



Ann Charles

THE ROWDY COYOTE RUMBLE

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Will Rogers once said, “If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging.” Unfortunately for Claire Morgan, she wasn’t the one holding the shovel. With her two sisters both digging away, one fueled by paranoia, the other by temporary insanity, Hell couldn’t be more than a few shovelfuls away.

But until the flames of Hell started burning her toes, Claire had a campground to prep for the flocks of snowbirds heading south. A few white-haired birdies had already rolled into the Dancing Winnebagos R.V. Park and set up for the season, motivating her to get her ass in gear. But first, her grandfather wanted to talk to her about something ...

Claire slid onto a barstool at The Shaft, the one and only watering hole in the dusty two-bit town of Jackrabbit Junction, Arizona.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said over the sound of Glen Campbell singing about how great Southern nights were. She preferred the cool desert evenings topped with a blanket of stars herself.

From the next stool over, her grandfather grunted in reply. He pushed a foam-topped mug of beer toward her. “I saved you a drink.”

“Thanks.” Claire took a swig, grimacing at the bitterness. Too hoppy for her taste, but she was never one to turn down free beer. Wiping off a foam mustache on the collar of the jean jacket she wore over her Tijuana Toads T-shirt, she glanced around the bar. “Where’s Kate?”

She searched for her younger sister’s blonde head over the sea of cowboy hats and baseball caps bobbing and wobbling under the dim lights. She found Kate in the corner, delivering a pitcher of beer to a table surrounded by dirt-crust-ed men in orange road-crew garb. Several of them flirted openly, trying to peek down her sister’s black blouse while she refilled their glasses.

Kate had been a hit with the guys since she’d blossomed back in junior high. She was a graceful willow whereas Claire was more of a sturdy oak with knobs. To top it off, Kate had the kind of blonde hair about which men wrote silly poems that mentioned “straw” and “sunshine.”

In Claire’s opinion, straw smelled musty and too much sunshine caused melanoma. But she loved her younger sister enough to go to jail for her ... more than once. Way more than once, actually, and that was what had Claire feeling anxious tonight.

“She’s doing her job,” Gramps answered. “Why? What’s got your eye twitching like that?”

Claire leaned closer to Gramps. Even though her sister was too far away to hear what she was about to say, she didn’t want to take any chances. “Kate’s flywheel is off balance.”

Gramps’s skin scrunched all the way up his bald head. “Her flywheel?” He set his beer down. “I thought she got her Volvo back from the garage last month all spit-shined and

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dent-free again.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Claire leaned in again, changing her tactic. “Her nail gun is misfiring.” She spoke his language this time.

Gramps had retired a few years ago, selling off his contracting business up in the Black Hills of South Dakota before heading down to the land of sunshine, dust, and huge creepy insects. He knew cars, but he knew construction better.

“Nail gun? You mean one of those doohickeys you girls use to paint your toenails at the salon?”

Claire wrinkled her upper lip. “When was the last time I visited a salon?”

“How should I know? I’m not your beauty consultant.”

“Gramps, I’m a handywoman, not a hand model.” She snorted into her beer. “Beauty consultant. You’ve been playing cards with your daughter too much.”

“Speaking of your mother,” he started.

Claire set her beer down on the bar with a clunk. “What I’m trying to say is that Kate’s ‘shooting the moon alone’ with a handful of nines and tens.” Since the old grump ate, slept, and breathed Bid Euchre along with his Army cronies, he should be able to figure out that euphemism.

Gramps stared at her, his light blue eyes shadowed under his crinkled brow. “What’s wrong with you tonight, child? Did you hit yourself in the head with a hammer again fixing that back fence?”

“You’re being a real buzzkill,” she pointed at her half-full glass, “and I haven’t even finished my first beer yet.”

“Just speak plain old English.”

“Fine. Kate’s gone *loca*.”

“That’s not plain English.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Is this about that mess you two got into on Halloween up in Deadwood?”

“How’d you hear about that?”

As far as Claire knew, only three people had any inside information about her field trip to the Deadwood cop shop: her, Kate, and Mac whom Claire had called to put money in her bank account in case she had needed to bail out Kate “the Bruiser.” Thankfully, Mac hadn’t asked too many questions that night on the phone. After seven months of sharing Claire’s bed, he’d learned that sometimes it was better to give her the money and save the questions for when hard liquor was plentiful.

Gramps shrugged. “Jackrabbit Junction is a small town.”

It dawned on Claire who had done the snitching. She should have figured Kate would panic and call the third musketeer. “Yeah, and Ronnie has a big-ass mouth.” Her older sister always had been a first rate tattletale when it had come to keeping secrets from their grandfather.

“Ronnie was only concerned you might need some cash to get sprung from cellblock C.”

“Cellblock C?”

“You know,” Gramps smirked at her, “where they keep the other *clowns* who are dumb enough to tag team up on a bartender.”

“Kate should’ve known better than to call Ronnie,” Claire muttered. “She’d have been better off calling Butch.”

“I thought they weren’t snogging anymore.”

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Claire gaped at her grandfather. “Did you just use the word *snogging*?”

“What? I thought that’s what you kids call sex these days.”

“No, snogging is mostly just kissing.” She chuckled. “You’ve been hanging around your stepdaughter too much.”

Gramps’s fifteen year younger new wife came with a “plus one,” as in a sixteen-year-old daughter who was going on twenty. Poor Gramps hadn’t had a moment’s peace since he said “I do.”

“That teenager won’t leave my side lately,” he told Claire. “She’s more dogged than a shadow and won’t shut up to save her damned life,” he grumbled into his beer before tipping back another mouthful. “I’ll tell you what else. That rotten, no-good father of hers has only managed to make things worse since he dragged his sorry ass down here and started trying to bribe her to come live with him. We all know that he only wants her for the money that comes with custody of her. If this was the Old West, I’d have him dance to my six gun all of the way to the state line, and then shoot ‘em up for another ten miles for good measure.”

“That scum needs a kick in the pants,” Claire agreed.

“I’ve got the perfect steel-toed boots for the job.” Gramps scowled. “So are Katie and Butch dating anymore or not?”

“Well, the official answer is ‘not’ if you ask Kate.”

“But unofficially?”

“Unofficially, she’s being a hard-headed nincompoop and insists she will not force him into a relationship that exists only because she’s carrying his baby.”

“That’s a different tack than what your mother took when she got pregnant with Ronnie.”

“And look where that got Mom and Dad.” A lot of yelling and screaming throughout the years, along with plenty of bitterness and misery, finally ending in a nasty divorce.

“Speaking of your mother and her—” he started again.

“I see Kate’s point, but she’s not giving Butch a chance to change her mind about him.”

Claire lowered her voice as her sister headed in their direction. “On top of it all, she’s totally crazy now thanks to those pregnancy hormones.”

“Katie seems fine to me. She’s a little tired, that’s all.”

Crazy Kate joined them at the bar, her blonde hair escaping her chignon and dancing around her face like she’d recently jammed a bobby pin in a light socket. She turned their way after giving the bartender a drink order, several ink smudges crisscrossing her face. “Do you two see that silver-haired biker over there in the red stocking cap and white handlebar mustache?”

Claire glanced in the direction of Kate’s nod, zeroing in on the man in question. While he was built like a steel safe, block shouldered and square jawed, he seemed harmless enough, laughing with another biker who was probably traveling with him. “What about him?”

“Two words—polar bear.”

“Polar bear, huh?” Claire repeated, giving Gramps a see-what-I-mean stare.

“Yep. Dark brown eyes, big paw-like hands, and a Coca-Cola tattoo. Definitely fits.”

“That was only a marketing campaign for the beverage company. You realize that, right?” Claire asked the normally intelligent, rational Kate who was loading her tray with drinks.

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“He may seem like your everyday friendly biker, but he’s looking for trouble.” She hoisted the drink tray, shooting Claire a determined look. “Before the night is over, I’m gonna teach him a lesson about messing with the Morgan sisters.”

“Kate,” Claire warned.

“You got my back again, right?” Kate didn’t wait for Claire’s answer. She waded back into the flotsam and jetsam floating around on The Shaft’s dance floor, leaving Claire in a cloud of her sweet and fruity smelling perfume.

Ah, hell. Claire didn’t want to go to jail again. That would be twice in a week. A new record.

“See that right there,” Claire pointed her thumb behind her in the general direction Kate had gone. “That is batshit crazy. We need an intervention or a séance or some kind of exorcism before her head spins completely off.”

“She’s pregnant,” Gramps said, as if that gave Kate a total right of way to the Insanity Express Lane.

“I know, but that’s a baby inside of her, not some demon spawn. I can’t believe I’m the only one worried about this.”

“I need to hit the latrine.” Gramps pushed back from the bar. “Don’t go getting into any fights while I’m gone.”

“If I do, it’s Kate’s fault.”

Gramps hobbled off toward the bathroom, his mending leg no longer requiring a crutch but still slowing him down.

Claire stared up at the bull horns nailed to the wall above the liquor lining the shelves behind the bar. When Butch got home from his trip to that classic car auction in El Paso, he’d better throw a lasso on his woman and get her under control or Claire was going to ...

“What’re you doing?” Her older sister, Ronnie, interrupted her plans for locking crazy Kate away in the back of Gramps’s Winnebago for the next seven to eight full moons.

“What am I doing?” Claire pointed at her glass. “I’m drinking a beer with Gramps.”

She looked Ronnie up and down, noticing there were no beer or food stains on her sister’s pink tunic and white capris, nor an order pad tucked away anywhere. Ronnie’s shoulder-length brown locks curled around her face making her look cool and classy compared to Kate, who appeared to have been dragged behind a horse for a half mile at some point tonight.

“Why aren’t you helping Kate wait tables?” Claire asked, irritation mounting. She was tired of always feeling like ruffled sheets around her sleek, perfectly creased older sister. “She’s pregnant for crissake.”

“Only eight weeks pregnant, not eight months.”

Claire scoffed. “Some fine sister you are.”

There was a distinct tightening of Ronnie’s glossed lips. “I don’t see you getting off your butt to help her.”

“I’m here by appointment,” Claire said. “Besides, I helped her open the place this morning.”

“Well, not that it’s any of your business, Miss Pissy, but I’ve been helping her, too, for most of the evening. Then I got a call from Butch and needed to take it in his office.”

“Butch called *you*?”

“I believe that’s what I said. Are your ears stuffed with tumbleweeds? Or did you clock yourself in the head with a hammer again?”

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“Shut it.” Sheesh, one miscalculated swing and everybody had a heyday with the wisecracks. “Why did Butch call you instead of Kate?”

“Because I’m helping him with his bookkeeping.”

Claire about fell off her barstool. “Since when?”

“Since Kate and you went up to South Dakota. I went to his office the day after you two left to chew him out about his responsibility as a soon-to-be-father. While I was there he offered me a bookkeeping job. So I took it.”

Tipping her head back, Claire let out a gut roll of laughter. “Well,” she said still snickering, “it sounds like you really gave him a talking to in that meeting.”

“Take your sarcasm and shove it up your ying-yang.” Ronnie used one of their childhood insults.

“Remind me, where exactly is my ying-yang?”

“I needed a job, you ninny.” Her sister nailed her with a squint. “With this gig I can keep an eye on the wallet of Katie’s baby-daddy in case she changes her mind about raising the kid on her own and decides to take Butch to court for child support.”

Actually, that was a pretty smart chess move. “I thought Butch had a bookkeeper.”

“No, he has an accountant, but with all of his traveling lately, he’s getting behind on paperwork and needs help. Katie told him about my organizational skills and he hired me on the spot.”

“Organizational skills?” She grinned at her older sister. “You mean your ability to sort your costume jewelry according to stone color?”

Ronnie pulled Claire’s hair in response.

“Ouch! Not so hard, you oaf.” Claire smacked Ronnie’s hand away as she tried to grab and pull again. “Seriously, does Butch know about your ex-husband’s money laundering skills and current prison sentence?”

“That dickhead was never officially my husband.”

“You’re splitting hairs.”

“Just because I was unofficially married to a lousy, no-good thief doesn’t mean I’m going to cook Butch’s books.”

“I’m sure you won’t. I was only curious what Kate has spilled about your current situation to Butch.”

As in Ronnie’s position way up shit creek thanks to her ex-husband skimming the money he’d laundered and sniffing it up his nose in the form of cocaine. According to the FBI, those goons he had stolen from were now coming for Ronnie, because they somehow had gotten the idea she knew where he’d hidden the dough. Unfortunately, there was no dough, and the only thing that had saved Ronnie from being in debt up to her zirconium earrings was nothing had been put in her name. Her lack of money didn’t matter to the men who wanted their pound of flesh, though. Her skin would do just fine.

Ronnie slid onto Gramps’s stool and spoke close to Claire’s ear. “Did you find out anything about the diamonds yet?”

“No, not yet.”

The diamonds Ronnie was talking about were goodies she had skimmed from a pair of rare artifact smuggling “mules.” The two mules had been staying at the R.V. park a month ago, helping an archaeology crew excavate one of their new step-grandmother’s mines. It seemed Ronnie had learned a thing or two from her ex-husband about *borrowing* from criminals.

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Then again, maybe she hadn't learned from her ex's mistakes, because now Claire had more to worry about than the goons coming for Ronnie. Now she had to worry about someone coming for those missing diamonds, too.

Claire glanced around the bar, suspicious of anyone staring at her and Ronnie too long. "I told you not to mention those stones in public."

Ronnie's brown eyes widened. She scoped out the room. "You think someone in here is dirty?"

Downing her glass of beer, Claire scowled. "Yeah, I think most of the guys in here are dirty, especially those road crew workers. Stop looking so paranoid, you spaz."

"I'm not paranoid."

"Please. You think any man who looks at you is going to kidnap you and torture you for information on your ex's hiding places when all they're really doing is checking out your hooters?"

"Hooters? Nice language. Kiss your new grandmother with that mouth?"

"Only on the cheek." Claire patted Ronnie on the forearm. "You know the first step to recovery is admitting you suffer from the affliction. Gramps told me you put up a trip wire alarm around his Winnebago last week while Kate and I were gone."

"I was only being cautious."

"The alarm woke up the whole R.V. park."

"It wasn't my fault Gramps's dog slipped his collar and came to visit me."

That damned beagle would have given Houdini a run for his money. "What about the eight canisters of pepper spray you have all over the Winnebago?"

"You never know when a grizzly bear might cross your path on the way to the bathroom in the middle of the night."

"There are no bears in Jackrabbit Junction." Well, except for Kate's polar bear.

Ronnie shrugged. "You don't know that for certain."

"I'm 99.9 percent positive. Besides, Gramps's R.V. has a bathroom."

"It could be occupied."

"At two in the morning?" Claire shook her head, dumbfounded. Was something in the water around here making everyone wacky?