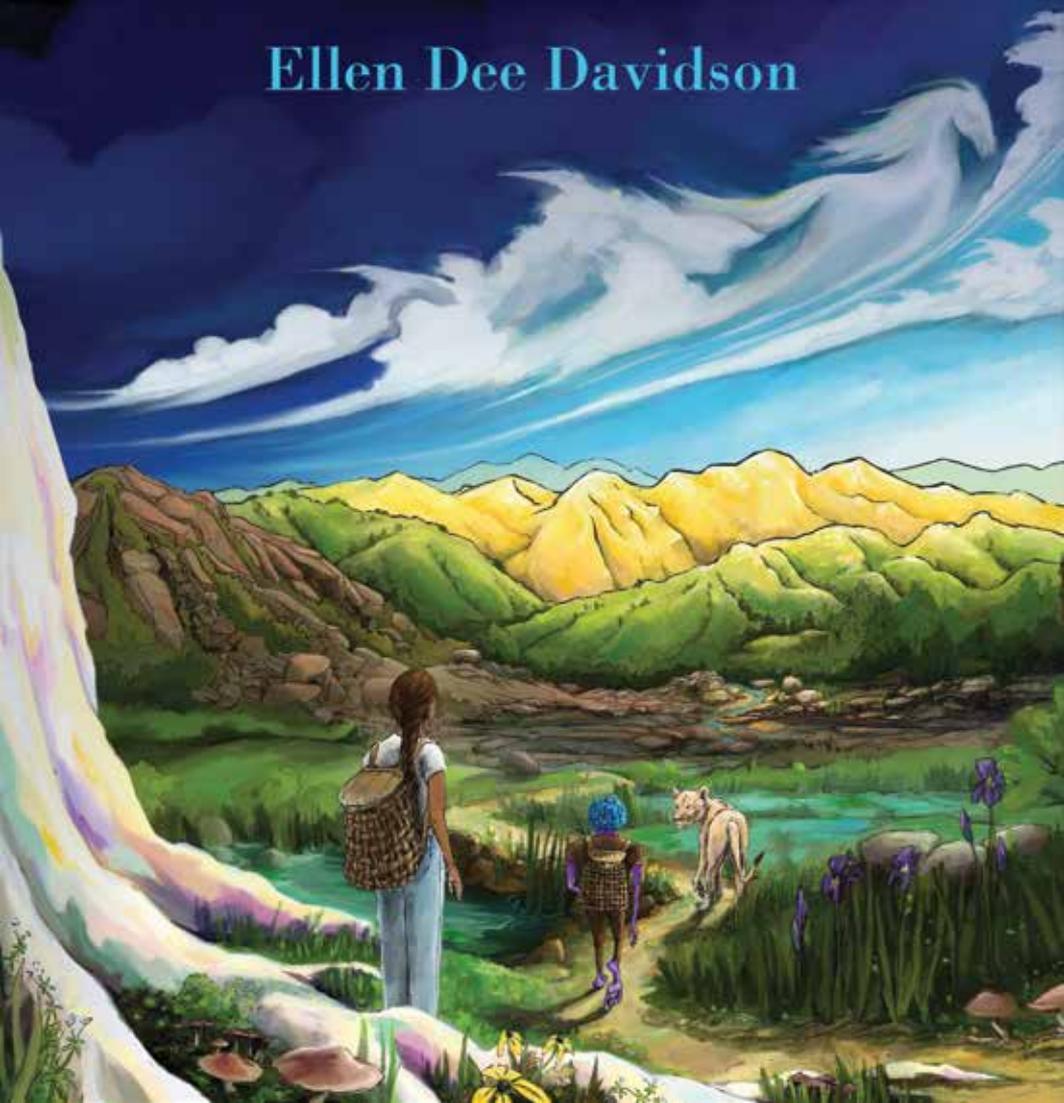


Wind

Ellen Dee Davidson



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For Stevie Alanna

WIND

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CHAPTER ONE

Shaken Up



Katie tugged on her brown braid as she stared out the window, noticing the green leaves on the oak tree swaying in the breeze. She let her mind wander as Mr. Pinski's voice washed over her, talking about the latest chapter in their life science book. She couldn't concentrate. Not with everything going on at home.

"Will you listen to me?"

Startled, Katie looked around. But it wasn't Mr. Pinski. He was up at the front of the class, looking crisp and professional in his blue button-down shirt as he spoke about the importance of biodiversity and of earthworms to the soil. Most of her classmates were listening, or at least pretending to listen. Julian doodled and Maggie passed a note to Leila, probably about Maggie's coming birthday party. No one was talking. Mr. Pinski wouldn't put up with that when he was giving a lecture. She stared back out the window.

"Will you listen to me?" the rough creaky voice asked again and a few branches on the oak tree shook, almost as if the tree were waving an arm at her.

'Who wants me to listen?' Katie thought, confused. 'Who's talking?'

“Me! Outside.” A twig on the oak rubbed slowly against the window and swallows darted up into the air.

Katie stared at the tree. “You can talk? And I hear you in my head?”

“If you listen,” answered the odd voice. It sounded almost like two branches rubbing together, shush-squeak-creak-shush, but the words in her mind were clear. “I’ve been having a hard time finding anyone who will.” Oak branches waved in a nonexistent wind, making a sort of distressed moaning sound. “No one seems to notice me and I need help!” Leaves rustled together with a crackle, crunch, swish, sniff-sniff, like someone crying. Katie couldn’t help feeling sad for the tree; the oak seemed so desperate.

‘I guess I’m hearing you now,’ Katie thought slowly, wondering if it was true, wondering if hearing a tree in her mind was even possible, and then remembering how sometimes in the past she’d almost felt like the plants in Dad’s garden talked to her, asking her for more water, or telling her how delicious the sunlight felt on their leaves. Maybe it was possible. ‘How can I help you?’

“My branches,” sighed the oak. “Please, no more pruning. I’m losing too much vital force. Promise to...tell...them to stop cut...” The tree’s leaves dangled limply, looking sad and weary.

‘I will,’ Katie thought back.

“Ahem!” Mr. Pinski cleared his throat. He was standing right in front of her desk. “Are you with us today Katie?”

Katie took in a breath. “Yes. But I have to tell you,” she blurted, “The oak outside the window doesn’t want any more of her branches trimmed.”

Mr. Pinski’s blue eyes widened. “Sounds like you were having quite a daydream!”

“No! It wasn’t a daydream. I heard her clearly.” Katie continued, determined to share the oak’s message. “She says it’s using too much of her vital force and she...”

Giggles burst out of Maggie. Then Tessa started laughing too, and soon the whole class was cracking up. They laughed hard for a few seconds and then Mr. Pinski held up his hand in the signal for quiet and the class settled back down, although Katie could still hear a few suppressed snorts and an escaped giggle. Out of the corner of her eye, Katie saw Maggie make the cuckoo sign, circling her ear with one finger, and whisper to Leila, “I’m not inviting her.” She paused for a second, and then added in a clear carrying whisper, “Or Amy. Must be as crazy as Katie to hang out with her.”

Katie’s cheeks warmed with embarrassment, but she held her head up and kept her promise to the tree, “She really doesn’t want any more branches cut.” Katie gave Mr. Pinski a pleading look. “Will you tell the office or the grounds keeper, or whoever you’re supposed to tell?”

Mr. Pinski replied, “You have one of the best imaginations in the 6th grade, Katie. Perhaps you can put it to use in creative writing? Right now, we’ve got to get back to the life cycle of earthworms. If you did your homework, you should be able to tell me if an earthworm begins with a live birth or an egg?”

He waited expectantly and Katie answered, “An egg.” She *had* done her homework. “When they are fertilized the eggs stay in a cocoon until the baby worms hatch and burrow down into the earth.”

Mr. Pinski smiled. “Good!” And then he turned back to the whiteboard and wrote, “What do earthworms eat?”

Katie tried to pay attention, but she just could not keep her mind on what Mr. Pinski was saying. She’d completely

failed the oak tree. 'I'm sorry,' she thought towards the tree, but this time there was no reply. The tree's branches drooped

Finally the bell rang and students burst out the door into the late August sunshine. Katie picked up her small blue backpack and joined Amy at the classroom door. Most of the kids took the bus or had their parents pick them up, but she and Amy loved to walk home together. It was only a mile and went past the red brick library, a mini-mall with a grocery store, and a block of houses. Some of the homes were a bit run down with peeling paint. Others were tidy. One even had a white picket fence. The golden retriever behind it barked at them and Amy called, "It's okay, Toby. It's just us." Then they turned onto their own street. More rural here, the ranch style homes were separated by a few acres. They passed several oaks and Katie felt a twinge. "I don't think Mr. Pinski believed me."

"Why did you do that?" asked Amy, running her fingers through her slightly frizzy red hair.

Katie kicked a pebble, feeling bad that now the oak tree's message wouldn't be delivered. "I had to. The oak..." She stopped in front of her driveway.

Amy pursed her lips together for a moment before saying, "The other kids think you're nuts, and they are starting to think I'm nuts too for hanging out with you. Did you hear Maggie whisper to Leila?"

Katie nodded unhappily. "I'm sorry, Amy. I wanted to go to that party too." Maggie always had the best birthday parties. "Do you want to come in? Mom made cookies."

"Sure," said Amy, following her up the wooden porch steps and into the green ranch style house.

Katie stopped in the kitchen long enough to grab two glasses of milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies before

walking down the hall to her bedroom. The two of them dumped their packs on the wooden desk and sat on the white shag rug. Amy stuffed half a cookie into her mouth.

Sasha meowed. Katie stared at her ginger colored cat. Sasha paced back and forth and then jumped onto the window sill. "Amy, Sasha's trying to tell me something."

Amy swallowed the cookie, took a sip of milk, and then gave Katie a disbelieving look. "You're talking to the cat now, too?"

Katie shrugged. "Sort of."

Amy glanced at the cat on the windowsill before shaking her head. "Your cat looks fine to me."

Sasha meowed again and the word "Earth!" rang crystal clear in Katie's head.

"She says something's wrong," insisted Katie, "with the earth."

Amy exhaled. "Look, Katie, I don't mind if you want to pretend you can talk to trees and cats when we're alone, but you really embarrassed me at school."

Katie looked a little hopelessly into Amy's green eyes. If she couldn't even get Amy to believe her, then it was a sure thing no one else would. "I wasn't pretending then, and I'm not pretending now."

Sasha arched her back and hissed. "The cat really is warning us," Katie said, "I just don't understand about what."

Amy glanced briefly at Sasha, shaking her red hair out of her eyes. "Maybe she's upset because your parents have been fighting?"

Katie nodded. "Maybe. It's getting worse," said Katie, flashing back to the fight. *'You're full of impossible dreams,' Mom had said, glaring at Dad. 'You just want to grow your forest garden to save the world. But let me tell you,' she paused for breath before continuing in that tone she got sometimes*

when she just couldn't take it all anymore, 'My salary as a music teacher is not enough to support the three of us.'

Amy passed Katie the cookie plate. "Anybody home?"

Katie sighed heavily. "I was just remembering the big fight we had. Mom was so mad she yelled at me," Katie said and then imitated her Mom's voice, "Katie Consuela Rosa Noriega, you are a rude ungrateful girl." Katie shook her head. "You know she's mad when she uses all my names like that."

"At least you have lots of pretty names," Amy said, reaching out and squeezing Katie's brown hand with her freckled white fingers. "I wish I had a flower name. I'm just Amy Scott."

"Dad told me a bunch of names is a part of our Mexican heritage. Rosa is for his Irish half, although he says in Ireland it'd be Rose." Katie gave a half-smile. "Mom named me Katie after her grandmother, but Dad always calls me Rosa. Says I'm his most precious rose, but that was before." Katie felt her face crumple. She probably wasn't his precious rose anymore.

"I'm sorry about the fight," Amy said.

"It was bad, Amy," Katie confessed. "Even I got into this one. By the end, all three of us were screaming at each other."

Amy gave her a sympathetic look and waited for Katie to say more.

Katie blinked back a tear and told Amy the part she didn't want to say. "They're talking divorce."

The room was silent for a long heartbeat. Finally, Amy said, "It's not so bad—once you get used to two houses. At first, I was always leaving my homework in the wrong house."

Katie knew her friend was trying to comfort her, but she didn't want her parents to get divorced. Why couldn't they all be happy together? Why couldn't Dad get a regular

job? Then, maybe, they could keep the house. Three acres was big enough for her to have a horse if she could ever convince her parents.

"Hurry!" Sasha urged mentally, interrupting Katie's thoughts.

Katie frowned at her cat. Why was Sasha so upset?

Amy sighed. "I wish I didn't have to go, but it's almost four and you know how my mom gets when I'm late."

Katie nodded in understanding.

"I'll call you tonight, okay?" asked Amy, gathering her school pack.

"Sounds good," said Katie, a bit distracted by Sasha.

"Ok. Bye," said Amy.

"Adios," replied Katie, going to the window and picking Sasha up. The cat's fur stood up straight, like porcupine quills. "What's wrong, Sash?"



NOTHING STIRRED OUTSIDE. IT WAS TOO QUIET. THE birds in the rhododendron bush stopped singing. Katie listened to the shsh shsh of tree leaves rubbing together, then shut the window firmly. "Meeew!"

Katie held the cat close. "Do you want to go outside?"

Sasha unsheathed her claws into Katie's arms.

"Ouch!" Katie dropped the cat.

"Outside!" the cat shouted in her mind. "Now!"

The glass in the window rattled and the floor rolled beneath Katie, like a ship. As books crashed off shelves, Katie staggered to her bedroom doorway, fighting to stay on her feet.

The paper mache globe swung crazily on its string. The fairy on her shelf cracked as it hit the desk, throwing shards of pink glass. One grazed Katie's arm and blood oozed out of the cut.

Katie's heart thrummed in her ears. An alarm clock tumbled off the bedside table. Suddenly the rumbling stopped. *Was the earthquake over? Was it safe for her to leave the doorway?* Dimly, Katie recalled something about aftershocks and moving outside slowly. She squeezed her fingers into sweating palms, longing to get out of the house, to find the neighbors, to get help.

Sasha streaked by, a blur of ginger. Katie couldn't help herself. She raced after Sasha, desperate to get out of the house. Her tennis shoes slapped the wood floor of the hall. A hole gaped in the center of the floor. She swerved just in time.

Katie steadied herself against the wall, inhaling the damp cold air that rose from the basement. *Mom, come home. COME HOME.* She pictured her mom with stray strands of curly brown hair tangled in her glasses. If only she could will her mom here. Creeping around the edge of the fissure, Katie was just in time to see Sasha shoot the rest of the way down the hall and out the cat door.

Without warning, the earth heaved and Katie fell straight into the crack.

CHAPTER TWO

The Orb



Katie landed with a thud, her hand slamming against something hard. Pain beat a steady rhythm against her skull. Thoughts floated slowly through her head. *What happened?*

She opened her eyes wide. Jagged shapes slowly came into focus, shadows against the black. There was something familiar about those shapes. Katie willed her scattered thoughts to come together, to make sense. *Of course! Dad's tools.* She must have fallen into the basement. Damp seeped into her pants. Her hand rubbed against slime. The floor was wet. *Must be from the leaking water heater.* She'd have to tell Dad it was leaking again.

Sweat beaded Katie's brow as she forced her stiff legs to move. She released her breath. *Good. Nothing broken.* She'd need to be in one piece to pull herself back out of the crack.

No point looking for the door. It was always padlocked from the outside. Child-proofed, Mom said. Katie strained her eyes, searching for the crack. She shook so hard her teeth rattled. If an aftershock closed the crack... Katie stopped herself from imagining more, although she couldn't stop her racing heart. She had to get out, get help.

"Mom!" she shrieked. Then she realized there was no way Mom could have made it back from the lawyer this fast.