

Accidental Virgin

A Novel by
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and
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Introduction

Carly Miller and I, Bryan Perri, invite you, dear reader, to hear the story of our relationship told from our individual points of view. It begins about ten years ago in a cemetery, a most unlikely place for romance to be born, progresses to a friendly restaurant and a number of locations along the way.

The story is sometimes humorous and often tumultuous as we deal with our emotions and life experiences and the conflicts resulting from them. Can love survive where secret fears compound our already problematic relationship? To learn the answer, we invite you to share our personal drama in *Accidental Virgin*.

Chapter 1

While squatting beside my father's monument in Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery, and running my fingers over his name chiseled into the polished marble, my thoughts turned inward, seeing again his sharp blue eyes darkened by disappointment. I could still see the grim set of his doctor's jaw in his final days, the same way it was when he had to impart bad news to a patient. It was my fault. Having me, his only son, follow in his footsteps was his dream, as if only that could complete his life, as if only that mattered, and everything else counted for nothing.

I remembered the closeness of my youth, the warmth and love that marked our relationship until my college years when I rejected medicine as a profession. Then came, the arguments, the insults and bitter recriminations that wore us down:

"Son, you have the ability, the talent, the brains. And money's no object. Don't you see the golden opportunity you're throwing away?"

"But I don't have the heart for it, Dad. Don't you understand? Or the stomach for it. How many ways can I say it? Medicine's not for me. It's just not!"

"Bryan, listen to me," he pleaded. "I can open doors for you, ensure you a secure future, give you prestige in the community. Someday you'll have a family. You'll want the best for them, too."

It was hard to stand up to my father, a man of strong will, a good man, a good father, but I had to fight back for the sake of my own manhood, my independence. As much as I wanted to

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please him, I had my own life to live and I intended to live it my way, even though I wasn't yet sure what it might be.

Arguments erupted from time to time, followed by long silences and my mother's hand-wringing nervousness. Finally came my father's brooding resignation and withdrawal that left him forever saddened, grievously wounded, like a man mourning some great loss, as I stood now, mourning at my father's grave, not only for the father I lost, but for something that had been lost between us several years before his sudden death.

I straightened up, hurting with regret and guilt I doubted time could ever completely heal. How insignificant our differences seemed to me now, how trivial the endless arguments now that my father was gone. I uttered a few silent words I prayed my father could somehow hear and understand. As I raised my head, the sun parted the billowy white October clouds and warmed my face.

That's when my eyes fell on her for the first time. She was standing some forty feet distant near the peninsular edge of the cemetery lot, her head bowed and her hands buried in the voracious pockets of her beige, knee-length jacket. She might have been an angel, sculpted like the statuary surrounding her, or a beatific vision, with the sunlight radiant on her face, and her dark hair blowing free from the sides of her turned-up collar.

Or was she merely a ghost, an apparition? Intrigued, I stood a long time watching her, entranced by this solitary figure in this most solitary place. I felt oddly drawn to her, as if something tangible were flowing between us, although she seemed totally unaware of my presence.

I stooped to retrieve the trowel I had used to clean up the weeds around my father's granite stone and tapped the dirt

crumbles from it. When I rose she was gone. I glanced about, looking every which way, over the swales and grassy mounds topped with several marble and sandstone mausoleums. I peered around several rows of headstones and monuments, stood on tiptoes, saw no one. My heart fell. Was I hallucinating? Impossible. I know I saw a woman, a real woman, a woman as real to me in those scant moments as I myself standing there. I felt agitated. I lingered, shaking my head, scanning the area again. Mystified, I wondered if being in that sad and lonesome place had addled my senses.

A gust of wind skirling across the rainbow-carpeted earth lifted a billowing cloud of fallen leaves like a flock of startled birds. Reluctantly, I turned and headed back to my car, my head low, my feet crunching the coarse gravel covering the lane.

I dropped the trowel on the floor behind my car seat, and moved to climb in when I saw the sunlight glint off the tail lights of another car, mostly hidden by foliage on a separate lane just around the bend. Could it be? My spirits picked up. I knew now I wasn't hallucinating or going mad. As I approached, I saw her standing there in a beige jacket and blue jeans, looking lost and lovely. I hurried toward her. Sensing her apprehension at my approach, I assumed what I thought was my most disarming smile.

"Car trouble?" I asked in as pleasant a voice as I could muster.

She backed up a step. "Of sorts, I guess."

"If your battery's dead, this is the right place for it," I punned, instantly worried that my little joke might be in bad taste, though not as bad as my original thought: *What's a nice ghoul like you doing in a place like this?*

In that moment our eyes met before wavering in mutual uncertainty, I thought I saw the twitch of a reassuring smile. She

edged back. “The battery’s fine, I think. I—”

“Must be your choke, then. Two to one that’s the answer. Common problem with these pre-fuel-injected models. Do you have a hood latch inside?” I asked, stripping off my top coat and laying it over her open car door.

“No, but—”

“No, of course you probably wouldn’t in an older model like this. *Secretly I wondered where she found an old clunker like this one.* I’ll check it out for you,” I said, moving around to the front of the car. “I’m no expert, understand, but I’ve tinkered a lot with car engines in automotive class in high school, so I do know quite a bit, if I say so myself.” Finding the latch inside the grill, I lifted the hood while keeping up a steady stream of light banter to keep her from thinking or worrying too much about my possible motives.

“You’re lucky you don’t have a broken fuel line or something like that, at least not as far as I can see. These wires are getting pretty brittle, though. They could use a changing,” I said, hoping to impress her. “Better have them checked out the next time you take it in for service.”

I stole flickering glances at her as I spoke. Up close she looked even more dazzling than she did from a distance. Uncovered now, her hair, raven black, hinted at mysteries unplumbed, especially the way it partially shielded her face and unfurled to her shoulders.

“Wow, take a look at the gunk on this engine, will you? It’s a wonder this baby ever started up at all. Or didn’t actually catch fire. I’ve seen it happen once before, on my first car, in fact. Just like that, in an instant, the heat of the engine ignited all the gummy stuff. I was afraid it would hit the gasoline vapors and blow the car to pieces. And me with it.”

“Oh, my gosh,” she said, peeking under the hood tentatively

and stepping back again.

“I have an old blanket to cover the fender—to keep me from getting greasy while I work. Nothing upset my mother more than having to wash greasy clothes, but I’m sure you know how that story goes. Anyway, that moth-eaten blanket came in handy for smothering the flames before anything disastrous happened. It was literally a life saver. You better make it a point to get the engine steam-cleaned, too, when you take it in, and make sure they check the head gasket.”

“I certainly appreciate your advice, but—”

“Don’t worry, it’s free,” I chuckled, soaking up in furtive glances the flashing blue eyes that seemed to take in everything and nothing at once, the delicate chin tucked in defensively, the fine, slender nose with nostrils slightly flared, like a forest creature testing the air for danger. The tilt of her head suggested a wariness and —what both scared and excited me— a certain sense of danger or, at the least, adventure.

I lifted the greasy cover and stuck my finger into the carburetor throat. “Do you want to try starting it now?”

“I really doubt—”

“We won’t know till we try, will we?” I said, amused that she, a woman, should presume to know more about cars than I did. “I think this will fix it,” I said, mightily pleased with myself. Smiling, I watched her from the corner of my eye, trying to gauge my effect on her.

“Look here first,” I instructed, cleaning my fingers with a tissue from my pocket and motioning her close. “If this ever happens again when you’re alone, just stick a pencil or something like it right there.” I gestured. “That’ll hold the choke open while you turn the key to start up.” Judging by her wide-eyed expression, I knew I was impressing her. “Once the engine fires up, take the pencil out, set this cover back on and

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screw it down tight with this wing nut. Simple as ABC,” I added, noticing the frown spoil her smooth brow. “Now if you want to get in and start—”

“I’m sure it’s valuable to know all that,” she offered hesitantly, and before I could interrupt her again, she said, “but I believe the problem is there.”

Puzzled, I followed her pointing finger toward the battery. “But you said it wasn’t dead.”

She poked downward. “The tire,” she said flatly. “It’s flat.”

I know my face turned beet red and I stepped back, running my hand through the mop of hair flopping over my damp forehead. *What a jerk! Of all times to make a fool of myself. A major fool!*

“I noticed the lean of the car,” I said, stammering, “but...but I thought she was just on a low shoulder here.”

“Yes, I can understand that.”

“You can see it’s on a little downhill slope here, too.”

“Yes, I see it is.”

What did that tiny smile at the corner of her mouth mean? Or was it a smirk?

“And with the body so low to the ground, it’s really hard, even under the best of conditions to tell the tire’s flat.”

“Yes, I see that. It is hard to tell, isn’t it? Lucky, I just happened to notice it when I approached that side of the car. I probably would have ruined the tire if I tried to drive away on it.”

I bent down and inspected the wheel. “Uh-oh. This tire’s shot, totally. Split in the sidewall. Wouldn’t have made any difference if you did drive on it.” I straightened up. “You’re

fortunate it didn't blow while you were moving on the highway, otherwise you'd have lost complete control and...well...."

She shuddered. "I see what you mean."

"I'll change it for you," I said, covering the carburetor, screwing it down and slamming the hood. "You do have a spare, don't you?"

"Yes, but I don't think—"

"Don't tell me, let me guess: the tire's fine but you don't have a jack. It never fails. It's okay, though, I have one in my car that will work."

She brightened. "Oh, yes, yes, I do have one."

"Well, that's a plus," I said, rambling on compulsively, hoping to keep her mind off the embarrassment still burning my wounded ego.

The lavender scent of her perfume wafted on the breeze made me giddy as I took her keys and moved to the rear of the car. I raised the trunk lid and stooped inside.

A loud thunnkk reverberated from the compartment as the lid dropped suddenly and struck my head. Dazed, I reemerged, blinking hard and rubbing my crown. "Looks like you have a faulty piston there, or something," I said, smiling foolishly trying to ward off another round of embarrassment.

Instinctively she moved toward me. "I'm sorry, I really am. I should have warned you about that. I forgot all about it. I've been meaning to have it fixed. Are you all right?"

It hurt a lot but I said, "It sounded worse than it was." I touched my head and looked at my fingers. "See?" I said, holding them up, "no blood. Which is good because I hate the sight of blood."

Seeing for the first time her open, unabashed, dazzling white