recruited by the vampires early in the war. She’d gotten captured doing reconnaissance for one of the vampire commanders and the zombies buried her in a pine box for safekeeping. Other than a tube blowing in fresh air, there were no other comforts and no room to move around. They let her out only three times a day: to eat; drink; and go to the bathroom.

That was it.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

By the time she was rescued by a shifter unit, she was half crazy. It had taken her two years just to be able to come close to sleep. And now the mafia was at it again—trying to start a war that couldn't be won. Only this time it was pretty much up to her to stop this thing. Was she ready to risk her life again? Was she ready to face the possibility of another capture and more torture?

She really didn't know.

The war had almost destroyed the paranormal world. It began, as most conflicts did in the underworld, conceived and executed by the mafia trying to gain more power. The current alpha, Jesse James, had just murdered the old one and felt the time was right to dispose of the ruling vampire class once and for all. Jesse was an ambitious man and had big plans for his new pack.

But the mafia had one big problem. No one in the paranormal world wanted them in charge of *anything*. They had a nasty habit of stealing everyone blind and beating people to death for complaining about it. Because they couldn't be trusted they had only one ally: the Zombie King, Seth.

The zombies were actually offspring of the vampires, created from a blood taking that was never completed. For centuries they haunted cemeteries and forests, never having a group to call their own until Seth came along.

Seth changed all the rules.

He was the first one to unite the zombies by fueling their ancient grudge with the vampires. The grudge still existed today. Every chance they got to stick it to the vampires, they were there.

The werewolves want them to make freak potions so they can shift into monsters? No problem. The only catch was, the

werewolves didn't exactly treat the zombies much better than the vampires had. But Violet guessed the mafia's empty promises were better than the nothing the vampires offered, so why not help them?

Her phone rang. She picked it up on the second ring. "Malone."

There was a heavy exhale. She could almost feel the breath on her ear. "Hey."

Tiny hairs rose on the back of her neck. "Who's this?"

"It's Jack, lady cop."

She wasn't too surprised by the phone call. Powerful mafia men like Jack were used to attracting any woman they wanted. And that weakness was just what she needed to control him. "What can I do for you, Jack?"

She heard springs squeak as he shifted around. "I was having a hard time sleeping. Talk to me." His voice had a sexy, hypnotic baritone that ignited a latent hunger inside her.

Violet grinned. She didn't know what kind of women he was used to dealing with, but she'd give him the phone sex of his life. She sighed and infused it with every ounce of sexual heat she could muster. "What would you like me to talk about? How wet my pussy is?"

His breath caught a few times. She could almost envision him stroking his cock. Then he chuckled and it rumbled out like a whispered sin. "You're playing with me, Violet." A few more heavy breaths. "I really like that. It makes me very hot. What are you doing now?"

Violet was quite surprised he remembered her name. She'd expected him to call her 'lady cop' from now on. He must be just as lonely as the vampires said. Might as well have some fun with this. She slipped her hand into her underwear

and placed her middle finger against her button. A surge of desire warmed her sex. "I'm listening to you, petting my clit."

"Close your eyes and pretend I'm licking your sweet pussy." His tone had taken on a harder, more demanding note she loved. "How does that feel?"

Riding the heavy sound of his voice, Violet conjured a fantasy of Jack between her legs gently lapping at her tortured sex. "Umm..." she moaned. "Ah, it feels *good*, really, really good." The images brought a sudden jolt of ecstasy all through her sex. She started to sweat. It wasn't a light perspiration, but the heavy, labored glow of a steamy sexual encounter. She arched her back and thrust her hips up to her fingers.

His breath came faster in her ear. "How wet are you?"

Her mind rolled over into a wilder more primitive state. She moved the finger from her clit to the threshold of her weeping channel. She couldn't remember ever being this wet. "Oh...very, very wet."

"I want you to glide your fingers inside that hot pussy and imagine it's my big, hard cock."

She did as Jack told her. She thrust her fingers into her body and was engulfed in a firestorm of blazing lust. She couldn't believe how fast she'd gotten turned on just from the sound of his voice. All control melted away as her passion tore a loud moan from her lungs.

"I'm fucking you, Violet," he growled in the receiver. "Can you feel my cock inside you?"

Her fingers worked their magic faster and faster until Violet was completely possessed and absorbed by her need. The climax came like a raging inferno, torching her mind and body in a devastation she had never experienced before. Over the line, Jack groaned out his own orgasm.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

There was almost a full minute of silence on the phone.

She blinked, shocked by the explosive level of her passion. She'd never gotten that excited before, especially during phone sex of all things. What the hell was going on with her?

"I want to come over," he said. "That was so fucking good I need the real thing."

Violet propped up some pillows and sat up. "No, Jack. We already discussed this. I'm not going to have sex with you. I shouldn't have even done this. It's probably given you the wrong idea. Go to sleep. You can pick me up tomorrow."

He laughed and it sounded cruel. "How the fuck am I supposed to sleep after that?"

"Take a pill. Good night, Jack." She hung up the phone and realized she was shaking from an adrenaline high. Could she really want that criminal to come over here and make love to her? Ugh. That was new.

Boy, I'd better get my emotions under control or Jack's going to be the one controlling me.

Chapter 3

Jack called that morning and Violet reluctantly gave him her address so he could pick her up. She usually wouldn't have had him come to her apartment but she wanted to start establishing some trust right off the bat. He already knew she was a cop, so there weren't any surprises as far as that went. And when it came right down to it, Jack had more at stake with this assignment than she did because the mafia knew everything about him. If they found out he was helping her, they'd definitely kill him first. So she decided to make this good faith gesture.

Violet locked up her apartment and went downstairs to be picked up. As she waited, she wondered if this whole assignment wasn't a big mistake. She found Jack willing enough, but there was something underneath his careful cooperation that just didn't sit right with her. But if she was really honest with herself she had to admit what really bothered her about this whole assignment wasn't so much Jack as the mafia's ties to the zombies. Take either of those groups alone and there was trouble, but the two of them working together? Anything could happen.

A white Ford pickup pulled up. She glanced in the cab to make sure it was him, then jumped in. Jack wore his trademark black everything: T-shirt; jeans; boots. Even his

sunglasses were black. He looked every inch the lethal killer he was and exuded a harsh sexuality that warmed her cheeks and some other places she tried not to think about. *Easy, Violet. Remember yourself, girl.*

He took off his sunglasses and leaned across the seat to stare at her with his strange yellow eyes. "Can I get a kiss?"

She leaned back. Oh yeah, the phone sex last night was a *big* mistake. "For what?"

"Picking you up, helping you out, take your pick."

"You're not helping *me*, you're helping yourself. Besides you haven't done anything to deserve a kiss yet."

"What about what we shared last night?"

She rolled her eyes. "*Please*. That was just for fun."

"I'm taking you to my alpha. That's something deserving a kiss."

"We're not there yet. And if he doesn't let me into the mafia, all this risk would have been for nothing."

His gaze ran over her breasts, her belly, and then her thighs. It was such an open display of lust, it totally turned her off. *Fucking mafia guys always think every woman is up for grabs.*

"Just one kiss," he said. "We can consider it a down payment."

She turned sideways to face him. "You want a *down payment* for saving your miserable hide? Listen, let's not get too confused here. I haven't agreed to anything other than the witness protection package and the way you're acting, that's all you're going to get. So why don't you drive the car and we'll see about the rest later."

He pulled away from the curb. A muscle jumped in his jaw a few times, but his driving didn't seem affected. No skidding or sharp turns in some passive-aggressive display of

disappointment. "I get it. You've got a boyfriend. That's it, right?"

She resisted the urge to sigh. She wanted to say her resistance had more to do with him being a scumbag than having someone else. "No."

"So what's the big deal with kissing me? It's just one tiny kiss. I mean, I didn't ask you to blow me."

As if that would happen. "Because I'm a cop and you're a criminal. And you know what else? You're acting really unsexy trying to pressure me into it."

"What was the phone sex, then? A tease?"

She stared out the window, feeling lost. Was she really going to be able to use him to get into the mafia? Could she stand him long enough to complete this assignment? "Yeah, like I said before, it was just for fun. But before you get pissed about it, don't forget that *you* were the one who called *me*."

"That's because I like you. You make me really fucking hard."

A laugh bubbled up from some unexpected place inside her and she giggled. Then she glanced at his groin and saw a huge bulge straining his jeans. She couldn't fault him for being honest. "I'm sure lots of women make you hard."

He shook his head once. "Not like you." It was said quietly, like a whispered secret.

She slumped in the seat staring at a few boarded-up stores they passed. "That's very flattering." The conversation lapsed into silence for a few minutes. Finally she asked the big question. "Why'd you do it?"

"What? Agree to be turned into a monster? Because they said it would elevate my status in the pack. You probably know that for werewolves, it's all about moving up."

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

She sat up a little. This conversation was getting interesting. “But it couldn’t have been the *only* reason. There must have been others.”

“Jesse James also gave me ten thousand dollars to go through with it.”

That made a lot more sense. “What’d you do with the money? You sure as hell didn’t buy a new truck with it.”

He grinned and it actually changed his appearance from dangerous thug to just plain handsome. “I needed the money for my parents. They’re taking care of my son. The money was so he could go to college and not end up like his old man.”

“Where’s the boy’s mother?”

“Dead.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. There was nothing between us but sex. She liked to live dangerously. I figured she was destined for an early grave right from the start.”

“Still, it must have been hard on your son. Do you ever go see him?”

“Losing his mother wasn’t hard on him; he never knew her. She died when he was six months old. Hell, the boy barely knows me. All he’s ever known is my parents and it’s better that way.”

Violet played with a loose thread on the bottom of her shirt. “I don’t know why you think your son is better off without you. Even a less than perfect parent is better than none at all.”

Jack pulled the truck over into a drug store parking lot, jammed the transmission into park and turned to her. “I don’t go see him because I don’t want him thinking mafia life is cool, or glamorous, or even an option. I don’t want him asking me

questions about what I do or how I do it. I want him to have a normal life, maybe buy that house with the picket fence, get married, and have some kids. You get that, honey? Am I getting through to you?"

Violet gave him her best icy stare. This was the side of Jack she'd expected to see—the mafia enforcer side. She couldn't *wait* to be done with this and put some distance between her and this colossal asshole. "Easy, Jack. I didn't realize you felt so strongly. Sorry if I hit a nerve."

He put the truck in drive and pulled out into the street. They didn't talk. They didn't even look at each other. A few minutes later he drove into the parking garage of the Blue Moon Casino and Nightclub. He cut the engine and finally turned back to her. "Listen, sorry I blew up at you back there. I get a little touchy about my son. He's a good kid and I want him to stay that way. I was thinking maybe, if we pull this off, he could come with me when I go into hiding. What do you think?"

"I'd have to ask, but I don't see why not."

He nodded grimly. "Anyway, when we're inside the casino, let me do all the talking. You screw up with these guys and we're both dead."

She nodded to appease him. "I know, sure, fine. But make sure whatever you do or say, they let me in."

"That's the plan, lady cop."

Violet got out of the truck and followed him into the Casino.

Chapter 4

The casino was crowded, hot and loud. Jack strode through the melee as Violet jogged behind, trying to keep up with his long strides. Every once in a while he would glance back to make sure he hadn't lost her. After the second time having to wait for her to catch up, he took her by the hand and dragged her along with him.

He led her through a number of gaming rooms until they reached a huge golden door with two men standing guard. He let go of her hand. She pegged them as mafia right away because of their charcoal Calani suits. Those suits retailed for over a thousand bucks each, too pricy for a regular casino employee. They appeared to recognize Jack right off, but that didn't stop them from detaining him at the door.

One of the men walked up to Jack and stared him right in the eye. "What do you want?"

"I'm here to talk to Jesse. Fuck off."

The man made a big show of looking around Jack's bulk to her. "And who's that?"

"My lady friend."

There was so much tension in the air Violet was sure there was going to be a fight. Then, to her amazement, the guard stepped aside and let Jack in. She guessed the werewolf enforcer had a little clout after all.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

Jesse James McHenry was easily one of the handsomest men Violet had ever laid eyes on. At first glance he appeared to be a classic dark Italian with olive skin, black hair, and gorgeous dark brown eyes, but under that thin layer of civility he gave off an aura of smoky sexuality and fierce cunning. He wore a dark gray Armani suit and a few gold rings. Everything about him reminded her of a pimp.

He was seated at a large round table surrounded by thugs who looked like uglier versions of himself. Empty glasses and plates were stacked on the edge, indicating the werewolves had just finished a big meal. Jesse stood up as Jack approached and held his arms out in welcome.

“My brother,” he said warmly. “Welcome home. You’ve been gone almost a month. I thought we’d lost you.”

Jack hugged the alpha in that tense, quick way men have of embracing each other when they don’t want to be mistaken for gay. They both looked so uncomfortable she had to suppress a grin.

“I had a lot of things to think about. I got it all figured out now. Besides, I could never leave you and the pack. This is where I belong,” Jack said.

“Of course, of course. Please,” Jesse said, gesturing to the chair on his right, “sit down.”

Jack lowered himself into the chair, keeping his eye on the other werewolves. Some skinny, weird-looking guy was playing a violin in the back of the room. It was a weak attempt at class. No one seemed to be paying much attention to her, so Violet took the vacant chair next to Jack. A waiter came over with a tray and cleared away the plates.

Jesse James touched the waiter’s arm and the man froze. The waiter knew not to look an alpha wolf in the eye. He kept

his gaze down, as if there were gold coins scattered on the carpet. Jesse grinned at Jack. "Can I get you something to eat? A drink perhaps?"

"No thanks, boss."

Jesse's gaze swept over to her. "What about your pretty lady friend?"

Jack glanced over at her but she shook her head. "No. I'm fine, thank you."

Jesse waved the waiter away and folded his hands. "Now that you've had a few weeks to recover from your...change, you must be feeling better. Are you ready to go back to work?"

Jack grunted his *yes*. He placed his hand on Violet's thigh possessively and squeezed. It was a smart move because he knew she couldn't take it off without looking suspicious, so she ignored it.

The alpha nodded, keeping his dark eyes on Jack. "I have some tribute owed me on the East End. You know who they are—the usual offenders." He opened his hands in a show of helpless surrender. "I'm a peaceful man, Jack. I'd hate to have to make an example of them. Maybe you can convince them to pay what's owed me without too much bloodshed. What do you say?"

This was her chance. Since she didn't trust Jack to get her in without a sexual promise, she jumped right in. "Excuse me, Jesse, but may I go with him?" she asked. Almost immediately all eyes were on her. Even the lame violin music in the background stopped.

Jack turned all the way around in his seat and stared at her. His yellow eyes felt like they were boring a hole into her. Violet ignored him. She was here to do a job, damn it, no

matter what the risks. She didn't have to look at Jack to know he had a *shut the hell up* glare on his face.

Jesse James smiled, but it didn't warm his features. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but this is a nasty business. It's not something most women would enjoy. Why don't you leave this for your man to handle?"

"I'm no saint and no stranger to the streets. I'm as good as any man here," she fired back.

"Are you?" Jesse said, his voice taking on that sinister tone villains use in horror movies. "Okay. Let's just see how tough you are."

Four men approached, undressing as they walked. They moved with a deadly, restrained power and Violet knew they were big trouble. She stood up and backed away from the table. This was a dangerous challenge and she was going to have to prove herself right here and now.

Every shifter had to strip before the change, no matter what kind of shifter they were. She *hated* getting naked in front of these strange men, but if she didn't take her clothes off before the change, she'd have nothing to wear afterward. It was one of the few sucky things about having the gift. The werewolves were naked in seconds and had already begun to shift. They seemed determined to kick her ass for speaking out of turn. But she had a big surprise for them. Undressing as fast as she could, she tossed her clothes under the table to prevent getting blood on them and shifted into tiger form. It was one of her favorites and usually got the point across.

Suddenly, all hell broke lose.

The werewolves were big and more muscular than most of the ones she'd had to fight on the streets and Violet attributed their size to all the meat they had access to. She

hissed and roared, taking swipes at the ones who dared get too close. Then, just as things started heating up, the werewolves backed off and transformed back. She wondered what had happened to change their minds. Werewolves weren't known to back off once they'd started something.

Then she heard it.

Violet had heard a lot of stuff in her many years as a cop but this...this was downright terrifying. It was a laugh, a cackling, demonic chuckle that caught in the throat and tumbled out like a death march. The laugh was chilling and laced with an evil, savage note that had nothing to do with humor. It was the laugh of a complete lunatic.

All eyes turned to Jack.

The laugh tumbled forth softly at first but soon grew louder, and louder until Violet, like the others, backed away and changed back into human. If she'd been worried about being naked before, she sure as hell didn't care now.

Over the dinner table, Jesse James, who had seemed so cool and in control before, had gotten up and taken several cautious steps back. Some of the gangsters around them pulled guns but kept them pointed at the ground. They just wanted to be ready for *something*.

Jack blinked twice as if trying to clear his head. He covered his mouth with his hand. A few more laughs escaped him but a few moments later, the laughing stopped. Violet watched several gangsters shudder and back up even more.

Jesse smoothed his hands down his tie. He nodded to the werewolves that they needed to get dressed again. "I'm sorry, Jack. I forgot about your condition. That was very careless of me. Are you okay?"

Jack burst out laughing again. That was when Violet saw

his many sharp teeth. Whatever he was, he was still an apex predator. Without taking her eyes off him, she grabbed her clothes and dressed quickly.

He watched her but didn't speak. He didn't laugh anymore.

Jesse let out a deep breath, as if he'd been holding it the whole time. He looked over at Violet. "So you're a universal shifter, huh? Impressive. You obviously can handle yourself. If you want in, we might consider making you an associate. But there's a trial period. You go with Jack and do what he says, and then we'll see."

She glared at the werewolves who'd tried to attack her. "You gentlemen sure we're done here?"

They nodded, a few of them still collecting their clothes. The ones who needed to, dressed in a corner of the dining room, then they all slipped out of the casino in to a backroom.

Violet didn't take her eyes off Jack. *They weren't as afraid of a Bengal tiger as they were of whatever he is. Weird. Never had that happen before.* Back at the table, Jack and Jesse were having a tense conversation she couldn't quite catch.

When she returned to the table, Jack was calm. He avoided looking her in the eye. "Ready to go?"

She wasn't sure she wanted to go anywhere with him. He still seemed pissed. "Um...yeah."

He slipped out the side entrance and she followed behind. Once outside, he grabbed her by the shirt and pushed her against the wall.

Violet wasn't startled. She expected him to be mad at her for butting in, but she didn't much care. What she really wanted to know was what the hell *was* he? She gave him a nasty glare. "Get your goddamn hands off me."

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

He frowned. “Not just yet! From now on, you listen *exactly* to what I say. Is that fucking clear?”

Violet wanted to tell him to go fuck himself in the worst way, but unfortunately she needed him. Her way might have been clumsy and crude, but at least she’d gotten noticed and was sort of in. Fuck him if he didn’t like it. She couldn’t wait around until he got his head out of his ass. She wanted this assignment done and over with as soon as possible. “Okay, Jack, okay. I’ll be good from now on. I promise.”

He let go of her and ran his fingers through his hair. “You caused so much fucking bullshit, I almost changed into that *thing* again.” He looked *really* upset, as if that was the last thing he wanted to do. She guessed he really did hate what he had become.

Yeah, about that... “What kind of *thing* are you, Jack?”

He headed toward the parking garage. “Hyaenodon, I’m a hyaenodon.”

She wasn’t sure she’d heard him right. *As in a prehistoric animal, hyaenodon? What in God’s name does that look like?* “You’re a *what*?”

“Not now, Violet. I’m still really worked up. Look it up when you get a chance. Now come on, let’s go.”

She fell into step alongside him. “And just for the record, I know what a hyaenodon is.” But she really didn’t. She’d heard of it, but couldn’t for the life of her remember what it looked like. She just didn’t want him to know that.

Chapter 5

Jesse James watched Jack and his woman leave. Nick, his second-in-command, moved up behind him and waited for orders. Nick had come over from Russia a few years ago and fought his way up to the beta position in the pack. He was notorious for being one of the most ruthless and bloodthirsty of all pack members. The only one who rivaled him—aside from Jesse himself—was Black Jack Heckle. Jesse could rely on the Russian to get anything done, no matter how unpleasant. Come to think of it, the more unpleasant the job was, the better Nick liked it.

“Is there something wrong, boss?” Nick asked in his thick Russian accent.

“That woman is familiar,” Jesse said. “Have you ever seen her before?”

Nick folded his arms. “No, boss. You thinking she’s a cop?”

Jesse rolled the idea around in his head for a moment. Even if she was, she wasn’t his problem yet. Jack was no great lover of cops. Let him deal with her. “She might be, but that’s not what I mean. I was thinking she reminds me of a woman I dated in the past.”

“Would you have dated a universal shifter?”

Jesse James smiled and glanced at Nick. It wasn’t very

common for an alpha werewolf to date outside his species. But Jesse had broken almost all the rules when he'd clawed his way to the top. "I dated a lot of women in my younger years. Universals, breed shifters, humans—but that was a long time ago. Jack—on the other hand—well, he only dated werewolf females. I've never seen him with any other kind. So it's *weird* to think of him with that universal chick."

Nick shrugged. "Not so weird. He was probably desperate to get laid. I know a lot of our women don't like him now he's undergone his change. Rumor was he couldn't get a date with one of our females even if she was in heat."

Jesse shook his head sadly. *Well that's the price you pay for power.* And make no mistake, Jack had power, lots of it. Only problem was he was having problems dealing with it. "How many other ancient shifters do we have?"

"Including Jack? Four. Smiladon, an imperial mammoth, and the raptor. Um...but then I'm not counting the teratorn."

Jesse rubbed his chin. "How many more do you think we can convince to undergo the change?"

"Is rough going, boss. Now that everyone knows the change is permanent, no one's volunteering. It doesn't help matters that the ones who underwent the change were rejected by the pack."

Four was good, but Jesse wanted to make *sure* they had enough muscle to overthrow those arrogant vampires. "We need more. I don't want another fiasco like the last coup attempt. The vampires haven't forgotten and this time they'll be ready. I'm sure we can succeed as long as we have ancients bring up the front. They'll serve as our overwhelming force." Jesse smoothed his hand down his suit. "Talk to the lower werewolves, promise them anything, just get them to the

Zombie King to undergo the change.”

“Yes, boss.” Nick turned to leave.

“Oh, and, Nick?” Jesse followed his beta outside into the morning sunshine.

Nick turned. “Boss?”

“If you still hit some resistance, offer them more money.”

“How much more?”

“We’ll deal with that on a case-by-case basis.”

High above, a shadow moved over them. They both looked up to see an enormous bird circling the casino. Jesse shielded his eyes from the sun and watched it fly in slow, lazy circles. *Beautiful*. He smiled and slipped back into the air-conditioned casino to rejoin his pack.

* * * *

The truck was a tense and unwelcoming place. Jack drove along a mountain highway, silent and brooding. Violet was starting to think infiltrating the werewolves was the easy part of the job. Dealing with this moody, colossal dickhead? Not so much. She rolled her window down and slumped in her seat. “You still pissed at me?”

He gave her a hard stare. “Yeah, I am.”

“Were you like this before the change or did you become a superjerk after?”

He pulled the truck over into a clearing.

Oh here we go again. He always has to pull over to yell at me.

“It might interest you to know that before you opened your big mouth, I was going to refuse this job.”

She sat up a little in her seat. What was this? Jack finally found morality? “I didn’t think you had that kind of freedom. I thought you did what the alpha told you to, no questions asked.”

“Well that shows how little you know about pack life, honey. I have seniority. I can refuse a job if I want—and shaking down a family for tribute is a *really* nasty gig. But when you piped up about joining me, you all but sealed the deal.”

Violet had been so focused on getting into the mafia she hadn't really thought about *how* she was going to get in. When this opportunity presented itself, she'd just assumed he would take the job. She was just being opportunistic. And with a possible Winter War looming, Violet was painfully aware they could run out of time.

Who knew when the werewolves were planning their attack? It wouldn't be long before the Vampire High King showed up on her doorstep and wanted to know what was going on. She just wanted to make sure there would be something to report. But maybe, in her haste, she'd made an error in judgment.

“I might have jumped the gun back there. I'm sorry.”

His features softened. “What are you doing here, Violet? You're a smart lady. Why risk your life like this? You could be pushing paper at a desk somewhere and not worrying about getting shot. Jesse's probably not going through with this stupid war anyway. I'm sure he's got a million other pack problems to deal with.”

She grinned. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Just the opposite. I'm trying to keep you around and in one piece.”

“Why Jack Heckle, I'm starting to think you have a crush on me.”

He leaned forward and surprised the hell out of her by placing a gentle kiss on her lips. “What if I told you I think it's stronger than a crush.”

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

She laughed. “You don’t even know me. Besides, I wouldn’t believe you. I’d think you were just trying to get me into bed.”

He caressed the side of her face. “I am trying to get you into bed. But listen, next time just trust me and let me do the talking.”

Violet stared into his eyes as her stomach twisted into a knot. *He’s a pretty smooth character trying to manipulate my emotions for control.* Strangely, she didn’t think he was lying about having feelings for her, but they were probably just coming from his intense desire to get laid.

She threw her hands up. “Yes, okay, I will. Happy?”

“I won’t be happy until I’m next to you sipping margaritas on a beach in Puerto Rico.”

“Don’t get too attached. I was never a guaranteed part of this deal and I have no intention of leaving my life to go into hiding with you.”

He stared out at the building traffic up ahead. His expression was unreadable. The lunch rush hour was starting. Then he eased away from the curb and merged.

Chapter 6

The Maxwell Butcher Shop was located on the outskirts of the city and catered primarily to breed shifters and some universals. Jack pulled his truck into the back lot, parked near the rear exit, and grabbed an aluminum baseball bat from behind his seat. A hot bolt of panic lit up Violet's eyes. Her panic was sharp and raw, so edgy he could almost feel it.

"Hey, hey, whoa there!" she said. He handed her a crowbar through the open window. Her face blanched.

"What's the problem? This is what you volunteered us for. Jesse wants his money and they won't pay. What's the discussion? Let's go to work."

She stared down at the crowbar like it was an alien limb. "Can't we just go in and scare them a little?"

"They're not going to frighten easily. They already know who Jesse is and they're obviously not scared of him or what he can do. So what do you want me to do, go in and beg for the money? Come on, Violet, this is what it's come down to. We have to scare the shit out of them and collect that tribute."

"Maybe we could talk to them, reason with them..."

"Someone's already been by to do that and it didn't work. That's why Jesse sent us. Now our asses are on the line. If we come back without that money, we're going to be the ones swimming with the fishes. Do you get that?" He opened her

door, grabbed her arm, and yanked her out. "Now butch up and let's go get that tribute."

The owner's son spotted them coming through the back door and tried to bolt it, but Jack ran forward and slammed the entrance with his shoulder. The young man flew back into a pile of cardboard boxes and the owner's wife started screaming. At the front of the shop, patrons in line to get their meat took off, making the bell over the door ring so hard and so many times it fell right off.

Jack grabbed the owner's wife and pushed her into the cash register. "Where's Owen, Beth?"

The woman glared. "Get your fucking murdering hands off me!"

The son grabbed a fire axe off the wall and was going to come at Jack when Violet tackled the guy and wrestled him to the ground. "No, no, no, please don't," she said in breathy terror. "He'll kill you."

Jack had to give her credit, she was right about that. He wasn't fucking around.

Owen came out with a large butcher knife in his fist. He was a round man with quick dark eyes and a balding head. Jack had always liked him and was sick to his core he had to do this.

When Owen saw Jack his features softened. "Jack? What the hell is this?"

Jack's heart twisted in agony. God, how he hated this life. "I need the money you owe Jesse James, Owen. They made me come."

The man's face grew hard and angry. "I told them and I'll tell you. I don't have it! Now get out!"

Jack dragged Beth away from the cash register. She screamed and fought him like he was about tear her arms off.

He was going through the motions but this fucking job was killing him on the inside. "Violet, check the register."

She scrambled off the boy and ran to the register. He knew she was as eager to be done with this as he was. She was just about to open it when he saw Owen make a sudden move. At first Jack thought Owen had turned into his jackal form but the shop owner seemed to know he was no match for the two of them. So he did the next worst thing. He pulled a gun and pointed it at Violet.

"No!" Violet screamed. Then, faster than any cop Jack had ever seen, she crouched and pointed her own weapon at Owen. Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

Jack felt like his stomach had dropped to his boots. *Please don't let this thing turn into a shootout.* "Owen, goddamnit, just give me the fucking money!"

Beth started to fight in Jack's arms, twisting and trying to bite him. Owen finally made the right decision and put the gun away. He stared at Jack with a mixture of pity and hatred. Jack didn't blame him. Right now he hated himself, too.

"The money's in back in a safe," Owen said.

Violet stood up slowly, keeping her gun trained on the shop owner. "Turn around and put your hands on your head," she ordered. Owen did as she told him. "Now lead the way into the back."

Beth stopped fighting and started sobbing. Jack leaned in close to her ear. "I'll let you go, but I want you to sit on the ground and don't move. Okay?"

She nodded and Jack released her. Beth sank to the floor cursing both him and his mother for giving birth to him. A few seconds later, Violet called from the backroom, "How much is the tribute?"

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

“Two thousand.” Jack kept a close eye on Beth and her son. The young man was leaning in a corner glaring daggers at him and Jack just prayed he didn’t try anything stupid. He’d hate to have to kill an innocent person today.

Violet came out with a bunch of money in her hand. “Okay. I’ve got it. Now let’s get out of here.”

Jack paused and glanced at the shop owner. “I’m very sorry, Owen.”

Owen shook his head and crouched by his wife. “You’re shit, Jack. You’re a soulless monster, just like all the rest of your mafia brothers. Always have been and always will be. Just get the hell out of here and don’t ever come back.”

Jack stood there, feeling like something small and vulnerable inside him had died a long, agonizing death. In that moment, he was kind of hoping Violet would grab her gun and put him out of his misery.

“Come *on*, Jack!” Violet shouted, running for the back door. There were a million things he should say to Owen but none of them seemed good enough.

Jack rested the bat over his right shoulder and strolled out.

Chapter 7

It took a long time for Violet to calm down enough to say anything. She was sick, not like going-to-throw-your-guts-up sick, but heartsick over terrorizing those poor people. *How does Jack do this job all the time?* But then she remembered Jack had wanted to turn down the job and she felt guilty and sick all over again.

“Are you okay?” he asked finally.

She handed him the money, which he took and stuffed down the front pocket of his jeans. She didn’t want to have that dirty money on her anymore. When this was all over, she was going to find a way to pay those people back every penny—even if it put her in the poorhouse. “Yeah.”

“You handled yourself pretty good back there.” He paused. “Must be all that cop training.”

“That and I used to play paintball on the weekends.” What the hell was she saying? Who gave a crap about paintball? She shifted in her seat and glanced at Jack. In the passing overhead streetlight he looked even more sinister and cruel. “Those people knew you. Didn’t it bother you stealing from them?”

“I didn’t steal from them. That money was cash they owed Jesse for protection against other gang members. They knew what the price was when they made a deal with the mafia all those years ago. Jesse makes sure you sign an

agreement when he gives you his protection oath. Problem is no one wants to read the fine print.”

“You think he’ll give you a cut? Maybe if he did we could give them the money back.”

“He usually does. He’ll probably give you some, too. But you can forget me giving up my money to them. Be my guest if you want to be a hero but count me out. I’ve gotta eat.”

“It’s dirty money and I don’t want it.”

“Well that’s just great, Violet. How’s the alpha going to interpret that? The new chick who was so *eager* to join the mafia now doesn’t want her share of the reward. Nothing yells undercover cop like turning down cash.”

“You think he’s pegged me as a cop?”

He glanced at her. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

This conversation had gone on long enough. She pushed a large tear in her shirt together. “I need to stop off at home and change my shirt. Will you swing by there?”

He grunted his *yes* and she wished he’d stop that ape talk. *Can’t the man respond with real words?*

She watched the white lines in the road pass. “So,” she said eager to change the subject, “why did Jesse want to make you a hyaenodon?”

“Same reason he made the others. He wants freak enforcers so powerful the vampires won’t be able to stop them from staging a coup. He should have all the suckers he could attract by now.”

“What I really wanted to know is how they changed you in the first place. I mean, that’s some feat, changing you from a werewolf into an extinct species. How did they do it?”

Violet pointed to a turn-off and Jack steered toward it. They were only a few blocks from her apartment.

“Jesse has these zombie scientists on his payroll. He hired them to come up with the serum. Seth was so intrigued that he built a lab in the Dead Lands which was smart because it’s the last place the vamps would look for it.” Jack shrugged. “After a few years and tons of money, the scientists came up with this stuff to generate the change. Only problem was it can only create a few extinct species. Guess the zombies could only steal a few DNA samples. Anyway, there you have it. Big letdown is once you change, that’s it. You can never go back to a werewolf again. Needless to say, not everyone was lining up to try it no matter how much they were paying.”

Of course, it all made sense. *Sad, very sad.* “So what do you consider yourself now that you’re not a werewolf anymore? Are you a breed shifter?”

“I don’t know what I am.”

“Have any breed shifters seen you as a hyaenodon? They’ll never accept you as one of them, you know. If anything, they’ll probably treat you worse than the werewolves do. You’ll have to relocate somewhere where they’re more liberal and accepting. Maybe some place on the West Coast.”

“Yeah, I know all that but give me a break. For the first time in my life I’m trying to do the right thing. Teaming up with you to stop the pack is probably the only chance I’ll ever get to climb out of this fucked-up life. But I don’t exactly have a lot of options if this doesn’t work out. I’m a shifter of an extinct species with a criminal history. What do you want me to do? Get a job at a fast food place?”

Violet pointed to her apartment building. “That’s it. Just pull up behind that Honda.” She turned in her seat to look him in the eye. “You know what I can’t figure out about you? I can’t tell if you’re really a decent guy trying to make a better

life or an expert con man saying all the right things to get me to sleep with him. Which one are you, Jack?”

“Maybe I’m a little of both. But you’re forgetting one thing. I’m rolling the dice on both our lives here. I think that deserves a hell of a lot more trust than just assuming I’m some asshole on the make for some tail.”

She studied him. “Why don’t you come up while I change?” She jumped out of the truck and headed for her apartment.

He climbed out and followed her up.

Chapter 8

From the time Violet was a little girl she'd always wanted to be a policewoman. She hadn't wanted to be a cop because her mother had been one, or for the steady pay, or for the early retirement. She had wanted to become a cop because, in a world ripe with injustice, she wanted to find some. Hell, she wanted to be the instrument of justice itself. So she worked her way through the police academy and graduated near the top of her class. Then there were the years working patrols dragging in drunks, thieves, and murderers until finally she was promoted to detective. Not long after, she got the opportunity to work undercover and found she could do just as much crime fighting without showing a badge and a gun. Her first assignment over a year ago had been an unparalleled success, netting the underworld prosecutors three high volume drug dealers.

But now there was this undercover job with the werewolf mafia and she was starting to lose her objectivity. Extorting those people had shaken her up like nothing she'd ever experienced. Violet scrubbed her hands, feeling dirty. Out in her living room sat Jack, a representative of everything she hated in the criminal world. *God, I don't know if I can keep doing this job if I have to hurt another family.*

She slid her back along the bathroom wall and sat down

on the tile with her face in her hands. She just couldn't shake the terrified look on those people's faces. What she wouldn't give to grab that money from Jack and take it back to them. Unfortunately she couldn't. She had to see this thing through. She was almost in, she just had to hold on a little longer.

* * * *

The apartment was filled with the rich aroma of her flesh and the things that filled her life. As he sat staring blankly at the afternoon news, he tried to break down all the different subtle scents. There was the slight lavender smell of her bathroom soap, the harsh citrus of her air freshener plugged into the socket, and the barely perceptible scent of her arousal rubbed into the sheets from their phone sex last night.

The last was the hardest to deal with and made him imagine a million different erotic scenarios. He thought about her coming out of the bathroom with only a robe on and seducing him right here on the living room floor. But he knew that wasn't likely to happen because from where he sat he could see her sitting on the bathroom floor lamenting the money they'd had to take. Jack wondered why she hadn't closed the bathroom door if she wanted some privacy to beat herself up.

Then he realized there was no bathroom door. Someone had taken it off the hinges. Jack got up and came over. Violet looked up from her place on the ground, her eyes wide and haunted. He leaned in the doorway. "Don't beat yourself up too much over today. You did what I made you do. Let it go."

She nodded and stared at the tile.

He ran his hand along the frame. "What happened to the door?"

She stood up and pulled herself together. "I got rid of it. I

have this thing about enclosed spaces. That's why I don't have any curtains either."

He looked up at the windows. Sure enough, nothing. "Did you get locked in a closet when you were a kid?"

"I'm a Winter War veteran. On a routine recon mission for the vamps I was captured by zombies. They held me underground as a POW for a while."

"Underground as in *buried* you?"

She ran her hands up her arms as if she'd caught a chill. "Yeah. When the war ended they let me go but...the bad memories still come back sometimes."

He reached out and pulled her into his arms. She resisted at first then she let him hug her. Jack rested his chin on top of her head. "I'm sorry about what happened to you."

"It's not your fault."

"No, but I'm sorry all the same."

"Thanks."

His cell phone rang and he dug it out of his pocket.

"Jack," he said. He grunted his reply a few times then ended with, "We'll be right there." He hung up. "It was Jesse. He wanted to know how our trip went and if we got the money. I told him yes."

She studied his face. "He understood *yes* out of all that nonsensical grunting you did?"

He toyed with her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers. "I guess so."

Her grin faded. "I hate the thought of giving that jerk all this cash."

"I do too. Come on. We need to drop this off or he'll be calling me every few minutes."

Violet got up and followed him, locking her apartment

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

behind her.

Chapter 9

Jesse's house was a cross between a fortress and a Hollywood mansion. Jack had to input a code to get past the huge iron gates and there were armed guards standing outside the main entrance. Violet let Jack go ahead of her as they walked past the marble foyer all the way into the spacious living room. Jesse was sitting there watching some crime show on the huge television screen mounted to the wall.

Jack waited by the entrance for Jesse to acknowledge him. A beautiful blond woman sitting next to the mafia boss rose from the couch, ran her gaze up and down Violet, and then left the room. Jesse muted the TV.

"That job didn't take you two long."

Jack stepped forward and handed Jesse the money. "They just needed a little persuasion."

Jesse counted the money, then peeled off a few bills and held them out to Jack. "For you and your lady."

Jack took the money and stuffed it into the front pocket of his jeans. "May we go?"

Jesse stared at Violet like he was trying to decipher her. She probably made a mistake not snatching her cut from Jack. "Not quite yet. I have another job for you," he said. "Something along the same lines as this."

A wave of nervous tension tightened all the muscles in

Violet's neck. *Oh please, not more extortion.* She glanced at Jack but his face was unreadable.

"I'm listening," Jack said.

"Wise Brewery has been refusing my protection for the past three months. I've been by there a few times, tried to talk some sense into the owner, Pauly, but," Jesse shrugged as if he were powerless, "you know how it is with these guys sometimes. The last time I went by all friendly like, he kicked me and the boys out. I'm done trying to be nice and screwing around. Pauly owes me six thousand dollars and I want you to collect it for me. Do you two think you can do that?"

Jack sighed as if a great weight were resting on his shoulders. "Okay, we'll do this job, too. But after we're done, no more shakedowns. We want something that pays a little better. Deal?"

Jesse gave them a very unfriendly smile. "Sure, Jack, whatever you say." He watched Violet like she was stripping all her clothes off. "I'm curious about your girlfriend there. I don't remember her telling me what she did before the mafia. How did you pay the bills, sweets?"

"I worked as an armed security guard," she replied.

Even Jack stared at her after that statement.

"You had a legit job? Interesting. Why take up with us?" Jesse asked.

"I heard the money was good."

"It can be, for the right person. Your success or failure all depends on you. Right, Jack?"

"Yeah. Can I do this shakedown in the morning or do you need the money now? I'm a little beat."

"I've waited this long. A few more hours won't make much of a difference. You kids get a good night sleep."

* * * *

Jack stopped by a twenty-four hour supermarket and picked up some steaks. He drove with Violet to his house in silence and started cooking the moment he took his jacket off. Even though she didn't know him that well, she could sense he was as upset about another shakedown as she was. So she just sat on the couch channel surfing and enjoying the hardy scent of cooked meat. Twenty minutes later, he carried two plates to the kitchen table and set them down.

She joined him at the table and stared at her food. She didn't feel much like eating. Jack didn't seem bothered as he dug into two large pieces of New York strip steak. She *hated* the thought of victimizing more people but there was only one way to stop Jesse James and that was to move this undercover operation along faster. Though it had only been a day, things were moving way too slow for her taste.

She needed to find out about that change serum as soon as possible. The drug was the key to the werewolf's advantage. "You said there were others like you. Did you mean other hyaenodon?"

"No, they're different animals."

"Like what?"

He didn't look up from his plate. "I don't know, just different."

"Can I meet them?"

He paused, his fork an inch from his mouth, and stared at her. "Why?" he said, stuffing a piece of meat in his mouth. He chewed noisily.

"I'm curious about them. I mean, it's not everyday you get to meet extinct breed shifters."

"We're werewolves."

She frowned. "Not anymore you're not."

Jack dropped his knife and fork on his plate. They clanked loudly. He looked really upset and Violet had to face the fact that he hadn't come to terms with the permanence of his condition.

"I'm not trying to upset you, Jack, but you have to face facts. You're never going to be a werewolf again and neither are any of the others."

He resumed brooding and eating.

Violet cut a piece off her steak and ate it. "I don't understand why meeting the others is such a big deal. It's not like you all didn't volunteer for the change. Why be so touchy about it?"

"I'm not touchy about it."

She wanted to say, oh hell yes you are, but decided to be more diplomatic. "So, will you take me to meet them?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow we'll stop by their hangout before we do this job for Jesse. Okay with you?"

Maybe I can get some more detailed information about Jesse's planned attack and the serum from one of them. "Sounds perfect."

Chapter 10

Violet sat at the kitchen table running her fingers through her hair. She hadn't experienced fear and disgust like this since the Winter War. The fear wasn't for her, but for the people they were going to have to extort tomorrow. If only she could turn back time. She'd redo that first meeting with Jesse James, listen to Jack's warning, and keep her big mouth shut. Thank goodness he'd managed to get them out of it for tonight.

Jack seemed to know exactly how she felt. He walked over to her and massaged her shoulders.

"You okay?"

She was surprised his touch didn't annoy her as much as it should have. It felt good to be comforted. "Yeah, I'm just feeling guilty over not listening to you." She let out a deep sigh. "I was so focused on getting this assignment over with, I blundered ahead and got us both into a pretty unsavory situation. I'm sorry."

He took the seat across from her. "Don't worry about it. After tomorrow, Jesse promised to give us something else, but I can't promise it will be any better than this."

"Great." She studied his face and was amused she found him attractive, sexy even. It had been a very long time since she'd found any man attractive. "Why did you get into this life?"

“Just bad choices. What can I say? I’m a fuck up. Have been from day one.” He reached across the table and took her hand in his. “You think you could overlook all that and give a guy like me a chance?”

“I don’t know.” She grinned. She took his face in her hands and kissed him, still not venturing to move her tongue into his mouth. He kissed her back with a teasing, seductive kiss that was much gentler than she expected. She smoothed her hands down his back, feeling the knotted muscles beneath his shirt. She tugged on it. “Take this off.”

He grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. She was pleasantly surprised he seemed so relaxed and affectionate. Rude, impatient Jack hadn’t exactly come off at first like he’d be a slow, gentle lover. Unfortunately, there was a downside to his kindness. He was starting to unravel her tightly controlled emotions. Violet had never considered herself a lonely woman but all this exclusive male attention was opening up her heart in ways she hadn’t experienced in a very long time.

Most of the guys she went out with were nothing like him. They were nice, stable guys with steady jobs and career plans. They were the kind of guys to marry, not visit in prison. Jack, on the other hand, was everything she *didn’t* look for in a man. Even though she didn’t know him personally, she knew his type. Jack was a career criminal and had made tons of money off the life. The witness protection program wasn’t going to change him.

Like he’d said himself, what was a man with a record like his supposed to do, get a job at Walmart? No, there weren’t a lot of places for him to go, so it was only a matter of time before he screwed up. Once this assignment was over, Jack

wouldn't be her problem anymore.

Jack stood up and gathered her into his arms. He carried her into his bedroom and gently placed her on the bed. He lay down next to her and cradled her face while planting light kisses along her forehead, cheek, and jaw. He took his time peeling his clothes off.

Violet's little inner voice was shouting, warning her that she was already too attached to this bad man, but the will to stop him simply wasn't there. She wanted him. Let the emotional consequences be damned.

Jack caressed his lips along her throat. The sensation was divine, awakening and arousing her. He traced the artery all the way down to the collarbone, and then followed that over until he reached the hollow of her neck. Something sweet and melancholy bubbled to the surface of her emotions. It was a joy so powerful that Violet knew she'd never felt anything like it. Was she falling in love with this man? She always had complete control of her emotions. It hardly seemed possible.

He stroked her back and let his hand wander down until he could move it under the hem of her shirt. Then he glided it up again, over her spine and around her waist. He moved his other hand under the front of her shirt and pinched her nipple. The tiny nub grew hard in his fingers. She lifted her shirt up and gasped as he latched on. He pulled her into a tight embrace, his tongue circling her areola and lapping at the nipple. When he'd spent a few minutes on one breast, he turned his attention to the other. Violet cradled his head, lost in the pleasure he conjured from her senses.

Jack stopped kissing her breasts to claim her lips again. Violet was overcome. He was opening her up, prying years of self-restraint apart and coaxing a host of new feelings. Moving

up over her body, he settled into the welcoming valley between her legs and touched the source of her aching need. Fingers tickled and explored, probing with a gentle curiosity. Plumes of ecstasy delighted her senses sending waves of pleasure all through her. Then, just at the cusp of her peak, he pushed his cock into her. She let a long, desperate moan escape her.

“Is it good for you, Violet? You want me to slow down?”

“No,” she said in a heated whisper. “Don’t slow down. This is perfect.”

Jack picked up the rhythm. His thick member massaged her, bringing her to higher levels of pleasure with each and every stroke.

A tenderness centered on her swollen clit, a needy swelling indicating she was growing closer to her climax. “I’m going to come.”

His cock grew harder. He thrust with a renewed sense of purpose until the orgasm overtook her.

“Jack!” she screamed, clutching at his back as he filled her. A moment later, he, too, was moaning out her name and filled her channel with his hot, lusty seed. But instead of climbing off, he lingered.

Violet hugged him, enjoying the contact.

“Do you want me to get off? I’m kind of heavy,” he asked, looking down at her guiltily.

“I like the way you feel on top of me.” She smiled. “I think I’m starting to like a lot of things about you.”

He laughed. “Well, lady cop, the feeling’s mutual.”

Chapter 11

The Whiskey-à-Go-Go Nightclub was really just a backstreet dive, so Violet wasn't at all surprised they were open twenty-four hours. She had been here a few years back busting pimps and drug traffickers and was very nervous about going in. *What if someone recognizes me?* That would be all she needed, some sleazebag out on bail fingering her as a cop to the other ancient shifters. That it was almost nine in the morning would mean there were less people inside. She wished they could have skipped this place, but she didn't have that luxury since she'd made such a big deal about meeting the other ancients.

Most bars and nightclubs don't fill up until late evening but this place had a number of patrons even though it was early. It was easy to spot the ancients. They were the big, burly guys hanging out in the back looking more like a biker gang than mafia members. Violet felt a little sorry for them even though she knew they didn't deserve it. Jack approached them, making sure to keep a step in front of her.

A dark blond man with long canine teeth overlapping his lower lips came forward, eyeing her suspiciously. She racked her brain trying to remember if she'd ever arrested him for anything. She came up blank.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

“Jack.” The toothy man extended his hand. “How you been?”

Jack shook it. “Not too bad.”

“I heard you came back to the fold. Gotta admit that surprised me. I thought you were done with the life.”

“I was but unfortunately I’ve got to eat. The jobs pay the bills.”

“I hear that.” Mr. Teeth glanced at Violet. “Who’s this?”

“My girlfriend. She’s trying to make a name for herself.” Jack turned to Violet. “This is my buddy, Jon Wayne Capone. We just call him Wayne.”

She shook his hand. “I’m Violet Malone.”

Mr. Teeth held her hand a few moments longer than was comfortable. He stared at her and leaned in close to catch her scent. Violet got really nervous. A person can mistake a face or a body, but shifters never mistook a scent.

“You’re not a werewolf,” he said, letting go of her hand.

“No, I’m a universal.”

Capone looked at Jack amused. “I thought you vowed never to date universals.”

Jack shrugged and moved over to the pool table to watch the game. “Different times call for different attitudes. You should know that.”

Violet was now standing next to Wayne. It was almost as if Jack had left her to be deemed worthy by the other man. She just *knew* if Wayne didn’t like her, she’d be in a plastic bag by dawn, waiting for garbage collection. Wayne tilted his head to the side and stared at her with dark amber eyes. He seemed to be trying to decipher a riddle.

“You look like a nice woman. Why would you want into the mafia? They don’t exactly have a good track record when

it comes to treating universals fairly.”

“I’m doing it for the money.”

“There are easier ways to make a living. Safer ones, too.”

“True. But they don’t pay as well.”

Wayne seemed satisfied by that. He turned to join the others. She appeared to have passed some kind of test. Violet touched his arm before he could get too far away, “Can I ask you a few questions?”

Wayne glanced down at her hand on his arm, and then turned back around. “I guess.”

“Why did you agree to the change? How did Jesse make this appealing for you?”

Wayne was quiet for a full minute and Violet was starting to think he wasn’t going to answer when he said, “He offered to pay for my father’s cancer treatments. My old man is dead now, but Jesse made good on his promise. My father got a full year more than he would have had I not made the deal.”

“How did they change you?” She might be pushing her luck, but she was willing to take that chance. It was important to verify what Jack had told her about the serum.

“They took me to the Dead Lands to meet the Zombie King, Seth. He brought me to an underground lab where some of his flunkies were tampering with genetic coding. They had this stuff in a syringe, stuck me with it, and when I woke up, I was different.”

“What species of ancient are you?”

“Smilodon.”

Violet looked around him at the others laughing and talking to Jack. “And all the others are different species?”

Wayne nodded. There was a low, nasty growl in his throat. “You sure ask a lot of questions. Kind of reminds me of

a cop.”

“I’m just really curious.”

“Now you answer another one of mine.”

Violet braced for something hard to answer. “Do you shift into a hyaenodon when you and Jack are fucking?”

“Who says we’re fucking?”

Wayne laughed. “No games please. Just answer the question.”

“No. To tell the truth, I haven’t really tried yet. I might be able to shift into one, but first I need him to show me his true form and then I can try to mimic it. It’d be hard, but that’s how all universals learn to change as children. But I’m afraid it’ll never happen. Jack doesn’t want to show me his true form.”

“Why not? Other than the fact that it *hurts* like a bitch.”

“He thinks I’ll be disgusted and break it off.”

Wayne glanced back at Jack now playing pool with the others. “He’ll change for you. Just give him time.”

“One last thing. What does Jesse have planned for you guys? He didn’t do all this without a plan.”

“We’re supposed to be the front line in his coup against the vampires. You and the other soldiers will take up the rear.”

“When is this coup planned for?”

“From what I’ve heard, about a week. They wanted to move the zombies lab to a more secure location. Then Jesse can make the final plans for the attack.” Wayne touched her shoulder. It was a smooth, caressing touch that was a little too much like foreplay for her taste. “Don’t worry too much about all that crap.” He glanced over at the other ancients. “With our superior strength, this new Winter War shouldn’t take more

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

than a few hours. Then a new werewolf kingdom with rise from the dust and things will be much better.”

Things will be much better for Jesse anyway.

“Enough shop talk. Can I buy you a beer?”

Violet forced a smile. “Yeah, sure. That would be nice.”

Chapter 12

It was late morning when Jack pulled up in front of the merchant's house and cut the engine. Violet sat next to him as jumpy as a cat. She'd already had a taste of what this kind of shakedown was like and she wasn't looking forward to it.

Neither was he, for that matter. It was times like this, when he realized how much he truly hated this job. The work had been fun enough in the beginning when he was a punk kid who didn't know his ass from a hole in the wall. But now that he was a man with a little mileage, he felt for the people he was exploiting.

Unfortunately, both he and Violet knew there was no way out. They had to see this thing through or they'd be killed faster than their families could call in a missing persons report. The mafia *did not* screw around.

Jack's growing feelings for Violet were complicating matters. Over the past few days he'd grown to enjoy everything about her. She was smart, caring, and a hell of a great lay, but he also was ninety-nine percent sure she was not interested in anything long term with him.

Quite frankly, he didn't blame her. He was damaged goods.

If he'd met her a year ago, before he'd been turned into this prehistoric monster, he would have killed her when she'd

come to his house with her deal. But there were two big reasons why he'd agreed to this risky undercover job. One was his feelings for her and the other was the possibility she might really be his ticket out of this life. It was nuts, he knew, but it was the only thing he had to hang onto. Jack just wished she'd open up to him a little more. She was so guarded around him most of the time.

"It's pretty gutsy parking right out front," she said.

Jack grinned and checked to make sure he had a clip in his automatic. "Don't kid yourself. There's no point in hiding my truck. Pauly would have spotted me four blocks away. He knows what's coming and he'll be ready for us." They got out of the car. He walked around and stood next to her. The two of them stared at the house like it was haunted. "Keep your wits and check your targets."

"Maybe he'll give up the money and we won't have to go through all this."

Jack grinned sardonically and knocked. "You don't know Pauly. He'd kill you over twenty-five cents."

"Fuck you, Jack," said a man's voice through the closed door. "Get the fuck out of here!"

Jack gestured for Violet to move to the side of the door in case Pauly started shooting through it. "I can't leave without the money you owe Jesse."

"Well, then you're gonna have to come in here and get it!"

Jack glanced at Violet. "I'm going to kick the door in," he whispered. "Cover me."

Before she could respond, Jack kicked the door in and stormed inside the house. Just like everyone else, Pauly had a gun and had no qualms about using it. A volley of gunfire

peppered the entrance and Jack's guts twisted in fear that she might have been hit.

"Violet?" Jack shouted from his crouching position behind a bookcase.

"I'm all right," she said from the other part of the room. *At least she's inside and not on the outside getting shot at.*

"This isn't worth dying over, Pauly," Jack said.

"I could say the same thing to you."

"Even if you shoot me, Jesse will only send another ancient, and another, and another. You know he'll never quit. Is this worth you and your family's safety? Think about what you're doing."

"The next bullet goes into your new girlfriend," Pauly warned.

Something snapped inside Jack's head and hot fury filled his blood. "Don't you fucking hurt her or so help me, I'll fucking change and eat your heart out. You get me, Pauly? I fucking mean it!"

"Yeah, I hear you, freak. She must be one hell of a good lay for you to get all up-in-arms like that, huh, boy?"

Inside Jack, the evil was bubbling over. He tried not to let the laughing start but a few chuckles escaped him. The room suddenly became very quiet. "Just give me the money!"

But it was too late. Even if Pauly had handed the money over that second, Jack was past the point of stopping it. The threat to Violet had pushed him over the edge and there was nothing left but to let the change happen. She would probably run for the hills and never speak to him again, but there wasn't much he could do about that.

Pauly peeked around a corner in the hall. "Jack?"

The change hurt, forcing him to stretch and grow. He

doubled over and dropped his gun.

“Jack?” Pauly said, trying to creep forward without getting shot by Violet.

I’m sorry, Violet, I’m so, so sorry. Then his mind blinked out and he melted into his form.

That was when all hell broke loose.

Chapter 13

The laughing was getting louder. Violet tried to see Jack from where she'd taken cover behind the sofa but all she could do was hear him. His voice got deeper and deeper, the cold mirth filling the house with its diabolical sound. Violet had to admit, she'd never heard anything like it. But almost as soon as the laughing started it changed, becoming more of a vicious cackle than a laugh. The noise was so primal and raw it brought all the hair up on the back of her neck and gave her chills. It was time to get what they came for and get the hell out of Dodge.

Violet spotted Pauly crouched in the hallway looking like he was about to pee himself from fear. She called his name but the big man didn't seem to hear her. He had gone away to a world of his own where big prehistoric mammals ate everything smaller than themselves. This was her chance to disarm the merchant and bring things down a notch. Violet bolted to Pauly and grabbed his gun hand. The merchant startled hard and fired one shot. The bullet grazed the meat of her left thigh.

Violet swore and yanked the gun away from Pauly. She pushed him into the wall. Then she reached down and touched her leg. Her hand came away covered in blood and man, did it hurt. *Great that's just what I need. As if dealing with a hyaenodon*

isn't bad enough. I just hope Jack doesn't smell the blood and start thinking I'm dinner.

"Jack!" Violet shouted. She could feel Pauly trembling beneath her hand.

Then she saw the beast. He came out of the semidarkness with his head low and bearing his teeth. He was *huge*, so big in fact Violet had to fight hard not to take off running herself. His back easily came up to her waist and he had to be easily six feet long. His long muzzle was wrinkled back showing big, sharp teeth. And not just the canines either, all his teeth looked razor sharp. He had a black face over a light brown body. Along his back was an array of bright white stripes that covered his shoulders and back.

Violet was suddenly panicked Jack wasn't going to recognize her. It wasn't typical for shifters not to recognize each other but Jack's change from werewolf to hyaenodon was a whole different thing. "Jack?"

He folded his ears back and his eyes softened. He crept forward and sniffed her leg, then let out a small whine. Swallowing her terror, she wiped her bloody hand off on her pants and petted the top of his head. He licked her hand and she sighed with relief. A sudden wave of horrible pain radiated from her leg and she gasped.

She pushed her gun into Pauly's neck. "Give me the money now. I'm done screwing around."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, I'll get it for you. But I have to get to the safe. That's where I keep all my cash."

Pauly pushed off from the wall keeping a wary eye on Jack. The hyaenodon gave the merchant a menacing growl. The merchant got the message. He rushed to a wood-paneled

office and removed a painting from the wall. Then he worked the combination and removed a stack of cash. Violet snatched it from him trying to fight off the urge to faint from the pain. “How much is here?” she asked, shaking the stack at him.

“Exactly what Jesse wanted. It’s all there, I can assure you.”

Jack bared his teeth at Pauly as if to say, it better be.

Violet holstered the gun under her arm and stuffed the money in her pocket. That was when she realized how much blood she’d lost. Her whole pant leg was completely saturated. She was drained and tired so she closed her eyes for just a moment. Then the floor jumped up and hit her in the face. It really hurt, but a moment later there was nothing but darkness.

Chapter 14

Violet woke up in Jack's car thinking her leg was on fire. She moaned and glanced down to see his T-shirt wrapped around her thigh. It was soaked with drying blood. She stared out the window, feeling nauseous. "Where are we going?"

"My house."

She shifted in her seat and a bolt of pain made her freeze for a second. "No, I want to go home, please."

Jack glanced from the road to her a few times. He seemed to not be able to make up his mind. "Why?"

"I'll be more comfortable at my apartment."

"Okay." He turned off onto a side street.

She wondered if he was mad, then decided she didn't care. She sure hoped he remembered how to get to her apartment. "How bad is it?"

"It looks worse than it is. When we get to your place, I have some medication that will make you more comfortable."

Violet didn't argue. She didn't have the strength. She just sat there like a bump on a log and waited for them to reach her apartment.

Once there, Jack carried her up two flights of stairs and brought her inside. He carried a black bag over his shoulder and she wondered what he was hiding in there. Then she blacked out for a few minutes only to wake up in an empty

bathtub. He had cut her pants off and was cleaning the wound with soap and water. It hurt so bad she had to stop herself from punching him.

He rinsed away some blood and Violet could see that the injury wasn't as bad as it felt. The bullet had just grazed the flesh and hadn't gone that deeply into her leg. She was damned lucky because, if she'd been hurt worse, she would just have to tough it out. He couldn't take her to the hospital because all bullet wounds had to be reported to the police and that would have opened up a whole can of worms. Worse still, she'd be running the risk of being recognized by one of the cops who came to investigate the shooting. Her cover would have been blown.

Jack had everything a medic would need in that little black bag. He even had painkillers and an antibiotic shot. After placing a few stitches in her leg he bandaged it and finished cleaning her up. He carried her into the bedroom and changed her into some clean clothes. It was weird how kind and gentle he was being. She never would have thought he had it in him.

Jack propped some pillows behind her head so she could sit.

"Thank you." The drugs were kicking in and the pain was becoming more manageable.

He stroked her cheek. "I want to stay with you, but Jesse's no doubt heard about what happened. He's going to be nervous about getting his money. I'd better take it to him."

She nodded. "Go ahead. I'll be fine."

"I'll be right back." He got up and headed for the door.

"Jack?"

He turned around. "Yeah?"

She shrugged. "If it makes you feel any better, I thought

you looked pretty cool as a hyaenodon.”

Jack stood in the doorway for a moment, his face unreadable. Then he grinned and said, “Thanks.” Then he was gone and Violet was surprised she missed him.

* * * *

It felt like she’d only been asleep a few minutes when her cell phone rang. Violet fumbled around on the bedside table before grabbing it. “Hello?”

“Hello, Violet, it's Victor. I need an update on where we are.”

“This is not a very good time.” She really didn’t want Jack coming in while she gave a report to Victor over the phone. He might get jealous and refuse to go any further with the assignment.

“We still need to talk. Would you like me to come to your apartment?”

That would be worse. “No. I’m home alone but Jack is coming back any moment.”

“Meet me in your back alley then.”

“Um, I’m having a little trouble walk—”

“Ten minutes.”

Violet sighed. “Yeah, okay. Ten minutes.” The phone went dead. Violet got up, doing her best not to put too much weight on her injured leg. She was grateful Jack had dressed her in sweatpants and a T-shirt or she’d just have to limp down to the alley in her underwear, because she sure as hell wasn’t going to try and get dressed.

By the time she got down to the alley Victor’s car was there waiting for her. She got in the back taking in the rich, luxurious smell of leather seats. The Vampire High King stared at her, his eyes glowing red like an animal caught by

headlights. She realized he must smell the wound and a kernel of anxiety jumped in her belly.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you but you're very elusive lately," he said.

"I *am* undercover."

A muscle moved in his jaw. "What happened to your leg?"

"I got shot doing unpleasant things to keep my cover." She was being rude but couldn't help it. She was hurt and tired and didn't know very much yet.

"What have you found out?" Victor's voice was cool and smooth, like polished marble and Violet felt herself relaxing despite how dangerous the situation was. If the vampire decided she wasn't as useful as he thought, it would only take a second for him to end her life. And the sad part was, he'd make her murder so seductive, she might even enjoy it.

"Jesse is planning to use the ancient shifters as his first line of attack. They're werewolves changed from their natural form into prehistoric beasts and believe me, they are really big and scary."

"Do you think they could beat my vampires?"

"I honestly don't know but that's not important to Jesse's plan anyway. The ancients are the heavy artillery. They were created to inflict the most damage until the werewolves could come in under the radar and strike at any unprotected targets. Without the ancients, Jesse doesn't have an advantage and he's bound to lose again."

"Can the ancients ever change back into werewolves?"

"No. Once they take the zombie serum, they're an ancient forever."

"That doesn't make any sense," Victor said. "Why would the werewolves let him talk them into something like that?"

“That’s easy. They do it for the money. Jesse offers the change to werewolves who desperately need the money. Then he pays them a pittance, promises them all kinds of honors and glory, and suckers them in. After the change they’re stuck. They’re no longer werewolves, and not Breed Shifters. They are something entirely different and alien. So they stick around on the fringes of werewolf society because they have nowhere else to go.”

Victor caressed his lower lip with his index finger. It was an innocent gesture that was sexy as hell. Violet felt her pussy grow all warm and achy but forced herself to look away. Boy, even wounded she wanted to jump that vampire for just an hour or two.

“Where’s the lab where they make the serum?”

“I’m still working on that.”

He gave her an evil look. “Work faster.”

“Yes, sir. Listen, I have to go. Like I said, Jack is due back soon and I’m supposed to be in bed hurt.” She opened the car door and fumbled out.

“I need to know when they are planning to attack.”

“I know, just give me a little more time.”

“We may not have a little more time. Understand?” Then, without waiting for a reply, the car door closed and the vehicle pulled away, leaving Violet to navigate up the stairs all by herself.

Nice. I guess chivalry really is dead.

Chapter 15

Jack arrived at Jesse's home eager to give him the money and get the hell out. Even though her wound wasn't that serious, he was worried about Violet and just wanted to be with her in case she needed anything. He hoped she took the recuperation time to rethink her involvement in this assignment. He'd sure feel better if she quit with just the little information she had so far. But unfortunately he knew she wouldn't. Too much was at stake.

Jesse was in his game room throwing a few darts with some other mafia bigwigs. He dismissed them when Jack came in.

"You get my money?"

Jack tossed it on a card table and stepped back. Jesse leafed through the bills and smiled. "You know, Jack," he said, shaking the money at him for emphasis, "that woman is a good influence on you. You ought to keep her."

Jack wasn't in the mood for the alpha's bull. All he wanted was to get back to Violet. "You've got what you wanted. Can I go?"

"Anybody get hurt?"

"Violet got grazed by a bullet. I treated her. She should be okay but I want to get back and keep an eye on her."

"No just yet. I have another job that I only trust you to

do. I know you're in a hurry but it won't take but a few minutes."

Jack tried not to show how angry he was. "What is it?"

As if on cue, a young woman came in. She was pretty and blond but Jack could tell by her scent she was a universal shifter like Violet. The alpha had probably been fucking her and was now bored with the relationship. *Poor girl.*

"This is Penny and it appears she's in law enforcement. A shame such a pretty girl has thrown in with the vampires but then again there's no accounting for taste. I've decided she knows far too much about me to let her live so she's going for a drive with you and will not come back," Jesse said, placing his hand on the woman's lower back. The shifter tensed and her eyes grew glassy. Jack could smell the terror in her sweat.

Jack had killed for the mafia before but never a woman and he wasn't about to start now. However, if he refused, Jesse would only find someone else with fewer scruples. So the only thing left for him to do was take the job and fake it. He nodded grimly and went over to where the alpha and Penny were.

Jack grabbed the woman by the upper arm but she pulled out of his grasp. Time to show her he was serious. He took out his automatic and pointed it at her head. He hated to scare her even more but he needed to convince Jesse that he meant business.

"Come with me or I'll kill you right here," he said.

The woman let him grab her arm. *That's better.* Jack holstered his weapon. Then, without a word to Jesse, he escorted her out.

* * * *

When Jack had left, Jesse summoned Boris, who had all

kinds of info on Violet, including her address. He told the alpha Violet's background and Jesse was surprised to learn she was the sister of a woman he had dated a number of years ago. Funny, she hadn't mentioned that. He hated it when people withheld information from him, it made him want to kill them. But maybe he was jumping the gun here. He needed to get the full story from Violet.

He wanted an opportunity to talk to her without Jack around. While Jack was busy with that undercover cop Penny, and Violet laid up in bed nursing a gunshot wound, now was the perfect time. He gave her address to his driver and was there in less than twenty minutes.

He went up alone, leaving his driver in the front parking lot to wait. Jesse knocked on the door but heard nothing. So he tried to door. It was open, which surprised him. Jesse pulled out his gun and entered the apartment. "Violet?"

Nothing.

Jesse crept into her bedroom and noticed the sheets wrinkled. She'd obviously been here not too long ago. Where the hell could she have gone wounded? A million unpleasant possibilities popped into his head. Jesse liked the girl; he'd hate to have to kill her because he didn't trust her. Wherever she went she didn't take her car or her keys so he decided to wait it out.

Keeping all the lights off, he settled into a comfortable corner chair and waited in the dark.

Chapter 16

Violet returned to the apartment. Once inside the living room she immediately sensed someone there and pulled her gun. She turned on the lights and was shocked to see Jesse sitting in a corner of the room.

“Hello,” he said.

Violet glanced around to make sure he was alone. It appeared he was. “Hello yourself. What the hell are you doing here? I could have shot you.”

“But you didn’t,” the alpha said, smiling. “Why don’t you put that gun away? I only want to talk to you.”

She holstered her weapon and limped over to the sofa. “Is Jack okay?”

“He’s great. I just sent him out on an errand for me.” His gaze lingered on her leg. “Jack said you’d been shot collecting my tribute. I just wanted to thank you for getting the job done.”

“You’re welcome but I doubt you came over here just to say thanks.”

“That’s fair enough. Okay then, truth. You’re always with Jack so I came over to talk to you alone. I like to know who’s working for me.”

She tried to look relaxed but didn’t know what she was doing. He had a good eye and he was watching her closely

trying to decide if she was trustworthy or not. His manner was cool and calm but she knew it hid the heart of a ruthless killer. "I have no secrets."

Jesse smiled and it transformed him from handsome to gorgeous. It wasn't hard to see why so many women fell for those dark Italian looks. "We all have secrets, Violet. The question is, are you willing to share yours with me?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Where were you just now? Why did you leave the apartment with a wounded leg?"

She elevated her leg on the coffee table. It was throbbing something fierce. "I went to the corner store to get cigarettes. Once I got there, I changed my mind."

"Why not take your car?"

"Because it's still at Jack's house. Besides, even if I had it, working the accelerator would be murder."

"I've never seen you smoke."

"I don't now, but I used to. I quit a few months back."

Jesse's dark brown eyes seemed to tear into her very soul. "Why start now?"

"I've been under a lot of stress lately. Smoking is a hard habit to break."

"Are you sorry you got involved with the mafia? Maybe you're looking for an easy way out?"

"I'm not sorry yet, but I'm starting to rethink my conviction." She was trying to be as honest as she possibly could. Jesse wasn't stupid; he'd sniff out a lie in a New York minute.

"Why didn't you mention you're the sister of a woman I dated a few years back?"

"I didn't tell you because I didn't think it mattered."

“Some say she committed suicide because of me.”

“Some may say that. I didn’t.”

“What if I told you she wasn’t dead?”

“Then I’d ask you where she is.”

He stared at her for a full minute. “I just wondered what your reaction would be. It’s pretty mature of you not to blame me for her loss.”

“Why do you say that? Did you have something to do with it?”

“No.”

“Then why should I blame you? You weren’t the first man to break her heart and most certainly wouldn’t have been the last.”

“If she had lived.” Jesse finished the sentence for her.

She shrugged. “If she had lived.” She was exhausted but trying not to show it. She didn’t need this shit from Jesse so soon after dealing with the Vampire High King. Did everyone get the same memo to screw with her today?

Jesse stretched one arm across the back of the couch and crossed his legs. He was too far to have placed his arm around her but he looked like he was planning to stay for a while.

Violet groaned inwardly.

“Are you and Jack more than business associates?”

“If you’re asking if we’re sleeping together, yes we are.”

“Have you seen him in his new form?”

She rested her head back on the couch and closed her eyes for a moment. “Yes, and it doesn’t freak me out.”

“Can you change into a hyaenodon like him?”

She looked up. That was an interesting question. “I haven’t tried. I’d have to examine him in that form and try to mimic it. So far it hasn’t really come up. I’m reluctant to ask

him anyway. He seems to be very ashamed of what he is.”

He nodded grimly. “I know.”

“Why are you asking all these questions about us?”

Jesse smiled. “I like you. You’ve got balls and can obviously get the work done. I was just wondering if you wanted to trade up.”

That one took her off-guard but really it shouldn’t have. Werewolf men were notorious for having multiple mates. “I’m flattered, but no thank you. Jack and I kind of have a thing.”

Jesse lifted his hands in surrender. “It never hurts to ask.” He got up off the sofa and Violet breathed a mental sigh of relief. Whatever this test was, she guessed she’d passed. She got up to walk—or rather limp—him to the door, but he shook his head. “Rest that leg. I want you back to work as soon as you can manage it.” He tossed a wad of bills on the table. “Just consider this a bonus for jobs well done. Talk to you later.”

She watched as Jesse walked out and closed the door behind him. She hated to admit it, but she was worried about Jack. She sure hoped he was okay.

A wave of vertigo came over her and Violet knew she needed to get some sleep. She grabbed the wad of bills and stuffed them into her underwear drawer. Then she lay down on the bed. She closed her eyes expecting to have a hard time getting to sleep but a second later she was long gone.

Chapter 17

Jack drove forty-five minutes to the most secluded spot he knew. Penny sat next to him, so scared out of her mind she was visibly shaking. She seemed to know she'd seen her last sunrise.

Jack wasn't happy about having killed in cold blood before. Hell, it was all part of the job. But he'd never killed a woman. He considered killing women cowardly and he refused to do it. Worse yet, Jesse *knew* that and was testing him. So now he had a big problem with Penny—he had no intention of killing her but it was a real risk letting her go. He glanced over and she shrank from him a little.

“You a cop?”

Penny remained quiet and stared out the window. He wondered if she was thinking of jumping out of the car when he slowed down.

“You might as well tell me. Jesse already thinks you are so you have nothing left to lose.”

“If you're going to kill me either way, I prefer to keep quiet.”

She was a very pretty woman and he couldn't imagine any full-blooded werewolf male wanting to harm her. Jesse must have gotten tipped off that she was indeed a policewoman to want her dead so bad. They stopped at a traffic light and Jack

saw her place her hand on the handle to jump out.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I’m a dead shot even with a fast-moving target.”

Her lovely brow wrinkled with worry and she took her hand off the handle. “Where are you taking me?”

“Someplace quiet.”

“Are you really going to shoot me?”

The light turned green and Jack turned onto a dirt side road. “I don’t want to.”

“But you do as your alpha says, right?”

He didn’t reply right away. He’d pretty much made up his mind not to shoot her but he still had a serious problem here. If he let her go and she popped up somewhere alive, he’d be the one getting a bullet to the head. And if he was with Violet when the assassins came? They might shoot her first to punish him. It was such a painful thought he couldn’t bring himself to think about it anymore.

But he wasn’t so concerned about dying himself as leaving Violet to the mercy of the mafia. With him as a buffer, she was safe. They were terrified he might change into a hyaenodon and come after them. But once he was dead, they could do anything they wanted to her. Hell, Jesse might even kidnap her and keep her as his exclusive fuck. The thought of them hurting Violet made him so furious he almost lost it. An evil laugh escaped his chest threatening to turn him into that cackling monster.

“What’s so funny?” Penny asked.

Jack shook his head, fighting to get his inner beast under control. “Nothing. Sometimes I just think funny thoughts.”

He pulled the truck up at the end of the dirt road but kept the engine running. He got out, walked around and opened

Penny's door. Her eyes were glossy with unshed tears.

"Please don't kill me."

He pulled out his pistol but kept it aimed at the ground. "You never answered my question back there. Are you a cop?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. A few tears dropped from her eyes. "Yes."

"How did Jesse find out?"

"I accidentally left my cell phone out. He went through my numbers calling each one back and found out that way."

It was suddenly crystal clear why Jesse was so adamant about killing her. "So he didn't suspect you were a cop, he *knew*."

She nodded sadly. "Well, what are you waiting for? If you're going to do it, get the hell on with it."

Jack fired two shots into the air. She flinched and put her hands over her ears. After a few seconds, she realized he hadn't shot her and lowered her hands. She stared at him questioningly.

Jack holstered his gun under his arm and pulled out his wallet. He leafed out four hundred dollars and handed it to her. She blinked, then took the money. He pointed at a trail leading past a group of saplings. "This trail will lead you to the back of the Water's Edge Hotel. It's run by a nice mom-and-pop couple who don't see as well as they used to. You can hole up there for the night. When you get into a room I want you to call your people and tell them to get you the hell out of town. This has to be a permanent move. Tell them the mafia has marked you for execution and if you get spotted again you're as good as dead. Do you think you can do that?"

Penny stared at the money. She nodded stiffly. "What about you? Won't they kill you for letting me go?"

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

“Only if they find out you’re not dead.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you doing this for me?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. He would have liked to follow her to make sure she made it to the hotel, but he needed to get back and check on Violet.

Maybe I’m just getting soft.”

“Well, whatever reason you have, thank you. I promise I’ll leave town right away.”

“Good luck, Penny.” Jack circled around the truck and got in. He glanced back to where the policewoman had been standing but she was already running down the dirt path. He sure hoped she made it to the hotel safely. But then he remembered, as a cop she was probably anything but defenseless.

Now all that was left was to get back home and make sure Violet was safe.

Chapter 18

By the time Jack made it back it was well past midnight. Violet had napped on and off waiting for him but never really got a good block of sleep. Her eyes burned and her leg ached despite the fact she'd taken about five Motrin. Jack came in and tossed his jacket on a nearby chair. He frowned when he saw she was awake.

"Why are you still up?" he asked.

"I had a visitor."

"Who?"

Violet moved her leg from the coffee table to the couch and put a pillow under her foot. "Jesse stopped by to chat. Apparently someone told him I was the sister of a woman he used to date."

Jack sat next to her foot on the sofa. Tiny lines around his mouth made him look grim. "That's it then. You need to get out while you still can. Your undercover plan is shot. Jesse will never completely trust you now. He knows you might have an axe to grind."

"I'm staying in."

He stared at her. "Why? What possible reason could you have? I can get the information to you about the attack without you risking your life. Keeping this crazy assignment is suicide. He'll be real careful around you now that he knows about your

sister.”

“Jack, you’re sounding paranoid. And I’m starting to think you might have a king-sized crush on me.”

He wasn’t in the mood to be teased. He was getting more and more pissed by the moment. “This is no joke. These werewolves mean *business*. You want to know why I’m late? Well, I’ll tell you. Jesse ordered me to take out some chick he just found out was a cop.”

Her heart jumped in her throat. *God, I hope he didn’t kill her.* “So what did you do?”

He shook his head. “I may be a lot of bad things, but I’m not a lady killer. Jesse knows that. This must have been some kind of test. I gave her some money and told her to disappear, but who knows if she’ll do it. If she shows back up in this city not only is she dead but so am I.”

“You took a big risk, saving that woman’s life. That’s very noble.”

Jack put his arm around her. “It’s you. You’ve changed me. I don’t want to be in this life anymore. I don’t want you in it either. Fuck this assignment of yours. Let’s take the money we’ve already earned and disappear. Let’s go somewhere, anywhere where no one knows us and we can melt into the crowd.”

She touched his cheek. This was crazy falling in love with the very bad man, just crazy. “I have to see this to the end.”

“Even if it gets us both killed?”

“It won’t. Trust me.”

He kissed her gently on the lips. “Every time I trust somebody, I get screwed.”

“I’ll make sure you don’t get screwed this time.”

Chapter 19

Violet woke up pressed against Jack's back. Other than throbbing a little, her leg felt much better. She reflected on the progress of the case thus far and scowled. She was about as far away from finding the mystery serum and stopping Jesse as she was when she'd started. She needed to make progress and fast. But getting the mafia to trust her was no easy task.

She ran her hand up the knotted muscles of his back, pausing to trace the pale jagged stripes that branched out from his spine. This growing relationship with Jack was really beginning to bother her. Underneath his gruff exterior he seemed like a decent guy, but she wasn't so sure he was sincere.

Jack rolled over and wrapped his arms around her. He placed a tender kiss on her cheek. "Morning, honey. How's your leg?"

Violet looked down. She'd been so focused she'd almost forgotten. "It's much better thanks to you. You're a pretty good nurse."

He nuzzled the side of her face. "You're too kind." He ran his fingers into her hair and cradled her head, placing warm kisses up and down her throat. The feel of his stubble against her skin was exciting and the scent of his flesh was pure carnal delight. He caressed his hand up under her shirt and massaged

her breasts. He kneaded each one then took the erect nipple between his thumb and forefinger and gave it a gentle pinch.

Violet's body burned with a desperate need. She grabbed his heavy shoulders and pulled him closer. "I love it when you suck them."

He lifted her shirt over her head and buried one of her breasts in his mouth. He mauled it tenderly, taking great care not to get too carried away. His rough tongue circled her areola and flickered over her nipple, sending a rush of terrible passion through every nerve ending.

She squeezed his head against her and kissed the top of his head. "Jack," she whispered. "Oh, Jack."

His hand traveled down the length of her body and touched the plump lips of her sex. He lingered there, touching and teasing, opening her body up so he could explore her completely. Violet's desire flamed high and a soft moan escaped her lips.

"How are we going to do this?" Jack whispered against her cheek. "I don't want to put any weight on you with that hurt leg."

She turned her back to him and pushed her butt into his hip. "Side-by-side would be nice."

He spooned against her and licked the back of her neck. The tip of his cock pushed against her flesh seeking her hot, wet center. She had never wanted a man like this. Her whole body felt like it had been set ablaze. He placed his hand on one of her thighs and lifted it so he could guide his cock inside her. The pressure increased, the swollen head massaging past her outer lips and finding the slick channel hidden within. He eased into her slowly, taking his time and letting her get used to him.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

Violet closed her eyes and let her body really *feel* for the first time in a very long time. Jack had stopped and she could feel her pussy lubricating to accommodate his invasion.

“How’s your leg doing?”

There was little pain, only the exquisite joy of his body in hers. “It’s holding up well.”

He laughed and it sounded wicked. He hugged her tight and then continued his entry. She expected him to give in to his building need and start hammering her, but he didn’t. Instead he rocked his hips, pausing often to ratchet up her hunger. After an eternity of this torture she found herself right on the verge of a powerful climax.

“It’s too slow,” she said, breathless.

He chuckled and there was that slight hint of the hyaenodon in his voice. It was feral and deadly and Violet’s body grew even more excited. She reached back and grabbed his hand placing it over her moist clit. Jack tickled the tiny nub and she shuddered with a desperate desire.

“Change, Jack,” she groaned. “I want to see your animal side.”

“No, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Violet thrashed. “You’re not going to hurt me. I can mimic your form. I just need to be in contact with you. *Please.*” But no sooner had the words escaped her than she was orgasming. Her climax was a perfect storm of several wonderful sensations and she couldn’t hold it back. Her body shook and bucked, her pussy clamping onto his cock, kneading the seed from his throbbing shaft. It lasted longer than any other orgasm she’d ever had but left her feel strangely alienated too.

She couldn’t trust enough to really emotionally open up

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

to him and he couldn't trust enough to let her see him in his animal form. With so much working against them, did they have a future? Or were they both doomed to lose each other forever? A moment of sorrow filled her but Violet forced it down into a private place in her soul. There was nothing she could do about their future. She'd just have to wait and see how this whole mission played out.

Chapter 20

The Blue Moon Casino and Nightclub was jumping with more werewolves than Violet could shake a bone at. Even though she was a universal shifter herself and could easily change into a wolf at will, she knew she wasn't welcome here. They knew she was different from her scent. They knew Jack was different, too, and he was probably less welcome than she was.

Poor Jack, an outcast forever among his own people.

Jack leaned down to her ear. "Be extra careful in here. The pack will be listening to every word you say. The last thing we need is someone reporting they think you're a cop to Jesse." He stroked her hair and placed a tender kiss on her lips. "One last thing. Don't drink anything that's handed to you. There's an orgy at the end of the night and the pack likes to mix aphrodisiacs in their liquor beforehand. It makes the night more exciting that way."

"Thanks for the warning." She wasn't a prude about sex but sure didn't want to be passed around by a bunch of intoxicated werewolves. That would really suck.

Jesse met them by the entrance dressed in a striking dark gray suit and matching tie. His thick dark hair was combed back from his face and there was a gold hoop earring in his left ear. He smiled at Violet with perfect white teeth. She caught a

glimpse of his thick, wide canines. "I'm so glad the two of you could make it." He took her hand and escorted her into the room introducing her to a few of his friends. She was grateful Jack wasn't far behind. Jesse ended his short tour over by the bar. He lifted a glass of what appeared to be red wine off the bar and offered it to her. "Would you like a drink?"

She gave him her most innocent smile. "No thanks. I'm kind of a lightweight. I think I'll wait a little bit."

If Jesse was offended he didn't show it. He turned his attention to Jack. "I know you're right at home here, Jack. Make sure you show your lady a good time."

Jack placed his hand possessively on Violet's back. "I will. See you around, Jesse."

Jack took her hand and led her up a flight of wide marble steps to the third floor. The music wasn't as loud here. He went to the minibar and ordered her a glass of wine and himself a beer. She took the drink from him and grinned suspiciously. "Why should I trust you and not the werewolf alpha?"

His eyes sparkled with villainy. "You shouldn't." He took a few sips of his drink and scanned the room. She spotted Wayne and a few of the other ancients. Jack and Wayne exchanged knowing looks.

"Will you excuse me for a few minutes?" Jack asked.

She wasn't exactly comfortable being at a party where she didn't know anyone and—well, if she was brutally honest with herself, she had to admit most of the guests hated her—but she could take care of herself. She certainly didn't want Jack to think she was a needy wreck. "Sure. Just check back on me from time to time."

He laughed. "Okay, honey. I will." Then he melted into

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

the group with the ancients. They all started talking in tense, hushed tones. She would have given anything to listen in on their conversation, but there was no way to get close without arousing suspicion. She'd just have to trust that Jack would fill her in when he was done.

Well, better mingle and try to find one friend in this place. Yeah, good luck with that one, Violet.

Chapter 21

The party went on well into the night. Violet hadn't been to a bash like this since she was in college and she sure didn't miss it. Everyone except her was getting drunk off *whatever* it was Jesse was handing out at the bar and things were definitely getting wild. People were starting to pair off in dark corners and weren't bothered at all by who might be watching.

But the most shocking thing had to be the orgy room. The room was located in the back of the club and once midnight came the heavy double doors were propped open. Inside were plush couches, padded walls, and lush scarlet carpeting. Every piece of furniture was covered in soft, rich fabric. Guests came and went randomly, some alone, others with two or three partners. They'd enter the room, sometimes shift, and begin having sex with whoever was nearest to them. Male or female, it didn't seem to really matter. Violet had seen a lot in her years of being a cop but this was off-the-charts *weird*.

To make matters worse, the room was on the dark side and had no windows. That little detail played on her lingering fear of confined spaces and was freaking her out. She really wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of here and calm down.

As fate would have it, Jesse found her and slithered on over.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

His smile was cool-as-silk as he glanced at the orgy room. “Aren’t you going to try out the entertainment?”

“As a universal, I don’t think I’d be too welcome in there.”

He toyed with a lock of her hair and Violet shuddered. “You’re such a beautiful woman I doubt any of the males would care.”

She gave him a sheepish smile. “I’m not really into multiple partners anyway.”

“To tell you the truth, neither am I,” he said in a confidential whisper. “Maybe we could take a walk together, enjoy the night.”

“Thank you, but I’m kind of tired. I’d just like to find Jack and leave.”

“Do you have feelings for him? Because if you do, I can certainly understand. Quite frankly, I think he has feelings for you, too.”

Violet scanned the room and shrugged. *So why are you hitting on me then? Where are you, Jack?* “We get along and I think we make a good team.”

“You don’t mind that Jack is...different?”

She met his gaze. His dark eyes danced with evil mischief. “I’ve seen what he looks like.”

“But have you seen him *up close*?”

She folded her arms. “Why don’t you just come out and say what you’re driving at?”

“Just this, Jack is the most terrifying creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. If you’ve seen him, it must not have in very good light because I can guarantee you wouldn’t be so casual. Every male who works for me hates to be in the same room with him. Women who usually do anything for money won’t even

sleep with him. And here you come out of the blue and he doesn't scare you one bit. Now that can only mean you haven't gotten a good, *close* look."

She saw Jack approaching from the casino room. *It's about time.* "I told you. What he looks like doesn't matter to me." The moment Jack joined them an unmistakable tension filled the air. Violet was so not in the mood for this. She touched Jack's shoulder. "I want to go."

"Not yet," Jesse said. "First I'd like Jack to shift for you. Right here under all these lights. Will you do that for me, Jack?"

Violet had experienced emotions all over the spectrum while with Jack but she'd never felt sympathy. That was a new one. Being a mafia member, he didn't have a choice but to play Jesse's sadistic game. He didn't dare refuse his alpha because the first person Jesse would target was her. Violet didn't need it spelled out to know that. And poor Jack was very protective of her, to his detriment. "Please don't make him do this, Jesse," Violet said softly.

"Why not? He's not ashamed of what he is." Jesse fixed a hostile glare at him. "Are you, Jack? Now shift."

Before she could protest further, Jack pulled off his shirt and tossed it on the ground. There was an angry, defeated quality to his actions, like a man doomed no matter what he did. He unzipped his pants and slid them down, stepping out of his briefs, pants, and shoes. Jack stood before them naked, a citadel of sculptured muscle and towering strength. His face was emotionless, cold and dispassionate. He was resigned to this regardless of the consequences.

Then came that laugh. It was mean and humorless, like a madman in an asylum and made every nerve in her body jump

with electric panic. An instinct came to life inside her, an instinct to flee an apex predator but she fought it. She wouldn't run from Jack no matter what. She just couldn't hurt him by rejecting something he couldn't help being.

He bent forward as his body sprouted dark hair and his legs bent beneath him. He fell on his hands, which shifted and warped into big, clawed paws. He cried out from the pain and Violet took a step forward but Jesse grabbed her arm and held her back. She hated Jesse for forcing him to do this. What she wouldn't give to slam her fist into the alpha's face.

Jack's face elongated, creating a long menacing muzzle complete with jagged teeth. His agony went on for a full ten minutes. It was longer and more painful than any shift Violet had ever seen, even among the universals. But when it was all finished, there he was—a creature that hadn't existed in over ten thousand years. His yellow eyes met hers and she could easily read the deep emotional turmoil within them.

She swallowed her fear. "Okay, I've seen him. Yes, he's very scary. Can he change back now so we can go?"

Jesse seemed a little surprised by her reaction. He raised a dark eyebrow. "He doesn't disgust you?"

"On the contrary, I find him magnificent. You made your point. Can we go now?"

"Sure, why not?"

She turned her attention to Jack. "Can you understand me, Jack?"

He came forward and nuzzled the back of her hand. She ran her fingers through his thick, dark fur and trembled. "Come on, Jack. The party's over. Let's go home."

Then she marched out of the nightclub with her massive hyaenodon right behind her.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

Chapter 22

Jack had transformed back but was quiet on the drive home. There was really nothing to say. Violet, for her part, hadn't spoken either and he was sure she was rehearsing her break-up speech. He just knew it. She had to be disgusted by his hyaenodon form. She must know there was no future for them. The reason was simple: he was a monster and she wasn't. He had to admit that he didn't blame her. No woman wanted to be stuck with a freak, especially a dangerous one.

Jack pulled his truck up in front of her apartment building and waited for her to get out. "Aren't you coming in?"

"Listen, why prolong this? You probably can't wait to be free of me and I can't blame you. I wish you luck with your mission to stop Jesse, I really do. But I don't want you to feel like you have to keep fucking me to get into the alpha's good graces. He's obviously interested in you, so why not try and date him directly? Move in for the kill. I won't let on what you've got planned. So go for it, get your information anyway you want, but just stop leading me on. You don't need me anymore."

She blinked several times. She looked like he'd just spit in her face. "I'm not using you. I'm very attracted to you and I don't care who or what you are. None of that matters to me." She glanced out the window and he noticed the dark circles

under her eyes. He should have taken her home earlier. Guilt tore at his insides.

“I really need your help with this.”

He remained silent, not sure what to say.

“Think about it,” she said. “Do you really want Jesse to take over from the vampires? You know better than anyone else what he’s like. Do you think he’d be better than they are?”

He combed his fingers through his hair. “This shit is really hard on me. I’m crazy about you, but you’re asking me to betray the only family I’ve ever known.”

“They’re *not* your family. They changed you and dumped you just as fast. You’re a curiosity to them, an interesting freak. They don’t give a shit about you. You don’t owe them anything. You have a new family now. You have the other ancients and they need you, too. Without you, they’re going to be exploited by Jesse just like you were.”

“So what else do you need from me?” His head was reeling and it was hard to think straight.

“I want you to help me. I have to get to the Dead Lands and get a sample of that serum. I also need to find out where and when Jesse is planning his offensive. If I don’t get that information soon, the vampires won’t be ready to defend themselves and Jesse will win.”

He stared off down the street. A few stray cats were in the process of tipping over a trash can. “I don’t know. I’m really confused. I’m worried I won’t be able to keep you safe.”

“Don’t worry so much about me, I’ll be fine. And as far as us not being able to assume the same form as you, you’re wrong there, too. I think I can take on your species but I’ll need to be in contact with you first. I’ve taken on difficult

changes before. It just takes more time and effort, that's all."

Jack hated to admit he needed that. Having sex in altered form was one of the most natural and gratifying things in a shifter's life. It was like food for the soul and he had sorely missed it. But if she was right and she could change...

"Why would you do that for me?"

Violet placed her hand on the side of his face. "Because I have strong feelings for you and I want us to be together in any way we can. And if that means I have to become a hyaenodon, then so be it." She placed a feather-light kiss on his lips. "Come on...let's at least try. Make love to me."

He'd intended to go home and think, but her invitation was too tempting. He needed her more than he thought possible. Jack's heart swelled in his chest and all he could think of was them being together as mates. His desire was so fierce and powerful, it became impossible to refuse her.

He parked the truck in an empty space and shut off the engine. Then he got out and followed her up the stairs to her apartment.

"Why are we always ending up at your apartment? Why don't we ever go to my house?" Jack asked as he peeled his shirt off.

She smiled. "Because it's not as dark and tomblike here as it is there."

"Tomblike, huh?" he said, grinning. "Maybe all it needs is a woman's touch."

"Maybe." She gestured to the middle of the living room. "Since you're pretty big in your animal form, why don't we work here?"

He unbuttoned his pants and slid them down his muscular legs. His briefs strained holding back an impressive erection.

Violet's cheeks grew warm. His eyes met hers and a slow hunger awakened her. He stripped, never taking his gaze from hers, until he was completely naked. Jack's body was very sexy. He was quite tall with tanned skin and large, thick muscles. Along his chest was a modest amount of chest hair that turned into a trail and ran down in a straight line all the way to his groin. "Are you ready?"

Violet tried to will her heart to slow down. She tried to form words but she couldn't so she did the next best thing, she nodded.

Jack transformed.

He moaned as he changed and the sound of his pain wrenched her heart. She knew how much it hurt him but there just wasn't any other way. Dark brown hair sprouted all over his flesh as he collapsed on all fours. Even though she had seen it twice already, the change still shocked and frightened her. After a long ten minutes, he was done.

The hyaenodon stared at her with piercing yellow eyes that seemed to cut right through her. She swallowed. "I'm going to touch you. I need you to stay as still as possible." With trembling hands, she began touching him on the back. His fur was thick and coarse, but with a softer undercoat. She pushed her fingers into his fur and closed her eyes. Her exploration moved from his back, up his neck, to the top of his head. His muzzle was long with the sharpest teeth she'd ever felt on a predator. He was very still, which helped her concentrate on the different aspects of his species.

She made two passes over his body before she tried to change herself. Once she was satisfied she could accurately mimic him, she stepped back and focused her mind.

Her change took at least as long as his, but once she was

done, she was confident she'd gotten it right. Violet opened her eyes to see the other beast right next to her.

He nuzzled her ear and whined. She guessed she must be an attractive hyaenodon female because he was definitely turned on.

Still trying to get used to this strange form, she let him lick and tease her. His rough tongue touched the tender center of her sex and she was surprised how aroused she became.

When she was ready, he mounted her, taking her in a coupling filled with heat and pleasure. Their mating was an exquisite joining of two like creatures, but it also seemed to be an outlet for Jack. She could sense how much this meant to him and was happy she'd been able to make it possible. Then, when he was satisfied as a beast, they made love as man and woman and slept in each other's arms for the rest of the night.

Chapter 23

If there was one thing Jesse never had a shortage of, it was women. Because of his status they were always throwing themselves at him. His alpha female didn't like it but she understood it came with the territory.

Today, he was lounging by the pool watching two young women massaging each other with oil as they lay in the sun. He couldn't quite remember their names but that didn't matter; they were here for his amusement. Both were very attractive and were doing a great job of keeping his attention, until Boris came over and blocked his view. Jesse wanted to be angry but he knew the beta wolf must have some very important news or he wouldn't have bothered disturbing him. Boris was not the kind of man who liked to waste time, not his or anyone else's either.

"Please excuse the interruption, boss," Boris said. "But I have some new information on Jack's woman."

"Go ahead."

Boris took out a CD in a white envelope. "The night you went by Violet's apartment to talk, you said she wasn't there at first, which was strange since she'd just been shot in the leg. When you questioned her, she claimed to be at the convenience store around the corner. But this copy of the surveillance camera for that night doesn't show she was there

at all.”

Jesse sat up. A creeping unease tightened in his gut. He’d been suspicious of her story. But now there was proof she was outright lying. He hated being lied to. “Have you talked to Jack about this yet?”

“No, boss. I think his judgment is clouded by his desire. I wanted to talk to you first and see how you wanted to handle this.”

Jesse ran his fingers through his damp hair. “Do you think she’s a cop?”

Boris lifted his thick shoulders in a shrug. “I don’t know. All I do know is she lied. The question is why?”

“Maybe she’s seeing someone else on the side?” Jesse said. He really didn’t want to believe Violet was a cop. It would really suck to have to shoot her.

“Maybe,” Boris said. But Jesse could tell the Russian didn’t believe it.

Jesse rubbed his chest, trying to remember how much he’d said in front of her. He doubted she knew much, but then there was Jack. Jack as a werewolf was very reliable, a model pack member, but that was before he’d undergone the change. Jesse wasn’t sure what Jack was capable of blabbing.

Another serious problem was Violet’s closeness to Jack. It wouldn’t be easy to separate them. And if Jesse did manage to get her alone and kill her, what would Jack do? Jesse knew exactly what he’d do, he would go absolutely berserk. Jesse needed to be very careful how he handled this particular problem.

Boris stared at the two young women. They had moved to inflatable rafts and were floating around the pool. He looked like he wanted to eat them. “Do you want me to schedule a hit

on her, boss?”

Jesse stood up and wrapped a towel around his neck. “No, we can’t risk Jack going crazy on us. He’s much too dangerous. I want to be sure she’s a cop before I do anything. Then we’ll give him the choice, his pack or his woman. I think he’ll make the right choice. He has in the past.”

Boris nodded, his thick jowls shaking like Jell-O. “If you say so, boss.”

Chapter 24

Even though Jack pulled down over one hundred thousand dollars a year from his various duties in the werewolf mafia, he never flaunted his money. He wasn't into expensive cars or fancy houses. He lived simply and stashed his money away for emergencies. But he was definitely in the minority. This morning when he and Violet woke up, they'd gotten an invite to a pack member's housewarming party. He really didn't want to go, but he did. It was considered bad manners not to show up and he and Violet didn't want to stand out more than they already did.

The house was a two-story Spanish-style villa located in an exclusive neighborhood with a fenced entrance. It was a newer house with one major flaw: it was painted a horrible tangerine orange. It was a typical blunder for a mafia member who had lots of cash but dime store taste.

Violet climbed out of the truck and paused to stare at the house. Jack came up next to her and kissed her cheek. "Were they colorblind?" she whispered so only he could hear.

"Be nice now." He smiled and escorted her in. The place was packed with wall-to-wall werewolves. Everyone was drinking and talking, some following the hostess around as she showed off her Italian Renaissance furniture.

Jesse walked up with a scotch and a salesman smile. "Glad

you two could make it.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” Jack said in his best sarcastic tone.

“Violet, could you excuse us for a few minutes? We just have a little business to discuss.”

She graced the alpha with a pencil-thin grin. “Sure.” She walked off to join the grand tour that had just started.

“What’s up?” Jack asked.

“Let’s go sit in my car.”

He stiffened but followed Jesse to the limo parked out in front of the house. They got in the back and Jack adjusted his shoulder holster. It wasn’t a threat, just a reminder that if Jesse had any nasty plans, he wasn’t going to get out unscathed.

Once they were comfortable in the car, Jesse said, “I think something weird is going on with your girlfriend. The other day, when she got shot in the leg, I stopped by to see her but she was gone. I waited almost an hour before she showed back up. When she did, she told me she’d left for the store to get some cigs. Only problem is, Boris has the surveillance CD for that night and there’s no sign of her coming in or out all night.”

Jack was afraid something like this might happen. The alpha didn’t get to where he was by being stupid. He’d probably been suspicious of Violet from the beginning. She was in serious danger. He did his best to look casual. “I know, she told me all about it. Her ex-boyfriend keeps coming by her apartment trying to get back together. She was in the parking lot talking to him in his car.”

Jesse was quiet for a long time. He must be trying to find holes in Jack’s story. “Why didn’t she tell me about that?”

Jack chuckled but instead of it coming out light and carefree it sounded mean and deadly. He sure hoped Jesse didn't catch his tension. "She didn't tell you because it's none of your goddamn business." Jack glared at the alpha. "A better question is why didn't you tell me you stopped by to see my lady? Are you trying to score a piece of ass on the side? Don't you have enough women without screwing with mine?"

"Hey, hey, it's not like that, Jack. There's just a lot that doesn't feel right about her. A guy in my position can't be too careful, you know?"

"I've worked for you for a long time. If there was anything about her that didn't sit right with me, I'd shoot her myself. Now back off and leave her alone. And if it makes you feel any better, I'll keep a closer eye on her in the future. Okay?"

Jesse rubbed his chin thoughtfully with his index finger. "So, you don't think she might be a cop?"

Jack's heart skipped a beat. "No."

"If she fools you, it's on your head."

Jack opened the passenger door. "Okay I accept full responsibility. Are we done here?"

Jesse's dark eyes seemed to scorch his flesh. "Yeah, I suppose so, you arrogant fuck. Get the hell out."

Chapter 25

Violet was beat. After a tense afternoon of trying to blend in with the werewolf wives and girlfriends, she couldn't wait to go home. But apparently Jack had other things in mind. He drove them to a seaside park just as the sun was sinking below the horizon. From his serious demeanor, Violet knew she was in trouble. She didn't know *what* he had on his mind, but it was something serious.

He climbed out of the truck, walked around and opened her door. She thought about asking if they could talk about this at home but one look at his face and she thought the better of it. They walked along the boardwalk for about ten minutes before he spoke.

"Where did you go the night you got shot in the leg?"

And there it was, the ugly truth demanding to be told. She was glad they were in a public place because she had no idea how mad he was going to get. He knew she worked for the vampires but didn't know she'd recently reported back to the High King.

"After you left, I went out to the alley to give my report to Victor Scarlet."

Jack smiled bitterly and shook his head. "I should have seen this for the mindfuck it was. How stupid could I be? I knew you were just screwing me for information."

She grabbed his arm, but he violently pulled away. “It’s not a mindfuck. I do have feelings for you, Jack. I *told* you I was working for the vampires. Why is it so surprising that I met with one of them?”

“You didn’t meet with just one of them. You met with their High King. Victor Scarlet doesn’t buddy up to just anyone. Everyone knows that. The two of you must have a *special* connection in order for him to come out personally to see you.”

Violet threw up her arms in frustration. “Oh my God, I don’t believe this. You’re jealous of him.”

“I am *not* jealous.”

She pointed at his chest. “Yes you are. Admit it. You think I’m having an affair on the side with Victor.”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“No! Victor has zero romantic interest in me. His only goal is to avoid another Winter War. But you know what? We’re no closer to stopping a potential war now than when I started the damn job. Even with you watching my back I can’t find out one thing about the Dead Lands or how the serum is made. If we’re going to avoid war, we have to get access to the Dead Lands labs and destroy that serum. Maybe if we can do that, Jesse won’t be so gung ho about starting a war with the vampires.”

Jack’s nostrils flared. Someone was nearby.

From between two huge oaks, two werewolf assassins leaped forward. Both men were enormous and in their wolf form. They snarled and flashed sharp, white teeth, as their hackles stood up on their shoulders. Jack laughed. It was a cold, bone-chilling laugh that had nothing to do with humor. The laugh was maniacal and vicious, and if Violet hadn’t

known him, she would have taken off as fast as she could and never looked back.

But she had a better idea. She was going to try to change too. Remembering his structure, she closed her eyes and pictured the hyaenodon form. It took every bit of concentration she had, but soon the change started happening. Like a euphoric rush the power of her new body warmed over her. Strength and ferocity fired her heart and when she opened her eyes, the world around her was clear and vivid in different shades of white and gray.

The werewolves pinned their ears at the sight of her but, to their credit, they didn't back down. Jack had transformed, too. He took the werewolf on the far left and she took the other one. She lowered her head and peeled back her lips in a wicked snarl. Suddenly her werewolf opponent wasn't so sure about fighting her after all. He kept glancing at the other one, who was backing away from Jack cautiously.

Violet decided to try and communicate with Jack telepathically. Many shifters had that ability. *I think they're going to bolt.*

Jack glanced at her flashing bright yellow eyes. *We can't let them go. They've overheard every word we've said.*

A panic filled her heart. *I'm not going to kill them.*

Jack lunged at the werewolf and grabbed it by its scruff. He shook the loose flesh hard, demanding his opponent yield to him as leader. The werewolf yelped and rolled over onto its back. *We won't kill them. We'll take them back to your friends, the vampires. They can keep them under wraps for a while until we can get to that serum.*

Violet rushed her opponent and pinned him to the ground. *We? You're not afraid of showing your face there? They're*

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

not exactly big fans of yours, you know.

“Yes, I know. But we’re going to do this together.”

Chapter 26

They arrived at the Scarlet Mansion twenty minutes later. For the first time since she'd met him, Violet was happy Jack was a member of the mafia. Who else but a mafia enforcer would carry duct tape and rope in his trunk? Not the supplies a typical boyfriend would carry around. Good thing, too, because those two werewolf gangsters were pissed. They fought their restraints all the way.

She could feel his tension rise as soon as he cut the engine. This was his point of no return. Meeting with the vampires would make him an enemy of the mafia forever and she wondered if he was ready for that. "Are you having second thoughts?"

He looked at her and the hardness in his eyes disappeared. He stroked her hair. "No, not at all. I'm just wondering what kind of reception the vampires are going to give me. I'm not exactly a welcome guest."

They climbed out of the car and dragged the two gangsters out of the back and up the driveway. The door was opened by the same femme fatale Violet had met when she'd first visited the house. The woman glanced at her, then ogled Jack a little too long for Violet's taste.

"We're here to see Victor," Violet said in her most authoritarian voice. "Can you find someone to get these guys

off our hands?”

The woman let them in, then slithered off. She returned a moment later with two hulking vampire soldiers who took the mafia thugs away.

“I don’t want them hurt!” Violet called after them.

The femme fatale gestured toward the back balcony. “Victor is out here.”

Victor stood as they came out. He took one look at Jack and signaled a vampire enforcer to handcuff him. Jack kept his eyes down and let himself be restrained. The enforcer pulled him back away from where Victor and Violet were standing. She thought about protesting but this was a delicate situation that needed as much diplomacy as she could muster.

“Jack’s no threat to you. He’s been good to his word. He’s been helping me,” she said to Victor.

The vampire High King sat back down. He gave her a winning smile. “I’m just being cautious.” He gestured to the chair across from him. “What news do you have for me? Did you find out when Jesse is planning his attack?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Um...no, not yet.” Victor’s dark eyebrows came down shadowing his eyes. “But before you get mad, I have to tell you I don’t think he has a concrete date set for the attack. He’s still trying to get werewolf recruits to submit to the serum.” Violet turned in her seat and glanced back at Jack. “And Jack has just agreed to take me to the Dead Lands so I can get a sample of that serum.”

The lumberjack vampire emerged from a dark corner of the balcony. Violet felt the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “What good will that do?”

Victor caressed his index finger along his bottom lip. “Once we have the serum, we can come up with an antidote

and turn the werewolves back. Without his army of freak shifters, Jesse is nothing.”

Violet wondered if that last comment about freak shifters bugged Jack or if he was getting over it. “I feel confident we can get you a sample by tomorrow night. Unfortunately though, I don’t think the ancient shifters can be turned back. All we can hope for is to get a copy of it and destroy any means they have of making more.”

“Violet,” Jack growled in warning. He shook his head slightly. He apparently thought her timeline was too ambitious. Unfortunately Violet needed results fast, and she was going to get them no matter what she had to do.

Victor glanced at her then stared hard at Jack. “Other than the fact that this man is good in bed, why do you trust him?”

“Because he’s been nothing but truthful with me and he’s saved my butt a few times.”

Victor glared. “Well, I don’t trust him.”

“He did help our other undercover operative escape certain execution, your Majesty,” the white woman said.

Victor gestured for Jack to be brought closer. “You and your ancient friends make me very nervous. You all were created for only one purpose, to destroy vampires and I simply cannot allow that. I have to admit my intention was to destroy all of you, starting tonight with you. But you came here knowing the great risk to yourself, so that tells me you must want to change. So this is the deal I have for you.

“You convince your fellow ancients to defect and work to stop this new Winter War, and I will reward all of you for helping us. Can you agree to that?”

“It’s true that a few of the ancients are unhappy and feel

betrayed by Jesse, but I can't promise all of them will turn against him. What if I can only get a few?"

"You do what you can. As far as those who choose not to help you, we'll discuss their fate when this is all over. For now, all I demand is that you do everything in your power to stop this coming war. If the two of you can get the serum and destroy the lab, it would certainly be helpful. But don't overlook Jesse and his unquenchable ambition. He might decide on an attack while the two of you are screwing around in the Dead Lands."

Victor turned his attention to Violet. "As for you, I need results by tomorrow or I'm going to send in someone else."

In other words, I'm going to be fired. She was pretty sure Victor was going to have one of his vampire soldiers take over and that would mean a lot of werewolves were going to die. That wasn't good either and would probably lead to more fighting. "I will bring you a sample of the serum and destroy that lab by this time tomorrow night. I promise."

"You're out of time on this mission, Violet. Make this happen," Victor said.

Chapter 27

The Dead Lands were the five acres of Wentworth Memorial Cemetery, situated right on the outskirts of the city. The iron gates were usually left open even at night so the police could patrol and keep an eye out for weirdos looking for a cheap thrill. And if any cops showed up, that's exactly what they'd think Violet and Jack were.

Although Jack had never been there, he knew from overhearing other mafia members that Seth's center of operations was an underground bunker right in the middle of the park. It was supposed to be located under an enormous stone crypt with the family name Butler engraved on the stone. The lab itself was rumored to be a few feet away from the bunker in the Wentworth Remembrance Chapel.

He drove past the Butler crypt at a respectful five miles per hour and turned right toward the chapel. There was a small, empty parking lot so he parked as close to the building as he could.

Violet stared at the chapel and chewed her bottom lip. "Do you think they'll be anyone in there?"

"Hard to tell." He squinted at the stained glass windows looking for any sign of light inside. It was completely dark. "We're just here to get a sample of that serum, right?"

"That's the plan." She got out of the truck and headed for

the front door of the chapel. Jack joined her, but neither was surprised the door was locked.

He gently pushed her out of the way and took out a locksmith's toolkit. He had the door open in seconds. With a theatrical flair, he pushed it open and gestured for her to go inside.

The chapel was dark and smelled of dust and wood mold. Jack turned on the light and Violet shielded her eyes from the sudden glare. The chapel looked like any other: crucifix; altar; candles; and pews.

"This doesn't look much like a lab to me." She took a few cautious steps forward. "Are you sure about this?"

"I'm just going by what I've heard."

She gave him a suspicious look. "You mean you haven't been here before?"

"No, I got the serum at Jesse's house. Over the years I've heard about this place, but I've never been here. Wayne claims they brought him here when he went through the change but he's the only one I know."

"So where's the lab?"

"If this place is like Seth's command center, it would be under the floor. Start looking around for a trap door somewhere."

Violet went to the front of the chapel and started looking around the altar. Jack started at the back. He came into a preparation room with flower pedestals and a white casket lying directly on the ground. He pushed it with his foot and spotted some hinges. He poked his head out into the main chapel. "I found it."

* * * *

The lab was the strangest place Violet had ever seen. Far

from small, it was a huge three-room bunker with top-of-the-line computers, microscopes, and beakers. It was everything a bunch of zombie mad scientists could want. It was so amazing she couldn't help standing there like a dummy staring. Jack didn't waste any time. He went right to the silver fridge and pulled out a sealed beaker of blue liquid.

"This is what we want. I recognize the color from Jesse's house," he said. Jack opened several drawers and until he finally found a glass test tube with a cork at the top. Then he filled the tube with the blue stuff and put the cork in place. He poured the rest of the liquid down the drain. In one of the drawers he found a notebook on all the research and the serum's formula. "Can't make anymore without the playbook." He stuffed it into his pocket.

She walked over and stared at it. "They injected you with that?"

"Yeah."

"Boy, you are brave. I wouldn't have let them near me with that."

"Or just greedy and stupid."

Violet smiled, went up on her toes, and kissed him on the cheek. "You're not stupid. You just trusted Jesse and now you know that was a mistake."

"I'm glad he was the mistake and not you." He pulled her against him and kissed her. It was a warm and tender kiss that took her completely by surprise. When he broke it, she was actually lightheaded.

"Well, well, well." A zombie entered the room wearing a dirty gray suit with no shirt under the jacket. His chest was smeared with grime. "What do we have here? I hope we're not interrupting anything. And who do we have the pleasure

of having with us? A used-to-be werewolf and his universal shifter lady friend. Welcome, you could say we've been expecting you."

Violet turned to run, then froze. Five more zombies came down the ladder to the lab. Things were going from bad to horrible.

Seth was the last to come down the steps. He pulled his light gray hood back to reveal a handsome but very pale face. "Jack, I'm surprised at you. What are you doing here? Conducting a clumsy breaking and entering? I expected so much more from a pro like you. As if that's not bad enough, you're endangering your lady friend too. Tsk, tsk."

Violet squared her shoulders. "I asked him to bring me so I could find the serum that changed him."

"And what would a universal want with our serum? You can already take on almost any living form."

"We know you and Jesse James are planning another Winter War. Why else would you need that serum?"

Seth glanced at Jack. "It appears you've been listening to some very tall tales."

"Don't patronize me. Why else would you and your kind want such an overwhelming force? Because the ancients are the only ones who might actually be able to overthrow the vampires. Well I've got news for you, no one's going to sit idly by and let you ruin the delicate balance of power that's worked for centuries."

"Nice speech," Seth said with a wicked smile. "But I'm afraid you're too late. The attack begins in the morning. And when it's all over? There will be a new ruling class made up of werewolves and zombies."

Jack laughed and it was dark and menacing. "You really

believe that, don't you? You're delusional, Seth. I don't know what kinds of lies Jesse told you, but he has no intention of keeping his promises. Jesse doesn't rule with partners. As soon as the fighting's over, he'll turn on you and your people and now you've given him the means to win."

"We have a deal. He gave his word and I believe him." Seth turned to his zombies. "Take them up top. I have a special surprise that Violet will especially like."

The zombies dragged them up the ladder and out into the fresh air. Violet didn't have to guess. She already knew what they had in mind for her and it was all she could do to fight off a full-blown panic attack. They dragged her and Jack over to a pair of pine boxes next to two freshly dug graves. She tried to harness her mind so she could concentrate and change but even as she started to take a new form they injected her and Jack with an inhibitor.

Jack fought hard but his four zombie guards had a tight hold on him and they felt no pain.

Seth pulled Violet over to the first pine box. "I'm sure I don't need to explain what this is for."

Violet dug her heels in and fought as hard as she could but, like his men, Seth was abnormally strong and felt no pain. He picked her up and was about to lay her down in the coffin when they heard the laughing. Seth paused with her in his arms and turned to look at Jack.

An evil, low laughter rumbled from his chest.

"I thought you gave him an inhibitor," Seth said to the zombie with the medical kit.

The zombie doctor scowled. "I did. Maybe he needs a higher dose." He went over to Jack with another loaded syringe. Jack grabbed one of his captors by his jacket and

threw him into the doctor. They both flew five feet back like they'd just walked into an explosion.

Jack's laughing grew louder and changed into something deeper and far more sinister. He snarled at the three zombies still holding him baring large, razor-sharp teeth.

In a moment of terror, they loosened their grip and Jack lunged, tearing the throat out of one and clawing the other in two. His attack was so ferocious and unexpected they stumbled back. He fell to his knees and changed so fast Violet couldn't believe her eyes. His clothes tore from his body as he changed from human to the deadly hyenadon. Once his change was complete, he turned on the four men who'd been holding him and mauled them so badly they could not longer get up.

Then he turned on Seth.

Seth let Violet go just as headlights illuminated the grisly scene. He sprinted for his car and jumped into the driver's seat, shoving the zombie driver over. Then he gunned the engine and rocketed toward Jack.

"Jack, watch out!" Violet screamed.

She watched in terrified silence as the car bore down on the hyenadon. But Jack was just as fast, jumping on the roof of the car before it could impact him. He slammed his long muzzle through the glass and sank his teeth into Seth's shoulder. The zombie king cried out in alarm and agony. Then, realizing he was outmuscled, Seth swerved the car hard to the left and dislodged Jack.

The zombie king had apparently had enough and skidded out of the cemetery.

Jack transformed back and came over to check on her. Violet threw herself into his arms. She was shaking so hard she thought she was going to faint. He placed light kisses on her

cheek. “It’s okay, Violet. No one’s going to put you in that box again. No as long as I draw breath.”

Violet squeezed his muscular chest. “Thank you, Jack. Thank you, thank you...”

Chapter 28

Jesse sat in the plush booth of his casino doing a word find puzzle. Although he owned several bookie joints and betting establishments, he wasn't much of a gambler. He was the kind of man who didn't like to take chances. He liked a sure thing.

He scanned the page and found three words in a row. This puzzle book was proving to be a little too easy. Jesse was just about to get one of his men to bring him another one from the gift shop when a horrible stench filled his nose. It smelled like dirty skin and flesh rot and a million other nasty things he couldn't place. He grimaced and leaned back in his seat.

He looked up. "What the hell is that?"

A zombie stood in front of the booth, one of Seth's men. The thing was tall and broad with gray skin and sickly yellow eyes. It wore a tailored gray suit, probably the one it had been buried in. *What a fucking sight.* If Seth hadn't been his ally, Jesse would have had his guys take this thing out back and burned.

"Seth sent me. We have a concern," the zombie said. His voice was rough and hollow like he had something stuck in his chest.

Jesse forced his face to remain neutral. "Could you step a few paces back from the booth, please?"

The zombie moved back and the stink subsided a little.

“What is the concern?”

“One of your ancients and some woman our security didn’t recognize broke into the chapel and took some of the serum. What they didn’t take, they destroyed.”

“Can’t you make more?”

“No,” the zombie said. “They took the research book with them.”

Jesse thumped his head back. *It’s gotta be Violet. She’s a cop after all collecting evidence for the vamps. How could I have been so careless?* “I know who the woman is,” he mumbled.

“Sir?”

“The werewolf is Jack, one of our own who must be trying to defect and the woman is a cop. They must be building a case for the Vampire High King. He’s been trying to nail me for months.” Jesse rubbed his face. “What time is it?”

The zombie glanced up at the large neon clock behind Jesse. “Eight in the morning, sir.”

“The vamps will be tucked snug in their coffins. This is a good time to attack. Is Seth in or not?”

“His Royal Highness will support you in any way he can but he will not supply troops. This coup was your idea. Disposing the Vampire High King offers no benefit to us.”

Typical. When the going gets rough, the zombies go underground. “Tell your king, I’ll be in touch. You may go.” The zombie bowed and turned around to leave. The back of his gray suit had once been cut down the back and pant legs, a sure sign he’d been buried in that suit for sure. Jesse shuddered. Was cleaning up and changing clothes such a big deal to these guys? He knew it wouldn’t solve all their smell problems but it might help.

Jesse climbed out of the both and was pleased to see Boris

slither up. “Bad news, boss?”

“That stupid bitch fucking Jack’s brains out must be a cop after all. She and Jack broke into the zombie chapel and found the damned serum. I’m sure they took a sample to that jackass Victor.”

“Surely they can’t come up with an antidote that fast. It took the zombies the better part of a year to design it in the first place.”

“We can’t take that chance. The time has come, we need to act now. Contact the ancients and tell them we’re moving on the vamps this morning. They need to arm up and meet us at the Scarlet Mansion within the hour. Got that?”

Boris smiled. “Yes, boss. I got that.”

Chapter 29

Violet's eyes were burning red as they drove back to Jack's house after dropping off the serum. She hadn't slept, really slept, in over twenty-four hours and it was draining the life out of her. Jack's phone beeped indicating he had an incoming text message. He pulled over to read it. It was a message originally sent to Wayne but the sabertooth ancient had forwarded it on to Jack. It read:

Good morning, all. Time to clean the bats out of the belfry.

"What's wrong?" Violet asked. She must have seen the haunted expression on his face.

"Jesse's mobilizing everyone for an attack this morning."

"Oh my God! We have to stop him!"

"The vampire guards inside the house can probably hold off the werewolves, but even they're no match for the ancients."

"Then we have to try and stop the ancients before they leave to join Jesse."

She was right, that was their only chance of stopping this thing before things got too far out of hand. He thrust the phone back into his pocket and took off toward the ancients' house.

* * * *

They arrived without a moment to spare. All the ancient vehicles were parked on the lawn and most had heavy duty guns in the front seat. Jack led the way, opening the front door and stepping inside.

Wayne, surprised by their unannounced entrance, whirled around and pointed an automatic at his head. It took him a second to recognize Jack. Thank heaven he didn't believe in shooting first. "Not one of your smartest moves, bursting in here like that."

"I needed to talk to all of you before you left to do this thing."

"There's nothing to talk about," a huge, seven-foot shifter with light blue eyes said. "We are pack members. When the alpha says attack, we follow orders."

Violet stepped forward cautiously. "But don't you see? You're not pack members anymore. Jesse changed you. He made you into a completely different kind of shifter. And what did he give you in return? His contempt and the *privilege* of being an outsider forever. But it doesn't have to be that way. The vampires are confident they can come up with an antidote to the serum. You can all be changed back into werewolves if you want to. Jesse never intended to offer you that. He wanted to keep you all under his thumb until he needed your services, then it was back in the shadows until the next time. Why are you going to be loyal to someone like that?"

The ancients fell silent. A few glanced at each other wondering what the majority was going to do. The seven-foot ancient came forward, his blue eyes searching Violet's face. He seemed to be trying to figure out whether to trust her or not. He was a man with a unique type of handsomeness. He had a curved Roman nose with high cheekbones and a thickly

muscled body.

The giant held his hand out to her. “My name is Norman and my form is imperial mammoth.”

“I’m Violet and I’m a universal shifter. It’s nice to meet you, Norman.”

Norman turned to the rest of the ancients. “Violet is right. From the first day of my change I’ve been treated like a dirty secret. Add to that, I was lied to. Jesse said if I wanted to change back into a werewolf, they had the antidote, but they didn’t. Lies, all lies to keep me hanging on and hoping. Well, I’ve had enough. I want to go back to the life that was stolen from me. I’m not going to do another thing for Jesse and I’m certainly not going to die for him. He wants another Winter War? He can fight it himself.”

There was murmuring in the room. Norman stood next to Violet and stared at the others. Then slowly, one by one the others joined them. When it was all over, not one ancient stood on the opposite side of the room.

Chapter 30

The caravan of ancients sped toward the Scarlet Mansion one right after the other. Violet had to admit, they were an impressive sight. She just hoped they got there before the werewolves had a chance to do any real damage to the mansion. The first sign of trouble was the broken lock on the front gate. Up ahead the parking lot in front of the mansion was filled with werewolf mafia cars. *We're in for a real fight now.*

Jack pulled up and parked his pickup as close to the house as he could. The house was surrounded by werewolves. Some were armed with crowbars, others with patio chairs and all were beating on the protective shutters that covered the outside windows. The shutters were a daytime precaution the vampires used to make sure they weren't attacked when they were at their most vulnerable. But the werewolves had a bit of a head start and had already done some substantial damage to the house.

Jack pulled his automatic and checked the clip. Violet had come prepared too with her service issue Beretta. He leaned across the seat and kissed her. "Be careful, honey."

She stroked his cheek. "You, too. If you have to shift, I'll be right behind you."

Jesse was standing at the front of the house having his

werewolf goons slam the front door with a battering ram.

Jack moved up behind them and Violet took the opposite side to be able to cover him better. He'd need some good cover if the shooting started. "I think this party is over," he said.

Jesse turned around. His eyes grew narrow and mean. "Well, well, look who finally showed up with his friends in tow." The alpha glanced behind Jack at the other ancients. "The only question is, whose side are you boys on?"

"Not yours," Norman said, taking his position behind Jack.

The werewolves stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to this tense exchange. "You mean to tell me you're going to side with the vampires over us? We are your pack, the ones who have loved and been with you all your lives, doesn't that mean anything?"

Wayne came forward, his handsome face taking on a savage, mean expression. "You *used* us, Jesse. You made up all kinds of lies and once we were different and couldn't change back, you and the others treated us like shit. We're done being the hammer for you. You want another Winter War, you fight it without us."

Jesse glared at them then stripped his clothes off and shifted. All the werewolves followed his lead. In seconds the ancients were surrounded by a pack of snarling, vicious wolves ready to tear them apart.

That was when Wayne shifted into his sabertooth tiger form. The shift looked painful and took longer than the werewolves had, but when he was done, he was an impressive sight. From a mouthful of sharp, predatory teeth were two extra long ones that extended long past the jaw. He was one

scary cat. His shoulders were thick, his paws huge and bulging with enormous retractable claws. Wayne easily dwarfed all the growling werewolves around him.

The others changed as well.

Norman into an imperial mammoth, Tex into a short-faced bear, and Jack into the hyaenodon. Violet changed into the hyaenodon, too, and moved in closer to the ancients. Wayne winked at her.

Before the wolves could get up the nerve to attack, Jack and the others were on them. Jack lunged at Jesse but the alpha sidestepped him and ducked around to attack Jack from behind. Violet pounced on a nearby wolf, who yelped in terrified surprise. The wolf took two bites from Violet's massive jaws and decided this fight was more than he bargained for. It was one thing to have the ancients on his side. It was entirely another to try and fight them only to be confronted by the vampires once he got inside. Violet was sure most werewolves wouldn't find any of this worth it, no matter what Jesse promised them.

She pinned the wolf to the ground but he fought his way free and took off running so fast, she had no chance of catching him. She turned on another one, but he too felt one bite, yelped loudly and took off running. All around her the scene was the same. The same except for Norman. No one wanted to mess with him being so damned big and powerful. He just kept picking up werewolves and tossing them around the parking lot like so many stuffed animals.

It didn't take long for the whole werewolf pack, all fifteen or so of them, to shift back to human and take off in their cars. Some left in such a panic they didn't even bother getting dressed again.

Werewolf Mafia Book 1: No Laughing Matter

In twenty minutes everything was over. Violet was almost disappointed. She shifted back to her human form and rejoined the other ancients.

Jack and Wayne surveyed the damage to the Scarlet Mansion. "That was almost too easy," Wayne said.

Jack grinned and took Violet's hand. "Not for them."

"What do we do now?" Wayne asked.

"It might be nice if we fixed up what we could of the mansion," Violet said. She pulled on her jeans and underwear, then dug around and found her shirt with her watch wrapped in it. "It won't be dark for several more hours. We have plenty of time."

Wayne looked at the others. "You guys game?"

Everyone nodded.

"I've got some tools in the truck. Everybody come on over, grab something, and let's get started."

Chapter 31

Victor finished inspecting the Scarlet Mansion repairs and returned to where Violet and Jack were standing. “I was wrong about you, Jack. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right, your Majesty.” He looked at Violet and smiled. “I’m kind of surprised by my evolution as well.”

“My people owe you and the other ancients our gratitude for not only averting another Winter War, but also saving us from a surprise attack. And now I have a gift for all of you.”

Violet glanced at Wayne and Jack. They had the joyful expression of two kids waiting to open presents on Christmas.

Victor walked over and placed his hand on her shoulder. He kneaded the muscle affectionately and grinned as Jack’s eyes narrowed. “I’m going to officially recognize the ancients as a unique breed of shifter. No more will you be second-class citizens. All of you will have full shifter rights and representation in the Paranormal Council.”

Wayne and Jack exchanged looks. They were stunned at Victor’s kindness. As werewolves, they were always taught that the vampires were cruel and arbitrary. It was nice to see those old suspicions evaporate. “You are too kind, your Majesty,” Jack said.

“I also have another gift for any of you who want it. Our scientists have successfully come up with an antidote to the

zombie serum. We have the ability to change any of you back into werewolves if you so choose. But whether you choose to remain as you are or change back into werewolves, we want you to know you are all welcome to stay on as vampire enforcers. For those of you who wish to rejoin another pack, it will not be held against you. The choice is yours.”

A few of the ancients lined up to go inside and get the antidote. Jack turned to Violet. “I’m not sure what to do. I’ve wanted this for so long and now suddenly I’m not sure.”

She hugged him, then pulled back. “I don’t care what you are, my feelings are the same. But...” She smiled. “You are pretty kick-ass as a hyaenodon. And since I can become one too, what’s the point of changing? You’re one of the baddest mammals on the planet. Wouldn’t you be a better enforcer as an ancient?”

Victor walked up, flashing a dazzling smile. Even though Violet was in love with Jack, Victor could still get her heart racing. “From the way Violet talked about you, I thought you’d be the first one in line.”

“I’m starting to like being different.” Jack possessively rubbed Violet’s back.

“Violet, I must admit I was having my doubts about you, but you did a fantastic job. Thanks. And as for you, Jack, I’m quite impressed by you too. Maybe the two of you would consider being head of security for the vampire royal house?”

“That’s quite an honor, your Majesty. Thank you,” Violet said.

“Is that a yes?” Victor asked them.

Jack kissed Violet on top of the head. “Yeah, I guess it is a yes.”

“Good, but there’s just one more thing I need to close up

this issue with the werewolves. Will the two of you take a few of my men over to Seth's lab and make sure there's no more of that serum? We can't afford for Jesse to start his takeover project all over again."

"Sure," Violet said. "When do you want us to go?"

Victor glanced over his shoulder and three tall, mean-looking vampires stalked up. They were all dressed in dark suits and each one was heavily armed with a gun on their hip and one in an underarm holster.

"We need to be sure that serum is out of Seth and Jesse's hands. How about you all leave now? You can take my car."

A black Cadillac limo pulled up and the three vampires got in. Jack smiled and shook his head. "Oh man, we won't look suspicious in this thing." He gestured for Violet to get in. "Ladies first."

"Oh, and, Violet?" Victor said. "We found your sister alive and well. We'll be changing her back along with the others."

"Oh my God, where did you find her?"

A hawklike screech filled the air as a huge bird circled overhead. Everyone looked up.

"It seems your sister was Jesse's first victim of the zombie's serum," Victor said.

Chapter 32

The cemetery wasn't as quiet and lifeless this time around. As they pulled up to the chapel in the limo, they noticed several panel vans parked with their backs open. Jack got out of the limo and was immediately greeted by a familiar face: Seth.

The Zombie King was taller than his minions, a good six foot two and although pale, heavily muscled. He wore a light gray cloak over his bare chest and his hood partially covered the top of his face. Seth also wore black pants and dark brown work boots.

Seth stepped in front of the path to the chapel. A light wind played at the corners of his cloak. "Nice to see you again, Jack," he said. "How is your alpha?"

Jack knew it was a dig. Seth had to know what had happened by now. "We had a falling out."

"That's a shame. Loyalty is such a hard thing to find nowadays."

The three vampires moved up behind Jack. He could feel their lethal energy like hands touching his back. But Seth wouldn't be afraid of them. They couldn't do anything to harm him, Seth was already dead. "We're here to destroy the lab, Seth. Get out of the way or we'll be forced to move you."

Seth tilted his chin up and Jack caught a glimpse of those

chilling pale blue eyes. "Over my dead body."

"Or your dismembered one," one of the vampires said.

"Don't you threaten me, bloodsucker. You're in my territory now and my children are always hungry."

Five zombies emerged from the chapel. Their clothes were torn and filthy and a distinct stench of decay clung to them. They shuffled up behind Seth and waited for his orders. "Besides," Seth continued, "you're too late. The lab has been dismantled and any trace of the serum destroyed."

"You are an evil liar," Violet said.

"Ah, there she is again, the woman who turned Jack from a successful gangster into a spineless traitor. I'm rather surprised Jack fell for you. I always thought he'd be attracted to someone prettier."

"And I thought the King of the Zombies would be more intelligent than to mess with vampires," she shot back.

"I guess we were doomed to disappoint each other." He glanced at one of the zombies and the creature opened the van door for him. Seth got in. "I would love to stay and chat but I have more important things to attend to. But please, by all means, feel free to inspect the chapel. I'm sure you'll find it's as empty as I told you. Until next time, lady and gentlemen."

Chapter 33

The final destruction of the lab was easy since the zombies had done most of it already. Now back at Jack's house, Violet was so tired her eyes felt like someone had poured a bucket of sand in them. She sat on the dresser waiting for Jack to finish changing the sheets on his bed. Even as exhausted as she was, the man could still do it to her. He moved around the bed, pulling and tucking sheets and blankets shirtless, and Violet could honestly say she'd never seen a sexier man. She wanted to spread whipped cream all over his pecs and lick it off.

"You look very sexy making that bed."

Jack gave her that smoldering look that never failed to arouse her. "Wait till you see what I do to mess it up again." He went over and picked her up off the dresser. Violet wrapped her arms and legs around him loving the feel of his muscular back.

"I'm glad those werewolf women didn't want you as a hyenadon. That leaves more for me."

He laughed. It was light and easy and it made her smile. Then he stared into her eyes and kissed her. The kiss was soft and tender, but as the chemistry between them bubbled, it grew hotter and lustier.

She broke the kiss and caressed the back of his neck. "Do you regret breaking off from your pack?"

He lowered her to the bed and lay down next to her. “No. I have you and you’re what I needed all along. Besides, they weren’t much of a pack to me anymore. I’m looking forward to being head of security for the vampires. I think they’ll do right by us.”

Violet traced the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes with her index finger. Jack closed his eyes and the muscles in his face relaxed. She ran her finger down his nose and could feel a solid bump under the flesh where he’d broken it once. She continued her exploration, tracing his cheekbones and thick jaw. The last place she caressed was his lips. His eyes opened and he stared at her with a rich mixture of love and arousal.

He leaned in close and ran his fingers through her hair. Then he claimed her lips in a ferocious carnal kiss that brought her body to roaring life. All her fatigue melted away and all Violet could think of was making love to him.

Violet pulled her shirt off and wrestled out of her jeans. His hands stroked her bare flesh, sending shivers of pure delight all down her back. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled one of her nipples into his mouth to lick and suck. Then he moved a hand down to the curly patch of her sex and tickled the outer lips. She gripped his arm and gasped, her body twisting with an ever-rising desire. She moved her lips up to his ear. “Jack, let’s shift and make love.”

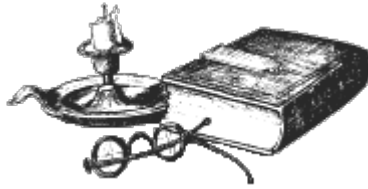
He grinned. “I’ll take you up on that as soon as we wake up. I want you fresh when I ravish you.” Then he wrapped his arms around her and they both fell right to sleep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle has been writing science fiction erotic romance for a few years now and can't think of a better way to have fun. She has several credits to her name, including the novella *The Love Machine* published by Whiskey Creek Press Torrid.

She is a member of the Winter Park Writers Group. You can visit her website at www.michelle-oneill.com.

*For your reading pleasure, we invite
you to visit our web bookstore*



WHISKEY CREEK PRESS TORRID

www.whiskeycreekpresstorrid.com