

Chapter One

Ari froze as she caught sight of the light creeping in from under her bedroom door. She reached over and turned off her lamp, set her book down on the floor, and waited, her breath caught in her chest. Down the hall the vacuum roared to life, and she reeled at the sound.

“Mom,” her voice broke. It was barely a whisper in the dark room. *Is she really back?* She took a breath and anticipation burned through her at the thought. She deflated as she looked hard at the door, and her shoulders slumped. She’d gotten her hopes up too many times before. Her eyes darted to the clock on her bedroom floor. The numbers on the digital face lit up the darkened room with a cheery shade of blue.

5:45am. *Crap, I’m supposed to be on my way to school.* The last time she’d been caught had been another good day. Her cheeks burned, and she squirmed at the thought of how disappointed her mother had been. She still couldn’t forget the slew of bad days that had followed that incident. *I can’t get caught again,* the thought was desperate, and rang in her head like an alarm. She pulled one of the drawers of her dresser open and grabbed her clothes. She tossed her pajamas in the general direction of her bed—a temporary air mattress that had long become permanent—and pulled on a pair of jeans and a baggy shirt. Her clothes were dark, inconspicuous, the way she liked. She stilled and listened. She could hear the vacuum moving relentlessly down the hall, the creek of the floor as her mother got closer. The smell of cleaning products invaded her room.

Ari cursed and picked her way to the window, careful not to disturb the clutter on the floor. She pressed her hand against the foggy glass and her eyebrows rose in surprise as cold seeped into her skin. She frowned and turned back to grab her hoodie from the floor.

She reached out deftly to the window latch, fumbling slightly before catching the hook and releasing the lock. With a soft grunt Ari shoved the panel outward and inhaled deeply as the chilly humid air entered her room. She slipped through the opening without hesitation and landed in the backyard. Overgrown bushes and trees covered the yard, shielding it from the nearby road.

The dirt beneath the window muffled her landing. She’d kept the ground here clear of debris for moments like these. Once she had nudged the window pane back into place, she pulled her tackle box and rod free from their hiding place in the bushes. Some of her tension ebbed away. She was, at least now, safe from discovery. The chill air clung to Ari as she stood, and she shivered, feeling the hair on the back of her neck stand up. A dog barked somewhere in the distance, its cries echoing off the nearby houses, and Ari flinched. Adrenaline thrummed in her veins and she stilled, feeling the comfort of her house at her back. The air seemed to press in around her. She took a breath and shook herself hard. She shoved off from the wall of her house and pushed on.

A breeze tugged at Ari’s hair as she climbed a tree in her back yard. Sprawling large oak branches rose just above fence height before drooping back to the ground. She knew she should keep going as she reached the peak of the branch she was on, but she hesitated. She just had to see. Her chest tightened and she paused for just a moment, her eyes catching movement from one of the lit windows in her house. She could feel the cool press of tree bark in her palms, grounding her, as she craned her neck to get a better look. Her mother was still vacuuming. Her brown hair, so dark it was almost black, was pulled back in a wet ponytail. Her clothes were clean, not her usual nightgown. The longing tugged at Ari as she watched, and she couldn’t fight

the smile that broke out on her face. Her mother was *back*. She wanted to run to her, to pretend everything was normal, and spend the day helping her mother do whatever it was she wanted to do. However, the gulf between the tree and the house felt too large, too overpowering to cross. Her mother was caught up in a world she could not reach. Ari pulled back slightly, as tears pricked at her eyes. As much as she wanted to be, Ari knew she'd never be enough. She dropped down into the dew-covered grass beyond the back fence and ran.

The street lights were dim, but they lit her way well enough. Ari followed the lights out of her neighborhood. Squat houses were barely visible in the dark. Tree frogs called out to each other, filling the early morning with noise. Once out of the neighborhood, the way was easier, and she kept to the shadows.

She didn't look back as she fled down the dark streets. She wasn't running away, not really. Her throat felt tight as she recalled her mother vacuuming, and she struggled to breathe as a deep and familiar loneliness sunk into her bones. She kept running, trying to out pace her pain.

A bird called out, and Ari stilled for a moment, not recognizing the call. It was then that she saw the golden glint of the street lamps on water, and the white body of the library that stood like a sentinel out front.

She sprinted forward, heading down the darkened street towards the lake. As she reached the grassy hill behind the library her shoes slipped, and she called out as she windmilled. Her shout echoed in the dark, and she let out a giggle as she steadied her feet.

"If anyone saw that they're probably laughing." She sighed as she slowed, and walked carefully down to the water's edge. Relief washed over her, and she couldn't help but smile.

The dark morning around the lake was calm, but not quiet. The water stirred occasionally with the restless energy of hungry fish. The songs of cicadas and tree frogs filled the air, and hearing their melodies, Ari relaxed. The earthy smell of the stagnant lake water permeated the air. The golden street lights flickered occasionally, but they were still bright enough to see by. The library sat in her peripheral, it's white stucco walls hiding her from the main road.

This was her spot. Few others ever ventured to the lake behind the library. So, it became hers. Her place to read, or fish, or just to get away. The place where she felt safe, the place where she went when home wasn't enough. Time seemed different to her here. Removed from the rest of the world.

Ari set the tackle box down and began unpacking her things, her hands moving delicately over each object. The box had been her mother's, back when she'd had more good days than bad.

She shook away the thought, and selected a fish hook from the box. Her mother would probably still be cleaning by the time she got home. Would she still be having a good day? Ari's throat tightened as she imagined her mother as she had been. Perhaps they could do something together. Watch TV, go out to eat even, if they had any money left. Ari's hands tightened and she hissed a curse as the fish hook pricked her thumb.

Something large and ghostly white flew at her out of the darkness, startling her from her thoughts. Ari dropped the hook into the box and ducked, flinching away from it as it landed nearby in the grass. She looked up, and her eyes met gold eyes in a white face. She froze. It was a bird, a snowy egret. Ari had seen them around the lake a few times, but never had one approached so close before.

"Hello. Aren't you pretty?" Her voice stood out, feeling too loud, and she shrank back. Ari waited for the bird to flee. Instead he canted his head, as if listening, and stepped closer. "Can I help you with something?" Ari asked as she watched it curiously. The bird just looked at her, and then started to preen. She moved slowly, reached into her tackle box, and removed a

small bag of bait fish. She opened the bag with her knife and tossed one of the fish to the bird. The egret jumped, cupping the air with its wings and landed away from the fish. Ari leaned away, laughing, as the bird jumped. It stepped forward, eying the fish for a moment, and then its eyes met hers. Ari felt her breath still. For just a moment she thought she saw something there, something different. The egret blinked at her, and the look was gone. With a swift movement he jabbed forward with his long beak, and grabbed the fish, swallowing it whole. Ari grinned and tossed the egret another fish.

"You're very strange, you know?"

The bird stood out, quite bright against the still black sky. Something nagged in the back of Ari's mind, and she checked her watch. Her breath caught as she read the digital numbers. 5:45am. *5:45am*. Her stomach twisted, and she suddenly felt very exposed sitting out in the grass. She shifted uneasily, and shivered.

Ari tossed another fish to the egret, her fingers suddenly stiff and clumsy. She tried to ignore the sense of disquiet creeping over her and focused on feeding the egret. She tossed him all the fish she had until the packet was empty.

The lake had grown quiet. Even the cicadas were silent. A breeze picked up and Ari shifted on the ground. She pulled her hoodie more tightly around her. "It's really freaking cold today," she said to the bird. "Nothing to worry about though. You're here, right? You wouldn't be here if it wasn't safe." Unease settled low in her gut, and Ari twisted her fingers in the still wet grass. The last time she'd felt this apprehensive had been during her mother's darkest days. She saw her mother, lying in bed, unresponsive.

But today was a *good* day. Her mother was up early. She'd showered, dressed. She was cleaning. "Today is a *good* day," Ari said through clenched teeth. The school busses would start dropping kids off around 3pm. She could head home, see her mother. They would act like nothing was wrong. Play card games, watch TV. It would all be *fine*.

A cry rose in the dark, loud, unnatural, almost a scream. Ari's stomach dropped and she startled at the sound. She crouched low to the ground. Adrenaline burned through her veins. What was out there? Was it injured? Dying? The egret flinched beside her and took off into flight, heading out across the night-darkened pond.

"No! Don't leave me!" She felt the loss of the bird's silence and simple companionship as an ache in her chest. The air seemed to chill even more around her, as if the bird had somehow staved off some of the early morning cold. She couldn't lose him. She lifted an arm, reaching out after the bird.

The egret landed in a small wooded area on the other side of the pond. Ari's eyes widened and she took a step backward. Her arm dropped back to her side. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes. She'd never seen that small woods before, she was sure of it. As the dark tangle of trees rose up, they caught the yellow glow of a street light, giving the woods an otherworldly appearance. She found herself standing, though she wasn't entirely sure why. She took a step forward, and squinted at the woods. A pressure that had been weighing on her, eased in the back of her mind. Ari stumbled forward, heading for the woods, her rod and tacklebox abandoned in the grass. *Something's out there, watching you in the dark*, her mind taunted. She jumped as she broke into a run. Her shoes slipped slightly in the grass, but she managed to keep her footing. She reached the trees and pushed into the bushes that grew alongside them. Her hands trembled, and she pulled her hoodie tightly around her. The street lamps flickered and went out, plunging the world into darkness.

The woods closed around Ari. She glanced back once but could not see her fishing spot anymore, or the library building. Instead she was surrounded on all sides by vegetation. The trees and bushes pressed in and she struggled. She turned back, intending to leave the woods, but she couldn't see where she'd entered. She couldn't see the way out. Her breath came fast, her heart pounded in her ears. She couldn't breathe. She was smothered. Ari wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and tried to breathe. She rattled off math problems in her head. Nausea rose up, and she spoke softly to herself. She needed to *focus*. To do something. Only that would stop her panic.

She thought of the bird. She thought of the flicker of *something* she'd seen in his eyes. How he'd somehow kept the cold at bay. She needed to find him. She needed to get out of these woods. Ari drew in a shaky breath and took one step, then another. The bushes rose up around her as she pushed deeper into the woods, scratching her arms, her face, catching in her hair. She tripped, her legs hung up by vines that would not break, and cried out as she fell. Fear got her back up on her feet. Fear kept her moving. It built up in her mind, a quiet tickle that became a roar. The darkness joined the bushes, and Ari felt herself struggling to breathe. She was smothered. She would die here. She would lose her way; she would never find the egret, never see her mother again. Her mother...

Ari saw her mother again, lying in bed. She waited for her to breathe.

The night broke with the strange screaming cry again, and Ari jolted forward, her mind blank with panic. The briars tugged at her legs and she tripped again. There was a sudden, crippling pain, and her world went black.

Ari groaned as she awoke. Her head throbbed and her vision blurred. What had happened? Why was she here? Where was here? Memories came to her in flashes. The lake, the egret, the woods. She struggled to sit up. Her pulse pounded in her head and she gagged. The world was silent and the air was thick with the smell of swamp. Ari thought she could hear her heart beating. She gingerly touched her head, feeling for the bump she knew would be there. Movement caught her eye, and a white shape landed in front of her. It was the snowy egret.

"Damned bird." She murmured. She smiled feebly and started to push herself to her feet when the bird suddenly beat its wings in her face and she fell backwards with a gasp. Ari clutched at her head and glared at the egret.

"What the hell, bird?" She tried to stand again, but stilled as the bird pulled a long white feather from his wing, and placed it in her lap. She glanced at the bird, and reached out gently, her fingers grasping the still-warm shaft of the feather. Ari's head buzzed, and the world tilted. She lay back down to steady herself.

She took a shaky breath and frowned. What was going on here? She brought the feather to her face. Her shoulders relaxed as the tension eased in her mind. Just as when she'd taken a step towards the woods. The shaft of the feather remained warm in her hand. She ran her fingers over it gently.

The loud screaming cry tore through the silence and Ari jerked her hand away, surging to her feet. She flinched, her muscles taught, ready to run.

She looked down at the bird and it met her gaze with an intensity she hadn't expected. She shifted back a step and frowned. The bird was tensed, huddled in a half crouch, as if it would fly at any moment. Something crashed through the bushes nearby, but too far away to see. Ari winced at the noise, and the bird opened its wings, its beak parted slightly in a pant. There was a moment of silence before something dove through the bushes again, the sound louder and closer than before. Ari spun around. She looked toward the noise, but all she could see was the dark

thick woods before her. Was something coming towards them? Would she have to run again? She turned back, expecting to see the egret once again taking flight, but he remained in place. The bird opened its beak wider, but instead of a bird call, the egret spoke.

"We don't have much time, so I need you to listen to me carefully!"

Ari's mouth gaped and she stared at the bird. She must have hit her head harder than she thought. She tried to back away from the bird. She couldn't do this. She needed to get home. She needed to wake up from their weird freaking dream. Her hands shook and she wiped her palms off on her jeans. She glanced around, looking for a way through the bushes, away from this place. The egret kept talking.

"You're going to have a lot of questions. I don't have time to answer them, I'm sorry. What I need right now is for you to run. Ari! Listen to me!" His voice was harsh. She jerked and her eyes met his. "Your life is in danger Ari, and I cannot protect you from this. Trust me and run. Run!"

She swallowed hard and nodded, gripping the feather tightly as she turned and fled. Her head pounded, but the pain was muted by the rush of adrenaline. Her thoughts felt hazy, and she could feel the chill as her skin grew damp with sweat. She sprinted through the trees, shoving her way past branches and twigs until the woods broke and there was nothing before her but grass, roads, and houses. The streetlights were still off. The strange night still hung over the world. The shadows seemed to grow around her in the moonlight. Her mind raced with her heartbeat. What had just happened? Had a bird really spoken to her? Was she really listening to it? But he had told her to run. Had told her that her life was in danger. Could she really afford to not listen to him?

Ari darted towards some back neighborhoods, but the streets were not familiar. The houses were different, not the ones she'd known and passed by earlier. and she felt as if a hulking nameless monster hid behind every corner, watching her. Her chest felt tight. Her breaths came in short gasps. She exhaled. She tried to slow her breathing, and her breath fogged in the air. Where *was* she? She spun for a moment, trying to find something familiar, something she could hold on to, but the dimly lit buildings and trees seemed to spin with her. She had to focus. She had to stop. Nothing looked right. Nothing looked the same. She saw an alley off her to left and sprinted down it. She couldn't look back. Couldn't stop running. Her mind screamed with panic. She hesitated only a moment as she reached an intersection she did not know. Which way would take her home?

A bird called out, loudly behind her and she jumped. The call was strange, one she had never heard before. Ari turned and looked back.