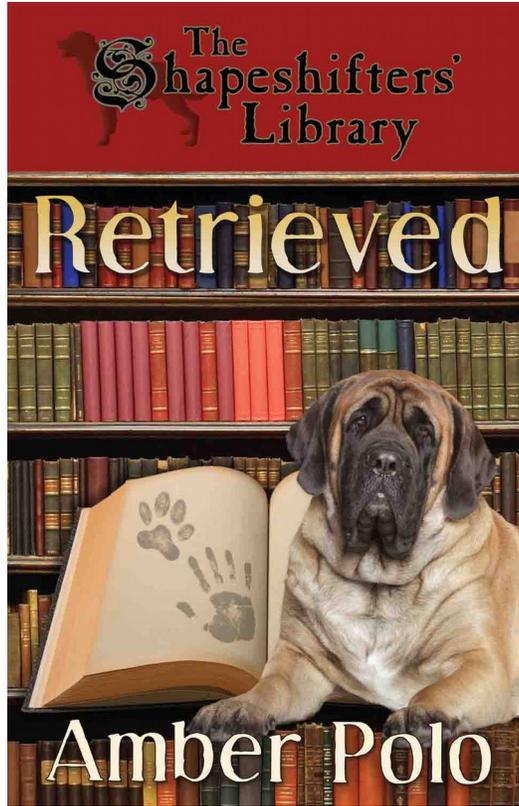


Sample

Chapter One of *Retrieved by Amber Polo*



Chapter ONE

The Labrador skidded into a mound of snow and threw herself into the deepest drift. Diva rolled and kicked her feet, squealing in delight as dry snow squeaked beneath her chocolate brown coat. She'd missed snow.

For oh so long the dog-shifters had been imprisoned by the werewolves. They'd worked hard to find clues to break the werewolf curse until, on the night of the Winter Solstice, under the star Sirius, and with the help of the human librarians, they'd broken free. Free. Free. Free. She rolled three times before bounding to her feet and barking in sheer joy.

Godiva Anglesey stuck her face into the snow and came up with a dollop of white fluff on her brown nose. A benefit of being a dog-shifter was exchanging her human body for her canine form. She'd hoped a run in the snow would turn off her human mind and allow her to revel in just being a dog. Diva's new responsibilities as director of the town's public library were making her itch. She much preferred the satisfaction of doing a job well. Being director only a few weeks had taught her she couldn't please anyone, even herself.

Her life had changed.

Dear Griswald would hardly talk to her. For years, she'd fetched books and brought him treats, hoping he might notice her devotion. Now she was his boss and he absolutely detested her with every inch of his German Shepherd heart.

She kicked up her heels, spraying a cloud of snow behind her, and stepped to the river edge. A short bass bark caused her to look across the river at the dark shape that stepped from the shadows. Ominous in the moonlight, the world's largest dog lowered his head and called out in his familiar clipped English accent. "Diva, would you like me to accompany you on a run?"

"I can go by myself," she answered, then added, "But thank you for your offer."

As the huge English Mastiff approached the far bank, the moonlight revealed his fawn coat and black mask. In human form, Cynerik Trent-Croft's romance novel cover-model good looks made Godiva shy. One look at his sun-streaked ponytail and his body builder's physique and she instantly forgot he was a brilliant librarian and astro-archeologist. But in dog form, he was just her good friend, Cyn. He, too, had been given a difficult new job and must also be feeling stressed. If he needed her company, she couldn't refuse.

"I'd like to accompany you. For security, you know." He lowered his head.

She laughed. "You're not on the security force anymore. You're the Academy Library Director." Snow began to fall and she flicked her tongue at the flakes. "But it would be fun to run with you."

She'd needed to go for a run this evening to escape Griswald's seething bitterness. Her promotion to Shipsfeather Public Library Director then his appointment as her assistant, had devastated the proud German Shepherd. And when Cynerik received Gris's former job as Academy Library Director, Gris had become insular and spiteful. What a biblio-blunder. She'd been happy as his assistant. She was just an ordinary librarian, not a manager. All she cared about was finding and retrieving books.

Cynerik chuckled, a deep pleasant rumble. "I know. Old habits..."

Being with Cyn always made her feel good, so she relented and placed one forepaw on the ice. Then the second. As her weight shifted forward, the ice cracked and the slab beneath her feet sank. With a gleeful yip, she slipped into the delightfully frigid river, laid her graceful neck onto the water, and paddled across, breaking crusty ice with her chest. On the far side, the brown dog scrambled up the bank and shook herself showering Cynerik.

"Careful," the huge Mastiff teased. "I'm not a retriever like you."

Godiva looked up. Snow melting on Cynerik's long eyelashes framed his soft dark eyes. "Nor a Toy Poodle." She poked her nose into his heavily muscled shoulder.

He lowered his broad head and licked her ear. "Your eyes are the color of milk chocolate in the moonlight."

She lowered her head. "You're frisky tonight. You used to be so serious."

He playfully leaned back onto his forelegs and, with a wave of his tail, stuck his massive rump in the air. "I'm glad I'm not Marishka's captain anymore."

"Now you're a library director and, sadly, so am I." She looked at him curiously. "After the curse was broken, I didn't think you'd want to stay at the old academy."

"I'd come to do field work. I theorized the Shipsfeather could be an important dog-shifter archaeological site. While we were locked in, working as a security guard under Marishka kept me busy and allowed time for in-house research. I surely didn't expect to be named Academy Library Director." The big Mastiff looked down at the brown Lab. "But I've grown to like the people." He poked his flat nose against her muzzle.

She ignored his teasing gesture. "But your research? Finding the Library of Ancients would be an important discovery." She sighed and her tail lowered. "I'm just running a small town public library."

"Your job is important. This town is important. Shipsfeather has been the center of North America dog-shifters since Chronus founded the town. Keeping this public library safe from book-burning werewolves is important work. You're doing a wonderful job. And as for me, I'm more convinced than ever that Shipsfeather was the historical home of shifters hundreds of years before human Europeans set foot on this continent."

"Proving that would be so exciting."

“Come,” he barked, “let’s run,” and twirled, kicking snow into her face as his brawny legs took him to the edge of the woods in three strides.

“Wait,” she cried and, with a yap, barreled after him.

The two dogs, one half the size of the other, one brown and the other tan, raced with abandon between trees, until Godiva skidded to a stop at the edge of the woods.

The Mastiff jumped over the smaller dog to avoid crashing into her. “Careful! Don’t stop so fast.”

She looked around. “Where should we go?”

“Wherever you want,” Cynerik answered.

“I’ll go wherever you want to,” she countered.

“I’ll go wherever you want to go.”

“No. You choose.”

He shook his head. “Don’t you ever think of yourself first?”

“I’m sure wherever you want to go will be fine with me. You know the land.”

“Then follow me. I’ve memorized the maps.” Cynerik trotted down the slope and broke into an easy pace. Godiva bounded after him and soon the two had covered three miles.

They crested a gentle rise as the snow turned to freezing rain and saw a wide valley, glistening silver in the moonlight. In the center, a flattened pyramid rose like a white-frosted cake, its far end decorated with leafless trees like birthday candles. During daylight, the rectangular grass-covered knoll might easily have been overlooked, but moonlight and an icy coat of snow brought its distinctive shape into sharp relief.

Godiva panted. “It’s beautiful, like a giant Toberlone bar.”

The big dog sat in the snow and brushed crusted snow from his eyelashes with his paw. “Diva, see! That’s the mound I’ve dreamed about!” He licked her cheek, then jumping up, nipped her rump and chased her until they’d trampled the wet snow into a round clearing.

Godiva bounded to her feet. “Let’s go closer.”

Cynerik blocked her path with his body. “You’re not used to rough ground. The ice will cut your feet. Now that I’ve located the site, I can plan the excavation.”

Godiva blinked, surprised at how quickly he had subdued his wild excitement in favor of logic and concern for her. He was a true scientist and scholar. “What do you expect to find?”

“My research sets forth the premise that our North American ancestors ruled a vast civilization from a big mound in Ohio. I believe they buried books beneath that mound. If I’m right, I may find the Library of the Ancients containing all the books saved from the lost libraries of the world. And they will reveal our true history.”

“I just know you’ll succeed. It’ll mean so much to us all.” The wind picked up and Godiva shook the freezing rain from her waterproof coat. “I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

Cynerik took one more look at the majestic valley. “I could stare at the mound all night, but we need to go back before you get chilled.”

Following their footprints in the snow, they backtracked through the woods. She always recognized Cynerik’s prints, for he, like members of his family, possessed the rare opposable thumbs that remained when he shifted into canine form. By the time they reached the riverbank, Godiva’s pace had slowed and her feet left furrows in the snow. Exhausted from keeping pace, she looked hesitantly at the frigid river.

Cynerik seemed to sense her fatigue. “Why don’t you change? I’ll carry you across.”

“You would do that? For me?”

He lowered his head. “Of course.” He turned away to give her privacy and listened to sounds of her change, like popping bubble wrap. When he turned back, a petite librarian in a brown sweater and skirt stood in a circle of melting snow.

“I’m ready.” She pushed back her thick brown braid, buttoned her sweater, and put her arms around the pony-sized dog’s neck and slid onto his broad back.

“Keep your feet up. We’ll be across in no time.” He waded into the river and used his body like an icebreaker to cross to the opposite shore. “Hold on. I’ll take you right to your apartment.”

In minutes, she stood sleepily in front of the Victorian building that housed her apartment, first Liberty Cutter’s refuge and now was hers. She missed brave Liberty, who’d become her friend in the short time after the former public library director had learned that she, too, was a librarian dog-shifter. Bouncing back from the shock of turning into a Golden Retriever on the Solstice, she married her beloved Chronus, the Old English Sheepdog headmaster of the dog-shifter academy. Chronus had helped Liberty remodel the old library, and she’d helped him find the clues to break the curse and keep werewolves from burning the library. It was so romantic. Now Liberty had left her job and she and Chronus were traveling on their honeymoon while she learned more about shifters worldwide.

“Thanks, Cyn, for everything. Sorry I wimped out at the end.” Diva stroked the top of his head. “I’m happy I was with you when you saw your mound for the first time. I’ll do anything you need me to do to help you find the Library of the Ancients.” As her hand slid down his powerful neck, his muscles quivered under her touch. She told him, “Go on home. You’re getting cold.”

The big dog watched and waited until a third floor light showed she was safely inside. With a sigh, he turned and trotted back to the library.

Sybilla Dinzelbacher’s belly burned and revenge was the only balm that could sooth the fire. She had to take action. Dog-shifters had killed her pack Alpha, smashed the ugly old bitch under—she shivered at the memory—piles of books. They had foiled every fire the pack had set to burn their blasted books. They’d even taken over the town government when that old library janitor beat the incumbent werewolf mayor. And against all odds, they’d broken the curse that had kept them leashed inside their dog library.

With a growl she walked through her Bistro’s dining room. Mornings, when the smell of candles and sizzling meat had dissipated, she swore she could still smell books. After the fire, she’d had this old library building gutted and sandblasted and the skeleton renovated into the Bibliothèque Bistro, Ohio’s trendiest new restaurant—her personal chef-d’oeuvre.

She blamed her husband, Harry, for the whole damned dog-shifter debacle. He could have taken over the pack, become mayor, and smashed the shifter school to smithereens. But his dog blood made him weak. She turned to him and faked a honeyed tone. “Harry, would you like your tea now?”

Her mate’s wimpy smile showed he thought she was letting up on him. He appeared thin and listless. The dweeb should be off his food. She’d been on his case since Elsie booked it out of this life. Sybilla had nagged Harry to take control of the pack or... or... she’d do something.

And now she was doing something.

In the kitchen she put the kettle on her Vulcan Wolf gas range, took an unmarked tin from the spice cabinet, and measured a heaping tablespoon of a lumpy dried substance into an infuser. She’d paid that Chinese herbalist in Cleveland a fortune for five ounces of genuine Asian wolfsbane. It would be worth every penny if it gave Harry some backbone. She’d made him drink the tea for two weeks and had yet to see any results. Whenever he complained of a stomachache, she gave him more tea.

She carried the teacup back to the dining room. Unable to hold her snappishness any longer, she circled her husband like a restless she-lion. With a menacing growl, she stopped and faced him. “Elsie’s been dead for five weeks and you’ve done nothing. Not one thing.”

“A pack needs to mourn its leader.” Harry dutifully gulped her foul-tasting brew.

“Cut the scat, Harry. Elsie was past due packing it in. You hated her grisly guts and now you shilly-shally over eulogies. I’ve worked my tail off positioning you to take over as Alpha. Now, get off your rump.”

“I was hoping for a vote of confidence.” With a grimace, he rubbed his belly.

"You think a wolf pack is a democracy?" She threw back her head and howled in laughter.

"Sibby, remember, Rhoda Sue's out of office and I've been dumped as chair of the Library Board. I have no power in this town."

"Not my fault."

Former mayor Rhoda Sue Rufus walked in and eyed the Bistro Chocolate Lava Cake. "No cherries jubilee? I so love the flames."

"No." Sybilla handed the brassy redhead the pot of coffee the dishwasher had let sit on the stove all night. "Beggars can't be choosers."

Rhoda Sue cut herself a hefty slice of cake. "Aldwyn Chisholm, the sneaky library janitor, stole the election. The recount showed the vote was totally accurate."

"Exactly," Sybilla spat. "Pacifco Lopez's techno-weenies curl my belly feathers. That Mexican millionaire tampered with the voting machine software. I'd like to send that Chihuahua back over the border. This year, of all years, we didn't need an honest election."

"I thought you wanted Rhoda out of office?" Harry's voice rose.

Rhoda Sue wiped a smear of chocolate lava from her freckled nose. "You wanted me to lose?"

Sybilla ignored her and kept talking to Harold. "I wanted you to be mayor. And Alpha. You could run the town and run the pack. I have big plans." She sighed and shrugged. "No use sniffing. Bring more chairs. I smell Foly's truck in the parking lot."

Harry moved chairs as Foly O'Hurley, demolition contractor, and Manfred Ulfamer, the nattily dressed architect, came in from the cold and sat around the table. The pack's temporary steering committee was complete.

Harry took a last sip of tea and opened the meeting. After Foly reported that the new mayor had laid off the dogcatchers and dogs were roaming all over town and being walked on leashes, he scrunched his face and held his stomach. "Looks like, with Rhoda Sue and me out of Town Hall, the dogs have a clear track."

Sybilla interrupted. "Now that Liberty, the doggone librarian, has left—I always knew she was a bitch—and with Chronus out of the way, too, there should be something we can do. I'd like to crop that meek little Godiva's tail and send her scooting back to her den. Doesn't anyone have any ideas how we can take back our power?"

Rhoda Sue raised her hand. "For the next election, I need a more flattering picture for my campaign posters."

Sybilla growled at the former mayor. "The next election is two years away."

"We could try to impeach that Chisholm guy," Foly offered.

Harry shook his head. "It would never work. People like him. Why don't we form a committee to work on the problem?"

Sybilla exploded. "Is that the best you can think of?"

Harry wobbled to his feet. "I don't feel so good. Let's adjourn. Maybe next week's meeting will be more productive."

"No." Sybilla stood. "We have to do something! You..." She pointed at Rhoda Sue. "Didn't you do anything your last week in office to mess things up for the new administration?"

"I cancelled the order for a new town hall coffee pot."

Sybilla glared and looked up at the ceiling. "I mean something really important."

Ulfamer leaned forward and jostled Rhoda Sue's arm. "Don't you remember? You rushed through my plan for my golf course out at the old mound site."

Harry sat back down. "And why is that a good thing?"

Sybilla hissed. "You fool! We talked about this. My sources tell me those mounds were built by the leg-humpers. It's probably a cemetery with lots of old bones. We have orders from international headquarters to destroy it before the dogs dig into it. We need to save face. So, I've recruited a new pack member. An explosives expert!" She glared at Ulfamer. "And when he's finished leveling that book-lovers' bump, you can have your golf course."

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