

# A Place in the Wind

# Chapter 1

Teenagers don't run away in January. Not in upstate New York.

In summer, they'll go out drinking with friends, pass out in a field somewhere, wake up hungover and covered in mosquito bites. In the spring and fall, they'll hop a train down to New York City after a fight with a parent or a problem at school. The Port Authority cops will pick them up, usually after a day or two when they discover that there really *is* no place to sleep in the city that never sleeps—and worse, no place to shower.

But a January disappearance was different. Jimmy Vega had only to look out at the early-morning ice sparkling on his windshield to understand that no teenager would choose to walk off into the blue-black heart of such a night as last night.

Especially not a girl like Catherine Archer.

He cranked up the heater in his pickup and palmed the sleep from his eyes. The teenager had been gone since ten p.m. yesterday. It was going on eight a.m. now. The sun held the sharp edge of promise through the bare trees as Vega drove into Lake Holly. But he knew it was just a tease. Sunny-side up for now. Over easy by midmorning. Hard-boiled by this afternoon. There was snow in the

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forecast. There was *always* snow in the forecast this time of year. Vega should be used to it by now. He was a native New Yorker. Bronx born. But the Puerto Rico of his parents' youth still ran like a Gulf current through his veins. He wasn't built for upstate New York winters.

He'd turned in early last night. His girlfriend, Adele Figueroa, had gone to see her nine-year-old's choral concert at the elementary school. Vega also had parent duty last night. He took his eighteen-year-old out to the new Ethiopian restaurant. Paid forty bucks for what looked like two unrolled burritos. Joy loved it. Vega ended up raiding his refrigerator for a frozen pizza afterward. Joy suggested they take in the new Norwegian film at the art cinema, but Vega didn't want to pay to see snow on film. He had enough of the real thing. So they called it an early night. He went back home and fell asleep on his couch with his mutt, Diablo, snoring beside him, then repeated the same routine on his bed. He'd planned to get up early this morning, lift weights and run at least five miles around the lake. He didn't want anything to stand in the way of him going back to full duty.

That was before he got the seven a.m. call from Adele.

"Jimmy, I need your help. Something terrible has happened at La Casa."

Vega was barely conscious, but the cop in him ran through all the possible scenarios in his head. A fistfight at the community center. A fire. A roof collapse. (*Lord knows, the landlord was overdue fixing it.*) An immigration raid. Adele always referred to the immigrants at La Casa as her "clients," a holdover from her days as a criminal defense attorney. But everyone in and around Lake Holly knew that a large portion of the people she served were undocumented. Vega sometimes wondered why Adele ever mothballed her Harvard Law degree to found and run this struggling outreach center. Something was always going wrong.

“One of my volunteers is missing,” said Adele. “The police won’t tell me anything.”

Vega pictured the volunteers he normally saw at La Casa on weekdays when Adele was working—earnest, gray-haired men and women who sat patiently with circles of day laborers or young mothers and played English-language games or taught them useful phrases for their work. He couldn’t imagine any of those people venturing out on a Friday night in January, much less disappearing. The roads in and around Lake Holly were winding, narrow, and poorly lit. The ice just made things worse, especially for older people.

“You think they got into an accident?” asked Vega.

“No. Her car’s still here. In the parking lot. She never drove home. Jimmy, I’m not talking about one of my seniors. I’m talking about a seventeen-year-old girl. A student at Lake Holly High. Her family owns the Magnolia Inn.”

The 150-year-old mansion was a venerable landmark in Lake Holly. All the important people in the county ate there: Wall Street CEOs. U.S. presidents and senators. Broadway actors. Hollywood directors. The Archers, who had owned the place for generations, were like old-line royalty in Lake Holly.

“So this girl? She’s an Archer?” asked Vega.

“She’s John Archer’s daughter, Catherine.”

Vega got dressed and drove over to La Casa as quickly as he could. Not because he thought he could do anything. More for moral support. In all likelihood, the Lake Holly cops were doing all they could already to track Catherine down. And whether they were or they weren’t, there was no way they’d let a detective from the county police tell them how to do their jobs. Especially not some desk jockey who spent his days giving ink manicures to the steel-bracelet set.

Every cop in the county knew Vega’s story. And every one of them was glad it wasn’t his own.

The community center was housed in a former seafood wholesaler's building that still smelled like low tide on damp days. It sat on a dead-end street across from an auto salvage yard, a propane company, and a janitorial cleaning service. A dozen or so people were gathered behind a blue police sawhorse at the entrance to the street, their breath clouded white in the early-morning air. Everything felt hushed and expectant—as if the ground beneath them could shatter at any moment. Beyond, Vega saw three police cruisers, a couple of unmarked detectives' sedans, and the county crime-scene van.

Things were going from bad to worse if crime scene was here.

A uniformed cop Vega didn't recognize stood behind the sawhorse, stamping his feet to keep warm while he spoke to the onlookers. *Family members? Rubbernecks?* They were bundled in hooded jackets, scarves, and hats, but Vega could still see their eyes—that jumpy, hyperalert, almost feral quality that Vega recognized as fear. Catherine's parents were no doubt someplace warm, being cared for by loved ones. But these people—friends, family or neighbors—clearly had a stake in this girl's disappearance.

Vega nosed his truck up to the sawhorse and powered down his window. He flashed his gold detective's shield and ID at the officer. "Who's catching?" he asked. He spoke like he belonged here. Not that he belonged anywhere much these days.

"Detectives Jankowski and Sanchez," the cop answered. He frowned at Vega's ID. "Did Lake Holly call in the county on this?"

Vega gestured to his department's crime scene van, parked in front of La Casa. "Hey, not for nothing, the county's already here." Nothing like a little creative misdirection. Then, for good measure, he name-dropped. "Is Detective Greco working?"

"Everybody's working this one." The officer wiped his

runny nose. He looked miserable standing point. Vega opened his center console and pulled out a package of chemical hand warmers. He always kept a few in the car in winter. He held them out to the cop.

“Here. You need these more than I do.”

“Thanks.” The officer pulled back the sawhorse. “No sense both of us freezing out here.”

Vega waved to the man and drove through. He parked his pickup next to the propane company. Across the street, La Casa’s parking lot was roped off with yellow crime-scene tape. A single car sat in the lot. A silver Subaru Forester. A sign across the front doors read: CERRADO HASTA NUEVO AVISO—CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Vega frowned at the security cameras mounted on the corners of the former warehouse. One was pointed at the front doors. Another was pointed at the parking lot. Their footage must have told the Lake Holly cops something about what time Catherine left the building and whom she’d left with. The temperatures last night were in the midthirties—reasonably balmy for upstate New York in January. But not the sort of weather that people hang around in. The teenager couldn’t have gone far on foot. Which meant she was either nearby—or she’d been picked up by another vehicle. The license plate readers in the area would be able to give the Lake Holly Police a readout of all makes, models, and car plates in the area last night at that time.

And yet, they hadn’t found her.

Surely by now, Catherine’s family and the police had canvassed her friends, the other students who were tutoring English last night at La Casa, and the immigrants who were being tutored. That should have provided another layer of knowledge. The more subtle kind. Not just movement but motive.

And yet, they hadn’t found her.

Vega stepped out of his truck and walked across to La

Casa's lot, where the silver Subaru Forester was parked. It appeared to be a recent model. No obvious dents. A sticker on the bumper read: PROUD PARENT OF A LAKE HOLLY HIGH SCHOOL HONORS STUDENT. Catherine didn't put that on her car. Which meant the vehicle probably belonged to her parents. The car doors were open and two county crime-scene techs—a man and a woman—were combing the inside for clues. The woman crawled out as soon as she caught sight of Vega. She pulled down the hood of her white Tyvek coveralls and lifted her face mask. Jenn Fitzpatrick was the spitting image of her old man: round, freckled face, like a Cabbage Patch doll. Curly hair the color of spun maple syrup.

"You know, Jimmy, most people try to sneak *out* of a crime scene, not into one."

"I'm not sneaking in."

"*Riiight*. You just wanted to give the Lake Holly PD an early valentine."

"C'mon, Jenn. I'm just trying to get some answers. Is Adele inside?"

Jenn nodded. "With two local detectives. Who aren't going to be thrilled to see you. My father used to say that crossing jurisdictions is like dating somebody else's girl."

Vega grinned. "Knowing Captain Billy, I'd say the analogy was a bit coarser than that."

Jenn laughed. "Yes. It probably was."

"Have you found anything so far?"

"The car was pretty clean. Not even the usual candy bars and junk." She tilted her head toward the building. "Not for nothing, Jimmy, you have enough troubles with the department right now. You don't need to buy more."

"I'll keep a low profile, I promise. But can you let me know if you find anything?"

"I'll do my best."

"Thanks." He turned to walk inside.

"I almost forgot," said Jenn. "Break a leg tonight."

Vega stopped in his tracks. “Tonight?”

“Your gig? At the Oyster Club?” Jenn gestured to her white coveralls. “I’m bummed I have to work, so I’m going to miss it.”

“The . . . Oyster Club. Sure.” Vega had been so caught up in Adele’s dilemma, he’d completely forgotten that his band had a gig tonight. At a sleek new waterfront bar south of here in Port Carroll. Jenn’s boyfriend, Richie Solero, was the band’s drummer. *Armado*, they called themselves. Spanish for “armed.” All the band members were in law enforcement. Which meant half their gigs expected them to double as unpaid security and the other half worried they were undercover narcs. Being a cop never elicited a neutral response.

“You *are* going, aren’t you?” Jenn must have read the uncertainty in Vega’s eyes. “Christ, Jimmy, you can’t back out. You’re Armado’s lead vocalist. Their lead guitarist. It took Richie and Danny, like, six months to get the band booked there. You go AWOL, you’ll let everybody down.”

“I know, I just . . .” *I can’t leave Adele like this to go play guitar with a bunch of cops.* “Maybe Catherine will show up before then.”

“She’s been gone ten hours,” said Jenn. “I think you need a Plan B.”

La Casa was usually bustling on a Saturday morning. In the front room, there were typically English and computer classes for adults and tutoring for their school-age children. In the back, people shot pool, drank coffee, met in self-help groups, or just relaxed and chatted in the one place that welcomed them in their own tongue and never asked why they were here.

There was none of that today. The computers sat idle. The chalkboards were bare. The pool tables stood empty and silent. Vega could hear Adele’s voice coming from the tiny conference room down the hall. He started to head in



that direction when he caught sight of two men in off-the-rack sports coats and identical bad buzz cuts. The Lake Holly detectives, Jankowski and Sanchez. Both men were square in every direction: the face, the shoulders, the torso. The taller one was white with dark brown hair, silver at the tips like a hedgehog. All his features were scrunched up in the middle of his big square face: tiny pale eyes, a slash of lips, a nose that zigzagged unevenly between them. When Vega was a boy, he used to press Silly Putty to the newspaper, then stretch and compress the photos he peeled off. Jankowski's face looked like the compressed version.

The shorter one was Sanchez. Same square build, though with a broad nose and thick black eyebrows. The Silly Putty when you pulled it sideways. Both men wore hip holsters under their dark suit jackets. Jankowski must be a lefty, judging by which side his jacket bulged out. They gave Vega that cop stare as he approached. Like junkyard dogs just itching to take a bite out of him. Vega pulled out his badge and ID and thrust it in front of him like it was some force field that could shield him from their wrath.

"We didn't send county an invite," growled Jankowski. "And if we did, it wouldn't be you."

Everywhere Vega went, his reputation preceded him. He wondered if he'd ever live down that incident last December. He spread his palms in a gesture of surrender.

"C'mon, guys. I'm just looking for a little information. Cop-to-cop." Vega decided to hold off mentioning Adele for as long as possible. As the head of a community outreach center that serviced both legal and undocumented immigrants, she was not a favorite of the local police.

Jankowski braced an arm against one of the cinderblock walls. He looked as if he could knock down the whole wall if he had a mind to. All of Vega's running and weight lifting would never take him up to the size and build of a monster like Jankowski. Sanchez, the compact model of the same

vintage, closed in on Vega from the other direction. They were like bookends—physically and mentally.

“What’s the matter?” asked Sanchez. “You don’t trust we can do the job?”

“You kidding me?” asked Vega. “The Lake Holly PD is first class.” An ego stroke. No county cop thought any of the townie patrols could catch a cold without them. “I worked a couple of cases with one of your guys. Good friend of mine, Louie Greco?”

“*Greco* invited you here?” asked Jankowski.

“Not . . . exactly.” Vega regretted pulling his friend into the mix. He didn’t want to create the impression that Greco was meddling. “Adele Figueroa gave me a call. She’s my, uh . . .” Vega hated the word as much as Adele did. It made them sound like two teenagers. “. . . girlfriend.”

Vega directed his words to Sanchez. A fellow Latino. A Mexican American, according to Adele, though she had no particular love for him. She felt that most cops were the same once they put on the uniform. Maybe she was right. Sanchez didn’t appear moved by Vega’s dilemma.

“The best way you can help right now,” Sanchez told Vega, “is to get Adele to assemble better records on the clients who pass through her doors.”

“This place has more fake IDs than a college bar,” Jankowski grunted.

“She has intake sheets,” said Vega. “I know she asks every client who comes into La Casa to fill one out.”

“We looked at those sheets already,” said Jankowski. “I could train my dog on them, that’s how worthless they are. There were twenty-eight men being tutored at La Casa last night. Do you know how many checked out cleanly through our criminal and immigration databases? *Five*. Twenty-eight people, and only five were who they said they were.”

Vega wasn’t surprised. He’d heard the same from cops

down in Port Carroll and Warburton and other towns in the county with large immigrant populations.

“How about their addresses?” asked Vega. “Were they also bogus?”

“We found five more guys at the addresses they listed, but they couldn’t provide us with any verification of their legal names,” said Sanchez. “The remaining eighteen are ghosts. All we’ve got to go on are the head shots in Adele’s computer and word of mouth on the street.”

Vega cursed under his breath. He understood the detectives’ frustration. It was a never-ending struggle to get a full legal name from an undocumented immigrant. There was a host of reasons why. Some were relatively benign. The person lived under a fake ID or a relative’s ID to secure work or open a bank account. Others were not—like hiding a criminal conviction or a prior deportation. Not that Adele could have done anything about it. Even Vega, as a police officer, had to have probable cause to verify someone’s ID.

“Maybe you can track down their identities through family connections,” Vega suggested. “A lot of these people are probably local, even if their names and addresses don’t check out.”

“Yeah, but we’re racing against time here,” said Jankowski. “None of Catherine’s family or friends have seen her since ten last night. We haven’t been able to locate a signal from her cell phone. And now, on top of everything, we don’t even know who these people are that she was tutoring.” Jankowski’s features scrunched up so tight, he looked like the before shot on an ex-lax ad. “I mean, no offense to the Hispanic community. But Mike Carp is right. This whole illegal thing has gotten way out of hand.”

*Mike Carp.* The billionaire developer who won election to county executive in November by promising to reduce the number of undocumented immigrants in the region. Adele openly campaigned against him—as did everyone in

the Latino community. Vega felt queasy thinking about how Carp might use this girl's disappearance to drum up supporters. He had plenty already. There were rumors he was just keeping the county exec seat warm as a dress rehearsal until his run for governor in two years.

"You seem a little sure that one of La Casa's clients is behind this," said Vega. "You got some evidence besides the fact that this was the last place Catherine was seen?"

"Not yet," said Jankowski. "Still, a beautiful girl like that disappears from a place like this without a trace, what would *you* think?"

"I haven't seen a picture of her," said Vega. "Do you have one?"

Sanchez pulled out his cell phone and scrolled to a picture on the screen. He handed his phone to Vega. "This is her last yearbook photo."

Vega stared at the screen. Catherine Archer was the girl that teenage boys everywhere conjure up in their wet dreams and first flushes of hormonal glory. It wasn't just the way her straight blond hair spilled like water down her back. Or the pale, bleached-denim hue of her eyes. Or the slight slouch to her narrow shoulders that suggested more child than woman about her. It was her smile. A small press of the lips that felt shy and hesitant yet welcoming. Vega could recall himself as a teenager—pimpley and lacking confidence. A dark-skinned Puerto Rican kid in a high school full of sharp-edged Nordic beauties who treated him, like the janitor, or at best, like an exotic pet. It was the smile he would have fixated on and lusted over. The forgiveness in it for the anxieties of a clueless boy who didn't feel he could ever fit in.

Vega handed Sanchez's phone back to him. "And her friends?" Vega asked the two detectives. "Are they the jocks? The school druggies? The popular crowd?"

"All. None," said Jankowski.

"Huh?" Vega wasn't following.

“Everybody liked her,” he explained. “But we can’t find a best friend or close circle of friends.”

“Really?” That surprised Vega. From his experience with his own daughter, girls dropped boyfriends like banana peels. But they always had at least one or two besties on their speed dial.

“She was an honors student. A varsity tennis player. A volunteer English tutor.” Sanchez ticked off her accomplishments on his stubby fingers like he was putting together a college admissions packet for her. “But she didn’t socialize after school with any of the kids we spoke to, not even the other students who volunteered at La Casa.”

“She was shy? Socially awkward?”

“On the contrary,” said Jankowski. “Everyone describes her as very friendly. But she kept to herself, mostly helping out at her parents’ restaurant and hanging with her family.”

“No boyfriend?”

“None that anybody was aware of.”

“So you’re back to the twenty-eight men in this center last night,” said Vega.

“Yep.”

It was after eight a.m. Catherine Archer had been missing ten hours. They all knew that if someone was likely to be found alive, it usually happened in the first twenty-four hours. The golden twenty-four. Every second counted.

One of the uniforms appeared at Jankowski’s elbow to speak to him. Jankowski turned to Vega. “Tell Adele nobody’s on a witch hunt, much as she’d like to believe otherwise. But we’ve got a girl to find. La Casa is ground zero—and we’re running out of time.”