



Ann Charles

OPTICAL DELUSIONS IN DEADWOOD

AN EXCERPT ...

From Chapter One...

Some jackass was spreading rumors around Deadwood about me chatting with dead folks. I didn't believe in ghosts, or hadn't since I started wearing a training bra. But a couple of weeks ago, a psychotic serial killer tricked me into being the guest of honor at a macabre tea party with his sister's ghost and three of his decomposing victims. Since then, my reputation had suffered.

Normally, I'd just shrug off the stares, whispers, and snickers of sidewalk onlookers and fellow Piggly Wiggly shoppers, but I was relatively new in town—and even newer at this real estate agent venture. With two young kids to support and raise on my own, big smiles and friendly service were my bread and butter.

Lucky for me, my fellow diners this morning at Bighorn Billy's restaurant were mainly tourists, who'd been too busy chattering away about what was on their agenda to rubberneck when I'd passed by on my way to a cleared booth. The din of their excited conversations drowned out all of Bighorn Billy's usual sounds except for the occasional "order up!" shout from the kitchen window.

With the infamous Sturgis Motorcycle Rally right around the corner, the Black Hills were crawling with chromed-out bikes. I stirred cream and sugar into my steaming coffee, happy as hell to be upstaged by the leather-clad crew for now. My stomach growled, antsy from the bacon-and-egg aroma that wafted thick in the air. A glance at the chrome hands on the orange and black Harley-Davidson clock above the saloon-style doors leading into the kitchen reminded me how long it had been since my last meal. My stomach growled again.

My breakfast date was fifteen minutes late, and if Old Man Harvey didn't get his ornery butt here soon, I was going to order without him.

I'd already caught a glare from my waitress when I'd asked to wait a little longer before deciding on what I wanted. With the lineup for a free table now extending into the parking lot, booth squatting wasn't winning me any new fans.

A shadow fell over my table. "Excuse me, are you Violet Parker?" a squeaky, female voice asked.

I looked up into a pair of owl-eye glasses. The silver-blue eyes on the other side were magnified by lenses thick enough to read *War and Peace* etched on a grain of rice. The woman's hair was a helmet of brown, frizzy curls that made my crazy, spiraling blonde locks look tame. My gaze lowered to the thick gray turtleneck sweater and long wool skirt. Somebody should tell her it was August outside.

I smiled extra wide, always the saleswoman. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

She seemed harmless enough, but I'd recently found out the hard way that looks could be deceiving. My eyebrows were just beginning to fill back in after learning that traumatic lesson firsthand from a previous client.

She pushed her glasses higher up on her nose. "A gentleman from your office told me

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we could find you here.”

Gentleman? My smile almost slipped. I had only one male coworker at Calamity Jane Realty. He hated my guts for stealing this Realtor job from his nephew and had made it his personal mission to destroy my career before it could even get one wheel off the ground. We’d hit it off like a sledgehammer and old TNT right from the start.

“I’m Millie Carhart,” the woman said. “My mother would like to hire you to sell her house.”

I peeked at the woman covering behind Millie. With her white hair twirled up into a bun on top of her head and her ample bosom restrained in a faded red gingham dress, she looked straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*.

My eyes returned to Millie’s magnified irises. “Is your mother’s place in Deadwood?” I assumed they were local, but with all the tourists around, it didn’t hurt to double-check.

“No. We live up the hill in Lead.”

Lead was Deadwood’s golden-veined twin. Its history books were filled with mining tales rather than gambling legends.

I had no issues with selling a house in either city. Money was money, and it was something I had very little of at the moment. I needed every opportunity to hold onto my job I could find these days, and another house on my plate would be great, but I wasn’t agreeing to anything until I saw the place. I’d learned my lesson last time. “When’s a good time for me to come take a look at your house?”

“As soon as you can.”

Nice, a motivated seller. Now if I could only find a buyer half as eager. Heck, just find a buyer—period. “How about this afternoon at two?”

“Good.” Millie pulled a piece of paper from one of the folds in her sweater and placed it next to my coffee cup. “Here’s our address. We’ll be waiting for you.”

Before I had a chance to fish one of my cards from my purse, she left, her mother trailing after her. They passed my tardy breakfast date on their way to the door.

“Sorry I’m late.” Old Man Harvey slid onto the seat across from me, his grizzled beard in desperate need of a trim. “I was putting out a fire all night.”

Another fire? I frowned. “At your ranch?”

His grin was broad, his gold teeth gleaming. “Nah. In an old flame’s bed. I left her smoldering.”

I choked on an involuntary chuckle and sipped my sweetened coffee to wash it down.

I’d met Harvey and his 12-gauge shotgun up-close and personal about a month ago. After we’d straightened out that I was a Realtor interested in helping him sell his ranch and not a banker bent on taking it, we’d tossed back some hard liquor over a listing agreement. He’d confessed he was lonely and then proved it by insisting I include a once-a-week-meal-on-me clause. Desperate, I’d made him promise there would be no funny business between us since he was almost twice as old as my thirty-five years, and then I’d agreed.

“What’s for breakfast?” Harvey opened his menu. “After all of that bumping and grinding last night, I could eat a herd of elk.”

Grimacing, I set my cup on the table. “Stop. You’re going to kill my appetite.”

He snorted, then buried his nose in the plastic pages. “What did the Carharts want?”

“You know them?” I shouldn’t have been surprised. Harvey had grown up in the Hills. The dirty bird liked to brag about all the cousins he’d kissed.

“Wanda was a few grades ahead of me in school.”

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“They want me to sell their house.”

Harvey squinted at me over the menu. “And?”

“And what? I’m paying them a visit this afternoon.”

He leaned across the table, his forehead puckered. “What are you thinking?”

I blinked. Had I missed the memo? “What do you mean?”

“Are you really going to take them on as clients?”

“Sure.” If their place wasn’t a pit. “Why not?”

He tossed his menu on the table. “Maybe because six months ago in that very house, Millie’s brother bashed her father’s head in with a rolling pin and then blew his own brains out.”

I swallowed wrong, hot coffee seared the back of my tongue. “You’re kidding me.”

“I wish I was.” He crossed his arms. “If you take this job, you might as well plug your nose and hold your breath, because your career is gonna go swirling down the crapper.”