



Ann Charles

AN EX TO GRIND IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Just when I thought my career couldn't sink any deeper, some asshole flushed it down the toilet.

"Jerry had another one of his genius marketing ideas," I said into my cell phone. "He's decided he's going to make me a freaking reality TV star." I rattled off a drumroll of curses to my best friend on the other end of the call, in case she couldn't hear how pissed I was about this latest swirling mess.

A pair of skateboard-toting teenagers dragging their pant hems across the parking lot of Bighorn Billy's Diner gave me a pair of thumbs up on my medley of swear words. I waved back. I appreciated the positive reinforcement after spending the last hour choking down a burger with a side of my boss's newest promotion plan.

"No freaking way," Natalie replied without the emphasis such a disaster required.

I'd already used the word *freaking*. Was she paying attention? It didn't sound like it. Damn it, she needed to get her butt home from Arizona so that we could slam tequila shots over my current problem until we came up with a solution ... or passed out trying.

A cool fall breeze blew through the parking lot, fresh with the scent of pine trees. The Black Hills oozed pine perfume since they were covered from head to toe in the evergreens. The wind stole my warmth—but not my fire.

I pulled my thick sweater tighter around me, the faux-fur trim tickling my chin. "Nat, did you hear what I said? This is bad, like getting caught picking my nose on national TV bad."

Okay, so maybe it was only a regional television program, but it could muddle up my world like a paint can shaker at the hardware store. I kicked the tire of the Picklemobile, the old green dilapidated pickup that I was borrowing to get me from here to there until I could afford a new set of wheels.

"Jerry is determined to turn my career into a circus side show," I continued, "complete with clown hair and makeup. Next he'll have me swallowing swords. I'll be damned if ..."

"Wait, wait!" Natalie said, her voice louder, her attention finally mine. "You need to back the truck up and tell me how all this started."

Tell her how it started? Had her brain turned into a tumbleweed and rolled away into the desert? "My old boss was murdered, remember? Then her giant ex-husband rode in on Paul Bunyan's ox, took over Calamity Jane Realty, and turned me into a billboard bimbo."

I'd almost driven off Interstate 90 when I saw the billboard yesterday on my way down to Rapid City. There I stood, larger than life in that god-awful pink silk suit Jerry had bought me for the photo shoot. My blonde hair spiraled every which way and my lips glistened with a red coat so glossy it looked like I'd just finished sucking the blood from my last victim. As if that weren't enough to make me want to flee the state, the caption underneath my image made me scream loud enough to rattle the Picklemobile's windshield:

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*Looking for love in all the wrong houses?
Call Violet at Calamity Jane Realty. She'll show you a magical place you'll love coming home to
every night.*

"I know all of that, Violet," Natalie said, adopting the calming voice she'd used while talking me through delivering my twins into the world almost a decade ago. "I left the state, not the universe."

"After seeing that billboard, I'd like to leave the universe."

"The billboard isn't that bad. You look good with crazy curls."

"Liar. I look like a vampire poodle that just peed on an electric fence." I'd sent a picture of the billboard to her phone last night. She'd called back laughing so hard she could barely speak.

Natalie chuckled. "Anyway, what I meant was did Jerry explain why he thinks this will help your career and how soon they will begin filming?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to breathe through my anger before my skin turned green and I went on a rampage. "I don't know."

"You don't know the *why* or the *how* part?"

"Either. Both."

"Did he tell you about his idea over the phone?"

"No. He was sitting across the lunch table." All three of my coworkers had been there, too. Judging from their reactions, which ranged from a growl of disapproval to a gasp of surprise, none of us had expected this to be the reason Jerry had insisted on a work lunch meeting today.

"Were you daydreaming about Doc again at the time?" Natalie asked.

"Doc was the furthest thing from my mind," I fibbed.

Yes, my boyfriend had been on my mind throughout the meal, especially after last night, but not at the moment Jerry had dropped the bomb about the TV show. I wasn't going to admit that to Natalie, though. She said she was over the betrayal of my sleeping with Doc, but I wasn't entirely convinced by her "we're good" claim.

"Then how come you weren't paying better attention?"

"Old man Harvey sent me a text." I didn't elaborate that it was actually a picture of a dead cow. At least the bigger chunks appeared to be bovine—hooves, head, and sections of hide.

After my eyes had registered what I was seeing, it had taken me a few gulps of water to keep my burger and salad contained in my stomach. During the internal struggle not to vomit, I'd missed everything Jerry had been telling us.

"Harvey has a cell phone now?" Natalie asked. "That's gonna make him more dangerous to the local female population."

"Doc got it for him a few days ago."

"Why?"

"Because Harvey insisted he needed it to protect me better when Doc wasn't around."

"Jeez, Harvey's really taking this self-appointed bodyguard duty seriously."

"Yeah, well, after that creepy shit at the Opera House." And the even weirder stuff going on out at Harvey's ranch. "I don't mind the company and you're like five states away. When are you coming home?"

"I told you last night that I leave in a week. Do you still have Harvey's booby trap set up

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outside the back door?”

“No, Aunt Zoe made him take it down. She didn’t like having a stack of old truck batteries wired to her porch light.” A Deadwood police car slowed on the road in front of the diner. I ducked out of view behind the Picklemobile. “I can’t see this ending well.”

“You mean old man Harvey and his phone or Jerry and his big idea?”

“Both. If I didn’t have two kids to support, I’d ...” My phone beeped in my ear. “Hold on, Nat. I have another call.”

I looked at the screen. An unknown number with the local area code appeared. My finger hesitated over the IGNORE option. What if it was an emergency about one of my kids?

I accepted the call. “Hello?”

“Violet Parker?” a woman whispered with a hitch in her breath.

I plugged my other ear to block out the sound of passing traffic. “Yes?”

“I need to talk to you.” There was an accent there, but I couldn’t quite place it.

I pressed the phone harder against my ear. “Is this about a house to buy or sell?”

“It’s about what you are.”

What I was? I doubted she was referring to my status as a single parent with an ever-shrinking savings account. Maybe she’d heard about my ghost-loving reputation ... or seen my billboard. “Have we met?”

“*Nein, Scharfrichter.*” The engine growl from a passing diesel pickup made the caller’s words sound garbled.

“Nine what?” I asked.

“I must see you immediately. Come to the Galena House on Williams Street, apartment four. Knock seven times.”

Right now? “I’m kind of busy at the moment.”

I wasn’t finished venting to Natalie. Not to mention that I’d planned to head up the road to the grocery store after hanging up to grab a gallon of milk for the kids and a tub of peanut butter fudge ice cream for me. It was going to take more than a spoonful or three tonight to lull me into subordination so that I didn’t start my day tomorrow with a hard kick to Jerry’s shins.

“You will come now,” the woman said, louder, no longer whispering. “I will be dead soon.”

I blinked. “You what?”

“Do not delay!”

Sheesh! “Who is this?”

“I will be waiting.” She hung up, leaving me standing there coated with a layer of goosebumps.

I frowned down at my phone and then realized Natalie was still holding on the other line. “Nat? You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“That was really bizarre.”

“What? Did Harvey find another decapitated body?”

“No.” Well, yes, sort of, only the reverse being that there was a head but not much else, and the victim was a cow. But I didn’t want to think about that after that unnerving phone call. “It was some woman. She insisted on seeing me immediately.”

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“She didn’t say. She told me to meet her at the Galena House on Williams Street.”

“The old boarding house? You know that’s haunted, right?”

“Whatever.” I was tired of hearing how everything in this town was haunted.

“Maybe it was a ghost calling you.” She hummed the *Twilight Zone* theme in my ear.

I shivered, peering around the parking lot, feeling like I was lined up in someone’s crosshairs all of a sudden. “That would be just my luck.”

“Are you gonna go over there?” she asked.

“Yeah, I guess. She sounded desperate.” Or insane.

“Maybe you should call your bodyguard and have him go with you.”

“I think I can handle visiting a boarding house in broad daylight.”

“Fine, but you better call me tonight and tell me what she wanted.”

“Deal. Say ‘Hi’ to your cousins for me.”

“Will do. Be careful, loony-toon. You have a way of stumbling into the kind of trouble that ends with you standing waist deep in guns and bullets.”

Actually, firearms weren’t even cutting it these days.

The Picklemobile smelled like cinnamon and old grease. The former thanks to an air freshener I had hanging from the rearview mirror, the latter because it was an ancient truck that belonged to old man Harvey. It grumbled and hiccupped to a start, belching black smoke as it got humming, reminding me of its owner.

I thought more on Natalie’s warning as I twisted and turned my way into Deadwood and decided to give my bodyguard a call after all. I pulled into the lot across from the hospital and let the Picklemobile idle while the phone rang.

“Where you been, girl?” Harvey answered. “I’ve been sendin’ you twits for the last hour.”

“Twits?”

“Yeah. You know, those lil’ notes on your phone.”

“Those are called *texts*, Harvey.”

“You sure about that? I think ‘twits’ sounds ‘bout right.”

I was not going to talk technology with one of Deadwood’s pioneers. “I was at lunch with my boss.”

“Where are ya now?”

“Heading to the Galena House on Williams Street.”

“That there’s a bad idea if I ever heard one.”

“If you’re going to tell me it’s haunted, I already know about that.”

“It’s *extra* haunted and more.”

Being that I was a big fat dud when it came to seeing, hearing, smelling, or feeling ghosts, the degree of haunting made little difference to me. “Good for it.”

“Pooh-pooh all you want,” he said, “but the last time you visited a ghostie, she turned a live woman into a ventriloquist doll.”

I shuddered. My queasiness around those talking dummies had been amplified lately, thanks to the particular ghost up in Lead he was referring to who had insisted upon reaching out to me when I’d least expected it.

Pushing my neurosis aside, I focused on the haunted house I was about to visit. “What do you know about the Galena House besides it being haunted?”

“I know that you shouldn’t dilly dally there without your bodyguard.”

“Dead people can’t hurt me, Harvey.” At least none had yet; only live ones had left

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bruises and scars.

“It’s not the ghosts I’m thinkin’ about. It’s the shrunken heads.”

I pulled my phone back and frowned down at the screen. Was he for real? I put it back up to my ear. “Shrunken *what?*”

“You heard me—heads.”

“Are you going to leave me hanging here or explain that?”

“Years back that place had a run of residents turn up dead, their heads all shrunken up weird like. The cops never could figure out who was behind it and how they’d gone about shrinkin’ the skulls.”

“You mean shrunken like what one of those tribes does down in the Amazon?”

“Sorta. From what I was told, they didn’t look the same as those, though.”

“Shrunken heads?” I repeated, feeling dazed.

“Did you stop off at The Golden Sluice after lunch to bend an elbow, girl?”

“I wish I was drunk.” This day was turning into a long unbroken string of bad moments. “What did they do about the dead residents?”

“The paper said their deaths were ruled as heart failure, callin’ them ‘natural.’ Now I don’t know about you, but I sure don’t figure someone’s head shrinkin’ up into a dried skull raisin is anything close to natural.”

His words painted a picture I didn’t want to think about so soon after a lunch of choked down rage followed by gut burning indigestion—and nausea thanks to a picture of cow pieces. Speaking of ...

“What’s the deal with that dead cow picture?”

“I found that carcass out at the back edge of my pasture.”

“What did that? A mountain lion?”

“I don’t reckon, the bite marks are too big. Coop wanted me to take some photographs of it because he was tied up in meetings and couldn’t come out to see it until later.”

“Your nephew is keeping busy these days.” Detective “Coop” Cooper had his hands full with a slew of murders and unanswered questions. I was happy that he hadn’t been knocking on my door lately looking for more answers, since the ones I gave him usually made him grind his molars and glare holes through the back of my eyeballs.

“That’s your fault,” Harvey said.

A group of four Harley Davidson motorcycles rumbled past on the main road.

“You must be close,” he said. “I could hear those motorcycles in both ears.”

“I’m parked across from the hospital.”

“What are you doin’ there? Come get me at your aunt’s place. If you’re going to the Galena House, I’m comin’ along.”

Rather than argue, I did as told. Those shrunken skulls had me feeling edgy about walking into the haunted boarding house on my own. Three minutes later, he climbed into the Picklemobile.

“Head ‘em out, Rawhide,” he said, flashing me his two gold teeth. He smelled like soap but looked scagglier around the edges than usual.

“Your beard could use a trim.”

“I ain’t got no woman to impress right now, so I’m giving my trimmer a vacation.”

“I’m a woman.”

“Nah, you’re still a filly to me. Besides, you got your own stallion to nag. How’s sex treating you these days? You sure seem to be riding a lot looser in the saddle. I take it Doc is

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gettin' the job done."

That was a subject we were not going to touch. Ever. I answered with a squint and changed the subject. "How many residents had their heads shrunk?"

"I can't remember. Two, maybe three."

Turning onto the main drag, I headed for Williams Street. "How long ago?"

"I must have been knee high to a buffalo when the story came out. I remember my folks jabberin' about it during a meal or two."

They talked about shrunken skulls during dinner? That explained why no subject seemed off limits with Harvey while eating, including castration techniques and the ins and outs of two-dollar whores.

Williams Street ran the length of Deadwood up above Main, behind a row of southeast facing brown and burnt red brick buildings. I drove up the hill past the historic Franklin Hotel and made a right.

"Did they ever figure out why?" I asked.

"Nope. Like I said, they ended up calling it 'natural' and went on to the next crime."

A Victorian boarding house loomed in front of us, reminding me of an unkempt gentleman down on his luck. Weeds stuck out of the wrought-iron fence like loose threads. White paint flaked onto the brown grass around its foundation joined by torn asphalt shingles from the roof. A faded rectangular sign confirmed I was at the Galena House.

I parked, squeezing as tightly as possible against the concrete wall in front of the house to leave room for passing cars. Streets on this side of Deadwood were made for horse carriages, not old pickups with side mirrors.

"Well, the woman who called and asked me to meet her here didn't sound like she had a shrunken head," I told him, "so we might as well see what's going on."

"A woman called you? What'd she say?"

"Something about nine sharks and that she needed to see me now because she'd be dead soon."

He grunted. "No shit."

We sat there staring up at the boarding house in silence. It was an old style Italianate. Some of the fine cornices had crumbled, but the two columns bracketing the porch stood tall and bright like they'd been recently painted. A shadow moved across the upstairs window. Was that the woman? As I watched, the shadow returned, obscured behind a white gauzy curtain.

Someone was waiting for me.