

# Your Special Preview of *Calling Down the Wind*

## Chapter One

The autumn air turns gold as honey the day fourteen-year-old Rue Pontaglia kills Bif Jones. Her day begins like this:

Rue senses the coming wind. She tastes the core of sage and moon dusted earth, then glimpses eddies of air, purple as tufted gentian. Like other long-time residents of Angel Valley, Rue inhales ozone, then heeds the innate warning to find haven from the coming storm. Or she tries. For who in her right mind would call *any* place that houses her latest stepfather a *sanctuary*?

Once she steps off the school bus, a brick of despair weights her chest; she knows she has nowhere else to go. The plain folk of Angel Valley shun children like Rue, whose mother flaunts multiple divorces and revels in immoral unions. The decent citizens do not *publicly* embrace women who wear clothes tight as snakeskin and who lure their men with come-hither hoochey-coo saunters.

“Bad blood will out,” they murmur until the crescendo of their combined voices sounds like a landslide.

Rue’s multi-hitched mother, Kitty Pontaglia-Jones, works either swing or graveyard shift at The Tuxedo Club. Based on Kitty’s examples, ‘wedded bliss’ appears to be an *oxymoron*, Rue’s word of the day. The girl frets that she inherited Kitty’s Poor Choice Trait. Of course, Rue has yet to make any life-shattering decisions. The same laws that let Kitty marry and divorce as fast as a whirligig spins do not sanction decisions by minors. Children cannot escape the misfortune of who gives them birth. Thus, fear of Kitty’s taint squirms like a vast mudpuppy in Rue’s chest each night as she tries to sleep.

Now the tempest threatens. Local wit dubs the wind ‘the zephyr’, although it is no tame breeze, but a fierce wind as strong as any hurricane. As with any potential disaster, family and friends becomes paramount. Not for Rue, though. She can shelter in no one’s yeasty kitchen or cozy family room where games of Scrabble or Five-Card Stud distance the storm. For Rue, no Mom makes hot chocolate with marshmallows while Dad stokes the fire as they wait out the storm. The only roof and walls where Rue *can* take cover belong to her mother and since Kitty married Bif Jones, he occupies their house like a rattlesnake on a hot rock.

Ill begotten and ill-favored as Rue knows herself to be, she heads toward the house that is absolutely not a place of safety. Yet, you do not toy with gale force winds. When the zephyr ricochets along the willowy swamp bordering Angel Lakes, anything unencumbered with certain knowledge of itself pitches helter-skelter into a rotting oblivion. In blustery weather, Rue has witnessed mobile homes bucking and rolling like feral mustangs. Unwary drivers skid to a halt along roadsides, where they huddle beneath twisted pines and find god. These passers-by spew a yard sale of coins and casino tokens as though the wind’s airy fingers pick their pockets.

Lately, Rue’s center keeps shifting like the wind, too. Random voices in crowds speak to her with profound meaning. Daydreams become reality. Just yesterday at school, the brisk principal who never once looked at her said, ‘Take shelter from the storm.’ Despite his fast gait past where she lingered in the shadows, she *knows* he spoke to her. *Maybe I’m nuts.*

Last year the wind blew into pieces the flame-haired woman known as ‘Ruby’. The redhead conducted her business from a travel trailer behind Minna’s bar. The wind stripped her bare. Poof! Phony eyelashes, falsies, and fake hair—all gone. Rue cannot afford for that to happen to her. Unlike Ruby, she has no parts to spare. Afterward, the prostitute grew invisible to all but Rue, who identified the woman by the deadness in her eyes. Finally, ‘that harlot’ left the valley. Not even her regular customers, including Rue’s stepfather, seem to miss her. This detail the girl finds instructive. Maybe if Ruby stuck around, Bif’s pick-up truck would not park in Kitty’s driveway now.

“Hinkle, winkle, indivisible; make me appear to Bif invisible...” she chants to herself. Recently, if she

focuses hard enough, her silly rhymes help.

Once she reaches her mother's house, Rue steps through the door into the stinking haze of beer, farts and body odor consistent with her stepfather. She scurries as fast as a lone deer mouse through chaos and disrepair to her bedroom. Here everything has a place. She has sewn sheets into curtains for the doorway, windows and closet. Used books, purchased for twenty-five cents a pop, line the crate that doubles as bookshelf and desk. Two prized statues, a carved Egyptian stallion and Arabian mare, act as bookends. Feathers, sticks and knotted hangings decorate walls and other surfaces. Rue scuttles too fast to admire her room, though. With Bif on the prowl, she slinks to a corner where she shrinks into a miserable ball.

Her three cats press against her, motors on high. For luck, she fingers an auburn hairpiece from Ruby's deconstruction, parts of which alighted all over the county. In Ruby's wake, boys like her neighbor, Cheater, harvested a rainbow of rubbers—what the sex-ed teacher calls 'prophyLACTics'. Condoms still hang like strange fruit on the random spiny scrub. From beneath a rabbit brush by Muskrat Channel, Rue unearthed this clump of fake hair backed by black netting. The locks smell of vanilla musk, much subtler when combined with the wind's fragrance.

Rue discerns potency in the synthetic hair, no doubt gained during its unconventional travels. She usually keeps the bedraggled curls beneath her pillow in hopes that the remnant will propel her overnight from flat chested to full-breasted. Peering down her front, where orange-furred Cheezits nestles, she sighs. *No such luck.*

"I know you're in there, girl," Bif growls from outside the curtained door.

Rue cringes and within her, the wind howls. She bites her bottom lip. Cursed as she is by having a priest as her father, she knows that no matter what her science teacher says, the Angel Valley Zephyr does not come just from invisible masses of hot and cold air grinding like strippers on the high Nevada desert. Rue shares a dynamic bond with the wind, a vast potential that presses for release like a flight of exotic birds beating against her insides.

"Get your skinny ass out here!" This shout booms from the living room.

Bif's tone makes the cats hiss and their claws prickle before they slink under the bed, where Rue wants to go, too. Her mantra forgotten, Rue clasps Ruby's tuft to her chest. She *could* try to wait him out. If Bif is drunk enough, he forgets about her. Still, chances are he will come into her room and drag her out—*again*. Making Bif more irate never pays off. As she gathers shredded courage, she unfolds and tiptoes to the living room, where Bif reigns supreme. From beneath her lashes, she stares at her stepfather. The gale force expands within her.

Disconnected as Bif is from all natural processes, he towers—legs spread—by the grimy windows. His stubby fingers sink into fleshy saddlebags that overhang his hips above work jeans. When Bif fixes her in the sights of eyes bloodshot from too many beers, Rue quakes. Like nubs of demonic horns, tufted mud-brown hair stands away from Bif's forehead. He flicks his tongue across thin lips, a yellow-bellied lizard of a man. His silver tooth glints. Turbid heat emanates in a haze off his forehead. He stinks of melted plastic, like the forks her friend Cheater heats into formless lumps behind the barn in Branigan's field. Rue's voice fails her.

*Run! Run!* Her instincts urge her on, but she stays.

*Big mistake to stand by the window.* No one with any sense loiters near sheet glass when a gale threatens. Stupid bullies like Bif Jones do, though. He probably figures he can master the wind. Why not? No one and nothing stands up to Bif. Even the ground sinks into smoking pits beneath his feet. He probably assumes that since he cannot see air, it can't hurt him.

She clutches Ruby's hairpiece and gulps, then murmurs, "Go away, go away, come again no other day..."

Kitty claims Bif was once a Marine. Rue doubts it. Marines are strong and decent; they protect the weak. Bif uses his physical strength to hurt those smaller than him. *Like me. Like Kitty.* Rue remembers the way he looked at her the day he took possession of her mother's house. His gaze pegged her as weak, scrawny, and worthless. *Not much has changed.*

"*Go away, go away...*" Malice like heat from the salt flats shimmers off him. Rue knows he wishes only bad things for her. If he only wished, she could deal, but Bif *makes* bad things happen.

"You slanty-eyed little bitch! Get in there and fix me some real supper."

Inside Rue, the storm twists and turns. She hears the high whine of her dog Aries from where he calls to her. Bif always locks Aries in the backroom as soon as he gets home.

“Whiny mutt! That’s no normal dog. He’d better shut up if he knows what’s good for him.” What Bif fails to understand, he hates, which in his case makes for a whole world of loathing.

In Aries’ veins runs both coyote blood and the desert’s spirit. His wild kin endow him with the reddish-ocher color of sunset-bathed dunes plus a vocabulary larger than Bif’s. Aries’ yippy-whine rises until it shrills like the transformers down the road when they flash blue and die. The dog’s protest lifts her nape hairs. She says, “I already fixed hamburger and noodles. It just needs to be heated up. There’s nothing else to make.”

“Figures. You’re useless in the kitchen. The only place you’ll ever be any good is on your back. And don’t get mouthy with me.”

The trembling strength of her crossed arms cradles her battered heart. Bif’s proximity dwarfs her, renewing Rue’s awareness of her puny nature. The knowledge causes her gaze to wobble. She forgets her rhyme. Once she drops her false shield, he strikes like the sidewinder he is. His hands close around her nape in a punishing grip. “I’m not eating crap!”

“There’s nothing else to make!”

He boots her into the kitchen. “I’ll show you ‘nothing else’.”

She rams into the stove. The impact sends shards of pain up her side. The one usable burner glows red. For once Bif has turned a knob, exhibiting his total level of skill in the kitchen. Her right hand slips on grease and Ruby’s auburn curls drop onto the element. Strands ignite with a whoosh! Rue chokes on the acrid stink and the pan’s iron handle catches hard against the exposed crease between her lower and upper arm. She tries to pull away, but cannot—not with Bif’s meaty hand around her neck. He forces her face toward the skillet.

“You like it? You eat it.”

Terror swamps her and she knows how the mouse feels as the wolverine’s jaws snap shut. Billowing into her face, heat sucks all moisture from her. Like desert air in August, it snatches away her breath. She braces her arms. Bif shoves and breaks her hold. Rue’s chest hits the pan and her knees buckle. Insignificant as it seems to her, Rue’s weight flips the dinner glop. It makes a spectacular arc toward Bif.

*He’s going to kill me.* With weird calm, she knows this for a distinct possibility.

Both the mess and the pan hit him dead center. On her butt, Rue scrambles crablike toward the backroom. Aries launches into renewed howls and barks. She lunges off the floor and pulls the door open as Bif charges after her. He yells the names he uses on her mother.

“Slut, chippy...”

She doesn’t wait around to hear them all, that’s for sure. As she opens the door, Aries, whose back and neck hairs splay like porcupine quills, springs at Bif. The bully aims a vicious kick at the dog’s head. Rue yanks hard on the dog’s frayed collar. Her actions barely save him.

“Come on, boy! RUN!”

She races through the tiny room. Dirty laundry tangles around her feet. Rue throws open the outside door before Bif can catch her. Behind her bounds Aries as they plunge into thick amber light. The dense air blares warning of the storm’s approach. Rue blows like a cyclone for the backyard, where she heads for the chimney base. Before climbing the stepped bricks, she seizes a fallen branch from the lifeless apple tree. Throwing the stick as hard as she can into the vacant pasture she cries, “Fetch, Aries, fetch!”

Before clambering to her hideout, she waits precious heartbeats until the dog hurdles the fence, safe from Bif. Then she scrabbles for hand and footholds. As soon as Rue gets to the roof, she presses her spine into the bricks. There she folds her bony knees under her chin as her breath catches in her throat. She frees the storm. The wind blows into the valley corridor like a herd of immortal mustangs whose unshod hooves spark green embers from the sand. If not for Bif, Rue would love this moment.

“*Get your skinny ass back into that filthy house and make me some supper,*” Bif screams.

She closes her eyes. Tears dribble onto her arm and sting the burn. “Zephyr, zephyr blow today, take Bif Jones far away; zephyr, zephyr...” Rue can care less where he goes, over some rainbow or just down to the channel, where he will make a summer of meals for resident bluegills and catfish. She huddles while a trick of chimney design shifts the wind’s breath around her. Eventually, she nods off.

Rue awakens to air vibrating with bell-toned clarity. Every star looks sharp as an arrowhead; the moon’s edges clean as broken flint. Aries lies curled at the chimney base. When she climbs down, he springs to his

feet. She buries her face in his ruff, inhales his fresh desert scent. Ready to face her doom, she plods around the house.

Branches from Lombardy poplars, which ring the property, strew debris along her path. She barely notices the twisted tin mixed with other rubble in the front drive. Corrugated metal always dots the desert after a blow. Aries trots to the spiky ruins. There he begins a noisy snuffling, then a noisier lapping at whatever lies beneath the tin. Rue slogs over to him. Cool moonlight bathes her. Filled with profound calm, she identifies the boots poking from one end of the rubbish, just like the bad witch's in "Wizard of Oz". With the sense of being both inside and outside herself, Rue nudges the heap's edge with a sneakered toe.

The full moon fills Bif's sightless eyes. A permanent scream stretches his thin lips and reflected light sparks off his silver tooth. Knotted cords barely attach his neck to his shoulders. Aries, who really is not a dog at all, slurps up the congealing flow of Bif's lifeblood.

The moon's cold silver fills her veins. What should have been relief and joy feels strangely like guilt and shame. She turns away and vomits onto the hard soil.

Time gets stuck for Rue afterward. For days, she stays in bed where Aries drapes her feet and her cats converge in her hollows. While Bif's brother from California takes care of arrangements, Kitty plays hooky from work, but mostly just wrings her hands. The physical remains of Rue's late and unmourned stepfather leave with his brother. On the third day, Kitty appears in her daughter's room, where Rue peers at her mother from beneath her bedcovers.

"Holy Mackerel, kiddo. How can you stand this neatness? It's spooky in here. Too dark. Open your curtains, will you? I keep getting a sense of swarmy things gathering at the edges, but they disappear when I look directly at them." Her mother snaps her fingers at the gloom and shudders.

Clad in a lacy bra and thong as black as her current hair color, Kitty drapes the fabric door over one bare shoulder and gets to the point. "I'm out of clean shirts. And why aren't you in school?"

Rue wiggles, while her cats and dog make their own adjustments. *I'll shatter into a zillion pieces of ice, then melt into nothing if I move.* "I'm too cold to go."

"Don't be a ninny. I thought you liked school. Besides, I have to go in tonight or I'll lose my job. Then where'll we be? Believe you me, Bif left nothing for us but dirty laundry. You need to get up and iron for me. If you want, you can start a fire in the fireplace. I'll be in the bathroom." Kitty shrugs off the curtain, which clings to her shoulder.

Rue wishes she could don a new face the way her mother does. One brushstroke at a time, Kitty will construct her facade. *Who will she be this time?* The Italian sex-bomb scheme failed miserably. Unless Kitty wants to lure more guys like Bif...no telling with her. Rue shudders at the thought. *What possible use is another man in our lives? If only...*

The girl's mind stutters over her longings. Kitty never goes longer than a week without some guy or another. Bif barely rates grief it seems, although Rue cannot fault her for that. Still, the progression of males called *uncle, Kitty's beau, stepfather, and boyfriend* crowds Rue's inner vision. Their combined weight hobbles her to the bed.

Her mother calls, "C'mon, kiddo. You're going to make me late."

Nudging the cats and Aries off of her, she drags herself from her refuge. Rue sets up the ironing board and lights the kindling she laid in the grate before—*that night*. After retrieving a rolled and frozen shirt from the freezer, Rue traipses back into the living room where the iron sputters and spits. Despite buttons left open to her navel, her mother thinks prim cotton gives her class. Thus, Rue starches and irons. She loses herself in the process, her burdens momentarily released. Once all the seams look crisp and straight, she totes the rigid shirt to the bathroom. Kitty's lush backside blocks her view.

"Well, how do I look? Yep, it'll do." Kitty steps back, evidently surveying her artistry in the mirror.

Rue's reflection wavers beside her mother's. Kitty yelps, then rubs her arms. "Whoa, kiddo, you gave me a start. For just a second, you looked all stern and golden. Like your father."

Old anger heats Rue's face. "I hate it when you compare me to *him*. He's been dead longer than I've been

alive.” She clenches her jaw.

“Only by one day. Father Dennis O’Rourke—what a man. And to fall off a mountain like that. And where in Hell is *Misti* anyway?”

“It’s a volcano in the Andes. Peru.” Rue’s breath jerks to match the sudden awkward pace of her heart. Kitty faces her and really studies her.

“You’re not looking so hot, kiddo.” She holds a narrow hand to Rue’s forehead. *As though she can learn anything of importance from such minor contact.* Nevertheless, Rue leans into the brief touch.

“No temperature, but your eyes... to think of those doctors talking about you being Mongoloid just because of your peepers. The idea.”

Rue looks squarely at Kitty, who snatches her hand away as though slapped. Her mother says, “It gives me the creeps when your eyes change like that. From gray to blue to topaz.”

*Like I have any control over that.* To assure herself of existence, she gazes into the mirror at herself. She sees gold-brown lashes emphasizing dark circles. Her stubbornness, as Kitty calls it, shows in the slashes of darker brows, a long and straight nose, firm mouth and chin. Hair like the silk on fresh corn wavers in the slight breeze puffing through cracks between wall and windows.

“A kid shouldn’t look so grown-up. You look marked already, after only fourteen years of life. And what’s that smell? Hyacinth. Have you been into my cologne samples again?”

Rue shifts her face away from the mirror. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Here’s your shirt.”

“Hang it on the doorknob, would you, sweets? And boil some water. I need coffee before I go.”

Rue heads for the stove. She clears off day-old doughnuts and misshapen bridge mix before moving a water pot onto the burner. Spooning two level teaspoons of crystals into a stained cup, she returns to the living room and gazes out the picture window.

Days have passed since she last sensed the weather. She walks outside barefoot to see if direct contact makes any difference. Other than an aching cold in her arches, she feels nothing; neither the tingle in her belly that foretells rain nor the ache in her jaw that predicts snow. Certainly, she detects no building pressure, which warns of the Zephyr. Instead, she feels abandoned, as empty as the heavens arcing overhead. The sky burdens her with its blueness. Only the nudge of Aries’ wet nose against her fingers keeps her from collapsing into herself.

He yips at her and she pats his head and whispers, “I know.”

Rue finally looks to where Bif leaked his blood onto the pale soil. Dread fills her mouth with bitter juices and slams her heart into overdrive. She clenches her fists until her whole body quakes. *Will there always be a dark stain?*

Rue promises herself: *Even if the Zephyr tears me apart from the inside out, I can never, ever let such a thing happen again.*