

Chapter 1

Said The Night Wind To The Little Lamb

“¿Escuchaste eso?”

Tita’s voice muffled a “did you hear that?” from the living room as I fumbled off a stiff-with-cold mitten and turned the key in the inside door. The December wind slammed the flimsy, metal storm door against my backpack and then raged up Dogwood Road. Before my glasses fogged, I disabled the alarm on the kitchen wall. If I didn’t move fast enough, the alarm would shriek a warning and the phone call from Safety First Home Alarm System would crab a tired, monotone follow-up. I wasn’t in any mood for that.

“¿Escuchaste eso?” Tita’s soda cracker voice repeated, pumped up a few decibels.

I stomped the frozen snow clumps from my boots, arched my purple jacket over the kitchen chair, and flung my backpack against the dining room wall. My jacket and backpack muttered their silent relief, ready for the weekend.

“¿Escuchaste eso?” More soda cracker, more decibels from the living room corner. “That you, Rey?”

“No it’s me . . . Jaz. Grandfather’s out in the garage. What’s up, Tita?” I squatted next to my grandmama who barely filled half of the 1980s stuffed chair—a thirty-year-old clunker with arms like a sidewalk and dainty flowers on blue upholstery. I gave up moving it to vacuum, so stuff’s been collecting under it for at least three years.

The chair surrendered, lodged in place. Not at all like Tita.

Without turning her head, Tita raked out a crumpled Kleenex from the wrist of her red, plastic-buttoned cardigan. The sleeves reached the end of her thumbs. With her knotted fingers, she picked at the Kleenex over and over again before pushing the shreds back under her sleeve.

Tita's left little finger was only a stub, missing after the first knuckle. "That happened before I ever went to school, before I came north," she always told me. No matter how I asked, she would say nothing more about her finger.

Tiny white crumples dusted onto Tita's black pants, a mix of Kleenex crumbs and dry skin flakes.

"This winter is really getting under your skin," I said, hoping to distract and calm at the same time. "I'll get you some lotion."

"¿Escuchaste eso?" No further volume, at least for now.

I shuffled through the bathroom closet shelves looking for Tita's tube of Jergens Ultra Healing. A collection of nylon nets tied around three or four brush hair rollers with one pink pick in each roller. A dozen bottles of nail polish stuck everywhere, separated into a long-ago color on the bottom and a layer of milky goop on top. The Jergens was jammed behind a leaning pile of half-folded hand towels.

When I moved a towel stack against the back wall I saw Tita's purse, the black one with the seashell pearl clasp. Last Sunday, Grandfather and I spent hours looking for it before giving up. Or giving in, as I saw it.

I sat on the wide arm of the monster chair to massage Tita's hands. The Jergens' fragrance took me back to childhood bath times before my twin brothers were born. Back then, I spent weekends with Tita and Grandfather that included a Saturday evening bathtub full of bubbles. I lay down the full length of the tub with my long, dark brown hair floating in the water around me like a crown—thick and straight. Now, except for my long bangs, my short, short hair doesn't float anywhere. But it's still thick and straight.

The lotion always followed the bathtub. “Let me Jergen up your hands and feet, Jasmina. To keep your skin silky,” Tita said. “Then we’ll have banana splits.”

Until a few months ago, Tita used my full name. It was given to me in memory of her older sister who died before she was five, before Tita’s parents moved to Texas. “My other Jasmina is buried by a little church in the Mexico hills,” Tita told me once. “I never knew her but now I have you.”

Fully Jergened up, Tita, Grandfather, and I licked down ice cream scooped over bananas and dripping with caramel. Three Ramirezes sat side-by-side on the couch. On the rose carpeting, a pair of feet planted on each side of me. Me and my ten bare, Jergen-silky toes reached just over the edge of the colonial blue.

That same Early American couch now has its back to the front window where the drapes were always drawn. Couch and closed drapes—keeping out questions, keeping in answers.

At least the front window wasn’t boarded up like those in Tita and Grandfather’s bedroom. There, dark drapes hung over more dark drapes on the inside, boards tight together nailed into the brick on the outside. Drapes and boards to help Tita sleep.

“¿Escuchaste eso?”

“I don’t hear anything, Tita. Just the wind.” *Do you hear what I hear?* I hummed the Christmas melody for a moment. *Said the night wind to the little lamb.* I finished my hum and the hand massage and capped the Jergens tube. “The wind’s rocking the pine tree in the back yard.”

“No, I’m telling you,” Tita said. “Someone’s knocking on the door. Walking around. Looking in our windows.”

“The drapes are pulled shut,” I said. “No one can see in. And I reset the alarm when I came in.”

“¿Escuchaste eso?” Tita pulled the Kleenex shreds back out from deep in their sweater cavern. More falling white crumples. More stress routine once again.

A key turned in the lock of the side door. From the garage in the narrow alley, Grandfather walked in with winter on his heels. “That car of yours going to make it till spring?” His voice crammed the small rooms as he hurried to disable the house alarm. Fresh snow stomps added to my melted puddles already soaked into the woven rug. “Sounds like it’s on its last mile.”

“Don’t worry. Priceless just has a bad cold.” I returned the Jergens to the linen closet and plunked into a kitchen chair. “Guess what? I found Tita’s purse.”

“¿Neta?” Grandfather poured a cup of cold coffee from this morning’s pot and punched the micro to ten seconds. “Really? Where the hell was it?” He looked at me, his eyes red with lack of sleep, his face gray-bristly, his peppered curly hair shaggy over his ears. It’s been months since I saw Grandfather with his hair combed back, slick and black. Maybe last year, I can’t remember.

“Behind the towels in the bathroom closet . . . oh, I’m going to take Tita for some Christmas shopping tonight when you’re gone,” I said, folding three days of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. “Probably to East Market, not downtown or anything.”

“Wish you wouldn’t. It’s nasty out there.” Grandfather gulped down his lukewarm black coffee from a well-used Dunkin’ Donuts paper cup. Although he had washed that cup many times, the brown stain on the inside was deepening. It was one of fifteen cups stacked in a tower next to the toaster. He saved those cups from early Sunday coffee meetings with his friend Tom.

Like 4 a.m. early. “The only time I can sneak out of here,” Grandfather said the first time I asked about the cup tower.

“We’ll be fine.” I reached in the fridge to pour a chocolate milk.

“Might not be a good day for that. She’s been on edge all day.”

“It’s only a few miles and it’s only East Market,” I said. “She’ll be OK.”

“Then why don’t you see if Megan or Sarah will go with you?”

“They’ve got other plans, like going to a huge basketball game. It *is* Friday night, don’t forget.” I know I came off smart-alecky, but things were beginning to bubble up.

“Really wish you wouldn’t, Jaz. She’s getting close to having another one of her spells—been feeling it all day. Why don’t you wait till—”

“You’re going out tonight. Why can’t Tita?” No matter what, I wasn’t giving up on taking care of Tita like my mother gave up taking care of me. And now maybe she’s giving up on taking care of the twins, too. I wanted to shout all of this and more at Grandfather, but I thought it best not to say another word.

I finished the last of my milk, grabbed my backpack, and headed up the stairs to my bedroom.

Everyone was going to be at tonight’s basketball game. Our own Capital City High School was playing Madison West. Megan reminded our lunch table at the Bird Feeder earlier today, “Even though our record’s tied with West, everyone still sees us as the runty underdog from the poor north side. But I think we’ll smoke ’em.” I thought Sarah might break out into a Cap City cheer right there in the cafeteria, but she was busy adjusting the puffy layers of her scarf.

It's always been Megan, Sarah, K, and me. Our personalities are miles apart, yet we've been best friends since kindergarten. Actually, K's name is—was—Kennedy but everyone called her K. She had a floor-to-ceiling letter K on her bedroom door. Then, less than a month ago, K died from bone cancer.

Megan, Sarah, and I have hardly talked about K since then. How long will it take before we can even say her name?

After I mentioned going shopping with Tita, Megan asked about hanging out with me. “The girls’ team doesn’t have a game tonight—some schedule mix-up, they said. So I can go shopping with you guys,” she whispered to me at our end of the Bird Feeder table. “I don’t *have* to go to the game you know.” She finished the last section of her orange.

“Thanks a lot. But taking Tita out goes better with just me and her,” I said to Megan, stumbling over the bench as I bolted from our table. I should never have said one word about shopping.

I couldn't look back as I headed out of the high school cafeteria, but I felt everyone's eyes on me. Confused and puzzled, maybe rolling and snickering. I didn't want to know. Having Megan go out with Tita and me was the last thing in the world I wanted. Besides, I knew they were dying to go to the game. Megan and her boyfriend Matt, and Sarah.

Nobody gets it.

I can't be with Grandfather and help take care of Tita *and* also hang out in high school and be with my friends. My grandparents—or my friends and high school.

It has to be one or the other.

I moved in with Tita and Grandfather a few weeks ago, right after K died. I didn't expect losing her would hurt so hard. That's kind of a stupid thing to say, I guess. When you're a junior in high school and your best friend dies, you don't *expect* anything. You just *are*.

Megan and Sarah haven't been here since then. We text and talk at school but that's it. They wouldn't understand Tita's dementia or Alzheimer's or things here at Grandfather's.

The smell from Grandfather's sausage soup drifted up the stairs. I heard him guiding Tita to the kitchen, half using and half dragging along her walker. He opened the door at the bottom of the stairs. "You going to eat with us Jaz?"

"I'll get something at the mall later," I said from my spot on the bed in the extra bedroom . . . and a spare bedroom it was. When I came here, I shoved my stuff into four or five boxes—I don't have much. Most of them are out in Grandfather's garage.

I unpacked a few clothes, my laptop, an old clock radio, and the volleyball pillow from K's bed with my name stitched on it. I saw K rest her arm on that pillow in her bedroom a thousand times before she died. I still feel K deep in the pillow's purple velour when I try to sleep . . . when I try to choose between my friends and high school—and my family.

My room here is only a walk-through on the way to the real bedroom. The real room used to be my dad's. When I cracked open the door last week, faint smells of Dad's after-shave, denim jacket, and black leather gloves rallied from sleeping corners. The room's still papered with the black, silver, and white of the Chicago White Sox. Dad was a Sox fan years ago and now he's a Sox employee.

After Grandfather left for his union meeting I came downstairs for the shopping trip.

“Let’s get your coat, Tita. But first the bathroom,” I said. Change her Depends, hand-wash, hairbrush, and a touch of red lipstick. Sometimes a second Depends change. Make sure the coat’s zipper is in the front and each glove is on the hand where it belongs. Routine prep.

I threw on my puffy jacket and ran out to start Priceless and turn on the heater. Then I helped Tita walker clunk to the door.

“Not going,” Tita said when we were almost to the door.

“It’ll be fun. All the Christmas stuff and music. You’ll see.” I propped the wooden door open with one foot and pushed the metal storm door against the wind with my arm. Then I gently but firmly guided Tita and her walker through the doorway and onto the landing.

“Not going.” I caught her arm just before she swung it toward my face. The “not going” and arm swing were also routine. They usually melted with a word or two of coaxing.

“I’ll help you find a Christmas gift for Grandfather. What do you think he’d like?”

“Not going.” I prepared for another arm swing but it didn’t come.

Fifteen patient minutes later, I had Tita charmed down the three steps and seat belted in Priceless. I folded her walker into the trunk, shoving aside the jumper cables and snow scraper. Better take the walker in case Tita gets a streak to really use it. I went back in to set the house alarm, pushed the lock on the door as I pulled it shut, and rushed back to the car.

Oh crap. My mittens lay inside on the kitchen table. That’s where they’d stay, I decided. I wasn’t about to shut the car off, take out the keys, unlock the house door, grab my mittens, and relock the door—all before the alarm caught me and howled. Who knows what Tita’s reaction might be as she sat in the car through all those moves? Couldn’t take the chance. Not tonight.

I finger-tipped the cold shift lever from park to drive and guided the stiff, icy steering wheel as I drove away. Every couple minutes, I blew some breath on my hand and squeezed it shut to warm it up. First one hand, then the other.

Tita looked my way and adjusted her red, crocheted cap around her shoulder-length, wavy hair. Dark brown with not a strand of gray. “No mittens,” she said, her smile showing one missing bottom tooth. “Too bad on you.”

“Yup. Too bad on me.” I shrugged, blew more warm breath on my fingers, and smiled back. “Maybe I’ll get some mittens for Christmas.”

I found a book for Grandfather about the history of farm unions in the United States. “He’ll like all the pictures and bigger print,” I said, as the Foreword and Afterword bookstore did a complementary giftwrap. Tita couldn’t select the book but, with a little charm-speak from the clerk wearing a Scandinavian sweater, she picked the silver paper and green ribbon.

So far, so good.

Then the Café Court. I got a small pizza and Pepsi for myself and a chunky candy cane ice cream shake for Tita. I found a small table by the bathrooms, far from where the high school kids sit. They usually clique up on the Cinema end so they wouldn’t see us here. But tonight it didn’t much matter, they’d all be at the game anyway. A Madison community band was tuning up on the risers in front of the large windows overlooking the parking lot. As the band settled in, I heard snatches of *Silver Bells* and *Sleigh Ride*. Trumpets, saxophones, flutes, and excited percussion.

“This music will go good with your candy cane shake,” I said as I unwound my scarf, helped Tita take off her coat, and put her walker to the side of our table. “Can you see the band

okay?” I took the first bite of my pizza and then a swallow of soda to wash down its greasy cardboard crust.

No comment from Tita. She jabbed her straw up and down in the shake and then tried a second, pursed-lip suck on its end. More jabs and a suck, this time her eyes wider and with more fume.

Now they froze my drink. Can't get nowhere with this. First, the neighbors peeping in.

What next?

I stopped in the middle of my second bite of overheated, curled pepperoni and held my breath.

Tita snapped the plastic lid off her shake, threaded it up the straw, and threw the lid to the floor. More raging straw jabs and a suck.

“Hold on, Tita. I’ll get you a spoon.”

I picked the plastic lid off the floor and hurried to the napkin and plasticware counter on the other side of the Court. The band ended its practice notes and began *O Holy Night*.

It's no use. Get rid of this. I'll show 'em. I'll show 'em all.

Just as I left the counter with a long plastic spoon and a fist full of napkins, I saw Tita throw her shake to the floor.

“¡Esto es una porquería!” Tita’s voice shrilled across the Court, her eyes terrified. A red scarf hung lopsided from her neck, the end in front far beneath the table edge down between her

knees and the other end slipping back over her shoulder. Tita's hat clung crosswise to her head, one corner nearly covering her left eye. She shouted again that her shake was garbage, "¡Esto es una porquería!"

The shake disappeared under a chair, leaving a milky trail and a few chunks of candy cane as it rolled farther under two empty tables. Stuck in a glob of ice cream at the bottom, the straw twisted in wild, bobbed circles before the red paper cup jammed itself against a stainless steel chair leg.

Nearby tables silenced their soft chatter. For a moment, they stared at Tita and the wobbling shake and then returned to their whisperings and the holy night.

In a phony, hushed voice, a mother wearing a reindeer antler headband scolded her preschooler whose fingers pointed to our table, "Stop pointing, Jacob. And stop your giggling, right now. I mean it." But Jacob giggled that much more. Reindeer turned to the other woman at their table. She was an older woman with bells hanging from all the branches of the Christmas tree sewn onto the front of her XXXL sweatshirt. Both women broke into giggles—antlers waving, chests heaving, bells tinkling—sputtering as they slurped their sodas.

Probably not just the drink. Maybe the tables and chairs too. They poisoned everything.

Armed with napkins and the spoon, I dashed to Tita but I couldn't reach her before she swung her arm across our table and sent my pizza and Pepsi flying to the floor. The pizza stuck to the paper plate, stayed upright, and sailed Frisbee-like under the next table. But the Pepsi lid flipped off. A puddle of soda and ice cubes spread quickly over the floor.

"¡Esto es una porquería!" Tita shrilled again. "They're poisoning us. Don't touch it."

At that moment, I saw Rock and Cooper and their son Siempre a few tables over. Rock's my Spanish teacher and Cooper's his partner. Siempre's the cutest preschooler ever and loves to dance to any music. I looked away, pretending I didn't see them. I'd just die if they saw me.

I squatted down to lay napkins on the soda puddle when a toddler came walking toward me. He clutched a leather ribbon of jingle bells and shook them in full force. With each shake, he stomped his foot into the swelling puddle, splashing my jeans and the nearby table legs. Two arms in a brown suede jacket reached for the toddler and whisked him away with one smooth, strong motion. Instant two-year-old screams exploded, paying no attention to the holy night.

I never looked up.

I lay out more napkins, edge to edge.

From out of nowhere a busboy appeared, wearing a green elf hat and a navy T-shirt with Court Crew embroidered in white letters across his back. "Bring a bucket and mop to Section Six," he said into the communicator clipped to his shoulder. He shouted over the band's *Deck the Halls*, "I just told you, we got a spill. What you *think* we need a mop for?"

"I'm so sorry." I pushed back my side bangs to look up at the busboy again. By now, I had most of the thin paper squares down—they were soaking and sinking fast into the puddle. "You have to know, my grandmother's not having a very good day."

"It's OK," he said with a sneering grin. "Kids, like, do this all the time. Old geezers and kids, they're like all alike."

At that moment, I was tempted to trip that salmon-faced jerk, tie his wrists behind his back with the communicator cord, and stuff his elf head into the trash can along with my greasy pizza. Holding his head plunged far into the pile of trashed paper cups, I'd ask, "Do you ever see kids do something like this?"

But I kept the kid stuff to myself and headed to our table.

There Rock sat next to Tita. Among the crumpled napkins and drips of candy cane shake, Tita smiled under her lopsided hat. In perfect rhythm with the band's *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*, Tita strummed the tempo with her four and a half fingers.