

# Ann Charles & Sam Lucky

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## CATAWAMPUS CHRISTMAS CAROL

AN EXCERPT ...

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### Chapter One

*Once upon a time ...*

*Actually, it was Christmas Eve 1876 in the rough and tumble mining town of Deadwood (Dakota Territory), but anyway ...*

“Uncle Mort is dead,” Jack “Rabbit” Fields told his longtime friend and partner in the livery and soon-to-be hotel business. “There’s no doubt whatsoever about that,” Boone McCreery replied, leaning against a freight wagon loaded with rough-cut planks that were destined to become part of The Sidewinder Hotel the two of them were in the process of building. He aimed a wrinkled brow at Rabbit. “I was standing next to you at Uncle Morton’s funeral, remember? Or has that McCuddle’s Original Magical Tonic you love to snuggle with through the night muddled your mind?”

Rabbit scooped up a handful of snow, packed it, and threw it at the wisecrack. “Of course I remember, lunkhead. My point being, now that Uncle Mort’s no longer breathing, it’s up to you and me to continue with his favorite holiday traditions, including takin’ the day off to prepare for the big celebrations happenin’ tomorrow.”

Still frowning, Boone wiped the snow off his coat. “This lumber isn’t going to unload itself, Rabbit.” He rounded the end of the wagon loaded with stacked planks.

“Booney, you’re beginnin’ to remind me of Ebenezer Scrooge, insisting I work in the freezin’ cold on Christmas Eve. I’m feelin’ like Scrooge’s assistant, poor Mr. Cratchit.”

“Cratchit was Scrooge’s clerk, not his assistant.” Boone grabbed the end of a plank. “Your tail is dragging because you can’t figure out what I got you for Christmas. Now pick up the other end of this plank and let’s get on with your next guess. You only get eight more, you know.”

Of course Rabbit knew. They’d only played this game since they were kids sharing a room on Uncle Mort’s ranch down in Santa Fe. “I can eat it,” he said, confident in his answer, and then he hefted the end of the twenty-foot piece of lumber.

His friendship with Boone had sprouted and grown since they were tykes some quarter century ago. That being an age-old fact, it wasn’t difficult for Rabbit to read the glow of evil delight on Boone’s face in spite of the dark beard shadowing everything south of his nose. Rabbit’s guess about being able to eat it must have been miles from close.

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"Nooo. You can't eat it." Boone chuckled after they dropped the plank on top of the others next to the hotel's foundation.

So it wasn't vittles. Rabbit returned to the wagon and lifted the end of another plank. "You gonna show me your muscles, you big strong man?" He nodded once at the plank. "Pick that end up."

"Give up?" Boone grunted as he hefted his end up to his chest. Without a word, they heaved in unison and lay the plank on the growing stack.

Rabbit wasn't about to quit guessing at what his *compadre* was giving him for Christmas. "Does it snow on a camel in the woods?"

Boone did a double-take. "What does that mean?"

"It means I don't give up. Is it big?"

"Depends."

"How can somethin' like that *depend*?" Rabbit clapped his half-frozen hands together to keep the blood from freezing in his fingers, then grabbed another plank and with Boone's help slid it out of the wagon.

They'd started early, before the sun had made a proper entrance and the gusts roiling up the streets of Deadwood still had the bitter bite of night in them. For the last hour, Rabbit had worked at keeping the cold bug from stinging his ass and giving him a case of depression. His thick sheepskin coat and canvas trousers weren't much of a match for a Black Hills winter night, not even when he dressed in layers with an extra pair of long underwear beneath it all.

"Hold on." Boone pulled his gloves off, tucked them into the crook of his arm, and blew into his hands. He wore pretty much the same garb as Rabbit, only his gloves were newer, his wool hat was thicker, and he was wearing *two* extra pair of socks.

Rabbit crossed his arms. "I remember some old tinhorn who's always offering advice—unwelcome advice, mind you—tellin' me that blowin' in my hands only makes them colder."

"That was me." Boone rubbed his hands together, grinning under his frosty moustache.

"Yep. Sounds like you."

"I'm six months older than you, so I'm not *old*. And tinhorn?" Boone scoffed. "I may be truculent at times, but a tinhorn?" He slipped his hands back into his gloves while shaking his head.

Rabbit bobbed his head. "*I may be truculent*," he repeated in a deeper voice, imitating Boone. The old tinhorn didn't even realize when he was being a windbag.

"Shut up, donkey." Boone pointed at the next plank. "Lift."

Rabbit shoved the plank toward Boone and started to lift the end just as a dog yelped and then howled down the street. He stilled, his mind returning to the damp darkness of the Bloody Bones mine in a blink. A sea of howling, snarling beasties flooded his thoughts. Slick dark fur, massive shoulders, dagger-like teeth and claws. The pack of *Bahkav* swarmed around him.

He shuddered and dropped the end of the plank. Sweat formed on his brow in

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spite of the frigid gusts that wheedled in through his coat. The vicious creatures haunted his memories and cast shadows on the cold reality that had been solid and bright a moment before.

"Rabbit?" Boone's face emerged through the vision of swarming *Bahkauv*. He grasped Rabbit by the shoulders. "You feeling fit, *Cochito*? Steady now."

His heart hammering, he focused on Boone's face. *Cochito*? He must be in worse shape than he thought. Boone used that name only when they were alone and things were serious.

His legs wobbly all of a sudden, Rabbit leaned into Boone's steady grip.

"Easy, *amigo*." Boone's voice was low and soothing.

The sinister, growling beasties retreated back into the dark corners of Rabbit's mind.

"Wh ... what was that?" Rabbit wiped his sleeve across his brow and straightened, his legs steady once again.

Boone loosened his hold but didn't let go. "Tell me."

"*Bahkauv*."

Boone nodded, his dark eyes full of understanding for all that came with that single word.

"You think we got 'em all, Booney?"

He let go of Rabbit and blew out his cheeks. "I'd be a kitten with a bowl of cream if I could say *yes*."

"Yeah. The recollection of those beasties does me in a little every single time it hits."

Boone studied him. "Back to the load?"

A wiggle of movement behind his *compadre* caught Rabbit's attention. Rabbit squinted in the dim, early light. "Uncle Mort!" His dead uncle's ghost stood next to a wagon that looked quite a bit like the fancy Mitchell the old codger used to drive when pulling freight. "What are you doin' over there? Why are you waving at me?"

And what was that on his head?

He frowned as Uncle Mort float-walked toward him, his long threadbare, light blue winter nightgown undulating with a current that had nothing to do with the stiff breezes blowing through the gulch. As he drew closer, Uncle Mort's form became clearer, less fuzzy around the edges. On his head sat the knitted, tasseled nightcap he wore on cold evenings back in Santa Fe; on his feet were a pair of old boots—the ones he wore to do rounds at the ranch before settling in for the night.

"You keep throwing conceptions when I come up from behind." He shook his palms at Rabbit. "Don't want to compromise your healthy mindedness. You skirt dangerous close to 'gone over' as it is."

"I'm dangerous close to 'gone over' because of you, that much you got right." Standing here talking to his dead uncle in broad daylight would likely send Rabbit into a lunatic asylum before he ... "Wait a goldurn minute! I'm not close to 'gone over,' you ol' coot."

"That may or may not be true," Boone interrupted. "I guess Uncle Morton

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decided to present himself this morning? To *you*, anyway. Tell him we could use a hand unloading.”

“Someday, Boone, you’ll see him, too.” So far, Uncle Mort’s ghost seemed to be visible only to Rabbit. Although Tinker, his uncle’s three-legged dog, seemed mighty disturbed whenever Uncle Mort’s ghost hovered near her. “And you know good and well Uncle Mort can hear you.”

“Surely.” Boone shook his head, though.

“His mind isn’t open to it,” Uncle Mort said, combing the fringe on the tassel of his nightcap. “Tell him I’d like to converse with him.”

*Tell him ...* Rabbit huffed. “Well, you’re stuck with me, Uncle Mort.” He pointed at his still-living *compadre*. “This is your fault, Boone. Too many books! Me? I’m open to possibilities. But your way of thinkin’ is all overfilled with big words.”

“Is that right?” Boone folded his arms.

“Yep. Uncle Mort says you’re not open to it.”

“Is that all? Open up, he says?” Boone’s moustache twitched.

“Yep. He says you need a dressin’ down.”

Uncle Mort’s ghostly pale forehead furrowed. “That’s not what I said.”

“That’s what I heard,” Rabbit shot back at his uncle. “I got it wrong? You go on ahead and tell him yourself.” He picked up his end of a plank. “Let’s get this done, Boone.”

Uncle Mort stood by and watched Boone and Rabbit as they finished unloading the wagon.

Rabbit kept an eye on his uncle as he worked while a mixture of irritation and uncertainty and gratefulness clouded his thoughts.

Why was he the only one who could see and talk to his uncle’s ghost?

Uncle Mort had previously told Rabbit that he’d considered his job of raising Rabbit to manhood to be incomplete, unlike Boone, whom he’d called a “fine man.” So, Uncle Mort had returned in his current wispy form to finish the job. But why wasn’t Rabbit “man” enough yet?

And why was his uncle so much more irascible since his death? Had the escape from his flesh freed this contrary attitude, or was he suffering from a case of frustration for the way things used to be?

Rabbit glanced over and caught Boone eyeing him with worry lines on his face. “I’m fine, I’m tellin’ ya.”

Boone nodded. “That was a spell is all?”

“Yeah. I think when that dog got to howlin’ down the street, that set me off.”

“I’m not surprised. Thoughts like that wake me some nights.”

“Same here.” Rabbit looked up and down the street. “Where are Ling and Gart with that other wagon? We need to get that unloaded, too.” The two gravediggers were moonlighting as carpenters and freighters these days since the frozen ground interfered with burying bodies.

“I’ll head up, assess the delay.” Boone closed the wagon’s gate and started toward the street.

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"You're walkin'?" Rabbit called after him.

"Take longer to saddle Nickel than it will to walk. Few minutes and I'll be at the lumber mill." Boone waved and headed off.

"*Bahkauv.*" Uncle Mort shimmered into a wavy mess. "Foul creatures."

"We took care of 'em, Uncle Mort. Horses did their share, too. They took down ten or fifteen. That black beauty of Clementine's did most of that. Dime did a lot of runnin'. Ol' Fred the Mule skedaddled, though." Rabbit started straightening the stack of planks.

"Clementine? You mean that handsome Amazon in the livery?" Uncle Mort pushed at the planks to help with straightening them, but his hands went right through the lumber.

Rabbit stretched his back from side to side, working out the kinks as he thought about Clementine Johanssen. Uncle Mort's description of her as an Amazon was fitting. She was extra long-legged for a woman and strong enough to toss a blacksmith's anvil clear across the Rio Grande. On top of those jaw-dropping virtues, the woman had a streak of stubborn independence that was out-matched only by the fierceness of her character.

It was that same fierceness that kept *almost* getting her into trouble. And by trouble, Rabbit meant the heart-stopping sort at the hands of beasties and other unfriendly non-human folks. Not that Clementine wasn't accustomed to strong-arming such troublemakers, but since coming to Deadwood, her carefully scripted routine of solitary existence had been disrupted—first by Hank, her unabashedly loyal associate ... no, make that friend; and then by Boone and Rabbit, fresh up from Santa ... *Hold up!*

"What?" Rabbit squinted at his uncle. "She's in the livery?"

"This very moment." Uncle Mort gave up on helping straighten the lumber and sat on the stack instead. Well, more like hovered above it. "She's saddling that big black 'Beauty,' as you call her. That surely is a grand animal. Some rascal whipped that horse, though. Got the scars to prove it."

"She said she had notes to take today," Rabbit said to himself more than his uncle. "Told us she'd see us tomorrow. For Christmas." It would be like Clementine to ... He kicked at a lump of snow, sending slush flying right through his uncle. "Jehoshaphat!"

"Now what'd you do that for?" Uncle Mort snorted. "That darn temper of yours is going to be your undoing, boy."

Ignoring his uncle, Rabbit sprinted the few steps to the livery and flung open the door. "Miss Clementine!" He paused inside the door while his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The smell of horseflesh, straw dust, and blacksmithing coal greeted him as he stepped farther into the barn's interior. "Miss Clementine! You in here?"

"*Verdammt!*" he heard her curse.

Rabbit squinted at the shadows in the direction of Clementine's voice. As his eyes adjusted, he could see that she had saddled and geared up Fenrir, her majestic black Morgan, and was preparing to lead the horse out of the livery. As for

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Clementine herself, the flaps on her fur-lined hat were down, covering her ears. Her long auburn braid looked like a tail trailing down from the back of the hat. She had a red knitted scarf wrapped around her neck, gloves tucked halfway into the pockets of her wool coat, and canvas trousers crammed into tall boots that reached her knees.

“Mornin’.” He sauntered up next to her and made a point of taking in the gear on Fenrir’s back. Bedroll. Haversack stuffed with who knew what. Saddlebags bulging with ... blades? “That might be considered more than a fair amount of sharp steel in there.”

Clementine sighed. “I thought you and Boone were busy working on the hotel.”

She must have seen them unloading the planks on her way into the livery. “Now, if Boone was standin’ here, I do believe he’d call that a look of dismay.” Rabbit slowly circled Clementine and Fenrir, careful to stay a fair distance from the end of the horse that had teeth. “As in, ‘Her escape nearly realized, Miss Clementine’s hopes were sunk and she was overcome with *dismay* at the sight of Mr. Jack Fields. You see, with his exceedingly ample intellect, Mr. Fields reckoned she was contemplating heading toward the backside of Hell.’ And by *Hell*, I’m referrin’ to ... oh, I don’t know, maybe Slagton?”

Her lips curled slightly at the corners. “I’m not sure that I’d say ‘overcome’ with dismay.”

Amelia Beaman, the daughter of the blacksmith Rabbit and Boone had recently hired, appeared from the shadows carrying a bucket heavy with grain in one hand and dragging a metal chain in her other. “Good morning, Miss Johanssen, Mr. Fields.” Happiness rang in her voice this morning.

Like Clementine, Amelia was wearing trousers. However, their new horse wrangler was petite and slender where Clementine was taller than most men and built to pull a plow through mud. Although, judging by the full bucket Amelia was hauling without much effort, she was plenty strong as well under her men’s clothing. What was she planning to do with that chain?

“Good morning, Amelia.” Clementine smiled at the girl.

Rabbit nodded in greeting, clearing his throat before adding, “Happy Christmas Eve, Amelia.”

His stomach fluttered when she stared back at him. With her cheeks turning bright pink from exertion and her dark hair swirling around her pretty face, Rabbit was having trouble looking away this morning. How old had Hank figured the girl was? Early twenties?

“I should have saddled Fenrir for you, Miss Johanssen.” Amelia stopped next to Clementine and lowered the bucket so she could stroke down along Fenrir’s neck and shoulder. Then she took up her bucket and chain and moved along.

“I didn’t want to bother you. Thought you might still be asleep.” Clementine waited while Amelia crossed the livery to a pair of horses nodding and nickering at the sight of the grain bucket before turning her attention back to Rabbit. “I’ll be gone just one day,” she said for his ears only. “Back tomorrow for Christmas supper most

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likely.”

Rabbit made a show of pursing his lips and shaking his head slowly, as if he were disappointed in Clementine’s sneaking off like this. He wasn’t, really. It didn’t surprise him at all, her being prepared to light out alone. Clementine had been a lone wolf for a long time. She’d been trained by her grandfather when she was a youngster how to hunt all by herself and rely only on her own strengths.

“Listen, Jack.” She kept her voice low. “You and Boone are busy with the hotel and this place.” She thumbed toward the rest of the livery. “I can handle Slagton. Besides, I just want to take a look around out there, that’s all.”

Rabbit tipped his head, his lips still pressed together.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Clementine fidgeted with the gear on Fenrir’s back. “I don’t need company everywhere I go.” She glanced at Rabbit. “I’m a grown woman.”

Rabbit crossed his arms. “I’m not inclined to argue that point,” he said. “But I’m not inclined to let you ride off alone to a mining town full of ambulators plucked from the ground, neither. Boone would tan my hide if I let you do that. And Hank would fret away all the hair on his head.”

Clementine’s eyes widened. She looked pointedly at Amelia, who was dumping the bucket of grain in a trough at the far end of the livery. She stepped closer to Rabbit. “There’s no need to be spreading talk of …” She trailed off, glancing toward Beaman’s daughter again, and then leaned toward him and continued in a hushed voice, “Of the ambulating recently deceased.”

Rabbit waved her off. “Amelia’s way over there.” Although the busy *señorita* was making her way back toward them now, still dragging that darn chain.

“And no one said Slagton is ‘full’ of *Draug*,” Clementine whispered in spite of Amelia’s distance from them. “For all we know, there might only be a handful corralled out there.” She patted Fenrir’s side. “I’m determined to find out for sure, though, sooner rather than later.”

“Right. Well, if you’re set on goin’, I need to get Dime tacked up.” He frowned toward the livery door. “I’d just as soon we wait for Hank and Boone, but that’s your decision.”

“I’ll get Dime for you, Mr. Fields,” Amelia called. She headed toward the stall shared by Nickel and Dime, Boone and Rabbit’s horses.

He frowned at Amelia. “She hears good,” he said under his breath.

The hard-headed woman next to him grunted. “I told you. She listens.” When Rabbit turned back to Clementine, he ran smack-dab into her scowling expression. “There’s no need to get Dime, Amelia,” she said loud and clear. “Mr. Fields isn’t going anywhere. He’s working on his hotel today.” She stepped closer, adding quietly, “And he’s not going to say a word about this to anyone. Right, Mr. Fields?”

He returned her stare with a defiant glare. Hank’s mule, Fred, had nothing on Clementine when it came to stubbornness. “Saddle Dime up, Amelia. I’ll go get my pack.” And his knives and guns, too. Uncle Mort hadn’t raised Rabbit to be a spineless milksop. If she was going to go riding into Slagton, then he was going to be

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there to stab and stick anything that needed to be stabbed and stuck.

“Mr. Fields?” Amelia stood next to Dime’s stall, worrying her lower lip.

“It’s ‘Jack,’ Amelia. Call me Jack. Or Rabbit.”

She draped the chain over the stall door. “Mr. Jack, after I saddle Dime, would you or Mr. McCreery mind terrible if I decorate some today? Here in the livery, I mean? For Christmas?”

*Christmas.*

A flurry of warm thoughts rushed through him. All of those happy holiday times on their ranch in Santa Fe with Lupe, the ranch’s cook, filling trays with mouth-watering, fried *buñuelos* sprinkled with shaved sugar; Carlos, their foreman, setting out paper lanterns, crafting colorful tin ornaments to hang in the windows, and painting gourds for the dinner table’s centerpiece; Boone lugging branches of juniper and piñon pine inside to decorate the mantel and sills; Uncle Mort ...

The flood of memories slowed, his mind focusing on Uncle Mort’s smiling face, silver whiskers, and ruddy cheeks.

Rabbit’s heart sank down to his belly. With Uncle Mort gone, this would be the first Christmas without the old codger since Rabbit and Boone’s parents perished on the wagon trip out West when the boys were just knee-high to those big grasshoppers that swarmed the plains.

“Someone say *Christmas?*” Uncle Mort appeared *through* the livery door, as if Rabbit had conjured him for real—well, as real as a ghost could be. “I do loooove *Navidad* and all its trimmings.” He chortled in his close-yet-far-away ghostly echo.

Rabbit watched his uncle swoop through the air with happiness. Make that the first Christmas without Uncle Mort for Boone, anyway.

“Lupe’s *arroz con leche*,” Uncle Mort sang out, now twirling in circles around the livery, as if dancing with a most beloved partner. “*Tamales*. Creamy *coquito*. Crunchy *tostones*. Mmm.”

Uncle Mort had always done Christmas in the biggest way he could. Lots of presents and lots of food. It was a weeklong *fiesta* for Uncle Mort, and he insisted that his “nephews” share in all of the festivities, too. Throughout that week, his uncle carried on a love affair with the pageantry and the spectacle of what he considered a proper Christmas celebration. From the ribbons and yarn that decorated his dog Tinker’s house to the grandest evergreen tree, cut from the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Santa Fe. Candles everywhere, stockings stuffed full of ...

“Lupe’s *cochitos!*” Uncle Mort twirled to a stop beside Rabbit. “You have molasses. You must! To make *cochitos* you must have molasses!” His ear-to-ear grin pushed his cheeks clear up to his eyes. “*Cochitos*. Little pigs. You remember?” Uncle Mort smiled down at Rabbit. “Boone called you *Cochito*—the little piggy that ate all the little piggies!” Uncle Mort began twirling again, his deep belly laugh rumbling up to the rafters. “Ha ha! Wonderful! We must make them.” He swooped back toward Rabbit, swaying gently in front of him as if drifting in a small pool. “Does Boone still call you *Cochito?*”

He didn’t wait for Rabbit’s confirmation, taking up an imaginary partner again



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and waltzing across the livery toward Tinker, who was now short of one hind leg thanks to those damned *Bahkavv*. The little dog spun in circles of her own, apparently sensing the excitement floating around her since she didn't seem to be able to see Uncle Mort's ghost. She barked twice at the air and then raced from one end of the livery to the other, her missing leg not slowing her down a bit.

A hint of a smile crept onto Rabbit's face as he watched his uncle dance and Tink run and yip and play. He couldn't help it. Uncle Mort's delight was contagious. It always had been. Even Tink felt it.

"You two boys always had such fun on Christmas," Uncle Mort said. He leaned down to catch Tink on her way back toward him, but the dog raced right through his long nightgown, which made Uncle Mort let out another drumroll of belly laughs.

"Jack?" Clementine rested her hand on Rabbit's shoulder.

He snorted in surprise at her touch. "Uh, yeah. Okay." He scratched his chin. "What?"

"I asked if you're feeling okay." Clementine took up Fenrir's lead line.

Amelia led Dime past them into the tack stall. "I'll have him ready in the shake of a lamb's tail, Mr. Fields ... I mean, Mr. Jack." As usual, Dime nickered to Amelia continuously as she worked on him. Rabbit had never known his horse to talk so much, not even to Nickel. Not until meeting Amelia.

"Don't bother. Jack is staying here." Clementine led Fenrir to the door of the livery. "Tell Boone and Hank not to come after me. I'll be fine." She stepped out into the early morning pale light.

"Goldurnit, Miss Clementine!" Rabbit ran after her. He caught up to her in time to see her glance down Deadwood's main street and then freeze in her tracks. "Odin's beard!" she cursed and shook her fist at the sky.

Rabbit followed her line of sight—Hank was walking their way, leading Fred the Mule along behind him.

"Mornin', Miss Clem!" Hank called, slowing to a stop in front of her. "Caught you at the start of it, did I?" Hank checked her out from top to bottom and then shot a quick look at Fenrir's load. "Looks like the makin's of an adventure."

If anyone knew what an adventure looked like, it was Hank Varney. The man claimed to be a few years north of forty, but something about the gravel in his voice, the whip-cord leanness of his form, the weathered lines on his face, and the grit in his never-ending gumption gave the feeling of a soul much, much older, not to mention thickly calloused by life. Yet whenever Hank came around, he spread cheer without even trying.

Clementine's shoulders drooped under the weight of Hank's scrutiny. "So it would seem." She knew, as well as Rabbit, that Hank could be a formidable force when he set his mind to a task, and it was clear to see by the older man's downturned mouth that he wasn't kicking up his heels at Clementine heading off without him.

Rabbit grinned, his spirits lifted in part because of his uncle's festive carrying-on inside the livery, but more so now thanks to the arrival of reinforcements. Any

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trepidation he'd felt about letting Clementine venture forth into the wilds of Slagton solo would be undoubtedly doubled by Hank's feelings on the matter.

The older man would do his darnedest to drag anchor when it came to her venturing off without them, Rabbit had no doubt. If that weren't enough, Rabbit was happy to try his hand at peddling the pleasure of celebrating the holiday here amongst her friends instead of out there in bad company. And he was most certain Boone would join their ranks soon as he heard tell of Clementine's solitary plans. Between the three of them, her notion to go gallivanting off on Christmas Eve would be done for.

"Good timing, Hank." Rabbit rubbed his gloved hands together. "If I didn't know better, I'd say a certain hard-headed ol' ghost paid you a visit and sent you this way to see Miss Clementine before she headed off to Slagton."

"Slagton, ya say?" Hank hung his head low, the sorrowful look in his eyes no doubt aimed right at Clementine's soft spot. "Oh, now, Miss Clem. I thought we was waitin' 'til after Christmas for that business."

Clementine regarded him for a moment, her expression stony, but then her focus shifted and she began a deliberate inspection of Hank's mule. "Is Christmas really worth the effort, Hank?"

She patted an overly stuffed canvas bag strapped to Fred the Mule's side. A matching sack hung heavy over the other side. On top, a crate big enough to make a man grunt and wheeze while lifting it sat perched and roped on his croup. Smaller muslin and cotton sacks tied shut with twine and wire hung in disarray around the larger items.

Rabbit's gaze dropped to the forlorn-looking mule shifting from hoof to hoof under the bulging load. "Poor ol' Fred. Like to break his back with all this consignment, Hank."

Hank patted Fred's shoulder. His brow knitted as he looked the mule in the eye. "Penance, ain't it, boy? Penance for skedadlin' on a pard." Hank waved toward Rabbit. "Two pards. Left us standin' outside that mine with our pants down." He glanced downward quickly, his cheeks darkening. "Sorry, Miss Clem. But ol' Fred left us standin' at the Bloody Bones. All them *Bahkauv*." Hank shook his finger at Fred. "Left Nickel. Left Dime. Even Fenrir here. Left us all, didn't ya?"

Fred's head drooped so low his nose nearly touched the snow. Rabbit would have laughed if the mule didn't look so darned forlorn.

Fenrir snorted and pawed at the broken ice beneath her feet, interrupting Hank's lecture. When it came to hitting the trail, the black beauty usually suffered from a terrible itch to get a mosey on. But this time, Fenrir sidled over as close as she could to the cargo-laden mule and nuzzled him, nickering softly.

"Whad'ya know about that?" Hank tipped his sweat-stained hat and rubbed his forehead. "Never seen her do such a thing."

"Fenrir's got herself a smidgeon of compassion under that cob-rough demeanor." Rabbit winked at Clementine. "Reminds me of somebody."

Clementine raised her brow, feigning ignorance, but there was a slight curve to

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her lips. "Why, who might you mean, Jack?" She turned to Hank, her smile spreading further up her cheeks. "Fenrir is a good judge of character."

Hank nodded once. "She is at that."

"Fred the Mule is loyal and durable," she continued. "While he may not be in for the battle, he gets all of us where we need to be every time. He knows the way. He reminds me of Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse in Norse mythology. Sleipnir was described as the 'best of all horses,' and Odin sometimes even rode him into Hel, the Norse underworld." She paused and scratched behind Fred's ears. "Only Fred's a mule and he's not gray with eight legs, but you get my point."

"He surely cuts the trail for us," Rabbit agreed. "You do too, Hank. Two bugs in a bed, you boys are."

Hank rubbed the back of his neck. "Suppose you both are right. Fred does his part. Just got to know what to expect from a body is all."

"Right." Clementine eyed the load burdening Fred. "Now, what is all this?"

"Delivering supplies?" Rabbit wondered.

Hank tightened a rope that was beginning to sag. "That about sums it, Jack Rabbit."

"You loaded that all by yourself, Hank?" Clementine asked and then sprang onto Fenrir's back, settling in for the ride to Slagton.

"Miss Clementine, don't go off now." Rabbit looked back at the livery's open door, trying to peer inside. He couldn't see anything but shadows, darn it. "Amelia's almost got Dime saddled," he fibbed.

"Miss Clem, you done brought me to my conundrum." Hank grabbed Fenrir's lead line and looked up at Clementine with big puppy-dog eyes. "If'n you'd just come down for a spell, I'll explain it to you."

"What is it?" She didn't budge from her saddle.

"Now I know you want to get on the trail. But I wonder if'n you might lend me a helpin' hand. Just take a minute or three. Maybe a li'l longer. Then you can be off."

Rabbit frowned. Hank was being uncharacteristically agreeable to the idea of Clementine riding into the hellhole of a mining camp very possibly filled with more than a handful of deadly troublemakers. Alone.

"Jack and Boone are here to lend you a hand, Hank," she replied offhandedly, her gaze aimed up the street.

"No can do, Miss Clementine," Rabbit said, finally catching on to Hank's game. "I got a freighter to unload soon as Boone gets back with Ling and Gart."

"I'll be needin' *your* help, Miss Clem." Hank emphasized his insistence by pointing his finger at her. "You know it's not often I ask for much from ya." Knowing Hank, Rabbit figured he took no pleasure in manipulating Clementine, but desperate times called for whatever it took to stop the obstinate woman from charging Hell on her own.

Clementine looked at the sky and shook her head. "Great hall of Valhalla!" she muttered. In a blink, she slid from Fenrir's back and stood before Hank again, arms folded, chin jutted. "Needin' my help with what, Hank?"

# *Ann Charles & Sam Lucky*

Hank handed Fenrir's lead line to Rabbit, sending him a quick wink on the sly. Then he turned and led Fred the Mule down the street toward Chinatown. "This way, Miss Clem. Fred will cut the trail, just like Jack Rabbit said."

Grumbling under her breath, Clementine took off after him.

"Miss Clem, I ever tell you about the Christmas I spent in New Orleans?" Rabbit heard Hank say as they moseyed off.

While Fenrir snorted steam and pawed at the snow, Rabbit watched as the three of them—man, woman, and mule—merged into the growing commotion of a busy little mining town on the day before Christmas.