Saturday, 27 June 2015

Ashley Greendale gave a customer his change then sat down to finish an article on tips for mothers of young children. Starbucks was now empty, less than half an hour until the end of the working day,

The door opened and Peggy came in. “Ashley, how’s business? Mine’s dead in the water. Don’t people buy flowers during the summer?”

Ashley smiled and lifted her gaze from the magazine. Peggy, the florist from next door, was emotional, as usual. “It’s normal here. People always buy muffins and tea.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Peggy looked around then sat on the closest chair. “Do you have any plans for tonight? How about going to Dada in San Francisco? Barney, Will’s friend, is interested in you.” Peggy winked.

“Barney? Have I really come to the point of dating a truck driver?” Ashley dropped the magazine and tiredly smoothed back her hair. “I’d love to hang out with you but tonight I’m seeing the guys from The Jackal.”

“The Jackal?” Peggy asked, puzzled.

“Yes, the band I used to sing in ten years ago. I told you once about the showcase we had at The Viper Room.”

“Oh, that one. And where are you seeing them?”

“At Gordon Biersch, San Jose. Craig suggested the place because it’s close to Cisco’s office.”

“Your buddy works for Cisco?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are the guys from your former band cool? Are any of them single?”

Ashley laughed. “Wayne is always available but he’s not exactly what I’d call ‘the dream boyfriend’.”

“But is he good-looking?”

“Oh yeah, but he’s only good for a flirt, not for a long relationship.”

Ashley set the cash register to run an end-of-day sales report while she opened the cash book. She decided to close fifteen minutes early today because of her plans.

“So I can join, then? Do you think Wayne might like me?” Peggy came to the cash desk and leaned on the glass.

“If you want,” Ashley replied absentmindedly, calculating the sales for the day.

“So how did you end up having a showcase at Hollywood’s glitziest nightclub?”

No answer. Ashley was taking out the receipts.

Peggy tried again. “It must have been awesome playing at The Viper Room among all those stars. Did you enjoy it?”

Ashley looked up when she heard The Viper Room mentioned but then concentrated on the report. The silence was suddenly broken by her joyful cry.

“One thousand five hundred and five dollars for the day! Not bad.” She gave Peggy a satisfied look.

“I did just a bit over five hundred. Yesterday it was below a thousand too.” Peggy issued a dramatic sigh.

“Why don’t you come over here and work with me? We’d have fun and time would go faster. I’ll talk Mike into hiring one more girl. The other one is probably quitting soon anyway.”

“Ashley, I just don’t get why you didn’t keep singing instead of working this dead-end job. Was it luck that brought you to The Jackal? What happened?”

“We were too young and too inexperienced‒and not stubborn enough. We thought our band would conquer the world all on its own.” Ashley smiled bitterly. “During the showcase at The Viper Room I was only 18. Wayne, at 20, was the oldest in the band.” She turned off the computer. “I guess if we’d been more realistic, and if we’d gone on, someone might have noticed us. Who knows?”

“That guy Wayne, is he coming tonight?”

“You can’t get him out of your head and you haven’t even seen him!”

Ashley recalled how ten years ago they’d had a fling. God, how fast the time flew! Back then she was just graduating from high school, full of big dreams about life. Now, ten years later, she was a barista at Redwood City’s Starbucks and the single mother of a four-year-old girl.

“Come on, let’s go! It’s at least a thirty-minute ride to Gordon Biersch.” Ashley picked up her bag and drew the blinds.

Peggy was already outside, waiting for her.

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“Scene two, take one! Aaannnd, action!”

Wayne Bonner started the motorcycle and hit the Jeep coming from the opposite direction at full speed. In the last second before the crash he jumped off and rolled on the ground.

“Cut! End of scene two. Nice job, boys! Thirty-minute break. We’re resuming at three o’clock.”

The director left the film set. Wayne saw him going down the alley along the shore.

“What’s up, bro? How’s it going?” Joe, the actor whose stunts he performed, firmly patted him once on the shoulder.

“Perfect–as usual!” Wayne smiled widely and returned the action.

“Are you free tonight? We’re going out with the boys‒” Joe didn’t finish because Wayne’s cell phone ground out the beginning strains of a hard rock classic.

“Yes?” he answered. “Baby, what is it? I think we agreed that tonight I won’t be able to…” Wayne took a long pause to listen then spoke nervously. “What are you talking about? I never went out with your friend Brittany! Yes, I’m seeing my friends from the band… What? The band I played in years ago! That’s right. No, they’re all men, except for Ashley… God, you’re crazy! Go see a psychiatrist!” Wayne jabbed the end call button and quickly put the iPhone into his pocket.

“Your girlfriend plaguing you?” Joe asked.

“Women! They’re crazy! She blames me for sleeping with her best friend, all because I once said she had great legs. I’ve never even been alone with her!.”

Joe clicked his tongue in disapproval. “You can’t do that, man. Don’t talk about other women in front of your girl. Make her feel unique.”

“Since when did you start talking like Dr. Phil? Has your wife begun throwing *Cosmo* tips for feng shoo bullshit at you or what?”

“It’s called feng shui, not feng shoo.”

“I don’t care! You’ve become a real softie, man. I guess that’s one of the cons of family life.”

Joe studied Wayne thoughtfully. He liked him as a friend but he couldn’t imagine him as a good husband, or even a decent boyfriend. He changed his girlfriend every three months. Either they caught him red-handed or he’d find “a hotter babe,” as he’d say. He was an incorrigible womanizer.

“I heard you’re seeing your old buddies from your ex-band?”

Wayne opened a bottle of beer then sat down. He looked around. Fifteen minutes later, when the break was over, the place would be full of people. Now it was just an empty set.

“Yeah, that’s right,” he answered vacantly. “We haven’t seen each other in almost a year.” His gaze wandered around the empty space before him. “The four of us keep the tradition of holding a reunion at least once a year.”

“Talking about reunions, are you playing with the Masters of the Dark at Mr. T’s Bowl this week?”

Wayne had given up on his music career but he still played in a pop rock band in his spare time.

“Yeah, we should.” He took a sip of beer.

Joe looked around and then asked. “So what happened with your former band? Why did you break up?”

“Buddy, could you do me a favor and stop asking me about that?”

“Okay. I was just curious.”

“Ask me anything but not about The Jackal! It’s painful.”

Joe looked at Wayne with interest. What could have happened then to make Wayne react so sharply now?