

## Chapter One

Inside the box it was pitch-black, and the air was humid and stale. Beads of sweat pearled on Wolf's body, and he felt a stinging sensation as a droplet broke loose from his skin and slid over one of the fresh welts on his lower back. He lay on his side, his knees pulled to his chest, swallowing hard as he tried to silence the sound of his crying.

Polly permeated the wooden wall and wrapped her arms around his torso, pressing her body into his until their two halves became like one.

"Why, Polly?" Wolf asked.

She tightened her embrace. "Stay on your path, Wolf. You'll get through this."

"I'm not sure I can," he whispered, sniffing.

## Chapter Two

Wolf preferred to be in the yard because he hated feeling scared and felt safe with his friends. Polly stayed with him at night, usually resting on his feet at the end of his bed, and although she couldn't protect him, she gave him a deep sense of comfort.

Wolf met Polly for the first time when he was eighteen months old. When he awoke from his nap, she was sitting at the opposite end of his cot wearing a simple, wraparound dress made from bone-coloured fabric with faded cherry blossoms, and a black, canvas belt tied around her waist.

That first day he saw her, she looked like a real girl, so Wolf named her Polly, the same name as his favourite cockatoo who had escaped from the aviary only three days earlier. The girl stared at him with radiant, emerald-green eyes that angled up and away from the bridge of her small, slightly flat nose, and her skinny calves were pressed against the mattress as she sat upright, smiling at him.

Over the years, Polly never told Wolf exactly how old she was, but since she seemed to grow and develop at the same rate as him, and since it was 1972, he figured that she must be six, like him. They had a game where Wolf would try to guess her exact age, and she'd always answer, "You're right," no matter what he said. Sometimes he'd say numbers like negative thirty-three, or one thousand and seventy-five, and she'd tell him he was right followed by a mischievous giggle.

As the years passed, Wolf found that she appeared differently depending on her emotional state. When her body was transparent or translucent, that meant her energy was normal. When she looked solid, almost like a real girl, Wolf knew that she was feeling strong emotions like sadness or joy. And, on the rare occasions when she felt extreme emotion, like rage, she looked like the figure of a girl consumed in blinding white fire.

Luckily for Wolf, Polly rarely left his side, and because of her, the punishments by his father were slightly less terrifying.

## Chapter Three

The abuse began shortly after Wolf's third birthday and after he had moved into the top bunk in the room that he shared with his older brother, Orville, in their family's small, two-bedroom house.

After the first few times it happened, Wolf could predict when his father would hurt him based on where he parked his car. Wolf knew that if his dad parked his car inside the shed, he would usually leave him alone and go straight to bed. But, if he left his car in the driveway, Wolf would panic, his breathing stifled because he knew this meant his dad was

drunk.

Wolf also knew what to expect based on which of the two doors his dad used to enter the house, knowing that the kitchen door was the worst. When Wolf heard his dad fumbling with the lock, he knew his dad was drunk, and he could even smell the alcohol on his breath as soon as he stepped into the kitchen. Once inside the house, his dad usually ate or poured himself a glass of brandy, then walked down the hall to the boy's room, often telling Wolf to get down from his bunk before hitting him and ordering him into the box.

The first few times it happened, Wolf tried to resist going into the cedar chest by clawing at the rug, begging not to be forced inside, but his dad just pulled on his skinny arm and lifted his lean body, dropping him into the box before closing the lid above him. Eventually, Wolf took his toys out and moved them into his closet so that he could get inside the box quickly, and each time he had to get into the wooden cell, his brown eyes glowed with fiery flecks while his heart beat so hard it hurt.

One morning, when Wolf was four-years-old, he was sitting at the breakfast bar watching his mum washing dishes at the sink, and he mustered up enough courage to ask her to remove the box from his bedroom. "I don't wike the box in my room. Take it out," he said, his bottom lip curved downward.

"Wolf, it's not pronounced wike. You need to say like, with an L, like the L in the word lollies, or little," she said facing him, her tongue visible below her front teeth. "Keep working on saying your L's correctly. And, with the box, I keep putting your toys in there, but you just pull them out. Use the box for your toys."

He didn't respond, staring at her with wide, round eyes as he pressed his teeth into his lower lip.

Then, his mother put her palms on the countertop and said, "That was my hope chest. My mum filled it with things for me to use after I got married. She tried to fill it up all the way, but my parents didn't have much money so there wasn't much inside it. Anyway, that's not the point. I don't have anywhere else to put it in the house. I'm sorry, Wolf, but it'll have to stay in your room."

Each time Wolf was forced into the box, Polly came inside and stayed with him in the darkness until he was told by his father that he could get out, or until he could hear his dad's snores drifting down the hall. Then he'd clamber out, hurry across the carpet, and crawl up the ladder to his bed where he'd hide underneath the blankets, hoping of getting some rest.

As the years passed, Wolf's fear of the box lessened, and when he and Polly were inside the cedar chest, she reminded him how to control his breathing so his spirit could leave his body. Throughout their long friendship, Polly was a reminder to Wolf that his body, mind, and spirit were separate, and that even though his journey in this life was going to be difficult, he would someday gain complete control.