



Ann Charles

DEVIL DAYS IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

Chapter One

Friday, January 11th

Lead, South Dakota

What dumbass thought catching a Hungarian devil made of smoke and shadow was a good idea?" I scowled up at the crumbling brick Sugarloaf Building, which had been perched on a hillside looking across at the Homestake Mine in Lead for a century ... and then some.

The sun was hiding behind a thick bank of clouds, making mid-afternoon feel more like early evening. Old Man Winter hit the Black Hills with a frying pan every year, knocking it ass-over-teakettle into short days and frigid temperatures.

The other old man in my life, Willis "the Mongoose" Harvey, grabbed my elbow. "If memory serves me right, Sparky, that'd be you." He tugged me toward the rickety metal steps leading up to the building's second floor.

"That was supposed to be a rhetorical question." I paused with my foot on the first step, which had a dusting of snow in the corners in spite of the rusty, corrugated tin roof overhead. Did I really want to go up there after the shitstorms that had gone down the last two times I'd been here? Not to mention what might be waiting for us up in those haunted rooms.

"My grandpappy had a sayin' about stupid questions," Harvey said, butting into my moment of indecision.

"It wasn't stupid." Unlike the deal I'd made months ago with the Hungarian devil's keeper.

"Never miss a good chance to shut up." He nudged me up the steps in front of him. "Now giddy up before my twig and berries freeze solid and break clean off. It's cold as a witch's tit out here."

I stopped midway up, adjusting my purse strap on my shoulder. "Why is a witch's tit supposed to be so cold? I mean, witches are human." At least I always thought they were. "And in my experience breasts are rarely ever that cold."

Harvey cocked one bushy eyebrow. "How many breasts have you handled in your thirty-five years?"

"Well." I pondered that for a second. "Two. Mine."

He pshawed. "I've fondled way more than that in my time."

"Yeah, but have you touched them daily like I have?"

His grin split wide, showing his two gold teeth above his silver-streaked beard. "No, but I could start a daily routine along with you if yer stallion doesn't mind."

"Parker!" Deadwood's favorite surly detective barked at me from the top of the steps. Detective Cooper's face was rigid. His blond hair stuck up in tufts, looking like pointy glass shards lining a concrete wall. "Would you two fruitcakes stop gabbing about your nail polish and get your asses up here. Some of us have actual work to do today."

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“Calm down, Detective Pissypants,” I growled under my breath, stomping up the stairs. “Aren’t you supposed to be relaxed after your trip to Arizona?”

Cooper’s gray eyes narrowed as I joined him on the small landing at the top of the steps. He shot his uncle a hard glance before asking, “Why do you ask that?”

“Because you took a much-needed vacation to the Sunshine State over New Year’s.”

“Arizona isn’t the Sunshine State, Sparky.” Harvey squeezed in behind me. “That’s Florida.”

“I know that. I’m just saying Arizona gets a lot of sun.”

“What’s your point?” Cooper prodded, literally, with his pointer finger jabbing my shoulder.

“Ouch,” I complained, leaning back into Harvey. “Never mind, you big bully.”

I looked at the door to the second floor of the old building. The lock and chain put in place by the captain of the fire department months ago to keep curious troublemakers from sneaking inside now hung loose, the metal quaking in the frigid breeze along with Harvey and me. Cooper had stayed true to his agreement to help me take another peek inside the building that had imprisoned the *lidérc*, aka the elusive Hungarian devil I had to find if I wanted to keep my aunt Zoe free from a life of a harem-type servitude.

Harvey grunted as another blast of wind rattled our bones. “It’s as cold as a cast iron commode out here.”

“Let’s get out of this wind.” Cooper pushed the door open, hesitating on the threshold. “Parker, is there anything I should know before I step inside?”

“Uhhhh.” I sent a pair of raised eyebrows in Harvey’s direction, trying to think of something fitting for the moment. A phrase I’d heard long ago popped into my head. “Oh, I know. Never give the devil a ride. He’ll always want the reins.”

“And never drop your gun to hug a grizzly,” Harvey added, playing along.

Cooper cursed at us both, and not very nicely either.

“Kiss your mother with that mouth?” I asked, scowling back at him.

“He’s been kissin’ someone, that’s fer sure,” Harvey mumbled.

The pointed glare Cooper shot at his uncle would have left holes in a thinner-skinned target, but Harvey’s hide was so thick that dirty looks, cutting insults, and sharp-toothed remarks bounced off of him.

I, on the other hand, liked my head stuck smack-dab in the middle of my shoulders and not bitten off, so I ignored Harvey’s intriguing comment about Cooper playing k-i-s-s-i-n-g ... for now.

Cooper turned back to me. “I meant anything I should know regarding this place and the whacky shit you and Nyce wade hip-deep in when you’re not doing all of that lovey-dovey crap together.”

I lifted my chin. “Doc and I aren’t doing lovey-dovey ‘crap,’ thank you very much. We are building a long-term relationship based on trust, respect, and communication.”

Boy howdy, that sounded as stupid out loud as it had in my head when I’d read it in a women’s magazine while waiting at the dentist’s office the other morning. The truth about our relationship was much more raw and messy, involving a lot of blood, sweat, and tequila.

“Don’t forget about the hot sex,” Harvey added.

“And that, too,” I confirmed, even though discussing my romantic life in front of the bristly detective and the old buzzard made my cheeks warm.

“Jesus, Parker. Can we not talk about your sex life for five whole minutes?”

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“Hey, you and your uncle brought it up, not me.”

Harvey snickered. “Coop’s just jealous. When’s the last time you dipped your stinger in the honey, boy?”

Cooper’s cheeks darkened. Without another word, the detective stepped inside the building.

“What was that about?” I asked Harvey.

He shrugged. “You’ll have to prod Coop for answers. He swears he’ll shoot me if I get to sufferin’ from jawbone diarrhea.”

We followed Cooper inside the building, pulling the door closed behind us. The dark clouds outside made for an interior laden with ominous shadows. Our breath steamed around our heads. The wind whistled through the large windows, their wooden frames dry-rotted long ago. I quivered, my nerves jittery about returning to the place where I’d battled not one, but two troublemakers before.

Nothing much had changed from the last time I stood inside the large open room. A layer of dust still covered the old floorboards. The smattering of footprints were most likely leftovers from the last time I’d crept around up here in the dark. The air smelled stale in spite of the cold.

Cooper stood across the room, shining his flashlight down what I knew was a narrow hallway leading to four rooms: two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen.

“This ward looks newer than the others,” Harvey said, aiming his flashlight at the square that was painted next to the door.

I stepped closer to the collection of symbols used to “ward” off trouble—or in this case, seal it in. Harvey was right. Someone had slapped white paint over the old version. Next to the patch of white paint, a fresh ward had been drawn on the wall in something dark red and thick. I touched the edge of the ward. It was sticky, like blood mixed with something thicker. Maybe tar? Cringing, I wiped my finger on the wall next to it, leaving a smeared fingerprint.

Inside the ward’s square edges was a combination of what looked like rune symbols, along with a rough sketch of an eye, two triangles, and entwined forks. At least that was my take on the ward. Aunt Zoe would probably be able to dissect the ward using Latin words for each part, but I only took two years of Spanish in high school and cheated on my final exams by writing verb conjugation charts on my arm, so I was useless. I pulled out my cell phone and snapped a picture of it quick, in case Doc wanted to take a look at it later.

Pocketing my phone, I glanced around. There were similar wards painted onto the walls next to every window, which I assumed were meant to keep a Hungarian devil trapped inside the building indefinitely. Unfortunately, a few months ago, a pissed-off bitch with a penchant for carving humans into pieces had figured out how to breach one of the wards and free the *lidérc* that had been held prisoner here for decades. Now it was my job to find that dodgy devil and bring it back here.

“I wonder if Masterson did this,” I said to myself as much as Harvey.

Dominick Masterson owned the building, more than a century old. He was also the one with whom I’d made the dumb deal that had me trying to catch a *lidérc* on this frigid winter day so that I could keep my aunt from ending up as Dominick’s concubine.

I took a step back from the wall, my heel coming down on someone’s toe.

“Damn it, Parker!”

I jumped sideways. “That’s what you get for sneaking up on me, Coop.”

“That’s ‘Detective Cooper’ to you and you know it.”

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“What about Christmas?”

Cooper’s gift to me had been permitting me to call him by the nickname everyone else on the planet was allowed to use.

“Christmas is over. You and I are back to square one.”

I harrumphed. “We haven’t been at square one since I broke your nose.”

His lips thinned. “Let’s get this damned sightseeing trip you had to take done so I can get back to the pile of paperwork sitting on my desk.” He limped toward the hallway.

I frowned after him. “You’re the one who ran off to Arizona on a whim, so quit taking your post-vacation blues out on me.”

Harvey eased up next to me as Cooper disappeared down the hallway. “You’re stirring up hell with a long spoon this afternoon, girl.”

“He started it.” I shrugged off my purse strap, letting my bag dangle and swing in my grip.

“It takes two to dance. What has me scratchin’ my noggin is why he’s on the prod in the first place.”

“I think something happened while he was in Arizona.” I turned to Harvey. “Or *something* didn’t and now he’s doubly frustrated and using me as his punching bag.”

Cooper had pursued my best friend, Natalie, all the way to Jackrabbit Junction, Arizona, after Christmas, taking his uncle along with him. While neither Natalie nor Harvey were talking much about what happened down there in the desert, I had a feeling sparks flew somewhere along the line. *And* based on Cooper’s repeated snarls and growls since he’d returned, I had a feeling those sparks weren’t in the bedroom. But because neither Harvey nor Natalie were feeling chatty about it since they’d returned a couple of days ago, I was stuck trying to pin the tail on a steely-eyed donkey that kept kicking and nipping at me in the process.

I watched for Harvey’s reaction to my theory about his nephew, but the old codger could bluff the devil even on a hot day in Hell.

“You forgot a certain something,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

He smirked. “Coop isn’t the only Deadwood gumshoe back on the prowl. Detective Hawke is out sniffing around now, too.”

I grimaced at the mere mention of Cooper’s pain-in-the-butt, temporary helper in crime-solving. Detective Hawke and I had a rosy relationship—I was a beautiful flower and he was a thorny prick. His list of crimes that I’d supposedly committed in the Black Hills was longer than Santa’s naughty list these days. Every time I ran into the jerk, he tried to hit me with another accusation, but I was rubber and he was ... an idiot. “Oh, yeah. You think Hawke is giving your nephew a hard time again?”

“Is a frog’s ass watertight?”

Cooper stepped back into the main room. “Are you two coming back here to take a look around or are you waiting for a queen’s herald to blow a damned horn first?”

“Keep your bloomers on, Coop. We’re comin’.”

We followed Cooper down the hallway, peeking in the rooms along the way. One had a broken iron bedframe spotted with rust. In another larger room there was a wooden chair—the same chair that I’d sat in last time we were here while making contact with the building’s namesake, Ottó Sugarloaf, or rather Ottó Cukorsüveg as he was known back in Hungary before he moved to Lead and anglicized his name.

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Farther down, the bathroom with the old chain pull–style toilet looked the same as the last time I’d checked on it. The archaic cast iron stove in the kitchen reminded me of the one in the historic Adams House in Deadwood. But unlike that museum, there was no cookie jar sitting nearby full of leftover goodies from days gone by, only an ancient sink big enough to fit a family of raccoons, which it might have in the past judging from the pile of dried critter turds in it.

“Are you picking up any ghosts?” I asked Cooper, who had the unfortunate ability to see the wispy folks now thanks to a tiny accident involving me, a pissed-off dead woman, and an innocent bystander who got in our way—him. Although Cooper wasn’t one hundred percent innocent of anything, in my opinion.

“Nope.”

Hmm. Last time we were here, Ottó had shown up to the party, along with a girl he’d killed back in his homeland when he tried to extricate the *lidérc* from her.

Cooper led the way out of the kitchen, checking his watch as we reached the front room. “Are we done, Parker?”

“I guess so,” I said, walking over to one of the windows.

While we were in the back of the building, the clouds had split enough to let the sun peek through. Across the valley, the old Yates Shaft headframe reflected the sun’s rays, looking like a lighthouse standing tall among the dark sea of hills.

“Aunt Zoe said that we should line the window sills with salt to be safe.” I unzipped my purse and pulled out the little bag of salt she’d given me.

My aunt was the keeper of my family’s long history of secrets, which it turned out was numerous enough to fill four leather-bound volumes. She also was my *magistra*, or teacher, when it came to the business of killing pests like Hungarian devils. Although, according to our family’s history books, slaying these assholes was a feat no previous Executioner had pulled off successfully so far.

Cooper waited while Harvey and I lined the sills. I was sprinkling salt along the last one when three loud thumps came from the other end of the shadowed hallway.

I looked at Cooper, who stood near the hallway. “Did you hear that?”

His brow wrinkled. “Hear what?”

“That thumping sound.”

Thump! Thump!

“There it is again.”

Cooper’s eyes narrowed. “Are you fucking with me, Parker?”

“Sparky’s tellin’ the truth.” Harvey moved next to his nephew. “I’m hearing it, too.”

I sprinkled the last of the salt, grabbed my purse from the floor, and joined them. “Shine your flashlight down there, Cooper.”

He did, but nothing was there.

“I’m going back there,” I told them. “Give me the flashlight. You two wait here.”

“Shut up, Parker.” Cooper eased down the hallway with his flashlight and Colt .45 leading the way. Harvey and I tiptoed after him. Partway down the hall, three more thumps sounded.

“It’s coming from the kitchen,” I whispered.

“I still don’t hear it,” Cooper said, frowning back at us before taking a turn into the kitchen.

Harvey hesitated in the doorway. “Did you bring your mace?” he asked me.

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He was referring to the wooden bat with an array of four-inch-long metal spikes jutting out of one end that Doc had made custom for me as a Christmas present, not the tiny can of spray used to scare off bears and human assholes.

“No. There wasn’t supposed to be anything in here that required blunt force trauma to subdue.”

“Parker didn’t need to bring anything. I have us covered.” Cooper looked back at where we stood in the hall outside of the kitchen. “Do you two hear anything else?”

We stood in silence, waiting. After several breaths, I shook my head.

“Could have been a packrat,” Harvey said, joining his nephew inside the room.

“Probably.” Cooper lowered his gun. “If you two are ready to go, I need to get—”

Thump! Thump! Thump! The old stove rattled with each thump.

Harvey and I both jumped. I might have squeaked a little, too, or maybe that was only in my head.

“There’s something in there wantin’ out.” Harvey pointed at the cast iron oven door.

“I still can’t hear anything. You’re sure?” After Harvey and I both nodded, Cooper eased over to the handle. “You two retreat to the hall,” he whispered.

“What? No.” I tiptoed closer to him. “This is my territory, not yours. You go wait in the hall.”

“Parker, it’s probably just some rat that crawled down the stovepipe and got stuck. I don’t need you screaming like a banshee in my ear when a rat comes running out.”

“I don’t scream like a banshee.”

“I’ve heard you.”

“When?”

“Your nightmares.”

“Oh, yeah.” Cooper had been forced to babysit me night and day last fall while we worked on clearing my name of one of Detective Hawke’s numerous murder accusations.

“Go!” he growled, nudging me back several steps.

“Fine, but if you die, don’t come back and haunt me.” I joined Harvey in the hall.

After a silent count of three, Cooper pulled open the oven door.

Nothing happened.

Harvey and I exchanged frowns.

Cooper leaned down, shining his light inside. “Uncle Willis was right. A packrat is living in here. Judging from the size of the nest, it’s been busy.” He slid on one of his leather gloves and reached inside, pulling out an old Raggedy Ann doll half-covered in brown and yellow stains. It was missing an arm, part of its red yarn hair, and a bright blue button eye. He held out the doll. “This must be his girlfriend.”

“She could use a makeover,” I said.

Cooper tossed the doll back inside the stove and closed the oven door.

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw something move at the end of the hallway. A glance down the hall found nothing. I looked back at the stove as Cooper pushed passed me and stepped out into the hallway.

“If you two hens are done squawking about a packrat, we need to hit the road.”

I scowled after the detective, only to do a double take.

And then I shrieked.

Harvey flinched. “What in the hell, Sparky? You swallow a screech owl?”

I pointed at Cooper, who was currently looking back at me with a slack jaw and wrinkled

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brow, like I was the one with a small, brown, raisin-skinned gremlin-like creature clinging to my shoulder. “Coop!”

“That’s ‘Cooper’ to you, Parker,” he shot back, like a freaking broken record.

The creature on his shoulder leaned down and sniffed around the detective’s ear. It lifted its tiny raccoon-like hand and extended a set of claws that were twice as long as its fingers.

A gurgling sound came from my throat. I held up my hand to stop it.

“I think the packrat has her tongue,” Harvey said.

“I don’t have time for this charades shit.” Cooper turned and started down the hallway toward the front room.

I shook off my stupor and raced after him. The creature’s claws were almost touching Cooper’s ear when I swung my purse at it.

My aim would have been spot-on if it hadn’t ducked at the last minute. Instead of knocking the little bastard off Cooper’s shoulder, my purse walloped the side of the detective’s head.

Cursing followed.

A lot of cursing.

But I was too busy taking aim again as the creature scrambled down Cooper’s back to worry about the pissed-off detective. It paused at his waist and bared its teeth at me, letting out a high-pitched squeal.

“What was that?” Harvey asked, looking around.

I swung again.

The creature dropped to the floor, my purse grazing the top of its head before slamming into Cooper’s hip with a solid *whump*.

He grunted. “What the hell, Parker!?”

The little shit took off across the floor in a loping gallop.

I shoved Cooper aside and raced after it.

It headed straight for one of the windows, still squealing as it ran.

I followed, catching up, not sure what I would do if I managed to grab it, because something told me this tiny son of a gun was trouble with a capital T.

It stood on the windowsill and turned, claws extended, teeth bared at me. Its eyes looked red in the room’s dim light.

I slid to a stop several feet away. “What are you?”

It lifted its snout, wiggling it as it sniffed the air. “*Scharfrichter!*” The word sounded garbled, like its mouth was full of marbles.

“I didn’t ask what I was, I asked what you are.”

“You will not survive *die Ankunft*.”

“The what?”

Its upper lip raised, making a sound that reminded me of a snicker. “The *arrival*.”

I frowned. “The arrival of what?”

Instead of answering, it squealed and lunged at me. I swung my purse again, connecting with a solid *thwap* that sent it flying through the air ... and right through the glass window, which shattered upon impact.

“Parker!” Cooper joined me at the window where the cold breeze was making my curls fly around my face. “What the hell did you break the window for?”

“I didn’t.” I looked down at the snow-covered ground, seeing no sign of the little bastard below.

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“What the hell was that critter?” Harvey asked, coming up behind me.

I glanced back at him. “You could see it?”

“No, but I could hear it squealing.” He peered over my shoulder. “Did you kill it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, whatever it is,” Harvey said, stepping back from the broken window, “it’s free now.”

“Right.” I grimaced. “I think that might be a problem.”

Cooper growled. “Here we go again.”