

Ann Charles

JACKRABBIT JINGLE BALLS

AN EXCERPT ...



Chapter One: Babes in Fogland *Jackrabbit-Land*

*Saturday Night, December 22nd
Yuccaville, Arizona*

Once upon a time, there was a rusty old railroad whistle-stop in a prickly, wind-scoured desert that Santa Claus had left behind for the buzzards to peck the hell out of," Claire Morgan said, starting her Christmas tale.

She had to speak loud enough to be heard over the heavy bass beat throbbing from the overhead speakers in the strip club. Up on the U-shaped stage, several nearly naked babes shook their moneymakers, along with their jingle ball pasties, as they wrapped themselves around candy cane-striped poles much to the delight of the swarm of male, Santa suit-wearing admirers ... along with a few females decked out in Mrs. Claus costumes, too.

Judging from the boisterous crowd of merry makers, Dirty Gerties' marketing idea for a nudie bar version of the North Pole was a rousing success. If only the ventilation system could keep up with the locker-room smells of stinky armpits, nose-burning cologne, and some cringe-inducing variant of *eau de sex*.

Ding-dong merrily on high! This was not how Claire wanted to spend her Saturday night. First, there were too many people in the place sharing in the festive nakedness. Second,

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while it was true that Claire had a bit of a colorful history involving bare-assed shenanigans, she suspected that watching Sparkles McSugarbritches blast a crowd of leering Santa Clauses with a large, phallic-looking glitter gun would scar her for many, many Christmases to come.

“That’s just silly,” Ronnie Morgan said from where she sat slouched next to Claire in the horseshoe-shaped booth, trying to hide behind a double-sided drink menu. Her brown eyes and hair looked black under the seizure-inducing strobe lights.

“What’s silly? That hat?” Claire pointed at the limp, felt Santa hat strapped onto her older sister’s head. “Just because the bouncer handed you that on the way in the door doesn’t mean you have to wear it, you know.”

Claire’s hat was tucked away in her coat pocket, along with the chocolate mints that had been stuffed inside the door gift. She had a feeling she might need the chocolate later to sweeten up the memory of tonight.

“No, your story is silly. Why would *Santa* leave this place behind?” Ronnie asked. “I mean, unless he has a good reason, like maybe there were gun-toting hitmen lurking in the shadows, waiting to take potshots at him.”

Claire scowled at her sister. Ronnie was sort of on the lam thanks to her ex-husband’s money-laundering history that had landed him in prison. Only she wasn’t running from the law—well, not on most days. Although she did periodically like to give the FBI agents hounding her the runaround. Ronnie was, however, trying to hide from some very, very bad guys that her ex had thrown under the bus in order to lighten his sentence.

“Because Santa wanted to leave this particular town behind, plain and simple,” Claire told her. “Don’t make this tale too complicated. It’s not your crap-tabulous life we’re talking about.”

Ronnie glared back. “Wow. I’m drowning in your sisterly affection right now.”

And that brought Claire to her *third* reason for not wanting to be at Dirty Gerties tonight—her tablemates for the evening shared a significant amount of DNA with her. Whoever said that family bonding improved mental health probably hadn’t been forced to sit next to their siblings while their seats bounced due to a five-minute, grunt-filled, ringing-tingling “sleigh ride” happening in the booth next door.

As far as Claire was concerned, lap dancers should never be allowed to wear reindeer antlers and glowing Rudolph noses, especially if a grisly-faced Santa wannabe who had shoehorned himself into a red velvet suit was on the Naughty list.

Claire scrubbed both hands down her face. Christmas would never be the same for her again.

Ronnie peeked over the top of the laminated menu, scanning the club for the umpteenth time. “It makes more sense if the protagonist is Father Time,” she told Claire, her gaze darting here and there. “Especially with the buzzards involved.”

With a growl, Claire snatched the menu from her sister’s hands. “It’s my Christmas story, you paranoid putz. I’ll tell it the way I want to.”

“What do you have against Yuccaville, anyway?” Ronnie asked, making a grab for the menu, but Claire held it out of reach. “It’s a nice town. A little dusty in the corners, maybe, but the people are friendly.”

Not all of them. “You’re biased.”

“Am not.”

“Ever since you started shagging the Cholla County sheriff on a regular basis—”

“Sex has nothing to do with my new positive attitude.”

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“That’s a big bowl of figgy pudding. And don’t even try to tell me your Polly Positive pretense is due to that new ‘energizing’ yoga routine you’ve been yapping about. We all know those butt-lifting, stretchy pants you like to wear these days are an excuse to go commando.”

Her sister’s jaw dropped. “You’re wrong. I wear them because they’re comfortable and they’re good for my circulation.”

Laughing, Claire said, “Please. Lighting up Sheriff Harrison’s Christmas tree is what they’re really good for.”

“You really need to stop ending your sentences with prepositions, Claire.” Kate Morgan horned into their conversation from her place on the other side of Ronnie.

Claire rolled her eyes. “Nobody asked you to share your English expertise, Pregosaurus Rex.”

Holding down the heel of the horseshoe booth, Claire’s younger sister was situated so she could make a quick escape to the bathroom, if needed. Coming up on four months into her first pregnancy, Kate spent a portion of her day with her pretty blond head parked over the commode, reading any floating bits of toilet paper like they were tea leaves. Although, thankfully, her bouts of nausea seemed to be calming down as of late. Unfortunately, the mad monkey in her head was still throwing bananas at anyone who dared to venture too close to her cage.

“With all of the college classes you have under your belt,” Kate continued, “your vernacular shortcomings are truly sad.”

Even though Kate had officially quit teaching last summer, she couldn’t muffle the grammar cop patrolling her airwaves.

“Stuff a stocking in it, Einstein.” Claire mimed zipping her lips. “Or I’ll tell your baby daddy that you’re planning to weasel out of meeting his parents this Christmas.”

Kate’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t dare!”

Claire shrugged. “I might.”

A commotion down near the far end of the stage caught her attention. One of Santa’s buxom elves appeared to be using her very large sugarplums to polish a candy cane pole while her admirers hooted and hollered. Claire grimaced. That poor elf was going to end up with a hell of a set of blisters if she didn’t change up her routine soon.

Kate leaned over the table, blocking Claire’s view. “You pinkie promised.”

Oh, yeah. “But my legs were crossed at the time.”

Ronnie snorted loud enough to be heard above the hip-grinding music. “That’s a first for you, Miss Butter Thighs. Your lover boy must not have been within a five-mile radius.”

“‘Butter thighs?’” Claire poked Ronnie in the ribs, making her squirm.

Kate grinned. “When is Mac coming back, anyway?”

Claire’s so-called lover boy had been working long hours for the last few weeks at a jobsite south of Tucson so that he could stay in Jackrabbit Junction over the Christmas holiday. Claire had opted to remain at the Dancing Winnebagos RV Park with her family over the last month, spending her days working at the campground rather than hanging out all alone in Mac’s house in the city.

“Tomorrow morning sometime,” Claire told her. “He’s going to try to be here before Dad shows up.”

“Why?” Ronnie smirked. “So he can watch Mom’s head explode when Dad’s girlfriend steps out of the car?”

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Claire groaned. As much as she loved her father, his insistence on spending the holiday down here in Arizona with them made her gut churn. Or maybe it was the tube of sugar cookie dough she'd bought at the store this morning and scarfed in one sitting.

Speaking of their mother, Deborah Ford-Carrera was heading her way across the strip club, fresh from the ladies' room where she'd gone to "powder her nose" and apparently poof up her mid-length blond hair so that it framed her head like a feathery bonnet. Her pink *New Bride* sash glowed brightly against the backdrop of her black party dress each time the stage lights flashed ultraviolet. The half-full drink in her hand sloshed as she stumbled slightly before stopping to glare back at a skinny Santa whose black boots had been in her path.

"Where'd Mom get the drink?" Claire asked.

Ronnie looked in Deborah's direction. "She must have stopped at the bar."

"Please tell me she's not drunk already." Claire frowned. "We've only been here twenty minutes." Hell, they were still waiting for the waitress to come and take their drink orders.

"More like thirty minutes, and I wouldn't put it past Mom to have snuck in her own flask and glass," Kate said. "Her private drinking party runs 24/7 these days."

Yeah, and that was an ongoing problem all three of them were going to have to deal with soon whether they wanted to or not.

"At least she's a happy drunk," Claire said, trying to find something positive about their situation. Ronnie-Polly-Positive must be rubbing off on her.

Ronnie scoffed. "Yeah, when she's not crying in her cognac about her lost youth."

An older version of Kate with a lot sharper teeth, Deborah liked to bemoan how she had wasted the last three-plus decades of her life trying to help her daughters achieve the best of everything—educations, careers, husbands, and whatever else Deborah felt she'd been shorted in her own life. In truth, she'd continually tried to control and manipulate Claire and her sisters, only to end up "abandoned and shunned" (in her words) by her daughters for all of her compassion, sacrifices, sweat, blah, blah, blah, and tears.

And then came the divorce from their father this last summer, which finally put to death a thirty-five-year marriage that had been high on hysterics and low on love.

Over the years, Claire had been amazed at her dad's heroic fortitude when it came to Deborah and their marriage, but she'd never expected him to seek solace in the arms of another woman—and neither had her mom, according to Deborah's many, many tales of woe.

But he had, and very soon, for the first time since having her blinders removed and learning her father was just as human as everyone else, Claire was going to see her hero without his mask and cape. Would she be able to look him in the eyes knowing what he'd done? While she could understand him divorcing her mom, his infidelity sort of grinded on her. They'd talked on the phone a few times since she'd moved to Jackrabbit Junction, but distance had kept everything from feeling too real.

Claire watched their mother, who was now cheering for the gyrating, scantily dressed elf on the stage.

And then there was Dad's girlfriend to consider. She was older than him by a few years, according to her mom. Was she going to end up as their new stepmom soon? How would that work out? It certainly had its pitfalls for Cinderella and Snow White.

Deborah set her glass of liquor down on a nearby table and leaned over the stage near one of the dancer's spiky-heeled boots.

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“Did Mom just tip that stripper?” Ronnie asked.

Grimacing, Claire nodded. “Using her teeth, no less.”

“Be nice, you two,” Kate chastised. “This is Mom’s bridal shower, remember? She’s here to have fun.”

“Belated bridal shower,” Ronnie corrected, directing their attention to a bouncer wrestling with a drunken Santa down by another topless elf dancer and her candy cane stripper pole.

Good ol’ St. Nick had crawled partway onto the stage, managing to lose his red velvet pants somewhere in the process. The tussle played out under the flashing lights, burning snapshots of bared butt cheeks—and more—into Claire’s memory, until the dancer planted her foot on the side of Santa’s bare ass and shoved him back into the crowd.

“A strip club bridal shower to boot,” Claire said and then sighed. Holy holly berries. She was going to need a full frontal lobotomy after tonight.

“I mean it, you two,” Kate continued. “Dad showing up tomorrow is really messing with Mom’s head. She hasn’t seen him since they parted at the courthouse after their divorce was final last summer.”

Ronnie winced, turning to Claire. “This Christmas is going to turn into a shitshow, isn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly.” Claire turned to their younger sister. “It’s too bad you can’t drink your way through it like the rest of us.” Where was their waitress anyway? Maybe they needed to get their drinks at the bar.

Kate lifted her chin. “I don’t need alcohol. I have impending motherhood to keep my spirits lifted.”

Claire guffawed. “Who are you and what have you done with Crazy Kate?”

“I told you the other day,” Kate said between gritted teeth. “I don’t like that nickname.”

“How about ‘Cuckoo Kate?’” Ronnie offered, chuckling.

Kate held her fist in front of Ronnie’s nose. “How about I rearrange your face, Commando?”

“Now girls,” their mother said as she slid into the booth opposite Kate. Her floral and citrus perfume had an extra punch post-ladies’ room visit, knocking Claire back into the seat. “No fighting tonight. You all promised, remember? This is about *me*.” She smoothed her feathered hair. “It’s not every day that a girl gets married for the second time.”

As Claire stifled a snort, a red-haired elf approached them wearing Christmas tree nipple pasties topped with jingling dingle balls and a pair of extremely short-shorts. Upon closer inspection, Claire wasn’t even sure they qualified as shorts. More like a few strips of stretchy material tied together by tinsel and secured with a candy cane belt.

“Hey gals, I hear we’re celebrating a big day over here.”

Deborah tittered and leaned toward the waitress. “I eloped to Las Vegas a month ago, so I didn’t get to have a bridal shower ... until tonight!” She squealed the last part, overplaying her role as a happy bride and edging more toward a fanatical, man-eating bridezilla.

“Well, we’ll need to make sure we celebrate the hell out of your weddin’ bliss, hon.” The waitress pulled an order pad out from somewhere behind her.

Kate leaned to the side, peering around the waitress’ mostly bare butt cheek. “Where did you have that thing tucked away?”

“Never mind, Katie,” Ronnie said, tugging her sister back upright.

The waitress dislodged a pen from under her elf hat. “What can I get ya girls?”

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Ronnie beat Claire to the punch. "I'll have a gin and—"

"Cognacs," Deborah interrupted. "On the rocks. All around." She made a pouty face at her youngest. "Except for Kathryn. She'll take a Shirley Temple."

"I don't drink cognac," Claire told her mom. To the waitress, she said, "A beer will be fine. Something local without too much hops."

"No." Her mother's chin jutted. "It's my party and you're drinking cognac with me." She smiled at the waitress, all honey without a hint of her usual acid to be heard when she added, "Just bring us a whole bottle, please."

As the waitress jingled away, Deborah leaned her elbows on the table and announced, "I have a fun idea for a bridal shower game. We're going to have a contest to see who can hold their liquor the best."

"That's a bad idea," Claire said, shaking her head. "Like the Grinch stealing all the presents on Christmas Eve bad."

Ronnie groaned. "We're going to end up in jail again."

A cackle came from the crazy pregnant monkey at the end of the booth. "This is going to be so awesome!"