

WE GOT A PROBLEM

“Jeanie. We got a problem!” my painting contractor, Nelson, yelled up to me from the living room.

As usual, I thought. I ignored him. I grabbed my yoga mat from my bedroom closet and stepped into the upstairs hall.

“Jeanie, c’mere, you gotta look at this,” Nelson shouted to me from the foot of the stairs. He always shouted. He beckoned insistently. “There’s a huge frickin bulge in the drywall here. I saw it, I was like, what the frick, Jerry’s guys did this? What were they thinkin, they got their heads up their ass. They musta got stoned before they came onto this job. Come here and look at it.”

“I don’t want to look at it.”

“No, come here! You gotta look.”

“Just fix it! I’ll look at it when it’s done.” I descended the stairs and grabbed my car keys from the kitchen counter. Nelson followed on my heels.

“Oh. My. God. You’re talkin just like a woman,” he said. He continued in a falsetto, wagging his fingers in the air: “Oh Nelson, this is all messed up, can you fix it for me?” He put his hands on his hips, feet apart, and shook his head at me. He was a muscled six-feet-three, his dark hair mussed like a boy’s and speckled with sawdust.

I looked back at him impassively. He returned to his normal, loud voice: “What do you think, I can just snap my fingers and fix shit? What am I, Superman?”

“Yes. You are Superman.” Now I was sweet-talking him. “That’s why you’re here. You are the best, Nelson. Your work is amazing. You will fix this, and I will be like ‘Oh my God, who did this—this guy is the *master!*’”

He curled his upper lip at me and narrowed his gray eyes. “You’re this close,” he said, holding his thumb and forefinger an inch apart. “Don’t you have a gym to go to? Why don’t you go buy some groceries? Your fridge is empty. I looked. Nothin but yogurt in there.”

I glared at him and grabbed my sweatshirt from the back of the kitchen chair. “Fix it before I get back,” I said, with feigned authority.

“Get outta here, go away, shoo!” He flapped his hands at me. “Let the man do the man’s work.”

I got into my car and headed to my yoga class, questioning my sanity. Why did I think my living room needed painting so badly? And why on earth did Nelson need to be the one painting it?

* * *

Nelson and I had grown up on the same street, and I was best friends with his younger sister Karen. I had moved back to our home town six months ago, to rebuild my life after my divorce, and Nelson turned up at my door almost immediately.

Nelson had harbored a pernicious crush on me throughout our teenage years. I deflected his aggressive flirtations, not caring much for jocks and even less for smart-asses. He was hard to avoid though, being my best friend’s brother. I spent a lot of time at

Karen's house, since my mother worked two jobs and my father was long gone. Over time, I came to realize that Nelson was slick on the surface, but kind and generous beneath his veneer of bravado. When I got my first job as a cashier at the grocery store, he picked me up after work so I wouldn't have to walk home alone at night. He changed the oil on my mom's car, fixed things around the house and cut the grass for us in the summer. We gradually settled into a tentative friendship. College and marriage eventually pulled me away from home, and I left my memories of Nelson behind.

He was still handsome at forty, despite his years of hard partying and run-ins with the law. He possessed great skill with saws and drills, and a measure of artistic talent with painting and finish carpentry; he lacked, however, the basics of project management and customer service. I hired him because he had agreed to paint my living room for a song, being in financial distress due to what Karen vaguely called his "poor life choices." My sentimentality got the better of me, and so here was Nelson, twenty years later, incorrigible and exasperating and down on his luck, but still willing to help me with whatever I needed.

* * *

I returned from the gym an hour later, and warily re-entered my house. Classic rock blasted from upstairs. A ladder stood in the middle of my living room with a drop cloth draped over it. A film of fine white dust coated the kitchen counter, and paint cans, rollers and brushes were strewn across the table. A circular saw was set up on a makeshift worktable precariously balanced between the kitchen island and the sink. Why a saw? I

wondered. I only want my living room painted. From upstairs, I heard the dull thuds of hammering behind the wailing of Guns N Roses, “Welcome to the Jungle”.

I crept up the staircase and peeked around the corner into my bedroom. Nelson was singing along with the radio, a length of crown molding in his hand. He looked up and grinned. “Hey Jeanie baby,” he said cheerfully, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. “Your crown molding is all screwed up. I couldn’t stand to look at, I had to fix it for you.” He plucked the cigarette from his mouth and poked it behind his ear. He waved a placating hand at me. “I won’t charge you any extra for this, hon. I had some molding left over from my last job. I just can’t believe Jerry’s guys did such a shit job on this. You’re gonna love it when I’m done, though. It’ll look so good, you’ll want your whole house done up with crown molding.”

“I don’t want crown molding for the whole house.”

“You say that now,” he said, pointing his finger at me. “But just you wait til I’m done with this, you’ll say this is the *bomb*.”

I felt my control slipping away. “No,” I said. “No crown molding!”

“*Nelson!*” a woman’s voice screeched through the open bedroom window, from the driveway below.

Nelson’s head jerked around, and we both stepped to the window. Donatella, my curvaceous thirty-year-old neighbor and fellow divorcee, had pulled her SUV into my driveway, and had her head sticking out the driver’s window, staring up at us. “Nelson, where have you been?” she demanded. “You’re supposed to be repairing my deck!”

Nelson and I pulled our heads back from the window. “Are you?” I asked him.

“Well, yeah,” he said, shrugging.

“Nelson!” Donatella screamed. *“Do you hear me?”*

“Yeah,” Nelson yelled down to her. “I’ll be right there, as soon as I finish with Jeanie in the bedroom.” He slammed the window shut.

“What did you just say?” I shrieked.

“What?” said Nelson. “What’s wrong? I’ll get to her job when I’m finished here.”

“But you just announced to the whole neighborhood that—oh, never mind!” My shoulders slumped. “Get out of my bedroom,” I said. “You should be taping the living room, getting ready to paint! I have someone coming for dinner. You’ve got to clean up and be out of here by five, so I can get ready.”

Nelson’s head snapped up. “Who’s coming for dinner?” he asked. “Is it a man? Have you got a date, Jeanie?”

“No,” I said.

Nelson wasn’t fooled. He waved a phillips head screwdriver at me. “You’ve got a man coming tonight, I can tell by the look on your face. Huh.” He tossed the screwdriver into the battered metal toolbox sitting open on my dresser, and turned to face me again.

“Where’d you meet him?”

“None of your business.”

A slow grin spread across Nelson’s face. He crossed his arms on his chest, his biceps bulging against his frayed and dirty t-shirt. “Where’d you meet him, Jeanie baby?” he said in a wheedling tone. “Come on, you can tell me.”

“No.”

Nelson wagged his head back and forth. “You met him at Paddy’s last weekend, when you went out for a drink with my sister, didn’t you?”

“No, I did not! I didn’t meet him in a bar!”

Nelson’s eyes widened innocently. “Oh? Then where?” His expression shifted with a sudden thought, and his blue eyes zoomed in on mine. “You didn’t meet him on one of them online dating sites, did you? C’se that’s for *losers*.”

I had, in fact, met a man on eHarmony a few weeks ago. Not that Nelson had any right to know this. “Never mind,” I said. “It’s time for you to clear out.”

Nelson slammed his toolbox shut and went downstairs. I turned the radio off, but he continued to sing in a screechy Axl Rose imitation, his voice ricocheting off the walls. I blew out a sigh and thumped down the stairs after him, watching to make sure he cleaned up after himself. He made a show of gathering his materials and stacking them in an inconvenient pile in the middle of the living room rug.

“Okay Jeanie,” he said at last, “I’m just gonna put my saw and shit in your garage for the weekend, so it’s out of the way of the kids.”

“They went to their dad’s for the weekend,” I said, without thinking.

Nelson’s eyes grew round. “Ooooh,” he said. “So the kids are away, and you’ve got a dude coming to spend the night.” He nodded as though he had just discovered an important clue in a baffling mystery. “I see how it is.”

“That is not how it is! He’s not spending the night! We—” I broke off, feeling ridiculous. I’m explaining my personal life to my painting contractor, when it’s *none of his business!* “Get your stuff out of here and go! Goodbye, Nelson.” I took hold of his upper arm and tried to push his bulk toward the door. He didn’t budge an inch, just looked down his nose at me with a knowing smirk. I threw my hands into the air and stepped back. He grinned, hoisted his saw and banged out the door into the garage.

I locked the door behind him and ran upstairs to shower and change. I came down thirty minutes later and started throwing dinner together. Nelson had got me off my schedule, and I didn't have much time to spare. Luckily, I had pre-made everything. I popped dishes into the oven to heat, tossed a salad and set the table for two.

The doorbell rang at five-oh-one, and I opened the front door to my date, David, who stood on the step in a neatly pressed shirt and slacks, a bottle of red wine in his hand.

"Hello David," I greeted him, holding the screen door open. My eyes jumped over his shoulder to Nelson's truck, still parked in my driveway. A terrific crash came from the garage. David jumped, and turned a startled face toward the garage.

"Fuck!" came Nelson's voice, followed by another crash. "*Fuuuuck!*"

David turned back to me with a questioning look. He was a tax accountant, and owned his own business. In the three weeks we had been dating, I had not heard a single word of profanity cross his lips. "My contractor," I said, gesturing helplessly. The odor of cigarette smoke drifted through the evening air.

"Oh," David said uncertainly. He shifted the wine bottle into his left hand. "Can I help?"

"I doubt it," I said. "Excuse me."

I darted past him, along the sidewalk to the open garage door. Nelson stood amidst a clutter of tools and paint cans. "Nelson!" I hissed. "What are you doing? Why are you still here?"

“I got this, Jeanie. I just dropped something. Nothing for you to worry about.” He looked out to David’s Camry in the driveway, and raised his nose like a dog on the scent. “Is your date here?”

“Yes.” I fixed him with what I hoped was a stern look. “Get out of here. You need to go now.”

“Uh huh,” said Nelson. He strode out of the garage toward David, who had advanced down the sidewalk to see what was going on, still gripping the wine bottle. Nelson stopped in front of him, a full head taller. “Hey, how ya doing?” He extended his hand to David. “I’m Nelson. Jeanie’s contractor,” he said, crushing David’s hand.

David winced and straightened his slender frame to stand a little taller. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah,” said Nelson. “I been working here on Jeanie’s house for a while. Quite a while.” He scratched his chest, and tilted his head back. He looked down at David. “I do a lot of work for her, if you know what I mean.”

“You do not,” I said, looking from Nelson to David. “He doesn’t. He’s just painting my living room. Actually, he hasn’t even started yet. He keeps—”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” said Nelson, putting his hand on my shoulder in a proprietary gesture. “You know you call me all the time, when the least little thing goes wrong around the house.” He turned back to David. “David, let me tell you about last night. Last night, she called me crying about the water not draining from her bath tub—”

“I did not call you last night! It was the afternoon. And it wasn’t about the tub, it was the pipes under the sink—”

“Sure, hon,” said Nelson, putting his arm around my shoulders and pulling me in to kiss the top of my head. I pushed away from him, in time to see him wink over my head at David. “That’s what they all say, it’s always about the pipes, isn’t it?”

David stood blinking at the two of us. Nelson was standing uncomfortably close to me. I edged away, and he edged along with me, leaning in. I gave David a pleading look.

“Well,” said David. “Maybe I’d better be going.”

“No!” I said. “Don’t go.” I elbowed Nelson away and stepped toward David, holding out my hand. “Nelson was just going,” I said feebly.

“Mm hm,” said David, turning away, gathering the shreds of his self-respect. He walked down the driveway past Nelson’s truck, got into his car and drove off.

I turned on Nelson in a rage. “Look what you did! You are a total jerk! Why did you do that? *Why?*”

Nelson looked back at me, all innocence. “I didn’t like his attitude.”

“*What?*”

“You’re lucky I was here, Jeanie, and prevented him from taking advantage of you.”

I was so incensed, I could hardly speak. “He’s the first decent guy I’ve met since I got divorced!” I sputtered, my fists clenched.

“He was a wolf on the prowl,” said Nelson, wrinkling his nose. “I know his kind.”

I felt tears gathering. No, I told myself, do not cry in front of Nelson. Bad idea. I tried to blink them away before he noticed.

Nelson peered at me. “Are you crying, Jeanie?” His voice softened. “Aw, don’t cry. I can’t stand that.” He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his chest. “I’m sorry baby, I didn’t mean to upset you.” I found myself hugging him back. This feels good, I thought. It’s been so long since someone held me like this. The image of David dissolved in my mind. Tax accountant, *pffft!*

“Mmm,” Nelson murmured into my hair, tightening his grip on me and shifting his hips closer.

Uh oh. “Nelson!” I said, pushing away. He held on a moment too long, then let me go. I stood at arm’s length and shook my head at him. “You’re the same as ever.”

Nelson regarded me wide-eyed for a second or two, then the wily grin slipped into place. “I still love you Jeanie, but you’re off limits. My sister said she would kill me.”

“If I don’t kill you first.”

He slapped his hand against his thigh and pulled his car keys from his pocket. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Jean,” he said. He turned and walked to his truck, whistling.

I know that song, I thought. It’s another Guns N Roses—what’s the name of it? Nelson’s truck started with a roar. The song title came to me as he drove off in a cloud of exhaust, his muffler rumbling. *Patience.*

THE END

