



# Ann Charles

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## MEANWHILE, BACK IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

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### *From Chapter One...*

Meanwhile, back at the ranch ...

**M**y lily white ass was not tough enough to handle the Wild, Wild West, especially if it were chockfull of pissed-off ghosts and relentless ghouls.

Take the century old ranch house that currently filled the windshield of old man Harvey's pickup as he braked to a dusty stop in the driveway.

No, seriously, somebody take it.

Anybody.

As Harvey's real estate agent, it was my job to sell his place. Unfortunately, when I had signed on to represent the ornery cuss, both of us had been unaware his ranch came not only with a ghost or two but with various severed body parts—some dried up, some still juicy.

Harvey killed the engine and looked over at me. "What's goin' on with your face there, Sparky? It's all puckered up like you swaller'd your chew."

"Can it with the *Sparky* crap." I reached across the bench seat and snapped one of his rainbow suspenders. "It's 'Violet,' remember? What'd I tell you about using nicknames right now?"

I had the whole of Deadwood's fire and police departments calling me unflattering nicknames these days. I didn't need my self-appointed bodyguard doing his part to remind me of my flame-filled past, particularly in the presence of the all-seeing reality television crew my boss had lured to town with promises of haunted locations and ectoplasmic costars.

Harvey harrumphed. "But I'm partial to *Sparky Parker*."

"He's right," piped up my best friend, Natalie Beals, from the backseat of the pickup. "It rolls right off the tongue, just like Pickle-faced Parker always did."

"And Boob-headed Beals," I threw back, pointing my knock-it-off finger at her. The same one I often aimed at my almost-ten-year-old twins. "Now zip those fat lips of yours, or I'll sic Harvey's good-for-nothing dog on you."

"What? And have old Red slobber me to death?" Natalie tugged on the ear of the yellow lab snoring next to her. The sleeping dog grunted but kept his eyes closed. "Harvey, I think your dog's in a coma."

"He's just sufferin' from Cupid's cramps after a night of playin' Don Juan to a saucy poodle two doors down."

"I thought his puppy-making days were over," Natalie said.

"They are, but Red still likes to give 'er the bone whenever he sniffs out an opportunity."

I shoved open my door. "Sounds like he's been hanging around his owner too long."

Natalie joined me out in the crisp October air, shivering in her blue jeans and corduroy coat. I was glad I'd settled on my soft wool slacks and chenille sweater today instead of that bohemian skirt and tunic. We frowned up at the dark clouds gathering in the west. Things

# Ann Charles

were about to get colder here in the hills.

“At least someone’s getting lucky these days,” Natalie said as we waited for Harvey to grab his empty Army duffle from the back seat.

Damned straight. Too bad it wasn’t me. But my luck was about to change. We just needed to get Harvey moved off of my boyfriend’s couch and into his nephew’s spare bedroom, which was partly why I’d agreed to ride out here today instead of holding down my desk back at Calamity Jane Realty.

Natalie’s lack of wild monkey love had to do with her long history of choosing smoking hot jerks as bed fellows and the vow she had taken to quit males cold turkey for a year. “Weren’t you the one telling me last night that this sabbatical from men has been good for your self-esteem?”

“Yeah, but it’s been killer on my libido. Just because I’m not allowing myself to have sex doesn’t mean I don’t think about digging in my spurs when a sexy stud rides across my horizon.”

“What kind of spurs are we talkin’ here?” Harvey asked, hefting his empty bag over his shoulder. “The ones with smooth rosebud rowels or those sharp pointy babies that really sting, like rock-grinders?”

Why did I have a feeling he was inquiring based on experience?

“Never mind, you dirty bird.” I led the way to his front porch, pausing with one purple boot on the bottom step. “This place gives me the heebie jeebies.”

“Quit bein’ such a girl.” Harvey grabbed my arm and hauled me up the steps after him. “I swear you’re afraid of your own face in the mirror these days.”

“You’d be afraid of my face, too, if you saw me first thing in the morning.” It was one of the main reasons I hesitated every time my boyfriend asked me to spend the night. The other had to do with how humiliating my stretch marks looked in the harsh morning light.

“There’s nothing here that’s gonna bite ya.” Harvey snickered. “At least not ‘til the sun goes down.”

Natalie brought up the rear. “Don’t let the ghosts and the ghouls disturb you, love,” she quoted from the 1959 version of *House on Haunted Hill*, adding an ominous Vincent Price-sounding laugh.

I grimaced over at the police tape marking off a section of the porch in front of the hanging bench swing. Almost two weeks ago we’d caught Red chewing on a decrepit antique boot that still had some of the previous owner’s foot left inside. Just the memory of the dried chunks of skin and bones made me take a couple of sidesteps away from the Caution tape fluttering in the late-morning breeze.

“You two smartasses are not making me feel all warm and happy inside.”

“Warm and happy is Doc’s job.” Harvey fished in his back pocket. “Where is your stallion roamin’ about today, anyway?”

“He had a client from down in Rapid call this morning with an emergency. Something to do with late taxes and a list of needed financial papers. He said he’d meet us for lunch if you still want to grab some food later.”

“Darn tootin’, I do. You haven’t bought me my weekly meal, and we have a signed contract sayin’ you’re supposed to keep me well-fed until you sell my place.”

At the rate of success I was having thanks to all of the body parts showing up, I’d be keeping Harvey fat and happy until one of us keeled over from old age.

“Late taxes, huh?” Harvey pulled a couple of long wood screws and a screwdriver from

# Ann Charles

his back pocket. “I thought Doc was a financial planner, not a bean counter.”

The more I got to know Mr. Dane “Doc” Nyce, the more I came to realize he was a jack of all trades, master of much—things like managing money, fixing anything mechanical, sniffing out ghosts, and sexing the clothes right off of me.

But not a master of wanting to get hitched. Definitely not that. Not with how fast he’d left his last girlfriend after she’d mentioned shopping for wedding bands. My two kids weren’t helping on that front either, both acting out their fears about a new man coming into their world by being rebellious snots.

But them acting out didn’t matter now, because truth be told, when Doc found out how dark and gruesome my family history was, I doubted he’d want me sneaking around his back door anymore.

What man in his right mind would want to spend the night next to a woman who came from a long line of killers? Hell, with some of the bad dreams I’d been having the last few months, Doc could be one nightmare away from my smothering him with his own pillow ... or ripping his tongue out with my bare hand.

I cringed at that all-too-real memory.

Harvey patted his other pocket, shrugged, and then held up the screwdriver. “This’ll do in a pinch.”

I glanced at the tool. “What’re you gonna do with that?”

“Open the door.”

“Why don’t you just use the key?”

“I left it clear back in the pickup.” He said that as if we’d hiked for miles to reach the porch.

“Move over,” I pushed him aside. “Let me punch in the lockbox code. The spare is in there.”

“Look, you guys, there’s no need for a key.” Natalie reached around me. “It’s not fully shut.”

She pushed on the door. It swung inward silently, the hinges well-oiled in prep for showing it to potential buyers.

I frowned at Harvey. “You left the door unlocked again?”

After we’d found the foot-filled boot on his porch, Harvey had been staying down in Deadwood day and night. He was supposed to be locking everything down tight, as in the house, the barn, even his tool shed, by order of Deadwood’s only detective, aka Harvey’s bossy nephew.

“I did lock it.” His bushy eyebrows morphed together into a hairy caterpillar. “Deadbolted it even.”

“Maybe we should call Detective Cooper,” Natalie whispered, peeking over my shoulder into the shadowy house.

“And tell him what? We found an unlocked door?” I’d pissed off the detective enough times to know better than to bug him unless I was face-to-face with a dead body. Even then I’d hesitate to call him and risk another slicing from that jagged razor he called a mouth.

“That’s a bad idea.” Harvey eased into the house with Natalie and me tiptoeing in tandem behind him like a pair of cartoon scaredy cats. “Coop’s been runnin’ with wolves and rattlesnakes since his ex-partner got called in by the chief to help solve some of the murders Miss Crazy-curls Parker here keeps findin’.”

“Leave my hair out of it.” I tucked in some unruly blonde curls the wind had freed from

# Ann Charles

my French knot. “The bodies are not my fault. I just seem to be having a run of bad luck lately.”

Harvey snorted. “Bad luck is losing a couple hundred at the poker table. You keep stumblin’ knee deep into manure with no shovel to be found. That takes a real special skill.”

“You’re his uncle,” Natalie said, still fighting her case. “Cooper might want to know somebody left your door unlocked so he can chew them a new ass.”

Ass chewing was one of the things Cooper did best, but I scoffed at her naivety. “You think Detective Cooper is going to drop everything he’s doing to race out here to make sure the house is safe for us to pack up Harvey’s skivvies and long johns? You’re forgetting how much that man would like to string me up like a piñata and knock the sweet stuff right out of me.”

“Violet does have a way of makin’ Coop’s tail twitch.”

“And that muscle in his jaw,” I reminded Harvey.

We peeked through the rest of Harvey’s house and came up empty-handed much to my relief. While Harvey went back to his bedroom to pack clothes and whatnot to take to Cooper’s place, Natalie and I held court in the kitchen.

Natalie leaned against the kitchen bar. “Fine, we won’t call Cooper, but what about his ex-partner? Do you have Detective Hawke’s number?”

I gaped at her. “Did you hit your head on the back window when Harvey bounced through that pothole down the road?”

“What? It’s an idea. You’re the one who wants me to get in tight with this new detective, find out what goods he has on you to support his theory, right?”

Cooper’s ex-partner turned current partner, Detective Hawke, had recently had an epiphany. Rather more like an incredibly asinine theory that involved me, a flying broomstick, and a big green nose with warts on it.

“I said to talk to Detective Hawke on the sly and find out why he thinks I’m a witch. Not invite him out here for a barn dance so you can ply him for details while you two salamander left and do-si-do.”

“It’s *Allemande Left*, you knucklehead.” Natalie crossed her arms over her chest. “Where did you learn how to square dance? From one of those Sally Struthers’ Correspondence School classes?”

“You get my point, mouth. You have to be careful when you’re playing Mata Hari.”

“I will be, but you’re going to have to set me up on a date with Hawke or something, because I can’t find out what he’s got on you unless I can get in for a close-up.”

“I’ll figure something out.” I poured myself a glass of water. “What’s taking Harvey so long?” While our search of the house had turned up nothing, the sooner we headed back to town, the sooner my blood pressure would return to normal.

Natalie joined me at the sink, staring out the window.

“You smell like old Red,” I told her.

“Better than smelling like you.” She snatched my glass of water from me and took a drink. “Before you know it, we’ll be wading through snow. I need to prep my place for ...” She trailed off, leaning closer to the window. “Look at Harvey’s barn.”

I followed her gaze, staring at the old, ramshackle building. “What about it?”

Besides it needing a fresh coat of paint, it seemed in good enough shape. My fingers were crossed that by next spring, the sheriff would have figured out what was going on out here with all of the body parts so we could see about at least renting the place as a vacation

# Ann Charles

getaway. While selling it might be a bit of a bust due to disclosure rules, tourists wanting to experience some Black Hills country living would love this place.

She pointed out the window. "Look at the doors."

I stole the glass of water back, sipping from it as I watched the doors sway in the breeze, opening slightly and then closing. "That's the wind moving them, you know, not some ghost."

"No duh, meteorologist Vi." She poked me in the shoulder. "But where's the chain and padlock he put on when we were here last week?"

She was right. Both were gone.

The doors swayed open slightly again as we pressed our noses against the window pane.

"Harvey," I called without looking away. "Did Cooper say anything to you about removing your padlock and chain when he was out here investigating earlier this week?"

I heard some shuffling coming toward us from the hallway.

"We may need to call Coop," Harvey said, his voice hesitant.

"About the padlock and chain?" There was no need to go that far, was there?

"What padlock and chain?" He came up behind me.

"The ones missing from your barn doors." I turned to find him holding a dried washrag that was covered with brown stains. "What's that?"

"Dried blood."

That got Natalie's attention. "How can you be sure?"

"You can smell it." He held it out for us to do just that.

I recoiled. "I'll take your word for it. Where did you find it?"

"In my bathroom wastebasket. That wasn't the only mess left behind. Come take a gander under my sink."

I followed him into his bathroom and squatted in front of the open cupboard doors. There were bottles tipped over, bandage wrappers strewn about, blood smears on the inside of the cupboard doors, a disarray of wadded towels, and more brown stained rags left behind.

"What do you think?" I asked Harvey and Natalie. "Maybe somebody was hurt and broke in here to fix themselves up."

"That's one notion." Harvey stroked his beard. "We should probably call Coop and have him weigh in on it."

"I agree," Natalie said from where she leaned against the door jamb, wringing her hands together. "And then you can suggest he bring Detective Hawke along so I can start working my magic on loosening his lips."

I'd rather she worked her magic on sealing them shut.

"Like I told you before, Nat, you're going to have to be subtle. This guy is a detective, albeit a shitty egotistical butthead, but he'll know when he's being set up."

"And if subtlety doesn't wind his crank," Harvey said with a wide grin that showed off his two gold teeth, "you could flash him your hooters. That'll loosen his lips and then some. Trust me, a sweet set of hooters is as good as any truth serum the Army ever came up with."

"That's your answer to everything," I told Harvey.

"You can look down your nose at me, girl, but it works. Just ask the widows down at the senior center."

"I'd rather not." I stood and brushed my hands off on my slacks. "While you were packing, did you notice anything missing in your bedroom? Anything of value?"

# Ann Charles

He shook his head. “Not yet anyway.”

I pulled out my cellphone and took a few pictures of the bloody rag and the mess under the sink. “There, we’ll show these to Cooper when we move you into his place tonight. He can come out tomorrow and see them for himself.”

Back in his bedroom, Harvey grabbed an armful of socks from his dresser and stuffed them into his duffel bag. “What were you bellyachin’ about out there in the kitchen?”

“Your barn doors,” Natalie answered. “The padlock and chain are gone.”

His eyes narrowed. “My doors were still sportin’ my padlock the other day when I was here with Coop.”

Something didn’t feel right about this—the unlocked front door, the dried blood, the missing padlock and chain. I palmed my phone, debating on making that call.

“Let me finish packing,” Harvey said, “and we’ll swing by the barn on the way out of here. I need to let Red out to water the bushes before we head back to town anyway.”

Natalie and I stood there swapping worried frowns while Harvey stuffed more clothes into his bag.

“Let’s skedaddle.” He grunted as he hoisted it.

I helped him adjust the heavy pack on his back. “Criminy, you could use a mule to carry this thing. How many clothes do you need?”

“Depends on how many women I’m gonna be wooing this winter. The fresher the duds, the fresher the women.”

Natalie chuckled and led the way out. Harvey made sure the door was locked behind us.

At the pickup, Red was waiting for us with his head sticking out the window, sniffing the wind.

Harvey let him out the driver’s side. “Get down outta there, boy. Go lift a leg before we head back to town.”

The lab hopped out of the pickup like he was still a pup, turned his nose up again, and then dashed toward the barn.

I watched him, my mouth catching air. Who was that dog? “I’ve never seen Red move that fast before.”

Harvey tossed his full pack in the back of his truck, securing it with some bungee cords. “When he needs to lift a leg, he doesn’t stop to smell the posies.”

Natalie nudged me, pointing at the doors. “Look.”

We watched as Red sniffed around the doors. Then he nosed them open and slipped inside.

“Red just went in the barn,” Natalie told Harvey.

“Why’d he go in there?”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know why.

Harvey started toward the barn, calling back over his shoulder. “Violet, grab old Bessie from under the seat, would ya?”

“Why do we need your shotgun?”

“In case he’s sniffed out a mountain lion or some other critter that’s holed up inside my barn.”

“I’ll get it,” Natalie said.

He pulled the doors open. “Red! Here, boy.”

Red whimpered in the shadows off to the right, giving me goosebumps. “Why’s he making that sound?”

# *Ann Charles*

Natalie cocked Harvey's shotgun like she was Rooster Cogburn readying for a passel of bad guys. "Something has him spooked."

"Point that thing at the ground, would ya?"

"What? I've been shooting since Gramps taught me how back before I even needed a bra."

"Give Bessie to me." Harvey took the shotgun from Natalie. "Red's probably whimperin' because he hurt himself jumpin' out of the truck like he did. He keeps forgettin' he's not a young pup anymore. You two wait here." With a hitch of his pants, he and his shotgun headed off in the shadow-filled direction of Red's whimpering.

Happy to obey, I stood in the shaft of sunlight coming through the doors. I was getting really tired of finding pieces of people and animals out here in the boonies. "Maybe we should call Cooper."

Nat jammed her hands on her hips. "Now you start with this shit?"

Red's whimpering turned to a growl, then a bark.

"Well, I'll be a twice-baked potato," I heard Harvey say. "What'd ya sniff out there, ol' boy?"

Something creaked, like metal on metal. What had Harvey and Red found? The Tin Man?

"Harvey?" I took several steps into the shadows beyond the shaft of light. "Is everything okay?"

"Jesus H. Christ!" Harvey's voice sounded higher, surprised.

Red let out a volley of barks.

"What'd they find?" I whispered.

"Let's go see." Natalie caught my wrist and tugged me deeper into the barn.