

Something New

The stoplight is new. It has been hard to find anything new in Lacey's hometown, but the stoplight at the edge of town is definitely new. Lacey wonders what the point is, as she has literally passed about three cars on Main Street, and there is nothing at this end of town except an ice cream shop, a bar, and a used car lot. She taps her fingers impatiently against the steering wheel, waiting for the light to change. What is she even waiting for? Traffic light cameras were outlawed, right? There are no other cars; she could just go. But no. Lacey is one to follow the rules, whether or not anyone is watching.

When she finally arrives at the bar a few minutes later, Ashley is waiting in the parking lot, one leg hanging outside her Jeep, boot swinging. Lacey pulls her X5 next to the Jeep and carefully navigates the gravel in her Jimmy Choo heels, hoping they don't scuff. They are one of her most treasured possessions. She allows herself to be enveloped in a cheaply perfumed hug and gives a long squeeze to show how much she's missed her cousin.

Lacey has been looking forward to this night since they planned it weeks ago, when she decided not to go with Daniel to his conference in Kansas City. The restaurants and shopping would have been fun, but she's been feeling so restless lately, like something is missing. She doesn't really know what she wants, but she wants *something*. Something different. Something fun. Something new.

"How's Dan?" Ashley asks as they head toward the bar. "How are the kids?"

"Great, great, and yours?" Lacey doesn't want to talk about Daniel and the kids. Madison has been ignoring her snaps all week. She'd gotten mad at her over something—Lacey couldn't remember what—and Jeffrey has a new girlfriend, so anytime he calls, all he talks about is how wonderful Emma and her family are. Emma's family is, apparently, perfect.

Lacey pretends to listen while Ashley waxes poetic about her genius daughter and the world's greatest dog, her lab mix rescue. Ashley is single, has all the time in the world to devote to her child and her dog. All Lacey's friends are married. There are couples from the neighborhood, who only ever talk about neighborhood gossip, and couples from Daniel's financial advising firm, who all seem to be either fabulously wealthy or ridiculously frugal. She and Daniel are the latter, although he is always planning for the former.

When they enter the bar, Lacey finally feels like she has come home. The music is the perfect decibel, the lights are softly dim, and the men—good lord, the men! The men are all manner of rugged in their flannels, Carhartts, and leather, and all turned their way. She looks at Ashley and smiles.

“This place feels familiar,” she jokes.

“How long's it been?”

Ten years? Twenty? Thirty?! Who's counting. “Too long!” she exclaims.

“Ash!” A Carhartt at the end of the bar calls out her cousin's name and approaches her for a quick side hug.

“Remember Shane, my wingman? Shane, remember Lacey?” Ashley prompts, and the man pauses to study her.

When recognition finally strikes, he throws a quick arm around her as well. “Haven't seen you in years, Lacey! How are you?”

“Great, great. We're in West County. I don't get back too often since we moved Mom to Florida. How are you?”

“Shane's a doctor. Living the dream, right Dr. Morris?” Ashley speaks for him.

Shane grins, and Lacey finally remembers him, whether from his dimples or his last name she isn't sure. He's Ashley's cousin on the other side, her dad's side. She feels a jolt of

something. My, how nicely he had grown up, and a doctor to boot. Lacey fidgets with her wedding ring with the thumb of the same hand. She knows a few doctors. There are both pediatricians and surgeons in her neighborhood, and she knows the pay is vastly different between them.

“What kind of doctor?” she asks.

“Emergency medicine.”

Hmmm. She doesn't know any of those. She has no idea what his salary might be. Not that it matters.

“Buy you ladies a drink?”

Yes, please, Dr. Morris. A hot doctor buying her a drink—this night is starting out just as Lacey had hoped.

“You think he's pretty, you should see his wife,” Ashley says as they follow him to the bar.

What was that? A warning? A challenge? Lacey lets her eyes flick around the room to the other men, who have all gone back to their drinks and conversation. She isn't here to screw around, but she knows she looks good in her 7's and her Jimmy Choos.

She reluctantly slides onto a barstool next to Ashley, who had sat next to her hot doctor cousin, who unfortunately had a man taking up the seat on his other side.

“Fireball?” Shane asks.

Lacey grins at Ashley, “How does he know?”

They used to always start the night with a Fireball shot for luck. Wishful thinking that if the night started hot, it would end hot as well.

“This ain't his first rodeo,” Ashley says. “You don't remember hanging with Shane?”

Lacey does not. She remembers a gangly youth with greasy hair who had always wanted to tag along with them, but she didn't remember actually *hanging* with him. Surely, they hadn't drunk Fireball with that kid. But what if they had? Would it be possible that Lacey would have married this hot doctor instead of Daniel? She rests her chin on her fist and eyes him, imagining the possibilities.

They toast to old times, the guy next to the doctor too, and Lacey wonders who he is, if he's someone she should remember. She tries to surreptitiously get a good look at him, but Shane is in the way, and the guy isn't paying any attention to her. He's gone back to nursing his drink, something in a rocks glass.

"What's his story?" she asks Ashley.

Ashley lowers her voice, "His wife left him like six months ago. Took their three kids and ran off with a lawyer from Nashville. He's spending every penny he has trying to get his kids back. That's the look of pure heartbreak there."

Lacey leans forward until she can get a good look at him. He's scruffy, like he hasn't shaved in weeks. Poor guy.

"Why didn't you go with Dan this weekend?" Ashley asks. "I thought you loved the big city."

"Eh, it's overrated."

"Podunk isn't?" Ashley teased.

"Podunk has my favorite people!" Lacey put her arm around her cousin's neck, the hug more authentic after the Fireball shot.

"I haven't seen you in forever! What have you been up to? What's new?"

Lacey tries to think of something. Anything interesting to report. Nothing. There is absolutely nothing. "You know, just keeping it real. What are we drinking?"

“What do you want?”

Lacey eyes the bottles lined up like trophies on the lighted shelves behind the bar. It had been ages since she'd been in a place without a wine list. She can't remember what she used to drink.

“Corona with lime?”

“That's my girl. We should have gone for margaritas!”

Lacey looks up and down the bar. The men outnumber the women three to one. Mexican wasn't the vibe she had been going for tonight. She would never cheat on Daniel. They had built a life together, and she would never do anything to destroy that. But she had been so *bored* lately.

When she had tried to talk to Daniel about it, he had suggested she could go back to school. What was he insinuating?! Sure, she hadn't finished her degree. She had gotten pregnant with Madison and decided to stay home with her, that sweet little angel baby who presently despised her. But she didn't want school now. She wanted *recess*.

She sips her Corona and feels a few years erase.

“Where's his pretty wife?” Lacey asks quietly so Shane can't hear.

“Where's Annie?” Ashley turns to him loudly.

“Book club.”

Ah, book club, Lacey thinks. A nerd. Probably not pretty at all. Probably wears thick glasses and comfy pants. Probably kicks up her crocs on her mahogany coffee table while she reads her cozy mysteries. *She* could doctor-wife so much better. She would wear fabulous clothes and throw fabulous parties and *lap up* her life of luxury. But she still wasn't sure what emergency medicine doctors made. He was wearing Carhartt, and what were those pants?

Wranglers, seriously? She chuckles. He and his nerd wife deserve each other. But, goodness, that chiseled face. That's something a girl could wrap her legs around.

She looks at her beer, nearly gone. It must be the Corona. This was Ashley's other cousin, which practically made him her cousin. She tries to think of Daniel. That's the right thing to do. But how long had it been since they'd done *that*? God, how she missed that. She eyes the heartbreak on the other side of Shane. He is cute, like a teddy bear—scruffy and harmless-looking—nursing his drink. She wants to hold him in her lap and rock him until he forgets all his troubles.

“You want to play pool?” Ashley asks.

“Nah, it's been too long.”

“Darts?”

Lacey wrinkles her nose, shakes her head. She just wants to sit here and swing her Jimmy Choos and look at boys. She rubs her hand across the wood of the bar, smooth from years of nightly buffing and polishing. “Didn't we dance on this once?”

“You did,” Ashley laughs, “right before you went home with ... what was that guy's name?”

Lacey chuckles. She remembers long hair and a guitar, not a name. “I think he was in a band.”

“He *was* the band,” Ashley laughs. “Wasn't Dan in a band?”

“Dan was in *band*, not in *a* band. He played the xaphoon. He still has it.”

“What the hell is a xaphoon?” a deep voice asks.

Lacey looks up. Finally, some life out of Heartbreak. It's as though the question sprang out against his will, and then he quickly swirls his drink and searches for the answer there.

“It's like a cross between a recorder and a saxophone. It's a woodwind,” she answers.

“What the hell is a woodwind?”

Lacey laughs. He’s still looking straight into his drink, but this is her kind of guy. She pulls up a picture of a xaphoon on her phone and holds it out to him. “A xaphoon.”

“Huh. Looks like a clarinet.”

“Goes doodle doodle doodle doodle det,” Ashley sings.

“Okay, you’re cut off,” Shane slides her bottle away.

“It’s a real song!” she protests.

“That doesn’t mean you need to sing it.”

Lacey remembers singing with Ashley in cars, at the park, at parties ... everyone always trying to get them to stop. Maybe they couldn’t carry a tune, but they sure had fun. When had she stopped singing? Ashley still sang. Ashley wasn’t married. Sure, she had a kid, but wasn’t there something intrinsically *fun* about being a single mom?

“I used to wet his reed for him,” Lacey says, and Ashley and Shane groan.

Heartbreak looks at her, finally. She realizes if he doesn’t know what a woodwind is, he’s not likely to know what a reed is. “It’s a little wooden strip that goes on the mouthpiece,” she explains, holding her finger and thumb a couple inches apart to indicate size. “You moisten it before you attach it to the instrument. I don’t know why. That’s what Daniel always did, and then ... I did it for him.”

Heartbreak looks back into his drink, and Lacey feels the loss of something.

She lowers her voice, “How do you go from that to this?”

“This what?” Ashley asks, “You and Dan aren’t okay?”

“It’s all just so ...” Lacey waves her arms to try to come up with the right words, “mundane. It’s like we used to live in color, and now everything is gray.”

“How long have you two been married? Twenty years? Thirty?”

Too long, Lacey wants to say. She doesn't like talking years. Years belied her Botox.

"It's fine," she says instead. "Everything is fine. I just need another drink. You know what this lime reminds me of?"

Ashley grins, "Girl, you know you get crazy on tequila. I think the night you danced on the bar was a tequila night."

Lacey remembers the long-haired guitar player. That had been one hell of a night, of which, admittedly, she had only ever remembered bits and pieces. But *he* had been *something*.

Heartbreak needs a haircut. His hair is shaggy and uneven, but it falls over one eye in an endearing way that makes Lacey want to run her fingers through it to feather it to the side.

"Tequila shots?" she asks loudly enough for him and Shane to hear.

They indulge, and Lacey feels the rush immediately after biting the lime. The jolt of happy energy. Like she could dance on a bar. When had she last danced anywhere? The music seems louder, and the conversation around them seems to get louder to match it. Ashley and Shane go to play pool and Lacey eyes Heartbreak. He's still staring into his drink. She slips past the seats in between them and slides onto the barstool next to him, close enough so that they're almost, but not quite, touching. She peers into his drink as he looks up at her, his eyes widening slightly in surprise.

"You finding any answers in there?"

He looks back down. "No. But I keep looking."

"How about a dance?"

"No dance floor."

"That wouldn't have stopped Fred and Ginger."

“That’s kind of a lot of pressure.” He almost smiles, one corner of his mouth lifts, ever so slightly, and Lacey feels a shiver. He’s not just cute. He’s sexy. That’s a mouth that would know how to *do* things.

She touches his sleeve lightly. “How long’s it been since you danced?”

“High school, maybe?”

“Okay. We may not be Fred and Ginger, but we could be damn fine dancers as Lacey and ...?”

“John,” he supplies.

John? Not the name she had expected. Heartbreak suited him better. John was boring. Like Dan.

“Johnathan?” she asks hopefully.

“Just John.”

Just John, then. She slides her hand down his arm to slip her hand into his. “Dance with me, John.”

He kicks back the last of his drink and stands, lets her lead him to the open area of the dart room where, thankfully, there are no games going on. She steps in close and slides a hand to the back of his neck, rubs the hair there where he needs a haircut, feels warmth surge down her arm at the physical contact. Her watch buzzes and she slants her wrist out of habit. Daniel. Lacey wants to laugh. Does he have a sixth sense? This is just her luck. Finally dancing with this hot heartbreak of a man and her husband has to call.

“Do you need to answer that?” Heartbreak asks.

“Nah.”

He leads her in some kind of modified foxtrot, and it’s invigorating, like the tequila. Fun. He reminds her of someone. Who is it? The dark hair, kind eyes, sexy mouth ...

When the music slows, something John Mayer-like, they sway slowly, bodies close.

“This is nice,” he says, his eyes on her mouth.

She feels heat flood her face, and her wedding ring suddenly feels tight on her finger. But isn't this really what she had come here for? This kind of attention? This kind of affection? She feels like a starving person who has just been offered food.

She tilts her face slowly toward his, very slowly, giving them both time to stop it. Neither of them stops it. His lips are softer than she expected, surrounded by hair that is also soft, and she can't get enough of it. He returns her desire, and she thinks of Daniel. When had they *ever* kissed like this? When she was wetting his reeds? Maybe. Maybe, then.

“Lacey.” Ashley's voice is loud in her ear, “Babe, we should go.”

“Mmmmm,” Lacey continues kissing her cowboy. *That's* who he reminded her of! “Rip,” she murmurs. That was a name befitting this man. All he was missing was the hat.

“Lace, let's go,” Ashley is more insistent, tugging at her arm, and Lacey is loose, so she is easily manipulated away from the guy she can only think of as Rip now. What was his real name? Something boring. Rip is better.

“Come on. Shane's driving us.”

“I'm not ready.” She isn't even slurring. She could be much drunker before having to be driven home. She could have a lot more fun with Rip too.

“Lace, you're going too far,” Ashley says quietly right against her ear. “You can't do this.”

“I'm not doing anything.”

“Yeah, we all saw you not doing anything.”

Ashley changes tack and turns to Rip. “John,” she implores, “She's married. They have two kids.”

“The kids are grown,” Lacey interjects.

“Dan called,” Ashley says, “Your phone was over there lighting up the bar.”

“You’re a buzzkill, Ash.”

“And you’re married, Lace.”

Lacey rolls her eyes and walks back to the bar to pick up her phone. No messages. If Daniel really needed something, he would text.

“You should call him back.”

“Not tonight.”

“Don’t throw your marriage away. Do you realize how many women would give anything to have what you have?”

Rip had returned to his seat next to Shane. Lacey rubs her lips. His mouth had been so soft. He had kissed her so tenderly, like a man who could really love someone.

“You don’t know anything about it,” she says.

“I know Dan has worked his whole life for you and the kids. To give you all that worthless crap you love so much.”

Lacey slides back onto her barstool and swings her heels. Was Ashley calling her Jimmy Choos worthless? Seriously?

“I’m just looking for a little fun, Ash. I’m not looking to end it all.”

“Baaabe, what you’re doing...? This could end it all! You’re going to throw away a life for one night? Why don’t you call Dan?”

“I’m not calling Dan.”

“Maybe I’ll call him.”

“Call him.”

She was bluffing.

Ashely sighs in exasperation and retreats to the ladies' room, and Lacey takes the opportunity to go to Rip, sliding in between him and the bar to stand between his legs. She holds his face in her hands, strokes his cheekbones with her thumbs.

"Don't you think we both deserve a little fun?" she says, quiet enough only he can hear.

He reciprocates with his hands on her face, and they hold each other as they kiss like they are lovers who had been separated during The Great War. He was *something*, exciting and fun and new, and Lacey was on fire.

"One more tequila shot," she says between kisses. Fortification. This night was definitely going to end hot. He orders one for each of them and holds her hand in his as he licks the salt from it, holds her eyes with his. Good lord, this man, her Rip? She is in love. The last shot of tequila is overkill. She can't get any higher.

"Your place or mine?" she asks in between kisses. The answer is obvious as her place is hours away and her cousin's guest room has thin walls. Plus, her cousin doesn't approve, has emerged from the bathroom and is arguing with Shane. He should have kept them apart in her absence.

"Not my circus," Shane replies simply. "Not yours, either."

"Lace, you can't drive. Shane's driving." Ashley is irritably loud.

"I'm riding with Rip," Lacey states.

"Who?"

"John," John provides with a befuddled smile.

"John, you good?" Shane asks.

"I'm good," John replies, and he is, stands without swaying, takes Lacey's hand and leads her out of the bar without another word. Maybe he's in love, too, Lacey thinks. Maybe this is the

first day of the rest of their life. She walks close to him, not wanting her body to lose contact with his even for a moment.

“Where’s your car?” she asks.

He gestures to a motorcycle, chrome gleaming in the moonlight.

Lacey laughs. This is perfection. This is wild and hot and fun.

“I need to park my car somewhere. I can’t leave it here all night.” She’s only slightly slurring. She can drive across town to Ashley’s and park it there. There is absolutely no traffic on Main Street this time of night, and it’s a straight shot.

“You good to drive?”

“I’m good. Just to Ashley’s.”

“Then you’re coming home with me?”

Yeah, baby. She nods, cannot wait to ride his motorcycle to his house. To make love to this heartbreak cowboy of a man all night long. To spend the night in those arms. She had gone looking for something fun and exciting and new, and she had found it. He holds her face and kisses her gently outside her car.

“Drive slow. Follow me.”

She nods and watches him saunter to his motorcycle. She’s healed his heartbreak. She tosses her heels victoriously in the passenger seat and gets in to drive barefoot. The moon is high as she pulls out of the parking lot, following the motorcycle. The taillight glows red, blinker flashes as he pulls onto the street. Lacey looks up at the full moon, imagines it leading her, leading him, to love, to whatever life might hold for them.

She registers her car beeping its emergency collision warning a beat too late. She hears the crash without realizing what it is as she automatically hits her brake pedal hard, hears the screech of tires on pavement as her car hits something, and she is punched hard in the chest, the

face, knocked back against the seat. Her airbag has deployed. She's disoriented. What happened? What did she hit? A tree? A stoplight? A stoplight. She missed the new stoplight. Her heart stops. Rip.

She fights past the airbag to try to get to her door handle, finally finds it and pushes the door open, but her seatbelt is locked. She can't move; she can't free herself.

"Rip!" she calls. She struggles, panic threatening to overwhelm her. An emergency tool. She has an emergency tool, a little hammer to break glass with a blade to cut the seatbelt. She frantically feels around for it, finds it in the console where Daniel had put it. She slices the blade against the seatbelt and finally feels it release. She fights her way past the airbag and out of the car. Everything seems turned around. Her car is facing the wrong direction. She spins slowly in a circle until she sees the motorcycle on its side in the distance.

"Rip!" She screams.

She hears footsteps running, a flurry of activity passing her, and she runs after them, stumbles and falls, gets back up and continues to run, tears streaming down her face. She stops suddenly when she sees the dark mass in the road, the black hole where Rip's face had been, Shane kneeling over his chest working frantically to revive him.

Lacey collapses to her knees and screams his name into the despair of the night, begging the universe for an antidote to the last five minutes. "Riiipppp!!!"

Ashley kneels next to her and calls Dan.