



Ann Charles

JACKRABBIT JUNCTION JITTERS

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Sometimes life tossed Claire Morgan a bone—other days it walloped her upside the head with it. Today was turning into a real knockout, the flat tire on the old Ford pickup the final bonk on her noggin.

Claire dragged her ass out of the passenger side of the truck, joining her grandfather who stood grimacing at a front tire that appeared to have melted under the desert's sun.

“What do you mean we have to hoof it, Gramps?” she asked. “Can’t you just throw on the spare so we can get out of here before the storm hits?”

She fanned her T-shirt and squinted through her sunglasses at the cumulus cloud puffing like a microwaved marshmallow as it raced toward her. Lightning lit the inside of the cloud in paparazzi-style.

Harley Ford reached for the grocery bags in the pickup bed. “The spare is flat.”

Of course it was. Claire swiped at the sweat dripping down the side of her face. The August sun and gravy-thick humidity had liquefied her modicum of makeup hours ago.

Across the valley, just past the dusty pit-stop of Jackrabbit Junction, a towering vortex of dirt churned. Gusts of sun-baked air whooshed past her, pelting her cheeks with invisible grains of sand, garnishing the barbed-wire fence with plastic bags and tumbleweeds trying to escape from impending doom.

“Maybe we should just wait this out,” she said. “Sit in the cab and watch the storm pass.”

Monsoon season in southeastern Arizona offered trial and tribulation in biblical fashion: floods, sandstorms, and lightning. Throw some locusts into the mix, and it would be a plagues of Moses tailgate party.

Gramps passed her one of the grocery bags. “Next you’ll want to hold hands and sing campfire songs.”

“Is that how you wooed Ruby?” Claire grinned, referring to her soon-to-be step-grandmother. “Serenaded her with ‘Kumbayah’ and ‘Do Your Ears Hang Low’ until she agreed to marry you?”

Thunder rumbled across the valley, sounding an early warning. A violet curtain of rain draped from the colossal cloud, veiling the mayhem behind it.

“My love life is off-limits to you this visit, wiseass,” Gramps grumbled. “Go roll up your window and grab your stuff. It’s not even a mile to the R.V. park. Besides, I have something to tell you, and I’d rather not be within arm’s-length when you hear it.” He raced toward the Dancing Winnebagos R.V. Park as fast as a seventy-year-old with a trick-hip could skedaddle.

Claire frowned after the ornery goat. The last time he’d spread some joy with one of his announcements, she’d needed a six-pack of Dos Equis and a box of MoonPies to find her happy place.

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This called for an emergency fix. She leaned into the cab and popped open the glove box. Scrounging through the nest of ink pens and fast-food napkins, she grunted in satisfaction when her fingers touched the pack of menthols she'd stashed.

Her flip-flops slapped the asphalt as she followed him, the back of his green shirt patchy with sweat by the time she caught up. "All right, Gramps. Let me have it."

His forehead wrinkled in a disapproving scowl at the lit cigarette dangling from her lips. "I thought you'd quit."

"I did." But that was before her love life had been sucked into a huge, panic-inducing maelstrom. "This is just a figment of your imagination, so stop stalling and spill."

"Remember I told you somebody broke into Ruby's place through the office window last month?"

"What?" She stopped in the middle of the road, momentarily forgetting about the thunder, the wind, and the sore spot between her toes where her plastic thongs rubbed.

Ruby's office was practically a museum, full of expensive antiques collected not-so-legally by her first husband Joe. Years ago he'd overdosed on potato chips, Marlboro cigarettes, and stress and had been taking a dirt nap ever since.

To Claire's knowledge, only four people had any inkling of the treasures hidden in Ruby's basement, and two of them were about to be drenched with Mother Nature's dirty bathwater.

"I remember you mailed me a new key, no explanation included." She couldn't believe he was just now telling her this.

Gramps glanced over his shoulder. "You'd better move your butt, girl, before a bolt of lightning zaps it."

She jogged up next to him. The wind whistled around them. "What got stolen?"

Personally, she would've grabbed the first edition copy of *Moby Dick*. No, *Treasure Island*.

"Nothing."

That made no sense. "Anything get destroyed?"

"Nope."

"Then why did they break in?"

"We've been wondering that ever since it happened."

She took a drag from her cigarette, savoring the cool, cough-drop taste before blowing smoke into the wind. "What makes you so certain it was a break-in?"

"Crowbar dents in the window sill and a busted lock."

"Did you call Deputy Sheriff Droopy?"

"Yep. Ruby insisted since Jess lives there, too."

On the threshold of her sixteenth birthday, Ruby's daughter Jess was at that know-it-all, boy-crazy age that caused her mother to fluctuate between loving her unconditionally and wanting to ship her to the nearest convent.

"But since nothing's missing," Gramps continued, "the deputy's hands are tied."

"His hands aren't tied. They're super-glued to a cheeseburger."

"Don't start again, Claire."

She had trouble biting her tongue when it came to the sheriff's choice for a second-in-command. "You think the burglar was after the money?"

A few months ago, Claire had found a wad of cash in Ruby's office, stuffed in an antique desk—a goodbye gift from Joe.

"Ruby doesn't, but I do. Jess doesn't keep secrets well."

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The National Enquirer kept secrets better than Jess. Ruby needed to deposit the cash somewhere safe, but her hatred of banks and bank vice presidents, especially Yuccaville's one and only, rivaled Willy Nelson's sentiment about the IRS.

Lightning flashed to their left. A resounding crack of sky-splitting thunder followed within a couple of heartbeats. The smell of rain and wet earth hung in the air.

Claire winced and flipped-flopped faster. "So, what's Plan A? Track down the burglar? There has to be some clue left behind."

Gramps groaned. "That's why I didn't want to tell you."

"Did Deputy Droopy check for fingerprints?"

"I knew you'd go off half-cocked."

"All you need is one hair for a DNA test."

"You'll end up getting into trouble again."

"That guy with the mullet and Care Bear tattoo who works thirds at Bidly's Gas and Carryout is up to something shady, I'm sure of it."

"But Ruby wanted you to know since you and Mac are running the R.V. park while we're on our honeymoon. When is Mac getting here, anyway?"

Thunder boomed again.

Claire leaned into the wind, protecting her cigarette with her body as she took another drag. Now was not the time to mention that her relationship with Ruby's nephew Mac was on the rocks—well, more like on the pebbles, but there were some definite rocks ahead. Maybe even boulders.

"Friday night." Mac had been working four-tens at his engineering firm, Tuesday through Friday, for the last month.

"We've set you two up in my Winnebago."

"What's wrong with the spare bedroom?"

"It's occupied." Gramps's face looked pinched, like he was sucking on an unripe grapefruit.

"Ruby has family coming for the wedding?"

"No."

Was it Claire's imagination or was Gramps walking even faster? "Then who's staying in the spare room?" Gramps and Ruby had been sharing a bed for months, so unless they had decided to spend a little time apart before the big day, the spare should be available.

"That's the thing I needed to tell you."

"I thought the break-in was the bad news."

Gramps shook his head. "Katie is coming for a few weeks."

Lightning flashed nearby.

Claire chuckled. "Come on, Gramps. Kate isn't that bad."

As far as younger sisters went, Kate was the typical spoiled favorite who hid her dirty laundry behind a sweet smile and sugar-coated lies.

"I agree. Katie is an angel."

He would say that. Kate was taller, thinner, smarter, and never mouthed off to Gramps.

"But she's not coming alone." Gramps was practically running now. "She's bringing your mother."

"What?!" Claire skidded to a stop on the asphalt. The cigarette slipped from her fingers.

Thunder crashed and then the sky fell.