

## Prologue

Arielina, or Ari as her sisters called her, looked around the hallway full of teenagers rushing to go home. She was already two months into her first year of high school. She walked along with a smile on her face. These past two months had been the second happiest time she had ever had in her thirteen years of life. She was doing well in her classes; she knew that she was smart, even though Felix, her father—or more accurately, her stepfather, as she found out this past July—was always saying she was stupid.

Her first happiest time was back when she discovered in middle of July at the school orientation that she had two half-sisters in the area and that they all were just months apart in age. She was the oldest of the three. The three of them were inseparable for the rest of that summer, and one day, they found out they had something in common that Ari would have found very hard to believe, if it hadn't happened to her. That day they were strolling deep in the woods of the Matheson Hammock County Park, when Ari felt a strange sensation stirring in her body. Suddenly her body began to transform. Ari could feel every bone in her body reshaping, like she was a puzzle being pulled apart then put back together just in a different shape. It didn't hurt, but the sensation was definitely strange. She didn't feel afraid, only amazed. She stood there as Cris and Pi looked at her. They didn't look frightened either, but their eyes were wide with surprise. Cris had finally broken the silence when she sputtered, "Ari, you're a wolf! A beautiful wolf!"

Later that same summer, Cris and Pi had also unexpectedly shifted into wolf form. They talked for many hours about it, wondering how they had come to be part wolf. Ari could offer no explanation, but they did learn together how to control their shifting so that it only happened when they wanted it to—when they were alone together in the woods. The three of them spent many happy days, running and playing together as wolves. They also learned to listen to their wolf voices. Ari had been the first to discover that her wolf had separate thoughts and feelings. Her wolf seemed to run on instinct, and would tell her if someone was approaching, and she would nudge her sisters to run in the opposite direction. When they weren't playing as wolves, they were hanging out together in human form. Ari felt so alive around them—as though there was a purpose to her life, and that purpose was the protection of her younger sisters. The connection between them was unique and strong.

As Ari walked out of the school and up the steps of the bus that would take her home, the smile faded from her face. She was worried about this upcoming long weekend. It was Columbus Day and Felix had decided to bring the family on a camping trip at the Oleta River State Park. Her instincts told her that there was something odd about him—even more than usual.

As they drove down a small road inside the campgrounds and deeper into the woods, she looked around. She wasn't surprised when her stepfather parked the camper deep in the woods, probably

the remotest spot in the entire campground. The closest camper she saw as they drove by was more than a mile away.

Ari got out of her seat as soon as Felix parked the camper and walked out. She stretched her body and tried to rub out the kinks in her shoulders. Soon the three of them were working together to set up the camper. They were done in about an hour, and her mother went outside to barbeque something for dinner. Her stepfather was stretched out on one of the lawn chairs half drunk; he had already yelled at her mother several times.

What really had Ari concerned was that, for some reason, Felix had been very pushy and forward with her tonight. She had caught him several times sneaking looks at her that were decidedly creepy. It was very unsettling. She felt that there was something really wrong with him—an especially ugly vibe emanating from him. Her wolf was continuously throwing warning signs at her. She kept herself in alert mode the whole time they were outside.

Soon her mother had dinner ready and on the table. Ari sat at the end away from him. She and her mother kept quiet as her stepfather ate his food, complaining about everything.

After they finished eating, Ari got up and helped her mother clean up and put everything away. Felix sat back on the large lawn chair and continued drinking. When they finished cleaning, Ari and her mother each grabbed a book and settled in a chair to read. At about ten o'clock, her mother decided to go to bed, so she got up from her chair with her book in hand. She gave Ari a quick kiss on the forehead and said goodnight, then walked into the camper.

Ari continued to read her book. After a half hour of being alone with him, she sensed a sudden change in his scent. One of the other interesting things Ari had noticed lately was that she could smell things she had not been able to smell before. The scent of emotions like danger, fear, and joy. She had this ability even when she was in human form, but it was even stronger when she was a wolf.

Ari kept reading without looking up at Felix. She tried to play it cool, but she could feel this nasty change come over him. All of a sudden, she felt his hand on her shoulder. She looked up as he grabbed her roughly by her wrists, then he pulled her off the chair and moved to his chair and forced her onto his lap. She could feel his atrocious hard-on through his jeans.

Ari twisted her wrists and forcefully pushed herself up from his lap. She took several steps away from him as he stumbled up from his chair. "You bitch. You think you're better than me? I'll show you," he blurted out, coming after her with his hand in the air.

Instinctively, she stepped aside and avoided his first swing. He regrouped and was about to swing at her again when she heard the camper door open then slam closed. She looked up to see her mother coming toward them.

"Mom, I got this. Go back inside," Ari said, keeping an eye on Felix as she turned slightly to look at her mother. But her mother did what she always did and rushed between them.

"Mom, no!" she screamed as her mother ran in front of her. Her stepfather swung his arm hard and caught her mother right in the temple. Her body dropped heavily to the ground.

"Fucking bastard. You're going to pay for that," Ari screamed, as she bent over her mother's body. She concluded that she was okay—unconscious, but breathing. She stood back up and gave Felix a hard stare.

"Asshole! You like hitting women? Why don't you come get me?" she screamed, keeping an eye on him as she slowly moved away from him.

Ari knew he would follow her. He wanted her—she could tell by his disgusting smirk and the way he licked his dry lips, and in the way he looked at her body. She didn't rush away; she needed to make sure that he would follow her away from the camper and her mother. She walked back into the woods, where by now, it was completely dark. The good thing was that this stupid man was still coming after her.

She could feel every stick and rock under her bare feet. Now that she was farther away from the camper where she could barely see their small campfire, she slowly discarded her clothes. He was still following, now only a few feet from her. First she pulled her blouse off and dropped it on the ground, then her leggings, until she stood in front of him wearing nothing but her bra and panties.

She could smell the mix of alcohol, sweat, and arousal. She stopped and took her bra and panties off. "Come and get me, you

motherfucker," she challenged him, standing up straight then starting to run.

She knew he was just feet behind her. She ran at a steady pace, letting him get closer several times, then speeding up again. He was fast even though he was half-drunk, but she was faster. When she was sure that she had led him far enough from the campsite, she sped away from him. He tried to keep up with her, but he couldn't cut it. She sensed the moment he stopped running. She turned around and circled behind him.

Soon she was close enough to see him leaning against a tree trying to catch his breath. She shifted into her wolf. She could feel her face getting longer, her arms and feet changing to paws, and she could hear her bones cracking. In seconds, she stood there in her wolf form. Her wolf crept closer to him and made no noise until she was right in front of him.

Her wolf growled loudly and he looked up. She could smell the fear on him. She jumped on top of him. Catching him in his chest with her front claws, she made deep gashes. He dropped to his knees as she stepped back to see blood oozing from his chest. She jumped on him a second time, snatching his neck in her jaw. Then, with no mercy, she crushed his windpipe. She opened her mouth and stepped away as his dead body dropped to the ground.

Her wolf found a loose branch, which she grabbed with her teeth and slowly circled around him and the area, erasing all her human footprints. She dragged the branch around a couple more time to make sure there was no sign of her human self—only wolf tracks.

Her wolf dropped the branch and walked away. She found a small stream farther into the woods, jumped in the water, and cleaned the blood from her fur. She made her way back, looking for her discarded clothes. She grabbed the bra and panties with her teeth and kept walking toward the camper. After another few yards, she found the blouse and leggings. When she got close to the camper, she shifted back to human form.

Ari quickly got dressed, found another loose branch, and while she walked back to the camper she erased her footsteps. Back at the camper, she found her mother still unconscious. She easily lifted her from the ground and brought her into the camper.

Ari undressed her mother and put her pajamas on. She settled her into the bed and covered her up with the blanket, bending over to give her a quick kiss on the forehead. "He won't ever hurt you again, Mom. Never," she murmured softly into her mother's ear. She settled in her own small bed, and after more than an hour of wakeful restlessness, she finally fell asleep. A peace that she hadn't had for a long time came over her. Her wolf settled calmly inside her.