

# **Ecochondriacs**

A NO QUARTER NOVEMBER NOVEL

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canonpress   
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## CHAPTER 1

# Unexpected Guests

### COUNTDOWN

**D**r. Helen Greene let herself into her brown Annapolis townhouse apartment, kicked off her shoes by the front door, set the small bag of groceries down on the kitchen counter, and then went back to lock and bolt the front door. She lived in a nice neighborhood, but it was only three blocks away from one that wasn't so nice, and she had always been a careful sort.

She circled back into her living room, enjoying how the carpet felt on her sore feet. It had been the day of days, and was actually about to get a good deal day-er than that. This, in fact, was going to be the day-iest of all her born days. If you threw in the next morning, it was going to be epic.

As she walked by her home office laptop—which was lined up perfectly straight with the lip of the desk and perfectly

perpendicular with the two mechanical pencils on the right side of the computer (there was nothing else on her most *immaculate* desk)—her eye caught a notification from Steven Lee, her one-time advisor and mentor from grad school. Dr. Lee was now the current head of her research group, and up to this year she had thought that his “gruff” manners were the mark of great genius. But over the last several months, she had started to wonder if they were really an indicator of a soaring ego, as opposed to a soaring intellect. That thought had occurred to her a time or three.

Helen had been appointed to the research group last year—and it really was quite the honor for someone her age. The group was an international task force on climate change, and was the most prestigious of the lot—the lot consisting of all the other task forces, each one scrambling for money and throwing the occasional elbow. Fueled by massive amounts of money from multiple governments and international organizations, climate change research was a growth industry, a boom town, a cash cow that emitted no methane, only cash. So the fact that Lee’s group was the most prestigious of the bunch was really saying something.

Usually no one was *ever* invited to join this group unless they were at least five years out of grad school and had made some kind of independent glory for themselves when it came to publication in the kinds of journals that exuded significantly higher levels of that special numinous and scientific glow. Although the source of that radiant gravitas was mysterious, you knew it when you saw it on a resume. And Helen had only been working at establishing her resume for three years, with the same number of significant

publications, three thus far, and so the invitation had come to her as a genuine shock. Such an invitation had been her goal all along, and was precisely what she had been driving for, but she had assumed she was going to be in the salt mines of schlub research for at least two more years. But since that exuberant day, since her appointment, as she was a careful sort, she had been doing her level best to pull her own weight. Her labors had been, she *thought*, paying off. It was not the kind of place where anybody ever said “good job,” but it was the kind of place where displeasure was cogently expressed without any stinting, and she had not been on the receiving end of any of *that*. So she thought she could say that she was doing well in her job.

She was quite an attractive woman, but she had some years before decided that she wasn't really all that attractive, and that if she were to make something of herself she needed to really give herself to her studies. She prided herself on her scholarship, and kept all her girl stuff in a back room somewhere. That decision, ironically, had been the result of some mean things another girl on her junior high cheerleading squad had said to her, and Helen had really no idea that the girl had said them because of how pretty Helen was.

At any rate, Helen sat down, clicked the email thread open, and according to her usual custom, scrolled down to the bottom of the initial email so that she could get the context. The subject line read “What's one more lie . . .?” which she thought a curious tag, but as the next few minutes passed, her curiosity gradually turned to horror and dismay as she scrolled up through the exchanges. They were between Steven Lee, her boss, and Martin

Chao, and Leonid Ravinsky, the triumvirate of Climate Change. World-respected authorities on the subject, and here they were all chortling at what a scam it all was. They didn't believe a lick of it.

Helen just sat there, gobsmacked on more than one level. The first had to do with her own worldview. They didn't believe *any* of it. She had believed *all* of it, heart and soul. No missionary had ever gone to deepest Africa with more devotion in her heart for the lost than Helen had gone off to grad school. Now she suddenly felt like an archbishop would have felt had he been goaded into opening up his cathedral's most precious reliquary to a team of scientists so that they could carbon date the finger bone of St. Andrew, only to have them come back to him with the hot news that the finger bone was only 700 years old, a time nowhere close to the time of St. Andrew, and that it was, moreover, the finger bone of a chimpanzee. It was the chimpanzee part that hurt.

The comparison may be inexact, but she felt *something* like that.

The second level had to do with her sense of personal betrayal and astonishment. These were men she had respected on a personal level, and here they were joking about all the money they were raking in, and making fun of all the rubes who gave it to them, and what a laugher the whole thing was. There was even a joke about how easy the women at the big climate change conferences were. Thank heaven *that* wasn't mixed up in her story with *any* of them. But she then thought, rather suddenly, that she *still* must be numbered among those gullible women in their eyes, and she could feel her cheeks getting hot.

But the third level of difficulty dawned on her a little more slowly. This last one was a stinker. She got to the last email at the top, in reply to the rest of the thread, the one that Steven Lee had sent directly to her. It said, without any fanfare, "Please delete the previous thread without reading it. It was sent to you by mistake, and does contain some confidential and proprietary information."

Without hesitating, and without thinking about it too carefully, she quickly typed, "No worries. Will not read," and clicked *send*.

Then she jumped up immediately and walked around her apartment three times. How should she conduct herself at the offices the next day? How was she going to *act*? What was she to do? She was needed there by 10 am, and she had a report to present right after lunch, at 1 pm. That part was all right because she was the sort of person who always completed reports a week before they were due. But how was she going to *act*?

Everything about her situation was a complete and total novelty to her. She had lost her surface-level evangelical faith in high school, and even the memory of it was greatly dimmed by her undergraduate days. By the time she had hit grad school, her atheism was in full flower, and so naturally she fit right in. But since the first appearance of that atheism, because she was the kind of woman who never did what's not done, she had never faced any kind of ethical dilemma. She had simply memorized the rules of her new chosen discipline, and followed them loyally. If there was a climate change line anywhere, she colored inside it.

And here she was now, with a full-blown ethical dilemma. This was an ethical dilemma with a fire in the attic. This was an



ethical dilemma with the brakes gone clean out at the very top of the switchback grade. There was no God, and so no help there. The rules of her discipline—well, the ethics code for climatologists—as she knew full well, had been drafted by Dr. Steven Lee, and helpfully edited by his friends Martin and Leonid.

Should she confront them? Should she just lie and keep her head down? Should she laugh about it openly, in a worldly-wise way, and assure them that their secret was safe with her? Join with them in the shake-down? She felt like her skull was a bone box full of water and that somebody had dumped about twenty-five Alka-Seltzer tablets into it.

She put her groceries away, more than a little bit agitated. She noticed this when it dawned on her that she had put the milk into the fridge at least three times, and must therefore have taken it out at least two times. She shook her head violently, and forced herself back to the task. When she eventually got *that* job completed, and it ought to have been a simple task, she thought about dinner momentarily, and turned away from that idea with a shudder. No appetite at *all*.

Helen then decided to get up early in order to sit down at her desk with a clear head, and work it all out. She *had* to work it all out. Tomorrow was Monday morning. She had to go to work in the morning, so she would work it all out. She set her alarm for 6 am, took a hot shower and went to bed. Despite an hour or two of tossing and tossing and tossing—Helen did not toss and turn, but always went clockwise—she eventually fell into a fitful and uneasy sleep.

## CHAPTER 2

# Making Messes

### LAUNCH

**D**espite her agitation, she did manage to fall asleep, albeit fitfully. And *that* lasted until about 5 am, when she sat bolt upright in bed, gasping for air. She was a woman who had an odd quirk in her thinking processes, shared only by a handful of others. During that strange gray time between waking and sleeping, she had the kind of mind that would solve problems for her, or remember things, or come up with great ideas. This characteristic had actually been her friend on many occasions. In fact, it was being her friend *now*, only it didn't feel like it. This time it just scared her sideways and silly.

Just last week, Steven Lee had been talking to somebody a bit too loudly in the alcove where the vending machines were, and she couldn't remember who he had been talking to. But she

had been just around the corner at her desk, and he was talking about some software he had just installed that could tell you if a person had read the email you had sent them. Not only so, but you could tell if they had forwarded to anybody. They couldn't yet tell *who* you had forwarded it to, but they could tell you how many. She wasn't sure if it could tell if you transferred it to a thumb drive or anything like that. She wasn't even sure if something like that was possible. The one thing she was sure of was that she needed to scramble out of bed, which was exactly what she did.

She threw on some clothes and went over to stare at her computer. She needed to decide what to do. As in, right now. Should she act like nothing had happened and just brazen it out? But what if her mouth filled up with cotton balls, and she started to talk to her boss like the guiltiest person on the planet? What about that? Should she copy the email thread onto a thumb drive? What would she do with it then? She didn't want it. Who would she give it to? And could he tell with his software if she were to do that?

She just stood there wavering, like an aspen in a stiff breeze. Suddenly she sat down, not quite sure why, pulled a thumb drive out of drawer, and copied the whole thread over, and then threw the drive in her purse. "*That's* not a plan," she muttered to herself. It was the most courageous thing she had ever done in her life, but she was not aware of that in the moment. She was simply in a state.

And it is likely that she would be there still, rocking back and forth in her chair, had events not started taking on a life of their

own. It was about 5:30 in the morning by this point, and she suddenly froze, startled by a scraping noise on her back patio, like a lawn chair being kicked, which is exactly what it was. She stood up and grabbed her purse with the goods in it, darted back to her bedroom, and pulled a Glock out of the drawer by the head of her bed.

Her politics were of course left of center, and so she had often felt guilty about having a firearm, not to mention a tad inconsistent, but whenever that feeling came over her she just thought how bad the neighborhood was just three blocks over. She could live with the inconsistency, and there had been times when she thought she might not be alive without it.

She jumped back to the door of the bedroom, gun raised, just like she had seen in movies, and held her breath. In the dim morning light, she started to stare intently at the gun to make sure the safety was off. Then she remembered that Glocks don't have safeties, like the kind man at the store had explained a couple of times. After that, she didn't have to wait very long. The glass in her sliding glass door shattered, from top to bottom, and a man with a green ski mask stepped through it. Another man, in another ski mask, this one a dull red, stepped in right behind him. The second man was about six inches shorter.

"Well, miss," the first one said, "we've just come for those emails. There's a good girl."

And then the second one spoke, and a spark of hope flickered to life down in Helen's chest. These men didn't sound too bright. "Yeah, miss," the second one said. "We don't bite. We won't *hurt* you." And he said this in a fashion that convinced her with

## CHAPTER 3

# Gassing Up

### LARRY LOCKE

**L**arry Locke did not look at all like a successful author. In his late twenties now, he had made most of his living as a logger in Montana. He had started at that when he was sixteen, and worked around his school schedule, and had done the same through college. He had managed to work full time, and graduate on time. And his looks belied him. He was 6 foot 10, and about 300 pounds of hardened muscle. That wasn't the part that belied him because he *looked* like a logger from Montana. He was also a wolf and bear hunter, and he looked like those two things also.

It was the *successful author* part that threw people. Four years before, he had walked into the DC offices of Aegis Imprint, and plopped a manuscript down on the desk of the receptionist. He had asked her, very politely, how these things were usually

handled, and who he should show his manuscript to. The receptionist, normally very adept at handling walk-ins who knew they were supposed to be big time successful authors, was freaked out by Larry's size, not to mention his apparent outlook on life. She squeaked something like "excuse me," and darted into the office behind her, that office belonging to Ken Corcharan.

He was the founder, owner, and publisher of Aegis Imprint, a wildly successful publisher of inflammatory conservative books and magazines. He was a hard case, with a straight-line edge, but not a sociopath. That said, if he ever got bitten by a diamondback, the snake would be the one that died. At the same time, he was a shrewd judge of horseflesh, so to speak, which is how he got to the place where he was. When we refer to him as a hard case, we are talking about his demeanor toward competitors, not toward his authors. He was astonishingly generous to his authors.

In fact, he was asked about that once in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, and he said that the normal practices of the publishing industry seemed to him to border on the insane. "Publishers cozy up to their social peers among the competition, and schmooze around like there is no tomorrow, and then turn around and treat their authors like *they* were the competition. But if I were the owner of racehorses, I wouldn't be chumming around with owners of other horses, who wanted me and my horse dead, but until that glad day arrived would willingly invite me to their parties on Martha's Vineyard. And then to compensate for such lunacy, would I feed all my horses on cheap oats?"

This parable was a dark saying for most readers of *Publishers Weekly*, except for the authors. The authors liked it.

But meanwhile, back at Aegis Imprint, the receptionist, whose name was Mindi, was pleading with Ken to come out and handle this one. *Please*.

And so it was that Ken came out, shook Larry's hand, and said *pleased-to-meetcher*, and told Larry that he did have fifteen minutes to spare, and to come right in. Larry picked the manuscript up from the receptionist's desk and brought it in with him, and plonked it right in front of where Ken usually sat. He didn't even have to bend over to reach across the desk.

Ken had looked at the title page, which read, simply, *Eco-chondriacs*. He flipped over a few pages until he got to the introduction and read the first three paragraphs, at the end of which he fully came to grips with the discordant note that was being struck somewhere in his brain.

The man sitting in front of him was a total unit, like two or three Navy SEALs packed into one. Moreover, he *looked* like a logger, the kind that could walk out of the woods with a tree under each arm. And yet . . .

"You write this yourself?" Ken asked.

Larry had nodded. "Yes. Yes, I did."

The prose read like it had been written by the archangel Gabriel—when the muse was on him, when he was writing hot, and was going real good. Ken sat back in his chair, and stared at Larry for a moment. Then he stared for two moments.