



Ann Charles

DEAD CASE IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Nothing good ever happens at the butt-crack of dawn. No doubt, the headless corpse on the autopsy table in front of me would agree.

Detective “Coop” Cooper scowled at me from the other side of the body. A Daniel Craig look-alike right down to his granite cheekbones, Cooper had called a half-hour earlier and ordered me to meet him in the basement of the Mudder Brothers Funeral Parlor before I headed in to work at Calamity Jane Realty.

His lack of patience with my wakeup routine prompted my current caffeine deficiency, which explained this morning’s forecast: bristly with a chance of a black eye.

“As I told you the other day, Detective,” I enunciated all three syllables of his title, “when you so kindly dragged me into your office and forced me to look at pictures of this.” I pointed at the body, not really wanting to think of it once being a whole human. “I have no idea who this was. Standing here next to the actual body changes nothing.”

Cooper squinted at me with his stainless-steel-colored eyes, not missing a single one of my blinks. I wondered if he practiced his gunslinger stare-down in the mirror every night while he brushed his teeth.

I glared back. While facing off with Cooper often spurred stomach cramps, I’d be damned if I’d let him intimidate me over a dead guy, who just happened to be palming my business card post mortem.

“Ms. Parker,” Cooper spoke through a clenched jaw, something I often did when dealing with my nearly ten-year-old fraternal twins. “You have to at least look at the body before stating for the record that you don’t recognize the victim.”

“What’s there to look at? His head is gone.”

Cooper’s nostrils flared. Surly bulls had nothing on him. “Do you recognize any other parts of him?”

“Like what parts in particular?”

“The remaining ones.”

“Nope.”

Cooper growled loudly enough for me to hear. “Look before you answer.”

“Fine.” I took a deep breath, thankful for the overwhelming scent of bleach-based cleaner in the air, and willed the troop of monkeys bouncing around in my gut to sit still. I could do this. No problem. It was just a dummy. A mannequin. One of those CPR dolls.

I had to do it, for my own safety’s sake, as well as my kids’. As much as I hoped it was just a coincidence that the dead guy had been holding my business card, I had to make sure this wasn’t a sadistic warning message of some sort.

I knew that kind of thinking was paranoid, but after the wacky crap that had happened to me over the last couple of months, these days I’d be suspicious of a jolly white-bearded man in a red suit carrying a bag over his shoulder.

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Focusing on the dead guy's furry chest, I tried to keep my eyes from glancing up at the void where the head should be ... and failed. It was such a clean slice through the neck. What—and who—could have done such a seamless job?

I remembered what I was inspecting and turned away.

"You know, if you can't handle this ..." Cooper started to say, the rigid tone in his voice softening.

"I can handle it," I interrupted and swallowed the acidic taste of nausea that climbed up my esophagus and onto the back of my tongue.

For some stupid reason, I had this irrational need to prove to Cooper that I could inspect dead bodies over black coffee and maple bars just like him and the other guys on the police force.

I looked over my shoulder at Eddie Mudder, who leaned against a group of floor-to-ceiling cupboards with his arms crossed over his black vinyl apron while we admired his handiwork. Looking and sounding like Lurch from the *Adams Family*, Eddie was the younger of the two brothers who owned and operated Mudder Brothers Funeral Parlor. His oddities went beyond his physical appearance to his love of eccentric organ music, such as the pipe-organ version of the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive" that was currently playing through the overhead speakers. Did psychiatrists have a label for someone who danced with dead bodies?

"Eddie, will you please cover this"—I hovered my hand over the missing head area—"with something?"

He lumbered over in two long strides and draped one square of paper towel over the space where the head should be. "Better?"

I'd have preferred two. Was there a paper towel shortage in the Black Hills? "Sure. Thanks."

I glanced in Cooper's direction and noticed his lips twitching. Oh, how I longed to jam a paper towel up his nose.

Another deep breath. Okay, back to the dead guy.

His milky ash-colored flesh had a marbled look to it. A thick coat of black chest hair covered his ribs and pectorals. I leaned closer, sniffing, picking up the smell of stale, raw hamburger meat—or maybe that was just my imagination.

I searched for a tattoo, a scar, a pierced nipple, something unique, but I couldn't see anything through the hair, not without a weed whacker, anyway.

Shrugging, I stepped back. "Nope, I don't know him."

Cooper crossed his arms over his chest. "Keep looking. Unless it's too much for you."

I curled my lip at him, and then returned to scan the corpse's less-furry stomach. "He has some lint in his belly button," I observed aloud.

"That's not lint," Eddie said from his spot back by the cupboards. "It's a black wart."

Emm! I grimaced across at Cooper.

A flicker of a grin rippled across his granite features. I had an inkling that torturing me rated high on his fun-things-to-do list, right after cleaning his handgun. He schooled his features and pointed down at the body, indicating that I wasn't finished.

Cursing him six ways from Sunday under my breath, I scooted down the table, past where the paper sheet covered the corpse's private bits and pieces, and looked at the toes. Small tufts of hair popped out from the knuckle of each toe.

"This guy must be part Yeti."

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"I'll be sure to make a note of that in the report," Cooper said.

I moved up to the corpse's knees. They looked like a regular set of kneecaps to me. Nothing remarkable.

I hesitated at the paper covering the man's junk, my determination wavering. I avoided glancing at Cooper, knowing any eye contact at this point would make me chicken out.

Would looking at a dead man's penis scar me for life? Would I ever be able to look at another live version of one without recoiling? This could seriously cripple my love life, which had barely limped along since the twins had arrived.

But Cooper was watching, waiting for my white flag. I gulped and pinched the corner of the little sheet.

"Wait, Violet." Cooper reached toward my hand.

The autopsy room's double-doors opened. Old Man Harvey crashed into the room, loud and grinning, as usual. His two gold teeth gleamed under the florescent lights.

He stopped short of me, eyeing me up and down. "Woo-wee! You look finer than frog hair. Did you wear that pretty dress to impress Coop, Eddie, or the dead guy?"

I smoothed down my new coral-colored knit dress, feeling my cheeks heat up. "You're late," I told him, avoiding an answer.

"Sorry 'bout that. I had trouble gettin' out of bed."

"Your trick hip keeping you up again?" I asked.

"More like Viagra and an old flame." His grin hung from his earlobes. "You should see the tricks that girl can still do with her hips. The way she wiggles you'd never guess she has an AARP card."

Criminy. I'd waltzed right into that one.

Willis "Old Man" Harvey was my partner in crime and self-appointed bodyguard, whether I liked it or not.

He also owned the ranch I was trying to sell in spite of the dead body parts that kept showing up there—parts such as an ear still connected to half a scalp that was found in one of Harvey's somewhat illegal traps. And the very corpse under my nose, which the old bugger's lazy yellow dog had partially dug up from the cemetery out behind his barn.

I stepped back to give Harvey room to inspect the corpse. His arrival had saved my future sex life, and my knees wobbled with relief.

"You figure out who it is?" Harvey asked, joining us at the table and looking from me to Cooper.

"Not yet," Cooper answered.

"Jesus H. Christ, boy." Harvey said to the detective, who also happened to be his nephew. Pretty much everyone in Deadwood was related by blood or marriage, which was something I'd grasped since moving from the prairie to the Black Hills six months ago. "Do I have to do everything around here?"

Harvey leaned over the corpse and sniffed. "Hmmm. Smells like that homemade goop I rub on my bunions." He poked the corpse in the ribs hard enough to slide the body over an inch or two.

"Harvey!" I said, poking him in the ribs in turn.

"What? He's dead. He didn't feel it." He nudged me aside and danced toward the feet, singing along in a high voice, doing a spin as the disco-playing organ hit the final chorus. The Bee Gees would never be the same for me again.

"Any tattoos?" Harvey asked.

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Cooper shook his head.

“His legs remind me of your Aunt Gertrude’s.”

Cooper kept shaking his head, a small grin surfacing.

Harvey had reached the paper towel covering the man’s family jewels. Without hesitation, he yanked off the towel.

“No! God!” I covered my eyes—a half-second too late.

“Hmph. Reminds me of the last time I skinny-dipped in Pactola Dam.”

“Ahhh!” I cringed. No amount of soap was going to scrub that image from my eyes.

Something rustled, and then Cooper said, “You can uncover your eyes now, Violet.”

I peeked out between my fingers first just to be safe. Harvey had returned to my side, his thumbs wrapped around his suspenders.

“So, neither of you two recognize this man?” Cooper’s eyes bounced between Harvey and me.

“No,” I said.

Harvey scratched his head. “Hold up. Did he have just one testicle?”

“Yep,” Eddie confirmed.

Harvey reached for the paper towel covering the corpse’s jewels again.

I squawked and turned toward the door. Another glimpse of the dead guy’s package and I’d never be able to have sex again. “If we’re done here, Detective, I need to go to work.”

“You’re free to leave.” He came around the corpse and walked me to the double doors, holding one open for me. “You aren’t planning any trips out of state, are you?”

I stopped on the threshold and frowned up at him. “Are you asking me that as my client?”

Cooper had hired me to sell his house a couple of weeks ago. The plan was to put it on the market this week.

“No, I’m asking on behalf of the Lawrence County Sheriff’s Department.”

“Are you working for the Sheriff on this?” I pointed in the general direction of the body. Detective Cooper worked for the City of Deadwood and was hired out to Lead, but last I’d heard he only played poker with the local sheriff, not cops and robbers.

“Not officially. But until we figure out who this guy is and how he lost his head, you and Uncle Willis both need to stay close.”

The sound of that made the hairs on my neck bristle, just as I’d forecasted. “Are you saying we’re suspects in his murder?”

“Not suspects, just persons of interest. So stick around.” His gunslinger squint returned. “And keep your big nose out of this case.”