



Ann Charles

GONE HAUNTING IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Chapter One

Friday, December 14th

Slagton, South Dakota (in the boonies south of Deadwood)

If Hell had a butt crack, the town of Slagton would be located one freckle north of the sphincter.

“Not that Slagton can really be called a ‘town’ anymore,” I said aloud, grimacing out the pickup’s passenger-side window at the rusted SLAGTON sign peppered with bullet holes and buckshot. “All that’s left here are the decaying shadows of lives built on silver ore.”

“Quit yer bellyachin’, Sparky.” My shotgun-toting, self-appointed bodyguard, Ol’ Man Harvey, reached across the front seat and poked me in the ribs. “We’ll be in and out quicker than a greenhorn at a whorehouse.”

“You two screwups aren’t going inside with me,” Detective Cooper said from the back seat. “Especially not Parker. She’s not even supposed to be here.”

For once, I agreed with the steely-eyed, often-obstinate detective. Normally, he and I made a habit of ramming our horns together, especially after I solved one of his cases for him, which tended to spur plenty of bristling on his part. But today neither of us wanted *me* to be joining Cooper and his uncle on this snowy joyride back to Slagton—for good reason, too.

Decades ago, the EPA had shut down the mine operating outside the town, listing contaminated water among the company’s many crimes against nature. The federal government strongly encouraged the locals to pack up and hit the road, offering financial help to relocate. Most of the folks took the deal, but not all. A few stubborn diehards lingered, peeking out from behind closed curtains with loaded shotguns whenever strangers came calling. Strangers like a hard-headed detective, a cantankerous old man, and a hungover blonde who should have stopped celebrating her best friend’s birthday after the fourth shot of tequila last night.

“Whether you like it or not, Coop,” said Harvey as he glanced at his nephew in the rearview mirror, “we need Sparky’s help with this mess ya done got us into, and I ain’t talkin’ about her house-sellin’ talents.”

Cooper cursed under his breath. “First of all, this isn’t a mess. It’s a minor situation that needs clarification in order to determine if it’s even a legitimate problem. Second, I didn’t get you two into anything. You stuck your big nose in my business and now you have it in your whiskey- and women-addled brain that the three of us are some kind of damned team.”

“My noggin’ ain’t spoiled with whiskey.” Harvey shot me a wink. “I prefer my grandpappy’s homemade hooch with my women.”

I cringed. “I know too much about your female preferences.” No amount of plugging my ears over the months I’d known Harvey had saved me from the intimate details of his love life, which he shared on a daily basis.

“Finally,” Cooper continued through gritted teeth, “nothing is going to happen today. I’ll go inside *alone*, interrogate my informant, and then leave. There will be absolutely no sniffing around or gunplay done by either of you while I’m inside.”

“I don’t have any guns,” I said, wishing I were home in my aunt Zoe’s kitchen nursing one of

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her hangover concoctions. Better yet, I could be stuffing my cheeks with the molasses cookies she'd been making this morning when I'd left for work instead of visiting a creepy ghost town with Detective Pissypants.

"I brought two guns," Harvey told me, frowning at the dilapidated shack up ahead on the left. Smoke seeped from the side of the crumbling chimney. Snow lined the barbed wire fence surrounding the yard and coated the caved-in porch roof. "Better to be safe than sorry back in these here parts of the hills."

"I don't want to see a single footprint in the snow outside of this pickup from either of you. Understand?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, *Coop*." I purposely shortened his name, poking the bear.

"That's 'Detective Cooper' to you, Parker, and you know it."

Harvey snickered. "Why'd ya drag us along if all we're gonna do is sit and count snowflakes?" He slowed as the snow started to fall harder, covering the windshield almost as fast as the wipers could clear it.

"I didn't drag you along, Uncle Willis. I asked to borrow your damned pickup. That's it. You're the one who showed up at the station with Parker here and refused to remove your stubborn ass even after I threatened to fill it full of lead."

"You should have known your uncle would call your bluff. He always kicks your ass at poker." I glanced over my shoulder at the detective. His blond hair was slicked back this morning. His jaw was rigid, matching his cheekbones. Not even the furry collar on his black police bomber jacket could soften up his chiseled features.

"Shut up, Parker." Cooper glared at me. The black eye I'd given him a week ago had finally faded to a dull yellow-green with a few spots of purple.

"Ya shouldn't come out here alone," Harvey told him. "None of us should. Things are gettin' too hairy. Bessie and Violet will go to the well with ya if shit hits the fan."

Bessie was Harvey's favorite shotgun. She rarely left his side, day or night. "You're putting me on the same level as Bessie now?" I smiled at the old buzzard with his freshly trimmed beard. "Dang, Harvey, that makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

Harvey grinned back, flashing me his two gold teeth.

Truth be told, I'd lay my money on Bessie. I was still pretty new at this Executioner gig I'd been born to play. My résumé as a killer was splattered with blood—my own—and had several pages of screwups and near misses listed under Past Experience.

"I've been a cop for close to two decades." Cooper leaned forward, his head butting into Harvey and my greeting card moment. "I believe I can handle a visit to a backwoods shithole without needing a babysitter."

Harvey's focus returned forward. "You underestimate Slagton, boy. The whangdoodles back here aren't yer normal sort of agitators."

I slunk down in my seat as we passed another rundown shack, this one with oil drums lining the porch. Last time I was here with Harvey, there'd been shotguns holding down those drums, the barrels aimed at the road. The shredded curtains in the window twitched as our tires rolled through the slushy snow now coating the gravel road. For a moment, I thought I saw a ghost of a face behind the window, but a blink later it was gone.

According to local lore, something still lingered in Slagton besides the contaminated water. Whatever haunted the streets of this ghost town had supposedly added an extra dose of insanity to the people who'd chosen to stay behind. I had no desire to see these "whangdoodles" up close and personal to decide for myself if the rumors about them were true. The bloodthirsty mutants in *The Hills Have Eyes* had nothing on the Slagton residents. At least that was the story my best friend liked to tell after a hearty dose of liquor at the Purple Door Saloon.

Natalie and I hadn't touched on the topic of Slagton last night while celebrating her birthday—at least I didn't think so. Truth be told, I couldn't remember much of what happened after our fourth

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tequila shot. I glanced over my shoulder at Cooper, recalling one particular blurry moment amidst the drinking that involved him, the birthday girl, and a steaming-hot kiss that had left Natalie reeling for several beats. The question was, did Natalie remember that kiss this morning? Or had last night's tequila overdose completely fogged that memory?

Cooper grunted, sitting back again. "I'm not wet behind the ears, Uncle Willis." I glanced over my shoulder. Cooper had his Colt .45 out. He checked the cylinder before stuffing the gun back into his shoulder holster. "I've seen and talked to more people back here in Slagton than you have."

He looked up, catching me in the middle of a scowl. I couldn't help it. Cooper and his guns always gave me heartburn. As often as my curly blond hair and I irritated the detective, I figured I'd end up facing off with the wrong end of his pistol one of these days.

His gaze moved beyond me. "That's the place up ahead on the right," he said to his uncle.

The house sat off the road in the shadows of several pine trees.

"I'm not talking about the regular folks," Harvey said, hitting the brakes and pulling into the front yard. He let the engine idle, turning in his seat. "I'm talking about the sort that require a visit from Sparky here and her war hammer."

Cooper aimed a frown at me.

"What did I do?" I held up my hands in surrender.

"You let this old man drag you along."

"Wrong again, Detective. He pulled the wool over my eyes, too. You'll have to snarl and bark at someone else for now."

Harvey had called me at Calamity Jane Realty and told me that he wanted to drive out and look at a place with Cooper. I'd assumed he meant a new home for his nephew now that the sale on the detective's house was wrapped up. A trip to Slagton was what I got for assuming around Harvey.

"The day is young," Cooper said. "It's pretty much a given that you'll do something to piss me off before the sun goes down."

I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Real mature, Parker." He opened the back door. "Neither of you two leave this cab, got it?"

Harvey grunted.

I scoffed.

"Do. You. Understand?" He bit out each word.

"Yes, Detective Cooper." I gave my best robot impression.

"Sheesh, boy. Yer a real buzzkill, you know it?"

The slam of the pickup door was Cooper's answer.

We watched Cooper through the windshield. He strode through the snow toward the drooping front gate that looked like it was one swing from breaking free of its hinges and dying a slow, rusty death in the weeds below. Pausing at the gate, he turned his head slightly as if listening.

"Did he hear something?" I whispered to Harvey.

"Between the pickup engine and the muffle of the fallin' snow, I doubt it."

Cooper pushed open the gate. It quivered as it swung, but didn't keel over. He hesitated at the base of the porch steps, testing each stair before putting his weight on it. The porch sagged, the right end dipping a couple of feet lower than the left. Cooper leaned toward the higher end, standing to the right of the door.

I couldn't see through the falling snow if he knocked or not, but I'd reached a count of eleven when the door opened inward.

Darkness greeted the detective.

"Do you see anyone?" I asked Harvey.

"Nope. The butler must be a ghost."

If that were true, Cooper would've reeled back. He hadn't learned to control his reaction around the ectoplasmic crowd yet since he'd only recently been "blasted open" by a pair of ghosts during a séance that had taken a turn for the worse. Since that night, his world had been turned upside down

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and shaken to hell. The ability to see ghosts only added to his crabbiness most days and gave him another reason to growl at me, thanks to my “oops!” part in his eye-opening ordeal.

After one last glance in our direction, Cooper stepped inside the rundown shack and closed the door behind him. Several clumps of snow fell from the drooping porch roof in his wake.

The waiting began.

I chewed on my knuckles. My gut grew heavier by the minute, feeling like I'd swallowed the lump of coal I was probably going to get from Santa this year after all of my grand fuckups.

Harvey and I sat in silence, both of us watching out the windshield, waiting to see if Cooper would crash out the front door and sprint back to the pickup. At least that's what I was half-expecting, eerie as the house looked.

“Have ya ever heard of a woman undertaker in the Old West?” Harvey asked.

I did a double take, ending with a scowl as I stared at his profile. “No. Why on earth would you ask about an undertaker right now?” I didn't need any help thinking about death while parked in Slagton.

He shrugged. “Fer some reason, I keep thinkin' about a woman gravedigger from way back when. It's the kookiest thing. I can even picture her in my mind standin' in the middle of the street in Deadwood.”

“Well, stop thinking about her until we're clear of this place,” I snapped.

“Breathe easy, Sparky. We'll be back in Deadwood in two shakes.” Harvey shut off the pickup. Apparently, his fight-or-flight meter was pointing in the opposite direction of mine.

“What are you doing?” I shot him a worried glance, not wanting to take my eyes off the shack for long.

“Savin' gas.”

“Don't you think we need to keep the engine running in case Cooper is chased out by a one-eyed mutant working a shotgun?”

His bushy brows drew together. “Girl, why is yer neck bristlin' so much?”

“Something doesn't feel right here.”

“We're in Slagton. Not Disneyland. Things haven't felt right here since the Feds shut 'er down.”

“Yeah, but this is different. I'm telling you, there is som—” I gaped at Harvey's backside as he shoved open his door and stepped out of the pickup. “What are you doing? We're not supposed to leave the cab.”

“Try explainin' that to my prostate.”

“Oh, sweet Lord! Your prostate is going to get me shot one of these days.” It had landed me in jail already due in large part to the prickly detective now dinking around inside of the shack.

“Don't be pourin' short sweetenin' into long,” he said. “Sit tight. I'll be quick as a jigger-wiffer.”

Having no idea what a jigger-wiffer or short sweetening was, I huffed. “Pee right there next to your door. I promise not to look.”

“I'm not going to show my doodads to the world right here.”

“Why not? You flash them at the ladies down at the senior center every weekend.”

“That ain't one hundred percent gospel. Besides, I got me one of those shy bladders. Like a turtle, it doesn't like to stick its head out of the shell too quick and when it does, it takes its time tellin' a tale.”

I held out my hand to make him stop. “That's too much information for a Friday morning.”

“Then ya shoulda let me take care of my business without badgerin' me.”

“Fine, go already. But leave me the keys in case Cooper comes running.”

He tossed the keys on his seat and shut the door. Instead of going through the rickety gate like his nephew, Harvey detoured around the right side of the house and meandered on back toward what looked like an ancient, two-story woodshed. Several of the windows in the upper floor were broken. The gray weathered wood reminded me of an old, tired lumberjack whose shoulders were weary from lugging an ax around for centuries.

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“Just pee already,” I muttered.

Harvey disappeared around the side of the woodshed, leaving me alone.

Alone in Slagton.

My stomach knotted.

I locked the pickup doors and huddled inside my quilted down coat. The seconds ticked by, turning into minutes. Outside, nothing moved besides the falling snow. My gaze darted back and forth between the front door of the ramshackle house and the old woodshed, willing Harvey and his nephew to get their butts back to the pickup pronto.

At the five-minute mark, I sat up and scowled at the woodshed. How long did it take the ol' buzzard to drain the lizard, dammit?

More seconds ticked by. Still there was no sign of life from either man. My patience was growing tired of pacing.

I wiped away the steam my breath left on the side window with my coat sleeve and peered through the smeared glass. If Harvey didn't return soon, I was going to honk the horn, even if it brought the town nutters out in full force.

Something moved on the other side of the woodshed back near the pine trees. Something dark and lower to the ground.

“What's that?” I pressed my nose against the glass.

It sort of looked like a large cat—mountain lion size. But its fur was dark, more black than tan. Its body was longer, too, sleeker even, reminding me of a Doberman pinscher mixed with a panther. The head was thick, like a mini-lion with a full mane encircling it. Was this one of those weird dog hybrid breeds I'd heard about from my daughter, the wanna-be vet?

I wiped off the window again and tried to see the creature clearly through the heavy snowflakes. It moved like a predator, slinking low as it crept along the tree line toward the woodshed, hunting.

My heart quickened.

Crap. Had Harvey slipped and fallen in the snow? Was that dog-thing stalking him? Pickings in the forest food chain were slim this time of year. A human would make a tasty meal.

I felt under the seat for Bessie. My fingers touched her cold barrels. I pulled her out, careful not to blast myself to smithereens in the process.

When I looked back at the woodshed, the creature was no longer in sight. I opened the door, listening for a growl or a bark.

My ears were muffled thanks to the falling snow, but my fingers tingled. Something wasn't right. I could feel it deep inside. Anxiety played me like a harp, plucking my nerves one by one.

I glanced at the shack, willing Cooper to step outside.

The porch remained empty.

“Bloody hell!” I stuffed the pickup keys into my pocket. Cooper was going to be doubly pissed now. Careful of Bessie's trigger, I crawled out of the pickup, easing the door closed. Maybe Harvey and I would return before Cooper noticed we'd disobeyed his order and went on a walkabout. Although there'd be no hiding our footprints in the snow.

The snow sloshed and crunched under my suede boots. Silly me, since while choosing my outfit today, I'd gone for fashionista, not frontier woman. I should have known better considering that I lived in the hills, where winter snowstorms were as legendary as Wild Bill.

I followed in Harvey's footsteps, hugging the fence line. The snow fell with purpose now, covering much of the ugliness surrounding the old shack and matching woodshed. It made for a peaceful scene, looking like one of those bucolic scenes Thomas Kinkade sold by the thousands.

I followed Harvey's trail around the side of the shed. I thought about shouting his name, and then remembered Cooper's order to stay in the pickup and kept my lips pinched.

Harvey's tracks led into the open door on the backside of the woodshed.

So did the predator's.

I bent down to take a closer look at the creature's tracks. I'd expected paw prints, the sort I used

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to make on steamed covered windows on the school bus alongside the hearts and various boys' names over the years. These weren't paw prints, though. I reached down and held my hand over one, fingers spread. There were three, forward-facing "toes" as long as my middle finger, if not longer. A fourth toe of about the same length pointed to the side, reminding me of a dewclaw.

Standing upright, I frowned toward the tree line, searching the shadows underneath for movement.

What kind of animal had finger-like toes on its feet? The prints reminded me more of a bird, but what I'd seen through the window was no bird. Could they be long claws rather than toes?

Something clunked inside the woodshed.

I turned back to the doorway, trying to listen over the commotion of my pounding heart.

All was silent.

I lifted Bessie's double barrels, keeping my finger off the trigger, but nearby just in case. After one last glance to my right and left, I eased into the woodshed.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

A board creaked overhead.

Something rustled to my left.

There was a soft clink in front of me.

"Harvey?" I squinted into the shadows. "Are you in here?"

Something huffed behind me.

I whirled around, Bessie leading the way.

A hand grabbed the barrels and yanked her out of my grip. "Dammit, Parker! Did I not tell you to stay in the pickup?"

The sight of Cooper made me breathe a sigh of relief in spite of his glare.

"Your uncle had to see about a mule."

"A man."

"What?"

"He had to see a *man* about a mule."

"Whatever. Are you going to stand there and correct my English all day, Detective Wordsmith, or help me find your dang uncle?"

"I wasn't correcting your English, Parker, only the idiom you were using incorrectly." When I held my fist up in front of his face, he almost cracked a smile. "Why do we need to find him if he's just taking a piss?"

"Because he's been gone too long."

"His prostate slows him down some."

"Dammit, Cooper. I know all about your uncle's stupid prostate. I'm telling you, something is wrong. He's taking too long and I saw something prowling around this woodshed."

"What do you mean, *something*?"

I pointed out the doorway. "Look at those tracks. Whatever made those is hunting your uncle."

He stepped over to the door. "Those look like turkey tracks."

"Then that's one big-ass turkey with long, fat toes."

This time he smiled wide. "Reminds me of you."

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you looking for another black eye? Because the last one I gave you has almost faded and I'd hate to have the boys down at the Deadwood dog pound be left with nothing to yip and bark about over their daily doughnuts."

"Touch me, Parker, and I'll handcuff you again."

"Handcuff me and I'll—"

Something growled off to our left from inside the shed.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up on their tiptoes.

Cooper raised the shotgun, pointing it in the direction of whatever was hiding back in the shadows.

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“That is no turkey,” I whispered.

He grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me behind him.

I tugged free. “I can handle myself, remember.”

“Fine, get yourself killed, but first make sure you write a note in blood to your boyfriend that I tried to save you.”

Doc Nyce and I had exchanged a note written in blood before. Once was enough for me. “Shut up and give me back that gun.” I reached for Bessie.

He shoved my hand away and moved deeper into the shadows.

I followed behind him, practically stepping on his heels. “Fine, then hand over your pistol.”

“No fucking way in hell.”

“Dammit, Cooper.”

“Go outside and wait for me.”

“If it’s one of the *others*, neither gun will protect you.”

Cooper and I had faced off with *other* supernatural creatures before that only grew more ferocious when filled with hot lead. Apparently, the detective hadn’t learned his lesson.

“You’re overreacting. It’s probably just a mountain lion.”

“That is no mountain lion.” I could feel that truth in my bones. “It’s more like a cat and turkey mixed. A cat-urkey.”

“A cat-urkey?” He snickered. “Are you still drunk from last night?”

“I’m not drunk. I know what I saw.” I looked around for a makeshift weapon, picking up a weathered two-by-four. The pointy end of two rusty nails stuck out from the wood, one bent, one straight. I hefted the board, practicing my swing.

When I looked up, Cooper was frowning at me. “Seriously, Parker?”

“Whether you like it or not, hot shot, you need me.”

“Hot shot?”

“You know. You like to fill things with hot shots of lead.”

“Jesus, Parker. I need you like I need a—”

From the darkness came a shed-rattling roar. Something dark and lithe flew between Cooper and me so fast that all I saw was a blur of black before the creature disappeared into the shadows at the opposite end of the shed.

The shotgun boomed next to me.

“What the fuck was that?” Cooper shouted.

My ears rang from the shotgun blast. “I don’t know, but it’s not a freaking three-toed turkey.”

“Then what’s with the damned feathers floating in here?”

He was right. Small black feathers, like goose down, drifted to the ground between us. I bent to pick one up and noticed a long gash in Cooper’s pant leg. “You tore your pants.”

“I did?” He looked down.

“Yeah, right here,” I pointed at his knee. The material looked wet. I touched it, frowning at the red on my fingers when I pulled them back. “Cooper, you’re bleeding.”

“Get back up here.” He hooked me under the armpit and hauled me upright. “That thing must have sliced me with its claws as it passed.” He squinted into the shadows. “How did it move so fast?”

“Is the cut deep?”

He put weight on his leg, grimacing. “It’s just a flesh wound.”

Cooper was covered in scars. I had a feeling his definition of flesh wound and mine were quite different. I stepped between him and whatever the hell was in here with us, blocking him from another attack.

“You should go outside,” I said, raising the two-by-four.

“You’re in my way, Parker.”

“Cooper, this thing isn’t a normal animal. I’m telling you that what I saw sneaking around the woodshed was unnatural. Your informant has a pet he forgot to tell you about.”

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“My informant didn’t tell me anything.”

“Why not? Did you piss him off, too?”

“The house was empty. He’s missing.”

“Missing?” I took a step forward. “Or dead?”

“I don’t know.”

Something blocked the light in the doorway.

We both turned, Cooper with the shotgun raised, me with the board cocked to swing.

“What in tarnation are you two doin’ in here?”

I frowned at Harvey. “What are you doing *out there*?”

“I was waitin’ fer ya in the pickup and then I heard Bessie’s sweet music.”

She had more of an eardrum-exploding bellow. “Your nephew got trigger happy.”

“Yer bleedin’, Coop,” Harvey said. “Did ya shoot yerself again?”

“Again?” I asked.

“That’s none of your business,” Cooper told me.

The creature growled.

“Shit.” I gripped the board, my right elbow out, ready to hit a home run.

“What was that?” Harvey whispered.

“Something that doesn’t belong here,” I said loud and clear. “Neither do you two right now.”

“Give me Bessie,” Harvey told Cooper, who complied without argument and then pulled out his handgun.

Focusing on the growls, I inched further into the shadows.

“Parker, get back here.”

I sniffed, picking up a cloying, mildew odor. The hair on my arms lifted, my warning system lighting me up. The urge to bludgeon and destroy drove me deeper into the darkness.

“Where are you?” I said aloud. There was no use trying to hide. It had a better vantage point. I needed to rely on my instincts. “Come out and play.”

“Jesus, Parker. You think it speaks English?”

“*Scharrrrrrfrichterrrr*,” said a scratchy voice from the shadows.

The creature knew my name—the killing one, anyway. I could hear it breathing through its teeth. I tightened my grip on the board.

“Don’t kill it.” Cooper came up behind me. “I need to know where my informant is.”

“I’ll try not to.” I stalked closer.

My eyes weren’t of much use, so I zeroed in on the creature’s sounds. The quick huffs of breath. The scratch of claws on wood. The rumble of its low growl.

“What are you?” I asked.

Garbled sounds were its reply.

“That sounds like turkey talk,” Harvey said.

“I told you, Parker.”

“Shut up, Cooper.” I was thinking more of a crow than a turkey, or maybe a raven.

“What did it say?” Harvey asked, cocking his shotgun.

“I don’t know. My ears are still ringing from Cooper firing your damned gun.”

I heard the start of its roar deep in its chest. Reaching behind me, I shoved Cooper toward the opposite wall.

The scratch of its claws on wood as it sprang from the shadows gave me the cue I needed to anticipate its course. I kicked out, connecting with its flank and sending it sprawling sideways into a chunk of log. It scrambled upright onto its four legs, hissing at me, its long fangs bared.