

Ann Charles & Sam Lucky



LIFE AT THE COFFIN JOINT

AN EXCERPT ...

Chapter One

Late Fall 1876

Deadwood, Dakota Territory

“I’m starting to see why you call this town the last lawless frontier,” Clementine said, bending over the naked bear-sized dead man laid out on her examination table. After a quick search for obvious signs of death, she stood upright, wincing. “I tell you, Hank,” she said to her assistant. “This business of bending over one corpse after another all day is hell on my back.”

Hank agreed with a grunt. “Specially for someone with pockets as high off the ground as yours.” He squatted in his preferred spot next to her wood stove, rubbing his hands together.

She frowned at the second corpse he had carried in moments before, this time without her help, and placed on her other table. The body looked about half the size of the first. She unbuttoned his wool shirt, spreading the fabric wide to bare his torso. Half as furry, too.

“What’s the tally so far today?” She linked her hands behind her and stretched her aching muscles. Too much dallying with what Hank periodically called “buzzard bait” was going to turn her into a crookback before she turned thirty, like so many others in her newfound profession. “Five?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hank opened the stove door and poked at the embers in the firebox. “Forgot to mention we have one more keepin’ cold outside in a snow bank.”

One more? She already had two wrapped in waxed canvases in the storage shed behind her place, waiting to be hauled to the cemetery. Clementine was accustomed to corpses showing up at her establishment weekly thanks to the unruly streets of Deadwood, but The Pyre’s business was booming lately.

It appeared she’d hit the mother lode of traveling souls on their journey to Valhalla. She frowned at the hairy giant. Or maybe the dishonorable that were passing through the gates into the goddess Hel’s realm.

“I swear, Hank. Wildfires burn slower in dry brush than the dead move through my hands these days.”

She hadn’t dealt with this many bodies all at once since the smallpox epidemic that marked her arrival in camp several months ago. Just thinking about those gruesome days made her shudder. There’d been so many deaths, and in the August heat, to make matters worse. When she signed on to help clean up the Black Hills, she hadn’t bargained on her job as undertaker demanding so much of her time, especially considering the fact that it was meant to be a front for her actual duties.

“Want me to fetch the last one, Miss Johanssen?” Hank continued to poke at the small fire, which kept frost at bay in the room, but did little to thaw Clementine’s freezing fingers.

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“Last one fer now, anyways.”

Her building was one of the few clapboards thrown up in the last couple of months as the town prepared for autumn snowstorms in the gulch. Cold air seeped in between seams in the rough-cut pine boards, but she didn't complain. Well, not out loud, anyway. Several local businesses were still operating inside of tents prone to collapsing under the weight of what some days seemed like never-ending snowfall.

“Not yet, Hank.” She crossed her arms. “What have I told you about using my first name?”

His cheeks darkened under his scruffy gray beard. “My apologies, Miss Clementine.”

“Just ‘Clem’ is fine,” she reminded him as she had periodically since she hired him.

After a small nod, he glanced toward the dead bodies on the tables and grimaced, pulling the brim of his hat lower. Clementine had seen him shield his eyes that way before around the dead.

Over the last few months, Clementine had learned that Hank Varney was not a man to be measured as average. He'd come to the Black Hills months before the smallpox epidemic to load very large bags with free gold and to conquer the new frontier. Or possibly just for the gold. But the gold had proved difficult to procure and the touch of Midas had eluded him. Hour after hour of picking, shoveling, and sluicing demonstrated both his ineptitude for mining and the pure bust his claim turned out to be. With a little luck, a day's work might result in a small bag of dust and the occasional picker, which he would promptly deposit at the Belle Grande Theatre or Yellow Strike Saloon, Hank's preferred gambling and drinking establishments in Deadwood, leaving not quite enough coins to silence his often-grumbling belly.

Clementine had watched Hank for some time until she'd felt comfortable with her idea to take him on as her assistant. From what she'd witnessed, he had no real vices to speak of other than drinking and gambling. On top of that, he went out of his way to help a stranger when he could. He was the trustworthy sort, she was fairly sure.

She walked around the hairy feet of the big corpse, patting Hank on the back as she passed. “Not too much fire. We don't want to help these poor buggers along any quicker than is natural.”

Clementine did what she could to control the stench of decomposing flesh in The Pyre. The cold weather helped, but the unpleasantness of her task had soaked into the clapboard walls and anything else in the room that was semi-permeable. On warm days, Hank would say, “Skunk cabbage is bloomin' again,” plug his nose, and pretend to gag.

“Lucky it's freezin' outside.” Hank stood. He made a point of keeping his chin and gaze lifted, probably to avoid the bodies on her tables. He looked toward the front window, which she'd draped with thin white curtains that blocked the view into the room while still allowing plenty of light to enter. “Snowin' so's can't hardly see across the street. It's a pain in my backside. I gotta get Fred the mule and that wagon moved before I can't find 'em.”

“There's an apple in the bowl on the sideboard for your sidekick.”

Clementine was fond of “Fred the mule,” as Hank liked to call him. He had more personality than most of the scrubby miners and slick gamblers she'd met, along with a belligerent streak that served him well. Nowadays, the mule lugged more bodies than mining equipment. His job pulling Hank's wagon took him all around Deadwood, south to Lead, and clear out to Slagton when necessary.

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“Let me take a closer look at this big fellow and then we can move him to the shed. Maybe stack him on top of the other beefy one.” Rubbing her hands together, she tried to warm her palms and fingers. Not that her customers ever complained about her cold touch. The lack of protests in her establishment was one of the benefits in working with the non-living.

“Yes, ma’am,” Hank said, his gaze still focused on the falling snow. “We’re gettin’ full up out there.”

“I’ll talk to Ling and Gart about gathering the deceased from the shed, but I doubt they’ll be willing to brave this storm.”

Waiting on the pair of gravediggers had become a pastime for Clementine. She paid them decently enough, but they weren’t what could be considered reliable. From what she’d witnessed, most of their money went to liquor, women, and opiates. However, in her line of work, beggars couldn’t be choosers. Most folks were too superstitious to touch the dead, let alone spend days and nights digging graves in the bone orchard.

Hank was a golden nugget on that score. He didn’t like watching her work on the bodies, but he had no trouble with moving them from here to there, especially when they were wrapped in canvas.

With her hands as warm as they were going to be for the moment, Clementine opened the dead man’s large maw.

She made no attempt to hold her breath. Her history of dealing in death had rendered her desensitized to the unpleasantness of unwashed bodies, coagulated blood, and decayed flesh.

Mostly.

Other than a hint of tooth rot and a putrid ripeness that Clementine associated with the early stages of death, the body smelled better than most that landed on her table. Maybe the man had recently visited a bathhouse prior to dying.

She peeled back the rubbery lips. The sight of a ragged, gaping hole in the gingiva up front on the right made her pause.

“I think we have a problem,” she said more to herself than to Hank, noting the condition of the flesh around the hole in the man’s gums.

“We do?”

She stood upright. “This body makes two.”

“Two what?”

Hank moved next to her, looking down at the dead guy for a second before cringing and averting his eyes. He grabbed a pair of surgical forceps from the small stand next to the worktable and tapped them on the porcelain washbowl.

“You’re going to break my washbowl again, Hank.” She stepped away from the corpse, her thoughts swirling like the snow outside the window.

“Sorry, Miss Clem.” He slid the forceps back into place alongside the other instruments. “Dead people cause me some discomfort, ’specially when they’re disrobed.”

“I know.” She frowned at the corpse. “This is the second decedent whose maxillary cuspid on the right side has been removed post-mortem.”

The first corpse missing that particular tooth had come through The Pyre the week prior. Clementine had scratched her head about it at the time, curious why someone would remove a tooth from a dead body, but she hadn’t dwelled on it for long. After all, having a

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mouthful of healthy teeth was rare out West. For all she knew, the tooth had been hanging on by root strings and had gotten knocked loose when Hank hefted him into the wagon.

But now there were two bodies within a week that had the same tooth removed post-mortem. What at first seemed odd was now suspect.

“What’s a max... maxillary cus ... shit.” Hank gave up.

“Maxillary cuspid. Eyetooth. Canine.” She pulled the big man’s lips back again and pointed at the hole in the gum left by the missing tooth.

“Oh, yuh mean dog tooth.” Hank wrinkled his upper lip, exposing his own not quite complete set of yellowed ivory surrounded on all sides by scraggly whiskers. “Lotsa folks ’round here are missin’ choppers. I know a card sharp, Whistlin’ Wilbur, had so much trouble with his teeth he had ’em all pulled when he hit thirty-three years, says he ain’t had no toothaches since. Wears clappers. Says they wiggle some and sometimes fall out if he bends down to pick somethin’ up, but ya look at him and it’s apparent he eats good. He took a week’s pannin’ and pickers off me two nights back with a streak of luck. Started with a pair of tens.”

Clementine knew all about Whistling Wilbur and his games. He’d bought her a whiskey the last time she’d stopped by Yellow Strike Saloon to pick up some raw alcohol for cleaning her instruments. His mistake was thinking that gave him permission to get grabby—first a fistful of her braid to hold her still and then a handful of her breast.

She’d gotten “handsy” right back, using her knuckles to show him how much he’d overstepped. A quick, well-placed jab had sent him yowling to Doc Wahl with a broken nose and lacerated upper lip. The touchy bastard was lucky she’d been feeling charitable that day. Next time she wouldn’t stop at his face.

Whistling Wilbur, like many of the scoundrels in Deadwood, preferred to take liberties and forgo permission altogether. Unfortunately for them, Clementine was no shrinking violet, standing at least as tall—if not taller—than most men and wielding big fists with forearms strong enough to break bones.

Her size was no genetic anomaly according to her grandparents who’d raised her. Ancestors from her family line had been sizable and powerful since the time of their Viking reign. While she’d grown comfortable with her height and strength over the years, some males tended to see her as a challenge to their manhood.

Others aimed to bed her but only a handful had ever wooed her out of her clothes. Of those, two ended up taking dirt naps not long after she’d left their beds because of the shadows that followed on her heels from contract to contract. She’d learned early in life that attachments of any kind, especially those of the heart, were dangerous to all involved. Even worse, they made her vulnerable.

Out of necessity, these days she kept her pleasures private and her affairs brief. Her work allowed nothing more.

She walked around Hank and grabbed the canvas measure from the stand. “I need you to hold this on his big toe,” she said, handing Hank one end of the measure.

He followed her instructions with a grimace aimed at the man’s face. “Sure is a strange-lookin’ fella. Never saw a jaw and nose that big. Kinda like an animal. A wolf or bear or somethin’. Bet this ‘Big Joe’ could really swing a sledge. Bet he broke more’n one on a rock or two.”

Big Joe? Not having found a proper name for the corpse since it had come to them

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without a stitch of clothing on it, Clementine supposed Hank's nickname was as good as any. More than a few of Deadwood's inhabitants had ended up in unmarked graves in Ingleside, nameless and forgotten.

Hank's gaze drifted down over Big Joe only to come to an abrupt stop at the large protrusion south of his belly button. He focused on his finger holding the measure. "Uh, Miss Clem?"

She tried to hide her smile at his blush. "Yes, Hank?"

"Do you really need 'em unshucked?" His voice sounded slightly higher than normal.

"You're the one who brought him to me without clothes, remember? My britches may be big for a girl, but they're not big enough to fit Joe here."

"Yeah, but I had him covered up good with canvas."

She focused her attention on the canvas measuring rule she had pressed to the top of Big Joe's slanted forehead. "Seven feet, three inches."

Damnation. This one had been a giant among men.

She tugged the canvas rule from beneath Hank's finger, staring down at the dead man as she rolled up the measuring rule. Where had he come from? How long had he been in this part of the country? She would've remembered seeing him around Deadwood, so it couldn't have been long.

She set the rule down on her instrument table and returned to Big Joe's corpse. She lifted and examined both his massive arms, checking for anything out of the ordinary, but found nothing to explain the cause of his demise. The post-mortem tooth removal and chew marks on his thigh obviously weren't fatal. In fact, she found no sign of major trauma at all excepting a round, slightly swollen, purplish bruise on his upper abdomen that measured about three inches in diameter with a hole in the center the size a small-caliber bullet or slender knife would make.

She took another look at the hole in the middle of the bruise. How could such a small wound take down a giant like Big Joe?

She didn't think it could. There was only one way to know for sure, and that meant slicing him open to see what was going on under the surface.

"Great Odin's sow," she muttered, using her grandfather's favorite curse at the mess that would surely follow her carving into Big Joe.

"Can we move the large fella to the shed now, Miss Clem?" Hank was back at the stove, warming his hands.

"Not yet. I need your help turning him over. Grab above the ankles, will you?"

"Oh, Miss Clem." His forehead wrinkled. "He's in his altogether."

And he looked to be even hairier on his backside, a sight Clementine didn't relish witnessing. Some grisly sights took longer to clear from her mind, and she had a feeling this one would haunt her for a good length of time due to Big Joe's size and girth. However, her job as a caretaker of the dead—and the other work for which she'd been contracted—left her no other option.

"Hank, I thought we'd already established the fact that this man was without clothing."

"Yeah, but ..."

"Close your eyes then, but grab above his ankles first."

"When I ... couldn't we ... okay." He straightened his shoulders, appearing to bolster his resolve, and took hold of Big Joe's ankles. "But if this pilgrim sets off any more vapors—"

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”

“Turn!”

She grunted as she pushed on Big Joe’s stiff shoulder while Hank twisted on the dead man’s thick legs. The corpse rolled over, almost sliding off the pine slab before Clementine could catch it.

As soon as Big Joe was stable, Hank returned to the stove and stabbed at the embers inside the firebox again. “That man ain’t right.”

Clementine suspected Hank was more spot-on with that assessment than he realized. Steeling herself, she continued to search for any signs of trauma on Big Joe’s backside, crevices and all. She looked for something besides that odd wound on his upper abdomen, for anything else that could be the main cause of death.

After several moments she cursed again and stepped away from the body. Nothing. Her gaze traveled down over Big Joe’s corpse. Make that nothing besides a remarkably muscled build under an even more impressive crop of body hair. Seriously, this man probably didn’t need a coat even in the snow and wind. In that matter, she envied him. He had a natural fur pelt.

“It appears this man was shot or possibly stabbed. It doesn’t seem likely he died from such a small wound. But ...” She trailed off, her thoughts moving faster than her lips.

“But what?”

Miners often died in accidents that involved asphyxiation, falls, or cave-ins. Most of the men she’d dealt with who were victims of mining accidents displayed more widespread or apparent bodily damage. Crushed torsos and skulls were more common on her worktable than gunshot wounds some weeks.

“Never mind,” she said to Hank. “Help me turn him over onto his back again.”

She knew her take on a client’s cause of death didn’t usually hold much interest for Hank. He was more concerned with fetching and moving corpses, or running errands for her. Occasionally, he worried aloud about some of the corpses waking up on his watch and demanding he take them back to where he found them.

Hank helped without comment this time, his gaze holding steady on the dead man’s feet while they repositioned the body.

After they had Big Joe belly-up again, Clementine turned to the smaller, leaner body on the other table. She did a swift search from top to bottom, removing his raggedy clothing as she progressed. In the process, she discovered a knife wound below and in front of the left armpit and a slashed Achilles tendon.

The wounds told a fairly clear story. First the victim had been disabled by the severing of his tendon. Then, a skillful thrust with a slender blade straight into the left thoracic cavity had finished the job.

The knife wound was much cleaner than most others she’d seen since coming to Deadwood. Usually, there were multiple, jagged stab wounds and knife tears placed randomly during the heat of a battle. But this blade had been adeptly guided between ribs to pierce the left lung and probably the heart.

In other words, the murderer knew his way around knives and swords. An ex-member of the military, maybe? Deadwood certainly had plenty of Civil War veterans roaming the gulch, playing bounty hunter, miner, or gun for hire. Some were trying to shake off the horrors of war and build a new future. Others were bored and looking for trouble wherever it could be

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found ... especially in this unruly frontier.

Upon a second closer inspection, Clementine noticed the dead man's scuffed palms and knees. She suspected he'd groveled or attempted a crawling escape before the blade penetrated his lung and heart. He'd then bled to death on the inside as his heart pumped blood into his chest cavity.

A miserable way to die, certainly. Not that there were many good ways to make peace with the ground, but the quicker the better in Clementine's experience.

This corpse still had all of its teeth, although several molars smelled of rot. Judging by the layer of dirt behind the dead man's ears and between his toes, not to mention the rank odor from his armpits and nether regions, he hadn't seen the wet side of a washrag in weeks.

She moved to the feet, grabbing the dead man's legs. "Let's move this corpse out to the shed, Hank, and then you can bring in the last one."

"What about Big Joe?"

"I'm going to need to look him over a little more first."

They made fast work of carting the knife victim to the shed. Clementine palmed the few coins Hank had found in the dead man's pockets, extracting enough for her time and pine-box services before dropping the remaining pieces into a "collection" bowl she kept tucked away in her work desk in the exam room. This spare money was used to pay for those who passed through The Pyre without any money to cover the cost of their burial.

"Would you like help bringing in the last body?" she asked, following Hank to the front door.

"No, Miss Clem. This one's even lighter than the last." He closed the door behind him.

While she waited for him, Clementine wiped down the empty examination table with raw alcohol.

The cold wind blew snow inside with Hank when he returned, the body draped over his shoulder. He kicked the door closed behind him and carried the corpse through the parlor and into the exam room, lowering it onto the table with more care than most others he handled.

She unwrapped the waxed canvas. One look into the empty eyes of the dead explained his tender touch. It was a female with extensive bruising on her face.

An ache tightened in Clementine's gut as recognition washed over her. "Oh, Ginny," she whispered.

Ginny was one of the working girls from Yellow Strike Saloon. An innocent, simple spirit who'd been tricked into coming to this land of greed and wickedness.

Clementine didn't bother stripping off the young prostitute's clothes. There was no need. Judging from the swollen contusions on her head and the blood stains on her bloomers, she could guess the cause of death. The girl had been bludgeoned to death by one of the many vile miscreants in town who roughed up whores to get their peckers hard.

Whether Ginny had been raped before or after she'd died, Clementine wasn't sure she wanted to know. But if she found out who was responsible for the girl's demise, there'd be hell to pay, and Clementine was going to relish collecting the toll.

She motioned for Hank to take Ginny out back with the others, adding, "When you're finished, wash up and head on out for the night."

"So we're just leavin' Big Joe where he is?"

What she had planned for Big Joe was going to be messy. She'd have to lock the doors

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and close the shutters Hank had built for her privacy. Thankfully, her oil lamps were full with plenty of wick left to take her deep into the night.

“Don’t worry about him for now.”

“You sure, Miss Clem?”

She nodded, untying the bag filled with coins someone had left tied to Ginny’s dress. She had no doubt that the money was sent to cover the girl’s funeral costs. This wasn’t the first time Clementine had taken care of a dead prostitute, nor would it be her last in this godforsaken place.

She handed the bag to Hank. “Here. Go and enjoy something that smells better than Big Joe.”

After Hank carried the dead girl out the back door, Clementine strolled over to the window, peeking out through a part in the thin curtains. It seemed so peaceful out there in the growing darkness.

The snow was too deep now for wagons, and few folks were willing to brave the way on foot. She glanced down the street toward Yellow Strike Saloon. Most likely, the saloons and brothels lining Deadwood’s rowdy streets were bursting at the seams with lonely, rough sorts who were busy drinking, gambling, and whoring to pass the time.

Clementine rubbed her arms, trying to warm them through her wool shirt. She doubted anyone suspected that a killer with a fetish for collecting canine teeth was hiding somewhere in the midst of it all ... anyone except for her.