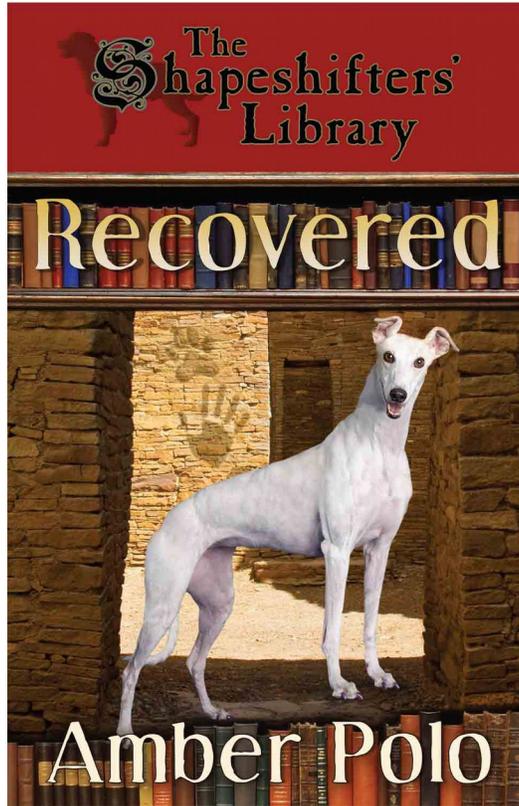


Sample

Chapter One of *Recovered* by Amber Polo



Chapter ONE

Bliss opened her eyes and gazed up toward the moon. She'd stayed out later than she'd planned. Here on this ancient mound her meditations were always longer and deeper. She stretched her long white neck and shook herself, lowered her front legs, raised her butt into the air, and waved her tail. Downward Dog as a dog felt even better than it did as a human.

She needed to run the three miles back to town to meet Harry at Starbarks. One of the problems being a dog-shifter was not wearing a watch. Trotting down the mound and then up the hill into the woods, she delighted in flickers of moonlight creating a subtle strobe effect through the forest back to the library. Smells of small furry animals rose up from cold leaves. The ground, still frosty under her toes, sent hints of new green growth to her sensitive nose, reminding her that spring would soon warm this southern Ohio wilderness.

Bliss galloped on, enjoying how her body lengthened, then folded, until her back legs reached forward farther than her front. Each vertebra stretched and compressed as she wound through the trees, her Greyhound body reveling in the chilly clear night.

She burst out of the trees and, instead of plunging in the river like many of the water-loving dogs, trotted to the bridge downstream and pranced on wooden planks to ford the icy river. On the other side, white coat glowing in the moonlight, she again increased her pace. In minutes

she'd be in the warm academy. Harry would help her change back into her human form and she'd drink a steaming chai latte.

A shadowed movement caused her to jump sideways, senses suddenly alert. A dark shadow swooped from the bushes, brandishing a stick with a loop. A rough voice yelled, "I've got one," as a burly man lunged at her. One gauntlet-covered hand grazed her hip as she leapt away.

Who was he? Why was he chasing her? A dogcatcher? She'd taken a self-defense class in college but in dog form she had no hands to hit, no fingers to poke eyes, and no knees to kick vital parts. If this man were truly a dogcatcher, she wished she could change into her human form. He'd realize his mistake and leave the Shipsfeather Public Library's Children's Librarian alone. If she uttered even one word, he'd freak out and perhaps want even more to catch a talking dog.

Bliss plunged behind an evergreen tree. Stick held high, the man came right at her. Gathering her back legs under her, she pushed off, scooting between his legs. Surprised, he fell on his backside. She ran towards the front of the library, hoping to reach the hidden entrance before the big guy caught her. Once inside she'd be safe.

As soon as her toes touched the sidewalk she galloped toward the domed Shipsfeather Public Library building, which once had been a shapeshifting academy and still housed the dog-shifters school and library in the lower levels. She'd been the upstairs public library's children's librarian for five years, telling stories and decorating bulletin boards before she ever dreamed of turning into a dog.

She heard the bulky man breathing hard behind her. Then a tall thin man in a padded coat rushed at her waving a huge butterfly net. His voice, gruffer and louder, called, "Get 'er, Elwood. She'd be one of them."

Surrounded, she whirled to face the second man, bared her teeth, and tried to growl with menace. A frightened Greyhound with her tail curled under her body until it touched her throat was not a very convincing threat. Elwood threw himself on top of her and held her down. She gagged at his pizza breath and fought to wiggle loose, just as a third dogcatcher, a woman, opened the rear door of a white van and called to the men, "Throw her in here!"

Harry Dinzelbacher walked towards the town library. His steps quickened at the thought of meeting Bliss with all the shifters at Starbarks. In small ways he was beginning to be accepted by the dog-shifters who'd once shunned him. He was no longer the same man who'd been Library Board Chairman and Beta of the werewolf pack that burned the original town library and tried to burn and blow up the present one along with the dog-shifter academy in the lower levels. Every day he worked hard to be a good dog and disown his werewolf side.

Beautiful Bliss had changed his life. She'd given him books to read and was the first person ever to treat him with kindness. Now she needed him. By meditating, she could turn into an exquisite white Greyhound, but was unable to return to her cute blond human form without his help. He wasn't sure what he did that assisted her change, but was grateful he was able to repay her in some small way.

He quickened his step. Parked a block ahead in front of the library, he noticed a white van. Any patron returning books this late would use the bookdrop in the lot, not park on the street in the no parking zone. Curious, he moved faster toward the vehicle.

He heard a cry. And a bark. Then Bliss's frightened, "Leave me alone. Please." He began to run towards the van. In four strides, his hands touched the ground and his nails scraped for purchase. In eight strides four legs pumped toward Bliss and her attackers.

A heavysset guy was holding Bliss down, while a tall man tried to shove her delicate head into a muzzle. Harry snarled. The man looked up into the angry eyes of a shaggy gray wolf.

A woman's voice called from the back of the van, "Hurry, Elwood. Let's git out of here."

Elwood sputtered, "Wolf," just before Harry lunged and took the man's scrawny neck in his massive jaws. The man froze, afraid if he moved, the wolf's canine tooth would puncture an artery. The look in the beast's eyes left no doubt he would be happy to do just that. His partner skittered back and jumped into the van.

The Greyhound cried, "Harry, please don't hurt him," again grateful for the miraculous shifter body that allowed her to talk in both her forms.

Reluctantly the wolf loosened his hold on the muscular neck, but kept his weight and paws firmly pressed on the man's chest, until the Greyhound struggled free. Then Harry released Elwood, who raised his hands to protect himself and backed away from Harry muttering, "Nice wolfie."

"Are you all right?" Harry asked over his shoulder.

Bliss stood and shook herself. "I'm fine. A little shaken. I've never been attacked before."

Harry's shaggy white-tipped tail wagged, relieved he'd been in time.

The woman in the van looked out. "I'll get the stun gun and git 'em both."

"You do that and your friends will be sorry," Harry growled.

"It's one of them talking dogs!" she shrieked. "I thought they'd made that up."

"That is no dog. It's a wolf. Our orders are not to pick up any wolves. Just dogs. That skinny white doggie would have brought a pretty bounty when they found she was one of the talkers."

The woman, already in the drivers' seat, revved the engine. "Git in now! Or I'm leaving you to the wolf."

Elwood opened the door and scrambled into the passenger seat. The van was halfway down the block before he pulled in his right leg and slammed the door.

Harry turned to Bliss, licked her nose, and sniffed her to be sure she was all right.

She shivered, leaned against the big shaggy wolf, and let out a big sigh. "Who were those people? And why were they trying to hurt me?"

"I have no idea. Their license plate was from Kentucky. Mayor Aldwyn has the local dogcatchers trained to identify dog-shifters and be gentle with any stray wandering into town."

They stood for a minute letting the feeling of safety return to their bodies. When Bliss was ready, she nudged Harry's muzzle and closed her eyes. "Help me change."

He stood close and slowly began his change. He let the transformation work slower than when he'd changed with his old werewolf pack. Those changes always felt rough and primitive, like an earthquake destroying perfectly good forest. He now preferred the controlled progression from wolfdog to human, letting bones and organs reform naturally. With pops and crackles his back legs lengthened and his spine extended while his long lush tail shortened. The toes of his front legs became fingers and the hair on his too-shaggy-for-a-wolf body fell away leaving only a mop of salt and pepper hair on his head. He looked to Bliss. Beautiful in both forms, she now stood smiling up at him - a cute-as-could-be blonde with a cupid's bow mouth, sparkling blue eyes, and a smile that melted his heart.

Her transformations obviously delighted her as if the magic of being in two bodies was a glorious gift. She told him she compared her change with the gentle crackle and the excitement of opening a new book, while he always cursed his tri-formed body where human, wolf, and dog fought for control. His mother, a vicious werewolf, and father a renegade Old English Sheepdog, both ignored his uncertainties and held him to their high standard.

"Come on, Starbarks awaits," Bliss teased and took his hand to lead him toward the dark library. "I'm so grateful for the shifter magic that re-clothes me just as I'd been before transformation into my Greyhound self."

Still uncomfortable in the library, Harry squeezed her hand, wanting to tell her how much he loved her free spirit and gentle soul.

Bliss used her staff key to open the side door of the library and looked back at Harry. The tall handsome man with unruly salt and pepper hair appeared healthier and more confident every day. When he smiled at her his strong jaw broadened and his soft brown eyes lit up. It had taken a lot of pleading with Jean-Paul, the shifter academy headmaster and Godiva Anglesey, the public library director, to accept Harry. Godiva had argued that a half werewolf wouldn't be good for the image of the public library and Jean-Paul insisted Harry's wolfish history would be a bad influence on the academy's students. Bliss had persisted until Godiva relented and hired Harry as a part-time library page under a Druid Order of Gutenberg Societies (D.O.G.S.) rehabilitation grant. When Pacifico Lopez, the Chihuahua internet entrepreneur, employed Harry as an accountant in his Zoogole conglomerate, Jean-Paul relented and allowed Harry access to the academy facilities. Since then Harry had accompanied Bliss to the gyms, spas, and their favorite, Starbarks, the popular shifter café.

Inside, Bliss hurried him to the stairs to the lower levels. She greeted Bran, the brindle English Mastiff who stood guard, with a pat on his head. "Hi Branny."

The giant dog sniffed her. "Are you all right, Ms. Bliss?"

Harry answered for her. "Bliss was attacked. By stray dogcatchers!"

Bran's black muzzle wrinkled and he snapped, "Why didn't you call 3-6-4?"

"Harry saved me. He was so brave."

As they walked down the stairs, Bran sniffed and called after them, "You be careful! I've heard rumors werewolf money is funding roving bands of freelance dogcatchers."

Harry and Bliss both felt Bran's distrust for Harry. He, like many others, didn't fully believe Harry's metamorphosis from book-burning werewolf to book-loving wolfdog. They remembered his role in burning the town's old Carnegie library, his wily werewolf wife and his role as Chairman of the Library Board that had held the library back for so many years. They could not forget his position in the pack that attempted to blow up the library and the ancient mound which revealed important clues to their shifter history. And no one was pleased with his spending a lot of time with the sweet new-shifter children's librarian.

Bliss ignored Bran's dismissal of Harry. She knew they'd all soon realize Harry was as sincere and trustworthy as any dog. He was her friend. He alone understood her feelings that she was still not a full shifter. Years of exploring spiritual paths, learning alternative healing, and teaching yoga had not prepared her for turning into a dog-shifter at the ripe age of twenty-nine. She felt her body truly become a different being. Different but the same essence. Perhaps that was why Harry, caught between werewolf and dog-shifter and struggling to leave his wolf ways behind, had become her closest friend. She guided him to read the books she loved. And he somehow helped her shift from Greyhound back to grateful human.

Bliss felt him slow and grasped his hand tighter as they approached the lights and exuberant noise coming from Starbarks. She waved to a massive St. Bernard, Vincenzo Imhoff, Starbarks Manager. Immediately she was greeted by students from her Shifter History class, the academy staff, and librarians from the public library who were also late-in-life shifters or special friends of the shifters. She noticed others pull back from Harry as she dragged him through the crowd toward an empty corner table near a rack of speculative fiction.

At the next table Taxi, the public library's Head of Circulation, read *Shifter Philosophers* in the original Greek for a report for their shifter history class while Julianna von Noir, Young Adult Librarian, who looked so much like her vampire father, wrote in her journal. They both looked up and greeted Bliss as Harry went to order their drinks, an espresso for him and a chai latte for her.

Pacifico Lopez walked in, deep in conversation with Cecil, the newly appointed computer services librarian, and informed Bliss he'd be installing new computers in her children's room. Thaddeus, the staff doctor-veterinarian stopped to check her and ask her to come to his office in the morning to be sure she'd sustained no damage from the dogcatcher attack. Everyone was concerned for her. And ignored Harry.

Godiva Anglesey Trent-Croft, her library director, sat down and handed Bliss a book. "This just came into the shifter library and I thought you'd like it." Bliss looked at the thin picture book with a drawing of a white Greyhound on the cover and paged through it. Every drawing in *The Legend of the White Greyhound* was beautiful.

"It's a story of a young dog who wants to be something she isn't," Diva told her.

Bliss laughed. "*The Ugly Duckling* for shifters?"

"Not exactly."

Cynerik Trent-Croft came over and sat with them, putting his arm around Godiva's shoulders. "Bran told me about your attack. Promise not to go out alone until we get those catchers off our streets."

Bliss nodded and to change the subject asked Cyn, "How's your excavation going? Every time I meditate on the mound I feel so close to the powerful shifters who built it. I can hardly believe those people are truly my ancestors." She sighed. "And I can't wait to see the books they brought from all the world's ancient libraries to this Ohio mound. It'll be the biggest discovery ever. Only for shifters, of course. Too bad humans will ever know."

The big handsome man's face looked sad for a moment. "Right. Humans will never know. And it will be a long time before I have enough information to announce my findings to shifters. Relative dating, stratigraphy seriation, cross-dating, chromometric dating, radiocarbon archaeomagnetism fission track, thermoluminescence testing. Science is a slow process. It will take years to excavate our mound properly. And a long time to translate the markings on the one remaining turtle shell."

"But surely you've found enough already to know this is the location of the Library of the Ancients?" Bliss stared at Cynerik. "This must be it."

Cynerik shook his head and brushed back his longish hair. "I've only found enough to prove that the LOA was here. Once. Perhaps during my investigation I'll find clues to what happened to it."

"Oh Cyn, everyone wants to believe it's here and that soon we'll be able to read our true heritage and those books thought lost to history."

Godiva placed her hand over Bliss's. "Cyn is right. Science is slow. You must patient."

"All my life I thought I knew who and what I was. I was adopted by the best parents in the world and believed it didn't matter who my birth parents were. I loved being a librarian. I loved learning more about the world of spirit. I became a yoga teacher and reiki master. I dabbled with tarot, runes, and shamanism. I kept searching for knowledge. Now I find that I'm from a completely different race and culture. A shapeshifter. A genuine shaman. A being beyond my imagination. I don't want to be patient. I want to know more." Bliss bit her lip, twirled away, and hurried to where Harry waited for their drinks.

Godiva watched Bliss follow Harry to a table and whispered to Cyn, "I've never known sweet Bliss to become so upset. Maybe Harry is a bad influence?"

Cynerik patted Godiva's hand. "It's probably just the dogcatcher attack. I'll report it to Aldwyn. Our mayor will make sure the police chief puts more officers on the streets. Hopefully, it was an isolated incident and the rogues long gone. I'd hate to think the wolves' freelance dogcatchers have targeted Shipsfeather."

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