



Ann Charles

BETTER OFF DEAD IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

You need to get your ass back in gear, Violet," Old Man Harvey told me. "The world's still spinnin'."

"I just can't believe Jane's dead," I said over the din of conversation surrounding us in Bighorn Billy's Diner, a local favorite here in Deadwood.

I picked at my lunch salad, pushing the lettuce around on my plate, looking for life's answers in between the leaves.

"Death will hornswoggle you like that," Harvey said. "It's like losing a molar; you're gonna keep jabbin' your tongue in that hole for a bit, but you'll get used to it. We all do."

A week had passed since Detective Cooper and his boys in blue had hauled my boss's body up from the bottom of the cavernous pit of Lead's Open Cut mining area, but I still hadn't been able to digest the fact that she was gone. Not even after spending the last two hours teary-eyed at her memorial service.

Gone.

Forever.

Damn.

I sighed, glancing across the table at Harvey.

He flashed me a grin. "Look on the bright side—I'm still around to keep you out of trouble."

That made me smile. "Lucky me."

Willis Harvey was known in Deadwood and in Lead—heck, in all of the northern Black Hills—for three things: chasing skirts, ruffling feathers, and sleeping with Bessie, his double-barreled shotgun.

Back in July when I'd agreed to be his real estate agent and sell his ranch south of town, he'd finagled an arrangement for a weekly meal, on me. Desperate Realtors called for desperate deals, and all that jive. Several meals and murder victims later, the ornery codger had glued himself to my side as my bodyguard and partner in crime ... and crime solving.

Taking a sip of steaming coffee, I peered around the dining room at all of the folks dressed in dark colors, just like Harvey and me, fresh from Mudder Brothers Funeral Parlor. The murmurs of grief were muffled now by greasy burgers, drowned out by the clanking of silverware on plates and the scraping of chairs on linoleum.

Life was moving on without Jane.

It was time for me to get moving again, too. There were houses to sell, dollars to make, kids to clothe and feed—namely my two almost-ten-year-olds who both seemed to be hollow from the neck down these days.

"Have you heard any more rumors about what happened to Jane?" Harvey asked, shoving a bite of strawberry-rhubarb pie in his pie-hole.

"No. Cooper's being extremely closemouthed."

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Maddeningly so.

Detective Cooper had no problem rattling off his list of questions, but when it came to supplying answers, he kept repeating, "That's police business, Ms. Parker."

I had daydreams of shoving the pen he kept clicking during his interrogations some place where the sun didn't shine, starting with his broken nose.

Harvey shook his head. "I can't believe Jane's ex-husband had the *cojones* to show up at her service with that sweet young piece of candy on his arm."

Months ago, Jane had caught her husband in the act of burning up the sheets on her own bed with a much younger firecracker.

"You mean Jane's *almost* ex," I clarified, stabbing at my salad. "Now I guess he's officially Jane's widower."

"You know, I could swear I saw his filly wrestlin' in a mud-covered bikini last year over in Sturgis during the biker rally."

After seeing the skimpy, black lace dress she'd been popping out of at the service, that wouldn't surprise me. "You think he'll be my boss now?"

For the last couple of months, Jane had been in the process of divorcing his no-good, cheating ass. She'd been trying her damnedest to keep Calamity Jane Realty, along with me and the other two agents who worked there, out of the jerk's greedy mitts.

Shrugging, Harvey said around a mouthful of pie, "Depends if Jane had her will up to snuff."

I swallowed more coffee, contemplating a suspicion that had been festering in my head since hearing Jane was gone. "There's no way I could work for the man who killed her."

Harvey's bushy eyebrows wrinkled. "Did you dump some hooch in your coffee when I wasn't lookin'?"

"No," I put my cup down. "I'm just saying he certainly pushed her to the edge."

A flurry of movement at the door caught my attention.

I watched as a handsome, square-jawed, dark-haired man in a sleek suit paused on his way over the threshold. I'd seen him earlier at Mudder Brothers and guessed him to be in his early forties.

He shook the hands of several lunch patrons who'd swarmed him upon entry. Then he held the door for a petite blonde in a dark blue jersey dress, touching her lower back as they made their way toward an open table. Several members of the funeral crowd greeted him with smiles and nods as he passed.

"Who's that?" I asked, jutting my chin at Mr. Popularity. "The guy in the suit."

"There are a lot of suits in here, girl. We just came from a funeral, remember?"

"The one with that busty blonde in blue on his arm."

I figured that would make Harvey sit up and take notice. I was right. His gaze zeroed in on the woman.

"That's Dominick Masterson and his wife, Ginny. She's purty, but not busty."

"Why did he get to sit in the front row at Jane's service? Is he related to her?"

"Nah, not that I've ever heard, anyway."

Harvey would know; after spending his whole life in the northern Black Hills, he could tell the story of pretty much anyone with a Deadwood or a Lead zip code.

"Is he in real estate, too?" I asked.

"Politics. Right now he's runnin' for mayor up in Lead."

A politician—and a handsome one at that. That made him doubly suspect in my book.

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Suspect of what, I had no idea, but my history with politicians involved dinners, drinks, and psychotic girlfriends who tied me to a chair, sliced open my thumb, and offered my womb for rent to a demon.

“Pull in your horns, girl,” Harvey said under his breath.

“What?”

“Dominick is a good kid. I’ve known him ever since he was just knee high to a coyote. He worked hard to support his momma when his daddy up and left town.”

“Left?”

“Yep, just disappeared one day, leavin’ Dominick and his momma alone to fend for themselves. The boy was still wet behind the ears. Years later, someone said they saw his old man at a bar over in Yankton, but they were probably three sheets to the wind.”

I assumed that meant “drunk” in Harvey speak.

Hmmm. Dominick and my kids had something in common—no father.

“Masterson’s daddy had to be a few clowns short of a rodeo, though,” Harvey continued. “That boy’s momma was as fine as cream gravy. Stacked clear to here,” he held his hand up to his chin, “with hips that just begged to be saddled.”

I wrinkled my nose at him.

“Ginny reminds me a lot of her, only not as curvy.”

“Is his mom dead?”

Harvey frowned. “You have death on the brain. No, she moved down South years ago, tired of the snow.”

As hot as today had been, it was hard to believe the Black Hills would ever cool off, let alone be buried under several feet of snow anytime soon.

“How come I’ve never seen this Dominick guy before now?” I asked.

“Probably because you’ve been livin’, eatin’, and breathin’ Doc for the past month. Hell, heifers in heat moan less.”

My cheeks warmed. “I have not.”

“How do you spell ‘obsessed’?”

“Zip it, old man.” My fascination with Doc Nyce wasn’t an obsession. It was more of an all-encompassing crush.

Back in July, I’d fallen flat on my face for Doc. By that, I meant I’d walked out Calamity Jane’s front door one day, tripped over some boxes stacked in my path, and landed face-down on the sidewalk. When I’d looked up, Doc had been standing over me with his dark hair and even darker eyes. Days later, he’d crossed my threshold looking to buy a house. His animal magnetism had pretty much leapt over my desk and pounced on me, startling the pheromones right out of me.

It’d been amazing that I’d been able to keep our agent-client relationship platonic for three weeks, considering that I’d gone without sex for years. Supporting and raising two kids on my own had left little time for dinner and dancing. I’d spent too many long, lonely nights watching Elvis, Gregory Peck, and young Captain Kirk on the television.

For three weeks I’d held out, but after one touch from Doc in a dark stairwell, my knees had gone weak. That one touch led to more, of course, which led to nakedness, and then to betraying my best friend, Natalie Beals.

My stomach knotted as it often did this last week when I thought of Natalie and the hurt pinching her face when she’d caught Doc and me K-I-S-S-I-N-G.

Damn her for falling for the one guy to whom I might be willing to offer my heart and

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soul for the first time since getting knocked up with twins. Damn me for being such a chicken shit and waiting too long to tell her the truth about Doc and me.

Natalie still wasn't returning my phone calls or text messages, not that I could blame her. But I had to keep trying. I wasn't willing to lose decades of sharing clothes, beers, and laughs over one guy.

Albeit one charming guy.

One very charming guy who could do things with his tongue that ... I was digressing.
“I’m not obsessed with Doc.”

Harvey snorted. “Right, and Mount Rushmore is chiseled out of marshmallows. Where is Doc, anyway? Why didn’t he show up at Jane’s service?”

Because Doc had a secret that only I knew—he could smell dead people, as in the already buried kind that returned in the wispy form to haunt the living. I figured him for some kind of medium, but he had yet to use a label and cringed every time I referred to his ability as “smelling” ghosts.

I shoved more salad around on my plate.

The sniffing out ghosts sounded a little off-rocker, but I *think* I pretty much believed him. Not that I’d ever witnessed anything wispy myself, but after going on enough tours of ghostly haunts with Doc, watching him react, and hearing him spill secrets that he couldn’t have figured out without a party-line to the past, my inner skeptic was courting belief.

Attending Jane’s service would have risked Doc having a public display of reaction to the possible ectoplasmic crowd in the funeral parlor. We’d both agreed it was better for him to pay his respects at Jane’s grave alone later.

“Doc woke up with a migraine,” I lied while hiding behind my coffee cup. My nose often twitched when I fibbed, and Harvey knew my tell. “I told him to stay home.”

Harvey seemed to accept this without a second thought. “I need to see him about a mule.”

That made me lower my cup a little. “Isn’t that code for having to go to the bathroom?”

“Yup. It’s also code for I got some money from an uncle who died last month but can’t collect it on account of a damned mule.”

I didn’t even try to make sense of that. “It sounds like you need a vet, not a financial planner.”

Doc played with people’s money as a day job. With clients like Harvey, who talked him up all over town, and Detective Cooper, who shared his name around the police station, Doc’s business had been booming lately. Unfortunately, that meant I got to see even less of him.

Speaking of the detective, I asked Harvey, “Do you think you could ask Cooper what’s going on behind the scenes with Jane’s case? Maybe get him a little liquored up first to oil his lips.”

“Liquor doesn’t work on my nephew, only bullets and babes do.” He pointed his fork at my chest. “Why don’t you pop some buttons, shove a Colt .45 Peacemaker down your pants, and ask him yourself?”

I knocked his fork away. “No way. I don’t relish seeing Cooper anytime soon.”

Truth be told, I’d been a little surprised *not* to see the detective at Jane’s funeral. But then I figured that maybe he didn’t want to be bombarded by questions. It wasn’t every day a body ended up in the Open Cut. In fact, I didn’t know if one ever had before Jane’s.

“What makes you think it’s an actual *case* and not just a suicide like the paper suggested?”

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Harvey asked.

"I can't see Jane walking down to the bottom of the pit and slitting her wrists."

"There's no way she could have jumped and made it to the bottom," Harvey said, "not with the way those walls are staggered."

I shoved my salad remains away. "If it's not suicide, then someone left her there. But who'd do that? And why?"

"Let's ask Coop."

"I told you, I don't want to see him again for a while."

"Well, you'd better make tracks then, because he's headin' our way."

What? I looked around and ran smack dab into Detective Cooper's steely glare. Where had he come from? The back door?

He weaved through the tables, never taking his eyes off of me. The Terminator had taken tough-guy lessons from Cooper, who looked like a pissed-off version of Daniel Craig with his two black-and-blue eyes and steri-strip-covered, broken nose.

I didn't waste calories trying to smile when he loomed over me.

"I need you to come down to the station, Ms. Parker."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not yet."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I need you to come down to the station to answer some questions."

"You can ask them right now."

He frowned at his uncle and said in a low voice for our ears only, "No, I can't."

"Is this about George or Jane?" I mouthed.

"I'll disclose my purpose for your visit when we are in my office."

"Nod once for George," Harvey whispered, "twice for Jane."

Cooper's rugged face hardened even more.

I raised one eyebrow. "You heard your uncle."

Growling in his throat, he nodded twice.

What about Jane?

"You can't arrest me just to get me to answer questions about my boss."

"Yes, I can." He leaned over and spoke next to my ear. "I'm opening a murder investigation, and you're on my list of usual suspects."

I could feel my eyes bulge.

Murder?

Jane?

Me?

"Now are you coming with me," Cooper continued, his tone quiet, yet menacing. "Or do I have to arrest you first?"