

# IN THE COMPANY OF WOLVES



ANTONIO  
FARIAS

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## Chapter 1

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### LIGHT THE WAY HOME

I went to live with my grandmother the summer my father was killed in the war. At the time, we lived in New York City, in a basement apartment in the Lower East Side, where my dad was the super. He was gone now, and the owner wanted us out. He said Mamá couldn't keep up with the kind of work the ratty building needed. My older brother, Kiko, said he could do it, and he was pretty good at it. Then, the truant officer came around and told Mamá off. Kiko almost took a swing at him, told him no one but his father had the right to yell at his mother, and since Papi was dead, he would have to answer to Kiko. Mamá had to push Kiko down onto the sofa, whose plastic covers were so worn they no longer squeaked. I remember sitting at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal just before the truant officer showed up. I watched them through the colored-bead curtain dangling from the doorway, yelling at each other. The truant officer threatened to lock Kiko up to see if juvie didn't clean up his attitude. Mamá yelled at Kiko to shut up and then turned to the truant officer to yell at him.

She screamed, "You already took my husband, and it'll be over her my dead body that you take my son away."

I sat there, watching it all, like it was a television show. I wanted to go to my room but was afraid to get out of my chair, afraid they would take me, too, take me to heaven, where they had taken Papi.

The truant officer was about to reach over and grab Kiko, when he glanced over and saw me in the kitchen, sitting there, with a spoon in my mouth. He just froze, like he was looking at a ghost. Everyone went quiet, and then Mamá ran into the kitchen with fear in her eyes. She rushed over and pulled me in tight, so tight I could smell the Ajax on her from her early morning obsessive cleaning of the bathroom. Then, Kiko ran into the kitchen and stood between us and the truant officer, who just held back in the living room. He looked down at his shoes, his large hand rubbing his forehead, his cap in the other, and said nothing. We all stood there for what seemed like forever, the beaded curtain returning to a perfect stillness.

I whispered, real low, like I had been doing for months, “When is Papi coming home?”

That was all it took. I felt my mother’s body falling, dragging me down to the green linoleum floor. She burst into tears so hard and loud, like I hadn’t seen her cry in a long while. I tried to hug her tight, like Papi always did, my arms just able to take her thin frame in. I looked up and could see fear in Kiko’s eyes as he turned his attention back and forth from us to the truant officer.

She held me tighter still, while her crying turned into something like a wolf’s howl. I grew afraid that if she didn’t close her mouth, all her insides would come out. Kiko was now low on the floor with us, trying to put his arms around us. Streams of tears just kept coming out of his eyes, but his face remained hard as a rock. Papi used to call him *cabezón*, rockhead, on account that he didn’t listen sometimes.

The truant officer stood at the kitchen doorway. The colored beads seemed to magically bar him from entering.

He quietly repeated, "Ma'am, you have to send Kiko to school. I'm not trying to be mean. It's just my job is to make sure your son gets back in school... and that he isn't working somewhere instead. It's the law." Then he seemed to focus on the picture on the refrigerator of Papi in his faded Army jungle fatigues. "I've been there, too... Vietnam. I was lucky to have made it back to my kids. And I'm sorry for all the commotion, but your son needs to go back to school." Then looking directly at Kiko, he added, "I expect to see you there tomorrow... without fail."

Mamá stopped crying and grew silent. She started rocking back and forth, holding onto me tightly with one arm and Kiko with the other. She stared at the truant officer and said, "You don't know how lucky you are, mister." But he was already turning to leave. He didn't stop to listen to my mother and just walked out the door, repeating, "Tomorrow, in school."

Mamá made sure that Kiko went to high school the next day. Before he left in the morning, she told him, "Now that your father's gone, you're going to have to grow up fast and be a man."

"But, Ma... I am a man and was just trying to take care of you two."

"You need to graduate and make something of yourself, *m'ijo*. You don't know nothing about being a man.... A man is someone who doesn't leave, makes sure the family is safe. And our family is not safe, if these Gringos keep coming around looking to take you away," she said and added, "You're not a man, but you will become one very soon, *m'ijo*."

The following week, the landlord came around again. He was a skinny guy with long curly locks. He always wore a black suit and white shirt and used to love coming by to talk

with Papi on the weekends. Mamá would tell Papi that the only reason the owner respected him was because he was good at keeping the drug dealers and the hippies out of the building. Papi ran the building with an iron fist, and fist is what he had given to more than one juiced-up junkie who tried to use the stairwells as a bathroom or shooting gallery. That day, the landlord sat down at the kitchen table with us, while Mamá shucked peas and I was busy half-helping her by popping them in my mouth.

“I’m sorry, María, but I need the apartment. It isn’t going to work out, and I already hired a new super. You and the boys need to be gone by the end of the month.”

Mamá kept silent, looking down at her colander, shucking feverishly. “All the times you came by here,” she said, “sat in that same chair and ate his food, drank his wine... He kept this place clean, while every lousy building in this neighborhood has become a rat’s nest. And now that he’s gone, this is your gift to us, two weeks to clear out?!!”

“María, please,” he said.

My mother got up and threw the colander against the far wall. Peas rained down on us. The landlord got up and hurried for the door, repeating his apologies and saying, “Two weeks, María.”

That night, I heard my mother praying in her room. I got up, but Kiko pulled me back to bed. I tried to fight him off, but he just held me gently in bed, saying I was still a kid and didn’t understand.

“I’m the man of the house now that Papi’s in heaven, and you have to mind me.”

“What’s Papi doing in heaven?”

Instead of answering me, Kiko whacked me with my pillow and told me to stop asking stupid questions and go to sleep.



We lay there in the dark, listening to Mamá's rhythmic call to the saints for their help. She was alone and may as well have been a million miles away. My hands curled up into tight fists.

"He's looking down at us," I heard Kiko's voice say in the dark. "He's up there watching over us, making sure we behave, making sure things are all right."

I lay there, my beat-up baseball mitt next to me. I looked up at the ceiling, trying hard to see Papi. "Can he see us when it's cloudy?"

"Of course," Kiko said. "In heaven they can see everything and listen to everything, and they can even tell what you're thinking."

"Like Santa?" I said and immediately regretted it.

He hit me with the pillow and said, "Don't be so stupid, Jaime."

"I'm not stupid," I said. "Mrs. Shea said I had the best math score in the whole sixth grade."

I looked up at the ceiling again and this time saw Papi. I saw him on top of a tall white building, by himself, looking down at us with really big binoculars. I could see his hand waving, his smile and the scratchy beard he sometimes let grow on the weekends. I put the pillow over my mouth so Kiko wouldn't hear me and whispered to him, told him that we were moving soon but that it was okay because I would tell him where we were going so that he didn't have to look so hard to find us. He just sat there on the ledge and smiled, waved at me and blew me a kiss. I fell asleep, and he followed me into my dreams, but this time closer, close enough to smell the coffee on his breath as he kissed me goodnight.

The next morning, we packed the last of our things, hurriedly throwing them into giant black trash bags. Some of Mamá's friends came by with vans to move the furniture and

big boxes. They all brought me candy, which they told me in a whisper to hide in a good spot, which I did, only to forget later that day where I had left them. The apartment sat empty of everything that belonged to us, except for two suitcases by the front door.

The morning we left New York was icy, even though the sun was already out, burning up the little snow that remained from the last snowstorm. Black snow served no purpose, not even good for a snowball, seeing how I'd get grime on my hands and clothes, which would eventually lead to a scolding.

Outside, people, miserable in the cold and wind, droned on toward the scattered subway entrances. Papi had told Mamá he would never return to that kind of life, that a dog got more respect, better food even, than these people who spent their lives in factories and offices to make the rich get richer while the workers got less than crumbs in return. That's why he joined the Army and ended up going to war. He said it was for us and that he would come back with money and connections. He'd have enough money to open up a little hardware store. It would be a neighborhood shop where people would come in and buy not just supplies but get expert advice from him on how to do the job right or even contract him to do it for them. I remember the ribbons and medals, shiny and made of gold, across his chest. I could see my reflection in his shoes, pretending it was another little kid like me. To this day, I cannot look at a pair of shiny shoes and not wonder at all the possibilities that closed for us that summer.

Kiko carried one suitcase, Mamá the other as we made our way to the Port Authority. I knew we were going to live with our grandmother. I had never met her but I had seen pictures of her, the ones she sent along with a Christmas card. She called every now and then. They were short conversations,

and I never got to say more than hi and bye before my mother pulled the phone away.

When we got to the giant silver Greyhound bus, Mamá started to sigh deeply. Her eyes were swollen. When I looked at Kiko, he just turned away, pretending to be interested in the bus. The bus driver threw our suitcases in the storage bin below, took our tickets and said it was time to board. That was when Mamá heaved short quick breaths, like it hurt her to breathe, and hugged Kiko really tight. She reminded him to behave himself at Consuelo's house and mind her as if she were his mother until she returned in a few days. I didn't know what was going on. For a moment, a deep fear came over me that I couldn't express. Kiko wiped tears from his eyes and pretended to put on a smile as he gave me a bear hug that lifted me off the floor.

"You take care of yourself, *hermanito*," he said.

He had never called me that before, and the feeling inside of me grew heavier as I tried to say something but felt my tongue was stuck.

"*Vámonos*, Jaime," Mamá said.

We climbed up two steps to get on the bus and then walk down the aisle. I sat down by the window and waved at Kiko, who only stood there a moment before he was gone. As the bus pulled out, I turned to find Mamá leaning back deeply into her seat, her eyes closed and breathing long and hard.

"Mamá," my voice finally returned. "Why isn't Kiko coming with us?"

She didn't respond, just sat there motionless, except for the rise and fall of her chest. A splotch of freckles covered her face. They got darker when she was mad. Right now, they were barely visible. As the bus made its way down the garage ramp, her earrings, large hoops that looked big enough to swing on, swayed.