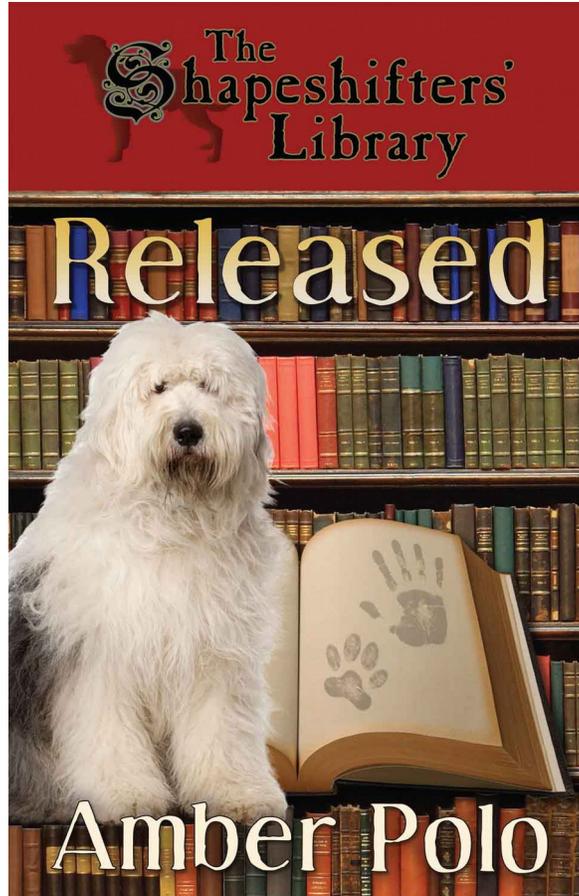


## Sample

### Chapter One of *Released by Amber Polo*



### Chapter ONE

**D**ogged 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. Just as she'd finally managed to fall asleep, a fire truck siren screeched her awake.

Dewey be damned, it was time to cut her losses. She'd hoped to base her PhD thesis on the mysterious history of the Shipsfeather Library, but neither in State Archives nor local records had she uncovered one scrap of data earlier than the construction of the current building. Not one resident would talk 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 she was five years old when her mother disappeared. Her four law librarian aunts had swooped into town and taken her home, eventually adopting her. They refused to talk to her about her parents. Or Shipsfeather.

She wanted to run her own small town library but should have been suspicious when no other librarian in the entire country had applied for the job.

She trudged along River Road, one sensible shoe at a time. 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. She would shut this chapter in her life like a book with a sad ending.

Her steps slowed as she approached an abandoned building partially hidden behind feral foliage. Everyone just called the old school the academy. The old place, with its formal columns and high rounded dome, had been boarded up long before she'd moved to town, but never mentioned in history books. It held a mystical fascination for her from the first day she saw its dingy gray stones. Every morning she sensed a person watching her from behind a cloudy window and once, the dogwood leaves had fallen, she glimpsed a movement inside.

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

She sniffed the air. Shipsfeather was a clean rural town without industry, yet she recognized the smell. Sickly acrid smoke. A siren cut the morning quiet and she began to run. Toward the library. Her library.

She turned onto the street from where she could see the red brick Carnegie library and ran into a wall of black smoke. A second siren split the air as a fire truck passed so close, the stiff yellow coat of a firefighter brushed her arm.

Smoke so thick she could only see five feet before her nose engulfed her as she followed the truck to a yellow tape draped between sawhorses, lifted a section, and ducked 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 she saw flames shooting from 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. We'll shut down this fire. Too late for much else."

"What do you mean?" Liberty rubbed her eyes with her sleeve.

"Sorry, Ms. Cutter. We can't 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. Maybe I could have..."

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

"The building was empty?"

The petite woman under the bulky fire garb nodded. "Our job now is to 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. She'd never seen a worse sight than hungry flames flicking out of broken windows. What would the town do? What would she do?

A shape emerged from the burning library's side exit. An animal limped on stiff awkward legs towards Main Street. Through the smoke the profile resembled a large gimpy dog or rangy wolf. It couldn't be a wolf. About to run forward to see if the dog was hurt, she saw the creature cross the street toward the drug store. 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 a swirl of 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.

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 thank Melville, every staff who started work at eight o'clock stood staring at their burning library. As flames were beaten back, the smoke thickened into a sooty fog and her nostrils no longer registered the reeking air.

Farther down the street the former Library Director Elsie Dustbunny looked as old as the long-deceased Mr. Dewey. 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. 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 her every idea to bring new books and modern technology into the library. He insisted Elsie Dustbunny, though retired, approve every change.

Told she looked too young to run a library, she'd disguised her youthful appearance by dressing like the town's previous dowdy director. She had not been able to hide her youthful enthusiasm to gain the Board Chairman's trust. Her looks had nothing to do with her failure, nor had her youth. Harold had wanted her to fail and had done everything in his power to make certain she did.

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. Send the employees home. I'll attend to Ms. Dustbunny. She's devastated."

The Bunnies 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 shook 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 windows, knowing the water would ruin everything the fire had not destroyed. She wanted to leave but felt compelled to watch this library holocaust.

Two hours later, she kicked aside soot and walked home. 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 discouraged, now, determination held her head high and her step moved resolutely forward. She glanced 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. But tonight she felt as if she had a guardian protecting her. And the feeling was not unwelcome.

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From inside the walls of the old academy building, the watcher still stood by the window staring into the night sky. He'd observed the librarian many times as she passed on her way to the library. Often she appeared discouraged, but tonight her stride was determined. 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.

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The next morning, Liberty surveyed her filthy sheets and her face streaked with grime and tears, sure 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 was 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. She saw a shadow in a first floor window and 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 Dinzeltbacher, whose five o'clock shadow 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 stank of scorched wood and charred books.

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."

"The entire collection needs to be replaced."

The mayor smiled. "You may use the 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.

Harold smiled. "The town has taken possession of the Shipsfeather Academy."

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 completely impractical, not be at all suitable for storing books, but if it were ... If it were .... "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.

"What about the old library?" Liberty asked.

The mayor's smile broadened, displaying a mouthful of sparkling teeth. "Mr. Dinzeltbacher and his lovely wife Sybilla have purchased the building and will rehab it into an upscale restaurant." Rhoda Sue stood. "Now 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. Dustbunny would agree to come out of retirement to help."

Bile rose in Liberty's throat at the very thought. "I'll handle it. Will insurance money replace all the books?"

"Some of that money will build barbeque pits in the park." Harold frowned at Liberty's open mouth. "Our decisions are good for the entire town, not just a few bookworms."

Liberty left the mayor's office feeling as hot as her roasted books.

The next Monday Liberty supervised the installation of surplus desks and shelving into their temporary quarters and the first truck arrived with salvageable contents from the smoldering library. The driver told her only local history materials and the basement backlog were untouched.

Without consulting Harold or Elsie, Liberty told the county library director that Shipsfeather would at last become a member. To rebuild, the library needed software and computers.

When the truck left, a library patron who'd been at the fire scene set a heavy carton on her table. "I figured the library needed books." Behind the old man, 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 exquisite 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. "What a good idea. I'll go through my cookbooks."

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. That evening when Bridget arrived to pick up her husband Webster, Liberty asked, "Do they know what started the fire?"

"The official report will say 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. "This library fire could not be called accidental. Ms. Cutter, it was a book burning."

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