

WHIRLWIND

ONE

The sun was white and hot, and the wind blew ceaselessly.

Annie Hatch stood alone on her ranch house porch, one hand absently rubbing her stomach as she tried to decide what to do. The late-morning sun made her squint, the temperature already riding near ninety.

But the wind that coasted across the high desert made her wish, for the first time in a long time, that she were back in California.

It hissed softly through the brush, and whispered softly in her ear. Of course, she thought; you could also just be a doddering old fool.

A quick smile, a quicker sigh, and she inhaled slowly, deeply, taking in the heat, and the piñon, and, so faintly she might have been imagining it, a sweet touch of juniper.

Wind or not, voices or not, this was, all in all, far better than Hollywood.

That was where she and Burt had made their money, so many years ago it might have been a dream; here was where they had finally made their lives, no dream at all.

A breath of melancholy fluttered her eyelids closed for a moment. It wasn't easy being a widow, even after fifteen years. There were still too many times when she thought she heard him clumping back from the stable behind the house, or whistling as he fiddled with the generator, or blowing gently on the back of her neck.

The wind did that to her, too.

"Enough," she muttered, and strode impatiently to the end of the porch, leaned over the waist-high, rough-hewn rail, and looked down the side of the adobe house to the stable. She whistled twice, high, sharp, and loud, and giggled silently when she heard Nando curse, not very subtly letting her know he hadn't finished saddling Diamond yet, was she trying to get him trampled?

A second later he appeared in the open doorway, hands on his wide hips, glaring at her from under his time-beaten Stetson.

She waved gaily; he gestured sharply in disgust and vanished again.

"That's cruel," a soft voice said behind her.

She laughed as she turned. “He loves it, Sil, and you know it.”

Silvia Quintodo looked at her skeptically for as long as she could. Then she grinned broadly, shaking her head as if at a child too angelic to be punished. She was a round woman, face and figure, with straight black hair forever caught in a single braid that hung down her back. Her skin was almost copper, her large eyes the color of a starlit night. Today, as always, she wore a loose, plain white dress that reached to mid-shin, and russet deerskin boots.

“You’re staring,” she scolded lightly.

Annie blinked. “I am? I’m sorry. My mind was wandering.” She stared at the weathered floorboards. “I guess I’m just feeling my age today, dear.”

Silvia rolled her eyes—oh, please, not again—and returned inside to prepare an early lunch.

Annie thanked her silently for not feeding the self-pity.

In truth, she knew she wasn’t so bad for an old lady of sixty-one. Her face was narrow, accentuating green eyes and dark, not quite thick, lips; the lines there were more from the sun than her age. Her hair was white, but softly so, cropped short and brushed straight back over her ears. Practical, but still lovely. And her slender figure was such that, even after all these years, she was still able to turn more than a few heads whenever she drove into the city or up to Santa Fe.

It was good for her ego.

Oh brother, she thought; it’s worse than I thought.

What it was, was one of those days that crept up on her now and then—when she missed Burt so much it burned. There was never any particular reason for it, no specific thing that jogged her memory. It just happened. Like today. And the only cure was to take Diamond and a canteen and ride into the desert.

Maybe, if she were brave enough, all the way to the Mesa.

Sure, she thought; and tomorrow I’ll wake up and find Burt beside me in bed.

A snort behind her made her jump.

She whirled just as Diamond thrust his head over the rail, his nose catching her stomach and shoving her back a step.

“Hey!” she said with a scolding laugh. “Knock it off, you big jerk.”

He was already in bridle and saddle, a short black horse with a rough diamond blaze between his eyes. Nando stood beside him, grinning, one hand on the animal’s rump, his stained brown hat pushed back on his head.

“Serves you right,” he told her smugly. He could have been Silvia’s twin, not her husband, save for the ragged streaks of gray in his hair, and the fact that his broad blunt nose had been broken too many times for him to be rightly called handsome. Those who didn’t know him figured him for an ex-boxer or an ex-Marine, not the foreman of a ranch that wasn’t much of a ranch anymore.

Annie made a show of ignoring him and his rebuke. She adjusted her straw Western hat, fixed the strap under her chin, and swung her legs easily over the rail. Without pause or hesitation, she grabbed the horn and swung lightly into the saddle. Only then did she look down at him. “Not bad for an old lady, huh?”

“The day you get old, Seora,” he answered solemnly, “is the day I stop shoveling horse shit for a living and start selling bad turquoise to the tourists up Santa Fe.”

Diamond shook his mane impatiently.

A warm gust made them turn their heads, but not before she saw the expression on his face.

When he looked back, he was somber. “It talks.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

He shook his head slowly, not quite sadly. “You know. You always know.”

She grabbed the reins angrily. “I know nothing of the sort, Nando.” She was prepared to cluck Diamond away when Nando tapped her leg. “Now what?”

He reached behind him and pulled out a canteen. Grinning again: “No rain, no water.” He tucked it into the silver-studded saddlebag.

She thanked him with a brusque nod and guided Diamond across the side lawn to a break in the double split-rail fence she had painted white the year before. Once through, she followed it around to the front, checking the grass inside to see where it was dying.

Everywhere, she realized; everywhere.

Despite the extraordinarily expensive, undoubtedly wasteful belowground system her late husband had installed himself and had connected to one of the score of deep wells on the ranch, the grass seldom survived intact all the way through the summer. Still, she thought as the ranch drifted away behind her, wasteful or not, it was better than nothing.

At least it had color.

At least it had life.

“All right,” she snapped to the shadow that rode beside her. “All right, that’s enough, Annie, that’s enough.” Her right hand held the reins lightly; her left hand rested on her thigh, and it trembled.

She ignored it, concentrating instead on the rolling land ahead, automatically checking for wind or flash-flood damage to the narrow wood bridges Burt and Nando had built across the several arroyos meandering across the four thousand acres, glancing to her right every so often at the high heat-brown hill that blocked the sun each morning. Like the exposed knobby root of an ancient, distant tree, it flanked the recently paved road that led east to the interstate and west to the Mesa.

To the reservation.

She couldn’t see it from here.

The hill crossed the road a half-mile ahead, still high, still marked with thorned shrubs and tufts of grass sharp enough to slice through a palm, still studded with large brown rocks and partially buried boulders.

Like a wall to keep the rest of the world out.

Or to keep the Konochine in.

For some, however, it wasn’t high enough or strong enough.

They left to see what the world outside looked like, to discover what the world had to offer besides life on a reservation.

For her, it was Burt, and a brief but lucrative career in Hollywood; for others, unfortunately, it was prejudice and pain, and ultimately, a grave too far from home.

Diamond shied suddenly, forcing her to pay attention, to glance quickly at the ground for signs of rattlesnakes. They'd be out now—the sun was high and warm enough—coiled deceptively still on whatever rocks they could find.

She saw none, and frowned her puzzlement when the horse began to prance, telling her he wasn't thrilled about approaching the ranch side of the hill.

That's when she saw the buzzards.

Five of them circled low near the two-lane road, and she mouthed a sharp curse as she nudged the horse in that direction. There weren't many cattle left; she had sold most of them off not long after Burt had died, and seldom replaced the ones she lost. Every so often, though, one of those remaining found a way through the barbed wire that marked their pastures. Sometimes they tumbled into an arroyo; sometimes a rattler got them; sometimes they just couldn't find the water or the food and simply gave up, laid down, and died.

Closer, and she saw a van parked on the sandy shoulder, on the far side of the fence that ran along the blacktop. Vague waves of ghostly heat shimmered up from the road, blurring the vehicle's outline.

"What do you think?" she asked Diamond. "Tourists?"

The desert beyond the Sandia Mountains was beautiful in a stark and desolate way, with flashes of color all the more beautiful because they were so rare. It was also a trap. It wasn't unusual for an unthinking tourist to pull over because he wanted to walk a little, stretch his legs, check things out. It also wasn't unusual for the heat, and deceptive distance, to combine to lose him.

One minute, you could see everything; the next, you were alone.

Sometimes he didn't make it back.

Another twenty yards, and Diamond pulled up short.

"Hey," she said. "Come on, don't be stupid."

He shook his head violently, reaching around to nip at her boot, a sign he wasn't moving another inch.

She glared helplessly at the top of his head, watching his ears twitch in agitation. Forcing him would serve no purpose. He was as stubborn as she, and most definitely stronger.

"Can you say 'glue'?" she muttered sourly as she swung out of the saddle and ordered him to stay put. "Idiot."

Dusting her hands on her jeans, she trudged toward the van, scanning the area for whoever it was who had been stupid enough to leave it.

She hadn't gone a dozen yards when she heard the flies.

Her stomach tightened in anticipation, but she didn't stop. A check of the fence revealed no breaks in the wire, no toppled posts. The van itself was a dusty dark green, streaked with long-dried mud.

"Hello?" she called, just in case.

The flies sounded like bees.

The wind nudged her from behind.

She stepped around a sprawling juniper, and her left hand instantly clamped tightly to her stomach.

“Oh God,” she whispered. “Dear Jesus.”

It wasn't a lost cow.

There were two of them, and they lay face-down, arms and legs spread, unnaturally twisted. Flies crawled in undulating waves over them, thick and black, drifting into the air and drifting down again. Not five feet away, a buzzard watched, its wings flexing slowly.

It snapped its beak once.

Annie spun away and bent over, hands on her knees, eyes shut and stomach lurching, her throat working hard to keep the bile from rising.

She knew the bodies were human.

But only by their shape.

Even with the flies, even with the sun, it was clear they had been skinned.

TWO

The sun was white and hot, and there was no wind.

Traffic in the nation's capital moved sullenly and loudly, while pedestrians, if they moved at all, glowered absently at the ground, praying that the next building they entered had its air conditioning working. In this prolonged July heat wave, that wasn't always the case.

Tempers were short to nonexistent, crimes of passion were up, and blame for the extreme discomfort was seldom aimed at the weather.

The office in the basement of the J. Edgar Hoover Building was, according to some, a working monument to the struggle of order over chaos.

It was long, not quite narrow, and divided in half by the remains of a floor-to-ceiling glass partition from which the door had long since been removed. Posters and notices were tacked and taped to the walls, and virtually every flat surface was covered by books, folders, or low stacks of paper. The lighting was dim, but it wasn't gloomy, and as usual, the air conditioning wasn't quite working.

In the back room, two men and a woman stared at a series of red-tabbed folders lying on a waist-high shelf. Each was open to the stark black-and-white photograph of a naked corpse, each corpse lying in the center of what appeared to be a tiled bathroom floor.

“I'm telling you, it's driving us nuts,” the first man complained mildly. He was tall, solid, and a close-cropped redhead. His brown suit fit too snugly for real comfort. His tie had been pulled away from his collar and the collar button undone, the only concessions he made to the barely moving air. He wiped a hand over a tanned cheek, wiped the palm on his leg. “I mean, I know it's a signature, but I'll be damned if I can read it.”