



Ann Charles

A WILD FRIGHT IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Hell hath no fury like a high-steppin' heifer who's been downright scorned," old man Harvey told me as I steered along the back streets of Lead.

I frowned across the console of my new-but-used SUV at my self-proclaimed bodyguard and partner in troublemaking. "First of all, you know how I feel about being compared to a cow." I poked him in the ribs to emphasize my feelings on that matter. "Second, I'm not high-stepping. I can barely raise my boots off the ground most days."

As a single mom with almost ten-year-old twins ruling my world, I was usually dragging my raggedy pride behind me wherever I roamed.

Harvey rubbed his side, grunting. "I'm not talkin' 'bout you, Sparky."

"Third, how many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me *Sparky*?" It was bad enough that most of Deadwood's fire department and half of its cop-shop were now calling me that. "My name is Violet Parker. Period."

"*Spooky Parker* is more fittin' these days, don'cha think?"

After some of the freaky shit Harvey and I'd been through lately, he had a point.

"Better yet, *Killer Parker*. Ya gotta admit, that has a real nice ring to it."

I aimed another rib poke his way.

Harvey held up his hands. "Fine, plain ol' Violet Parker it is."

"That's better."

A snort came from his side of the vehicle. "It's no fair. Ya let Doc call you all sorts of names besides *Violet*."

I also let Doc Nyce see me naked whenever life allowed us a moment alone, and I often encouraged him to touch me in territory outlawed to the rest of mankind. "That's different."

"Because you two are knockin' your low-steppin' boots?"

This time I pinched his thigh.

He howled. "Dang it, girl, ya sure got yer horns out this mornin'."

He didn't know the half of it. I'd woken up fighting with my pillow in sweat-soaked sheets again. Over the past week, while the flu held me hostage, my nightmares had returned in full force. The legendary cast of my nocturnal imaginary world ranged from white-haired juggernauts to snarling bone crunchers and face-melting demons. I'd been slain in my sleep more times than I could count thanks to their ghoulish choice of weaponry.

But my nightmares were my problem, not Harvey's.

A glance his way found his blue eyes narrowed, watching me. "If you're not talking about me high-stepping, who then?" I asked. I slowed, easing as far right as I could on the narrow residential street to allow a jacked-up pickup to pass going the opposite way. "One of your old flames?"

Harvey had so many old flames burning around the Black Hills that I couldn't go to the

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grocery store without getting singed.

“Nope. Yer boyfriend’s ex.”

The mere thought of Doc’s ex-girlfriend made me clench the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. “I don’t want to talk about Tiffany Sugarbell!”

Or her flat stomach.

Or her perky boobs.

Or her gorgeous red hair, especially after trying to wrangle my blonde curly mess into submission today only to have it spiral out of control as soon as I’d stepped outside.

He blew out a low whistle. “Yer like sittin’ next to a box of ol’ TNT today. You need to breathe easy for a bit, spitfire.”

“I can’t help it.” I peeled my fingers off the wheel, trying to shake the tension out of one hand and then the other. “You and I both know that bitch is nuts.”

Harvey nodded. “That’s how the cow ate the cabbage.”

“The cow ate what?” Was that another bovine comparison?

He waved off my confusion. “That woman’s banjo ain’t been tuned right since you came to town.”

It wasn’t my arrival that sent Tiffany spinning out of control; it had been Doc cutting her from his life. That had been when she’d started filling up his phone with text messages and voicemails.

“I’d like to shove her banjo where the sun doesn’t shine.” Or better yet, take a sledge hammer to it now that she’d decided that wooing back my boyfriend wasn’t enough and had begun seducing my clients, too.

I slowed and turned into the gravel driveway leading up to the Carhart house. The arched and gabled Gothic-revival style dwelling loomed in the windshield. Dark clouds threatening snow painted a gloomy backdrop.

Speaking of a lack of sunshine ...

I killed the engine.

“There she sits in all of her hair-raisin’, blood-stained glory.” Harvey stared out the windshield along with me.

“It’s a beautiful house.” I stuck to my original observation from back in August, but my tone was more anxious than in months past.

The old place was the picture of elegance and calm on the outside, a wood and nails version of a classic Hollywood starlet. My gaze climbed up past the first two stories, faltering when it reached the attic window. The gauzy white curtain hanging there swayed even though the window was closed. If only the ghost living within the house’s graceful bones would stop scaring the bejeezus out of me every time I crossed the threshold.

“It’s time to batten down the hatches.” Harvey’s voice had a smidgen of unease rippling through it. “Things are gonna get ugly.”

I dragged my focus away from the attic window. “I heard we’re supposed to get several inches of snow by nightfall.”

“I’m not talkin’ about the weather.” He pointed at the house. “I got a notion tightenin’ my innards.”

“I told you at breakfast that I was done talking about glitches with your bodily functions for today.” Frankly, I didn’t have the stomach for that discussion. I loved the old codger dearly, but I couldn’t afford to be *off my feed*, as Harvey liked to put it. With Deadwood winters being long and cold enough for my fellow cows to give ice cream, I needed to make

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sure my extra layers of fat remained gelatinously in place to keep me good and warm.

“This ain’t about *my* problems, it’s about yers.”

“You volunteered to be my bodyguard, remember?” Harvey and his companion, Bessie, which happened to be a doubled-barreled shotgun, had the job of making sure I retained life and limbs at all times. “How is this going to work if my problems aren’t yours, too?”

He scratched under his beard. “You got too many wasps in yer outhouse, girly, especially with that scorned she-devil sharpenin’ her pitchfork.”

“Tiffany can kiss my ass.”

I was done festering about Doc’s damned ex. It was time to go play hide-and-seek with Prudence the ghost.

I shoved my door open, wincing as a frigid blast of cold air whipped past me and slammed the door shut behind me. “You can pucker up, too, Mother Nature.” I shook my fist at the dark sky. Tucking my head inside of my collar like a turtle, I clutched my coat lapels and plowed through the wind toward the house.

Harvey caught up with me at the porch steps. “There’s a shitstorm comin’ yer way.”

My laughter didn’t travel far thanks to the gust of wind that blew it toward Lead’s cavernous Open Cut next door, tossing it over the side into the 1,250 foot deep pit mine. “I’ve been mired in one shitstorm after another since I moved up to Deadwood last spring.”

A sharp-clawed ex-girlfriend and an unnerving ghost were only two of my many problems. These days, I chewed my knuckles more about all of the other terrors hiding in the shadows.

“Yeah, but yer belly’s showin’ now,” Harvey said.

I glanced down at my stomach, which was visible through my open coat. The sight of loose threads where two buttons formerly had been sewn distracted me for a moment, making me want to strangle a chicken. Not just any chicken—my daughter Addy’s pet hen that she’d named Elvis. That damned bird was obsessed with stealing buttons and burying them in her cage down in the basement.

“Not that belly.” Harvey jammed his hands in his coat pockets. “Yer other one.”

“You mean because word has spread now about my real job as an ...” I still couldn’t get my tongue to participate on cue when it came to saying the word aloud.

“Executioner,” Harvey finished for me.

“Shhhh.”

“Why are you shushin’ me, girl? There’s nobody here but you and me and yer wacky ghost buddy inside.”

“Nobody that we can see.” I pulled him up on the porch, lowering my voice. “And Prudence is not my buddy.”

“According to her, yer from the same killin’ breed.”

Behind Harvey, a black Ram truck rolled into the drive, easing around my SUV. It was time to play real estate agent extraordinaire.

“They’re here.” I pasted a smile on my face as the pickup came to a stop. “No more talk about all of this weird stuff going on until we leave,” I warned through my teeth.