

# RIVERS AND CREAKS by Marc Jedel

## EXCERPT

I daydreamed of becoming a recluse, living a solitary life without bothersome people.

Calling myself a recluse was better than hermit, which implied living off the land, unwashed, in a cave, with a beard down to my knees. Beards made my face itch. Also, the term hermit came with connotations of being a sociopath, and I didn't fit into that particular category. At least I didn't think so.

My careful use of this terminology came thanks to the therapist I had visited after Catherine's death. In response to her question of how I envisioned my life going forward, I'd replied, "Hermit." Instead of laughing, she had defined both terms, providing me with the only useful tidbit I ever got from her. It was easy for her to tell me I needed to process Catherine's tragic death and find a more productive way to move on with my life. What if I didn't want to?

Providing a last minute reprieve from sharing some bad news with the guests, a white pickup pulled into the driveway. Finally, something was going right today—the new plumber had arrived.

As fast as my aching knee allowed, I hurried from the garage up the driveway to where the truck had parked. Reminding myself to be friendly, I made the effort to plaster a smile on my lips as I approached the truck from behind.

Stepping out of the truck, Charlie's heavy work boots became visible first. From the back, I could see dark blue uniform pants and a matching long-sleeve uniform shirt cinched with a black belt. The dark blue ballcap had braids of long blonde hair pulled through the hole in back.

"You're a girl," I exclaimed as the visual reality connected with known human features.

"Woman," snapped Charlie, turning to me with her blue eyes flashing in annoyance. "You Andy?"

I nodded and stupidly sputtered, "But your name is Charlie."

"So?" Her expression twisted into a frown. Despite the unflattering outfit, she looked reasonably attractive—if that were the sort of thing I cared to notice these days, especially in a girl—*woman*—who didn't seem to have hit thirty yet.

"But . . ." Then I closed my mouth, realizing I didn't care as long as she could do the job and not cost me an arm and a leg.

She glared at me before adding, “Surely with your last name, you can’t have a serious complaint about someone else’s name?”

“Like I’ve never heard that before,” I grumbled along with a roll of my eyes. As a kid, I saw the movie *Airplane!* in the theaters, along with practically everyone else at my school. With a last name of Shirley, I immediately became the target of juvenile humor for the rest of my school years. And beyond.

I took a breath, realizing if this escalated, I’d never get my shower repaired. “Look, I’m sorry. I was just surprised. I don’t care who you are as long as you can fix my shower.”