



Ann Charles

DANCE OF THE WINNEBAGOS

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

If Claire Morgan had known she'd be chaperoning a senior citizen sock hop, she wouldn't have given up smoking. Yet here she was, stuck in Jackrabbit Junction, Arizona, with an ornery old man, his smartass dog, and a parade of blue-haired babes.

"Gramps, your dog found a bone!" Claire yelled, staring at the foot-long bone clenched in the jaws of her grandfather's beagle.

Harley Ford stepped out from behind a half-dead cottonwood tree, zipping up his faded Levi's. "Damned prostate. I have faucets that leak more." He shuffled towards Claire.

"What'd you say?"

Claire wrinkled her nose. After traveling together for three days in his well-used Winnebago Chieftain, she'd learned everything about him from the pattern of his snoring to the number of prunes he needed to maintain regularity. He'd left his modesty in Colorado, and she'd lost most of her sanity long before they had crossed the Arizona state line and pulled into the Dancing Winnebagos R.V. Park.

"I said Henry found a bone." She squatted next to Henry and examined the broken end of the white fragment hanging from his black lips. "It's pretty chewed up already."

Gramps stood behind Henry. "Is it made of gold?"

What kind of a question was that? "Of course not."

"Then why get your knickers all bunched up over it?"

Ignoring his sarcasm, Claire tried to wrestle the bone from the dog's teeth. Henry growled and dug his back paws into the sand. He yanked the slobber-covered bone free of her grip, ran several feet away, plunked down next to a prickly pear cactus, and watched her with the shaft still locked in his jaws. She wasn't sure who was harder to live with, Gramps or his spoiled dog.

Gramps snorted. "As soon as you're done playing with the dog, can we get the hell out of here?"

"What's your hurry? Got a hot date tonight?"

"That's none of your business."

Grinning, Claire stood and wiped Henry's slobber onto her jean shorts. "I wouldn't be here with you if it wasn't my business."

"I told you I don't need a chaperone."

"And I told you that Mom put the squeeze on me. She's expecting a call tonight with the first of my weekly reports on your love life."

Just the thought of hearing her mother's voice made Claire's fingers itch to hold a cigarette. Instead, she dug a stick of cinnamon-flavored gum from her pocket. Three weeks now without a single cigarette. God, she missed nicotine. Even more than sex.

"If I wanted my private life spilled to your mother, I'd write a story for the *National Enquirer*." Gramps crossed his arms over his chest. "The nosey busybody."

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Henry trotted past Claire, obviously teasing her. She lunged for the bone, but the dog sidestepped her and bounded away. “Would you tell your damned dog to sit still for a second?”

Gramps smirked. “It’s more fun to watch you chase him.”

Claire took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet smell of sun-baked greasewood trees. She wouldn’t kill the little bastard. Not for a bone.

“With your cheeks rosy like that,” Gramps said, “you remind me of your grandma when she was your age.”

A warm breeze rustled the leaves of the cottonwood overhead. Claire’s mind flashed to an old black and white picture hanging on Gramps’s wall back in Nemo, South Dakota. A young version of her grandma stood in the shade of the same tree, only its canopy had been full then.

“She sure loved this spot,” Claire said, remembering Gramps and her trip six years earlier to this corner of the state on a chilly fall day. Her throat ached at the memory of him sprinkling her grandma’s ashes around the base of the tree.

“She called it her own little Utopia.” Gramps’s tone was scratchy around the edges. “She’d drag me here for a picnic every damned day while we were staying at the R.V. park.”

The man hated eating off a blanket. *Ab, true love.* Claire smiled. Some people found it; others ran screaming from it.

She fell into step behind him as he hiked back toward the car.

“Your grandmother had a way of making life interesting.” He looked at Claire over his shoulder. “She could turn a funeral into a carnival. I doubt I’ll find another like her, but a man needs a woman. Especially an old man.” He whistled for Henry.

“I understand, Gramps. But did you and your Army buddies have to round up a harem to find one?” Why couldn’t he just get another dog?

“It’s nice to have choices.”

“Yeah, but there are better, less flea-market-like ways to meet women.” She never should’ve shown him how to use the Internet. He’d become the king of the senior-set chat rooms.

Henry trotted up to Gramps and dropped the bone in his outstretched palm. She could’ve sworn the dog snickered at her before dashing ahead.

“Just keep out of my way and we’ll get along fine for the next month.” Gramps wiped the slobber-covered bone on his pants before handing it to Claire. “And remember the rules.”

“I know.” She gripped the bone. As the trail widened, she upped her pace until she walked next to him. “Rule number one: When you have a lady friend over, I should make myself scarce for a half-hour—”

“An hour,” he blurted, then glanced at her. “My equipment is a bit rusty these days. Getting the gears all greased takes—”

“Ahhh!” She waved the bone in front of her. “Stop before I lose my Twinkies.”

“Fine, smartass. Just make sure you stay lost until I give you the sign that the coast is clear.”

She nodded as her gaze locked on the bone. Her footsteps slowed. “This kind of looks like a femur.” The marrow was long gone. She measured the thickness with her finger.

Gramps stopped. “Child, it’s hot, I’m thirsty, and there’s a six-pack waiting in the fridge. Quit playing CSI.”

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She ran her fingertips along the length of the bone. Its smooth hardness was cracked and bleached from the sun. The other end was broken and rough with the gnaw marks she'd noticed earlier.

"Claire, are you listening? Because heatstroke is knocking."

"Look at the diameter. It's as thick as Mr. Bones's femur," she said, remembering the male skeleton from her Human Anatomy 101 class.

"Sweetheart, I know you've taken more college classes in the last decade than most people take in a lifetime, but you're making something out of nothing. It's just an old bone."

"No." Her heart galloped. "This isn't just any old bone." She thrust it in front of Gramps's pale blue eyes. "It's a human leg bone."