

# An Accidental Meet-up

Leah St. James





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Meet-up*

A Short Story  
by Leah St. James

*Bump!* It came from behind, rocking my car for an instant. I froze, my right foot squarely on the brake, and shot my eyes to my rain-splattered rear-view mirror. Behind me, sitting in a swath of the gas station's yellow-gray lighting, was the hood of some large vehicle—a pickup, or monster SUV. Its powerful engine rumbled and snorted, then cut out.

Had I hit him? Had he hit me? Not sure why I presumed the driver was a “he,” I eased my foot off the brake and started to pull away from the pump. I had rolled only a couple inches when the big horn blared, as if saying *STOP!*

Bit of an overkill, if you asked me, for what amounted to a tap, regardless of who hit whom. If anyone's vehicle was damaged, it was sure to be my 10-year-old sedan. Besides, what was he doing pulling so close behind me in a gas station anyway?

On the other side of the pump, the teenaged attendant stood watching while he squeegeed dirty water from another car's windshield. I lowered my window and waved until I got his attention.

“You see any damage?”

“Nah,” he said with a small smile—the kind teens give adults when they're trying to hide their amusement. But I knew I was in trouble when his smile froze and his eyes widened, fixed on something behind me. I dropped my gaze to my side mirror and caught a glimpse of the driver of the truck/SUV, making his way toward me.

I scrambled from the car and pivoted to face him and his vehicle, an oversized pickup. They were both big, tall and broad, like they'd been tailor made for each other. The driver was in full-stalk mode, arms swinging at his sides, hands balled into fists, his face set in a grimace. He neared, seeming to suck the oxygen from the surrounding space. My space.

I gulped.

Road rage had taken its natural evolutionary course and had morphed into gas station rage.

Pushing my lips into a half smile—enough to convey concern but not fear—I

took a good look. Dark, dark shaggy hair—not a styled shaggy, though, a needs-a-cut shaggy that matched his needs-a-shave face. His eyes were dark and unreadable behind no-nonsense glasses that had slipped a half inch down his nose.

Actually, he wasn't bad looking, all things considered. And there was something eerily familiar about him. My stomach fluttered, as if it had already figured it out.

With a deep breath, I forced a cheerful smile toward the very annoyed alpha male who had stopped two feet away. Something about catching flies with honey flickered through my consciousness, but not long enough to gel. All I knew was I better make it good, because this guy looked like he was ready to squash me under the heel of his black leather boots.

"Gee," I began, working on the premise that a good offense is the best defense, "it's so nice of you to get out and check to see if there's any damage to my little car from you creeping up suddenly like that on me, and everything."

It worked, for a second. The guy shook his head, like one of those cartoon double takes, and his eyebrows lifted, then lowered, then jammed toward each other until they nearly touched.

He took another step in my direction. I retreated a step and shot a quick glance at the attendant who'd moved to a sporty powder blue car in the next lane. Could he see us? Was he witnessing this about-to-be crime? I squinted. No, he was making goo-goo eyes at the young thing driving the little blue car. Even from here I could see a good amount of cleavage. No hope for salvation from the kid.

My gaze swung back to Mr. Angry. He was pointing his finger at me, his mouth working but no sound coming out. Finally he said, "What the hell are you talking about, lady?"

Holy God, this was going to get nasty. The man had an accent, and I knew immediately he was one of those expatriates from Brooklyn, or maybe Staten Island—I always mixed up the two dialects—who had been swarming in alarming numbers into my little town on the Central Jersey Shore.

"It's okay. I'm sure, you're not familiar with our local customs, being that you're from the City and all. But it's a common courtesy we practice around here to give

the car in front of us enough room to back up. You know, without playing bumper cars. But it's okay. No harm done. I'll just mosey on out of your way, and you can get your gas."

"Wait just a damn minute. You hit my truck."

Drawing myself up to my full five-feet-five-inch height, so I only had to raise my eyes about eight or nine inches to stare into his—a deep, pansy-velvety brown—I responded, "I most certainly did not. And even if I did, I was only rolling back. There couldn't be any damage to that, that..." I waved a hand in his general direction. "...that tank of yours."

I leaned to my left, hoping for a line of vision around his bulk so I could see his bumper. He crossed his arms, leaned to block me, and crooked an eyebrow.

"Let's let the cops figure that one out."

"The cops?" I hated when my voice squeaked like that. "I hardly think that's necessary." On the other hand, maybe it would be best. Lord knew we wouldn't have to wait long. Patrol cars were a plentiful sight around town. In fact, you could pretty much flag them down any time of day or night. The local drunks liked to think of them as their personal taxi service. "But if that's what you'd like, fine."

Stepping across the pump barrier with an injured "excuse me" muttered in my enemy's direction, I marched to the curb and waved my arms in the air.

A minute later I was giving my statement to the young officer who had pulled up. A patrolman from a second car was busy directing the gas station traffic toward the other pump island. Mr. Complains-About-Nothing was still posed, and poised, for battle, making snide little comments about my answers.

"What the hell kind of name is Carlene? What, are you from Mayberry or something?" He snickered.

For a second I debated whether to dignify his rudeness with a response, but he'd hit a sore spot. I'd always hated my name, a name that my mother had come up with during her country-music phase. Other mothers listened to sophisticated jazz. They christened their daughters with tasteful, dignified names like Patrice or Judith. Even daughters whose hippie-era mothers listened to Sixties rock got off

better than me in the name department. Oh, they could complain all they wanted about being named Sunshine or Terra – as in *terra firma* – but any one of those names would be a lot easier to take than *Carlene*. You could pretend they were nicknames, or favorite childhood endearments that stuck through adulthood.

Not much you could do with *Carlene*, except make fun of it. You couldn't make a nickname out of *Carlene*. What would it be? *Car*? I had tried it for awhile, and I could hear the kids even now: *Car, Car, C-A-R, stick your head in a jelly jar!*

I shuddered, visibly. "There's no need to get personal."

"Hey," he interrupted before I could get in a good insult about him being a no-class bully, "I know you! I thought you looked familiar!"

My eyes shot to his face. He was grinning. But it wasn't a happy grin. It was one of those knowing, "*aha, gotcha*" kinds of grins. And then I realized why he had seemed familiar. He *was* familiar.

His daughter was in my son's third-grade class. I'd noticed him across the room on Back to School Night. He was the only man there without a wife. Kind of coincidental since I had been the only woman there without a husband.

I'd seen him from a distance on two occasions after that, once picking up his daughter after school, and a second time when he rode into the parking lot on a Harley to watch his daughter parade in her costume on Halloween, the sleeves of his tee-shirt rolled up to stretch tightly across his not-unexceptional biceps. That had been six months ago, and the man had caused me many restless nights. He had to pay.

But I shook my head. "No, you're mistaken. We've never met."

"I never said we met. But I know who you are. You're that school person, the one that runs the parent-teacher group at my daughter's school."

What could I do? I was busted. And being PTA president had seemed like a good idea at the time.

I smiled and held out my hand, "Well then, despite the circumstances, it's nice to meet you, Mister. . . ? I knew full well what his name was. I just didn't want him to know I knew. Nor did I want him to know that I had, in a completely involuntary,

absolutely uncharacteristic savant-like display of brainwork, memorized his home address and phone number from the class list. I told myself it was just for future reference...you know, in case I ever needed it in the commission of my official duties. Like if a blizzard hit town and I had to call all the parents to come get their kids, and his daughter's emergency card was somehow lost. There were a whole host of reasons if you really thought about it.

"O'Malley, Matt O'Malley."

"Oh, Mallory's father?" I bit my tongue. This wouldn't be a good time to point out he hadn't done his own daughter any favors in the naming department. That poor kid probably sprained her tongue every time she introduced herself.

"Yeah, I'm Mallory's dad." His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head, studying my face, before another *aha* grin resettled on his mouth. Only this time it wasn't so arrogant, more like satisfied. My stomach fluttered again. "And you have a kid in the same class, don't you?"

"Listen, Mr. O'Malley," the police officer blurted, "there's no damage to your car, not even a scratch. What do you say we forget about this? I'm sure Mrs. Adams will be more careful the next time she backs up at a gas station."

"Adams. Yeah, now I remember." To be fair, only a hint of the laughter that I could hear in Matt O'Malley's voice made its way to his face. "Your son is Samuel. Samuel Adams."

"I swear to you, the choice of names for my son was my ex-husband's fault. It was all *his* idea. I was exhausted and on an emotional high from giving birth. No mother should have to decide on an innocent baby's name under those circumstances. I certainly wouldn't have chosen for my only child to go through life, forced to convince people he had *not* been named for a brand of beer. At the time I was thinking Revolutionary War, patriotism, and all that!"

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat, and his grin reappeared. "Hey, I can relate. You don't think I picked *Mallory*, do you? My ex-wife thought it was poetic. She liked the syllabic rhythm...or some garbage like that. "

I felt my own lips curving into a smile, a small one at first, then wider, and for a

second I worried that my face might split. “*Syllabic rhythm*. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard those two words used together.”

“Yeah, neither had I. I’m not even sure *syllabic* is a word.”

“You can pull out now, Mrs. Adams, if you don’t mind. We’ve got a traffic jam going here.”

The officer’s words pulled me from my perusal of Matt O’Malley’s face, from wondering what that stubble would feel like against my skin. Naked skin. The two of us entwined on satiny sheets, some instrumental music pulsing softly from his top-of-the-line sound system. He had a top-of-the-line truck. He had a Harley. The man liked his toys....

Mortified at my thoughts, my ears heating as if under a sun lamp, I reached for the car handle. “Oh, sure. Sorry about that.” I felt my eyes drift back to my new almost-friend. “I’ll be off then. It was wonderful to bump into you, Mr. O’Malley.” A hysterical laugh shot up my chest. “Sorry, I’m a sucker for puns.”

“Yeah, me too. And call me Matt.” His brown-eyed gaze lingered over my face as the words exhaled caress-like from his lips, and damned if I didn’t sway toward him for a tiny second. It was all I could do to stop myself from licking my lips, from running my hands through my dirty-blond hair to bring it to some sort of order. It was all I could do to keep from leaning in for a nice long whiff of that all-male aroma—the scent of oozing, raw testosterone.

In my defense, it had been a long, long time since I’d had a man use that *I want you* tone with me. A long time since I’d seen a man’s eyes focus on me with something close to interest.

My ex, Warren, had walked out the second Sam hit his terrible twos—and I had hit my terrible thirties. Seemed Warren liked his women young, young enough to bamboozle them into thinking he was a catch with his ancient family pedigree, his law partnership and his fancy BMW. He was now on his second family, and I wish I could accuse him of being a crappy dad to his first, but he wasn’t. Only a crappy husband. He’d stopped paying much attention to me about the second Sam was born, like I’d fulfilled some royal duty to breed and no longer served a purpose.



Ten years was a long time for woman to turn off her woman genes.

Somehow in all these years, no man had turned them back on, until this, this...encounter with truck-driving, Harley-riding Matthew O'Malley.

Swamped with regret that I wasn't confident enough to pursue the idea, or the man, I opened my door.

"Say," he said quickly, but not like an afterthought, like a last chance, his quick touch on my arm sending goose bumps all the way from shoulders to fingertips, "the kids are in school, it's just about lunchtime, and I have a couple questions about the stuff that goes on in that school. I'll buy you a sandwich at the deli down the block, and you can fill me in. My ex-wife doesn't tell me anything."

He swung my car door open for me, holding my elbow as I settled into the bucket seat.

"I'm sorry," I answered with a gulp, trying to ignore the shivers that had now overtaken my body, "that could be construed as trying to influence the president. But I'll go halvesies."

He shut my door and leaned his left arm on the roof, watching me through the still-open window, that knowing smile playing on his lips, his eyes smiling along with them. "Deal. Meet you there in about ten. And while we're there, after you get done telling me all about that school, you can tell me about yourself. Like how did a Jersey girl get a name like Carlene."

I watched him in my side mirror as he strode back toward his truck, filling out the backside of his jeans the same way he filled the truck. As if sensing my eyes on him, he turned, cupped his mouth and shouted, "Make sure you put it in drive this time, okay?"

I leaned out my window, shouted back, "Oh, don't you worry, Matthew O'Malley, next time we make contact, you'll know it's on purpose."

~ The End ~