

The Wind in His Heart  
Chapter Two: Steve Cole

I'm camped on a ridge overlooking Zahra Road, the highway that follows the foothills of the Hierro Maderas Mountains, when I hear the car. It's been a perfect night. Crisp, cool air, with a moon close enough to full that it casts long shadows on the desert floor below. It's the kind of night where you can imagine you're the only person in the world. It's just you and the desert. Sure, there are coyotes talking from time to time off in the distance. An owl hooting from the top of a saguaro this past hour or so. Mice scurrying about in the brush closer to hand. But no people. No hikers. Nobody joyriding on their ATVs. Not even any Kikimi whose land this is.

Until the car.

The stars tell me it's not yet midnight. I step over to where the ground drops off and watch the headlights as they come down the otherwise deserted two-lane blacktop below.

A few hundred yards past my camp, the car pulls over. The passenger door opens and a figure stumbles out onto the packed dirt on the side of the road. I make it to be a woman or a girl, with that head of hair, though I've known my share of long-haired guys. But she doesn't move like a guy.

Once she gets her balance, she lunges back toward the car but the door slams shut. The driver stomps on the gas, spitting gravel. The figure runs a little ways after the car, only stopping when she sees she doesn't have a hope in hell of catching up. She stands there for a long moment, shoulders drooping, arms hanging at her sides in defeat. Then she sinks to the ground and sits there hugging her knees.

The coyotes howl again, closer than the last time I heard them. I'm not worried, but the woman below jerks her head.

Coyote attacks are rare. She doesn't know that. Or maybe she's smart to be nervous because, bottom line, you can't trust anything you meet out here in the desert. Not the thorns, the heat, the mountains, the animals, the people. Maybe especially not the people.

Possum Jones, the old desert rat who took me under his wing way back in the eighties, told me his number one rule was, don't get involved. You see somebody, best

walk in the other direction.

“Most times,” he said in that drawl of his, “you’ll get more sympathy from a hungry mountain lion.”

Of course, this was while he was setting my broken leg after he found me at the bottom of a canyon, so I took what he had to say with a grain of salt. Until that moment, we’d never met. But the fact of the matter is, up in the mountains, out in the desert, most times he’s right.

That girl down there, she could be in trouble. Or could be she had a little spat with her boyfriend and he’s already on his way back. He catches me with his girl, he could pull out a 12-gauge and teach me the difference between buckshot and gut shot. Let me give you a hint. The first causes the pain. The second is the pain.

“Goddamn,” I mutter as I turn back to my camp.

I pack up my gear and throw dirt on the fire, then make my way down to the highway. It’s a roundabout route, so it takes me a good fifteen minutes before I’m standing on the blacktop. I’m a quarter of a mile south of the woman. I don’t know which I’m hoping for more—that she’ll be there, or she’ll be gone—but when the highway takes me around the headland, I see the small figure still huddled on the side of the road.

I start to whistle an old cowboy tune as I get closer, to give her some warning. The first few bars of “Streets of Laredo” work just fine. Her head lifts like it did when the coyotes called, but she doesn’t do anything more than look over her shoulder in my direction.

I sigh. She’s just a kid—I doubt she’s even sixteen—and too damn trusting. Meeting a stranger out here, she should have been smart and taken to the scrub till she could figure out what’s up. I’m at least three times her age and twice her size. But all she does is sit there, still hugging her knees, watching me come.

I stop ten feet away, lower my pack to the dirt and hunch down to reduce the appearance of my size, resting my weight on my ankles.

She’s wearing jeans and a hoodie, sneakers with no socks. She looks cold, and I don’t blame her. Once the sun goes down in the mountains, the temperature drops with it.

I'm wearing a sweater under my jean jacket and I can still feel the chill in the air.

"Hey," I say.

She just looks at me.

I dig a bottle of water from my pack and offer it to her. "You thirsty?"

"Fuck off."

Nice.

"Your mama kiss that mouth of yours?" I ask.

"The only part of her that ever touched my mouth is the back of her hand."

Okay.

"Was that her who pushed you out of the car?"

"What are you—stalking me?"

"I was camped up there." I jerk a thumb up to the top of the ridge. "It's more like you brought your drama into my living room."

"You live out here?"

"Most of the time."

She scoots around so that she's no longer looking at me over her shoulder.

"What do you do?" she asks.

"Commune with nature?"

"I bet you run drugs. You got any weed in your bag? Maybe some uppers?"

I sigh, but I don't answer. "Who pushed you out of the car?"

"Why do you care?"

I want to be charitable. I really do. But I've never had the patience for this kind of crap.

"Not so much, I guess," I say and stand up. "Not enough to have to work at it, that's for damn sure. I'll leave you the water—you'll need it when the sun comes up. You have yourself a good day."

"Hey!" she calls when I start to walk away. "You can't just leave me here."

"Watch me," I reply without turning.

"It was my dad—okay? That's who dumped me here."

This time I stop and turn to look back at her. She's standing up, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of her hoodie, a challenging look in her eyes.

I have no idea how to respond.

"Jesus," I finally say. "Why would he do that?"

"To make room for a new foster kid."

"So he's your foster father."

She shakes her head. "But he gets money for each foster kid they take in. He's up to three now, but if he gets rid of me, there's room for one more."

This is why I live in the mountains and desert. They insulate you from the crap people do to each other.

"Seems to me you've got three choices," I tell her. I count them off on my fingers. "You can wait here. Come morning, you might be able to hitch a ride to wherever you need to go.

"Or you can come back to my camp and wait while I go find somebody that can help you.

"Or you can take the hike with me."

"Why don't you just call somebody?" she asks.

"Don't have a phone."

She gives me a look. "Everybody's got a phone."

"Okay. So where's yours?"

"I use Reggie's, and seeing how things played out today, I guess I won't be borrowing it again."

"And he's...?"

"My loser dad."

Everywhere this conversation goes, it takes me to a story I don't want to hear.

"Three choices," I tell her. "Which is it going to be?"

"Can we go to your camp and take the hike in the morning? I don't want to go walking into a cactus."

There's still hours before the moon sets, but I guess she's a city kid and doesn't see

the way I can out here. Hell, I can make my way through this land in the dark of the moon.

“Sure. We can do that.”

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Twenty minutes later we're back on the bluff from which I first spotted her. I get the fire started again and she sits up close to it, my spare blanket wrapped around her shoulders while she stares into the flames. I boil some water and make tea.

“Here,” I tell her as I hand her a tin mug. “Sorry, I don't have sugar or milk.”

“Sokay.”

“You hungry?”

She shakes her head.

I settle across the fire from her. “I'm Steve. What's your name?”

“Sadie.”

“Huh.”

She looks up, that challenge back in her eyes. “I know it's a loser name. I didn't pick it.”

“It's not that. My grandmother's name was Sadie.”

I guess she sees something in my face because she asks, “What happened to her?”

“She got the death penalty for killing her husband. This was back in Texas, where the family's from. She might have gotten off, or only had to serve some time, but instead of shooting him when he was hitting her, she waited until he was drunk and asleep, and then shot him in the face.”

She doesn't say anything for a long moment, and I wonder what the hell made me tell her that. I walked the desert with Possum Jones for twenty years and it never came up once.

Her head lifts and she looks at me from across the fire. The firelight makes the glint in her eyes look fierce. “I can relate to that,” she says.

“I like to believe that we can be better than that, myself,” I tell her, “but honestly? Knowing what a piece of work my grandfather was? I can relate to it, too. I still miss

her.”

“Must be nice, having family you can miss.”

“So you’ve got nobody else you can stay with? Friends? Kin?”

She shakes her head. “Reggie didn’t like us making friends outside the house.”

“Sounds like Reggie’s a real piece of work.”

She shrugs and takes a sip of her tea, pulling a face at the bitter taste.

“So what do you want to do?” I ask.

She gives me a puzzled look.

“With your life,” I say. “Where do you want to go? What do you want to do with your life?”

“I don’t know. I don’t wanna go anywhere. There’s no place to go anyway.”

“What did you think was going to happen when you came up here to my camp?”

“I thought maybe you’d fuck me and then give me some money.”

“*What?*”

“Except I guess you don’t think I’m pretty enough.”

I shake my head. “You’ve got this all wrong.”

“You wouldn’t have to look at my face while you’re doing it.”

“For Christ’s sake—you could be my granddaughter.”

“But—”

“It’s never going to happen, kid.”

Confusion returns to her face. “Reggie says old guys all like to fuck young girls.”

“Yeah, well, Reggie needs his face rearranged.”

“That’s not all he needs rearranged. He can’t get it up anymore, and that pisses him off.”

“Listen kid, you shouldn’t even know that shit.”

She shrugs. “It’s just what it is. So what?”

“Jesus. You’re young and you’ve got your whole life ahead of you. Focus on getting an education. Make something of yourself. You ever hear the expression ‘success is the best revenge’?”

She shakes her head.

“You make something of yourself and that just shows losers like Reggie you’re better than them.”

“But I’m not.”

“Don’t say that,” I tell her.

She fiddles with the cuffs of the hoodie, pulls them down over her knuckles. She won’t look at me.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” she says.

“I know people who can help you.”

“Why would they?”

“Because it’s what they do. You should get some rest. It’s a bit of a hike in the morning.”

She nods. “You don’t sound much like a Texan,” she says.

“How would you know what we sound like?”

“You think I’ve never seen a movie or a TV show? They all talk funny.”

“Maybe when I left home I made a point of learning to talk like a Yankee.”

“Why would you do that?” she asks.

I shrug. “Kids get embarrassed about the stupidest things. If I had to do it over, I wouldn’t. But now this is just the way I talk. The only time you’ll hear me drawl these days is when I’m putting it on.”

“Why would you do *that*?”

“Why don’t you get yourself some rest.”

She has another sip of her tea and grimaces again before she sets it down in the sand by the fire.

“You need to get some normal tea,” she says as she lies down. “That tastes like a dog pissed in it.”

“Goodnight to you, too,” I tell her.

I finish my own tea. It’s not my best batch, but it beats buying it from a store. I wait until her breathing evens out, then stand up and stretch. I walk away from the camp and

take a leak. When I get back, Calico's sitting on a rock, a big grin on her face.

I don't know why she's attached herself to me, but it's not like I got any choice in the matter. She just showed up a few years ago, not long after Possum died, and has been hanging around ever since. Not that I mind—her smarts and beauty are off the chart.

"Didn't think I'd see you tonight," I say. "I thought you said you were off leading the dog boys on a chase."

She shrugs. "I took them up through Devil's Canyon and wore them right out. Those boys are not in good shape." She nods to the sleeping girl. "Didn't take you for the nurturing type."

"I'm not. But she needs help."

"Yeah, I overheard. I was feeling horny before I got here, but listening to her story pretty much put a damper on that."

That's Calico in a nutshell: full of innuendo and mischief.

"I'm taking her to Morago—see if he can help."

"But she's not Kikimi."

"Neither's the money they got for their school."

Calico cocks her head. "Except I thought it came to them with no strings attached."

"It did. Same as Sadie's coming to them. They can help or not, but I'm hoping they'll help. It's pretty damn obvious her own people are useless."

She nods. "Call me if you decide to go break this Reggie's head. But remember, it's not the Wild West anymore. They come after you for stuff like that now, doesn't matter how justified."

"Call you?" I say with a laugh. "How am I supposed to do that? Neither of us even has a—"

But she's already gone.

\* \* \*

"Who was that woman that came by last night?" Sadie asks me in the morning.

I'm in the middle of pouring myself a second cup of coffee and almost drop the pot.

"You *saw* her?"



“Well, yeah. Was I not supposed to? You could’ve told me you already have a girlfriend.”

I stop, mid-pour. I was sure the kid was dead asleep. It’s a good thing Calico and I didn’t get into anything amorous.

“You really saw her?” I repeat.

“Have you been into the weed? That’s what I just said. And what’s with the furry deal? Is that your kink?”

I don’t know what to say. My girlfriend’s a—for lack of a better term—foxalope. Part antelope, part fox. You should see the look on Calico’s face when I use the word. She looks to be in her mid-thirties, with a shock of fox-red hair that she usually wears loose, and a pair of small antelope horns push up from the top of her brow. Some days, she’s also got fox ears and a big bushy tail. She calls herself a *ma’inawo*, which is Kikimi for “cousin.”

We keep our relationship on the down-low, so this is weird, and I don’t know how to explain it.

“Furry?” I manage. “That’s a thing?”

She nods. “Yeah, you know. People who put on costumes, pretending they’re some kind of animal. It’s how they get it up.”

“Sure,” I say. “Let’s go with that.”

“And that’s what turns you on?”

“No, she’s—look, we should get going.”

I turn away and start packing my gear, covering the fire.

“God, I hope I never grow old,” she says. “If you’ve got a kink, so what? Own it.”

I don’t bother answering.

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Three hours later a gaggle of rez dogs welcomes us into Abigail White Horse’s yard. They run circles around us, barking, tails wagging. Sadie shrinks away from them and moves closer to me.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “They’re friendly.”

“Yeah, tell that to the last guy they ate.”

Aggie’s place is high up in the foothills at the end of a couple of miles of winding dirt road. It’s a long low adobe building with a lean-to and corral made of saguaro ribs on the south. A pair of those big cacti dominate one side of the yard, with a stand of raggedy mesquite and palo verde on the other. There’s the remains of a fire pit out past the corral. Farther up the hill is a little adobe casita that serves as the old woman’s studio.

She comes out of the little building now, drawn by the dogs’ welcome. Someone once told me she’s got to be in her eighties or more, but she looks more like she’s in her late sixties. Out hiking, she’s got staying power long past anything I can muster, and I can jog for a couple of hours under the hot summer sun. She’s sturdily built, with an open brown face and grey-white hair pulled back into a long braid.

“I thought you were Old Man Puma,” she says, “coming down off the mountain the way you did. Pretty sure you gave the dogs a heart attack.”

“We were up on the ridge trail.”

She nods. Her gaze shifts to Sadie.

“Who’s your friend?” she asks.

“Says her name is Sadie. I found her up north on Zahra Road.”

“Found her? Was there a wreck?”

I shake my head. “She got tossed from a car.”

Aggie frowns.

“It wasn’t moving,” I add.

“And that makes it better?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She focuses her attention back to Sadie.

“How are you holding up, child?” she asks.

Sadie fiddles with the cuffs of her hoodie and shrugs. “I’m fine,” she says.

Aggie studies her until the girl finally looks up. Sadie shifts from foot to foot, but she doesn’t look away. Aggie has that effect on people.

“So you’re looking for a safe place for her?” Aggie asks me.

I nod.

“Whoa,” Sadie says. “I’m not staying out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’ll just be for a day or so,” I tell her. “I need to talk to this guy named Ramon Morago, figure out a few legalities. But you should be able to move to the dorm in a few days.”

“What dorm?”

“You want to finish high school, right? We talked about it on the way here.”

“We didn’t talk about no dorm. I want to go with you and live in the desert.”

I shake my head.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I won’t cramp your style with your furry girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” Aggie says, her brows rising.

“Yeah,” Sadie says helpfully, “the one with the furry fetish.”

“Forget it,” I tell her.

But Aggie isn’t about to let it go.

“What does that mean?” she asks Sadie. “What’s a furry fetish?”

“You know. She likes to dress up and pretend she’s an animal. Big fox tail and ears, little deer horns.”

Aggie’s lip twitches.

“And how long has this been going on?” she asks me.

I sigh. I like my privacy and don’t want to talk about the relationship, especially in front of a kid, but Aggie’s waiting for an answer.

“She showed up after Possum died.”

“Possum?” Sadie says. “Are *all* your friends into this animal thing?”

“No,” I tell her. “It’s just his name—I don’t know how he got it. He never told me and I never asked.”

“John Little Tree gave it to him,” Aggie says. “Back in the day. Because he was playing dead back then.”

“I don’t get it,” I say.

She shrugs. “He lived in the desert while the rest of the world thought he was

dead.”

Now it’s my gaze she holds. I know what those dark eyes of hers are saying: We might as well call you Possum, too.

“So it was like, his Indian name,” Sadie says.

Aggie nods, her gaze still holding mine. “And what’s the name of your friend?” she asks.

“Calico.”

“I know her. I’d say be careful. Fox girls are tricksters, but antelope are loyal. So you’re probably okay.”

Sadie’s following our exchange with big eyes.

“She visits you?” I ask.

Aggie shrugs. “Cousins. They stop around from time to time.”

“So you know Calico? Does anyone else?”

“Ask Reuben Little Tree about her visits. She seems to have made it her life’s work to tease him and those dog boys of his.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to make sense of what she’s saying. Calico does have a thing about running dogs, but this business about Reuben is giving me a headache.

“When you say ‘dog boys,’” Sadie asks Aggie, “are they really part dog?”

“No,” I say, eyeing the kid.

“Yes,” Aggie says at the same time.

I sigh, but Sadie doesn’t seem to have any problem with it. That’s clear from the bright interest in her eyes.

“I’d like to stay here,” she says to Aggie. “If it’s still okay.”

“Of course,” Aggie says. “I’ll get a poultice for those injuries of yours.”

Sadie’s eyes go big. Me, I’m in the dark.

“What injuries?” I ask.

Neither of them responds for a long moment. Then Sadie pulls down the zipper of her hoodie and takes it off. She drops it in the dirt and stands there in a sleeveless T-shirt.

Her forearms are covered with dozens of tiny scars and cuts that cross each other in a bewildering pattern. They look like they were made with a razor or a really sharp knife. Some look infected.

Then she lifts the T-shirt up to the bottom of her breasts. Her whole torso is a mess of bruises. Yellow and green. Purple and blue.

“The fuck?” pops out of my mouth. My hands are clenched in fists at my side.  
“Who did that to you?”

But I already know.

“He only hits me where it doesn’t show,” she says.

“And did he cut you, too?”

When she doesn’t answer, I realize she did it to herself.

“Maybe,” Aggie says, “it’s a way to take back ownership of your body?”

Sadie shakes her head.

“It’s okay,” Aggie says. “You don’t have to talk about it. And you can stay here as long as you need to.”

She nods and picks up her hoodie, but she doesn’t put it on. I can’t take my gaze from all those crisscrossing cuts on her arms. Why the hell would anybody do that to themselves?

“You go on ahead inside and make yourself comfortable,” Aggie says. “I’ll be right in.”

She nods again, but she doesn’t move.

“Is there something else you need to tell us?” Aggie asks.

Sadie looks at me. “You’re not going after him, are you?”

“Who? Reggie?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you want to protect him?”

“I don’t,” she says. “But I don’t want you to get into trouble and I don’t want him taking anything out on the foster kids.”

“You’ve got a good heart,” Aggie says.

“Do I?” Sadie asks. “Then why’s my life such crap?”

Aggie shakes her head. “We’ll see what we can do to make it better.”

Sadie turns her attention back to me. “Am I going to see you again?”

“Sure. I come by here all the time.”

She doesn’t say anything else, but she keeps looking at me, waiting.

“Okay,” I say. “Reggie’s off limits. For now. I can’t promise forever.”

She mouths the word “thanks” and walks toward the house. One of the dogs steps close to her and bumps its head against her leg. I expect Sadie to freak, but she just drops a hand and absently strokes Ruby’s head. It’s like Aggie’s words changed something inside her and she’s no longer afraid of the dogs. She goes inside the house, the dog with her, and the door closes behind them.

I turn to Aggie. “Calico and I—we’ve been keeping this private.”

“So I see. I thought you were alone most of the time out there, by choice.”

“I am, just not always. But solitude doesn’t bother me. And crap like Sadie’s life—that’s why I’m done with the world beyond these mountains. I’m not running away from anything. I just don’t like the way people live their lives out there.”

“I understand,” Aggie says. “But when it comes to the world right here, maybe it’s time you realized some of the other people you meet out in these hills aren’t necessarily human.”

“Like who?”

“That doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that you keep your heart open. Speaking of which, why did you help the girl? Why didn’t you just walk away?”

A lot of things go running through my mind. The way Sadie was just sitting there on the side of the road, arms wrapped around her knees. Possum shooting a coyote caught in a trap, the festering of its infected forepaw having already crawled up into its torso, swelling its chest to twice its normal size. Reuben catching packrats nesting around the kids’ dormitory and taking them clear across the mountain before letting them go, whereas somebody else would have just shot them.

“The hell would I know?” I finally say. “I’m going to talk to Morago.”

I head off before she can ask me something else I can't answer.

From *The Wind in His Heart*

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