



Whispering Valley.

Wandering stone.

Spreading wings,

Stand alone.

Caller of Shadows.

Mist in the night.

Eyes of the lost.

Light in the Light.

Ghosts of the morning.

Mountaincry.

Crystal canyons,

Burn and die.

Color to silence.

Fire to clay.

Songs of the darkness...

on a Windy Day.

Chapter One - The Wind

It was the stillness, that was what Alex Lancaster and his sisters remembered most about the beginning, a stillness that hung like ancient, invisible mold in the trees. But who could forget anything about Wind Sunday? The sharp, acrylic memories of that day painted themselves on their hearts and then refused to cure. Ever after, touching the canvas brought tears.

On Wind Sunday Alex and his sisters began to learn great mysteries. And the deepest of all was the first of all. They learned that waking periods of light and sleeping periods of darkness have names just like the people who live through them. Who gave them the names, the children could not tell. But one thing was certain. When a day had two names it took on a mind of its own. And minds have voices. Every Two-Name Day had a whispering voice that tried to be heard. And when it was over, it left echoes.

Listening back, Alex, Cindy and Phylis could hear the first one. Divorce Wednesday. Three years ago. A day of electric whispers that crackled with hatred. And the echo it left was still crying.

Since Divorce Wednesday, Alex, Cindy and Phylis had lived with their mother. Ellen Lancaster was not a bad mother. She was a very lonely one. The children couldn't understand her loneliness, which made her lonelier still. Most of all, Ellen prayed for no more Two-Name Days. It had taken all of her strength, but finally, she had created enough noise in her life to silence the last one--to silence all of them. Undoubtedly, Alex, Cindy and Phylis would have grown up to live that way too. But Wind Sunday wouldn't let that happen.

Warnings about weather are supposed to come from scientists. That's the way the world is set up. Scientists check their meters and satellites, then tell the TV weathermen what's going to happen. But on Wind Sunday, the whole system fell apart. It crumbled because not a single scientist believed that such a wind was possible. Naturally, they had logical reasons for their disbelief.

"A wind larger than a planet would have to come from outside", they said. And "outside" meant

space. But there wasn't any air in space. And without air you can't have wind.

That's what the scientists said, and, of course, they were correct. But being correct isn't always the same as being right. With all their meters and equations, they had forgotten something that

people long ago knew well. They had forgotten that the wind of this world, the wind we can measure

on instruments and feel in our hair, is only an image of something far greater. By the time they

remembered, it was too late.

On that Sunday morning, Alex Lancaster had gotten up early. He was pretending it was like any other Sunday morning when he never got up early. At fifteen he had learned the joys of sleeping until

noon. But the truth was he hadn't slept very much at all. His room looked like a motel, strange and cold with the posters gone. Only yesterday the walls had been alive with super heroes and rock stars, silent

images loud enough to blow your eardrums out. But the posters were gone now, neatly rolled and

packed into sixteen cardboard mailing tubes. His mother had promised to ship them in a week. Half the

night he had stared at an infinity of plaster. All that remained of his life were tape marks in the paint.

Sunday morning and nothing to do but get the newspaper. At least that was a regular, normal,

Sunday sort of thing. Alex turned his attention away from the walls and looked out the window. As

usual the newspaper was in the grass on the front lawn, soaking up the dew. But that was better than

last week. Last Sunday it had landed in a very inauspicious location; a corner of the yard frequented by

every dog in the neighborhood. Perhaps getting the comic section would be more pleasant this day.

And maybe the comics would take his mind off the mailing tubes.

With great stealth, Alex began his journey through the house. It was a trick getting past his

sisters' bedroom without waking them up. The problem wasn't Cindy. She could snore through a

nuclear attack. It was Phylis. Alex had considered renting her out as a German shepherd. She heard

everything. The boy curled his toes so his slippers wouldn't flop. For some reason, it was important that

this last morning belong to him alone.

Down the stairs and through the living room. At the front door, he moved even more cautiously, opening it with excruciating slowness, to keep the hinges from squeaking. Finally, he was outside.

The moment he stepped onto the porch, Alex knew that something had changed and it wasn't for the better. Confused, he stared up and down the street. Perhaps it was the houses. But they were

exactly the same. And it wasn't the trees, not one was out of place. Even the lawn next door continued to need mowing. But in spite of the sameness, everything was different--and all wrong. The

neighborhood looked as though it had developed an extremely upset stomach and was about to

regurgitate. Every edge had grown indistinct, the colors muddling into the first stages of a softly tinted blur. Alex rubbed his eyes. Maybe Cindy was right and he did need glasses.

After retrieving the newspaper, the boy went back to his room, but for some reason his favorite chair wasn't comfortable anymore, not even when he propped up his feet on the suitcases. And the comics were boring. Sometimes the pictures became indistinct as though the blur had seeped into his bedroom. Or maybe it was just his tears.

Of course, Alex didn't realize it, but the whole world was slowing down in a muddled blur. As the hour progressed, people everywhere stopped what they were doing and walked outside. What they saw meant nothing in particular, so they ended up staring at the air. Then they shrugged their shoulders and went back to business. Unfortunately, business didn't seem to work quite as well as it had the day before, which only served to make everyone even busier.

Soon the remaining Lancasters were up and about. Cindy and Phylis wandered down to the living room, but neither girl seemed interested in her favorite Sunday morning pastime, arguing over

control of the television set. Phylis always wanted cartoons, while Cindy preferred rock videos.

Strangest of all, neither girl tried to jerk the comic section away from Alex.

Then came breakfast. Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, doughnuts and hot chocolate. Special food prepared by their mother for a special day. But nobody was very hungry.

Alex glanced at his watch. An hour before the cab would arrive. He wished the time would go faster. His mother saw the glance, understood, and fought back tears.

Phylis was munching a doughnut, when the stillness outside was broken. Broken, but not enough to notice. From somewhere within the blur came a high, whistling call just beyond the range of

human hearing. Around the world, scientific equipment measured it, but only the dogs understood what it meant. For thirty minutes, untold millions of them set about howling as they had never howled

before. Like all prophets, they were beaten to silence. While the dogs howled, learned men in large cities debated about what was happening.

Unfortunately, their debates disintegrated howling matches too, but saner heads soon prevailed and an explanation was negotiated. The explanation wasn't true, but that didn't matter. What mattered was

coming to an agreement for the television reporters. As usual, there had been premature leaks of speculation which were confusing the viewers. People who watch a great deal of television news won't

sit still for speculation unless it is both easy to understand and delivered with the utmost authority. In this, the scientists obliged them.

When they faced the cameras, here is what they said: The fluctuations in the atmosphere; the high frequency sound and the visual distortions, were the result of capricious sun spots—minor

disturbances of little importance that would soon pass away. Now, precisely how sun spots could generate high frequency whistling was a little vague. But

the vagueness was dispelled when a distinguished public relations representative from the National Academy began wielding weather charts and important photographs. The representative looked exactly

like a scientist ought to look so instantly the viewers began to understand. There was even an ounce of

truth in what he told them. Indeed, there were sun spots, the largest ever seen in history. But he didn't mention the most important fact of all, because the real scientists had forbidden it. The trifling problem on the sun was growing.

It had taken the Lancaster young people months to pack for their trip, but, finally, everything they owned had been distilled into a rag-tag collection of suitcases and shipping crates. Their rooms, once treasure troves of precious junk, stood empty. It had been an agonizing process. At one point,

Cindy had caught Phylis packing a trash can full of ripped up cartons from her "Barbie doll" collection.

Of course, the older girl had stopped her. But then the tears had come and they had ended up

concealing the cartons in a crate of videotapes. Now the packing was finished. The only thing left to do was leave.

The family gathered in the living room to wait for the cab, if "gathering" was what you could call it. It was Ellen and Phylis at one end of the couch, Cindy at the other, Alex slouched by the door, and no one speaking.

Cindy stared down at her tennis shoes. They were new and very red. She had bought them yesterday at the shopping center. Alex had told her they were stupid-looking, like a little kid would wear. But his opinions didn't matter. Cindy liked them and she wasn't a little kid. Not anymore. Twelve going on thirty, that's what the psychologist had said and he was right.

At the other end of the couch, Phylis crawled up on their mother's lap. Cindy glanced at her, but a glance was all that she could bear. The two sisters were completely different, but that didn't keep them from understanding each other. Their understanding came from many nights of sharing a room. Crying together and crying alone.

It was hard for strangers to believe that the girls could be related. Phylis with her light skin, blonde hair and blue eyes, could have been the model for "Skipper", "Barbie's" little sister in the doll

collection. But if Phylis was "Skipper", there was no pretending that Cindy was "Barbie".

A long time ago, Cindy had given up the dream of being beautiful. Mirrors do not lie. She looked like their father. Brown hair without a wave or luster in it, a chin too large to be considered delicate.

Dark, sensitive eyes often kept averted. Not that she was ugly. Cindy just wasn't anything at all. At least, that's the way she viewed herself. Of course, her mother had told her that with a little effort she could be pretty. She hated the lie.

Cindy had accepted her looks and knew her place within the family. Phylis was the doll-like child, her mother's favorite, while she was the smart one, the lover of books who got straight "A"s.

Phylis was all bubbles and laughter and light. She was the one who could stare at nothing for hours, drifting in a place where no one else could come. The psychologist had tried to reach that place and had failed. But what he had reached had been very frightening.

At the other end of the couch Phylis laid her head on her mother's shoulder and began sucking her thumb. It was a forbidden act, but she didn't care. The thumb tasted good and made her feel better.

In one way the littles Lancaster was very much like her older sister. Both were proficient at dancing the family minuet. Though only seven, Phylis was an expert at the game that kept them all alive. Each child had an unconscious role to play. Hers was to remain a happy "Barbie doll". To perform it, Phylis had studied ever since she could remember, evaluating each "Skipper" accessory as soon as

her mother brought it home. Now the collection was large. The game had started out fun, but lately

Phylis had grown tired of it. Not that being tired meant it could end. The game must never end. It had to go on because it kept her mother happy. And when her mother was happy everything was fine.

The closing moments in the living room were very painful. Ellen moved down the couch so that she and Phylis could be close to Cindy. Which made Cindy hug her corner even more tightly than before. And then the whispering began.

Alex tried not to hear what his mother was saying, but he couldn't help it. The words made him furious. They were the same ones he had heard from his earliest childhood, meaningless promises about tomorrow, and the wonderful days ahead, and how very much she loved them all.

Soon Phylis was crying. Alex swore under his breath. He couldn't stand it when Phylis cried. When she did it late at night he would rush to his CD player, burning away the sound with white-hot rock and roll.

He was about to search for it that very moment, when he realized it was packed away in the luggage. Another curse. This time for his own stupidity. He had meant to get it out for the flight and had forgotten to do so. Which meant no escape. No choice but to listen.

And then salvation came. It took the form of a honking wheeze muddling through the walls from the driveway. Unsure of what he had heard, Alex opened the front door and stared outside.

Every other time the children had travelled to the airport, they had ridden in a boring yellow cab with two dings on the right fender. But parked in their driveway this time was an ancient, rust-red, limousine, a true veteran of demolition derby, scratched and battered almost beyond recognition. But strangely, its metallic-blue tinted windows were clean and shining.

The wheeze came again. Definitely an attempt at a horn. Trying to hide a smile, Alex turned to his mother.

"I think the cab's here. If the junk-heap on the driveway is what you called for us."

Instantly, the whispers stopped. Alex grabbed their suitcases and walked outside.

As the family gathered on the porch, the limousine door creaked open. Onto the driveway stepped a gangling old man in a ragged chauffeur's uniform.

"Howdy, howdy. Well, I see I got the right house. Ain't no surprise. I never miss. You folks ready to go?"

He was as ancient and battered as his vehicle. A shock of white hair stuck out from under a cap which was three sizes too large and, consequently, rested on his ears. Plastered under his nose was a fat mustache that made him look like a malnourished walrus in livery. Alex's grin widened. It didn't

take a psychologist to see that before them stood a bona fide, class "A" nut case. Just the sort of person to take your children to the airport. The boy loved it. He knew it would drive his mother to distraction.

"Are you...from Central Cab?" Ellen's voice quavered as she stared first at the man and then at his vehicle.

"Sure am, lady. Jerry's all full up. Told me to come by and git you. I tell you, he's got calls runnin' out the kazoo. Cars ain't startin' today fer some reason. Course, I don't have no trouble with ol' Malleus here."

Malleus? Alex barely stifled a snicker.

"Now I know we ain't what you was expectin'."

The man pulled out a set of keys and walked to the trunk.

"But this here ol' boat jist loves kids. An' I guarantee Malleus knows his way to the airport better'n anybody. That's where these young turks is headin', ain't it?"

With a metallic shriek the trunk opened. Ellen gulped.

"Uhh, yes. Yes, it is, but...I was thinking...maybe, I should drive them myself."

Alex waited. Any second his mother would start shaking. She didn't deal with the unexpected very well at all.

"Ain't no day to drive. Take my word fer it, Missus. I know we ain't so pretty, but we're safe as kin be. Ol' Malleus never had an accident in all his life. Perfect record."

"Yeah, right. And those dents got there from hitting air pockets." The boy couldn't hold back the sneering comment.

"Matter o' fact, son, you hit the nail on the beezer. Half of 'em come from air pockets and the other half just flat out old age. Sorta like metal wrinkles. That's what happens when yer odometer tops a million. Dents show up outta nowhere. Woke up yesterday mornin' and had a new one right on top my skull." The driver took off his hat and started feeling his head. "Derned if I know how it got there."

Alex glanced at his mother. To his surprise, she was smiling. So was Phylis. Even Cindy's eyes had a twinkle in them.

"Yeah, ol' Malleus an' me got some miles on our tires, but there's still a lot o' tread left. These kids is gonna be safe, Maam. You kin bet yer stars on it. How 'bout it kids, you want to ride in my ol' junker?"

"Yeah! Can we, mom?" Phylis's tears were gone.

"Well...I suppose it might be all right."

Alex couldn't believe what he was hearing. She was actually going to let them do it—ride with a crazy man in a car that would fall apart if it ever reached twenty miles an hour. Instantly, his rage returned. It was just another example of how little she cared about them. So fine. They would take care of themselves. Nothing new about that. And the sooner they were on their own the better.

But the boy hadn't noticed something. While he had been staring at the dents in the hood, his mother had looked into the old man's eyes. Strange. Instantly, all of her fears had vanished. She knew beyond words that her children would be safe with him, safer than anywhere else in the world.

"What are we waitin' fer? By jiminy, let's pack'er up. Malleus wants to roll." The driver clapped his hands. Phylis laughed and grabbed her suitcase.

But then Ellen looked at her son and all of her fears returned.

"You...you do think it's all right, don't you, Alex? I mean...if you'd rather, I could take you myself."

"Hey, just forget it. We'll be fine." Utterly disgusted, the boy picked up his luggage and stalked

to the open trunk. Once more, Ellen fought back tears.

But then the old man approached and spoke quietly to her. "Don't you worry none about yer

boy, Missus. He's gonna be all right. You done the best you could and that's all that matters to any of

em. They seen and they know."

Ellen didn't know why, but the curious, simple words gave her great comfort. Then the lines in

his face crinkled into a smile.

"Hey, will you look up at that sky. We got a touch o' weather comin' on. Now you take my

advice. Go inside an' shut yer windows an' doors. Then git a little rest. Nothin' like rain an' sleep to

wash the crumbles away."

Suddenly, Ellen was weary, more weary than she had ever been in all her life. The man picked

up the remaining luggage and loaded it in the trunk.

The last moment was the most painful one of all as Ellen kissed and hugged each of her

children. When Alex's turn came he stiffened, but she kissed him anyway. His coldness only deepened

when she whispered, "I love you. Someday, I hope you'll understand."

Wrong. He understood now. Their eyes didn't meet. He wouldn't let them.

The three young Lancasters climbed into the car, the girls in the back, Alex in front with the

driver. Then the old man started the engine and with a lurch of loose gears they rattled into the street.

Cindy and Phylis waved out the back window until their home vanished behind them. Alex stared

rigidly ahead.

Forty-five minutes to O'hare, the worst airport in the western world. The boy slouched in the

tattered front seat. He wished the driver would close the glass partition so he could be completely

separated from the ludicrous passenger compartment behind him. One glance had told him that his

sisters were enjoying themselves, enthroned like princesses on the way to a junkyard ball. Phylis had

discovered an old television set bolted into the ceiling and was watching cartoons. Cindy had found a paper back novel, just the one that she had put on special order at the library.

Alex examined his surroundings. They were abominable. If anything, the limousine was worse inside than it was out. The boy estimated that 4000 years before Christ the upholstery he was sitting on had been red leather. What was left was barely visible between crazy patchworks of plastic tape that kept the whole mess from sliding onto the floor. The dashboard in front of him was cracked and broken as though someone had taken an axe to it. Unquestionably, his mother had consigned them to a garbage truck. Alex knew that only a fool would arrive at the airport in such a vehicle. And more than anything, he hated looking like a fool.

There was only one small consolation. As bad as the limousine was, it was better than riding with his mother. Of course, she had talked for days about driving them herself, but he had been firm in his refusal. Like always, getting his own way in things that didn't matter. True, Ellen had been hurt, (he was trying to think of her as "Ellen" now and not "mother") but that was good. She deserved to be hurt. While the scale of justice was hardly balanced, retribution had to begin somewhere. He hoped that she was miserable, as miserable as he was. The boy fought a growing lump in his throat, hating himself for the welling sorrow.

It took a great act of will, but finally, Alex managed to swallow his emotions. Shifting his mind into neutral, he concentrated on the trance of the highway. Odd how smooth the old limousine ran now that it was on the road. Not the slightest bump or rattle.

The boy laid his head back and watched through half-closed eyes the liquid blur of trees and buildings. Blue town. The town of the tinted window. A metallic river of speeding shapes focused on nothing. The trance was almost complete when the driver's grating voice jarred his eyes open.

"Come on, Malleus. Git up there, boy. Don't let that dern wind stop you."

The old man was having a hard time steering the limousine up the ramp onto the tollway.

"Ever see such crazy weather? 'Nough blowin' to carry off the whole dern city. Gonna go home an' fly me a kite. Got a big red one shaped like a dinosaur. Think I'll go down to the Loop an' let'er float

up in between the skyscrapers. Scare them secretaries straight into Tuesday."

He wheezed with laughter. Alex stared at him in utter silence.

"Jist jokin', boy. Don't take me serious now. What airline you kids want?"

"Pan American". Alex intentionally mumbled the words.

"How's that?"

"I said, Pan American." Was the old fool deaf?

"That's what I thought you said. Goin' a long way, are you?"

Alex groaned in silent agony. What a stupid question. And it would lead to a hundred more.

There had to be a way to shut the antique idiot up. Then he remembered one of his favorite tactics. He had discovered long ago that a few well-timed grunts kept adults babbling with no need for the slightest response. It was a technique he had used successfully for many years.

Staring at the road, the boy grunted a half-word that sounded vaguely affirmative. True to form, the driver continued babbling without missing a beat.

"Don't never fly myself. Too dangerous. Was drivin' right by when that DC 10 crashed in '78—er was it '79. Anyway, I said then what I say now. If the good Lord had wanted us to fly, he wouldn't have give us perfectly good cabs. No sir. Not by a long shot. Never fly when you kin take a cab. It's a good

rule, son, 'specially on a day when the Time Spirit's movin'!"

Alex was all ready with another generic "grunt", but the man's last words made it strangle in mid-articulation. He stared into the lined face.

"What did you say?"

Dim, whimsical eyes peered back at him.

"I said, don't never fly when you kin take a cab."

"No. After that. Something about a spirit."

"Oh, the Time Spirit. I said he's movin'. Look up there at the sky. Don't you git some kind o'

screw-ball spin between yer ears when you look at it? That's what he does, shifts yer brain aroun'

sixteen ways from Sunday. Course usually he's a little quieter about it. Pretty noisy today, if I do say so

myself. Bet you never heard o' the Time Spirit, did you, boy?"

Alex shook his head, his eyes never leaving the old man's face. Suddenly, everything was clear.

They were being driven to the airport by a certifiable lunatic—just as senile and brain dead as the wino

he and his friends taunted every day after school. Of course, there was no way the old man could be

from the cab company. His mother could have discovered that with a single telephone call. Picking

them up had been a scam. He even knew how it could have been pulled off. All it took was a CB radio.

When the pick-up order went out from the dispatcher, you raced over and beat the cab to the door.

Very likely, the real driver had arrived a few minutes after they were gone. Alex wondered if Ellen was

worried. Maybe she was trying desperately to find out who had stolen her children. The thought

brought him pleasure. He would call when they got to the airport. But not right away.

"Yeah, nobody talks about the Time Spirit these days." The loony was still gibbering.

"Can't say I blame 'em none. He's nobody to mess with. Let me tell you, he kin scare yer eyeballs
out without half tryin'."

It occurred to Alex that since as he was stuck listening to the old man, the least he could do was
get some entertainment out of it. A sarcastic smile twisted the corner of his mouth.

"Bet you've seen a lot of spirits, haven't you?"

"Yessir, I seen my share. Real interestin' crowd if I do say so myself."

"Well, you better look behind you, 'cause you got one on your tail."

"Really?"

Alex loved it. The old fool actually looked in his rear-view mirror.

"What you talkin' about, boy? There ain't nothin' back there."

"He's there all right. It's the junkyard spirit and I think he wants your car."

But as soon as Alex had said the words, he wished that he hadn't. There was a long pause, then the old man smiled, and turned to look at him. With that look everything changed.

It was in his eyes. From being dim and whimsical, they took on a clarity and power that the boy had never seen on any human face, as though a curtain had been torn away. For an awful moment,

Alex couldn't speak. He couldn't even breathe.

"You like music, don't you, son? Why don't we just stop talkin' an' listen to the radio. Ain't nothin' like rot-gut rock an' roll to take yer mind off the sky."

The driver punched a button and Alex's favorite rock group blasted from the dashboard speaker.

From that moment on, the man never said another word until they reached their destination. Alex rode slumped down, sullenly staring out the window, trying unsuccessfully to make the blur re-settle over his mind.

Finally, the battered limousine turned off the Tri-state tollway and headed down the ramp toward the Kennedy. Moments later, they arrived.

Outside the terminal, the children's bags were removed from the trunk and deposited with a sky-cap. Cindy and Phylis entered the building through the automatic doors, while Alex paid the driver. For some reason, the tip was more generous than planned, but still he couldn't look the old man in the eye.

Cramming his wallet back into his pocket, the boy was about to follow his sisters, when he felt a tap on the shoulder.

"Got a mind to give you somethin'. Think yer gonna need it."

Alex turned and stared at the closed hand thrust out toward him.

"Well, I ain't got all day. Gimme yer palm."

Without wanting to, Alex obeyed.

Onto his open hand dropped a tiny scrap of metal. It was a key, just a small, brown key such as

people toss into drawers, forget about for years, then throw away.

"Shove it in yer pocket an' don't let nobody know it's there. You understand what I'm sayin'?"

Answer me, boy."

"Yeah. Okay."

There was such intensity in the order that Alex had no choice but to do what he had been told.

The ancient face softened. "Now, you an' yer sisters have a good trip to England. An' don't forget what I told you about cabs."

Alex nodded and hurried into the terminal. It wasn't until he was inside that a chill came over him.

England. He had never mentioned anything about England. How had the old man known their

destination? Rushing to the window, he stared out into the street.

But the limousine was gone.