

“You did what?” Adam Hennessy pushed a hand through his hair, his grip tightening on his phone. He toyed with the hammer in his tool belt, waiting for Jared to explain himself. The August sun beat down on him, and he wiped at his sweaty brow with the back of his hand.

“I backed my Jeep into my neighbor’s backyard. Took out her fence and her deck.”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“I was backing into my driveway, and I hit the gas instead of the brake. I panicked, and instead of taking my foot off the gas, I just, I dunno, I kept going, and I swerved to avoid my house. Went straight into her yard.”

Adam blew out a slow breath, shaking his head. “Jesus Christ. I love you, man, but you’re a fuckin’ terrible driver, you know that?”

“Thanks, asshole.”

Cradling the phone between his ear and his shoulder, Adam reached into his cooler for a bottle of water. He’d been working for hours now, sweating through his T-shirt. “But you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Neighbor lady just about took my nuts off though.”

Adam snorted, twisting the cap off his water bottle and taking a long pull before answering. “You drove right into her yard. What did you expect? A welcoming committee and a fuckin’ parade?”

Adam smiled at his own smart-assed joke, but Jared didn’t laugh. “Hennessy, seriously. This chick’s scary. She tore a strip off me and threw a pot of flowers at my head. She was flipping out, man. Wicked gross mental fit.”

Adam laughed, shaking his head at his friend, knowing full well that Jared was laying it on thick. He’d known him for almost thirty years—they’d become fast friends on the first day of

kindergarten—and Jared was a lot of things. Loyal. Hardworking. A good friend. A bit of an asshole. And a chronic exaggerator. “Can’t say I blame her.”

Jared paused before continuing. “So, listen. Don’t get mad.”

Adam tensed, the muscles in his shoulders stiffening as he paused, the water bottle halfway to his mouth. “What did you do?”

“She was yelling at me and throwing shit, and I...I promised her you’d fix it.”

Adam sighed heavily, tilting his head back and closing his eyes against the sun beating down from directly above him. He scuffed the tip of his steel-toed work boot against a two-by-four lying on the ground in front of him beside his open tool chest. “Let me get this straight. You promised the dragon lady I’d fix the fence and deck that *you* drove through.” His voice was flat, irritation rolling through him.

“She was gonna kill me. I had no choice. I panicked.”

“Yeah, I’m sensing a theme here.” He rubbed the cool, plastic exterior of the water bottle across his forehead, drops trickling down over his sweaty face. As much as he loved his job—building things, making something from raw pieces, bringing it together in a perfect meld of functionality and beauty—he couldn’t wait to pack it in for the day. A shower, a cold beer, and his couch were all calling his name.

In his empty house. Where all he had to eat were takeout leftovers.

“So you’ll do it?” Jared asked.

“I’m booked solid right now, man. I can’t. Besides, I don’t do pro bono work. I’m not a fuckin’ lawyer.”

“Yeah, no. I understand. It’s not like I let you crash with me when your ex-wife kicked you out last year or nothin’.”

Shit. The leaves of the maple tree in his client's Back Bay yard rustled softly above him, the breeze drying the thin layer of sweat clinging to his skin. It was so damn muggy out that he might as well have been swimming in the ocean. He pulled at his sweat-darkened blue T-shirt, emblazoned with his "Hennessy Carpentry" logo, fanning the cotton away from his skin, just trying to move the air.

Goddammit, he did owe Jared a favor—a big one—for the way he'd let Adam stay with him after his marriage had gone down in flames over a year ago. He stared at the intricate lattice he'd assembled that adorned the top of the red cedar tongue-and-groove fence he'd spent the past three days putting up.

"Adam? You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I'll swing by her place tomorrow, see what I can do. Text me the address."

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate it. Oh, and Hennessy?"

"Yeah?" Adam took another sip from his water bottle before dumping the rest over the back of his head and down his neck.

"You might want to wear a cup."

Charlie Grant stared at her computer screen, her fingers poised over the keyboard as the cursor blinked back at her expectantly. Dust motes swirled idly around her in the morning sun streaming in through the window above her desk. The sunlight bathed the room in a warm, cozy glow, the cheeriness of the morning totally out of sync with her current mood. She pulled her hands away from the keyboard and chewed on a thumbnail, fighting the urge to open her web browser. If she did, she'd go straight to Facebook, and then Twitter, and then ESPN.com,

checking out last night's scores instead of working on her column. Which was due tomorrow. And she had...five words so far.

She flipped through her coffee-ringed notebook, staring at the notes she'd taken during the last Red Sox game, wondering if she was on the wrong track with this week's column. She'd planned on doing a profile of Dave Rossum, the Sox's star relief pitcher, but it wasn't coming together. Although she had lots of notes, all of her ideas felt flat. Uninspired, and uninteresting. She rolled her neck, trying to work out some of the tension gathered in her muscles. Her chest tightened, and she knew it was anxiety. Pressure.

She'd taken over the Boston Globe's weekly Red Sox column at the start of the season four months ago, and each column needed to be better than the last. Even though it was the twenty-first century, and gender equality blah blah blah, the truth was that women still weren't entirely welcome in sports journalism, especially not twenty-eight-year-olds with limited experience. So, with each column, Charlie felt the need to prove herself. To shut them all up with how well-written and insightful it was. To show them that her gender and age didn't matter. Each column was a step forward in her career, a building block for the future she envisioned for herself.

Taking a deep breath, she shook out her hands, knocking over a stack of papers and magazines and an empty beer bottle from her cluttered desk. She rolled her chair back to retrieve the spilled items, the wheels crunching over the chip crumbs she'd spilled the other day and hadn't cleaned up.

Charlie could do lots of things. Was good at lots of things. She could write. She could run for three or four miles and barely break a sweat. She was kind to dogs and children. She could

sing, better than most. She could teach her mother how to use a smartphone. She was amazing at catching food in her mouth.

So with all of those skills, who needed to be domestic? She didn't have time for that other stuff—cooking, cleaning, organizing, whatever the hell it was people did on Pinterest. And by not having time, Charlie meant she couldn't give less of a shit.

“Pfft. Pinterest,” she said aloud, righting the beer bottle and putting it back exactly where it had been perched on her desk. A few months ago, one of the editors—a penis-having editor, of course—at the Globe had suggested she “branch out” and write a “women’s interest” piece on social media trends, including Pinterest. Within minutes, Charlie had been knee-deep in articles on how to have a perfectly organized pantry, and she'd told the editor that she'd be sticking to sports, thanks.

A perfectly organized pantry. Seriously. Charlie could think of about six hundred things she'd rather be doing with her spare time besides alphabetizing spice jars. Like having sex. Watching baseball. Hiking. Sleeping. Making friends with the hobos who lived at the dump.

She hadn't done a masters in journalism at Northwestern to write about things she wasn't passionate about. She'd always known she wanted to be a sports journalist, chronicling the glorious highs and the heartbreaking lows of her favorite athletes. She loved writing about a game, or an athlete, or a team, and finding the narrative hook that would take the story from mere reporting to a memorable, emotional, and compelling tale. Connecting fans with their heroes through words on a page.

It was alchemy, doing that, and on the days when it came together, it was beautiful.

Today was not one of those days.

“Uggggggghhhhhhhh.” She tapped her forehead against the edge of her desk as her brain ran away down a procrastination rabbit hole. She sat up and rolled her chair back toward the desk, more chips crunching as she went. She contemplated digging the vacuum out, and that was when she knew she was well and truly stuck on what to write.

Her doorbell rang, echoing through the quiet house, and she frowned, not expecting any visitors. She rubbed a hand over her makeup-free face and tightened her messy ponytail before pushing out of her chair. As she walked down the stairs to the main level of her grandfather’s old house, she adjusted her faded blue T-shirt, trying to smooth out the wrinkles. At least it was clean, despite the fact that she’d pulled it from the pile of dirty laundry littering her bedroom floor. Crossing the last few feet to the front door, she hastily re-tied the drawstring holding up her black-and-gold Boston Bruins flannel pants.

Pressing up onto her toes, she peered through the peephole and stilled, not quite able to believe who was standing on her front porch. Her heart pushed up into her throat as her fingers curled against the oak door, her nails scratching helplessly against the wood. She swallowed, her pulse hammering in her temples, and watched as the asshole on her front porch rang her doorbell for a second time. How the hell had he gotten her address?

He raised his fist to knock, and she flung the door open, not wanting to feel the rap of his fist against the wood. He froze, his big hand still in the air, and as he stared at her, it dropped slowly to his side. If you’d asked her six months ago, this wasn’t at all how Charlie would’ve predicted her first face-to-face meeting with her online crush would go. Not. At. All.

She leaned against the doorjamb and crossed her arms in front of her. Her heart beat against her ribs, hurt and anger warming her skin. “Adam Hennessy. So. You *are* alive.”

He stared at her, his mouth agape. “Charlie?” His eyes raked over her body, and she hugged herself a little tighter. For a second, she wished she were wearing something other than a worn T-shirt and flannel pants, and then she hated herself a tiny bit for feeling that way. He didn’t deserve *anything* from her. He deserved nothing, which was exactly what he’d given her.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked, meeting his gaze. His light blue eyes held hers, and he rubbed a hand over his mouth. The pads of his fingers rasped against his closely cropped light brown beard, the soft bristling sound prickling over her. He looked even better in person than in the photos from his profile. He was taller—at least 6’1 seeing as he had a good half a foot on her—and broader than she’d expected, with mouthwateringly sculpted arms and huge, strong hands. He ran one of those hands through his short, light brown hair, leaving it slightly disheveled. His white T-shirt stretched across his chest as he moved, the muscles bunching and flexing beneath the cotton. The breeze shifted, and she caught the faint scent of clean laundry and sporty aftershave. Her stomach did a slow turn, flopping over on itself, and she hugged herself tighter.

Silence stretched between them for several moments, broken only by the rustling leaves of the maple tree in her front yard and the birds chattering merrily from somewhere nearby. A horn blared in the distance, several streets over, and all she could do was stare. For once in her life, words were failing her. She didn’t know if she wanted to laugh, or cry, or slap him, or just keep staring. Why the hell did he have to look so good? She clamped her teeth together, her chest burning as the wave of humiliation and hurt came crashing back over her.

Six months ago, she’d foolishly thought they’d had a connection. Thought she’d found someone kind and smart and funny. She’d thought that maybe, just maybe, she’d found the person who could help her put the shredded pieces of her heart back together.

But he'd proven her wrong.

It had been almost six months since Jeff had left everything she had to give—her heart, her confidence, her trust—battered and broken, and she'd decided that it was time to move on. That she wouldn't let that heartbreak dictate the rest of her life. So she'd joined OkCupid, and while she'd found her share of losers on the site, Adam had seemed different. He hadn't immediately asked her to send him topless pics, or if she liked anal, or sent her a dick pic, so right from the start, he'd been miles ahead of ninety percent of the other guys who'd messaged her.

Six months later, she still remembered his opening volley. He'd said "Hey. So, I have nothing clever to say. Awkward, right? I just wanted to message you because you seem cute and fun and cool. I also question what the fuck is wrong with our society that someone like you has to be on this site, but I'm on here too, so...Yeah. I'm terrible at this. Hi."

They'd messaged back and forth for weeks, getting to know each other, talking about anything and everything, and God, she'd liked him so much. He'd seemed too good to be true: gorgeous, and funny, and smart, and sweet. Finally, after hundreds and hundreds of messages, he'd asked her to meet him for coffee at Fiore's Bakery, and she'd agreed.

Her skin prickled as she remembered sitting in Fiore's Bakery by herself for an hour, watching the sky darken from purple dusk to velvety winter darkness. Waiting. Willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. But he hadn't shown. He'd stood her up, and she'd left, walking home alone in the cold, the wind whipping at her hair and stinging her cheeks.

She'd messaged him as soon as she'd gotten home, even though she felt like a fool for letting history repeat itself. Once again, she'd put herself out there, had let herself feel things,

had let herself believe that a seemingly great guy would be into her, only to come crashing back down to reality.

At least he hadn't waited until they were engaged to reject her, though. He did have that going for him over Jeff.

He'd never responded to her "what the hell, dude?" message, and his profile had disappeared from the site. He'd ghosted; she'd never heard from him again. She'd deleted her own profile from the site after that. Now, here he stood, six months later, on her front porch. Staring at her. Looking ridiculously hot in his stupid white T-shirt and stupid jeans. With his stupidly sexy face.

Finally, after several long moments, he answered her question. "I'm here to look at your deck and fence. I'm a friend of Jared's—your neighbor—and he asked me to come by. He feels terrible about what happened."

And what about you? Do you feel terrible? The words bounced around her skull, but she held them in, trying to convince herself that his answer wouldn't matter, because she didn't care.

"Why am I not surprised you're friends with that asshat?"

"I'm just here to help." He watched her warily. Her eyes dipped down over his body, taking in the small "Hennessy Carpentry" logo over his left pec. A very well-developed pec. The fact that she was ogling his chest made her angrier, both at him and at herself, and she ground her teeth together, tension radiating through her jaw.

"I don't want your help. I don't want anything to do with you."

He closed his eyes for a second and sighed, his arms limp at his sides. "Charlie, I...I'm really sorry. I owe you an explanation."

A wave of hurt crashed into her, stealing her breath, and she channeled that hurt into anger. “I don’t want your explanation, or your apology. Get the hell off my porch.” She spun on her heel and slammed her door in his face.