

“An Accident of Wyrd”

by

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She was still beautiful, no matter the years that had passed. Her slightly rounded stomach had compacted into a hard stretch of abdomen that she almost absently bared to the world. Her hair was now a gleaming auburn, the red highlights that I remembered having stared at in class now dominant over plain brown strands. But those were the only obvious differences. Apart from those, all I could discern was a sort of glitter to her that hadn't been there before.

Perhaps I am wrong. She wasn't beautiful anymore; she was *gorgeous*, my original fantasy sashaying past me, led by the salivating host to the booth in front of the one I was sitting in.

"Thank you, sir," she drawled flirtatiously as she slid into the seat opposite me, nothing but two tables and two low-slung benches between us. Her voice was the South, flavored with the magnolia trees that stood in her yard back before she moved, back when I knew her. It went straight to my groin.

The poor host flushed, as affected as I was, and stammered out that her waiter would be with her shortly. He walked away, cursing himself for a coward, too intimidated to reciprocate her attentions.

I was staring at her, I knew. I couldn't seem to help it. I watched as she gave a cursory glance to the menu and then pulled a book out of her purse. I smiled at that. Guys might stare at her now, but still she read. I squinted at the title: *Social Intelligence*, by Daniel Goleman. Interesting. The last time I'd seen her, she'd been into past life regression. But that was so long ago....

"James!" A shrill female voice slapped me across the face. "James Sheridan! Are you listening to me?"

I saw her glance up, her eyes startled, before I dragged my attention back to my date, a girl who had seemed enormously attractive only minutes before.

Kitty glared back at me, her lower lip pushed out in a pout.

"Would you stop staring at that barely dressed whore?" she demanded, not losing any volume in deference to her subject's proximity. "She WANTS you to stare at her trailer-trash self!" She snorted, tossing her hair in a gesture of disdain. "She probably has like, the whole rainbow of STD's."

My mouth dropped open, empty of the words to defend that magical girl whom I'd known so long ago. How dare this excuse of a woman insult her!

"Pardon me." That caress of a voice sounded, and we both turned to see her standing at the end of our table, her smile directed more at Kitty than at me. "Since you've caught me out as a whore, I feel I might as well proposition your date directly." She nodded poison-sweetly, leaving Kitty choking on her rage, unused to being on the receiving end of such remarks, before she turned to me.

"How 'bout it, darling? Want to go somewhere private-like for dessert?"

I bit back shocked laughter. How outrageous, how utterly inappropriate! My carefully cultivated sense of social propriety shuddered while my deliberately smothered libido cheered.

But I'd only just managed to build up my social standing to the point where I was generally accepted. And the now sputtering Kitty was from among the popular set. If I ditched her to talk to this vision from my past, I'd be screwing myself over; those five years of hard work since starting middle school would be lost.

Then she winked at me, and I thought of all the fun we'd had when we were younger. I thought of her in a modest one-piece bathing suit by my pool; of her reading the eulogy in her Southern voice when my hamster died; of her making carb-less brownies because I was on the Atkins diet; of her laying on my bed as I played the Sims, too shy to complain of boredom; of her perched in that magnolia tree in her front yard, unaware that her underwear was showing beneath her skirt.

And then I looked up and saw her as she was now, her legs long beneath tight denim jeans, sophisticated in high heels and a hand-sewn crop top, her hair that classy shade of auburn.

"No..." I heard, as though outside myself. "I'm sorry."

Her lips parted in surprise, but I had to continue on; the words wanted saying.

"I'm sorry for not saying yes the first time you asked. I'm sorry for running away – from you, from me. I'm sorry for not returning your calls. I'm sorry for not telling the truth." I paused, a little confused by my uncharacteristic honesty and the final phrase in my head. "I'm sorry for growing up before you."

I looked back up to find her staring at me, brows knit together, head tilted to the side. Slowly, she nodded.

“I never forgot you, you know?” she said, all bold joking and innuendos gone. “I’ve been looking for you, really, every time I come back to visit this town.”

I inclined my head in return.

“I never forgot either,” I admitted softly.

“The past is over though, huh?” she asked, or maybe stated, smiling wryly, sadly. “You never wonder what if?”

“All the time.”

She looked perplexed at that.

“Then why...?”

I shrugged. I didn’t have a reason that I could think of, not really.

“Neither one of us is the same person as we were back then. That what if can’t be answered.”

She nodded again, now understanding something I only vaguely grasped at, and turned crisply back to her booth, grabbing her purse before returning.

“Goodbye, James,” she murmured, leaning down and pressing her lips to mine, moving away before I was sure what was happening.

I watched her backside as she left, gliding through the restaurant doors, easy and confident, not looking back.

“What the *hell!*” Kitty’s angry inquiries broke free of her throat now that the threat was gone, and I jumped, having nearly forgotten that she was still there, that she was still important. “What the *hell* was *that!*”

I eased back in the booth and smiled at her, drank in the sight of the most popular girl in school sitting across from me, in a restaurant, on a date.

“Oh, just someone I used to know. No one important.”

“Well, that was *super* weird and I *didn’t* appreciate it!” She all but spat the words, her usual slang swallowed up in seething. “How’d you end up associated with someone like *her*, anyways?”

“An accident of wyrd,” I replied calmly, winking jovially at her and picking up my silverware as the waiter set our food down. “You’re on purpose.”

