

Ann Charles & Sam Lucky

A LONG WAY FROM ORDINARY

AN EXCERPT ...



Chapter One

Late 1876

Deadwood, Dakota Territory

Waves of death were crashing into The Pyre, drowning Clementine Johanssen in corpses.

Today, for the first time in weeks, her undertaker exam tables were empty. Finally, she had a moment to sort through the signs of devilry she'd been finding on more and more bodies each day. These brandings and other strange markings made on the flesh of the dead—what did they mean to Deadwood's future? To her future?

Not one to sit idle while she pondered, she grabbed a bucket and brush. Who to hunt? Who to slay? Who to let live? Answers eluded her as she worked through the afternoon. There was too much death clouding her vision.

She was brushing the last of the whitewash on the back wall of the parlor when the front door banged open. An icy gust swirled around her legs, peppering her with snow, blowing away the smell of wet wood walls.

Hank Varney stomped across the threshold, as he tended to do, and knocked clumps of snow and mud from his boots. "Miss Clem, you ain't gonna believe what I seen!" He waved a rolled-up news sheet above his head, then frowned at the bucket of whitewash next to her. "What are you doin' that for? We just washed that not more'n two months ago."

"Hank, would you stoke the fire, please?" She winked at her assistant and nodded toward the door. "If we're going to heat all of Deadwood in the middle of winter, we'll need the stove good and hot."

"Huh? Oh." He kicked the door shut. "Street's a-bustlin' this evenin'. Word is population is growin' by a few hunerd a day now in the Hills. Guess they don't know all the good placer claims is gone already."

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Clementine could believe those numbers based on the increasing number of “customers” adorning her tables. The lure of gold in the Black Hills drew fortune seekers like locusts. In turn, opportunity filled the coffers of many who preyed on those new arrivals, tempting the gold-seekers with vices and profiting from their weaknesses.

Hank hung his coat and hat on a wall peg and turned his attention to Tinker, the three-legged dog, who was working on a chunk of beef bone near the stove while she kept Clementine company.

“Hiyo, Tinker. I see you’re ’bout done wrestlin’ with the cow I brung you.”

He plopped down beside her, crossed his legs, and dropped the paper next to him on the floor. Tinker wormed into his lap and nuzzled and nipped at his hand as the pup had done nearly every day since her *compadres*, Jack “Rabbit” Fields and Boone McCreery, had left for Santa Fe weeks earlier. Not that Clementine needed to keep track of how long they’d been gone, because Hank was.

The two gunmen had made a friend in Hank. Clementine, too, for that matter, in spite of her reservations about emotional attachments. More than once over the last few weeks she’d found herself looking toward the south, wondering if the travelers would return as they’d promised Tinker. She tempered her hope with reality. There was a lot of trail between Deadwood and Santa Fe filled with all manner of trouble, including the perils of winter weather. They might have changed their minds about returning to this cold, lawless frontier. In Santa Fe, they had a freight business to run, a ranch to work, friends to help pass the time, and probably plenty of sunshine.

If common sense ruled their actions, she doubted they’d come back. The only thing waiting for them here besides Tinker and Hank was death. Clementine could feel a storm brewing over the northern Hills. A tempest not of wind or snow, but of malicious intent and foul deeds. She’d been bred and raised to fight. They hadn’t.

Neither had Hank, for that matter, but no number of warnings had convinced him to find employment elsewhere. She couldn’t have wished for a better assistant or friend. Watching him play with Tinker fueled a comforting warmth she’d not experienced since leaving her childhood home many, many years ago.

The dog squirmed around to face Hank and thumped the back of his hand with the peg leg Jack had rigged for her.

“Ow! Appears to me yer better at walkin’ with that thing than you are sittin’ in my lap.”

Tinker wiggled her rump and yipped at him.

“She’s healed up real good while the boys are away, Miss Clem.”

She glanced at the paper on the floor next to him. “Hank.”

His attention was focused entirely on Tinker. “You know I brought you somethin’, don’t ya? Course I did.” He drew a piece of jerky from his coat pocket. “Uh oh,” he said and stuck it in his mouth, his eyes wide.

The dog scolded him with a series of quick yips.

He pulled the jerky out. “Ho ho! Tinkerdoo. I’m just foolin’ with ya.” He held the jerky out and she grabbed it with her teeth, carefully avoiding his fingers.

“You’re a good little girl, ain’t ya? Just a good little girl.” He scratched behind her ears and grabbed her front paw. “Next time I’ll get ya—”

“Hank.” Clementine balanced the brush on the rim of the bucket.

He stopped mid-handshake and looked up, still holding Tinker’s paw, waiting for

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Clementine to continue. His eyes creased in the corners; his brown, wavy hair curled over his collar. For a moment, he looked much younger than his forty-plus years. Just a boy and his dog.

She pointed at the sheet of paper. "What did you read that you came to tell me?"

"Oh!" He picked up the paper. "It's the *Trailblazer*."

"So I see." Deadwood's newspaper office was located several buildings down Main Street from The Pyre.

"You remember we blasted the Bloody Bones pretty good?"

"Of course."

The whole Bloody Bones mine incident was still fresh in Clementine's memory, from what Jack had found in the adit to the battle they'd all fought in the cavern shortly thereafter.

"You remember I said two kegs should do?"

She nodded.

Days after what Hank liked to call the "Battle of Bloody Bones," Clementine and he had hauled two full kegs of blasting powder into the adit and placed them near the entrance to the cavern. Their intent had been to seal off the mine, down deep in the preexisting tunnels past the cavern used by their foes to retreat. Where and to what they had retreated, Clementine didn't know.

But as it happened, the blasts from Jack's sawed-off shotgun during the battle had triggered cave-ins that efficiently collapsed those tunnels. With that task done, she and Hank had decided to use the powder to bring down the side of the hill, closing off the entrance to the mine. They hoped to keep gold seekers from meddling inside of Bloody Bones and once again freeing the troublemakers hidden deep within its rocky guts.

"And you recall the *Trailblazer* had somethin' to say about the blast." Hank frowned at the paper. "*The ground shook*, it said."

It had shaken, knocking the snow off the pine trees all around them as they watched the hillside cover the mine's entrance. Hank's mule, Fred, had plopped his hind end down on the ground and let out a squeaky wail until the rumbling stopped.

"*Big doings apparent in Gayville*," he continued. "All the way to Deadwood it shook, people talkin' ever'where about it."

Tinker wiggled off his lap and thumped over to her pile of blankets by the stove where she began to gnaw on the hunk of jerky she held between her paws.

"It was quite impressive," Clementine said, grinning at the memory of Hank cursing and tugging on Fred the Mule so they could hightail it out of the area and back to Deadwood before they were spotted by anyone.

"Prob'ly shouldn't have used quite so much powder, I s'pose." He rubbed the back of his neck.

"It should stay sealed. At least for a while."

He shook his head again. "I surely hope so." He held the paper up for her to read. "Look here what it says."

She read the first item aloud:

Winter reaches the Black Hills

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The Hills are draped with increasingly mountainous drifts of snow and thrashed by icy winds. The resiliency of Deadwood's citizens is tested to breaking, and still unfriendlier times approach as we near the beginning of winter ...

"Not that one, Miss Clem," Hank interrupted.

"Funny, I could swear winter arrived weeks ago."

This was Clementine's first taste of the snowy season in the Black Hills, but not her first experience with severely cold weather. Her childhood had been spent enduring long, dark, harsh Nordic winters. Before the snow had started, she and Hank had prepared The Pyre for all Skathi, the Norse goddess of winter, had in store for them. Thanks to Clementine's booming business, she had plenty of gold and coins tucked away to pay for food and other supplies.

In short, Clementine was ready for anything Deadwood could throw at her. Anything related to weather, in any case. The *other* problem she might encounter was another story. Time would tell.

Hank stood and brushed Tinker's fur from his trousers. "Down the page a ways."
She read another:

Icy death in the streets of Deadwood

Hundreds of penniless and newly arrived citizens find adequate accommodation and nourishment woefully lacking in Deadwood. Exposure dispatches many and threatens more ...

"Not that one neither, Miss Clem. Down the page, toward the bottom. Goes onto the next."

She pointed at the article about icy deaths. "We certainly have seen more than a few dead from exposure come through The Pyre the last couple of weeks, especially with the temperature dropping lower every night."

"Yep." Hank snorted. "Fred the Mule can't hardly keep up."

"I don't know what we'll do if this continues on like it is. Ling and Gart have bodies stacked like cordwood in the shed out back. Near full to the rafters." Her two-man, grave-digging crew had been scratching their heads lately about what to do with the corpses until they could put them in the ground. "Have those boys had any luck thawing the earth enough to dig at Ingleside?"

"Yup. But it's a slow, cold job. Can't keep up with the current business we're doin' here. 'Specially since extra fire fuel's hard to acquire presently, what with ever'body fightin' for wood and coal oil. Reminds me. Earp dumped his logs out front. I'll help the boys saw it up and stack it out back so's nobody gets the temptation to borrow it. Anyway, Ling sounds near to quittin' but Gart likes the pay, and if Gart don't quit, Ling won't neither."

"They're due some bonus. Maybe a few extra coins will keep Ling happy."

Hank grunted in agreement. "I s'pose you still need to thaw the dead out, at least an itty bit, 'nough to see if they been stuck or not. And check teeth."

"More than ever."

Signs of trouble had been showing up more and more often in the last couple of weeks in the form of two different symbols she'd found on several corpses. The *capere-sus* emblem, which looked like a goat melting into a pig, seemed to be spreading. In addition, each victim

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with this branding or ring had been slain in a similar method—first a slicing of the tendon that Clementine figured was meant to hobble, and then a deep thrust of a blade through the lower jaw up into the brain or between the ribs to pierce the heart.

Quick, efficient deaths.

“The killer is back to work. But I haven’t noticed any missing teeth since Big Joe.” Awhile back, a few bodies had come through The Pyre missing a canine tooth.

“Don’t comprehend takin’ teeth from a dead man.” Hank wrinkled his upper lip and poked at an exposed canine. He shuddered. “Downright revoltin’. Savage. Ain’t enough to lay a man out, gotta violate his body, too.”

Savage? Clementine considered that. There was something to this style of murder beyond desecration or defilement. In each instance, the tooth had been taken post mortem, and always the maxillary canine. Something else was at play here. Ritualistic perhaps, or possibly a trophy for a kill.

Hank was right. “It does seem savage, doesn’t it?” Unlike the other execution-style killings.

“Yup. Causes me some infirmity to think ’bout it.” He leaned down and stroked Tinker’s back, probably more to calm himself than Tinker.

In any case, there was an assassin out there responsible for some of the deaths. The slayings were precise, calculated. Clementine wondered if she were being taunted?

Or was the killer like Clementine, an executioner hired to complete a job? If so, who would benefit from these deaths? She had heard the words “rogue executioner” discussed last month behind closed doors. Perhaps this slayer wasn’t a rogue at a—

“Miss Clem, it’s the next one down there, toward the bottom.”

She focused on the sheet, scanning to the next item.

The rush is on! Again.

Recall, if you will, a few weeks previous, the earth rumbled. The blast rattled glass and tin. Its origin, now established and confirmed, the abandoned, or rather previously abandoned, Golden Echo, in the area northwest of Gayville.

“Shouldn’t-a used so much blastin’ powder,” Hank said softly. “I knew better.”

“What’s done is done. After what we went through in that mine, we wanted it sealed. Both of us did.” She squeezed his shoulder. “And I was glad to have you by my side, Hank.”

He raised one side of his mouth into a lopsided smile and nodded at the paper for her to continue.

The subsequent search exposed neither the scoundrel responsible nor any victim of same, but the revelation of things more interesting indeed. Gold!

Prospector and city dandy alike commenced scouring the hills behind Gayville in hopes of finding the next Comstock.

The claim was legally located, prospected and staked, but the owners, numbering and including three brothers, have been missing for slightly short of five months.

Reports indicate color varying from dust to nuggets as large in size as to fill a man’s open hand is being taken from the mine and it is said that veins run thick and deep into the mountain.

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The mine is generally considered abandoned, whether legally or otherwise, and as such, is claimed by an assembly of men of the opportunistic sort.

Consequently, discord and hostility proliferate in the area with four deaths and many fracasas reported.

We note that there has been neither demonstrable concern for the three brothers nor discernible intent to verify their well-being.

Increasing numbers of men continue to converge on the area with equipment and a dismaying number of firearms.

It is the opinion of the Trailblazer staff that the town of Gayville, possibly with the help of the miner court of Deadwood, should rectify the growing problem without delay.

“Damn it,” Clementine muttered.

“That was my assessment.”

“We’re sitting on one massive powder keg here in the Black Hills, Hank. They’ll open the Golden Echo mine again and follow that gold seam into the earth. To the very end. There’s no stopping it. The gate will be opened again ... eventually.”

And then all hell would break loose.

Hank cocked his head and frowned at her. “We’ll go right up that mountainside and seal it up again.” He nodded once, apparently agreeing with himself.

“Perhaps, but not yet. I think we have time until they remove all of that rock.” The gold would keep luring them back, though. The avarice of men was so heightened by the prospect of striking it rich in these hills that Clementine didn’t think sealing off the mine again was the final solution. She’d need to exterminate the vermin at the source. “Besides, that’s not our biggest problem at the moment.”

One of his eyebrows shot up. “It ain’t?”

She didn’t know if Hank was prepared to hear the extent of what she suspected was happening in the Black Hills.

Men and women were pouring into the gulches and filling them up with humanity. It was a virtually endless supply of *livestock*, as Clementine had heard them called. Humans arriving in the Hills with not a penny in a pocket, their last few dollars spent on the trip here, only to find that gold did not pave the streets. There were no fist-sized nuggets to pick from the streams as they had been told. Even worse, the prospects of anything regarding financial security did not materialize the moment they stepped from their horses or carriages. In short, they had arrived in the cold, icy realm of Helheim, or whichever version of the Underworld they preferred.

These desperate souls offered a unique opportunity for the worst sort of evil. The increasing number of bodies bearing rings, burn scars, and tattoos of the *capers-sus* emblem supported Clementine’s suspicion that someone was recruiting these people to build an army. Or armies.

But who was killing them? The rogue executioner? If so, to what end? Could Clementine’s benefactor have summoned more than one slayer to do his bidding?

Aha! Maybe that was the answer. She looked at Hank. He stared back with both eyebrows raised, but she wasn’t prepared to share her suspicion just yet.

She changed the subject. “Were you planning to stop by the Cricket this evening?”

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He scrunched up one side of his face. “Don’t cotton to that place. Swaengen likes them prizefights. Rowdy crowd there. That man sells a ruckus, that’s what I say. Swaengen’s a swindler, that’s what *they* say. Don’t cotton.”

“Then where? Belle Grande?”

“Prob’ly. Lose my money there, though. Cardsharps. Good beer. Prob’ly go th—”

A series of thumps on the front door interrupted Hank.

“More business, maybe.” He opened the door to a tall, lean man wearing a thick sheepskin coat.

“Jack Rabbit!”

“Ho there, Hank!” Jack Fields’s grin lit up his face. “Damn, it’s good to see you!”

Hank reached out and bear-hugged Jack, lifting the taller man off the ground. He shook him and then dropped him back onto his boots.

Another man stepped into the doorway behind Jack, his shoulders wider, his head a few inches taller, his black hat marred by a single bullet hole.

“Boone!” Hank grabbed Boone McCreery’s hand in both of his and shook it vigorously. “It sure is mighty good to see the both of ya! Look, Miss Clem, it’s the Santa Fe Sidewinders.” He stepped aside and pushed the pair into the room, closing the door behind them. Tink leapt up and yipped and danced around their legs, licking their fingers when they tried to pet her.

“Howdy, Miss Clementine. You’re a sight for tired eyes.” Jack grabbed the hat from his head, put it to his chest, and bowed toward Clementine.

“Hello, Jack.” She crossed the room and hugged the blond traveler. He smelled fresh from the outside. The leather of his coat felt cool under her hands. “It’s good to see you two here, safe and sound,” she said as she stepped back and turned to Boone, meeting his green eyes. “Welcome back, Boone.”

Boone raised his hat to her and then whipped it against his leg, powdery snow swirling to the floor at his feet. “Rabbit’s right, Clementine. You surely are a sight for some tired eyes.”

She laughed, looking down at her old wool shirt and denim men’s trousers. “I’m a sight, all right.” Clementine hugged him. Boone was one of the few men she’d met who stood taller than she, besting her by a couple of inches. His short beard tickled her cheek before she pulled away. When she stepped back, she feasted her gaze on the two men, far too happy to see them again. “You weren’t due in for another couple of days, according to Hank.”

“That is correct, Miss Clementine,” Jack said. “But Booney here kept pushin’. Nickel and Dime ain’t none too happy about it neither.”

Boone glanced at her, the look on his face edging on sheepish. “A winter trail isn’t a place to waste time, especially in Wyoming or the Dakota Territory.”

“That’s sure enough,” Hank said. “You both got real clothes, looks like. Glad to see it. Winter’s just gettin’ started around here.” Hank rubbed the sleeves of their thick sheepskin coats.

“So you know,” Jack said to Boone, “I still didn’t like the ride up here from Santa Fe any more than I did last time. Hey, Tink!” Jack dropped to his knees and began to ruffle the dog’s fur. He smooshed his face against hers. Tinker mirrored his excitement with a swooshing rump and slobbery tongue, yipping and whining her excitement.

Clementine chuckled, glancing up to find Boone watching her with a hint of a smile. “You did a fine job taking care of Tink, Clementine. Thank you.”

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Her face warmed at his gratitude. “It was my pleasure. She’s a sweetheart. Hank helped as well, bringing her bones and treats each morning.”

Hank waved off her words, grinning as he watched Jack play with Tinker. “I’ll get Keller to squeeze Nickel and Dime in at the livery. You boys got a place to sleep? Doesn’t matter, you stay with me, up in Keller’s hayloft above the stable. He charges me enough to cover you two along with me.”

“With the line forming out front, I’m guessing business must be good.” Boone pointed his thumb toward the window.

Line forming? “What do you mean?” Clementine asked.

“The body you’re storing out front?”

Clementine exchanged frowns with Hank before striding to the door. She marched out onto the porch with Hank on her tail.

Out front were the four coffins Ling and Gart had propped up against The Pyre’s façade. “Advertising,” Gart had said.

Three of the pine boxes were empty. She stood in front of the fourth, her hands on her hips. A body had been placed neatly in the tipped coffin—a man with his hands folded over his lower abdomen, as if prepared for a parade of mourners to pass by and pay respects.

“Where’d this’n come from?” Hank muttered under his breath, scratching his jaw.

“What the hell is going on, Hank?” Clementine asked in a quiet voice. She glanced up and down the street, wondering who might have left this dead man on her doorstep.

“I surely don’t know, Miss Clem. I’ll take him in and put him on the table.”

Jack stepped out to help Hank carry the body into the exam room. “It’s a fine welcome back to Deadwood you arranged for us, Hank. Thank you kindly.”

Hank snickered. “Happy to accomodate, Jack Rabbit.”

After they’d settled the dead man on her exam table, she donned her leather work apron. “You boys can warm up by the fire if you’d like.” She pointed toward the parlor. “There’s coffee on the stove and some of those biscuits you like left over from breakfast. Hank has been doing his best to fatten Tinker and me up while you’ve been gone.”

She followed the men into the parlor while tying her apron.

Boone slid out of his coat and carefully picked up Tinker. “You’re looking like a young pup again, girl. I see Clementine and Hank have taken extra good care of you.” He sat in one of the chairs by the fire with Tinker on his lap. Jack poured a cup of coffee and plopped into the chair beside Boone.

“I’ll be just a few minutes.” With that she left them to it and crossed into the exam room, where she prepared her instruments and grabbed her notebook.

Hank joined her shortly. “Who would have left him without informing us?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No rigor in him. Ain’t frozen stiff. Wasn’t there when I came in neither. Purt near fresh.”

He fetched the measuring rule and they began the exercise they’d completed too many times to count since Clementine had hired him as an assistant at The Pyre a few short months ago. They measured the dead man’s height and guessed his weight. Hank waited by the exam room stove while Clementine circled the table, scrutinizing him from head to toe.

The body was well-dressed, compared to most in Deadwood. Wool coat, hat, and pants. Sturdy leather boots.

She took up her notebook and wrote:

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Adult male, approximately mid-twenties. Appropriate attire for winter in Deadwood. Apparently well-nourished. No sign of exposure. Beard matted with blood but the injury is obscured.

She'd explore that wound shortly. Setting down her notebook, she looked over at Hank. "Let's remove his clothes."

Hank grimaced. "Don't like this part."

"That makes two of us."

He started tugging on the dead man's boots while Clementine worked his arms free of the coat. Hank draped a muslin rag over the corpse's waist, muttering something about letting the man keep his "dignity."

Clementine stood over the body, staring at the brand on his chest. *Caper-sus* again.

"The placement of that brand reminds me of the man left at the back door shortly before Boone and Jack left for Santa Fe."

"If you say so, Miss Clem."

Oh, right. Hank hadn't been there to see that one. Boone and Jack had helped relocate the body to her table that day.

"Boone! Jack!" She called toward the parlor. "Will you come in here, please?"

She began checking the pockets of his coat as she waited, looking for anything that might help identify who she had on her table. She found a piece of paper in one pocket, unfolded it and read:

Are you paying attention?

"Are you paying attention?" she repeated aloud.

"What's that, Clementine?" Boone joined her. He did a double take at the corpse on the table. "He's been branded."

"Just like before," Jack said, leaning against the other exam table.

They confirmed her memory.

"Look at this." She handed Boone the note and began examining the man's body. She found no sign of any other injuries save the blood-soaked beard. He even had all his teeth. She felt around under his chin and found a small puncture.

"Jack, will you hand me that metal rod on the tray over there?" She pointed at the tray of instruments near her desk.

He obliged. "What's that for?"

She held the rod up between them. "You might want to look away," she said and then eased the rod into the hole under the dead man's chin. She leaned closer, listening, and slowly pushed it up until it clunked against the inside of his skull.

No familiar clink of steel against lead.

"He wasn't shot." A glance up at her companions found each had turned a pale shade of gray, their faces a mixture of cringes and pained expressions.

She slowly moved the rod around in a small circle, exploring, trying to assess the damage done by ... what? A blade? She pulled the rod back out. It came free with a sucking slurp.

All three men groaned.

"Miss Clem," Hank said, his whole face pinched tight. "That's revoltin'."

Boone turned away, saying over his shoulder, "Sounded like you were stirring porridge."

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Jack headed for the door to the parlor. "I'm gonna visit Tink."

She wiped the rod clean with a strip of cloth. "I suspect this man was slain by the same individual who left the corpse at my back door before you headed for Santa Fe."

"Same brand too, isn't it?" Boone still had his back to her.

"Yes. But this man is different."

He turned, his gaze narrowed. "How so?"

"He's well-dressed and fed. He's been taken care of or had the wherewithal to take care of himself."

Boone shot a quick look at the dead man. "The body left at the back door was extra lean," he said. "Hadn't been eating too well for a while. Clothes were threadbare. You're right. You make something of that?"

"Maybe." She crossed to her desk and pulled a piece of paper from her drawer, handing it to Boone, who had followed her. "This is the note from before you left. It's the same handwriting."

"Looks like it." He frowned down at the two notes. "Not signed with the letter P, though."

Clementine nodded, focusing on the corpse again. "'Are you paying attention,'" she repeated the words on the paper. "If I were to guess, this man was higher up in rank. Possibly."

"Have you seen any rings or brandings with the *capers-sus* emblem since we left?"

"Yes, but not during the first week. Business has been up in general—namely due to exposure, accidents, and murders. But none of those who came through The Pyre during the first week after you left wore the sign. Then it started up again, slowly, one a day, sometimes two. But now we're seeing it more and more." She looked to Hank. "Right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Downright busy with 'em anymore."

"There's something else," she told Boone.

"Oh?"

"There seem to be two different forms of the *capers-sus* and no discrimination in death." She opened a wooden box on her desk and pulled out two rings, handing them to Boone.

He studied each and then held one up. "This one has a curved horn. And this one," he held up the other, "is curled, like a ram. Is that the only difference?"

"That I can see."

"Do you think we're dealing with two different ... what was it you called them?"

"Cults." She nodded. "That would be my guess. It's possible that there are two rivals vying for control here in the Black Hills."

He lowered the rings, his gaze searching hers. "What aren't you telling me?"

"It's possible that one of them is led by the benefactor with whom I'm contracted to help."

Boone leaned against the desk. "It's becoming apparent there is a lot you know that Rabbit and I don't."

Clementine grimaced. "This reminds me of a quote from the saga of Hen-Thorir, an old Norse tale my amma used to tell me."

"Amma?" He handed her back the rings.

"My grandmother." She tucked them in her desk drawer.

"So this story is about heroic Vikings battling impossible odds and all that?"

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“Not quite. It’s a tale about infighting that develops between neighbors and includes some people being burned alive and others beheaded. But it does end with a marriage, if that makes you feel better.”

“What’s the quote, Miss Clem?” Hank asked.

“ ‘That which has a bad beginning is likely to have a bad ending.’ ”

Boone frowned at Hank. “Has she always been this uplifting?”

“That’s a question for later.” Hank patted Boone on the shoulder. “I got just the place for you and Jack Rabbit. Good steaks and beer and maybe we can shuffle some cards. Then I’ll take you boys back to my roost for some shuteye. It might smell some, but it’s comfortable and *almost* warm.