



Ann Charles

DON'T LET IT SNOW IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

Chapter One

The Black Hills, South Dakota

Christmas Eve

7:36 p.m.

“Winter wonderland, my ass,” I bellyached, my teeth chattering while the frigid wind rocked me in my boots. Snow pelted my face, sticking to my eyelashes.

I shivered, my shoulders pulling in tight as I stood in the middle of the two-lane highway. My SUV’s headlights blazed from behind me, but in a storm this fierce, the bright beams of light weren’t much help. They reflected off the swirling flakes, blinding me rather than illuminating the vast stretch of dark, empty snow-covered road in front of me.

Old Man Winter could be such a dick. He’d gone and coated the hills in a thick blanket of white on Christmas Eve of all days. It was going to take at least a week of December sunshine to melt this white fluffy crap away. I scowled long and hard, not giving a flying reindeer if my face froze that way either.

The wind raged and howled around me, tearing through my blue wool coat. It stole my breath and gripped my bones with its freezing fingers. I tucked my scarf tighter around me, weighing my options. The blizzard had crowded into the Black Hills so fast, pushing and shoving to make it in time for Christmas.

Trudging ahead through the frozen tundra would be right up there with dodging icebergs in the North Atlantic. Besides, my new purple snow boots were no match for the drifts, many of which were already knee-deep and rising.

“Razzle-frazzit,” I muttered through stiff lips.

Down on the prairie in the warm bosom of my parents’ house, my two kids were waiting for Santa and me to show. Earlier on the phone, I’d reassured them the snowy roads wouldn’t stop me from arriving in time to help them prep for St. Nick. Little had I realized then that Old Man Winter had a plan to knock me on my caboose and then kick me while I was down.

But I wasn’t waving any white flags yet. Nope. I still had plenty of grit in my gizzard. Raising my gloved hands, I aimed both middle fingers at the sky. “Kiss off, icehole!”

A strong gust of wind rammed me from behind, knocking me to my hands and knees in the snow. Cold wetness soaked through my jeans and gloves. Before I could catch my breath, another blast of air hit me, blowing snow into my face.

Son of a sugarplum!

I wiped at my eyes with my coat sleeve. Rolling onto my back, I stared up at the maelstrom whirling overhead. Somehow, I had to make it to my kids through this frozen wasteland.

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Chapter Two

Six Hours Earlier ...

The only way I could think to keep this Christmas from ending in disaster was to poison my sister.

As I killed the lights in Calamity Jane Realty's office, my cell phone rang. A glance at the screen made me curse. Unfortunately, my mother was one step ahead of me, doing her damndest to interfere with my sister's untimely demise.

Buttoning my wool coat, I accepted the call. "What now, Mom?"

"Really, Violet Lynn?" my mother scolded. "You're going to take that tone with me on Christmas Eve?"

"You've called me like five times in the last two hours."

Something thumped overhead. I frowned at the ceiling. What was that? Other than me, myself, and I, the building was supposed to be empty. My coworkers and boss hadn't even come into work today, and our upstairs neighbor was out of town.

"If you were down here already as we'd planned," Mom's voice interrupted my what-the-hell moment, "I wouldn't have to keep calling you."

As we'd planned? I gritted my molars. Was she smoking mistletoe leaves? Until yesterday morning, *my plan* was to enjoy Christmas Eve here in Deadwood with my kids, Aunt Zoe, and Doc, my boyfriend. Then, on Christmas afternoon, we'd drive down to my parents' place for a family dinner. That was all. The end.

But yesterday morning, everything had changed when the TV weather guy started squawking about the sky falling and burying the hills up to their cockles in a shitload of snow. Of course, that made my mom freak out in true Chicken Little style, calling me in a panic to rant that she'd filled the refrigerator and deep freezer with hundreds of dollars' worth of food and piled presents under her tree, all for us. In other words, if the kids, Doc, and I were stuck in Deadwood because of a blizzard, Christmas would surely end in a tragedy that rivaled Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Suddenly, my cozy Christmas Eve fantasy filled with visions of snuggling in front of the blinking tree lights with a plate of sugar cookies and a mug of hot buttered rum had disappeared in a puff of chimney smoke. The next thing I knew, Mom had beseeched and bribed Aunt Zoe to haul Addy and Layne down yesterday to spend the night with her and my dad, leaving Doc and me to follow when I finished with work today.

What was supposed to be a three-hour family Christmas dinner event had morphed. Now I was looking at a hellish two-night stay—maybe even three if the blizzard hung around to pester western South Dakota as long as the local meteorologists were forecasting.

It was because of this change in plans that I was wondering where I could buy a vial of poison on Christmas Eve for my sister, Susan, whom I'd lovingly nicknamed "The Bitch from Hell" many moons ago.

Ann Charles

Susan had moved back home semi-recently, setting up her fiery lair in my parents' basement. Susan's modus operandi since childhood had been to seek and destroy anything special to me, including my relationships with various men over the years. It wasn't enough for her that she'd popped out of our mother's womb having everything I didn't—long legs, a model-thin body, straight brunette hair, and a black soul overflowing with mischief. Okay, so maybe we shared that last trait along with matching heart-shaped lips.

My point, which I spelled out in loud enunciated words to my mom yesterday, was that it'd be impossible for my sister and me to endure each other's company for forty-eight hours without something getting broken, such as Susan's neck, followed of course by my mother's heart. Breaking my mom's heart would land me in a heap of trouble with my father, whom I adored to pieces. Therein lay the main setback to my poisoning plot.

Snapping back to the present task of making it out of Deadwood before the snow hit, I took a calming breath and returned to my conversation with my mom. "As I told you five phone calls ago, I couldn't come down yesterday because I had to show a couple of houses this morning." I opened the office's back door, hunching into my coat at the blast of cold air that greeted me.

She scoffed through the phone. "Who goes house shopping on Christmas Eve?"

"Potential buyers who are in town visiting family for the holidays, that's who." I locked the door and scurried across the parking lot toward my Honda SUV. "This was the only day that worked for both of our schedules, so I had to stay in Deadwood."

"Well, I think it's selfish of them to make you work on Christmas Eve."

"So you've said over and over and over and—"

"You know, if you manage not to screw up things with your boyfriend this time and actually snag a wedding ring in the deal, you could probably quit that job of yours and focus on being a good little homemaker."

I pulled my phone away and scowled at it before holding it back to my ear. "There are so many things wrong with what you just said, Mother. You seem to be forgetting about the fact that Susan stole a couple of potential husbands away from me."

She pshawed through the line. "Those boys weren't marriage worthy and you know it. You really need to try to focus on the positive."

"Positive, right. Help me out here. What could be positive about walking in on my sister screwing my boyfriend in my own bed?"

She sighed, as if I were the one being melodramatic today. "Try to think of it as Susan saved you from years of anger and frustration, possibly even divorce."

My gaze narrowed, red clouding the outer edges of my vision. "Mom, has Susan been slipping drops of LSD into your morning coffee?"

"Don't be silly, Violet. All I'm saying is that you've been working hard to provide for your family ever since the twins were born. Your doctor fellow is a good egg. Don't break him."

She'd met Doc once while she was drunk, and already he rated higher in her esteem than I did. "His *name* is 'Doc,' Mom, which is short for 'D' and 'R,' his first two initials. He's not an actual doctor, you know."

"Of course, but doctor or not, he knows how to hold onto his money. That's a skill you could stand to learn with the way dollar bills have always slipped through your fingers."

I kicked my back tire. Twice.

Ann Charles

What dollar bills? Hell, I'd been scraping by on spare change for the last decade. "Was there a purpose for this call, Mother?" Something besides reminding me of my shortcomings when it came to my finances, along with my multiple calamities with the opposite sex?

"Yes. Addy wants you to bring Buck when you come down this afternoon."

Buck was my daughter's stuffed white unicorn with a pink horn that she cuddled with most nights. "She slept without Buck last night. Why does she need him now?"

"She insists Christmas will be miserable without him."

I rolled my eyes. I translated that to mean Addy would make *my* Christmas miserable if I didn't take her that dang unicorn. "Fine, I'll grab Buck. Anything else?"

A snowflake drifted down in front of me.

Then another.

Then several more.

"She also wants you to bring the game Twister."

"Who's going to want to play that game after stuffing ourselves to the gills with meat and pie? If I bend over, something will probably come back up the pipe."

"Really, Violet? That's disgusting."

Maybe so, but it was the truth. "What's wrong with the games you have there?"

"We don't have Twister."

"Fine, Twister and Buck." I crawled inside my SUV and closed the door. "Anything else?"

"Did I just hear a car door shut?"

"Yes, I'm leaving work and going home to grab the bag of gifts from Santa."

Plus I needed to make sure Addy's cat, gerbil, and chicken were taken care of with food and water for the night. My self-appointed bodyguard, Old Man Harvey, would be stopping by at some point each day while we were down with my parents to check on Addy's pets until we returned home.

"Good. Then you'll be on your way down here soon. Your father is looking forward to visiting with your handsome doctor."

I didn't even bother wasting breath on correcting her again. Knowing my father, "interrogating" was a more fitting description of how their conversations would go. Doc was the first man I'd brought home since my son was born, and Layne didn't really count since he was related to my father by blood and couldn't really talk for the first year of questioning.

"I have to swing by Natalie's place before we leave," I told Mom.

My best friend was staying in Deadwood this holiday instead of spending it with her parents, who were traveling to see Natalie's younger brother. She planned to hang out with her landlady in the Galena House, an old boarding house located one block up from Deadwood's Main Street.

"What? Why?" Mom asked.

"Nat and I haven't had a chance to exchange gifts yet. It will only take a few minutes."

"Sweetheart, you're running out of time!"

I was running out of patience with my dear mother, too. Honestly, what was the rush to put Susan and me in the ring together? Did my parents have a bet going on who'd score the first piledriver?

"Mom, it only takes forty-five minutes to get to your house."

"Sure, if the roads are clear and dry. Haven't you been watching the forecast?"

Ann Charles

I stuck the keys in the ignition. “I thought we’d established that I was working this morning.”

“The news channels are all calling for a terrible blizzard.”

“The news channels are exaggerating.” I started my engine, shivering in the cold air blowing out the vents. “They’re trying to scare people into staying off the roads. Besides, you know my theory.”

“Violet Lynn, don’t be absurd. The local weather folks do not consult a Magic 8 ball to determine the forecast. They use computers now instead.” The sound of glass breaking came through the line, followed by my dad shouting, “Layne, get the broom!”

I cringed, hoping my kids hadn’t broken anything I’d need to apologize for with dollars as well as words. “Listen, Mom, I need to go so we get there before dark, and you need to clean up whatever just broke.”

“Be careful, dear. It’s getting scary outside.”

Who was she kidding? Satan’s concubine and I were going to be spending the holiday together under one roof. It was going to be absolutely terrifying *inside* before long, too.