

THE FEATHER

by Lindsay Adams

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 blinked at the sound.

“Mom,” her voice broke. It was barely a whisper in the dark room. *Is she really back?* She took a breath. Could it really be? For a moment, just a moment, she wanted to believe. Ari deflated as she looked hard at the door, and her shoulders slumped. No. 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 could not face that again. She pulled one of her dresser drawers open and grabbed her clothes. She tossed her pajamas in the general direction of her bed—a temporary air mattress that had long ago become permanent—and pulled on her 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 fumbled slightly with the window latch before catching the hook and releasing the lock. With a soft grunt Ari shoved the panel outward and inhaled deeply as the chilly, dry 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. She nudged the windowpane back into place and pulled her tackle box and rod free from the hiding place in the bushes. Some of her tension ebbed away. The chill air clung to Ari as she stood, and she shivered, feeling the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Too cold to be normal for here, Ari tried to shake off the disquiet that settled over her. Ari jumped as a dog barked somewhere in the distance, its cries echoing off the nearby houses. Breathe, she reminded herself, and she paused, 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 stopped by a tree in her backyard. She knew she should keep going, but she just had to see, so she climbed. Sprawling large oak branches rose just above fence height before drooping back to the ground. 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 song. 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. If she ran fast enough, she just might out-pace the pain.

A bird called out, and Ari slowed for a moment, not recognizing the call. Something about the call felt off to her, but the library was just ahead. She shook herself and walked on. And there it was, just ahead. 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 cried out as she wind-milled. Her shout echoed in the dark, and she let out a giggle as she steadied her feet.

“Hope no one saw that.” 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 periphery, its 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 had become 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. She 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 watch must be broken. That was it. There was no way she had walked all this way, and no time had passed. She eyed the still dark sky. 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." Surely the bird would fly off if it sensed any danger. It was just all in her head. She *knew* that. Still, unease settled low in her gut, and Ari twisted her fingers in the still wet grass. The last time she'd had this feeling. That sense that something—somewhere was wrong. So very wrong. The house had been so quiet that morning.

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.

Ari's stomach dropped as a cry rose in the dark, loud, unnatural, almost a scream. 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 took off, heading out across the night-darkened pond.

"No!" 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.

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. And she knew it, though she couldn't say how. But she could feel it watching. 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 and tried to breathe. This was a mistake. She should go back to the library. The woods surrounded her. 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.

"Seven times eight is fifty-six," she whispered to herself. Nausea rose up, and she spoke softly to herself. "C'mon Ari, get it together." 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 would find the bird. That's what she would do. And then—then maybe she'd find the way out too. 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 mewling that became a roar. Ari felt herself struggling to breathe. She was smothered. 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 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 stopped 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 was taunted, 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 started, 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 it. She couldn't do this. She needed to get home. She needed to wake up from this 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 looked back 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 forward towards one of the neighborhoods that butted up to the back side of the lake. The houses were unfamiliar in the dark, but she knew the streets well enough. She would get home. See her mother. Tell her—something. Whatever. It didn't matter. What mattered was getting away, getting home. Being safe.

Her shoes thudded on the pavement as she ran. The strange scream still echoed in her mind with the words of the egret. *Your life is in danger—run!* She felt as if a thousand eyes watched her from the shadows of the neighborhood as she ran. It was still too cold—too dark. She glanced down a side street for a moment and saw—but no that couldn't be right. Could it?

She slowed, and blinked. Snow. It was snowing. It couldn't—it never snowed here. It wasn't possible.

Ari watched for a moment, as the gentle flakes drifted down, and landed on the street. There was a faint, almost translucent aspect to them. She blinked again and they were gone. It was just a normal suburban street in the dark; yards that consisted of short, mostly dead grass, and scrubby looking palmettos. Her shoe hit a curb as she backed up and she paused.

“What—what is going on here?”

Her voice shook, her words softer than a whisper. She looked down at her watch again.

5:45am.

A chill raced down her spine again and she shivered. She could still see the lake in her mind. The woods that shouldn't have existed. The bird that shouldn't have talked. And that scream—what had been out there in those woods with them?

A bird cried out in the silence of the early morning, a sharp high-pitched note. Ari started, and broke into a run again. She'd stayed too long. She needed to get home. She needed to get away from that lake, from the bird, from all of it.

The light changed as she ran, as she put distance between the lake and herself. The streetlights stayed off, but now sunlight crept up through the trees, bathing the world in rich warm light. The air still bit with chill, but something about the sunrise made things feel just a hair warmer. Just a little safer.

Ari slowed as her house came into view, rising up out of the early dawn shadows like a beacon. Its weathered dark wood trim and stucco walls were shaded from the pink morning light by live oaks that dripped spanish moss from their branches. Ari hesitated, her eyes fixed on her house. She'd made it. She was home.

Movement flickered in the corner of her eye. The hair on the back of her neck rose as she turned to look. The neighbor's yard was covered in snow. It covered the lawn, the driveway, and piled high against the walls of their house—and then it was gone, as if it had never been.

Ari checked her watch. *6:30am.* Why was she still seeing things that weren't there? Why had she seen them in the first place? Impossible things. Snow that couldn't, and would never, be. She shivered, the world still too cold, too wrong, and turned towards her home. It would be safe there. She could hide away, forget the morning, with its talking birds and strange noises. Her mother would be there. Her mother would keep her safe—wouldn't she?

She didn't go back to her bedroom window. She just needed to get inside. She needed to be done with this. She took a breath, and tried to force herself to relax. Then she pulled the spare key from the fake rock in the yard, and opened the front door. It swung open with a groan.

"Mom?" Ari stood in the doorway, her breath hitched and stuck in her throat. She hovered over the threshold, afraid at what she might find. The front entryway and living room were dark. She couldn't hear the vacuum—

She saw her mother in the darkened bedroom. She waited for her to breathe—

The strangeness of the day vanished, pushed back by the silence of her house. Ari swallowed hard, as she stood frozen, her eyes scanning the house for movement. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think—couldn't stop seeing her mother lying in the dark.

No. She couldn't—wouldn't give in. She forced herself to suck in a breath and pushed her way through the door way. She sunk to the ground, and kicked the door shut behind her with her foot. She sat there, in the dark, silent entry way, and tried to remember how to breathe as the walls pushed in around her.

Six times five... Her palms were slick with sweat. She wiped them on her pants and slid them into her hoodie. Something warm brushed her hand. The feather. She pulled it from her pocket, and twirled it between her fingers. Home now, it all felt so impossible. Like a dream. Yet here was this strange white feather.

"Ari? Is that you?"

"Mom!" Ari's breath hitched, and she rubbed at her dry eyes as her mother leaned out of the bedroom doorway down the hall. She drank in her mother's image, lit from the bright bedroom beyond. Shoulder length wavy dark brown hair. Hazel eyes; blue with flecks of brown. Long slender fingers. She was large compared to Ari, both tall and heavy. She had a smile that could

light up any room. A smile that said you were home and loved. That everything would be ok.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” Her mother was giving her that stern look, hands on her hips, a frown on her face. Ari ignored it, and ran down the hall. She pulled her mother into a hug, and sighed as her mother’s arms wrapped around her, and held her close.

It was ok. Everything was ok. Everything would be ok.

“Oh sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

Ari could feel the hot wet fabric of her mother’s shirt against her face. She knew she was crying. But she couldn’t bring herself to answer. Her voice lodged in her throat. What could she say? How could she possibly put it into words?

“Were those kids picking on you again?”

Ari nodded into her mother’s shirt. There was no right answer. No truth she could tell. What would she say? That she’d snuck out and a bird had talked to her? That it had been dark, and she had been so afraid? The strange screaming cry, and how her life had been in danger? And then she’d come home, and the lights had been out, and for a moment, just a moment, she was four years younger, and so, so alone.

“C’mon. Why don’t you help me clean, and you can tell me about it?”

Ari let her mother pull away and followed her into the bedroom. Like the rest of the house, it was piled high in clutter. Trails cleaned for walking led to the bathroom and the door. An oversized air mattress lay on the ground. Ari flopped down onto the bed as her mother turned back to the junk on the floor and began to sort. She had a few garbage bags that she was stuffing newspapers into. It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. It would take a dumpster to clean their house.

“How long have you been awake?” Ari asked, as she laid back and stared up at the ceiling.

This room smelled like her mother. If she closed her eyes she could almost chase away the bad memories of that one dark night. Almost, but not completely.

“A while,” her mother murmured, still sorting. “I just—there’s so much I need to do. All this cleaning! This house is a disaster. We’re gonna get this whole house clean Ari, and then we’ll keep it that way.”

Ari bit back the words that floated to her mind. How many times now had she heard the same story? Every time her mother had really believed it would be different. And every time it was always the same. It would be clean, maybe they’d even make it a month. But it never lasted.

“How long?” She asked again.

“Really honey, not that long. I—I think I woke up around midnight?”

Ari cracked her eyes, as her mother left the pile of clutter, the half-filled garbage bags, and began cleaning out an old fish tank on her dresser. How long would they have together this time? A month? More? Less? It was hard to know sometimes.

“We should go shopping later,” her mother said.

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I want to pick up some fish for this tank. I used to have black mollies and guppies. They’re so much fun! You’ll see. We can even breed them! Did you know they have live birth?”

“Sure, if that’ll make you happy,” Ari murmured. Her words were weighted. She knew it. Her mother knew it. Ari closed her eyes, but she could feel her mother’s gaze snap to her.

“Ari, honey—”

“Yeah?” She waited for her mother to apologize. For any acknowledgement of that day—

“You really need to stay in school. Even if it’s hard. If those kids are bothering you again I’ll call the school and see what we can do. But you have to stay in school. Please.”

“Sorry mom. I just—a lot went on this morning.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

The strange woods, and how it grabbed at her. That screaming cry. The crashing in the bushes. The white egret, with his piercing yellow eyes. Ari watched as her mother abandoned the fish tank, to start sorting through more stuff on the floor. Mostly newspapers, but Ari could see a few dirty plates, bills, and clothes as well. She slid her hand into her pocket, and brushed along the warm shaft of the feather there. Did she want to talk about what had happened? What she had seen? She had spent so many years of her childhood reading fantasy novels, and now—now she was either living one, or losing her mind.

Trust me and run. Run!

“Mom?” She took a breath, forced the air slowly through her lungs. She sat up on the bed, but kept her gaze on the floor. She couldn’t bring herself to meet those hazel eyes. To see the disappointment. To know that she’d failed. Again.

“Yes Ari?”

“Do—do you ever—see things?”

“What do you mean?”

“See things that aren’t there?”

The cleaning stopped. Movement stopped. The world stopped. There was no sound other than their collective breaths in the room. Ari glanced up through her bangs, but her mother wasn’t looking at her. Instead she stared down at a piece of paper clutched in her hand. No—not paper. A photograph. Ari’s parents. She could just make out their smiles on the worn and blotched Polaroid.

“Yes,” she murmured, her voice soft, distant, raw. Longing to reach out to her mother hit Ari

like a weight to her chest. She lived for these little moments. The self-aware mother. The one who knew. She couldn't fix it, neither of them could. But the acknowledgment made it more real. More valid. "Sometimes it's obvious. Sometimes it's—not."

Ari's breath caught in her chest. So did that mean, the snow—even the egret, hadn't been real? Maybe there had been a real bird, and she'd found the feather it had dropped after preening. Surely the rest couldn't have actually happened. A bird couldn't have really talked could it? And the snow. The snow—she'd seen it, but it hadn't really been there. She knew that. It was impossible.

She looked at her mother. Her mother who'd set the photo aside and was sorting through more crap on the floor. It was genetic right? That's what her aunt had whispered to a friend one holiday when she'd thought no one was around to hear. Ari had lived every day since, with the shadow of her mother disorder hanging over her life. Her legacy.

No. She didn't want that. It would only hurt her mother more. And she couldn't do that to her. She couldn't—her breath came faster as she saw her mother again, in the darkened room.

It's all your fault!

It had always been her fault. She blinked, and her vision cleared. Her right hand still wrapped around the feather in her pocket. She could feel the silence, stretched out between them both.

There was a loud thunk, as a bird flew into the bedroom window. Ari and her mother jumped.

"Well, that was different," Ari's mother murmured with a slight laugh. Ari returned her grin, but unease twisted low in her gut. Her thoughts tangled back towards the morning, towards the egret and his warning. She told herself the dead bird was simply a dead bird, and nothing more, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it was some sort of omen. *It's all in your head*, she thought to herself, but then, was that any better?

“I know,” Ari’s mother said, her voice loud in the quiet room. Ari looked up and met her mother’s gaze. Her eyes were alight, burning with one of her ideas, and Ari couldn’t help but smile in return. “Let’s celebrate!”

“Wha—celebrate what?” Her grin faltered, and she frowned at her mother.

“Your birthday!”

“Mom, that was months ago. And we did. You just—you were just really tired that day. But we still did cake and presents.” They always had, no matter how bad a day it was. Ever since her tenth birthday.

Her mother was shaking her head. “No. That’s not good enough. You need a real birthday. C’mon, let’s order pizza.” Her mother stood up, and brushed her hands off on her clothes.

“Mom, it’s still early morning,” Ari said with a laugh.

“Oh. Well then,” she sat back down. “I’ll do a bit more cleaning, and then we can hang out. Maybe play some video games? Watch movies? And then we’ll order pizza.”

“Okay,” Ari said with a laugh, as she let her eyes drift shut again. She could enjoy this, couldn’t she? Live in this moment? Her mother was here. She was safe. Everything was ok. The ceiling lights warmed her eyelids, and she could hear her mother continue to clean. She took a long slow breath, and then another.

When she opened her eyes, her mother had moved to clean another part of the room. The photograph of her parents lay on the floor, forgotten and crumpled under a garbage bag.

“Ari, would you go keep an eye out for the pizza guy?”

“Okay mom,” Ari said with a laugh as she stepped outside and pulled the door shut behind her. Her eyes scanned the street, but there was no sign of the pizza delivery guy. A breeze tugged

at her hair, and she shivered. Ari pulled her hoodie tighter around her, as she kicked at the leaves in their driveway.

The streetlights were on, their dim yellow glow splashed on the oak trees and the cracked asphalt of the road. Tree branches twisted and bent, like the limbs of grotesque monsters in the dark. Ari shifted, feeling her earlier fear come creeping back. It was almost too real, alone out here in the dark. Crickets chirped, and Ari could just make out the calls of a few cicada as well. She kicked another pile of leaves on the ground, unearthing a rock in the process. The breeze tugged harder at her clothes, and something wet landed on her face. *Rain?*

Ari looked up, her breath catching as snow once again fell from the sky. It blanketed houses, the street, yards. White and endless, it was everywhere. She could feel flakes melting on her face.

It's not real...it's not real. But—it felt real. She could practically smell it. She shut her eyes, just for a moment, but when she looked again, the snow was gone.

The streetlights flickered. They almost went out. And then—

The shadows moved.

The hair on the back of Ari's neck stood on end as she shadows cast by the streetlights started to grow and stretch. "It's not real," she whispered aloud, her voice fragile in the night. "It's not real." She turned back. She'd just wait for the pizza guy inside. The house was clean enough, at least in the front entryway. But she froze, her eyes locked on the house—

The house that was no longer there. Streets and houses stretched out before her, dark and unlit, but her home was not there.

Her eyes widened, as ice shot through her veins. *No—no, no, no!*

"Mom?" She called out, but there was no response. *Nine time eight is seventy-two.* This was

just all in her head. Her house was still there. Her mother was still there. She would just feel out the door handle, and go inside.

But the door wasn't there.

She closed her eyes. She tried to breathe. *Five times seven*, she thought. She tried to breathe. Her hands shook.

When she opened her eyes again, the door was there. She opened it, and flung herself through the entry way, and slammed the door shut behind her. She stopped there, her back against the door, her ears filled with her panting gasps, and the pounding of her heart. She tried to slow her breathing, and the noise from the living room filtered in.

The doorbell rang, and Ari launched away from the door. She stood in the living room, and trembled. Her mother frowned up at her.

“Ari? Is everything ok?”

Ari opened her mouth to speak, but the words didn't come. She shook her head. Her mother frowned at her a moment longer, and then left to answer the door with a sigh. Ari listened as she tipped the pizza guy, and took their food, but her mind was elsewhere. She was back at the lake, the egret there in front of her, his eyes looking through her soul.

“Your life is in danger Ari. Run!”

“Ari, can you help me with all this?”

Ari turned back. Her mother stood in the entry way, three boxes piled in her hands, and a few sodas on top. Ari stumbled forwards, her hands out to help, but she couldn't chase the egret from her mind.

She had to go back.

Had to see if it was all real. Maybe there would be something there. Something that would

tell her it hadn't all just been in her head. Or something that would tell her it had. Either way. She had to know. Had to stop this. Had to make things right again.

She took the sodas from her mother, and they made their way to the living room. Ari's movements were robotic as she sat down with her mother. Her mind still locked on the lake, and that egret, and the strange warm feather in her pocket.

There were no clean dishes, so they ate right out of the boxes, and drank out of the bottles. Her mother had put a movie on, but Ari couldn't focus on the images that flicked across the screen. Instead she took the seat next to her mother, and leaned in against her. Her mother was there. She was safe. Wasn't she? She pressed harder against her mother until warm arms wrapped around her and drew her close.

First thing in the morning. She'd go back there. She'd get her answers, and she'd figure out what to do from there.

Ari's sleep was fitful, and she was glad when her alarm went off. The lights in the house were still on, and she could hear muted music drifting through her door.

She didn't pack her school bag. She'd rarely taken it even when she'd gone to school. Not even when she had attended regularly. She was just another student to drift through the cracks, unnoticed.

"Hey mom, I'm off to school."

Her mother was still cleaning. She'd made a great deal of progress since Ari had gone to bed. At least half the house was clean enough she could see the carpet again. Ari knew by tomorrow the entire house would be clean. Minus the stains that would always be there. They could never really hide from the truth of what their life was.

“Ari,” her mother pulled her into a crushing hug. “Come here, sit for a moment?”

“Okay,” Ari said as sat next to her mother on the exposed carpet.

“I just wanted to say, I’m so proud of you. And—I’ve been thinking. We’ll find you another school ok? I promise. Next year we’ll get you into that magnet school. It’ll be better there. I promise I wont put off applying like I did last year ok? I won’t let you down.”

“Okay mom,” Ari said with a smile. She had liked the idea of that. A school where the focus was on learning. Maybe she’d even go to her classes. If her mother actually got the paperwork done this time.

“I love you sweetheart, more than anything.”

“I love you too mom.” She took one long look at her mother as she pulled away. She hated losing time on days like this. Hated this game of pretend she played to keep her mother just a little happier.

Then she was outside, the long dark streets of her neighborhood stretching out before her. She took a breath, and began to walk.

It was still dark when she made it to the library. The world was still cloaked in the eerie silence of night, broken only by the calls of insects and frogs. Her rod and tackle box were still where she’d left them the morning before. There was no sign of the egret. No sign of the impossible woods she had seen. She checked her watch. *5:45 am*. Her breath caught, and she stared at the digital face until the minute ticked over.

She sighed. There was nothing here. She must have imagined it after all. Ari turned away from the lake. She’d find some way to kill time for a few hours until she could head back home. Just like she always did when her mother was like this. When her mother noticed—

She froze. There, in front of her, was the egret.

She tried to steady her breathing. It was all in her head. It wasn't real.

“Ari,” His beak opened as he spoke.

No. This wasn't real. This couldn't be real. She covered her ears with her hands, and shut her eyes. When she opened her eyes again he'd be gone. It's not real.

That screaming cry pierced the night behind Ari. Her eyes flew open. She whipped around, searching—

“Ari,” The egret called out to her again. *This isn't real*, she thought. *This isn't real*.

She ran.

Ari darted towards the neighborhood past the library. The one that would lead her home. The houses were unfamiliar, not the ones she'd known her whole life. She felt as if a hulking nameless monster hid behind every corner, watching her. She could hear something in the dark, crashing through the bushes behind 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 fear. 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.

