



Ann Charles

THE GREAT JACKALOPE STAMPEDE

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

In a bone-littered desert bristling with prickly plants and venomous predators, Claire Morgan had forgotten one of the most important rules of survival—to keep her big mouth shut.

“You told Ronnie what?” her grandfather, Harley Ford asked, his hammer frozen mid-swing as he squinted down at where Claire stood at the base of his ladder.

Was it just her or had the skull-baking Arizona sunshine rocketed the temperature another twenty degrees? Claire fanned the neck of her faded Tijuana Toads T-shirt.

Crud. What had she been thinking? She should have gone to Ruby first, Gramps’s much less crotchety better half.

Claire cleared her throat, not letting the glare from Gramps or the sun deter her. “I told Ronnie that she could stay with you guys for a month.”

Footfalls on the gravel drive behind her caught Claire’s attention. A tall, skinny college kid wearing flip-flops, checkered swim trunks, and a yellow velvet sombrero complete with black embroidery and chin strap smiled at her through a mouthful of braces.

“*Hola, señora,*” Beanpole called to her, pushing his thick rimmed eyeglasses up the zinc oxide that coated his nose.

Claire waved back, trying her damndest not to rubberneck. Had someone hired a Mariachi-singing lifeguard?

“What in the hell did you tell Ronnie that for?” Gramps didn’t wait for Claire’s answer before pounding another nail into one of the two-by-sixes making up the skeleton roof of the new bathroom facility.

Claire winced with each hit, glad her head wasn’t shaped like a nail.

Up the way, she watched Beanpole open the door of a beige camper and step inside.

Autumn had almost arrived at the Dancing Winnebagos R.V. Park, a dusty slice of paradise beneath a grove of old cottonwood trees that lined Jackrabbit Creek in the southeastern corner of the state. Along with slightly less hot temperatures there was a whole new monkey troop of oddballs. However, unlike the harem of golden-oldie babes who had danced through the park last spring or the pretty flock of summer bird watchers, there were more Y chromosomes in this new bunch.

A couple of weeks ago, the University of Arizona’s Anthropology Department had rolled into the R.V. park, filling several camper and tent sites. Since the cave dwellings they were excavating had been discovered in a mine belonging to Ruby, she had given them a discount on their weekly rent. In return, she had a steady income—something the park hadn’t seen in a long time.

Unfortunately, the traffic was overworking the plumbing in the only set of restrooms at the back of the campground. That had spurred Gramps to build more, seeming to forget he was more of a crotchety old rooster these days than a spring chicken.

About the time he’d started pouring the cement, Ruby had called Claire. Growing up,

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Claire had spent summers working for Gramps's general contracting business. A jack of all trades and master of absolutely none, Claire knew enough plumbing and carpentry to act as Gramps's second in command. She also happened to be unemployed—again.

Claire grabbed a handful of nails from the pocket of her tool belt and held them up to Gramps. "I told Ronnie she could stay because she's your granddaughter."

He pointed the hammer at her. "But she's *your* sister. That makes her one step closer in blood to you than me. She needs to stay put right where she is—with you."

Shielding her eyes, Claire glared at the ornery cuss on the ladder. "Ronnie has been staying with me for almost a month now in case you've forgotten." Her older sister had been the source of several rumbles between Claire and her boyfriend, Mac, whose house the three of them were sharing. "It's someone else's turn to chauffeur her around like she's Miss Daisy."

Since arriving in Tucson, Ronnie had been blowing her money on a silly post-divorce makeover. She'd had her salon-blond hair dyed back to brown and trimmed into shoulder-length curls. She'd even bought vanity contacts to make her 20-20 brown eyes blue, which put the old song by Crystal Gayle in Claire's head whenever Ronnie wore them.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, Claire, but Jackrabbit Junction doesn't have any of those fancy spa places Ronnie likes to go to."

She snorted. "No shit."

Gramps took off his faded U.S. Army hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. "The last thing I need right now is another pain-in-the-ass female nagging me to take her to town."

"Ruby can take Ronnie to Yuccaville. It could be a weekly girls' day out."

Gramps grunted. "Ronnie is *your* problem. We have our hands full with a teenager whose father is scrambling her brains."

Far from done with her campaign to get her older sister out of her hair, Claire let him change the subject. "Jess is giving you grief, huh?"

Gramps's new wife had come with some hormone-laden baggage—a sixteen-year-old whose biological father had opted to pay child support in lieu of doling out love and attention.

"It's not really Jess's fault." Gramps pounded in another nail. "Her dad is getting her all stirred up."

"Is he still ignoring her letters?"

"It's worse. He's writing back."

"What? Why the sudden interest?" Then it dawned on her. "Jess didn't tell him about the mine stocks, did she?"

Gramps grunted again.

"Damn." When was that red-haired, freckle-faced girl going to learn that talking about cash attracted all sorts of trouble? "Is he trying to get out of paying child support?"

Gramps banged away for several seconds, the echo ricocheting through the arroyo behind them. "He's trying to get Jess to come live with him."

"I thought his other kids were more important than her."

"So did he until his wife left him and decided to sue for custody. Rather than pay two sets of child support, he's set his sights on Jess moving in with him so Ruby has to pay him. Jess is convinced he's finally come around to wanting her in his life, and you know how hard it is to sell her any truths when it comes to that horse's ass."

"How's Ruby taking this?"

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“She curses and throws things when Jess isn’t around.”

Claire grimaced.

“He says he’s coming down here soon to spend some time getting to know Jess.”

“Wow, he’s not messing around now that there’s money in it for him, is he?”

“Nope.” Gramps pounded in another nail with three hard blows.

Two older women strolled past wearing tan University of Arizona shirts, khaki pants, and Aussie hats with air holes in the tops. Claire recognized them from the campground General Store and waved.

The two dressed like twins, but according to Jess, they were just lifelong friends. They had lobbied Jess to join them at the site to learn all about archaeological digs. Claire had them pegged for volunteers, here to help the university catalog the cave dweller remains. Jess waged her bet on the two being visiting professors partly due to their age, but mainly because they kept trying to teach her stuff she had no desire to learn.

Claire waited until they were out of earshot before turning back to Gramps. “All of these new people around here make me nervous.”

“You’re paranoid.” He held out his hand for more nails. “Too much of that schooling you’ve had over the years has stirred up your brains.”

“No, my schooling has made me more aware of the value of the ‘goods’ stashed in Ruby’s basement. You guys need to be more careful letting strangers in the house.”

“That’s a little tough since the store is attached to the house, Miss Big Brains.”

“Maybe you should install a door between the two. That old curtain has seen its day and the velvet stinks like cigar smoke thanks to you and your army cronies.”

“We’re not putting a door there.” He emphasized his statement with a hammer blow.

“Fine, but you and I know that Joe was up to a whole lot of no good.”

Joe was Ruby’s dead husband. He had gone out in a blaze of greasy potato chips and cigarettes that had stroked him and his brain into the grave. Asshole that he was, he’d left Ruby in a pile of debt without any life insurance. Earlier that spring, she would have lost everything if it hadn’t been for Claire’s curiosity, Mac’s help, and Gramps’s cash cushion.

Joe’s lousy leftovers hadn’t ended there. He’d spent decades not only fencing antiques and random black market gems but also stealing goods from other fencers. Not just any goods—sweet, pricey pieces that drew trouble, including the killing kind.

Claire’s latest concern was a golden pocket watch she’d found in a hidden wall safe in Joe’s basement office. Her gut said the watch would bring bad juju down on Gramps and Ruby. What sucked about all of the strangers milling around was how easy it would be for the boogeyman to blend in and sneak up on them.

“All I’m saying is—” A loud, yapping dog interrupted Claire. She knew that bark. “Gramps, your damned dog got loose again.”

Gramps’s spoiled beagle, Henry, lived for three things—to lick Gramps’s feet, eat sour cream and onion potato chips, and to disrespect Claire.

“Catch him before he heads over to that Fleetwood again.” Gramps pointed the hammer toward a camper with pink flamingo lights dangling from the porch awning. “That woman has a Shih Tzu the old boy’s crazy about.”

Claire scrambled around the back of the building frame. When she caught Henry, she was going to go all Shih Tzu on his bony little ass. She headed the ornery beagle off at the pass. “Gotcha!”

Henry screeched to a stop. Then he backed up a couple of steps, pawed the ground, and

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barked at her.

“Quiet, Henry!” Gramps yelled from his ladder post.

The dog circled and whined, his leash dragging behind him and then barked at Claire again.

She lunged for the leash and missed.

Henry zigged around her and zagged through the two-by-sixes making up the back wall of the structure.

Claire followed, reaching between the boards, coming up empty. She grunted in pain as her shoulder connected with a board.

“Quit horsing around, Claire, and grab him!”

“I’m trying!”

Henry rounded the corner of the building with Claire on his tail—or at least reaching for it. She tried to step on the leash and missed.

“Damn it, girl! You’re gonna lose him.”

Cursing, she lunged again, sliding up to where Gramps stood on his makeshift watch tower.

“Quit your bitching and grab him.”

She caught the leash as Henry dodged under the ladder. “Got him!”

Henry turned and leapt back between the rungs, wrapping the leash around the foot of the ladder. He tried to sprint to freedom, but Claire held the leash tight. “No you don’t, you little bugger.”

“Claire!” Gramps’s voice sounded shaky.

She looked up as the ladder tilted to the side, teetering.

“Hold on!” Letting go of the leash, she grabbed for the ladder ... too late.

She watched, cringing as Gramps flailed through the air and landed with a crunching sound on the hard, dry ground.

“Oh, shit!” Claire covered her mouth.

Gramps’s hammer bounced and came to rest on the dirt next to him.