



Elvira can keep secrets. Don't let her wide eyes and sweet smile fool you. She knows a thing or two about life's dark side. But what she knows, she's not telling.

Still, Elvira's good company when things get quiet here at work. Which doesn't happen all that often now that the economy's picking up. My little shop does a pretty good business.

Make no mistake, Renew is not a place for cast-off clothing. Not cast-off, outdated, worn out, done in, or thrown away second-hand threads. At my shop we cherish the beauty of the classic line, elegant tailoring, rich fabric. It's fashion that lasts, vintage. My little shop celebrates the best of the past, here and now, in the present. These are clothes that have lived full lives, so don't dare call them "used." I admit I find that insulting. And so does Elvira.

Elvira wasn't with me in the beginning. We hadn't met when I signed the lease, nearly a year ago, on a sweet bungalow-style cottage facing Old Colorado City's main drag. A hundred years ago the building played its role as a cozy abode, one of dozens constructed in a mass frenzy to house mill workers, miners and middle-class families. Now surviving houses cluster on side streets adjoining the historic main street, where trendy restaurants, shops and art galleries line broad, proud Colorado Avenue. I see them out my picture window and credit them for helping draw tourists and regulars to Renew.

History lovers love Old Colorado City. That's what brought me here in the first place. Mine was a tired, old story: empty nest, mid-life divorce. He wanted it; I didn't. She made him feel young again, and I was part of a past he was all too ready to trash. So I moved West, driving an old car with a new bumper sticker: **Men. You can't live with 'em. You can't kill 'em.**

I owned a decent vintage clothing collection, springing from closets-full left to me by my grandmother and Great Aunt Amanda. So when I saw a "for sale" sign on the blue bungalow, I jumped to invest my divorce settlement in a new start. Vintage clothing and me seemed like a perfect match, just a little the worse for wear and ready for a new life.

But those early days were lonely. I was tired all the time, trying to get Renew up and running. Long days in the shop with no help left me feeling a little trapped. Brand new to the West, I had no friends or relatives in the

area. Customers began to trickle in, but you couldn't really call them company. The loneliness of my ex-marriage was starting to feel like a life-long condition.

After a day of setting up displays, arranging the inventory and waiting on customers, I had no energy left for a social life. I realized I'd reinvented myself all right, into a strange, solitary woman obsessed with old clothes and fading treasures. Instead of the new beginning I wanted, I had retreated into a bungalow-sized box.

Then, three months after I opened Renew, she walked in ... decked out in vintage clothing hat to heels. My kind of customer! She headed straight for a hat rack and pored over the price tags. Same with the shoe display. And the purses. She didn't pause to admire the merchandise, just squinted at each tag and kept moving. As she whisked past me, I caught the scent of mothballs and mold.

"Is there something I can help you find?" Hope for a small sale in those early days was ever hungry.

She finally looked up, appearing surprised to hear my timid offer. "I'm not buying, hon. I've got a barn full of this stuff. Glad to sell you some of it cheap, though. I'm moving out one of these days and have a lot to unload."

My stock was still sparse, so I agreed to meet her Monday morning, one of the few blocks of time I hung a "closed" sign on Renew's front door.

Her name was Mrs. Wallis and she lived in Cascade on what turned out to be a decrepit ranch, down a twisted dirt road, hiding behind pines. And she wasn't

kidding about the barn. I've watched episodes of *Hoarders* that couldn't compare to the clutter collected by little old Mrs. Wallis.

When she answered my knock on her front door, I could see her house was crammed with piles of newspapers, stacks of books and boxes overflowing with possibly entire garage sales carted away. She didn't let me in, but led me across the front porch, past a window blocked by every kind of can imaginable. The kitchen window, maybe?

We walked through the back yard, picking our way past rusted hills of ancient farm tools and tractor corpses, to the vast, faded red barn. A side door barely squeaked open enough to squeeze through without rubbing up against its dusty, peeling paint. But inside, wonders never cease, I found a trove of clothing my customers would kill for.

The racks were tilted and tipping, yet the pieces hanging beneath tarps, old curtains and quilts were beautiful. Glamorous gowns and perfect ensembles hung shoulder to shoulder, above boxes filled with coordinating hats, shoes, bags and bangles.

My heart leapt at the bounty in that barn. We tossed off more covers and under each was another rack of vintage delights.

"Where did you get all this?" I asked.

"I'm the only daughter on my side of the family, and my husband and I were childless. Mom and her sisters didn't have much for fun out on the prairies, but they loved to dress up for their Eastern Star ceremonies. As their friends passed, they asked for the outfits, and it all got handed down to me. I was thinking of starting a shop like yours one day."

Mrs. Wallis suddenly tugged at a dusty white sheet. I gasped and jumped back at the sight of a human form.

She laughed. "Don't be scared. That's just Elvira."

The mannequin had the molded, wavy hairstyle of a '30s movie star, and graceful limbs designed to model any outfit to perfection. Her smile was mysterious, inviting, frozen forever in place.

I had to have her. "Could I buy her too?" She was just what Renew needed.

Mrs. Wallis' forceful sigh sent dust motes scattering. "I don't want to sell my Elvira. But I can't leave her out here alone." She chewed her lip for a full minute.

"Offer me a fair price for her and this lot, and I'll let you take her away. But you have to let me visit."

We sealed our deal quickly. As we shook hands, I watched tears spill over the seller's wrinkled-apple cheeks. She didn't comment on them, and neither did I.

Elvira was exactly right for Renew. She radiated a certain charm as customers dropped by in chatty groups for repeat visits to try on the new merchandise and study the splashy outfits I'd dress her in each week. Business picked up and I got the idea to throw parties with champagne and chocolates.

When I started calling the customers by name, I realized what they really wanted was connection to the happier times represented by the past. And a connection to like-minded women who cared about classics, not just the latest fad. We knit ourselves into a community of kindred spirits.

As the crowds at Renew grew, I noticed Mrs. Wallis from time to time quietly drifting in behind a group of strangers. At first the ladies' noisy chatter would mask her murmured comments. So it took a while before

I realized she wasn't visiting the shop. She'd come to see Elvira. And talk to her, too.

But inside, wonders never cease, I found a trove of clothing my customers would kill for.

I'd look up from ringing up an order and see a black-coated figure standing in the center of the shop facing our glamorous mannequin. Making what can only be described as eye contact.

Months went by. Renew was a local success, and thanks to the Internet, I tapped into a broader market for buying and selling vintage clothing. One dealer was holding a gala event and needed more displays. She asked if I had any mannequins to rent and promised to pay well for their services. I figured Elvira wouldn't mind the travel involved, based on the spirit of adventure I'd seen hidden behind her life-like blue eyes.

Packing Elvira for her trip proved to be a huge chore, and I was still in the middle of it when the doorbell tinkled behind me. Before I could turn, a shriek of animal pain pierced the quiet. I whirled around to see Mrs. Wallis, white as porcelain, mouth open in horror. She stared at my mess: Elvira disassembled into pieces, arms in the shipping box, legs swathed in bubble wrap, the rest scattered on the floor.

Mrs. Wallis was in tears, trying to speak. But she could only sob. I never found out what she tried to say that day before she ran out of the shop.

I felt terrible about Mrs. Wallis' extreme reaction. But Elvira went smiling off to her assignment and returned unscathed a few weeks later. She resumed her place at center shop and said nothing about it. I couldn't tell if she missed her regular visitor, but I started to. Would she ever come back?

Months later I wondered if I should try to contact Mrs. Wallis. How could I talk to her about what happened without making her feel worse about her strange relationship with Elvira? I expected to see her again sometime, but she never returned to Renew.

Two days ago, on a snowy, quiet afternoon I was Googling around on the

computer and got the idea to search for Mrs. Wallis. Maybe she had been discovered by that Horders TV show at last.

Her name did come up. Mrs. Wallis was mentioned in a series of old newspaper articles from a weekly regional paper preserved on the Web.

Goosebumps crept up my arms as I read the headlines: Search for Cascade Rancher Continues; Rancher's Body Discovered Dismembered; Trial Day 3 – "He Beat Me," says Rancher's Widow; Wallis Found Not Guilty After Insanity Plea; Rancher's Killer Sent to Pueblo Mental Hospital.

In the silence of the chilly shop, I sensed Elvira gazing at me from her pedestal. I stood and walked over to face her. I studied her calm stillness, stared up into her ice-blue eyes. "Did you know anything about this?"

Snow melting into the chimney dripped like a ticking clock.

It was the only sound.

Elvira, as usual, kept her secrets to herself.



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