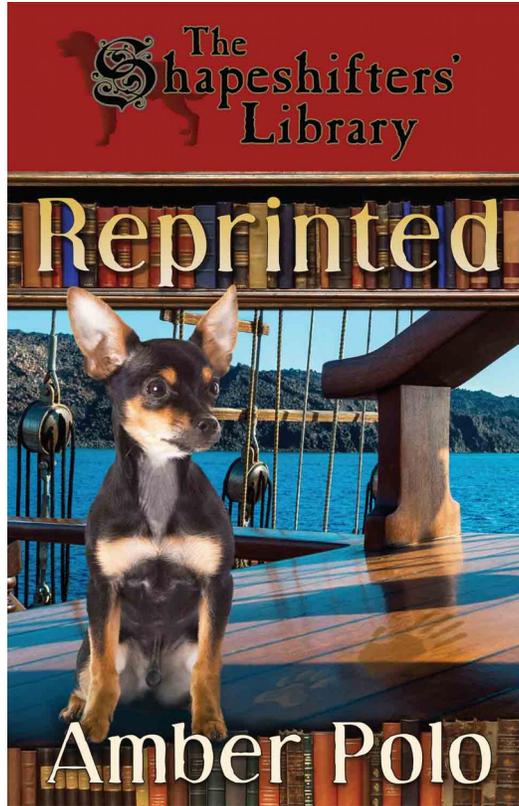


Sample

Chapter One of *Reprinted by Amber Polo*



Chapter ONE

Pacifico Lopez faced the elevator door and punched ninety-nine. Just the smell of this werewolf office tower made him want to bare his teeth. Anger had brought him to New York City. For months he'd applied his software conglomerate's resources to track down an international book piracy operation. Now at last he had proof the werewolves' World Wide Publishing was stealing ebooks by the millions and giving them away free from an unknown location.

Pacifico pulled himself as tall as his five foot two height allowed. A black fedora and shoulder pads added height and bulk and he'd need every centimeter to face Dominika Romano. Online photos showed an older version of her daughter Sybilla, who'd terrorized his town of Shipsfeather. Tall with terrible fierce beauty, the Romano women were alpha from their Mediterranean noses to the tip of their plumed tails.

With a whoosh the door parted. He stepped onto the black marble lobby floor. The gold letters WWP floated over the receptionist's head next to a swirly abstract logo that looked like a wolf swallowing a penguin. Pacifico removed his hat, grasped his briefcase tighter, and marched toward the desk with the confidence of a CEO of the world's dominant software company. Known to prefer to do business electronically, the financial press called him the most brilliant recluse since Howard Hughes.

Ready to do battle, he would expose damned Dominika if she didn't shut down the scam ruining the book world. Werewolves only entered publishing to dominate and intimidate other publishers and demoralize librarians and dog-shifters dedicated to disseminating knowledge. The woman behind the desk looked up and opened her mouth. When he strode past, she demanded, "Where are you going?" to his well-tailored back.

He heard the receptionist phone security as the soles of his Italian-made shoes tapped stone-tiled floor, sending echoes against walls lined with museum quality paintings.

The hall ended at a huge double door labeled D. Romano, Publisher. Pacifico didn't slow but pushed open the door and stepped inside, primed to demand Dominika end all illegal operations immediately or he'd point all Zoogole's resources into shutting down WWP, ruining her personally, impeaching her former husband Senator Dante Romano, and if necessary revealing them all as werewolves. That last would, of course, be the last resort, for exposing werewolves would also expose the worldwide community of dog-shifters whose librarians kept safe the world's knowledge and literature.

As the door closed behind him, his brow wrinkled and he blinked. Instead of the terrifying werewolf he'd expected, a petite young woman peered at him over reading glasses.

His eyes scanned an office the size of most New York bistros, black leather except for red carpet under the ebony desk and book-lined walls. Beyond the desk a window framed a classic New York skyline. He squinted in the mid-afternoon light to examine the woman who leaned over a messy pile of papers. Whoever she was, she was not Dominika Romano. Perhaps a secretary or gofer, but not the most powerful woman in a city run by powerful women.

The woman stood, her delicate body draped in a severe black dress a fuzzy white cardigan.

He stepped closer, "I'm looking for Ms. Romano," and noticed exotic periwinkle blue eyes against her pale face.

Her voice was hesitant as she smoothed her blond curls. "I am Ms. Romano. Who are you?"

He saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes before he replied, "Pacifico Lopez, Zoogole Corp. But you're not Dominika." He smelled a faint scent of frangipani and his face flushed.

She snugged her sweater tight over her chest. "My mother. She's out of town. I'm Atlandia Romano. Her daughter." Then added, "Mr. Lopez."

Pacifico realized he was staring. Atlandia looked nothing like her mother or Sybilla. This lovely woman didn't look like she could even be a werewolf. His face softened into a smile, then remembered he'd come on serious business.

Behind him doors flew open and two ugly security guards burst in, burly werewolves that appeared to be wolf-hyena crosses. The bigger one growled, "Want us to hurt him, miz?"

Atlandia shook her head. "I'm fine. Leave us alone."

When they left, she raised her chin and asked, "Why did you come, Mr. Lopez?"

Pacifico stepped closer to the desk and refocused on his mission. "I have information that WWP operates an international ebook piracy operation. I want it shut down."

The look on Atlandia's face told him she had no idea what he was talking about.

"You must be mistaken, sir. This is a legitimate publishing company. Not financially successful, but I try to publish—"

The door burst open again and Sybilla Romano strode in looking as mean as in the days she was Alpha of the Shipsfeather Pack. Edges of darting dark eyes slanted up, pulled tight by her raven chignon. Her black Armani suit and knife-sharp stilettos accentuated the werewolf bitch's style. "Landy, whatever is this dog doing in Mother's office?" She approached Pacifico, looked down her prominent nose at him, and laughed. "Dog-shifters should be leashed. Or are little lap dogs an exception?"

Pacifico bristled. "Sybilla, this is not your business."

"Ha! Chihuahua-shifter, you have no business with my little sister." She turned to Landy. "Will you put the dog out or will I have to do it?"

Landy rubbed her hands together and seemed to shrink next to her sister's powerful persona.

Sybilla snapped at Pacifico, "Get out! Now scat!"

Pacifico didn't move. He looked at Landy who seemed too frightened of her sister to speak. He removed a gold pen from his inside jacket pocket and wrote on a business card. Sliding it across the desk towards Landy, he said, "My card," and with a nod strode past Sybilla and out the door.

Landy stepped in front of her desk and pocketed the card Pacifico left.

Sybilla glared at her sister. "What was Lilliputian Lopez doing here?"

"I don't know," Landy lied. "Said he wanted to see Mother."

"And what are you doing here?"

"I'm running WWP." Landy took off her glasses and blinked. "Temporarily." Just being in the same room with Sybilla was making her nervous.

"You a CEO. That'll be the day. Almost as ridiculous as that pedigreed pup running Zoogle. I hear he's on the gravy train, now." Sybilla looked around the office and scrunched her face in disgust. "But I guess Mother's finally found a use for her reading-addicted runt. How can you stand being surrounded," Sybilla sniffed, "by all these books?"

Landy took a deep breath and sat in her mother's oversize chair wishing her feet touched the floor. Dealing with Sybilla always meant taking a deep, deep breath. "This is a publishing company. We publish books."

Sybilla laughed as she threw herself into the leather chair in front of the massive desk. "Don't be silly. WWP publishes trash and rejects good books with the most creatively scathing rejection letters ever penned. Isn't that why Mother hired you? She needed to find some use for you after you were so busy reading you flunked out of law school."

Landy scrambled to change the subject. "Why are you here? Last I heard you were working for Dad in DC."

Sybilla pulled at the cuffs of her black jacket to cover the steel gray blouse. "That didn't work out."

With a few keystrokes on her computer keyboard, Landy called up the Werewolf Network News and searched her sister's name. "I remember something about a scandal a few weeks ago. You and some scrappy soldier named Blaze McKenzie. A failed attempt to prevent your ex-husband and some librarian from finding the dog-shifters' Library of the Ancients. Right, here it is." Gaining confidence, she looked up and noticed the lines under her sister's eyes that matched her un-pressed suit jacket. She'd never seen Sybilla wrinkled. But it was clear she was now struggling to look her old wolfish self.

Sybilla seemed to read Landy's thoughts and pounced to the offensive. "Look at you. I can't believe we're even related. Who ever heard of a short blond werewolf? Mother always thought you were an albino runt."

"I know." Landy sighed. "Mother always loved you best. But now I'm working for her. Things are different. You didn't want to have anything to do with our mother's company. You wanted political power. And look where that's gotten you." She saw the frightened look on Sybilla's face and backed off. "Where are you staying?" she asked more gently.

Sybilla glared back but didn't respond.

"If you need a place, my condo's big enough for two. Until you're on four feet. Again."

Sybilla gritted her teeth. "That would be fine. Just while I'm in the city."

"It would be like old times. When we were girls."

"We were never girls," Sybilla snapped. "When we were werewolf pups, you never wanted to do any of the things I enjoyed. Fresh kill made you nauseous. You were weak and slow. Father always wondered if Mom did it with a dog and you weren't full wolf."

Landy tossed Sybilla a key to her condo, watched her leave, and collapsed back into her chair. Sybilla in disgrace was still Sybilla. Still, Landy was pale-skinned for a werewolf. And small. Sybilla was a foot taller, much stronger, and had been captain of the intercollegiate werewolf girls rugby team. Landy's wispy blond curls stood out in her dark sultry family. She'd always been different. And it wasn't just her looks. To survive she'd learned to keep her head down, her tail lower, and her books hidden.

Putting on her glasses, Landy vowed to ignore her sister and finish reading the most interesting manuscript she'd ever pulled from the slush pile. A discovery that made her nose twitch. She was going to publish this book despite what the board or her mother had to say. Anyway, Mother hadn't been in the office since she'd been named Chairman of World Wide Media and moved into the New Jersey WWM corporate headquarters. She'd left Landy in charge of WWP, sort of. With orders to follow its traditional acquisitions policies. Take only the worst manuscripts to the company's review committee. Reject the best books with a nasty letter, then shred them. Ignore the rest. Delete all email queries after sending authors a personal reply promising a quick response to their excellent submission.

She read fifty more pages. This Ohio librarian's book was both literate and genre bending. *Vampire Summer* read like a YA novel, but the author had pitched it as a memoir. Could Julianna von Noir really be the daughter of a librarian and a vampire? In any case, Landy hadn't been able to put down the pages and believed readers wouldn't either.

Landy called Ms. von Noir at her work number and invited her to New York to discuss details of a contract to publish *Vampire Summer* and talk about a three-book deal. She explained she was determined to make this book a bestseller and felt a series would justify a national marketing campaign.

When Landy quoted an advance figure only big name authors or celebrities received, the young woman became speechless. Landy smiled. Second to reading good books, discovering literary talent was her greatest delight. She wanted the deal signed quickly before Julianna had other offers. She didn't want a bidding war and needed a signed contract before her mother found out. Her mother frightened her even more than her sinister sister. Someday she wanted to be able to stand up to them both.

After finishing the call, she read the business card her visitor left, noted a scribbled restaurant name and time, and googled Pacifico Lopez. She studied articles about the good-looking technology genius. The man fascinated her. He exuded confidence, but when he'd looked at her, his gaze had softened and for a moment he seemed as shy and self-conscious as she always felt.

Late that afternoon Landy took the express elevator to the roof. Using her executive key, she opened the door and stepped out into heavy midtown air of her mother's penthouse roof garden.

Landy closed her eyes and let the change begin. Slowly her body began to shrink, bones and muscles contracting, as cell by cell she changed from petite blonde to small blond wolf.

As a canine shifter, she had the ability to change at will from canid form to human look-alike. It was her genes, not magic. Or not much magic. The only magical element was that when she changed back to human form she wore the same clothes as before her shift. She'd been taught that quirk was an ancient adaption to keep shifters safe from discovery by humans, who didn't need to know shifter species lived among them. To Landy, it was a welcome perk for a shy city wolf.

She shook herself and trotted onto the exercise turf. Soon she was galloping in a circle, stride by stride, ridding herself of the stress her sister stirred, though no amount of exercise could ease the plight of having Sybilla for a sibling.

That evening, Pacifico sat in the private dining room of Poc Chuc, his favorite New York restaurant. During his infrequent trips to the City to consult with lawyers or hold meetings prior to purchasing companies to add to his Zoogole conglomerate, Poc Chuc was a refuge from urban noise, traffic, and crowds. And it served the comfort foods of his Yucatan childhood. Of the few authentic Mayan restaurants outside Mexico, Poc Chuc was the best.

He sipped a cold *horchata*, made the way he liked it with rice milk, ground almonds, sugar, and lots of cinnamon, and admired the glyphs that decorated the walls. Uayab, his usual waiter, approached and asked Pacifico if he wanted corn tortillas and *sni-pec* to start. Poc Chuc staff never called their fiery salsa by its common Yucatan name, dog snout, so named because the heat made your nose moist. He asked for a few more minutes.

Pacifico's eyes glanced to the entrance and his lips curved into a smile. Landy Romano stood next to an arched carved stone Ixim, the maize and cacao god. She took one look at the fierce image and appeared ready to turn and escape. Pacifico jumped to his feet and quickly walked to her. "Thank you for coming, Ms. Romano, thank you," he gushed. Standing in front of her, he became aware he was slightly taller than Landy. "Please join me." And suddenly he felt ten feet tall.

She gave a tiny nod and followed him to a booth with a table covered with a cloth so white it glowed in the dim light. She sat and pressed her lips together. "Mr. Lopez, I'm not quite sure why I'm here."

"I'm so glad you came." She was here. And he wanted her to stay. He wasn't good at chitchat, especially with attractive women. Even the interesting ones claimed he was arrogant, an allegation he didn't understand. He plunged on, "I wanted to discuss concerns about certain activities that your company might be involved in."

"I don't come here to be accused of illegal activities." She stiffened and began to rise from her chair.

"Oh no." He laid his hand on her arm, then quickly removed it.

"If you're attempting to purchase World Wide Publishing to add to your vast holdings, know WWP is a privately held company and part of the WWM family of companies. And I am not the person you should talk to."

"I know that. In fact, I tried negotiations last year and was told to chase my tail."

Landy stifled a laugh. "I'm sure you were. Mother doesn't bite back her words."

Pacifico grinned, pleased Landy had softened a bit, and noticed her sweet smile. He wanted her to like him, but he also needed to find out more about WWP's operations. "Let's have some dinner."

She looked around. "I've never heard of Poc Chuc. And it's in my neighborhood." She picked up the menu and squinted. "I don't have my reading glasses. And don't read Spanish. Please order for me."

Pacifico signaled to Uayab and asked him to bring his regular favorites, their signature poc chuc, conch and fish tamales, and guacamole made from the creamy avocados grown in the Yucatan. He turned back to Landy. "All their ingredients are flown in from Mexico. I've ordered the mildest versions."

"I'm sure it will be fine. Now, could you tell me why I'm here? You mentioned ebook piracy. WWP is a traditional publishing company. Of course our books are available in electronic formats. We have no need to resort to illegal means to acquire literary property."

Pacifico leaned forward. "I didn't mean you've done anything wrong. Not at all."

The waiter brought their dinner and poured *horchata* in her glass.

The poc chuc and tamales seemed to improve her mood and she listened to him lay out the problems of ebook piracy. When he finished, she asked, "Tell me what information you have. Accusations aren't facts."

He waited for Uayab to pour two cups of hot spicy chocolate, then opened his briefcase, removed his laptop, and placed it on the table. "I've been collecting information on a large-scale

piracy operation. I know every software trick there is, but this group has eluded me and my tracking program.”

“I understand computer games entertain you, but I assure you, Mr. Lopez, WWP has no time for such foolishness.”

“This is no game, Ms. Romano. The group, I can’t give them a name for they regularly change both name and location, steal ebooks from all publishers and post them on their websites.” He typed “Books for Free” into his Zoogole browser and slid his computer in front of her. “Search your most recent WWP titles.”

She shrugged. “*Adventures of a Celebrity Busboy* was just released in print and eformats this morning. I assure you our computers are as secure as yours.” She typed in the book title and the cover image appeared. Landy gasped. “Impossible. Our security is bulletproof.” She looked up at Pacifico with suspicion.

“I found links from your main computer site to Arrh.com, Barnacle.net, and seawolf.com, all run by Davy Jones, Inc. As far as I can tell, your eformats are being transferred directly to the pirates.”

“You are mistaken. All our internet activities are handled by Cloud, Inc.” She took a small scratched cell phone from her bag and checked the time. “I need to leave. Thank you for dinner.”

He watched her hurry to the door without a backward glance.

Landy turned the spare key in the lock, opened her condo door, and tiptoed in, hoping Sybilla was asleep or out for the evening. She dreaded facing her sister after their disturbing meeting in her office.

She flicked on the light and heard Sybilla’s strident voice. “So at last you’re back. I had to order carryout for dinner. You took Mother’s car and driver. And you didn’t answer your cell phone.”

Landy backed up. “Sorry. I had business. I didn’t know you wanted to have dinner with me. Sorry.”

“I wanted you to take me to some fabulous restaurant to cheer me up.” Sybilla stepped close to Landy and sniffed. “You smell like Mexican food.” She sniffed again. “And Mexican dog! You met that dogboy on the sly.” Looking down at her sister, she sneered, “Wait till I tell Mother!”

Landy, wilted, took off her jacket and hung it in the closet. “How about I fix you a cup of calming tea and a snack?”

“Oh no, you’re not getting off the hook so fast. Why were you out with the dogman?”

Landy took out two cups and put on water for tea, all the while not meeting Sybilla’s gaze. “Mr. Lopez wanted to finish the conversation you interrupted, that’s all.”

“That can’t be all. It’s never all with the dogs. They’re always collecting information. Nosing around, trying to prove werewolves have some grand plot to get rid of libraries and books.”

“But don’t we?”

“Of course. Because dogs are the weak creatures that share our DNA, we need to wipe them off the face of the earth. We’re werewolves not were-wimps.”

Landy poured a cup of tea for Sybilla. “There’re cookies in the cabinet.”

“No ribs?”

“Syb, I’m tired. It’s been a long day. I’m going to bed.” As she turned, Sybilla said, “I took the master bedroom. I knew you’d want me to be comfy while I’m in town.”

Landy opened the bedroom door and saw Sybilla’s clothes scattered over the bed, smelled her musky perfume, and felt her anger rise. She took a breath. “I’ll just get my clothes so I don’t bother you when I leave for work in the morning. Do you have plans for tomorrow?”

As Landy gathered her clothes, makeup, shampoo, and a copy of *The Book Thief*, Sybilla’s grin widened. “Why, I think I’ll drive down to New Jersey to visit our dear mom.”

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