



Ann Charles

NEARLY DEPARTED IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

The first time I came to Deadwood, I got shot in the ass. Now, twenty-five years later, as I stared into the double barrels of Old Man Harvey's shotgun, irony was having a fiesta and I was the piñata.

I tried to produce a polite smile, but my cheeks had petrified along with my heart. "You wouldn't shoot a girl, would you?"

Old Man Harvey snorted, his whole face contorting with the effort. "Lady, I'd blow the damned Easter bunny's head off if he was tryin' to take what's mine."

He cocked his shotgun—his version of an exclamation mark.

"Whoa!" I would have gulped had there been any spit left in my mouth. "I'm not here to take anything."

He replied by aiming those two barrels at my chest instead of my face.

"I'm with Calamity Jane Realty, I swear! I came to ..."

With Harvey threatening to fill my lungs with peepholes, I had trouble remembering why I'd driven out to this corner of the boonies. Oh, yeah. Lowering one of my hands, I held out my crushed business card. "I want to help you sell your ranch."

The double barrels clinked against one of the buttons on my Rebecca Taylor-knockoff jacket as Harvey grabbed my card. I swallowed a squawk of panic and willed the soles of my boots to unglue from the floorboards of Harvey's front porch and retreat. Unfortunately, my brain's direct line to my feet was experiencing technical difficulties.

Harvey's squint relaxed. "Violet Parker, huh?"

"That's me." My voice sounded pip-squeaky in my own ears. I couldn't help it. Guns made my thighs wobbly and my bladder heavy. Had I not made a pit stop at Girdy's Grill for a buffalo burger and paid a visit to the little *Hens* room, I'd have a puddle in the bottom of my favorite cowboy boots by now.

"Your boots match your name. What's a 'Broker Associate'?"

"It's someone who is going to lose her job if she doesn't sell a house in the next three weeks." I lowered my other hand.

I'd been with Calamity Jane Realty for a little over two months and had yet to make a single sale. So much for my radical, life-changing leap into a new career. If I didn't make a sale before my probation was up, I'd have to drag my kids back down to the prairie and bunk with my parents ... again.

"You're a lot *purtier* in this here picture with your hair down."

"So I've been told." Old Man Harvey seemed to be channeling my nine-year-old daughter today. Lucky me.

"Makes you look younger, like a fine heifer."

I cocked my head to the side, unsure if I'd just been tossed a compliment or slapped with an insult.

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The shotgun dipped to my belly button as he held the card out for me to take back.

“Keep it. I have plenty.” A whole box full. They helped fill the lone drawer in my desk back at Calamity Jane’s.

“So that asshole from the bank didn’t send you?”

“No.” An asshole from my office had, and the bastard would be extracting his balls from his esophagus for this so-called *generous referral*—if I made it back to Calamity Jane’s without looking like a human sieve.

“Then how’d you know about my gambling problem?”

“What gambling problem?”

Old Man Harvey’s eyes narrowed again. He whipped the double barrels back up to my kisser. “The only way you’d know I’m thinking about selling is if you heard about my gambling debt.”

“Oh, you mean *that* gambling problem.”

“What’d you think I meant?”

Bluffing was easier when I wasn’t chatting up a shotgun. “I thought you were referring to the ... um ...” A tidbit of a phone conversation I’d overheard earlier this morning came to mind. “To the problem you had at the Prairie Dog Palace.”

Harvey’s jaw jutted. “Mud wrestling has no age limit.”

“You’re right. They need to be less age-biased. Maybe even have an *AARP Night* every Wednesday.”

“Nobody told me about the bikini bit ‘til it was too late.”

I winced. I couldn’t help it.

“So, what’re you gonna charge me to sell my place?”

“What would you like me to charge you?” I was all about pleasing the customer this afternoon.

He leaned the gun on his shoulder, double barrels pointed at the porch ceiling. “The usual, I guess.”

No longer on the verge of extinction, I used the porch rail to keep from keeling over. Maybe I just wasn’t cut out for the realty business. Did they still sell encyclopedias door-to-door?

“This ranch belonged to my pappy, and his pappy before him.” Harvey’s lips thinned as he stared over my shoulder.

“It must hold a big place in your heart.” I tried to sound sincere as I inched along the railing toward the steps. My red Bronco glinted and beckoned under the July sun.

“Hell, no. I can’t wait to shuck this shithole.”

“What?” I’d made it as far as the first step.

“I’m sick and tired of fixin’ rusted fences, chasing four-wheeling fools through my pastures, sniffing out lost cows in every damned gulch and gully.” His blue eyes snapped back to mine. “And I keep hearing funny noises at night coming from out behind my ol’ barn.”

I followed the nudge of his bearded chin. Weathered and white-washed by Mother Nature, the sprawling building’s roof seemed to sag in the afternoon heat. The doors were chained shut, one of the haymow windows broken. “Funny how?”

“Like grab-your-shotgun funny.”

Normally, this might give me pause, but after the greeting I’d received today from the old codger’s double barrels, I had a feeling that Harvey wore his shotgun around the house

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like a pair of holey underwear. I'd bet my measly savings he even slept with it. "Maybe it's just a mountain lion," I suggested. "The paper said there's been a surge of sightings lately."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Harvey shrugged. "I don't care. I want to move to town. It gets awful lonely out here come wintertime. Start thinking about things that just ain't right. I almost married a girl from Taiwan last January. Turned out 'she' was really a 'he' from Nigeria."

"Wow."

"Damned Internet." Harvey's gaze washed over me. "What about you, Violet Parker?"

"What about me?"

"There's no ring on your finger. You got a boyfriend?"

"Uh, no."

I didn't want one, either. Men had a history of fouling up my life, from burning down my house to leaving me knocked up with twins. These days, I liked my relationships how I liked my eggs: over-easy.

Harvey's two gold teeth twinkled at me through his whiskers. "Then how about a drink? Scotch or gin?"

I chewed on my lip, considering my options. I could climb into my Bronco and watch this opportunity and the crazy old bastard with the trigger-happy finger disappear in my rearview mirror; or I could blow off common sense and follow Harvey in for some hard liquor and maybe a signed contract.

Like I really had a choice. "Do you have any tonic?"