

# Ann Charles & Sam Lucky



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## CAN'T RIDE AROUND IT

AN EXCERPT ...

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### Chapter One

#### *Winter 1876*

*Deadwood, Dakota Territory*

Jack “Rabbit” Fields was not a complicated man by any means. That was his estimation, anyway. His reputation was shoot ’em or buy ’em a drink. He liked it that way.

He knew a good thing when he saw it, whether it was a healthy horse, a solid business venture, a sure bet, or a pretty sage hen. When it came to locking horns with any curly wolves he ran into along the trail, he tended to shoot first and ask questions later—a notion that had saved his hide more times than he could count.

Rabbit grabbed a handful of snow from the top of a wagon wheel and began to shape it into a ball. Nope, not complicated one bit, unlike his partner in the livery business, Boone McCreery. Being complicated was in Boone’s nature, along with his proclivity toward over-cogitation.

Since they were kids, Boone had been the one who had to think a thing beyond its duration. Take the time they were twelve and Boone was contemplating the purchase of a pig for their uncle at the autumn hog auction in Agua Fria. While prime hog after hog went to the highest bidder, Boone sat and pondered, too busy considering an undersized ear or turned-in hoof to put in a bid. He’d ended up with the runt of the sale by overindulging his thoughts.

Their uncle Mort, who’d adopted them when they were wagon-train orphans no bigger than overgrown possums, couldn’t decide whether to laugh or bang his head against the barn door most days when it came to Boone’s over-thinking habit. Early on, the tendency to ponder to no end had earned Boone the nickname “Molasses,” which Rabbit was fond of using to stoke the fire in Boone when needed.

Boone would have Rabbit believe that thinking things out was the wise man’s way. That it was smarter to take the time to contemplate every damned little thing.

“Somebody’s got to watch out for you,” he’d say.

But Rabbit’s pistol watched out for both of them plenty over the years, and more than ever since they’d arrived in Deadwood, where the streets were filled with some of the best and worst humanity had to offer.

“Jack Rabbit!” Hank Varney called from the street near the front of Keller’s Livery. The same livery Boone and Rabbit had bought and registered on paper just two days prior. They were going to need to change the name now that Keller was heading back east to rejoin his family.

Hank was a fast friend to Rabbit, and he hadn’t given Boone time to consider the pros and cons of a friendship. Nope, that wasn’t Hank’s way. If he had a biscuit, he’d give a friend half in a heartbeat and put an arrow in the ass of anyone who tried to take the other

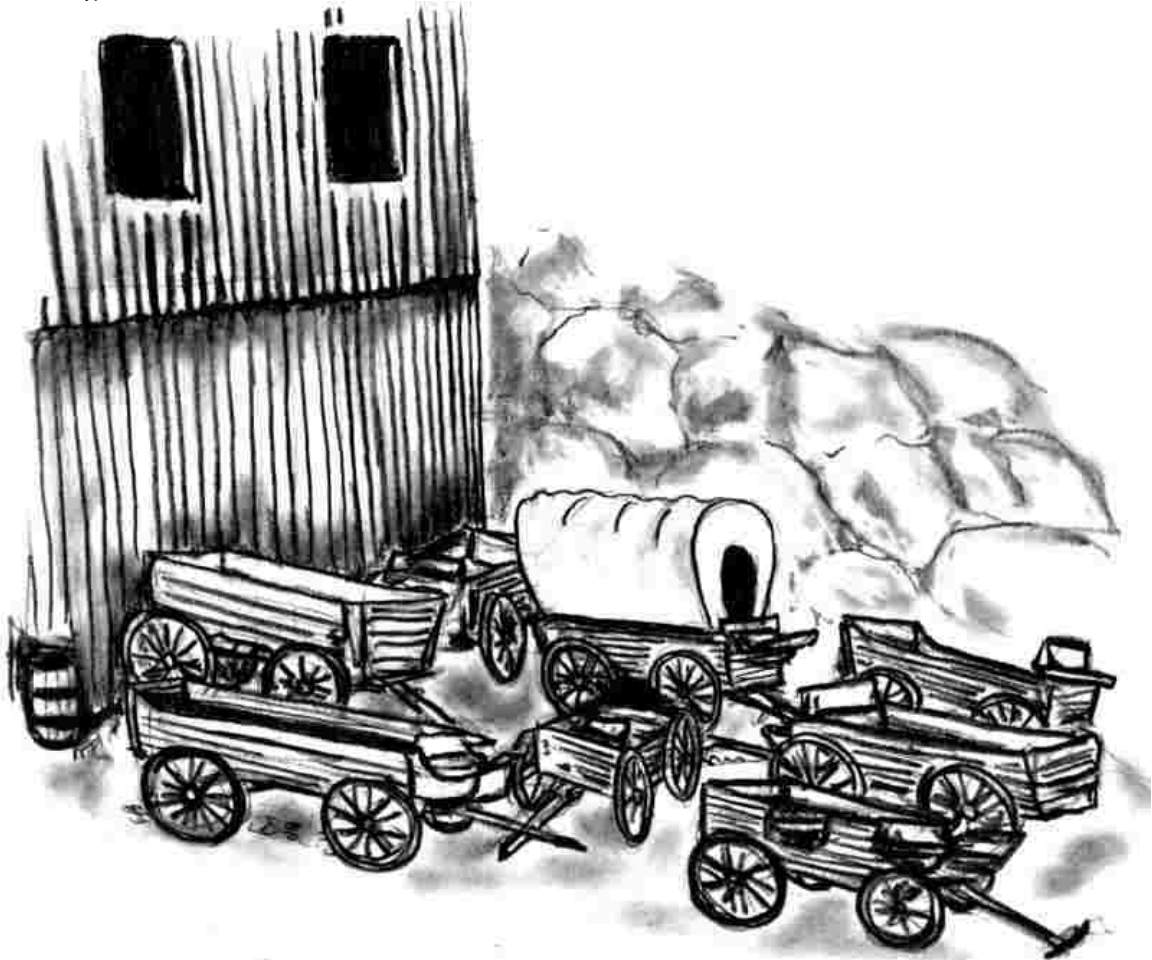
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half.

“Hiyo, Hank!” Rabbit waved. “Come back and help us push this buggy outta here.”

Rabbit and Boone had gone to work immediately selling off the derelict wagons and buggies and tack overcrowding the livery’s storage lot even though Boone had resisted the idea at first. Mr. Molasses had struggled to get past the idea that the owners might come back. He’d always had a soft heart for a sad story. Then again, a short time ago Uncle Mort’s freight wagon had been one of the many abandoned pieces of equipment in this very storage lot that had been sold before he and Boone could recoup it.

Rabbit could understand Boone’s hesitation, but the lot needed to be cleared. More equipment and rigs were arriving every day, practically every hour, and they had the biggest livery in town. As a compromise, they’d decided to start by selling the older stock first. Unfortunately that meant moving most of the damned wagons and buggies out of the way to reach those that had been pushed to the back of the lot, wedged up against the crumbly rock forming one side of Deadwood Gulch.



“Rabbit, push the neck yoke back and forth,” Boone called from the back of the buggy. “This wheel is frozen in the mud. We need to break it loose.”

“Wait for Hank. He can help push.” Rabbit closed one eye and squinted into the bright cloudless morning sky. The day was colder than a bucket of snowman snot, especially with

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the dang wind.

Rabbit scooped up another glove full of snow and packed it into the ball he'd started. He gauged the distance and height and then lobbed the snowball at the blanket of snow that had accumulated on the roof of the buggy they were attempting to break free. A small avalanche slid down the backside, landing with a satisfying *smish-ploosh!* Right about where Boone was standing.

"Son of a rat catcher. Rabbit!" Boone popped out from behind the buggy, his hat drooping down over one ear and onto his shoulder, weighed down by a healthy pile of snow.

Rabbit burst into laughter. "Commence to shiverin', icy britches."

Boone leaned forward and gingerly tipped his black hat, dumping the load of snow on the ground. "Went down my neck, you scrawny chicken rancher." He took off his hat, shook it, and flopped it back on his head.

Rabbit held his stomach. "Hoo hoo! Your pretty green eyes were big as wagon wheels. You needed a bath anyway. A shave, too, ya scruffy sheepherder."

"You sound like Hank." Boone glared at Rabbit while he wiped at the slushy snow running down his back. "That's gonna end up on your list of regrets before we're done."

Rabbit kept chuckling. Payback or not, seeing Boone wearing a bonnet of snow over his dark hair and rosy cheeks was worth it.

"Movin' wagons I see." Hank joined them, slapping Rabbit on the back. Tall and lanky, and tough as nails, Hank reminded Rabbit of an old ironwood tree down in the desert. Not that Hank was that much older than Rabbit, maybe a decade or so was all. This morning, the older man's whiskers had a layer of frost on them.

"Watch that rascal." Boone shook the front of his coat, still trying to get the snow out. "He'll douse ya."

"Ho there, Boonedog! Didn't see you back there."

"Glad you're here, Hank. Now you can help us give this buggy a push."

Hank eyed the wheel that was buried up to the spokes in frozen mud. "Looks like the wheel there is done for 'til spring."

Boone scowled. "You're probably right."

"What say we cook some coffee?" Rabbit suggested, thinking about the hot, fiery forge inside the livery. "Thaw the innards."

Twenty minutes later they were melted a little around the edges and sitting at the table in the livery loft, warming their hands on steaming tins of coffee.

"You been busy at The Pyre lately, Hank?" Rabbit asked.

The Pyre was one of two undertaker establishments in town. It was a typical house of the dead except for one key thing—it was run by a woman.

And not just any woman.

Clementine Johanssen had come to town six or so months previous and gone into the business of burying the town's dead, which was a thriving trade in a booming gold town as rough and rowdy as Deadwood. Taller than most *hombres* and tough as rawhide, she could knock a man sky-westward and crooked eastward in a flash. Hell, Rabbit had seen her do nearly that more than once.

In addition to burying the dead, Clementine also was an ace at killing troublemakers of the otherworldly sort, and made a mighty fine fourth *compadre* in their posse. Trained to fight from a young girl up, she came into their newfound friendship with a healthy dose of

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gumption. Not to mention a cabinet full of deadly weapons that made Rabbit swoon.

Clementine had been visiting them in the livery every day for over a week, teaching them all she could about the weapons they would use and the creatures they would face if they continued to associate with her and Hank. Rabbit had never chopped and stabbed so many straw men in all his born days. Of course he hadn't. What sane soul would? Boone would probably agree. They were both sore every night from head to toe after exercising muscles they hadn't even known they had.

With Clementine coming around so much, Rabbit and Boone hadn't seen the need to visit her at The Pyre. Hell, Rabbit's preference was to avoid that place anyway, if possible. He wasn't exactly squeamish around a dead body, but that place felt like an eerie stage stop on a one-way trip to a long sleep.

"Miss Clem and me ain't busy so much these days," Hank said, answering Rabbit's question. "New undertaker in town is doin' drop-dead business."

Boone laughed. "That's a good one, Hank. People dying to get into his place, are they?"

"Hoo hoo, Boonedog." Hank shook his finger at Boone.

"Miss Clem appears happy about the situation," Hank told them, taking a moment to sip from his cup. "She's been practicing with her weapons a lot. She works with you boys pert near ever' day, but by herself, too. Occurs to me the letter from that Rogue character had some persuasion on her. She even swings that big sword, *Ulfberht*, around now." Hank's gaze lifted to the ceiling, a smile rounding his whiskered cheeks. "Like watchin' a fancy dancer spin and jump."

Rabbit smiled along with Hank, thinking of the times he'd watched Clementine swing her blades. She moved like greased lightning when she fought. It was a fine sight to see.

Across the table, Boone was scowling at the wall and tugging on his ear, something he'd been doing more often lately, especially when Clementine was around. The last time Rabbit had seen Boone so preoccupied with his damned ear was when he fell for that dark-eyed, sweet-talking *señorita* down in Las Cruces. Unfortunately, it turned out she was married, and to more than one *hombre* at that. Since that fiasco, Boone hadn't paid much attention to the ladies. Mr. Molasses always took his time picking out a woman, the same as he did hogs way back when, often losing out to other stallions in the meantime.

Rabbit cleared his throat.

Boone blinked and looked at Rabbit. "Uh, anyway, I think that Rogue is trouble. Wish I'd seen her there in that saloon in Galena. Don't know what I'd have done. Be good to know what she looks like, though."

The Rogue Executioner was another deadly female in town in the same killing profession as Clementine. However, where Clementine, like Boone, considered her steps deliberately when it came to spilling blood, the Rogue wasted no time weighing options. She quickly slayed anyone or any *thing* she considered worthy of execution. She'd kept Clementine's two exam tables busy in previous months with bodies bearing their enemies' insignia in the form of a tattoo or brand.

"I think that Rogue is a real fireball." Rabbit winked at Boone. "I'd like to sit with her a spell. All that action, but nobody knows who she is. She must be a hoot to watch fight. Must have a real interestin' story or two in her."

"Sit with her a spell." Boone smirked. "She might just pin your ears back, if you're not careful."

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“Oh! Jack Rabbit. Miss Clem gave me this.” Hank fished in his pocket and pulled out a linen bag.

“What? Another blade?”

“Nosiree. Don’t feel like one of them blades you been playin’ with.”

“Playin’? Take a look at this.” In one fluid movement he stood, jerked a shiny slender throwing knife from his belt, and flung it across the room. *Thwap!* It stuck into a board he’d hung on a stack of hay at the other end of the loft.

Hank opened his mouth so wide it took up half his face. His round eyes took up the other half. He nodded his head exaggeratedly and slapped his knee. “I’ll be a hellbent horny toad!”

“I know!” Rabbit pulled another knife and held it up. “When she gave me these things, I thought she was pullin’ on my rooster tail, but I gotta tell ya, I like ’em. Quick as a sidewinder on hot sand and before you know it, I’ll be able to shave those whiskers from your chin from across the loft.”

Hank rubbed his whiskered chin. “Better’n a six-shooter?”

“Quieter, anyway.”

Hank nodded. “Well, here.” He handed Rabbit the bag.

“Wonder what Miss Clementine thinks I need.” He opened the bag and pulled out a silver and turquoise bear pendant on a leather lanyard. “Hey now! Uncle Mort’s bear.”

“Miss Clem says you forgot it when you departed on your Santa Fe gallivant after your uncle’s funeral.”

“I surely did. Distracted, I guess.” Rabbit strung the loop of leather over his head and rubbed the silver bear. He couldn’t help but smile. “Feels like a little piece of Uncle Mort is here now.”

His head began to spin, but only a little, like what tended to happen when he slammed a whiskey on an empty stomach or sipped a little too much McCuddle’s Original Magical Tonic. But he hadn’t had either for better than a day.

That was odd. He rubbed his temple, waiting for the feeling to pass. Instead, the back of his neck prickled, same as it did now and then when he was a kid playing near the old horse graveyard in the ravine behind Uncle Mort’s woodshed. He felt the air shift behind him. The tingling in his neck spread south, down his spine, making his legs itch to skedaddle.

He looked at Boone and Hank, wondering if they were feeling something far from ordinary, too. They sat at the table, sipping coffee as if they were having tea with the queen of England. Hank broke out a deck of cards and began to overhand shuffle.

Rabbit’s stomach weighed heavy. There was something behind him now, he knew it without even turning.

*Sheeat! Someone is lookin’ at me.*

He craned his neck, peeking over his shoulder.

What he saw made him spin back around. “Nope.”

“What ‘nope,’ Jack Rabbit?” Hank looked up, still shuffling the cards.

Rabbit shook his head. “Fuck that.”

Yet he couldn’t help but glance behind him again. The sight was same as before. He scowled and focused on Boone and Hank.

“You two see that?” He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder.

“The bed? Stairs? What?” Hank asked.

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Rabbit frowned. "Boone? What do you see?"

Boone shot Rabbit a wide grin, his eyes sparkling. "I see a real handsome man. Kinda *loco*, though."

"Ain't exactly helpful, are ya? Hank, anything else?"

Hank looked up from the cards he was dealing and tilted his head to see around Rabbit. "Don't see nothin', Jack Rabbit. Just the bed over there." He went back to flipping the cards into three piles.

"Jack, turn around." The gravelly voice that spoke sounded far away, yet right in Rabbit's ear. A very familiar voice. "Let me look at you."

Rabbit froze, his heart thumped in his chest like it was trying to break free and race back to New Mexico.

"Jonathan Virginia Fields." The voice grew louder. "Turn around this minute!"

Rabbit gulped. Only one person had ever used his full name since his mother had died back on that wagon trip west. Rabbit did as ordered, moving slowly, his gaze aimed down at the straw-covered floor. His legs felt like heavy piles of meat with the bones removed.

"Look at me!"

Rabbit let his gaze lift to the bed, in front of which a pair of boots stood with legs attached. His gaze eased up and up, until he locked eyes with his uncle, who'd been dead for way too long to be standing in the loft right now.