

A Perfect Shot

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A Perfect Shot

Creating a new life for herself...

Renee, having spent a lifetime career as a war photographer, has earned her retirement and moved to one of America's beautiful wilderness areas.

Same old camera, same old lenses...

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A Perfect Shot

by Vanayssa Somers

Renee reached down, grasped the rope attaching the rowboat to the pier, and untied Blue Rose from its moorings.

Holding onto the rope as she walked toward the small craft, its back end barely touching the lake, she pushed it out a little, made sure the paddles were firmly in place. Clambering into Rose, as she called her little wooden friend, she settled her hind end onto the middle seat, placing the paddles in the oarlocks. She shoved one paddle hard against the gravel of the shoreline to get away onto the clear, smooth surface of water, and made sure her backpack was safely stowed under the stern seat.

Her expensive cameras and photo lens were wrapped in waterproof coverings, packed where they'd always been packed, in her camo packsack. When she'd been on assignment in the Middle East, she'd carried the tools of her profession in that same backpack, a discreet color that would blend in if enemies thought they spotted something worth shooting at.

"I really should get something brighter for travelling around here at home," she muttered aloud to herself. "If I got lost or something, it would be better to have bright red. Maybe pink. Or yellow. Something that can be spotted from the air, for example. Maybe I'll think about that. But I won't be getting lost anytime soon."

She soon settled into the pleasant, slightly demanding, job of stroke-and-relax, stroke-and-relax, moving further out to the middle of the lake.

She set the paddles down into the boat bottom and sighed, relaxing and looking around with the usual stream of pleasure the perfection of landscape brought her.

Surrounded by forest-clad mountains, the lake was pristine, reflecting the surrounding scenery in detail. High overhead, the noon sun, not so hot in autumn, lit the entire scene and lent a quality of peace and comfort to her soul.

Her soul. Suffering from a kind of post-battle syndrome, not PTSD, not that bad, but she'd taken a fair time to get her usual calm aplomb back after returning from what would be her last trip abroad as a war correspondent. She still found herself shaking as her mind wandered the backtracks of memory, the roar of bombs and rockets, the dead bodies, the screams, the falling buildings, the piles of rubble...

She shivered and put it from her mind. That was then. This was now.

"I coped with what I had to cope with and now it's over. I won't have to ever go back to those places, I'm retired from all that," she reminded herself, returning to the peace of the scenery around her.

She picked up the paddles and began to move across the lake to the opposite side. Today, she was hoping to come across a bear, perhaps even the wolf pack if she was lucky. From a safe distance of course. Before buying a cabin at the far end of the lake and setting it up to use seasonally for wildlife photography, she'd hired a guide to show her the ropes. Her territory might not be Taliban territory nowadays, but wilderness dangers were just as threatening for the unprepared.

One thing she'd learned early on in her previous life, her life as a war photographer: never go out unprepared.

She carried a couple of weapons, the basic things, a .22 rifle and a good knife. Not that she'd ever have to use them, she felt sure. Prevention was worth a pound of cure, that was her lifetime motto. And it had always paid off.

Binoculars raised to her eyes, she followed the shoreline from the south western end to the north. Something moved. She froze, leaning forward a bit. A bear? Didn't look quite right...

Something else moved, a little lighter in color, and then she had it. The wolf pack. She'd heard about this pack, composed of several family members of different shades. Whether they'd gotten mixed with dog or coyote, no one knew, but they were a mixture for sure.

She sat very still, far away on the glassy surface, binoculars pinned to her eyes and her body unmoving. Renee had perfected the art of stillness, even in discomfort, for long periods of time, over her many years of professional cameraman in one job or another.

Should she paddle to that shoreline and step off into those woods? The wolves had plenty to eat in these parts, the chance of them feeling interest in a grown adult human was very low. She decided to follow them just a bit, then climb into a suitable tree and wait for a while. There were no guarantees, but her gut told her she'd get a good shot today.

She glanced back at her packsack, tucked under the stern seat. If she could find the right tree, she could haul her stuff up mostly on her back, a couple things around her waist. It had to be the right tree, with enough foliage to hide her from whatever came along.

Having made her decision, she reached for her rifle and moved the packsack forward, searching for the outside pocket with the ammo. She was confident of her safety but it paid to be doubly sure. She loaded the .22 and put the safety on, lay it along the bottom of the boat beneath the seats. Got her knife, a good quality blade, out of the packsack and strapped the harness across her shoulder and chest, the knife in its protective sheath across her chest for quick use.

Renee had never had to use the knife, but one of the soldiers she'd gone to the battlefield with, inside the confines of a tank, had talked to her about getting one. She believed in listening to experts, and that twenty-six year old veteran of more than one deadly confrontation knew what he was talking about.

She hoped, if she ever needed it, she'd handle herself effectively. Perhaps someday she should take some lessons if she could find a place that offered them.

Anyway, she was as safe as common sense could make her, and she'd sort out her cameras when she got to shore.

She was well aware of what many had said to her over the years: you'll probably never see any trouble with a wild animal; if you ever need your weapons, it will be for trouble with a human.

But grizzlies were on the move these days. They were turning up in places they'd never been seen before. It would be terrific to get a shot of a grizzly. Especially in these parts where they weren't supposed to be.

The pleasant effort of paddling the still lake to the northwest end settled her mind, got her focused. She thought about her cameras and her long lens.

She'd once damaged an expensive lens heaving herself and her backpack up a sturdy tree in an English forest. She'd learned to take more care with organizing her gear after that.

Pulling Blue Rose up on the gravelly shingle, she tugged until it was safe from drifting, and then made sure she tied a good knot as she secured the rope to some willow trees lining the shore.

Her mind was fully on her tasks and on the hope that she'd get a great shot of something fabulous. It didn't have to be large, a good shot of a raccoon would do. But she wanted to start her time at the cabin with at least one good result from her first outing.

She stood straight, adjusting the pack on her back, shifting a bit to get the knife in the most convenient spot across her chest. Adjusted her yellow baseball cap on gray-gold curls. Stood, strong and sure in her well-worn hiking boots, boots she'd chosen not only for hiking slippery rocks and wet leafy trails, but also for a good grip on a tree trunk. Some she'd seen working would take their boots off and tie them round their neck to ascend to the forest canopy. But she'd picked boots suitable for the task so she could just leave them on. Easier and handier if she suddenly had to move fast for some reason.

In the safety of a large deciduous tree with plenty of greenery and branches to disguise her presence, she always felt comfortable except for one animal – the cougar. If a big cat realized she was up there, she'd have to try to either scare it away with a rifle shot over its head, or, even worse, destroy the animal. There were a lot of cougars around. And you never saw them unless they came right into town. But walking a trail, many people had been silently stalked by a curious, hopeful big cat looking for a meal, perhaps a medium sized dog. People never knew or dreamed such danger walked beside them, hidden only by a screen of bushes.

But putting these thoughts aside, Renee set out happily along one of the deer trails she spied, knowing the wolf pack had most likely chosen that very trail to follow as it hunted these familiar woods, the long-time home of the pack.

She walked along, not making an effort to be really quiet, for she wanted any bears feeding on berries nearby to know she was there, and go into hiding. She thought about a dog. She needed a companion for sure, and though she would not be living in the cabin through the long hard winters, she still wanted a furry friend to care for and love through the seasonal changes and challenges of lakeside living.

Her mind briefly turned to her condo in Seattle and the caretaker of the building who'd promised to send on her mail to the small local post office in the town twenty-five miles away. Old Duncan would take care of things, she knew that. She thought of her red geraniums in white tubs on the balcony. He'd water them, she knew, and felt no pull on her heartstrings for her pleasant town life. Right now, the busyness of getting settled in her cabin was exciting and filled her soul. Whether or not she'd ever stay on the lake for a whole winter she had no idea right now. Maybe once she knew a few people, had a social base built.

Her mental meanderings brought her to a curve in the trail and she paused, eyeing the woods around her. This might be a good spot to settle in and get her cameras set up.

A deep male voice spoke, startling in the forest stillness. "Hi there. Looking for wildlife?"

She whirled, stunned that another human could possibly be there beside her, unnoticed.

"Uh...where are you?" she asked nervously, glad her voice was quiet and calm as it came out of her throat. She craned her neck, looking around.

A figure stepped out of a screen of trees, seemingly out of nowhere. She stared at the tall, well-built man who materialized in front of her.

His gaze was cool and steady, intense blue eyes in a face framed by coal-black hair. A fuzz of beard shadow gave the face a dangerous sense. He stood a few inches taller than she, and he cocked his head, looking down at her, his thumbs hitched in his jeans pockets. The worn, cracked leather of his quality jacket spoke of years spent in just such surroundings.

Outdoors. This was an outdoors guy, whoever he was.

She noted the hard line of his mouth, a slash across the lower part of his face. Not a friendly sort.

A heavy sigh escaped her chest. "Well, I wasn't expecting to see anyone out here, to be honest. I was a bit startled to hear your voice coming out of nowhere. Yes, I'm looking for wildlife. Are you just out hiking?"

Renee felt a little frisson of, not quite fear, but anxiety. She was very alone out here with this stranger, who looked extremely unsympathetic.

“Sort of. I have a blind here.” He gestured with his arm toward the leafy expanse behind him. “I write books about wildlife, about being outdoors, basically. Ash Hagedorn. I spend a lot of time sitting still in the middle of a bunch of trees. And you?”

“Renee McDonald. I was hoping to see the wolf pack. Thought I saw them coming up, maybe, this trail, earlier, when I was out on the lake. I hear they may be mixed with dog or coyote. The only wolves I’ve seen before were the Grays.”

He eyed her rifle, slung over her shoulder, and his eyes dropped to her chest, but not for the usual reason. The harness with her knife fixed on it for handiness in a moment of dire need stretched across her body. The handle was exposed at an angle which gave her the best chance of a quick draw if needed.

“I see you are well equipped for the woods.” His voice was cold. “Well, if you will excuse me, I’ll return to my perch. I won’t wish you luck with hunting. There are probably a number of hunters around, as the season just opened. Be careful that yellow cap of yours doesn’t get mistaken for a rack of horns. Take care.”

And just like that, he turned rudely on his heel and disappeared into the shrubbery as quickly as he’d appeared.

She stood, staring in surprise at his sudden departure.

Well. Of all the nerve. Hunting! He thought she was hunting...heading into the woods to kill something.

Maybe she should carry a camera around her neck so no one else thought the same thing. But then, that was just too much stuff, especially if she was hanging on to a sturdy branch, swinging herself and her pack up into a tree.

Disgusted and now, with her good mood evaporated, she strode off huffily along the trail, turning the corner and moving away from the rude and, yes, ignorant guy sitting in his blind. She knew what it took to sit still for hours. She’d learned it on the job thousands of miles from this place. When it could cost her her very life if she moved a muscle. Or sneezed.

As she walked, she couldn’t help but compare, and think about the ways his pastime matched her own experiences. She, too, had sat in blinds, but the creatures she was hiding from were all too human. And she’d huddled inside many a tank with a gang of youthful soldiers, their easygoing manner covering a level of alertness unmatched by most people anywhere. She’d squeezed herself into a corner of the metal monster lumbering along desert roads, knowing as the soldiers did, that every moment might be their last. Roadside bombs were everywhere.

But you couldn’t let that stop you. You had your job to do. They all did, and she did, too. They shared the same dangers, but used different tools. Their weapons, her cameras. But they’d taught her about weapons, too, and she’d been a careful and serious student.

Few women here at home knew what she knew. But the nerve of the guy, assuming instantly she was out to kill his precious wildlife, just because she was...and there her thoughts stopped, because she had to admit that she looked like a hunter, armed for anything that might come along.

Then the humour of the situation hit her, and she began to grin, chuckling to herself. If she ran into him on the way back, she’d be sure to have a camera at the ready. They could shoot a photo of each other. The image made her laugh out loud.

“He’s, like, too serious for his own good,” she decided, aloud.

She stopped and looked around. Bending a little, she peered down at the low shrubs, wondering if she could see any signs of the pack moving this way.

Her eye caught on something so compelling, she froze where she stood. A rotting log, covered in moss, lay a short distance off in the undergrowth. Shafts of golden sunlight streamed down through tall, ancient tree branches. A soft wind moved the trees, causing shadows to flutter across the log as it lay there, the autumn sun lighting up its knots and old bark.

And sitting on a large knot in the old log was a robin, its red breast shining where the sun touched it. It bent its head, finding a bug buried in wet cracks in the wood, lifting its head to enjoy a small feast. It hopped on a bit, intent on finding more goodies hiding in the dark crevices of the broken bark.

She carefully dropped one strap of her backpack, then the other, hardly moving as she got it off and silently let it drop to the earth behind her. With agonizing slowness, she squatted, so her head was below the robin's line of vision, got a camera out of the pack and expertly attached the lens she wanted, then lifted the camera to her eye. She carefully rose slightly from her squatting position, grateful for the strength in her willowy muscles. Her thighs trembling with tension, she was afraid to fully stand in case the bird noticed her. She held herself in that painful position so she could line the lens up with the bird.

She took pictures for a good ten minutes, not only of the bird, but of the log itself in all its beauty, the broken trunk, half rotten, the darkness of the hole it offered to small animals looking for a hiding place, wild lilies growing carelessly here and there along its length. She studied its width, realized it had been a forest giant once, some years ago probably. A hard wind, perhaps in winter, had brought it to earth at last, and its functions changed from those of a lofty fir to that of a nurse log, nurturing a multitude of new lives, botanic and insect, avian and mammalian.

The incredible usefulness of the dead log struck her, not for the first time, as one of nature's most amazing creations.

Finally, the red-breasted bird fluttered off to a high branch in a cedar nearby, no doubt planning to sit quietly and digest its well-earned meal, perhaps have a snooze even.

She smiled, feeling good about her first shots in her new home.

She looked at her watch. Maybe just another half hour, then head for home. It was a fair stretch of lake to paddle across, and she had to unpack some groceries and figure out what to put aside for her supper. Her first supper in the cabin.

Smiling, feeling supremely content, she packed the camera away again and started out, still wondering if she might get lucky and spot the pack.

They would have been heading this way for a reason. Perhaps there was a river or creek up this way.

Walking on for a few more minutes, Renee found she could indeed hear the burbling sound of a creek and stepped out into a clearing, at the edge of which was a sparkling body of water, rushing along and disappearing into the forest. Yes, the pack had probably come this way to drink its fill before continuing on to do whatever.

She stood looking at the water bubbling around and over boulders along its course. Over the centuries, it had cut out a wide swath for itself within the hidden depths of this lovely, unspoiled grove.

It reminded her of places she'd hidden in English woods, snapping wonderful photos till her stomach rumbled and drove her to the nearest inn, where a hot lunch or supper and a warm bed awaited. Creeks just like this one, deep in forests of tall, old trees, the sweet quietness of British countryside.

She lifted her head, coming out of her reverie. Shook her head, took off her cap and rubbed her hand over curls that had never learned to succumb to her styling efforts.

She went still. A branch broke, somewhere nearby, in the woods. Something with more weight than a robin was moving around near her, here in the middle of nowhere.

But she was prepared, she reminded herself. Turned and stood tall, eyes narrowed, ready for anything. Her hand hovered near the handle of her knife. She silently popped off the snaps holding the knife in place, kept her fingers touching the handle. For the first time, she wished she'd brought her handgun. A rifle was cumbersome, a handgun quick, to take out and line up.

She made a mental note about that for future reference.

Then she heard quiet voices, some whispering, and realized it was probably a couple of hunters. Perhaps just as the writer guy had warned her, thinking she was a buck with a rack fit to be hung over a mantel somewhere in some far off city.

Immediately, she called out, "Hi there. Anyone there?"

The whispering voices silenced. For a moment, all was still, then a male voice called out, "Hi. We thought you were a deer. Good thing you said something." Then there was a racket of embarrassed laughter. Two guys stepped out of the woods, their rifles at the ready. They both grinned at her abashedly.

“Sorry about that. We’ve been looking for something to shoot at for so long we were ready to imagine you were it. You don’t really look the least bit like a deer.”

She glared at them and shook her head. Sighed. “I was thinking maybe it’s time to call it a day anyhow. I was hoping to get some photos of the wolf pack but I think they’ve gone off somewhere. I saw them moving up this trail when I was out on the lake. But since I almost got myself shot here, I’ll just head home. You guys have to be careful what you shoot at. “

“Well, you know, lady, it’s hunting season and really, if you want to walk around in the woods, you need to be wearing red. Red jacket, red cap, and so on. So you’re easy to identify. But yeah, you’re right, we’ll be more careful now. Sorry. So, you’re a photographer?”

“Yes, actually, I’ve just started here, but I’ve shot pictures in other countries. I’ve just retired. Been in the Middle East with our forces there, getting pictures of the war with the Taliban and the war zone in Syria and so on. It’s much nicer being here. But, nevertheless, I can still get shot, even here at home. You do need to be careful, but yes, maybe you’re right. I should get some bright red stuff to wear when I’m out here during hunting season.

“Well, I best head for home. It’s a long paddle back across. I hope you get lucky,” she finished, telling a blatant lie. She hoped they’d get nothing, but she couldn’t say that. As she moved off back up the path, she waved at them good-naturedly.

They waved back and then disappeared into the woods, talking to each other and, no doubt, scaring every kind of wildlife there was for a mile around.

So it was with quite a shock she jerked to a halt on the path as the branches parted and another figure, but a familiar one, stepped out. This time, Ash Hagedorn wore a big smile.

“I’m sorry I took it for granted you were hunting. I thought you were out looking for a trophy or something. I heard you tell them you’re a photographer. Why didn’t you say something?”

She found her voice, feeling a bit tired of being surprised one time too many in one day.

“Well, I could see by your face that you weren’t feeling friendly, and I had no idea who you were, so I just decided to mind my own business and get on with my hike. Did you get any good shots?”

“Not yet, too much noise,” he replied, grinning. His eyes looked twinkly and friendly now, and the hard slash of his mouth was changed to a really quite attractive grin. “There are just too many people around today. I’ve given it up till another day. So, you said your name is Renee. Are you French?”

“No,” she said in irritation. Her day was not going at all according to plan. And she knew she could say goodbye to any hopes of seeing the wolf pack, with all this nonsense going on. “Did you hear me talking to those hunters?”

He rolled his eyes, lifted a hand to brush some stray dark strands off his forehead. “Yes. I decided to follow you for a bit, see what you were up to. Somehow you just didn’t *feel* like a hunter. There are a surprising number of women hunting now, but they tend to give off these vibes. You can tell. But you’re different. I wondered if you were looking for photos. But you’re wearing all this armor. “

He grinned again, nodding his head toward her rifle and his eyes dropping to the knife in its harness.

She pressed her lips together. “I’m getting tired. My day hasn’t gone as planned at all. I’m not going to get a decent shot of anything now. Those two guys would have scared the whole wolf pack off, not to mention any grizzlies or black bear. I did get a lovely video of a robin on an old nurse log, though.”

Suddenly her mood brightened, like one of the streams of sunlight had found its way into her mind. “Yeah, it was nice. A little robin having a bug fest on that old log. Really some pretty shots. I do feel like I got something good. It doesn’t have to be big to be good.”

He went quiet, gazing at her thoughtfully. “Can I see what you shot there? I’d love to see your work.”

Raising her eyebrows, she nevertheless pulled her backpack off and lifted the camera out, found the video and got it going, handed it to him.

He stood there for a few minutes, appreciating the quality of her efforts, and the way she had captured the endless functions of a mossy old nurse log, something a lot of people would just climb over and never even look at twice.

“You know what you’re doing,” he said appreciatively, handing the camera back. “You’ve done a fair amount of this stuff, I’d guess.”

“Well, not so much here, I’ve only just come home from...” once more she launched into a brief explanation of her recent past.

“So. The Middle East. You must have seen a lot of action. A lot of terrible things.”

“Yes. You could certainly say that.” Suddenly her eyes went distant, looking at the past, at piles of rubble, dogs working, people pulling people out of heaps of broken homes. All the signs of ordinary family life lying around on the ground, broken, smashed, in pieces. Small bodies covered with a piece of cloth, wailing family members. The smell, the emotions, the control needed to just keep filming, no matter what.

She sighed deeply, suddenly very weary. “It’s time I was home,” she said, and shrugged the backpack into place on her shoulders.

“How about you use my blind sometimes? I’m not always here. Like tomorrow I have to be in town, if you want, you are welcome to sit there and watch, instead of hiking around. Whatever you want, though.”

She felt surprise, and took a second good look at him. “Well, that’s nice. It’s right there where I met you, in the woods along there a bit?”

“Yes. You’ll find it no trouble. And it’s at the base of a good size tree if you want to get up higher, there’s one of those seats that hunters use up there, very safe, you can sit up there if you prefer. I won’t be using it till day after tomorrow.”

“Just out of interest, who do you sell your work to? Your name sounds familiar, that’s all...”

“Several magazines. I also do coffee table books. I love the work. How can you lose? It’s so beautiful here, any place where there are old, original forests, wilderness, streams and rivers. Would you be into a coffee sometime?”

She hesitated and for some reason, felt her face growing warm. She hadn’t thought about men for a long time, ever since she and Brian had broken up after his return home from a stint in Africa. He’d met a woman out there and she was expecting. He’d bought her a ring, told his family, and was heading straight back, a wedding in the offing. An image of his happy face as he’d given her the news; it’s over, sorry Renee, you’ll find someone. Someday. And he’d disappeared from her life as quickly as that.

Going to a war zone was a quick and effective cure for a broken heart, and she’d gotten over him fast.

The memories had flashed across her mind but now vanished.

Coffee. No harm in a cup of coffee.

She smiled, looking up at him and warming to him suddenly. He was handsome as hell. And those blue eyes. She suddenly found herself noticing those lips, lips which had seemed so harsh and cold earlier, now curved nicely in a gentle smile.

“Sure. Coffee would be nice. I don’t know many people yet. Just got one of the lake cabins there on the far side. Getting settled. Where would you like to meet?”

A half hour later as she untied Rose from the willow trees and pushed hard to get her afloat, she stepped into the lakeshore, glad of her waterproof boots, and climbed gracefully into the little rowboat, picking up her paddles and pushing off. She looked over her shoulder, got her bearings and began to move smoothly across the glossy surface.

As she got to the middle of the lake, she took her binoculars and looked around at the shorelines, wishing for a final sight of the wolf pack before she gave up for the day.

She went still. The pack moved gracefully, padding to the water, stringing out along the shore, drinking and looking around. Some of the animals sat, scratched, stretched out, yawned, lay down in a sunny spot on a rock.

Carefully and slowly, she got the camera out and ready and used the big zoom lens. The wolves were quite a way off, but she could get some good shots anyway. She smiled. Sitting on this pristine lake, the late afternoon sun casting gentle rays across the water, outline of trees on far off mountains shining against the sky. Stillness.

Then her fingers froze on the camera. On a cliff above the pack, a human rose slowly from behind shrubbery. A tall, dark haired figure with a cracked leather jacket, and a camera to his eye.

She watched through her lens as he filmed the wolves for a few minutes, then slid down behind the shrubbery again, then appeared minutes later a bit further down the cliffside.

He knelt on a large boulder overlooking the lake and began to film. She continued to watch, getting some shots of her own of the lone figure with his camera. It made a dramatic scene and she could appreciate the effect it would have on the public, living in a concrete jungle far from this idyllic place.

Then she lowered her camera and grinned. Lifted her arm cautiously and gave a gentle wave. His camera was pointed at her and he was filming for the same reason she'd been...it made a terrific picture. She could imagine it, the little rowboat with the name "Blue Rose" painted along her side, and a lone woman sitting in the middle of the picturesque lake, not a ripple on the surface. Sunlight, the forests, the mountains around. Slowly, she lifted her bright yellow baseball cap and slipped it on her head.

Might as well give him another shot. Nothing like a yellow hat to brighten up a picture.

Grinning, she saluted at the brim of the cap and gave him another little wave.

Then picked up her paddles and, still smiling, moved toward home.

Home, in her little cabin by a wilderness lake. Far from the terror of the Middle East, of rockets and bombs exploding around children and helpless families. Far from the unbearable grief of life in the midst of war.

She'd done her work in life, left a good footprint with catalogues of photographs, pictures that would be her legacy of a lifetime well spent.

She sang softly as she worked the oars, loving the sense of smooth movement, looking over her shoulder at the wharf below her cabin, now coming up fast. Yup, she was a mountain woman all right. Sang on as she tied Rose up at the wharf, tugging the rope snug, heaving herself and her equipment up on the dock, adjusting her rifle for the walk uphill to the quiet cabin. She thought about the stack of firewood she'd ordered and stacked, ready for a warm fire that evening.

Smiling, she unlocked the door, stepped inside, glad to be home.

Home. Yes, this was home. She unloaded the .22 and hung it on the wall, placing the ammo nearby.

You never knew. Best to be prepared, always.

She smiled at herself in the mirror. Ran her hand over her curls again, thinking about the dark-headed stranger.

Ash. A good name for a man. Then, *Come on, it's only coffee. He's probably married.*

But he hadn't given off those vibes. She didn't think he was married. She thought about that mouth again. Smiled some more.

Preparation, yes. She needed some of that. The kind a hairdresser could provide.

Good thing I brought all my makeup. And perfume.

The scent of the wilderness, the autumn woods, was fantastic. The overlaying aroma of fresh berries, hanging in the air everywhere at this time of year. The smell of trees—fir, cedar, green leaves.

But a little Guerlain wouldn't go amiss over a cup of really good coffee.

Civilization was good, too. Yes, Renee could do civilization. She shivered with contentment, looked out her window at the shining water, thought about the robin and the log.

Happy, she thought. I'm happy.

THE END

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<http://www.paranormalfantasyromance.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vanayssa Somers was born in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, on a dark and stormy winter night. She has been writing romance for a number of years and is known for stories of passion and personal growth as her heroines battle through life's challenges and come out winners in life's romance stakes.

Her books mix heat, action, humor, and mystery, and are recommended for those who like fast-moving stories of women and men who face great obstacles and overcome.

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