

Ice and a



Curious Man

RENÉE ANGERS

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MAN**

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a Mushroom eBooks sample

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Chapter 1

*'I might get the fingers to start turning flips and
the language will spill
like some 5 gallon box of wine'*

Excerpt from 'Ugly People' by Shane Helmsley

It's not as if she had anything better to do for the next month of her life – just writing a bunch of redundant articles and reviews on the local music scene in St. Louis. It wasn't that she hated her job at 'Room', a small, alternative entertainment paper, but it really *had* become tedious. Her nights would typically be spent attending shows, which never left her any time to finish her current novel. Finish... that was funny. She had never gotten past jotting down a few notes long hand in a cheap pharmacy notebook. It was just an idea in its most embryonic stages. She knew, however, that if she had found the time, she would never get around to submitting it in anywhere, anyway. *'Too many anys,'* she concluded.

Then there was the perpetual hangover. A thick skulled feeling that she wasn't altogether certain was

caused by the loud music every damn night, or the drinking she felt she needed to participate in to tolerate it. Just an occupational hazard, she supposed, while she would continue to pound them back.

Regardless, she had accepted this latest assignment and here she sat, in the back of a taxi cab headed for Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. She was so preoccupied with dreading the trip that she barely noticed when the car pulled up to the front entrance. She paid the unkempt and rather unsavory taxi driver and grabbed her laptop and bag off the seat. “Excuse me, Sir. What time is it?”

“Mmmeahey forhee fi.”

“Pardon?” she asked, but the car squealed away before she had a chance to hear him repeat his answer. She wasn’t even given the chance to close the car door properly. She reacted by shooting him the finger and hoping that he saw it in his rear view. “Asshole!” she mumbled under her breath.

She had forgotten her watch in her rush to get out of the apartment on time, but forgave herself for allowing her impending terror to steal her organizational skills away from her. She was positive that her loss of wits was only temporary and the result of a mild phobic anxiety toward flying. *Mild*—that was the understatement of the week. She was already two Dramamines into the game and her head felt like she was witnessing the world through a snug fitting sandwich bag.

Her flight was at five after nine in the AM and she had been warned to get to the airport at least one hour beforehand, preferably two. The largest of the clocks on the wall in the airport read eight fifty, meaning that the cabby's "Mmmeahey forhee fi," meant eight forty-five. She hurried at full gallop through the airport trying desperately to get a good hold of her luggage, but the bags kept slipping off her shoulder.

She reached the counter huffing wildly, trying to ask for directions while catching her breath. The woman behind the desk directed her to the proper terminal with a one-dimensional smile and the overwhelming stench of cheap hair spray.

Marren's hurried pace had her forgetting just how horrified she was of flying, and before she knew it she was on the plane and settling in.

She glanced around at all the safety blurbs, taking note of what each said, but wanting to ignore them the way everyone else was. Everyone else seemed so calm. Too calm. '*You're all just too fucking calm,*' she thought.

She pulled a compact out of her bag and checked her reflection. She didn't look nearly as flustered as she felt. Her fire red hair was still neatly tucked away in its tidy ponytail. The minuscule amount of make-up she wore seemed in place and her flushed complexion from the rush only made her radiate a healthy looking glow.

The flight attendant passed by and Marren asked when she would be able to get a drink. “Not until we’re in the air, Ma’am,” she said. Marren smiled at her pleasantly, not much liking the answer but accepting it readily enough. Still, she was fairly certain that all the passengers in first class could enjoy a drink whenever they damn well pleased. Probably had a glass of champagne offered to them upon boarding. Spoiled upper class brats.

Her painfully polite smile fizzled off her face as the flight attendant moved on. Marren wished she had tripped the Barbie impersonator on her way by, but kept her thoughts silent. *‘Ma’am? I can’t believe she called me Ma’am. Hey lady, I look way younger than you do. And MY tits are REAL. Christ, why did I take this job?’*

She knew very well why she took this job. It was an opportunity to break into a larger market. One published novel didn’t deliver nearly as much recognition as she had hoped and working for *‘Room’* wasn’t her idea of an exceptional stepping-stone in her writing career. She was still tightly wedged into a dollar more than minimum wage, and still a nobody.

At first, she was thrilled that a large national publication wanted to hire her. *‘Literary Today’* was no small potatoes – it was the big boy of its kind. The bad ass of literary magazines. Gavin Preston, the Editor in Chief, called Marren himself, asking to meet with her. She agreed. How could she not? She wasn’t crazy. Even if he had her mistaken for someone else,

which she felt had to be the case, she jumped at the chance for a meeting.

She went to his big chic office and he quickly sat her down and then flung the proposition on her. She asked him if he was sure he had the right person and he assured her that he did; he then offered her the job again. This time it hit her like a pillowcase full of doorknobs and she wasn't even able to form words in response. She just sat there staring at him, her jaw too frozen in shock to even dangle stupidly. After several long moments, she began to stutter, "I . . . I . . .", but he interrupted her.

"I know this must come as a bit of a surprise." He smiled. "Why don't you take a couple of days and think on it. Get back to me when you've decided to accept."

She had met Preston a few years earlier when he wasn't such a bigwig. It was some kind of awards banquet and Marren was only there as a favor to a friend who had been nominated for something or other and begged her to be his escort. She really couldn't remember the specifics, nor did she care to. She didn't remember it as one of the more pleasant chunks of her life.

In any case, now Gavin was the head man at 'Literary Today'. He was still as friendly and personable as she remembered him to be. One might expect such an esteemed title to spawn an egomaniacal transformation of startling proportions, but Gavin was a gracious as ever.

As Preston suggested, she sat on his offer for a few days, then called to meet with him again. She went to his office for the second time and was treated like she was his best friend. She found the treatment odd, but didn't question it. The proposition, or "assignment" as he called it, sounded kind of adventurous . . . exciting even, but that quickly wore off when Gavin mentioned the subject matter she would be investigating and writing about.

She was to fly to Dillingham, Alaska, and get the full story on a reclusive poet named Shane Helnsley. She knew the name well. Shane Helnsley started at Oklahoma State University teaching English Literature and Poetry. Although his work refused to follow any of the rules he taught at the University, it was much sought after and he had a collection of his poetry published very quickly. He was rumored to have lost his mind and run off to Alaska with little else than the shirt on his back. This only made his work much more in demand. Unfortunately, over the years he very seldom released any new work to the public, prompting every interviewer and journalist in the country on their knees, begging his agent for some answers. They were usually just given some vague excuse or thrown a table scrap of old Helnsley work.

Helnsley had apparently agreed to an interview just recently, but only under his own very strict conditions. This is where the whole idea gave Marren an extreme case of the willies. His conditions were that

the writer was to come alone, bringing nothing but their writing tools. There was to be no recording equipment of any kind. No tape recorders. No cameras of any sort. And . . . the writer was to be the one of his choosing: Marren Lang.

Why in the world would Helnsley choose her? She knew she had never met the man before. Not ever. She'd never even seen a picture of him. How had he heard of her? Gavin told her that he didn't ask and didn't know, ". . . but does that really matter? This is Helnsley we're talking about."

Marren chewed on the inside of her lip for a moment, all the rumors about Helnsley thick and all consuming in her thoughts, and then opted to just blurt out her concerns. "I've heard that he's . . ."

Gavin stopped her with an amused laugh and then proceeded to assure her that Helnsley was, in every sense of the word, a gentleman.

"Well, how do you know that?" Marren asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"A colleague of mine has a friend that has met him several times," Preston said, reclining back in his cushy leather chair.

"Oh, how comforting," she said.

"His agent also assures me that he's a very well mannered man."

"Really? Well, I kind of find that hard to believe," Marren said. "All I have to go on are all those rumors I've heard and read."

“Most of them, Marren, are not true. He’s a brilliant man. He’s just very . . . secretive.”

“Yeah. That was the mildest thing I heard.”

“Don’t tell me,” Gavin started, holding his hand up. “You heard that he’s a dirty old man. Completely mad and bordering on psychotic. He’s John Merrick.”

“Check. Check. And check,” Marren smiled, ticking her finger off on an imaginary clipboard.

“No,” Gavin said, looking altogether too sure of himself to know what he was talking about. “Don’t worry. He’s a bit . . . how shall I say . . . eccentric, but very bondable.”

“Bondable?” Marren laughed. “Interesting choice of words.”

“For an interesting man. Actually, Shane Helnsley is a fascinating man and I think you’ll like him. Besides, this may be the one job that’s going to push your career into high gear. Do you know how many writers would kill to be in your position right now?”

“I know. I know. It’s just weird,” she said waving her fingers around spookily. “I mean, why does he want *me*?”

“His agent says he respects your work,” Gavin answered.

“But I write reviews on bands . . . ”

“I think he meant your novel.”

“What would Shane Helnsley read a smutty romance for?” Marren asked, finding that airing her question out loud only made the whole idea sound that much more ludicrous.

“Maybe he likes that kind of thing,” Gavin suggested. “In any case, Marren, I really must know if you are going to accept this assignment. It is, after all, up to you, but I really don’t think you should pass this opportunity up. I hate to make you feel rushed, but we need to make arrangements . . . you know, travel and what not. Helnsley’s agent is pushing for this to happen now, before Helnsley changes his mind.”

* * * *

The flight attendant picked up her microphone, asking for everyone’s attention, then began running down the safety instructions. It was, Marren supposed, the usual spiel. She wanted to listen, but her distracted mind only half heard what the attendant was saying.

She was surprised to find that she was able to get through the take off without digging her nails into the arm of the businessman sitting next to her. Actually, it really wasn’t all that bad. Once they were in the air, she decided that it would probably be best to refrain from looking out the window until they were safely back on the ground. Just the thought of glancing out the window gave her a sticky feeling of vertigo. She went to close the window blind and got a glimpse of the sky outside. Her heart pounding hard in her chest, she took a closer look, only to see that it was beautiful, especially so above the clouds.

After an hour in the air, she finally had the drink she wanted so desperately earlier and was feeling

much more relaxed as a result. She hadn't eaten anything due to her apprehension toward flying, and that together with the couple of Dramamine she had swallowed, meant she was definitely feeling much more calm. Noticing that it was only ten AM, she looked down at her drink before partaking. She summed that it was seven AM in Alaska, and felt guilty for drinking so early . . . but she was sure no one was keeping tabs on her. It had to be happy hour somewhere in the world. Just the fact that she was being hurled through the air at a speed of 565 miles per hour in a hunk of metal that weighed in at 147,000 pounds . . . it just seemed unnatural. The wings weren't flapping. Nothing was flapping for that matter, and as far as she was concerned, this enormous thing she was sitting in just shouldn't be in the fucking air.

She opened her laptop to start taking a few notes on what she wanted to discuss with Helnsley (the psychotic freak), when the businessman seated next to her introduced himself. "Gary Crenshaw," he blurted out.

Marren looked up at him, seeing what she thought was an unthreatening smile on an even more unthreatening face. "Marren Lang," she responded.

"Nervous of flying?" he asked, peeking down at the glass she held clenched in her white knuckled hand.

Marren followed his eyes down to her scotch, neat. "It shows, huh? Uh . . . yeah, a little. Well, a lot, but

I'm OK. Other things on my mind to be freaked out about."

"On your way to Anchorage?"

"Mmmm," she affirmed. "Overnight. I'm chartered out to some God-forsaken bush in the morning. Some place twenty miles outside Dillingham." She looked over at him, taking in the obviously expensive pin stripe and tailored suit. "You an accountant?"

"Investor," he corrected. "You?"

"Writer," she said, taking a sip from her drink.

"Oh, a writer. Very good. Novelist? Journalist?"

"A little of both, I guess you could say," she said.

"So what's in Dillingham?" Crenshaw asked.

"Some sour old pervert of a poet. I'm supposed to interview him. Shane Helnsley. You ever heard of him?" She knew it was absurd, but somewhere in the back of her mind she hoped he would say *'Yes. I've known him since we were boys. Good man. Very proper and trustworthy. Nope, no mental illness there,'* but he didn't.

"Helnsley . . . sounds familiar. But I'm not an expert on poetry."

"Join the club," Marren said.

"You don't sound very pleased," he observed.

"I'm not. I mean, this is a great opportunity for me. It'll probably improve my career prospects . . . It's just that . . ." She stopped herself and looked over at the stranger sitting next to her. "God, I'm a mess. I don't even know you and I'm telling you my life story. I'm sorry."

“No, no,” he said. “You’ve got me interested now, and we’ve got . . .” he looked down at his very pricey Rolex. “Nothing but time and a bad movie. You were saying that this thing will be great for your career but . . .”

“See . . . he *chose me!*” Marren griped, her inability to understand the whole idea very obvious. “Helnsley has never given an interview to anyone before. Ever! Now he’s finally agreed to give one but only under his own really strange and strict conditions.”

“Sounds intriguing.”

“Well, that’s what I thought until I found out he actually picked me to do it. That was one of his conditions.”

“There were other conditions?” Crenshaw asked.

“Yeah. No recording equipment. No cameras. And I’m to come alone. Me.”

“Why you?”

“I don’t know. He says he respects my work,” Marren told him.

“You must be a very well known writer then?”

“Hardly,” Marren laughed. “I write reviews on the local music scene in St. Louis. I’ve written one smutty romance that was published through a small press but it didn’t do very well. I don’t know Helnsley. Never met him in my entire life. I’ve read his work and it’s wonderful. I can’t figure out why on earth he would ask for me. Then, there’s the little matter of him being a complete lunatic.”

“This just keeps getting better,” Crenshaw chuckled. “Tell me about this . . . lunatic.”

“He’s a recluse. He left his life and his teaching position at Oklahoma State to live like a savage in the middle of nowhere. The last frontier.” She laughed nervously. “I’ve heard nothing but horror stories about him. People have actually referred to him as the ‘missing link’. To be honest with you, Mr. Crenshaw . . . I’m absolutely terrified. I’ve never been so terrified in my life.”

“You know what . . . I bet it will end up being really boring and then be over with before you know it.”

“I’m there for a month,” Marren muttered.

“A month? Wow. Is this Helnsley paying for your hotel?”

“I’m staying in his guesthouse,” Marren said. “I’m told his home is too far out to commute every day.”

“Guesthouse? Hmmm . . . he must have money,” Crenshaw said, assuming a guesthouse meant that he had a large home.

“I guess,” Marren agreed, finishing her drink. “Where are you off to?” she asked, feeling like she needed to change the subject for her own nerve’s sake.

“Anchorage. Business. Nothing nearly as interesting as your situation.”

They chatted about investments and financial portfolios. Interest rates and mutual funds. Capital gain this and stock market fluctuations that. Marren pretended to understand and to be interested, but

quite frankly, she didn't and wasn't. Regardless, the conversation busied them for the next hour and a half, but then Marren's two Dramamine and three-drink breakfast demanded an urgent nap. She slept a numbed and drugged sleep for the next two and a half hours. Upon waking she read some of Helnsley's work, companioned with another dose of whiskey. Her stomach was beginning to feel an uncomfortable and empty rot from the lack of food and the alcohol, but it wasn't anything that couldn't be numbed with another drink.

As she read, she came to see just how amazing Helnsley's writing was. His work was absolutely incredible. She found herself wanting to cry one moment and laugh out loud and hysterically the next. The tears would be of pity or heartbreak. The laugh – of amusement, or total revulsion. The work followed no grammatical rules whatsoever and it appeared that he just let it all flow without any predefined or patterned obstacles, and then let it lie there gasping for breath like a wounded animal. He made her feel a strange ache and an even stranger itching frustration. It was as if his printed word itself *was* frustration and that frustration infected anyone who came into contact with it. Shane Helnsley's work was a disease. A very contagious and debilitating disease.

The flight finally ended, landing at Anchorage International Airport at two forty-five PM, Alaska time (five forty-five, hers). She dragged herself and her bags out to the front exit of the airport, her legs

stiff yet rubbery from the lack of space in the economy section. She had heard tell of people suffering from blood clotting after long flights and imagined herself having a stroke right there on Helnsley's front step. There she would lay, convulsing and flopping around like a big, slimy, foolish fish, surrounded by Helnsley's servants. "Who is she?" one would mumble in a Ukrainian accent.

"She's the writer," another would whisper.

And then Helnsley himself would appear, pushing his way through the crowd rudely and as forcefully as his hobbling age would allow. He would gaze down at her, babbling insanities through brown spike-like teeth, spittle dribbling out the corner of his mouth. His bald, liver spotted head shining in the white Alaskan sun causing near snow blindness. Beads of sweat clinging to his wrinkled and quivering upper lip. She imagined him kneeling down beside her and begin howling and masturbating. The entire scenario repulsed her, but also caused her to start laughing.

She hailed a cab and put the ridiculous images out of her mind. Her legs were fine and with the amount of alcohol she consumed on the flight, she was certain her blood was running quite thin. She willed old babbling Helnsley out of her mind. She refused to have him take up the bulk of her thoughts until she absolutely had to allow him to be there. Instead, she focused on a hot shower, a cold beer, a meal and a good night's sleep.

She called Gavin once she arrived at her hotel to let him know that she had arrived. Then she called to confirm her charter for the next morning out to Helnsley's home. It was to leave at nine, so she planned on being at the airport by eight. This "two hour prior to" bullshit was for those anal retentive travelers that like to sit around and guard their luggage against those evil flower toting Krishnas. Nine times out of ten there were never any complications with tickets, and more often than not any problems with flights were delays. Why did passengers need to arrive two hours prior to boarding if boarding wasn't to take place until a delayed sixteen and a half hours after the scheduled time? Her flight was a charter, so she wasn't about to start worrying about all these moronic rules and regulations. One hour was going to have to be enough.

After showering and helping herself to that much anticipated beer from the mini-fridge, she ordered room service and then selected a movie from the pay-per-view in her room. 'Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure' and 'Trainspotting' were the only choices. The latter was the obvious choice, for obvious reasons. It was the perfect prescription for a mind requiring intelligent distraction. The brilliance of the film would do nicely, so she allowed the first five minutes to pass by without turning it off, which allowed the hotel's billing mechanism to kick in. It may be the last time she ever saw a good film. It may be the last time she ever saw anything for that matter,

considering that she was about to spend the next month with that psychopathic relic of a man. She quickly brushed the thought out of her mind reminding herself of Preston's description of Helnsley as "bondable". Wasn't that the word he had used? Well, if you're going to be a mad axe killer, you may as well be a bondable one.

With a full stomach and another beer to her name, she found it impossible to stay awake any longer. She clicked off the television three quarters of the way through the movie and crawled under the blankets. She was out cold before her head hit the pillow. Seven-thirty PM.

The wake up call came in at seven AM, taking ten rings to successfully bring her into consciousness. She didn't think she needed the call, being a habitual early riser, but she was proven wrong. She hung up the phone and rubbed at her face groggily. This must be what they mean when they say 'jet lag'. She felt tired in a very thick sort of way, like she had gotten *too* much sleep but needed more.

She called room service and ordered herself the standard Continental breakfast. She showered while she waited, looking forward to it, but once it came she was only able to push half the croissant down. It would seem that her meeting with Helnsley had come complete with its own set of appetite dissolving butterflies.

Arriving at the airport at twenty to nine, she was again running. At the main counter she asked where

she would find her reserved charter going to Dillingham.

“The name?” the young man asked.

“Marren Lang,” she said.

“Could you spell that, please,” he asked.

Marren took a deep breath to keep her patience.

“M-A-R-R-E-N-L-A-N-G”

“Lang. Lang . . . Oh, here it is. It’s reserved under the name Heln . . . Helnsley. A Mr. Shane Helnsley.”

“That’s right,” she said, starting to tap her foot as the minutes ticked by.

“Well, this charter isn’t going to Dillingham, Miss Lang. It’s going a bit further north than that.”

“Yeah, well, whatever. Can you just tell me where I have to be?”

The clerk gave her directions and she was off running again. She found the terminal easily enough and jogged over to two men standing by the exit, talking.

She excused herself and showed her reservation to them, asking them if they could help her out. The more casually dressed of the two smiled at her. “Ah, you’re the writer I’m takin’ out to Shane’s place.”

Marren nodded, panting and feeling relieved that her hunt for the plane had ended. “Yes,” she panted, fighting to catch her breath.

“I’m the pilot,” he said. “Follow me.”

The pilot said his so-longs to the man he had been speaking with, then led Marren out through the gates. Outside stood waiting the small Cessna Skylane that would deliver her out to her dreaded assignment. Its

wingspan stretched for what looked like thirty feet, maybe more. For some reason she felt safer with the idea of being hurled through the air in a hunk of metal that was a tad bit more compact than the monster she had sat in yesterday. Still, she swore, it just wasn't natural, even if the physics behind this plane were a little more believable.

"Nice day to fly," he said. "I'm Ed by the way. Ed Lawry."

"Marren Lang," she returned. "I'm the only one on this flight?"

"Yup. Shane wanted it that way."

"Do you know him?" Marren asked.

"Shane? Sure I know him," Ed replied.

Ed helped her climb in then shut the door behind her. He walked around to the other side and climbed in himself. Marren's eyes darted all over the instrument panel, and then over to Ed. He smiled as if he were the happiest man on the planet. "Sure is a nice day."

He started the engine and the propeller began to whirl. Marren felt that familiar poke of terror's pointy finger in her stomach. She realized that she had forgotten to take a Dramamine and immediately began frantically hunting through her bag for them.

"Forget something?" Ed asked.

"Dramamine."

"Don't worry about it, Miss Lang. I've got a good stash of air sickness bags."

"Great," Marren mumbled sarcastically.

She found the bottle, fumbled to get one out and stuffed it in her mouth quickly. Ed smiled. "We'll be there before that thing even starts working."

"It's more of a mental thing," she informed. "Knowing it's in me calms me down." The plane started to move, turning slowly to make its way toward the runway. "Can I talk to you while you fly, or do you need to concentrate?" she asked.

"You can talk, I can talk, we can both talk at the same time. Hell, I can sing show tunes for ya if ya like."

Marren laughed at Ed's unpredictable response, then her face became serious. "What's he like?"

"Shane? He's a great guy," Ed said.

"Great like what?" she prodded.

"Well, he's real friendly. He's kinda private, but not in an anti social kinda way. He's friendly. Real friendly."

"So he's not nuts?" she pushed.

"Shane? No . . ." Ed answered. "Well, maybe just a little. Don't tell him I said that."

"How old is he?" she asked.

Ed frowned slightly with thought. "Ya know, I'm not too sure. Now that ya mention it, I don't know. I never asked him." He peered over at her quickly, giving her a wink. "Rest assured, he's old enough."

Marren found herself turning her nose up at Ed's answer. It came across as perverse and she decided right then to give it up. Just go out to Dillingham, or wherever it was she was going, meet the weird old

coot, do the best job she could do and reap the rewards later. Both Gavin and Ed said pretty much the same thing about Helnsley. She felt like she should be reassured about her safety. She hadn't been hired to write the memoirs of a serial killer. *'Don't be so silly,'* she told herself. All the same, she was out in the middle of nowhere to interview some eccentric and possibly dirty minded old crust of a poet.

It *was* a nice day. Clear. The Cessna flew low enough for Marren to appreciate the spectacular scenery that was Alaska. She had had no idea it was so striking. It was so immensely breathtaking that she felt stupid for never allowing herself into a plane before. She had been born, bred, and rarely ventured very far outside of Missouri.

Ed made small talk with her, asking her what it was like to be a famous writer. She looked over at him and then broke out laughing. "Why don't ya ask Helnsley that?"

"I did," Ed said. "All's he said was that he needed a drink. So now, I'm askin' you."

"Well, I'm not famous," she said.

"Shane said you're good. He said you've got something. He told me that out of the few rough diamonds he's seen, you shone the brightest of the lot."

"He said that? How corny! Who is this guy?"

"Yup, that's what he said," Ed confirmed. "He always has a way of putting things. And as far as he goes, he told me he was just a lump of coal that didn't want the pressure."

Chapter 2

She didn't know how long they had been in the air; maybe only about forty-five minutes or so. It could have been over an hour for all she knew. Ed told her he was going to circle the clearing below, and come up from it on the other side. "Easier for me to take off again," he said.

"We're here?" she asked.

"We're here."

He circled around the clearing, just like he said he would, and then began his landing maneuvers. Marren thought her anxiety would escalate again as the plane descended, but found that her discomfort with meeting Helnsley far surpassed her petty phobia. She gathered her wits and took in a few secretive deep breaths hoping she would find the strength to meet him without trembling and perspiring too profusely.

The Cessna's landing was a little bumpy, but all in all, virtually painless. Once they were on the ground and came to a full stop, Marren looked over at Ed. "Am I supposed to hike to his house from here?" she asked.

“Depends on what ya think a hike is,” Ed smiled. “That’s Shane’s house right there,” he finished, pointing across the clearing.

Marren peered out the windshield to see a tiny little cabin. “*That’s his house?*”

“Sure is.”

Marren’s deep breath wasn’t as concealed as her previous few, and held more of a discontented manner about it. She gathered her things, unbuckled herself and opened the door. “Thank you, Ed. It really was a pleasure meeting you.”

“Pleasure was all mine,” Ed said. “I’d pop in and say hello myself, but I’m runnin’ a little late. Tell Shane I said Hi. I’ll be out for a visit soon.”

Marren smiled and closed the door, then turned and began walking through the overgrowth toward the sorry looking little hovel. It wasn’t necessarily in bad shape – actually it looked quite solid and well kept – but it was so small. “My washroom is bigger than this place,” she muttered under her breath as she tromped through the tall, dried, yellowed grass.

Once at the stoop, she turned to see Ed lift off into the deep blue sky. Her heart sank as the reality of her situation set in. She felt alone. Very wary, vulnerable and alone. She climbed the three steps, one of which was loose, and moved up to the door. There was a note on it:

‘Marren Lang - Around back.’

She sighed heavily and turned around, stepping off the porch again. She made her way around the side of

the house, struggling with her bags. Coming around the back corner she heard a striking sound and then a moment later she saw a young man chopping wood in the far end of the yard. She approached him, trying to get his attention by calling out to him . . .

“Excuse me . . .”

He appeared to be in his late twenties. He had shoulder length dirty blond hair and was shirtless. “Um . . . EXCUSE ME? HELLO?” she tried again. “I’M LOOKING FOR SHANE HELNSLEY.”

“Marren Lang,” he said, whacking his ax into the tree stump he had been chopping wood on. He walked over to her, wiping his hands on the thighs of his loose fitting green work pants. They hung so low on his hips that Marren thought for a second that if he rubbed his hands on his thighs one more time, they would drop right off of him. He did and they didn’t.

He stuck his hand out to her and she took it. “Hi,” she said. “Is Mr. Helnsley around?”

“Yeah,” the young man said in a low and gruff, but friendly voice. “You’re lookin’ at him.”

Marren’s eyes grew wide as she stared at the young man in front of her. “You are . . .”

“Shane,” he said.

“No you’re not,” she smiled. “Oh, I get it . . . you’re his son. Is your father around? I’m looking for Shane Helnsley . . . the poet.”

He looked down and laughed a little, then peered back up at her. “My father died twelve years ago, and

he wasn't no poet. I'm Shane Helnsley. I'm the so-called poet."

Marren just stared at him, her expression painfully stunned. She didn't say anything at all, simply stared. She couldn't believe it. The man standing before her was young and, quite honestly, criminally attractive. "But you're . . ."

Just then, her bag slid off her shoulder and she struggled to grab it. Shane reached over and snatched it before it hit the ground, taking it from her. "Lemme help you out here," he said, taking her other bag as well. "You were expectin' someone a bit older I reckon. A lot of people think that. I played a little trick on them, but you'll find out all about that later," he said. "C'mon. I'll show ya around."

He walked away toward the house, leaving Marren to stare at him from behind, dumbfounded. He turned around a moment later, noticing that she wasn't following. "Ya comin', or do I have to carry you in too?"

That said, Marren woke up, took in a cleansing breath and followed him into the house through a back door. The house smelled like wood, fire, cigarette smoke, and strong coffee. It was dark inside, but not dismal by any means. It looked comfortable. Cozy.

"This, obviously, is the kitchen," he said, walking through it, his heavy boots clomping loudly against the wooden floorboards. He motioned for her to follow him into the next room. "This is the living

room,” he said, passing through it to another doorway. “Bedroom,” he said, nodding inside. “And the privy,” he smiled, pointing to what she guessed was the bathroom.

She peeked inside the bedroom to see nothing but a bed with a small table next to it, a raw wood dresser and a wood burning stove in the corner. She then glanced into the washroom to see a large old tub, a toilet and an old fashioned sink with the two spouts. He passed by her on his way back toward the kitchen and turned his walk backwards to face her. “Ya want a cup of coffee or somethin’?” he asked.

“Um, no thanks,” she replied. She looked around the living room but only did so to keep her eyes off of him, not because he was so immensely easy to look at, but because he was the last thing she had ever expected to see.

“How about a real drink?” he asked.

“Pardon?”

“Ya look like you could use it. I can smell it in your writing too. Ya like to take a belt once in a while, don’t ya?”

“A real drink would be fine. Thanks,” she said, trying not to smile too much. What did he mean, ‘he could smell it in her writing’? Was it that obvious? It wasn’t like she was an alcoholic or anything, was it?

Shane disappeared into the kitchen and she took the opportunity to try and absorb the shock she still felt after meeting him. She glanced around the living room again – this time, actually taking everything in.

There was a stone fireplace . . . nice. Over on the far wall, under the window, was a large oak desk. On it sat a computer, and a telephone with its cord wrapped around itself – obviously not hooked up. There were stacks of books and papers all over the top covering any possible work area. Evidently the desk was not in current use either.

A small sofa rested directly in front of the fireplace by about ten feet. It wasn't long enough to be a regular sized couch, but it was larger than a love seat. Over in the opposite corner from the desk, sat a comfortable looking armchair, and a large shelving unit that contained a surplus of books and yet more stacks of paper. Next to the chair sat an off balance reading lamp. Other than that, there was only an enormous rug that everything was sitting on.

There wasn't much in the room, but it held exactly what it needed. Any more would have been too much. She liked it. She felt it was charming. No overkill. No confusion, except for the confused mess on the desk, but even that looked to be comfortably at home.

A moment later Shane returned with two glasses and an ancient and very decorative looking bottle of something unlabeled and amber under his arm. He offered her one of the old fashioned glasses and then filled it for her. "This is Ed's pride and joy – I mean, aside from his plane," he said, letting his eyes drift from the glass up to hers. "Ed. He flew you in."

“Ed. Yes. Interesting man,” Marren said, lifting the glass under her nose. The aroma was a little like whiskey, but she couldn’t be sure. “Whiskey?”

“The best,” Shane said. He poured himself a glass, then corked the bottle back up. “Ya don’t say much, do ya?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just really, really surprised,” she admitted. “I heard that you were . . . well . . . not at all what you are.”

“Yeah,” he mused. “I planned it that way,” he added, tipping the glass but keeping his eyes on her.

“You planned . . . what? I don’t get it,” she said, taking a small sip out of her own glass as a test. The liquid’s warmth didn’t start in her throat like all other whiskeys did, but it started right on the tip of her tongue, and as she swallowed, its warmth spread throughout her insides like a gigantic security blanket with a fantastic sense of humor.

“C’mon outside. I guess I got some explainin’ to do,” he said.

She noticed that his southern accent was still quite pronounced. Well, why wouldn’t it be? He hadn’t been out here that long.

Her mind was swimming with all of this. Just the anxiousness she had felt toward the trip, and the uncertainty of meeting Helnsley, had her adrenaline pumping a steady flow since yesterday morning. With her body now filled with it, she was beginning to feel its numbing affects. It was almost as if she was

removed from everything going on around her. Distant and ghost-like. It was all quite exhausting.

The man in front of her said something, but she was somewhere else. She didn't notice until he smiled at her. "Anyone home?"

"Pardon?"

"Are you OK? Ya seem kind of far away."

"I'm fine," she answered, shaking the bats out of her head. "I'm sorry, just tired I guess."

"Well, c'mon outside and sit down."

Again, she found herself following him and once out on the front porch she sat down on the step, but made sure to keep her distance. "OK, start explaining," she said. "Just don't shock me anymore than I already am. I'm too spent."

"Well, what do ya already know about me? Just so I don't become more tiresome to ya."

"Um . . . I know that you were an English professor at Oklahoma State for about two years . . . wait . . . how can that be? You don't look more than twenty-five, twenty-six."

"Thirty-three," he corrected.

"Really? You don't look it," she came back.

"This place. It's kind to more than the spirit," he told her.

"You're thirty-three?" she asked, needing to confirm what she thought she heard.

"And counting."

She took a moment to accept this, looking into his face and noticing his soft brown eyes. There was the

faint evidence of aging, but the very few almost invisible lines around those warm brown eyes were only the shadow of the character they would become. “Still,” she said, “You’re very young to hold such a high position.”

“They called me a genius when I was fourteen, and the fun never stopped after that,” he said. He sipped out of his glass, and then seemed to speak only to himself. “They. Who the fuck are *they* anyway and what do *they* know?”

“I also know that from 1992 to 1994, your works were published in various magazines and books, and critically acclaimed as well.”

“*They* again,” he mumbled.

“Then, in 1994, your book was published. ‘*Ugly People*’. But soon after that, you picked up and left to come here. That’s all I know for sure. Other than that, all I’ve heard and read are rumors.”

“I started them,” he said. “A list of character flaws as long as my right arm and physical deformities as long as the other.”

“Why?” she asked, finding it unfathomable that anyone would do such a thing.

“This is off the record, right?” he asked.

“If you want it to be.”

“Yeah. Please.”

“OK. Off the record,” she agreed. “Why?”

“I got a glimpse of success and I ain’t never seen anything so ugly, but by the time I figured that out, it was too late. My success was something that has been

following me around all my life and when I wasn't lookin', it just fell right into my lap. I didn't ask for it. I didn't even work for it. Just all of a sudden, there it was in my lap. A big sloppy mess of ugliness. Everybody wantin' a piece of me. So . . . I put a stop to it. I paid a lot of people to deny they knew me and counted on a few others to be real creative in describing my person to anyone that came askin' any questions.

"It wasn't easy, but before too long I was this toothless, deformed, ninety-year-old man that had lost every last one of his marbles and took a certain pleasure in pleasin' himself every chance he got . . . if ya catch my meanin'. My agent has done a great job keepin' the whole thing goin' for me. I owe him a lot. He's a good friend," he finished.

"You're still famous, you know. Maybe even more so," Marren informed.

"Yeah," Shane agreed, sounding disappointed.

"So, you did all this just because you didn't want success?" she asked.

"It's the way people treat ya," Shane said. "If you aren't a big important person with piles of money, you're nobody. No one cares. I've seen people with no one – not a fuckin' soul carin' about them – and it's ugly. If you have a name and a few bucks, everybody wants to be your best pal."

He looked over at Marren. "Why would I want to be best pals with someone that has no sense of empathy, no sense of decency? People that would just as soon

run over you in their car and leave ya there to die? The greed, selfishness, and expectations of these creatures didn't make sense to me. I just wanted out."

His words struck her hard. It seemed to her that his animosity toward society ran a little deeper than he was letting on. "So it's your disgust with society that brought you out here?" she asked.

"Yeah . . . that's a part of it," he answered.

"Do you hate everybody?"

"No, not hate," Shane said. "Dislike."

"Do you dislike me?" she asked, smiling and feeling amused with his over the top disapproval of the human race.

He peered over at her with a look on his face that was stone. "No, I don't." It was a look that bore right through her and she needed to look away. Then he added, "So, all my best pals and biggest fans wanna know what's goin' on, huh?"

"Yes, they do," she said. "So what do I tell them? I mean, you're not that twisted old masturbating maniac wearin' Kleenex boxes on your feet." The whiskey was catching her off guard and making her feel rather free to poke fun at him.

Shane laughed and gazed over at her. For a fleeting instant, she thought he looked familiar, but it quickly passed. It was the softness in his eyes. "Sure I am," he said.

"You are?"

"I am."

She stared at him, unable to stop smiling but feeling that she didn't understand him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just more bewildered than I've ever been in my life."

"You ain't bewildered. Ya just ain't drunk yet," he said.

Marren decided, although it seemed like she didn't even make the decision herself, that she was beginning to like this man. "Is there anything else I should know?" she asked.

"Do ya know how to fish?" he asked.

"Fish?" she repeated. "No, actually I don't."

"Well, you should know how to fish. Everyone should know how to fish. I'll teach ya."

With her stare fixed on him, she found his simplicity terribly attractive and willed herself to not look away. "Why did you ask for me to write your story?"

"I read your book. I like your style," he said.

"It's a mindless romance," she laughed.

"No it isn't," he stated strongly. "The way I read it, you took the idea of romance, or what western civilization sees as romance, and you shit all over it. You brought romance back to its most primitive beginnings. It's thick. You chose raw passion over all that perfumey crap. You found the limbo between romance and eroticism and I'm sure you pissed a lot of people off with that find. You've got the guts of it."

She felt flattered by his words, but disagreed with him. "I think you read a little too much into it."

“I don’t think I did. I taught this stuff and I think I have a pretty good eye for it. I think you have it.”

“OK,” she said, raising her eyebrows and still disagreeing with him.

“Your writing – is it from your fantasies or is it from experience?” he asked.

Marren looked over at him unable to decide whether his question was too forward or just the inquiry of a very respected English Prof. She pondered that for a minute and allowed herself to answer him truthfully; after all, he was being honest with her. “Fantasy. There is no such thing as perfect love.”

He emptied his glass and smiled. “Fantasy is good,” he grinned. “You’re a very passionate woman. Your writing will do just fine. This is gonna work out just fine.”

He lit a cigarette and offered it to her, then lit another for himself. He snapped his zippo shut and stood up. “Let’s walk.”

They strolled out across the clearing together and their conversation waned. It was a little while before Shane finally spoke. “I don’t want ya goin’ out by yourself. Least for a while. It’s pretty easy to lose your way around here and ya never know when you’re gonna run into a wolf or a bear or somethin’.”

“Bear?” Marren repeated.

“Yeah. There’s tons of them around here. Black, Brown . . . I’ve even seen a Cinnamon Black hangin’ around. She’s somethin’.”

“Oh great,” Marren mumbled, sarcastically.

“Bears are cool,” Shane said. “Respect them and they’ll respect you. Whatever you do, don’t get between a mother and her cubs. Actually, don’t go anywhere near a cub . . . ever.”

“I’ll make a mental note of that,” she chuckled.

They crossed through a patch of tightly grouped trees. Marren could hear the sound of water moving and slapping against rocks, becoming louder with each step. Just before they emerged from the trees Shane put his arm out in front of her to stop her. “Be real still,” he whispered as he crouched down and urged her to do the same. “Speak of the devil. We got a female Black out there gettin’ her lunch.”

“Where?” Marren whispered in return, feeling oddly safe with him.

“Right over there, in the stream,” he said quietly, shimmying up close to her and pointing.

Marren’s eyes followed the direction his finger was aimed to see a shiny, pitch black bear staring down into the water. She pounced on a fish and then lumbered up on to the bank with her catch. She dropped it to the ground and it flopped around violently, but she plopped one huge paw down on it, probably killing it. She then settled down to eat it. Marren recalled her thoughts about suffering a stroke from the flight, on old man Helnsley’s mansion porch, flopping around the way the bear’s lunch did. She smiled, pulled her eyes off of the bear and planted them on Shane’s profile. There was no stroke, and there was no old man. With the trip, the fear, Ed’s

home-made whiskey and this insanely attractive man crouched next to her, she was, for the moment, very pleased to be exactly where she was. She returned her gaze to the bear and they watched intently for several long minutes. “God,” Marren breathed. “She’s beautiful.”

Shane looked over at her, seeing her smiling. “Ya like that?” he asked.

“Definitely,” she nodded, unable to take her eyes off of the sight.

“Good,” he said, quietly.

They watched for a little while longer, then snuck back through the trees the way they had come. Once they were back out in the open, Shane began to talk again. He told her stories about his first few run-ins with bears when he had first relocated up here. He made her laugh. He made her feel on edge, waiting for his next word with excited anticipation. She was enjoying his company so much, she had actually forgotten that she had been hired to come here and interview him. She had forgotten who he was, and who he was supposed to be. Shane Helnsley – poet extraordinaire.

It was getting close to five PM and Marren sat on the back steps while Shane moved the wood he had chopped that morning under a protective wooden canopy next to the house. She watched him quietly, taking note of how much more relaxed she was. That ghost-like feeling of not being a part of what was happening around her was no longer a surrounding

entity. Her body had worked off the adrenaline overdose and her mind was not so noisy.

Load after load, Shane carried armfuls of wood across the yard. She had offered her assistance, but he said that if he accepted her help and decided that he liked it, he was liable to want to become lazy. He told her that she would be helping him enough with her writing and left it at that.

“So, how did you find this place? This house?” she asked.

“I built it,” he said.

“You built it? You’re kidding, right?” she smiled.

“No. I bought the land and built it,” he said. Marren was still looking as though she didn’t believe him. “I came up here not knowin’ what the hell I was gonna do. All I knew was that I needed some quiet and to get away from everyone. I needed to work for what I needed.

“I met Ed Lawry and he took me around lookin’ for the land I needed. I liked this spot so I worked through some red tape and bought it. Got myself some wood and built my house.”

“Got some wood?” she repeated. “You make it sound like an afternoon project. Were you a carpenter before or something?”

“No. Just needed a house. How hard could it be?”

Marren thought about what Gavin had said to her just before she accepted the assignment. He said that she would be staying in Helnsley’s guesthouse for the month. All there was around here was his house and a

shed where he had put his ax away earlier. There wasn't even a garage for his truck.

It had been on her mind since she arrived, but she was hoping that through the course of the day he would have said something about it. He hadn't, and even though it was still looking like high noon, her body was telling her that evening was lowering itself down on them quickly. She had heard tell of the long Alaskan days, and this time of year the sun rose at around four in the morning and set close to eleven at night. She had entertained the notion of bringing one of those sleep masks with her, but assumed that after a few days she would become accustomed to the bright nights. No matter, still heavy on her mind was where the hell was his guesthouse?

"Um . . . Shane? Gavin Preston said I would be staying in your guesthouse."

"Yeah. That's right," he said, a shrewd smile creeping up on his face.

"OK," she said. "So where is it?"

"Right there," he answered, nodding his head at his house.

"*This* is your guesthouse? I thought this was *your* house."

"It is. It's my house, and this month I have a guest."

She had been smiling, but the smile seemed to have frozen on her face. It lost its flavor and left her looking like a heavily outlined comic strip character. He began tossing older and drier pieces of wood through the back door and into the house as she

stared at him. He was well aware that his little joke about the sleeping arrangements weren't tickling her at all.

"No worries. You can have the bedroom and I'm takin' the couch out in the living room," he finally clarified.

Now her smile died altogether. Although his clarification sounded a little more acceptable, it also sounded very unfair to this host that had been so far nothing but courteous to her. "It's OK. I'll take the couch," she said.

"Actually, I can't allow that," he said. "Besides, it'll be a good change for my back. Ya gettin' hungry?"

He stepped over her on the steps and vanished inside the house. Marren remained sitting wondering just how many more surprises were in store. All Shane had done since she had been here was amuse and charm her. She had just found out that there was no guesthouse but it wasn't upsetting her. She was miles and miles away from anything that even remotely resembled a motel, and although she knew she should be furious, she giggled quietly finding her entire predicament quite entertaining.

Shane re-emerged from the house, popping his head out and asking her if she wanted to join him for a beer. She didn't even have to think about it before she said she would love to. A moment later, he came out and handed her one. It wasn't a brand she knew of, and whatever it was, it wasn't American.

He sat down next to her, a little closer than she had allowed herself earlier, and looked over at her. “Hope ya like fish. We ain’t got any fried chicken and waffle joints anywhere nearby.”

“Fish is fine,” she chuckled. “You caught it yourself, I assume?”

He nodded. “I pretty much catch and grow everything I eat,” he said. “It’s one of the ways to escape the indolence that has plagued our culture.”

Marren raised her eyebrows, as if his statement had collided with what she had expected him to say, and it definitely left a small dent. She had nothing to say in return, and settled to just move the conversation on if only to keep from laughing at him. “I guess you cook, too?”

“I ain’t no galloping gourmet, but I make do.”

“Poet. Fisherman. Carpenter. Philosopher. Cook. What else do you do?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he smiled, getting up and making his way over to the canopy.

He grabbed five pieces of wood and chucked them over to the fire pit. He arranged them with his foot, then walked off in the direction of the shed. He grabbed some kindling and came back out, placing them down as well. He felt the chest pocket of his untucked and open flannel shirt, only to find that it was empty. He lifted from his crouch and smiled at Marren as he passed by and into the house. He returned back outside moments later with a box of matches in his hand and resumed his stance next to

the fire pit. He lit the kindling in several areas, then bent down low to blow on the struggling flames.

She was only human. She couldn't help but watch as he took in deep breaths and expelled them slowly into the fire, helping it grow and burn with a hot intensity. Her imagination lifted to a level she did not wish it to go, but its disposition seemed to have a mind of its own. She too, took in a deep breath but hers was not to fan a flame; hers was to cleanse herself of the less than honorable thoughts that had entered into her mind uninvited.

Within a few minutes, Shane had the fire up and going satisfactorily. He got up and sat back down with her as he waited for it to get hot enough to cook on. "That was fast," she said.

"Ya get good at shit ya need to survive with," he told her. "I'm sorry about the guesthouse thing."

"I'll get over it. I'm pretty resilient," she reassured.

"Good," he said. "I'd rather gnaw my own leg off than send ya home with any painful emotional scars."

"Do you ever say anything that isn't amusing?" she asked.

"One of the few things I don't get to do a whole lot of out here is talk to people, so when I get the chance, I do my best to entertain."

* * * *

He cooked some Northern pike and whitefish in a cast iron skillet that sat on a flat rock in the center of the flames, and baked a couple of potatoes. They then

retreated into the house to eat, as the sun was taking on an eerie white chill.

After dinner, Shane started two more fires. One in the fireplace and one in the wood burning stove in the bedroom. He had taken Marren's bags and placed them behind the bedroom door. He returned back out to the living room and sat down on the sofa, looking over at Marren as she sat before the fire he had built. She gazed into it, watching its hot fingers snap and flicker. "It's almost unbearably quiet here."

"Does that bother you?"

"It's strange."

Shane nodded. "I'm used to it."

"I can hear myself breathing and that kind of freaks me out," she finally said.

He was quiet for a moment, watching Marren listen to her own life. "What else do ya hear?" he asked.

"My damn heartbeat," she answered.

Shane laughed, then offered her a challenge. "Listen real close for a minute and tell me what else you can hear. I can pick up five things."

"Other than my breathing and my heartbeat, I hope."

He laughed again. "Yes, other than your breathing and your heartbeat."

Marren tilted her head as if it would activate some kind of invisible radar for her. "Crickets," she said.

"That's one," Shane said.

Marren listened again, needing to strain, but she didn't get anything. "No."

“The fire,” Shane said.

“Oh well, of course. Yes I can hear that, obviously.”

“But ya didn’t notice it.”

“You’re right, I didn’t.”

“What else can ya hear?”

She listened hard, squinting her eyes, but got nothing. She shook her head.

“The wind,” Shane pointed out. “Don’t ya hear it in the trees or moving past the house?”

His question motivated her to listen even harder and after a few seconds she could hear what he was talking about. “OK, yes. What else?”

“The water running from the stream to the lake . . . and a raccoon going through the garbage out by the shed.”

“Really? Right now?”

“Yup. He will likely be at it for a while, and make a few trips back tonight,” he told her.

“Well, won’t he leave a mess?”

“No,” he said. “Way I look at it, I’ve already made the mess. Why should his be any worse?”

“Well, because *you’ll* be the one cleaning it up, not him.”

“Hell, that’s OK,” he said, taking a hit from his beer. “Only difference between his mess and mine is that mine is organized. All neatly tucked away in bags and cans ready to be hauled away and dumped somewhere where we can all ignore it and pretend like it didn’t happen. One of the human race’s dirty little secrets.”

“You sound like you have something against your own garbage,” Marren chortled.

“I guess I do. Everything we make is taken from what the earth has generously given us. We manipulate it, melt it, mold it and destroy it until we have the end product we just can’t live without, right? Lord save us if we had to live without it. Then when we’ve used it or become bored with it, we give it back to the earth as trash that can’t be broken back down into its original state. It’s perverse.”

“Are you an activist?” she asked.

“No. I’m a coward,” he replied.

“A coward? That’s kind of harsh. Why would you say that?”

“Because I chose to run away from everything that I don’t want to look at. All the perversions.”

“Garbage being one of them?” she smiled.

“Garbage being one of them,” he smiled back. “But the truth is, I can’t get away from it. If it isn’t in front of me, it’s already in here,” he said, tapping on his temple.

“Garbage,” Marren said.

“Everything,” he said. “As for garbage, we can recycle it until we’re blue in the face. We can correct injustice with compassion and stomp out greed by being a charitable soul. We’re all just a bunch of hypocrites. What we as a race have already done to ourselves is just foreplay. We haven’t even started to fuck ourselves yet.”

“You definitely are Shane Helnsley,” she said.

“Every God damn day.”

A hush fell between them, filling the room with a thick soupy tension. “Mr. Helnsley, you’re a curious man.”

Just then, one of the logs in the fireplace popped loudly, spooking Marren. A moist air pocket in the wood then released a high-pitched whistle that escaped the living red fibers in a stream of steam. Outside there was a muffled thud and then the sound of angry animal chatter. The pop in the fireplace was one thing, and something Marren could explain, but the sounds outside were alien to her. They bit down on her nerve endings and tugged at them, feeding her already teetering state of uneasiness.

“What the hell is that?” she asked.

“Coons,” Shane answered, smiling at her. “Sounds like someone is defendin’ his supper.”

“Defending it from what?” she begged.

“Probably another ‘coon.”

“Raccoons don’t make any noise, do they?”

“Sure they do. They speak up when it’s necessary. They can get pretty ornery, too.”

Marren’s hand rose to her chest in an attempt to calm her pounding heart. Shane chuckled a little. “Ya need another drink?” he asked.

“No. I guess I’m a little jet lagged. I’m already half-way in the bag.” It was true. Her speech hadn’t yet been affected, or not so much that it was noticeable, but she really was feeling drunk and one more drink would surely finish her off.

“Ed’s Juice packs a punch too. It nips at ya all day. If you ain’t used to it, it’ll get the better of ya,” he said.

“Does it get the better of you?” she asked.

Shane smiled. He could say a million things right now, all of which would be very clever, but also very inappropriate. “Not the way I would like it to,” he said.

“What does that mean?”

“I’m still a coward,” he muttered.

“God, you really aren’t what I expected. I can’t get over it,” she said, staring at him.

“Are ya disappointed?” Shane asked.

“Are you kidding?” she spat. “Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

“What does *that* mean?” he asked, repeating her own words.

“Touché, right?”

“Yeah . . . that’s right. Answer the question.”

“It . . . I . . . Well, I just, I wasn’t expecting a hot lookin’ guy, that’s all.”

“Ya like the way I look?”

Marren just realized what she had vocalized and wondered just what exactly was in that damn whiskey. She had just backed herself into a corner and Shane was right there in front of her, waiting for an answer. “I just said that out loud, didn’t I?” she smiled. “I didn’t mean it . . . I didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t? So ya *don’t* think so?” he asked.

“No . . . I mean yes . . . I mean . . . Ah, fuck it. Yes, I think so.”

Shane's smile hadn't dwindled, but grew. He nodded and stood up to make his way toward the kitchen. The sun had sunk quite a bit lower now causing the new darkness of the kitchen to swallow him as he entered. A moment later, Marren heard the back door open and shut. She wondered what he was doing but dismissed it knowing that she probably wouldn't understand it anyway.

He really was a curious man. What was going on in that mind of his was something she really would have enjoyed digging out of him and giving to all the die-hards out there that wanted to know, but he seemed to want the lies kept alive. The lies. All the rumors and stories were nothing but hired tales designed to deter the public from asking of him more than he was willing to give. He was a genius that appeared to be haunted by his own thoughts and actions. His problem was that he was too willing to accept the reality that he could do nothing about what he called 'the perversions'.

Desires and good intentions aside, as one man he really couldn't mend the damage he felt mankind caused, or ease the ugliness of society. Who could? He felt that being a man himself automatically dubbed him a representative of the race that disgusted him and that . . . that he had to run from.

If their discussions of this day were any indication of how they would go for the rest of the month, she could very possibly return with one hell of a story. The truth. What if she brought back the truth? Gavin

Preston would shit himself and her success would be assured.

She laid her head down on her arms as the heat from the fire relaxed every muscle in her body, or was it that damn whiskey doing it? Regardless, her eyelids were so heavy she couldn't keep them open any longer.

* * * *

Shane came back from checking to see if there were any casualties from the raccoon feud. He returned to the living room to find that Marren was out cold; not the casualty he was expecting. He crouched down next to her and just watched her for a moment. He slid his arms under her back and her knees and picked her up. As he carried her to the bedroom she woke slightly and wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face in his hair. "Oh God, you smell good too," she mumbled in a sleepy voice, too exhausted to realize what she was saying.

He placed her down on the bed gently and took her boots off. He covered her with two thick blankets, checked the stove one last time, and then left the room closing the door over behind him.

Sitting back on the sofa, he grabbed her half finished beer off the floor and took a sip out of it. Feeling hot in front of the fire, he took his shirt off, and as it brushed his face he noticed something: the scent of her had taken up temporary residence in the flannel collar. He brought it up to his face and breathed it in

for a moment before placing it over the back of the couch. Sitting back, he lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply and then letting it escape in a long blue stream. He didn't notice, but he had pressed his tongue up to the roof of his mouth and the muscles in his jaw worked tensely. He didn't want to say what was fighting to get out of him but found it slip past his lips with the smoke anyway . . .

“How long's it gonna take for me to make you love me?”

Chapter 3

The aroma of embers in the wood burning stove and bacon from the kitchen woke her. The sun was beaming into the room right at the base of the bed and it took a moment to realize where she was. She was in Nowhere, Alaska, in Shane Helnsley's house . . . in Shane Helnsley's bed. Panic rose up inside of her. She had gotten herself quite drunk the night before and wasn't sure what she had said or done. She held her breath and peeked under the blankets to find that she was still fully clothed. She let her breath out with the force of relief behind it. The door was closed over and she sat up, rubbing at her face.

Her head hammered as though it was going to burst open and splatter its contents all over the room. She had one of the nastiest cases of gut rot she'd ever had the pleasure of. Crawling out of bed slowly, she made her way directly toward her bag, pulling out a bottle of aspirin she had packed. Finding her way to the washroom next door, she washed her face and took three aspirins, drinking them down directly from the tap. She remained in the washroom for a few

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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About the author

Renée Angers was born in Scarborough, Ontario, Canada, a small town outside Toronto. After relocating as many times as there are years in her life, she finds a comfortable permanent home in her writing. Her stories and characters, although fictional, are inspired from the many interesting and provocative personalities she has run into during her second career as a musician.

Since expanding her creativity into writing, Angers has worked for several information sources and magazines such as local entertainment periodicals, *Upfront*, *The Crow*, and *Front Magazine*, as well as being the founder and Editor in Chief of the controversial literary e-zine, *New Graffiti*.

Renée Angers is the author of several published books and is currently working on a screenplay/project with a local filmmaker.

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