

The Shapeshifters' Library, Book One: Released - CHAPTER 1

Dogged by disappointment, Liberty Cutter shivered as she walked down the steps from her third floor apartment in the gray Victorian. The morning's dark skies fit her mood. She had tossed and turned all night. Twice she'd gotten up: first to write a hate-filled resignation letter to the Library Board that had employed her for the past five years, then to browse job openings on the Internet. Then, just as she'd finally managed to fall asleep, a fire truck siren screeched through her window.

Dewey be damned, it was time to cut her losses. She'd hoped to base her PhD thesis in Information Science on the mysterious history of the Shipsfeather Library, but she hadn't uncovered one scrap of data earlier than the construction of the current building, neither in the state archives nor local records. Not one resident would talk to her about the town's history. Although many buildings in town dated from the turn of the century, it was as if Shipsfeather, Ohio, had not existed before 1922.

Liberty had been born in Shipsfeather and had lived here until her mother disappeared when she was five years old. Her four law librarian aunts had swooped into town and taken her home with them, eventually adopting her. They refused to talk to her either about her parents or Shipsfeather.

She'd taken the job of Library Director because she wanted to run her own small town library and make a difference to the townspeople—and hopefully uncover the secrets of her own history. She should have been suspicious when no other librarian in the entire country had applied for the job, but she'd been too happy to question Fate.

She trudged along River Road, one sensible shoe at a time, muttering to herself. Nothing had worked out the way she had planned. She would shut this chapter in her life like a book with a sad ending. This town had looked like a perfect opportunity to bring new life to an old library, but she'd been completely thwarted on every page.

Her steps slowed as she passed an abandoned building partially hidden behind feral foliage. Everyone in town just called it the academy and she assumed it had been a private school of some kind. This old place, with its formal columns and a high rounded dome, had been boarded up long before she'd moved to town, and was never once mentioned in history books. But from the first day she saw its dingy gray stones, it held a mystical fascination for her. Almost every morning she sensed a person watching her from behind a cloudy window and once, when the leaves were off the dogwoods, she thought she glimpsed a movement inside.

Despite the spooky façade, the feeling exuding from the once proud edifice never made her feel creepy. Looking at it always comforted her and she'd continue on her way, ready to confront the day.

Raising her head, she sniffed the air. Shipsfeather was a clean rural town without industry, yet she recognized the smell. Sickly acrid smoke. She heard a siren and began to run. Toward the library. Her library.

She turned the corner from where she normally glimpsed the two-story red brick Carnegie building and ran into a wall of black smoke. Another siren split the air with a cacophony loud enough to banish nightmares. A fire truck passed so close, the stiff yellow coat of a firefighter hanging from its side brushed her arm.

In a few more steps, smoke so thick she could only see five feet before her nose surrounded her. She followed the truck to a yellow tape draped between sawhorses, lifted a section, and bobbed under. A firefighter's outstretched arm stopped her. "Stay back behind the line, ma'am."

She pushed forward. The yellow-coated figure grasped her arm. "I said no trespassing."

Her eyes stung and she blinked back tears. The smoke swirled and through an opening she saw flames shooting out of the roof of the blood-red library. Her knees wobbled and she let out a cry.

"Ms. Cutter?" the voice under the helmet asked.

Liberty coughed and looked up into the sooty face of Bridget Bartlett, the firefighter wife of Webster Bartlett, the library's reference librarian. "Bridget, what happened?"

"Clive spotted smoke when he opened the drugstore. It got a good start. That last truck came from Athens. With mutual aid we'll shut down this fire. Too late for much else."

"What do you mean?" Liberty rubbed her eyes with her sleeve, hoping one more time that this was a dream.

"Sorry, Ms. Cutter. I don't think we can save the contents."

Liberty closed her stinging eyes. "You mean ... the books?" She didn't expect an answer. "This is the first Monday morning I haven't gone in early."

"Just as well. You could have been trapped."

"The building was empty?"

The petite woman under the bulky fire garb nodded. "A water truck's here to spray and keep sparks from spreading to other buildings."

Liberty leaned against the side of Shipsfeather's once-shiny red fire truck. Her wonderful library was going up in flames. After all her heinous thoughts about leaving, she'd never seen a

worse sight than hungry flames flicking out broken windows. What would the town do? What would she do?

A shape emerged from the burning library's side exit. An animal limping on stiff awkward legs looked around and trotted towards Main Street. Through the smoke the profile resembled a large gimp dog or rangy wolf. It couldn't be a wolf. This was Ohio and Shipsfeather didn't even have a zoo. About to run forward to see if the dog was hurt, Liberty saw the creature cross the street toward the drug store. In a swirl of smoke it seemed to grow, rear up on hind legs, and step forward on two. Liberty blinked soot from her eyes and when she opened them again the shape had disappeared back into the smoke.

Before Liberty could process what she'd seen, Bridget came back along the tape. "The fire is under control but it'll be a while before we know the extent of the damage. Or the cause." She raised the tape and Liberty stooped back under.

Against the wall of the office building, library staff covered their faces. Liberty heard, "No. No," repeated over and over. Bliss D. Light, the children's librarian, rushed over, hugged Liberty, and whispered, "Don't worry. Pluto is retrograde but I see regeneration."

Liberty pulled away from Bliss and made a mental list of staff who started work at eight o'clock. Thank Melville, every one stood staring at their burning library. As the flames were beaten back, the smoke thickened into a sooty fog. Her nostrils, immune to the stench, no longer registered the reeking air.

Farther down the street, Elsie Dustbunnie, the former Library Director, who looked as old as the long-deceased Mr. Dewey, pressed against the drugstore window. Liberty had never seen the withered woman read a book. Elsie had once announced that her job had been to keep the books on the shelf, not to send them out the door with any fool bookworm. Through smoggy air, Liberty saw Elsie straighten as tall as her twisted body allowed, lean toward her old friend Helga, and laugh. That could not be right. Even those dour nasty women must be crying.

Harold Dinzelbacher, Chairman of the Library Board of Trustees, strode toward Liberty with smarmy grace. As usual, his wolfish grin made Liberty shiver. Harold, too, did not look distraught. The banker was the main reason she wanted to quit and leave this town. For five years he'd blocked every innovative idea to bring the library into the modern world with new books and modern technology. He insisted Elsie Dustbunnie, though retired, approve every change.

Liberty had worried that she looked too young to run a library. She'd tried to disguise her youthful appearance by dressing like the town's previous dowdy Library Director, but it hadn't worked. She had not been able to hide her too-short-to-reach-the-top-shelves height and her youthful

enthusiasm in order to gain the Board Chairman's trust. Her looks had nothing to do with her failure, nor had her youth. The Chairman had not wanted her to succeed, and had done everything in his power to make certain she did not.

Without preliminaries, Harold said, "Ms. Cutter, we must move forward from this tragedy."

She looked up into his too-bright eyes. "Right." Her throat raw and her voice raspy, she asked, "What do you want me to do?" With every word she swallowed more smoke. "Put out the fire?"

"No need to be sarcastic. You are in charge of this library, such as it is. Send all the employees home until further notice. I'll attend to Ms. Dustbunnie, personally. She's devastated."

The Bunnie did not look devastated, just sootier than the others. Liberty turned away from Harold toward a crowd of library patrons.

A middle-aged woman cried, "Ms. Cutter, what are we going to do without our library?"

Liberty consoled her with a confident, "Don't worry," which she herself did not believe.

One of the story-hour moms walked away shaking her head. "What will I tell my kids?"

A man clutching a stack of books asked, "What should I do with these? They're due today."

She told him, "Take them home and keep them safe." She watched a truck spray water into broken library windows, knowing the water would ruin everything the fire had not destroyed. She wanted to turn away but felt compelled to stay and watch this library holocaust.

Two hours later, she kicked aside soot and moved away from the most dreadful sight of her life. The resignation letter in her briefcase would never be submitted. This town needed a library. It needed her. She couldn't leave now.

As she approached the old Academy building, she slowed. So often she'd felt discouraged, but now, after the disastrous fire, determination held her head high and her step moved resolutely forward. Something drew her to glance toward the old building. Her sooty skin prickled like she was being watched. Or watched over. She'd always been independent and managed for herself. She didn't need watching out for. But tonight she felt as if she had a guardian or shepherd protecting her and the feeling was not unwelcome.

She walked the rest of the way home, climbed to the third floor, and tossed her dress into the trash. Naked, her mirror showed her face, neck, and arms as black with soot as if a charcoal woman wore a tight pink dress. Too tired to shower, she slid into bed and slept.

From inside the walls of the old Academy building, the watcher still stood by the window staring up into the night sky. He'd observed the librarian many times as she passed back and forth on

her way to the library. Often he'd felt she was discouraged, but tonight after the fire her stride was determined and her head high. She did not look defeated. The sight of her made his heart race with hope. Through the cloying smoke of a thousand dead books he could smell change in the air. A shift had begun in Shipsfeather and this woman was destined to be a part of the change.

Rising the next morning, Liberty surveyed her filthy sheets and her face streaked with grime and tears, wondering if she would ever get the sickening smell out of her nose or out of her mind.

After a long hot shower, she dressed in an expendable brown dress and headed downtown. The closer she got to the library, the worse the stench. By the time she reached the old school, sidewalks were gritty and bushes dusted with ash. She imagined each speck of burnt paper as a single letter from someone's favorite book. Choking back a sob, she stepped closer and looked through the fence at the once elegant building, still standing, while her beloved library was now a skeleton. About to plod on, she saw a shadow in a first floor window. This time she was certain a man watched her. She continued, her step inexplicably more determined.

Averting her eyes from tired firefighters, fire trucks, and barricades, Liberty reached Town Hall. Harold Dinzelbacher, whose five o'clock shadow always sprouted like clockwork by mid-morning, waited for her in Mayor Rhoda Sue Rufus's office. The mayor's freckled face flamed the exact color of her hennaed hair and she wrinkled her nose as if Liberty alone and not the entire town stank of scorched wood and charred books. Rhoda Sue gestured Liberty to a chair at the conference table.

Harold nodded gravely. "We have a crisis, Ms. Cutter."

As if she hadn't figured that one out.

"However, the mayor and I have worked out a solution."

Liberty bit her tongue and kept silent.

Harold continued, "We've rented a warehouse across town to serve as a temporary library. Salvage what you can, clean things up, order some new materials if you must. That kind of thing."

"The entire collection needs to be replaced."

The mayor smiled. "You may use the emergency fund we created by selling the library building."

"Sold?" Liberty's voice cracked. "It will take at least two years to build a new one."

The mayor tugged on one of her huge hoop earrings. "The town won't be building a new library."

"A warehouse is not a library." Liberty leaned forward to make them understand.

The mayor patted Liberty's arm. "Never fear, Libbie, you will have a library."

Liberty pulled her arm away from the lobster-red fingernails. "Call me Liberty."

Harold put on his kindly father look which Liberty distrusted even more than his wise Board Chairman face. "The town has taken possession of the Shipsfeather Academy."

“The old school on River Road?” Liberty sat back, thoughts racing. That marvelous old building, so filled with mystery. Of course, the building was ancient, and must be in terrible shape. Inside, it might be damp, filled with wood rot, or completely impractical. It might not be at all suitable for storing books, but if it were ... If it were ... what an exciting prospect. “It will be the new town library?”

“Exactly. My bank sold it to the town. We’ll use some of the money that would have been spent to build a new library to renovate that derelict—I mean historic—building.”

“Actually, a lot of people thought the library had too many books, anyway,” the mayor added cheerfully and waved her hand in a dismissive gesture.

“What about the old library?” Liberty asked.

The mayor’s smile broadened displaying a mouthful of sparkling teeth. “Fortunately, Mr. Dinzelbacher and his lovely wife Sybilla have agreed to purchase the building as is and rehab it into an upscale restaurant. Recycling benefits the town.”

Liberty thought the Dinzelbachers would benefit more than the little Ohio town.

Rhoda Sue stood, excused herself. “All this smoke is making my hair dingy.”

Liberty watched the mayor leave and turned to Harold. “There’s so much to do.”

“Perhaps Ms. Dustbunnie would agree to come out of retirement to help out.”

Bile rose in Liberty’s throat at the very thought, and she shook her head. “I’ll handle it.” She flipped through the insurance forms. “Will insurance money replace all the books?” Thank Dewey she had duplicate statistical reports on her laptop and kept a copy of the shelflist in the Town Hall safe.

“The mayor and I will use some of that money to build more barbeque pits in the park.” Harold frowned at Liberty’s open mouth. “We make decisions for the good of the entire town, not just a few bookworms. As a librarian, you have a very narrow view.”

Liberty left the mayor’s office feeling as hot as her roasted books. She called every library staff member and told them all to report to the warehouse on Terhune Road.

By the next Monday Liberty had supervised the installation of surplus desks and shelving into their temporary quarters. At eight o’clock, the first reclamation truck arrived with salvageable contents from the smoldering library. The crew, covered in soot-streaked jumpsuits, unloaded boxes. The driver told her only the local history materials, new books, and backlog in the basement were untouched.

Without consulting Harold or Elsie, Liberty phoned the county library and told the director that Shipsfeather would finally become a member. To start over, the library needed cataloging and circulation software and computers.

Proud to at last defy Harold, she left her makeshift office and met a library patron who'd been at the fire scene. The old man set a heavy carton on her table. "Mr. Mason, what's in the box?"

"I figured the library needed books." Behind him, more sad-faced citizens entered with overflowing boxes of books. "I called everyone I knew. They emptied their home bookshelves."

Liberty peeked into a box of expensive art books. "We can't take your book collections."

"Of course you can. This way everyone in town can use them."

Mrs. Perkins handed Liberty a plate of cookies covered with plastic wrap. "What a good idea. I'll go through my cookbooks tomorrow."

Liberty smiled and took the plate. No one would go hungry in the temporary quarters.

The disaster brought out the best in everyone. Donations poured in and librarians throughout southern Ohio and northern Kentucky promised to help on weekends. That evening when Bridget arrived to pick up her husband Webster, Liberty asked, "Do they know what started the fire?"

"The official report will probably say the cause was defective wiring." Bridget's voice sounded hesitant.

Webster put his arm around his wife. "Honey, tell her what you saw."

"I saw books heaped in the middle of each room. And I smelled accelerant." Bridget shuddered. "The chief refused to call in those dogs that sniff out materials arsonists use. But this library fire could not be called accidental. Ms. Cutter, I'd call it a book burning."