



RAPID READS



THE THIRTEENTH ROSE

GAIL BOWEN

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Summary: It's Valentine's night, and late-night radio talk-show host Charlie D's planned discussion of love and satisfaction is derailed when a vigilante group promises to kill one prostitute each hour and post their murders live online.

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For Stefani Langenegger, with love.

CHAPTER ONE

For the hustlers in my neighborhood, the evening of February 14 is bigger than Christmas. No one wants to spend the last hours of Valentine's Day alone. And Shuter Street is the place to connect. Even the midwinter slush can't dampen the festive mood. Everybody wants to party. The hookers, in their lipstick-red, thigh-high boots, offer clients a buffet of sexual pleasures. Drug dealers offer their own buffet, an array of goodies that can perk you up or take you out—buyer's choice.

When Dolores O'Reilly calls my name from across the street, something in her voice catches my attention. Dolores has been working Shuter Street for as long as I can remember. Her days as a dewy Irish rose are long past. She's giving Father Time a run for his money. But there's more brass than copper in Dolores's shoulder-length curls. Her eyes are tired too. She's seen too much.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Charlie D," she says. There is no mistaking the sadness in her voice. I'm carrying thirteen long-stemmed scarlet roses for my producer, Nova Langenegger. I cross the street, pluck one of the roses from the florist's wrapping and hand it to Dolores.

She holds the deep-red blossom against her cheek. "You didn't have to do that, Charlie D," she says. "But I'm glad you did."

"Bad night?"

She nods. “The worst. That O’Hanlon guy you’ve got working at your station is trouble. He’s frothing at the mouth about cleaning up the red-light district.”

“Kevin O’Hanlon is a mean dog,” I agree. “He’s always growling and snapping at something. His ratings are through the roof. But I don’t think people take him seriously.”

“You’re wrong, Charlie D.” Dolores lights a Player’s Plain and drags deeply. “Kevin O’Hanlon has a following. They call themselves O’Hanlon’s Warriors, and they’re making life hell for sex workers.”

“Are they harassing you?”

She raises an eyebrow. “You have no idea,” she says. “At first it was just name-calling. And what the cops call ‘inappropriate touching.’ Then O’Hanlon’s Warriors got creative. They started a one-page newspaper called—are you ready?—*SLUT ALERT*. It’s about what you’d expect. Pictures of girls

on the stroll. Obscene cartoons. Lists of the license numbers of johns. Now the word on the street is that the Warriors are beating up both girls and johns.”

“If people are getting hurt, you should go to the police.”

Dolores widens her eyes in disbelief. “Jeez, Charlie, were you born yesterday? In this neighborhood, cops are not our friends. Besides, we don’t have proof that O’Hanlon’s Warriors have hurt anybody. All we have are rumors.” She takes another drag on her cigarette. “Whatever they’re doing, the Warriors have really cut into business. I’ve been out here for two hours and not even a sniff.”

I smile. “A knockout like you? That must be hard on your ego.”

“Like I have any ego left after all these years.” Dolores laughs, but the Player’s Plains have taken their toll. Her laugh ends

in a coughing fit. “My New Year’s resolution is to quit smoking,” she says.

“New Year’s is eleven months away,” I say.

She winks. “Lucky for me, huh?” Dolores takes a final puff of her cigarette. Then she throws it to the sidewalk and grinds it out with the toe of her boot. “Time to get back to work.”

“Why don’t you take the night off?” I say. “Go home. Pour yourself a glass of that vin rose you like and listen to Leonard Cohen.”

“A girl’s got to pay the rent,” Dolores says. She tries a smile, but she’s had a procedure to plump out her lips, and they remain frozen.

A late-model SUV turns the corner. Dolores waves her rose at the driver, and he slows. Her face brightens.

“You brought me luck, Charlie,” she says. “Leonard Cohen’s going to have to take a cold shower.”

She approaches the car, exchanges a few words with the driver and slides into the front seat. Over the years, I've seen Dolores hop into a hundred cars. I turn my attention to something that's a real novelty.

A black Rolls-Royce is purring down the street toward CVOX ("ALL TALK/ALL THE TIME"), the radio station where I do the late-night call-in show. We don't see many Rolls-Royces in our neighborhood. But I know who's inside this one.

Tonight's guest expert on *The World According to Charlie D* is Misty de Vol Burgh, the twenty-five-year-old bride of eighty-three-year-old billionaire Henry Burgh. Our Valentine's Day topic is satisfaction—specifically, how to curl your partner's toes and make him or her beg for more.

Before her marriage, Misty was a high-priced escort. She knows a thing or two about toe curling. In the past year, she's also been learning a thing or two about

running a radio station. As his wedding gift to his bride, Henry Burgh bought her CVOX. Misty is now my boss. So far she is doing a bang-up job. I quicken my pace so I can welcome her.

The driver is helping Misty out of the Rolls when I arrive. Lighting Misty's way are the neon call letters on the roof of CVOX. The O in CVOX is an open mouth with red lips and a tongue that looks like Mick Jagger's. It may be tacky, but for eleven years that sign has said *Welcome home* to me.

When Misty steps onto the sidewalk, the driver holds her arm as if she were spun glass. She and Henry are expecting their first child any day now. As she smooths her coat over the swell of her pregnancy, the light from the call letters bathes Misty's face in a rosy glow. She has always been a very pretty woman. Tonight, brimming with anticipation, she is beautiful.

The streets are slick, so I take Misty's arm and lead her toward the door. Out of nowhere, the image of Dolores hopping into the SUV to have sex with a man she's never met flashes through my mind. Luck is a funny thing. Some people have it. Some people don't.

Someone has taped a copy of *SLUT ALERT* on the door of the entrance to CVOX. I grab it and try to crush it into a ball before Misty sees it. She's too fast for me. She takes the paper from my hand, smooths it out and looks at the caricature. It's a cartoon of Misty and Henry. Both are naked. They're having sex on a mountain of money. The caption is chilling. "Sexually transmitted diseases kill. Kill a whore before she kills you."

Misty leans toward me. "Nice," she says drily. She looks again at the cartoon. "You know what's really sad? Whoever did this has talent. Why would someone with that kind of ability waste his time on hate?"

Without waiting for an answer, Misty takes out her cell and hits speed dial. As she speaks to her husband, her voice takes on a special tenderness. “Henry, it’s me. Everything’s fine. I just wanted to hear your voice.” She laughs softly. “No, I don’t need you to come down here. I need you to stay at home, listen to Charlie’s show and keep our bed warm.”

After Misty breaks the connection, we pass the security desk and make our way down the hall. The walls are hung with oversized black-and-white photos of CVOX’s on-air personalities. *The World According to Charlie D* is our station’s top-rated show. My photo has pride of place at the end of the hall, but Misty stops at the first picture on her right.

It’s of Kevin O’Hanlon. In the photo he looks like a stand-up guy. Lots of hair, a snub nose, freckles and a boyish grin. But in person, Kevin can’t hide the fact

that he's a creep. There's real ugliness in the curve of his mouth, and his body is always tense with anger. On air, his voice is hectoring. He treats his callers badly—interrupting, shouting, belittling, even cutting off callers who disagree with him. His fans love him. People who disagree with his right-wing politics tune in just to see what he'll do next.

Misty stares at O'Hanlon's picture for a long time. "What do you think of him?" she says finally.

"I think he's a prick," I say.

Misty nods. "That's my opinion too, but his ratings are phenomenal." She smiles. "You're still number one, though."

"Thanks for noticing," I say. "Time for us to join Nova—the woman responsible for keeping our show at the top."

No one is more surprised at the success of *The World According to Charlie D* than Nova and me. We offer our listeners

standard fare—riffs on the topic of the day, a few tunes and a chance to listen in as I chat with our callers. Most nights, we just keep our listeners company in the small hours. Once in a while we do good work. Over the years we've kept more than a few people from hurting themselves or others.

I'm aware of my limitations. I'm not a shrink or a social worker. If we have a seriously troubled caller, we always arrange for follow-up treatment with a professional. If a caller poses a real threat, we contact the authorities. As I see it, my job is to be there for our listeners—not judging, just listening. So far, my approach seems to have worked.

I glance down at Nova's scarlet roses and at the pink-and-white teddy bear I bought for her two-year-old daughter, Lily. Tonight's Valentine's show was supposed to be as sweet and frothy as a girlie drink. The copy of SLUT ALERT taped to the

front door has left a bitter taste in my mouth. By inviting the public to “kill a whore before she kills you,” O’Hanlon’s Warriors have crossed the blood-red line that separates harmless crackpots from the dangerously disturbed. The cartoon on the door was a warning. As I shepherd Misty down the hall toward Studio D, my spidey senses are tingling. It’s going to be a long night.