



Ann Charles

RATTLING THE IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Saturday, December 1st
Deadwood, South Dakota

In my world, police detectives came in two flavors: Acidic Asshole and Bitter Butthead. On this cold, windy afternoon, I had the molar-grinding task of house hunting with ...

“You’re speeding again, Parker,” Detective Cooper barked from the passenger seat of my Honda Pilot.

Right turn, Clyde, I heard Clint Eastwood’s voice in my head. I clenched my right fist and imagined slamming it into Cooper’s left cheek. But common sense prevailed before I followed in the steps of the orangutan from *Every Which Way But Loose*.

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that punching an officer of the law would most likely land me in a heap of trouble ... if not jail. The probability of being slapped with an assault charge was even higher with this particular detective since I’d “accidentally” broken his nose a few months ago, and he was still clinging to a grudge about that teeny-tiny incident. The big baby.

“Relax, Detective.” I spoke through gritted teeth. “I’m only going thirty-five.”

“That’s ten over the limit for this neighborhood. Slow down.”

Detective Cooper and I had a colorful history filled with blackened eyes, blue bruises, and red welts. Months ago, as payback for breaking his nose, the jerk had thrown me in jail. He’d denied that one was related to the other, but since his nose was still bent out of shape and bandaged when he slapped the cuffs on me, leaving my wrists battered along with my reputation, I had my doubts.

Since then, he and I had exchanged plenty of insults and a healthy amount of swearing, but we’d managed to find some common ground, too. For example, besides my acting in his best interest as his Realtor, we shared a partiality for Doc Nyce, my boyfriend and Cooper’s current roommate. We’d also bonded over a mutual loathing for Cooper’s current crime-solving partner, Detective Stone Hawke.

Unlike Cooper, who was a decent detective except when he was harping on me for something that wasn’t my fault, Hawke was a pen-clicking, brown-nosing dipshit who’d most recently mistaken me for a witch. Not the nice, sexy sort of witch either. More like the wart-covered, spell-casting type with knowledge of mind-altering potions and disfiguring hexes. I wasn’t sure if this included flying broomsticks, but most days I wouldn’t put it past Detective Doofus.

I slowed to thirty miles per hour, but that was as far as I was going to bend for Cooper this afternoon. “Are you telling me that you always do the speed limit?”

“Unless I’m in pursuit.”

A guffaw came from the back seat. I looked in the rearview mirror at Cooper’s uncle, old man Harvey, who was tagging along today to keep me out of trouble. The buzzard knew me

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too well when it came to his bristly nephew and my daydreams about jumping on Cooper's back and pummeling him with a rubber chicken.

"That's a whole lotta corral dust, Coop," Harvey said.

Corral dust? That was a new one for me. Harvey had a way of speaking that often left me either scratching my head or fanning my cheeks.

"I've seen you rip-roarin' through town, tearin' up the streets without your cherry lit too many times to recall."

After shooting his uncle a glare, Cooper pointed at my speedometer. "Slow down, Parker, or I'll give you a speeding ticket."

I batted Cooper's hand away. "You can't give me a ticket when you're not on duty. Hell, you're not even wearing a tie or one of those bulky police utility belts." Not to mention his short blond hair looked like he'd been trying to tear it out tuft by tuft.

Surely he'd already clocked out when I'd picked him up at the station a couple of hours ago to find a new place to call home-sweet-home. His house up in Lead was in the process of being sold, thank God. As far as I was concerned, moving Cooper out of my boyfriend's house couldn't happen soon enough. I preferred my morning-after cups of coffee with cream and sugar, not scowls and interrogations from a rigid-jawed, Daniel Craig doppelganger.

"I'm always on duty, Parker. That's something you should remember the next time you plan to break the law at one of my crime scenes."

A snicker came from behind me. "It's hard to belly through the brush when the law is planted in yer front seat, Sparky."

I slowed and pulled as far to the right as possible on the steep hillside located above Main Street while a Chevy pickup rattled past. It continued down Star Street, taking the branch onto Centennial Avenue toward downtown.

"You're one to talk," I told the old man in the mirror.

"What? I shoot straight every day, don't I, boy?" When Cooper didn't answer, Harvey reached forward and flicked his nephew's ear.

The squint Cooper aimed at his uncle would have sizzled the backside of a less ornery rooster, but after years of hanging around his nephew, Harvey had a nonflammable set of tail feathers.

"Keep it up, Uncle Willis, and I'll shoot straight, too—right at your big toe."

I pinched my lips together to keep from grinning when Cooper's focus centered on me for several seconds before returning to the windshield again.

"What's got ya so bugged up this afternoon, boy?" Harvey asked as I hit the gas and steered away from the hillside. "You should be nicer to poor Sparky. She's tryin' to help git ya situated in some new digs."

"Your uncle's right. All I want to do is warm the cockles of your heart. You know, that beating organ in your chest that's coated with glass shards and wrapped in barbed wire?"

Cooper smirked at me. That was the closest he'd come to a smile since he'd crawled into the cab with me and unzipped his leather coat. "When did you start letting Uncle Willis call you 'Sparky'?"

Harvey had taken a shine to the nickname I'd earned from the captain of Deadwood's fire department after numerous multiple-alarm incidents that also weren't my fault.

I shrugged. "I've given up on telling him to stop. You know as well as I do when it comes to your uncle that sometimes it's easier to let him do his thing."

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“You can borrow money on that,” Harvey agreed.

“You shouldn’t encourage my uncle. It only makes him more incorrigible.”

“Me?” I frowned at Cooper. “What about those illegal traps out at his ranch that you keep pretending he doesn’t have?”

A sputtering sound came from the back seat. “Ain’t a man allowed to defend his property anymore in this country?”

“What do you call Bessie?” Cooper asked.

Harvey had named his favorite shotgun after a cow. At least I’d always figured he borrowed the name from a cow. Maybe it came from an old flame. Harvey had enough of those flickering around the Black Hills to keep the fire department hopping.

“Bessie is my peacekeeper,” Harvey explained. “But she ain’t enough to scare off those damned Slagton whangdoodles on a dark night. I’ve been shoppin’ for a cannon online.”

Cooper made a choking sound. “I’d advise against it.”

“A cannon?!” I gaped at Harvey in the mirror. “Who do you think you are? Yosemite Sam?”

“I’m a Hessian without no aggression,” Harvey said, quoting Sam.

Chuckling, I slowed to a stop in front of one of my coworkers’ new listings—a three-bedroom, two-story house built in the early 1900s high in the Forest Hill neighborhood. The roof of one of my listings, the Galena House, was visible through the bare cottonwood branches below us.

The cottage-style house out my window had been renovated recently inside and out, according to Ben Underhill, my male counterpart at Calamity Jane Realty. The updates were clear to see in spite of the growing gloom as dark clouds moved into the gulch. From the black shutters bracketing the windows to the fresh coat of gray paint with white trim on the gables and porch railing, the place looked spiffed up and ready for a new owner. I figured Cooper would like the lack of color on the exterior since his current bungalow was filled with black furniture, white curtains, and plenty of steel-gray firearms.

Cooper stared at the house, his face lined with craggy ridges. I’d seen a similar profile on a PBS show last week showcasing Ansel Adams’ monochrome photograph of Manly Beacon in Death Valley National Park.

“What do you think?” I asked, letting my Honda idle. It was too dang cold to make the short hike up to the front door if he wasn’t interested in the property. “It sort of looks like a storybook house, don’t you think? Especially with that curly design detail at the apex of the gable.”

“Curly design?” Cooper raised one eyebrow. “Do I look like the type of guy into curly things?” His gaze moved to my curly blond hair. “You have me confused with Nyce.”

I bared my teeth at him. “Don’t start with my hair today, Cooper. I won’t be held responsible for my retaliation if you do, which may include a windmill maneuver or two.”

A smile cracked his expression. The sight of it had me reaching for the door handle in case it was really a precursor to his biting me. “I could use a good laugh, Parker, especially after the bullshit going on at work.”

What was going on at the police station? Was that why Cooper was being extra bristly this afternoon? Did it have anything to do with me? Detective Hawke? Both of us? Or had someone else turned up dead? Someone not linked to me for once. Wouldn’t that be a treat—not that I wanted someone to die, but a distraction from my trail of suspicious crumbs would be good.

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“That rock wall looks purty solid,” Harvey interrupted, his nose pressed against the window. “Ya reckon they’ve fortified it recently? A couple decades ago they had a whoppin’ bunch of problems with the walls crumblin’ on this here hillside after the snow melted.”

Cooper’s focus shifted back to the house. “Since we’re here, we might as well check it out.”

Or ... we could return to the police station and I could shove him out the door as I detoured through the parking lot on my way home to Aunt Zoe’s kitchen and her cookie jar filled with lemon drop cookies. Personally, the cookies sounded like a better choice to me.

He opened his door, letting the freezing wind inside. “Let’s go, Parker.”

Unfortunately, the lemon drops would have to wait. I killed the engine, careful not to let the wind catch my door and slam it into the retaining wall Harvey had been admiring. The wind nipped at my long corduroy skirt, hurrying me along. By the time I made it to the porch steps, it had torn some of my curls free from the bobby pins I’d used this morning to keep it from morphing into an eagle’s nest. Tiny pellets of ice peppered my cheeks as I climbed the steps. My fingers shook when I fished the key from the lockbox. I’d like to blame the cold for my trembling, but I had a feeling the stress of sitting so close to Detective Cooper this afternoon, putting up with his nit-picking about my speeding and more, was strumming my nerves.

“Hurry up, girl.” Harvey pulled his sheepskin coat tight around his neck. “It’s colder than Jack Frost’s balls out here.”

After pausing to wrinkle my nose at him and remind him of my new decree about his refraining from testicle-talk around me, I pushed open the door and led the way inside.

The house smelled like a mixture of old varnish and new paint. The heat had been turned down since the owners lived on the other side of the state, so I kept my red pea coat buttoned—all except for the missing one in the middle that my daughter’s stupid pet chicken had undoubtedly stolen again.

Slipping off my boots, I grabbed two pair of booties from the basket on the sideboard and held them out for Cooper and Harvey. Both men looked at the shoe-coverings as if they were slimy and squirming.

“What? If you want to see the place, we have to abide by the rules. You know all about rules, remember, Detective? You were blathering on and on about obeying them all the way here.”

With a wrinkled upper lip, he snatched the booties from my hand and slipped them on over his black cowboy boots. When Harvey still bucked me, I pointed at his feet. “Harvey, those shit-kickers look fresh from the pasture. Put the damned booties on or you’re waiting outside in the cold.”

Cooper pushed past me as I waited for Harvey to take the coverings. The clump of the detective’s heels on the hardwood flooring was muffled by the booties as he moved toward what appeared to be the dining room.

As soon as I made sure Harvey had his booties in place, I sought out Cooper. He’d apparently bypassed the dining room with its gorgeous maple crown molding and lace curtains and headed for the kitchen. The modern appliances, wood floor, and can lighting gave it a warm, homey feel. Cooper, however, was too busy opening and closing the doors of the double oven to focus on his inner comforts.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Perfect for Christmas dinner, right?” Did Cooper even bake? I should ask Doc since he’d been sharing kitchen space with Cooper for over a month.

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I knew from first-hand experience that Cooper's uncle baked. Harvey could give Betty Crocker a run for her money if she weren't a figment of fiction. His cooking was so delicious that I'd asked him to marry me in an effort to keep him cooking for me and my two kids until death did us part, but the bachelor refused to even consider it, saying I was too much work.

"The oven door creaks." Cooper demonstrated the issue for me.

"I'll come over and oil it once a week for you."

"The counters are low."

"They're standard height. Have you considered that maybe you're too tall in those boots?"

"The can lights are spaced too closely."

I was beginning to think I'd have better luck catching raindrops with a fishnet than finding Cooper a damned house.

"So, we've determined that the kitchen is not up to your standards." Neither were the last two kitchens we'd toured, nor the bathrooms, the bedrooms, or the garages—especially not the garages where he planned to keep his prized Harley Davidson. "Do you want to look at the rest of the house or call it a day?" *Please say call it a day.*

He walked away without answering, heading through an archway into what looked like a living room. I stayed put, not really interested in hearing his list of complaints about the rest of the house. I'd plumb run out of give-a-damn about twenty minutes ago.

Harvey grunted from the doorway. "Somebody must've put a horse chestnut on his chair this mornin'."

Or was hanging around with me making him snarl more than usual this afternoon? Cooper and I rarely spent even ten minutes in each other's company without ramming our horns together. "I vote we throw down our cards and try another hand at this game when he's not so irritable."

"I don't know." Harvey combed his beard with his fingers. "The Rocky Mountains will probably go flat before then. Although we could try gettin' him a fine heifer. Nothin' like a pair of grippin' hips and a full rack to smooth out a man's burrs."

I let his "grippin' hips" comment go without an eye-roll because he'd spurred an idea for a way to make my next house-shopping trip with Cooper less scratchy. I needed a distraction for the detective, and I had just the girl for the job—my best friend since childhood, Natalie Beals.

According to Natalie, Cooper and she had shared a brief but heated history, as in one evening at the Purple Door Saloon where some heavy flirting apparently took place. But then work had interfered and Cooper turned back into the tin man, minus the desire to find a heart. Recently, however, the tables had turned, and now Cooper was often pawing at the ground whenever she was around. Natalie, on the other hand, was in the midst of a sabbatical from men and appeared to be oblivious that the detective's hot-for-her-bod feelings had returned tenfold.

I was in the process of planning how I could trick Natalie into joining us on our next house-hunting trip when Cooper backed into the kitchen and tried to run me over. His boot heel came down on my sock-covered toes, making me howl and shove him away.

"Watch where you're stepping, Cooper." I hopped on one foot while I rubbed my toes.

"Uh, Sparky." Harvey pointed at his nephew. "I reckon his knees are about to turn to puddin'."

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Harvey was right. The detective had backed as far as the kitchen counter would allow, his face noticeably pale, eyes wide. “Are you okay, Cooper?”

He stared at the archway leading to the living room. “Do you see that?”

Harvey and I both turned to look, peering into the room filled with long afternoon shadows. “See what?”

“That ... that ...” He shook out of his trance-like stare and scoured my face, searching for what, I had no idea. I smiled, or at least I tried to, but since my toes were still throbbing it probably came out wrinkled.

Dark red circles bloomed on Cooper’s pale cheeks. His eyes narrowed. “Damn you, Parker!” With a litany of cursing, he strode out of the kitchen, slamming the front door in his wake.

I turned to Harvey. “What did I do?”

“For one thing, yer breathin’. That alone pisses off Coop most days. Then there’s yer crazy hair ...”

“You leave my hair out of this, old man.” I frowned toward the archway, wondering what the detective had seen in the living room. I tiptoed over and peeked into the room.

Someone breathed down the back of my neck and then snorted.

“Looks like a plain old livin’ room to me,” said the heavy breather. “Only thing odd is the TV.”

“What TV?” I didn’t see one.

“That’s what I mean. It’s missin’. Who doesn’t have a TV these days?”

I sniffed to see if I could smell anything unnatural. Doc had taught me that trick months ago, only he was a mental medium who could sense ghosts at a mere sniff. His abilities were actually much more complicated than just being able to “smell” ghosts, but for a lack of a more thorough paranormal vocabulary, I stuck to the basics.

While my boyfriend had an ability to interact with the ectoplasmic crowd, I normally couldn’t even sense a ghost when it was standing inside of my skin, hiding behind my face. A creepy dead prostitute had actually tested that for me one time, and it still gave me goosebumps.

After tossing a shrug back and forth, Harvey and I headed for the front door. I collected his booties and slipped into my boots. Cooper must have stormed out with his booties still on—a parting gift from Ben and his client.

We found the surly detective leaning against the hood of my SUV, not a bootie to be found.

I held my tongue until we’d all climbed inside, escaping the wind. “Care to explain your damning me back there, Detective?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What’d ya see in there, boy?” Harvey asked, rubbing his hands together in between blowing on them. “A ghost?”

Cooper squeezed the bridge of his slightly crooked nose. “It was nothing, Uncle Willis. Just shadows messing with my head.”

Shadows, huh? Right.

I chewed on my lower lip, wondering if I should play parapsychologist and dig deeper into the truth of what Cooper had seen in the living room. Guilt tied my tongue, though.

Recently, the detective had attended a séance where he was given the job of keeping an eye on me while I was “under.” Being the diligent cop that he was, Cooper had trailed me

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when I left the group and he'd been plowed down by a ghost.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't just any ghost, but a very powerful and twisted one.

And I suppose it could be said that he wasn't merely plowed down, more like blasted clear through by the evil presence.

Also, there was a *slight* chance that I was partly to blame since I had been the one who accidentally conjured this nasty being somehow, but those details were insignificant at the moment.

The main thing was that Cooper was now sort of seeing ghosts, whether he wanted to or not. Judging by his reaction to whatever was floating around inside of the house, he was still in the "not" category.

Doc had prophesized that the detective wouldn't accept this newfound ability without a fight, and Cooper had proved him right to date. Every time Harvey prodded his nephew about catching sight of "wispy folks," Cooper dug in his boot heels and came up with a laundry list of excuses for what he must have seen.

The shock of having this new ghost vision had apparently shifted to denial. How long he could keep pretending ghosts weren't real was a worry that those of us who knew him best debated behind his back. Doc's concern was that Cooper's rigid mind might break instead of bend. My worry was that if he *did* snap, he'd blame me and fill me full of holes for dragging him into my chaotic world.

"So." I decided to change the subject from ghosts. "I take it that's a 'No' on this house."

His wrinkled upper lip was my answer. I pulled out a sheet of listings I had brought along with several circled. "You sure you don't want to move to the country? I have a couple of properties that match your want-list about five miles out of town."

When Cooper had first hired me to sell his place up in Lead, he'd told me he wanted to move to the country, far away from the civilians he protected day and night. But he'd had a change of heart since then.

I had to wonder if it was something to do with his job and all of the overtime he kept putting in; or with his friends who lived in town, including Doc and their other poker buddy, Deadwood's fire captain.

Then again, maybe it had to do with Natalie, who'd recently mentioned an interest in moving closer to Deadwood so she could hang around with me and my kids more. Cooper had been pretending to read the paper when she'd told me that, but I doubted he missed much when Natalie talked, let alone breathed, within the same four walls.

Cooper's phone rang before he could answer me. He pulled it out of his coat pocket and frowned down at the screen. "Shit." He held the phone to his ear. "Detective Cooper speaking."

I scanned my listings sheet again, checking if maybe one of the other agencies in the area had something on there that I'd overlooked.

"She's right here with me," Cooper said to whoever was on the phone.

I frowned at him, wondering who was asking. Was that Doc? If so, why hadn't he called me instead of Cooper? I pulled out my phone to see if I'd missed his call.

Nope, nothing from Doc.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Cooper's words were clipped.

I lowered my phone, my chest tightening. Harvey's wide blue eyes in the rearview mirror matched mine.

Cooper rubbed the back of his neck. "No. I need to come see it first."

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“See what?” I whispered, twisting my hands together.

He held up his index finger. “You’re overreacting, Hawke.”

My stomach tanked. Oh, no. What did Detective Hawke want with me now? The Columbo wanna-be had a real hard-on for the idea of seeing me behind bars. He really needed to get a hobby. Maybe I should give him a paint-by-numbers set for Christmas. Then again, numbers were pretty advanced for the blockhead. I should probably stick to something with shapes.

“I’ll be there in five minutes.” There was a pause, and then Cooper added, “No, I’ll be alone. We can discuss your theory after I take a look.”

He hung up without waiting for an answer from his partner. His eyes held mine, the lines on his forehead doubling and then tripling before I even got a word out.

“I didn’t do it. I swear.” I had no idea what I didn’t do, but I was sure I could come up with an alibi.

“What has Hawke all lathered up, boy?” When Cooper didn’t answer, Harvey leaned between the seats, prodding his nephew with a poke in the shoulder. “Spit it out. Yer scarin’ poor Sparky.”

“She should be scared.”

“Why? What happened? What did he say?” I rattled off, ending with, “I’m innocent.”

“I need you to drive me back to work, Parker. Detective Hawke claims to have learned of new evidence on Ms. Wolff’s murder case.”

Ms. Wolff was a previous resident of the Galena House, the old boarding house turned into apartments down the hill from where we were currently parked that I was trying to sell. She’d lived there for decades, I’d been told, much loved by the other residents from the past and present.

A month ago, however, Ms. Wolff had dialed my number out of the blue, told me I had to come see her immediately, called me something in German that later turned out to be the word for *Executioner*, and then hung up on me. After I’d shaken off my surprise, I’d fetched Harvey to go with me to visit her apartment. We’d shown up a short time later and found her dead and then some—she’d been decapitated.

What was even more bizarre, her head was shriveled up like a raisin and her body looked like a bunch of bones tossed into a wrinkled leather sack. Cooper had been less than thrilled to receive that phone call from us, adding yet another dead body to his stack of unsolved cases.

I shifted into reverse, backed into a nearby drive, and then headed down the hill to the police station.

“What sort of evidence?” I asked as we crossed Main Street. More important, “What’s it have to do with me?”

Maybe they’d found the missing picture of my son that had been stuck in Ms. Wolff’s mirror at the time we stumbled onto her body. Why my son’s picture had been slid in the dead woman’s bedroom mirror frame was a spine-chilling mystery that had not been solved yet by Detective Hawke and his clicking pen.

Cooper stared out the window, not making a comment on my speed, which was ten miles over the posted sign again. As we pulled into the police station parking lot, he finally answered, “All I can say for now is that it’s police business.”

“Dammit, boy! Ya can’t drop a bomb like that and then cover up yer mess with a load of horseshit about police business.”

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“I’m sorry,” he said to me more than his uncle. “Until I see what Detective Hawke claims to have found, that’s as much as I can tell you.”

I idled at the steps leading up to the cop shop’s front doors while Cooper climbed out of the SUV. A blast of wind plastered his coat against him, trying to take my door down the road with it.

He frowned at me. “Do me a favor, Parker. Keep this between the three of us and Nyce until I find out for certain what is going on.”

“Fine.”

“I mean it. Your aunt and Natalie are not on the need-to-know list. Understand?”

I pretended to cross my heart. Keeping tight-lipped that I had a detective potentially trying to pin a crime on me again was not a problem. It was almost quitting time, anyway. I planned to go back to work, check in with my boss, and then head home for supper—which I might drink my way through until I heard back from Cooper.

“How long will it take you to find out if I’m in some kind of trouble for something I didn’t do?” I asked him, refraining from adding an “again” to the end of my question since he was kind of on my side this time ... so far, anyway.

“I don’t know.” He rubbed his eyes. “But when I call, you’d better answer your damned phone.”