



# ON THE LINE

MILWAUKEE FOOTBALL CLUB BOOK 1 

# LIZ LINCOLN

---

# ON THE LINE

A Football, Single Dad, Nanny Romance

Milwaukee Soccer Club

Book 1

---

LIZ LINCOLN



# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Thank You](#)

[Other titles by Liz Lincoln](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

*For my amazing stepdad Peter, who instilled in me a love of  
football. I miss you every day.*

---

## Chapter 1

---

CARRIE HERON'S toes wiggled impatiently inside her shoes. It wasn't the cashier's fault that Carrie had put off grocery shopping until eight o'clock at night, when her stomach was ready to digest itself. But it was his fault he was possibly the slowest cashier on the planet.

The man in line behind Carrie set his purchases on the belt, drawing her attention.

The first thing she noticed were his tanned arms, all thick, corded muscle. Her gaze moved up to his wide shoulders and solid chest, wearing a maroon Milwaukee Dragons T-shirt. She took in his jaw, covered in a neatly trimmed blond beard, and his blond hair, pulled into a bun at the nape of his neck. His nose was pink with fading sunburn, like he spent his days outside.

Her toes stopped wiggling so they could curl. She was a sucker for tall, muscular guys. And for beards. And man buns. And blondes. If he had blue eyes, she quite possibly would jump him right here in the grocery line. They certainly had plenty of time.

She allowed herself a glance at his eyes.

Clear, light blue.

Had someone sucked the air out of the grocery store? She felt a bit faint.

Beardy McMuscles glanced up and caught her looking. He gave her a conspiratorial smile, inclining his head slightly

toward the cashier.

Carrie managed to keep her cool, smiling back and rolling her eyes. Inside, her pulse fluttered and her toes uncurled so they could curl again. Good thing she'd opted for tennis shoes and not flip-flops. She hated getting her feet wet in the rain, even a warm early-September storm like tonight's.

She made herself look away before the eye contact became staring and he decided she was creepy. Her gaze dropped to his purchases, two items behind hers on the conveyer belt. A bunch of bananas and a box of super-plus tampons.

Tampons. Well then.

He was clearly married. And absolutely smitten, because no man bought feminine hygiene products for anyone but a wife he adored.

Like it mattered. She wasn't going to ask him out or anything.

"That'll be \$127.49."

The cashier's high-pitched voice drew her attention away from McMuscles. When had food gotten so expensive? She flashed the teen a quick smile, then reached into her purse for her wallet.

Her fingers brushed her keys, cellphone, lip balm, sunglasses, a paper napkin she needed to throw away, loose change. No wallet. She set the bag on the edge of the counter and peered inside. No wallet. She took out most of the items, one by one. No wallet.

Dammit. She didn't have time for this. Not only was she starving, but she was supposed to do laundry at her brother's tonight. He'd threatened to start watching the last episode of *The Walking Dead* without her if she didn't show.

"Well," she said, her voice overly bright, "I guess I left my wallet at home." She shoved her hand into her hair, trying to think. At least she was too frustrated to get embarrassed by her extreme idiocy. "Can you . . . is there a way to set this aside, and I guess I'll run home and grab it, then come back?" She couldn't wait and come back tomorrow. If she didn't buy the

food tonight, she'd have to get takeout for dinner. Which didn't fit into her unemployment budget.

She resisted the urge to scream in frustration, biting down on the inside of her lips to hold in the sound.

“Sure, I can suspend the transaction and leave it at customer service,” the boy said. He barely looked older than her former seventh-grade students. Shouldn't he be home, getting ready for school tomorrow?

“Thanks,” she said, voice weary. “I appreciate it.”

Bananas appeared in front of the cashier. “Here, add these to her total. I got it.”

Carrie's heart stopped for a moment, leaving room for her stomach to drop to her feet. Mouth gaping, she turned to McMuscles. He was sliding his credit card through the machine.

“Wha . . . I . . . you . . .” Until a few months ago, she'd been responsible for the education of Milwaukee's youth. Yet she couldn't form a full word.

He grinned—of course he had perfect teeth—and for a second she couldn't catch her breath. Hot man. Buying her groceries. She was hardly a damsel in distress—OK, maybe a little in distress, but not a damsel—and he wasn't a knight. All those muscles would probably break his armor. But oh, she was going to swoon.

“Thank you,” she finally managed to say. With that grin, he was a million times hotter. That, and his enormous generosity, had her completely stunned.

“No problem.”

He had a deep but gentle voice, at odds with his size and immense masculinity.

When the cashier started to put his items in a bag, McMuscles waved him off. “No bag. I got it.” He took the bananas and tampons in one large hand.

“Have a good night.” The cashier handed over the receipt.



Carrie gave him another awkward smile that felt forced. She was still in shock. People didn't buy someone else's groceries. It was a huge gesture and she couldn't quite wrap her mind around it. "Thank you again. Really. You don't know how much I appreciate it."

"No problem. I'm glad to help." He walked beside her as she pushed her cart toward the exit.

"Your wife is a lucky woman. Very few men would be willing to buy tampons."

He cleared his throat and looked a little embarrassed.

Why had she said that? She was racking up the idiot points tonight.

"I'm not married. It's for my daughter." His ears and neck turned red, which was both adorable and sexy.

"Oh, wow, I wouldn't have guessed you were old enough to have a daughter who . . ." Realizing what she'd said, Carrie clapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. That was rude." *Shut up, Carrie.*

"No, it's OK. I was young. And she's only twelve." His blush crept to his cheeks and eventually his whole face was red. He stopped right before they reached the door. "It's, uh, you know, her first time. She'll know what to do with these, right? I mean, girls know these things, talk about them with their friends. Yeah?" He waved the box of tampons.

Super plus tampons. Carrie clenched her thighs at the idea of how uncomfortable that poor girl would be. Shaking her head, she pushed past the awkwardness to say, "Nope. Those are way too big for a twelve-year-old girl. I can't let you give her those."

Humor danced in his eyes as he narrowed them at her. Those gorgeous blue eyes, framed by thick dark lashes that didn't quite go with his blond hair. "I buy your groceries for you, and you repay me by giving me a hard time?" The corner of his mouth twitched, like he was trying not to smile.

He was teasing her. OK, she could do teasing. She nodded vigorously, matching his almost-smile. "Seriously, I'm saving

your daughter from a much worse time.”

As quickly as it had appeared, his teasing expression faded. “So what’s . . . shit.” He scrubbed his hand over his face, then glanced skyward, his face tight. He made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat, and it was so sexy, it had Carrie clenching her thighs again.

They were discussing his daughter and feminine hygiene products and she was turned on. When had she gotten so pathetic?

“What do I get her? I don’t . . . I have no idea.”

She had to put away her groceries, scarf down dinner, and take her laundry over to her brother’s before he started their show without her. It was already after eight o’clock, and her stomach was yelling at her. She shouldn’t do this.

And yet . . .

She swung her cart back toward the aisles. He’d bought her groceries. It was the least she could do for him. For his daughter. “Come on.” She put her hand on his forearm and pulled him with her. If she was going to do this, she should at least get to feel those amazing muscles.

He flexed under her hand, and a zap of electricity shot through her, hitting her square in the chest. He was warm and solid—so very solid—and she wanted to touch him everywhere.

Geez. It wasn’t like she’d gone years since her last time. But Lord, he was just so masculine. And big. And muscled.

And adorably embarrassed.

He followed, though she had no illusion that she actually had the power to move him. “What are we doing?”

“I’m gonna help you figure out what you need to buy.” She turned down the aisle they needed.

He stopped, so she did too. Because it would be weird to keep touching him, she removed her hand. He glanced down at his arm, then at her hand, then up to her.

Her stomach, still working its way back up from her feet, thumped.

“You don’t have to do that. I’m sure you have things to do. Mads and I will figure it out.” He gestured to the shelves. “You can tell me what she needs.”

He had no idea how many choices there were. If she said “Get maxi pads,” he would be lost. “I teach seventh grade. I would never forgive myself if I didn’t help out a girl stuck with her dad for her first period.” She glanced at him. “No offense. But no girl wants to share this with her dad. I promise.”

He ran his hand over his head and made a noise. She couldn’t tell if it was assent, dissent, or plain annoyance. Whatever emotion it conveyed, it was damn sexy.

“I thought you were in a hurry.”

Right there in the feminine hygiene aisle, she gave up on *The Walking Dead*. “This is more important. A girl never forgets her first period. It’s a rite of passage. But a somewhat miserable one, considering you’re bleeding and have no idea what to do.”

He looked lost and a little desperate. “I thought girls talked about this stuff.”

Carrie thought back to her preteen years. She and her friends had wondered what it would be like, but they didn’t talk about practical stuff like what to do. Only one girl in her group had gotten her period before Carrie, and she was the shy, quiet one. So Carrie had gone to her mom, and her mom got out a box of pads and explained what to do. Then they’d gone to get ice cream and some new comic books.

“Not really. Not until they’re older and all complaining about having their period.” Carrie gave him a smile she hoped was sympathetic and encouraging. Poor guy. It couldn’t be easy being a single dad for a tween girl. “But her first period is a big deal. Maybe even a bigger deal than the first time she has sex.”

“Jesus! She’s twelve!” He stepped back, glaring at her like she’d suggested his daughter was the Antichrist. “She is *not* having sex.”

His reaction was so vehement, so typical dad, Carrie couldn’t help laughing. “No, I didn’t mean she is. I mean this is a big deal too. You want it to be a positive thing. And if you give her a gigantic tampon, you’ll terrify her.”

“How big are we talking? You said it’s like the first . . .” The blush returned to his ears and he rubbed his chest, scratching the Dragons logo on his T-shirt. He glanced at the box, shot a glance in the direction of his groin, then looked away quickly and back to Carrie. “They’re not *that* big, are they?”

It was her turn to blush, imagining what he was referencing as “that big.” He was a huge man, probably everywhere.

Once again, she couldn’t draw a full breath as she held up two fingers side by side. No, this wasn’t awkward at all. She was not thinking about what this Thor look-alike could do with two fingers.

The heat in her cheeks rapidly spread throughout her body “About like this. I think she might want something a little friendlier, don’t you?” Why had she offered to do this? She was discussing tampons and a child’s menstruation with the hottest guy she’d ever met, because of course that’s what she’d discuss.

She didn’t even know his name.

“I’m Carrie, by the way.” She held out her hand, partly to be polite, but also because she really wanted to touch him again. She’d never been this attracted to a man she’d just met. Then again, she never met men who were both stunningly gorgeous and adorably human.

His giant hand engulfed hers and his tanned skin made her fair skin look almost white in contrast. “Seth.” He squeezed her hand, firmly but not hard enough to crush it, the way some men did to exert their dominance. His palm was rough, and she noticed he had athletic tape around one of his knuckles.

She glanced up at him and found him watching her. There was that spark again. The zap. Oh man. She wanted to climb his huge body until she could kiss him.

Wow, OK. Time to derail that thought train. She forced herself to turn back to the shelves. “Maybe let’s try something that goes on the outside for now.” Why couldn’t she shut up? He didn’t want a play-by-play, and she sounded like one of those lame sports announcers.

She scanned the boxes until she found regular-absorbency pads, the same brand she preferred. The girl likely wouldn’t need the super-thick ones yet.

Seth took the box from her and studied it carefully, turning it over to read the sides and the back. “I don’t think Mads will want to wear a diaper thing.”

“Trust me, she’ll prefer it to trying to put in a tampon.”

He cringed when she said *put in*. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t have sisters, do you?” He was almost comically clueless.

“Two younger brothers.”

“Then you’ll have to trust me, as someone who’s been doing this for fifteen years.”

He nodded, but his attention was still focused on the box. “If I give her this box, she’ll know what to do? She and her friends covered this?”

“There are instructions in there.”

He nodded again. “OK. We can do this.”

“I’d suggest you don’t help her with it.”

“Right.” He looked up, his eyes powerfully blue as they met hers. Oh boy. There was that funny stomach thing again, along with a burst of awareness in her chest.

He stared back, as much as she did. He shifted his weight, moving closer to her. She couldn’t stop herself from doing the same. His gaze dropped to her mouth. Of course her teeth decided it was a perfect time for a nibble on her lower lip.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly and leaned away.

What the hell was that? They had a *moment* in the middle of tampons and pads? A moment that left her heart racing and her cheeks hot and her whole body antsy.

“So. That should do it.” Taking a step back, she tossed her hand toward the pads. “Do you have someone you can ask if she has questions? Is her mom around?” Probably a loaded question, and way too personal. But she felt a certain kinship to this girl she’d never met.

His face tightened. “No, her mom is most definitely not around.”

Carrie sighed and gathered her courage. This was about the girl and not ulterior motives. “I’ll give you my number. You can call if you have a question.”

He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and unlocked it, then handed it over. It was the same phone she had, so she easily found his contacts.

As she typed, he stepped closer, close enough she could feel his warmth against her arm. It was like his energy came into her space. Which was totally weird but still how it felt. She liked the feeling.

It was tempting to add more of her information so he would stay that close, but she had no reason to, so she handed the phone back to him.

He took it, glanced at it, then slid it into his back pocket. “Thanks.” She thought he was giving her a faint smile, but his facial hair made it hard to tell.

“No problem.” She started back down the aisle with her cart. She didn’t want to separate from him, but they could hardly continue chatting in the feminine hygiene aisle. Plus, he had pads to deliver.

“You bought my groceries. It’s the least I can do.” Their conversational detour had made her momentarily forget her stunned gratitude at his gesture. Now it came flooding back, the reminder good people existed, the reminder you could make someone’s day by doing something kind, the reminder

she needed to pay it forward. Did helping him count as paying it forward?

Maybe, but it would never be a bad thing to do more.

They reached the checkout. It was time to part ways, since she didn't have anything to buy and he did. He gathered his bananas and the box of tampons he'd set in the baby seat of her cart.

Tucking his three items under one arm, he held out his other hand. She gladly took it. After the initial jolt, warmth spread through her. She looked up at him. She wasn't tiny, standing five foot seven, but he made her feel small. He had to be at least six-four.

Did he feel the attraction too? Or was he just a supremely nice guy with cash to spare? She opened her mouth, the words *Would you like to get a drink sometime?* on the tip of her tongue. But nerves held her back.

"Thank you, Carrie. I really appreciate it, and I know Mads will too." He gave a gentle squeeze, and it electrified her arm. His wide smile electrified the rest of her.

"My pleasure." She smiled back, her mind screaming for her to ask him out. But she couldn't force the words past her throat.

With a smile and a nod, Seth took his hand back. She could have imagined that he trailed his fingers over her palm. It might not have been deliberate. "Have a good night." He turned away to get in line.

Disappointment settled on Carrie's chest as she pushed her cart out of the store. She should have asked him out. He was kind, he was hot enough to melt her brain, and he was clearly a responsible guy, dedicated to his daughter.

At least he had her number. Maybe he'd call.



SETH PACED THE BREAKFAST NOOK, restless as he waited for his daughter to finish with her . . . girl things. As he did when forced to think about Mads' mother, he mentally cursed Jessalyn. He completely understood not wanting the responsibility of a child at nineteen; he sure as hell hadn't. But she'd made the choice to have their baby. And bailed before Mads' first birthday.

But they did well together, he and his girl. Most of the time he was glad they didn't have to deal with Jessa's drama. On the rare occasion she contacted him, Jessa wanted money; rarely did she inquire about their daughter.

But tonight, having a woman around would have been really damn helpful.

His mind jumped back to the woman at the grocery store. Carrie. His body tightened at the memory of her long red hair and sweet blue eyes. Her hand had felt small but strong in his. And her smile. She'd burned him from the inside out when she smiled.

He could admit buying her groceries was at least 10 percent thinking with his dick. Not that he thought she owed him if he did. He'd wanted to do something nice for the most beautiful woman he'd seen since moving to Milwaukee three months ago.

Then she'd turned around and saved his ass.

He took his phone out of his pocket and pulled up her contact information. He could call her. Ask her out for a drink. Spend some time getting to know her, listening to her talk in that smooth, slightly husky voice. She'd mentioned being a teacher, and he bet all her male students had crushes on her.

But maybe he'd imagined the attraction in her eyes. He was definitely interested in her, and her smiles and body language had seemed to say she returned the interest. But who knew?

Jesus, the scene in Houston had spoiled him. Being a star linebacker meant he had women throwing themselves at him. He got daily marriage proposals on social media. For his first



few years in the NFL, he'd taken advantage of his celebrity status. His parents watched Mads for the most part, and he partied like a rock star.

Or a football star.

But that lifestyle got old fast. Somewhere during his third season, he realized he wanted better for himself, and for his daughter. So he devoted himself to the two things he loved most: football and Mads.

He still had no problem getting dates when he wanted. He had relationships. But he rarely had to do much pursuing. Women made it known they were interested.

This insecure infatuation was something he hadn't felt since high school, when he wasn't even a starter on the football team. He hadn't gotten a scholarship, and had to go as a walk-on at the University of Texas, less than ten miles from where he'd grown up. There he'd quickly become Somebody, and had been ever since.

But hell, he hadn't gotten where he was in life by waiting for things to happen. If he wanted something, he went after it.

His thumb hovered over the call button, and he was about to tap it when Mads walked in.

His gut sank, but he locked his phone and shoved it in his back pocket. "Hey. Everything go . . . OK?"

She stared at her feet, at her hands, at the floor, at the counter. Anywhere but at him. "Yeah," she mumbled.

Shit. This sucked.

He cleared his throat. How did he cut through the awkwardness and get back to the easy, comfortable relationship they'd always had?

They were always honest with each other, so maybe that's what they needed here. "Look, Mads. I know this situation sucks. I'm sorry. Some things are gonna be awkward. If it helps, this is really weird for me too."

She wandered into the adjoining living room and flopped onto the couch. "It's really OK, Dad. I FaceTimed Sophie."

Seth followed her into the living room area of their open kitchen-living-dining room and sat in the armchair facing her. “Good. I’m glad you have her to talk to. You’ll make friends here in no time.”

His trade to the Dragons had been rough on Mads. She’d asked to stay in Houston and live with his parents, but he couldn’t put that burden on them. And dammit, he was her father.

As a compromise, he’d let her spend a final summer in Texas with her grandparents and friends. So while he’d moved in June, as soon as the trade was a done deal, Mads had only come a week ago. He was damn glad to have her.

“Yeah, I guess.” Her voice lacked conviction.

Of all the days to get her first period, the night before her first day at a new school had to suck the most.

“I’ve gotta be at practice until late tomorrow. Sarah is going to pick you up.” They’d been over this already, but he didn’t know what else to say to her. In Houston, his parents had taken care of her when he was out of town or had late practice. Since it hadn’t occurred to him until two weeks ago that he needed someone to do that here, he hadn’t yet found someone willing to be a twelve-year-old’s nanny.

Sarah, the wife of his friend and now teammate Lemalu Feu’u, was generously helping until he hired someone. He’d known Lem since they played together at the University of Texas, and he’d known Sarah since she started dating Lem their junior year. He trusted them almost as much as he did his parents.

“I know.” Mads didn’t roll her eyes, but it was implied in her tone. She fussed with a strand of her light brown hair, inspecting the end for who knew what.

He should be going over his playbook. He’d spent the summer not only in the grueling workouts of training camp but also learning a whole new system. Now it was week one of the regular season and he had to know his shit.

Sometimes, though, Mads was more important. “Remember, it’s a strange week. We play the Thursday night game, so I leave on Wednesday.” He hated playing on Thursdays. Routine was everything. Ritual. Playing any day except Sunday screwed him up. The only thing that made it not a complete clusterfuck was that all the players on both teams were equally thrown off their routine.

She stood up, not looking at him. “I know. You’ve only reminded me, like, a million times.” She started out of the room. “I’m going to bed.”

“This early?” It was still an hour before his mandated lights-out.

“I got some new comics I want to read. Night, Dad.”

“I love you, Madison.”

“Umm, you too.”

Seth stared after her long after she disappeared. No “I love you too”? When he left Texas at the beginning of the summer, she’d been the sweet, devoted girl she’d always been.

Why the hell had his parents sent him this moody, distant impostor?



CARRIE PULLED into the visitor’s spot in her brother’s parking garage, tugged her laundry bag out of the trunk of her car, and lugged it to the elevator. Because she was on a tight budget, Jason let her come over every week to use his washer and dryer so she didn’t have to pay for the laundromat.

She rode the elevator to his fifth-floor loft and let herself in. As she shut the door behind her, her phone pinged to signal a new text message.

Seth?

Her pulse stuttered at the idea the sexy single dad might be contacting her so soon. Though it was likely about his daughter, not asking her out.

“Hey, Jace!” she called as she headed for his tiny laundry room. He was undoubtedly using his laptop on the couch and watching ESPN, his unofficial home office setup. He was a talent scout for the Milwaukee Dragons, the local NFL team. Watching sports news was an actual job requirement.

After starting her first load, Carrie leaned back against the dryer to check her message. On the off chance Seth had sent a flirty text, she didn’t want to read it in front of her big brother.

But the message was from her landlord.

Evan: *Letting you know I sold the house, closing 9/28. New owner won't be renting, so you need to be out by 9/27. Sorry!*

Carrie read the text three more times before the words started to sink in. Evan, who lived in the upstairs apartment while she occupied the downstairs, told her he had put the house on the market. But he’d sworn he was looking for someone who would let her stay.

Since she’d lived there for five years, and after two they’d given up on her formally signing a lease, she had no legal standing to protest. Which was her own damn fault for trusting Evan not to screw her over.

And the jerk hadn’t even had the balls to come down and tell her when she’d been home putting away her groceries and grabbing her dirty clothes. His car had been in the driveway, so he’d been home.

“Fuck.” She had no income, dwindling savings, and less than four weeks to find a new place to live.

Tears scratched at the back of her eyes as she shoved her phone back into her purse and headed for the living room.

“Hey,” Jason mumbled distractedly as she flopped into the armchair that matched his black leather sofa. As she’d guessed, he was on the couch, laptop balanced on his knees, pen between his teeth, notebook on the cushion next to him, and a preseason football game on the TV.

Carrie didn’t bother checking who was playing. Despite her older brother being the star of their high school team, a starter at the University of Texas, and now a scout for the

Dragons, she'd never cared about football. She knew who most of the best Milwaukee players were, and the handful of celebrity players from other teams—everyone knew Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers—but most players could walk by her on the street and she wouldn't have a clue. So her interest in a preseason game was negative.

And right now she really needed to talk to her big brother. “Before we start *Walking Dead*, can we talk?”

Jason nodded distractedly. He took the pen out of his mouth to jot down something. “I'm almost done. There's curry in the kitchen if you're hungry.”

“Thanks.” She was famished, so she didn't bother asking what kind. She wasn't picky. And it had been so late when she finally got home with her groceries, she'd skipped making something, despite it being the reason she'd gone in the first place. Big brother to the rescue again.

She served herself a plate of Thai red chicken curry and rice, got a beer from the refrigerator, and resumed her seat. She didn't let herself think about her housing predicament, because she'd work herself into a circle of panic. Whereas if she talked it out with Jason, she'd force herself to stay calm and rational.

She took a long drink of her Sprecher Black Bavarian, her favorite local brew, which Jason kept on hand. When she set the bottle on the side table, she looked up to find him watching her.

“What's up?”

The drone of the announcers' voices had disappeared. She glanced at the TV to see the game paused, a player hanging in midair, the football inches from his outstretched hands.

If he'd paused an in-progress game, Jason must have realized how upset she was. And here she thought she'd hidden it well.

He set his laptop on the table in front of him and leaned back into the cushions. “It's Saturday's game. Not live.”

Of course. She should have known better.

“You having a rough night since school starts tomorrow?”

“No. I thought I would, but no.” Meeting Seth had held off some of the melancholy she surely would have otherwise felt. She’d avoided her best friend Amy’s texts all weekend, not wanting to hear about her back-to-school preparations and complaints. Teaching wasn’t Carrie’s dream job, but she enjoyed it more than most people seemed to enjoy their jobs. And she really liked having a paycheck.

“Surprisingly perceptive of you, though,” she teased, her attempt to keep the mood light.

Jason rolled his eyes. “I have my moments.”

“I got a text from Evan. He sold the house and I have to be out by the twenty-seventh.” The words tumbled out of her mouth, then she shoved a chunk of chicken in to prevent herself from wailing or letting loose a string of profanities.

“Shit. That sucks.”

She made a noise of agreement.

Weighty silence hung in the air as Carrie ate and Jason looked at the ceiling, a sign he was thinking hard. Finally he huffed out his breath. “I mean, if you need to, you can stay here, but . . .”

He spread his hands to indicate the couch. His condo was spacious for a single guy, but there was no extra bedroom. She’d be stuck on his couch. At best, she could fit a twin-sized air mattress in the corner. It would be better than homelessness, or moving up north to live with their parents. But it was far from preferable.

Six months ago, she’d been saving every extra penny from her paycheck to buy her own house. Now she was unemployed, had burned through her down payment money and most of her savings, and was about to be evicted.

She let out a yell-growl of frustration. “How did everything get so fucked up?” She wanted to throw her fork across the room, but Jason’s silverware didn’t deserve the abuse. Besides, she had better uses for a fork, like stabbing Evan in his cowardly, traitorous face.

“I suppose with school starting, you’re out of luck finding a new teaching job, huh?” Jason leaned forward, elbows on knees. He still had a thoughtful expression, but it did no good to press him until he decided to say whatever was stewing in his head.

Appetite gone, Carrie took her half-eaten dinner to the kitchen, which was part of the same open room as the living and dining rooms. She loved her brother’s loft, especially the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Lake Michigan. At least if she had to live with him temporarily, the view would be included.

“I still have one job I haven’t heard back from. Ninth-grade earth science at a private school way out in Waukesha.” The suburban school was much more upper-crust than the Milwaukee public school kids she was used to. The pay wasn’t as good and she hadn’t liked the headmaster or the science division chair during her interview the previous week.

But it was a job. “I should hear soon. I can’t imagine they want to get too far into the year without a teacher.”

Jason nodded absently. “I can ask at the stadium. We’re probably hiring event staff.”

“Great, I’ll be a hot dog vendor!” Fake enthusiasm made her words come out overly bright. She knew teachers who worked second jobs as food vendors at the various sports arenas around town. But she’d rather work retail. Which was looking more and more like a possibility.

“What can you do besides teach?”

He’d tried to initiate this conversation back in April, when she’d been notified she was being laid off. But she’d been certain she could find another job. After all, science teachers were in demand. Except in southeastern Wisconsin, apparently.

“Sew superhero costumes.” It made her a total nerd, but hey, as a science teacher, she was already pretty nerdy. And in her spare time, she did cosplay. Usually as the Batman villainess Poison Ivy, herself a redheaded scientist. While

there was probably a market for seamstresses who could make complicated custom outfits, Carrie's skills weren't that good. She only sewed the parts she couldn't buy.

"You make a mean apple crisp," Jason added.

"Perfect. I'll be a crisp baker."

"What about . . ." He pinched up his face like he didn't want to finish the sentence.

"What about what?" Anything was worth considering. Well, almost anything. If he suggested she try out for the Dragons, it was a wasted conversation.

"You remember my friend Lainie?"

"Your college roommate? Sure." They'd been teammates and best friends, but because Jason had gone to school so far from home, she'd never met the guy. He and Jason were still friends, but Lainie was still playing in the NFL—in Texas, maybe?—last she'd heard. What did that have to do with her?

"He just got traded to the Dragons."

"That's great." Still had nothing to do with her getting a job.

"He's looking for a nanny. I don't know what it pays, but I can find out."

A nanny? For a rich football family? Could she do that?

It beat selling overpriced junk at the mall. Or overpriced popcorn at the stadium.

"I guess?" Way to sound super confident.

Jason typed something on his computer, tapped one last key with a flourish, and looked up. "I sent him a message asking for details. I'll let you know."

"Thanks?" What did Lainie and his wife need a nanny to do? Presumably watch their kids while they were at work, but was there anything else? Carrie didn't know much about nannying, other than what she'd seen on TV and in movies, which were hardly a reliable source.



Jason set his laptop on top of the notebook. “I know it’s not teaching, but at least it’s working with kids, right? Maybe she’s into comic books too.”

Except Carrie was a teacher because she didn’t know what else to do with a science degree, since she didn’t want to be a doctor, either the MD or the PhD kind. She liked kids, sure, but it was science first. If Lainie needed a nanny, his daughter couldn’t be old enough for the science Carrie taught. At most, Carrie could probably teach her how to make a vinegar and baking soda volcano.

A noise of frustration bubbled up her throat, but before it could escape, Jason’s computer made a trumpet sound. He tapped the keyboard, then read something on the screen. As he did, his mouth turned up in a smile. “Perfect.”

“What?”

“Lainie says he’s looking for a live-in nanny. He’s negotiable on salary. Just wants to make sure his daughter’s in good hands. He’s emailing me the job description. But he’d love to set up an interview.”

Carrie pulled in a deep breath and held it. A live-in position. It did seem ideal, solving both her job problem and her housing problem. But did she want to be a nanny?

Did she have a choice?

“Let me call that other school first. I don’t want to tell your friend I can do it, then get the teaching job. And no offense to him, but I’d still rather teach.” Probably. She really hadn’t liked that school. But she could handle it for a year while she kept looking for a job back in the public school system.

“Sure.” Jason typed out his reply on the computer.

“I mean, if I get that, I shouldn’t have a problem finding a new place.” Though with the pay cut, she’d have to downgrade significantly. Probably a studio, maybe a one-bedroom. Definitely not a spacious two-bedroom like she was in now.

“Can’t you move in with Amy or something?”

Carrie and Amy had been friends since they were twelve, so Jason had known her almost as long as Carrie had. “She moved in with her boyfriend in June. So no.”

Jason’s computer trumpeted again. “He said sooner is better, and if there’s anything he can do to persuade you, he’ll do it. He trusts my sister more than a random stranger from a nanny service or Craigslist.”

Carrie picked up her beer and tilted it toward her brother, tapping it against an imaginary bottle for a toast. “So I’ve got that going for me.”

---

## Chapter 2

---

SETH: *It's Seth, from the store Monday night. Thanks again for your help. You're a lifesaver. Mads called a friend back home and figured it out.*

Carrie: *Glad it worked out. I've thought about you a lot the last two nights. Take it you're from out of town?*

Seth: *Moved here a few months ago.*

Seth: *I thought about you a lot too.*

Carrie: *I'm out of practice. Are you flirting with me?*

Seth: *I am. If that's not OK, I'll again thank you for your help and you'll never hear from me again.*

Carrie: *No, it's fine. I might be awkward, but I'll attempt to flirt back.*

Seth: *Awkward I can handle. A husband or not being into men, I find, is a deal-breaker.*

Carrie: *Not married. No boyfriend. Into men.*

Seth: *Noted. How do you feel about men who'd like to take you out on Saturday night?*

Carrie: *I'd like to say yes, but I'll be at my parents' all weekend. Next weekend?*

Seth: *Standing Friday night date with Mads. Out of town Saturday and Sunday. Can I interest you in a weeknight?*

Carrie: *Yes, but not right away. I have an insane amount of crap to deal with for the next few weeks.*

Seth: *Explains why you were so stressed the other night.*

Carrie: *That obvious?*

Seth: *No comment. My answer seems inappropriate for our first text flirtation.*

Carrie: *Now you have to tell me.*

Seth: *You'll think I'm a jerk.*

Carrie: *I have a brother; I already know guys have sex on the brain 24/7.*

Seth: *Not 24/7. Sometimes we think about sports.*

Carrie: *Fair.*

Seth: *Still not telling you.*

Carrie: *What if I won't go out with you unless you do?*

Seth: *You drive a hard bargain. When I noticed how stressed you were, I thought of several ways I could help you relax.*

Carrie: *I see.*

Seth: *Too far, wasn't it?*

Carrie: *No. I . . . no.*

Carrie: *Appreciate this is 100% out of character for me to tell an essential stranger. But . . .*

Seth: *You have my attention.*

Carrie: *Dammit. My landlord is at the door—part of the crap I'm dealing with. I'll have to tell you later.*

Seth: *Ooh, that's cold.*

Carrie: *Nothing about me is cold right now.*

Seth: *Me either, darlin'.*

Carrie: *TTYL (sorry, too much time around tweens).*

Seth: *I'll definitely talk to you later (and me too).*



STEPPING off the metal stairs and onto the tarmac, Seth switched his phone out of airplane mode. The late afternoon Florida sun beat down on the back of his neck, his navy polo instantly uncomfortable against his skin.

Although the plane was equipped with Wi-Fi, Tom Kelsey, the Dragons' head coach, insisted they all turn off their phones. He wanted the players focused on either relaxing or studying the late changes to their playbook for tomorrow night's game against Miami.

As Seth walked with his teammates to the chartered bus, he opened his messages to see if Mads had sent him anything. And, if he was being honest, to see if Carrie had finally gotten back to him.

He'd checked right before turning off his phone on the runway in Milwaukee. But her confession remained incomplete. He'd shot off a quick message asking if he'd get to hear her out-of-character confession, but so far no response. What if he'd pushed too hard? She'd admitted to being flustered. He'd meant his text to be light and flirty. What if she took it as creepy?

It had been too many years since he'd really tried to catch a woman's interest. His relative anonymity was a refreshing change, but it also left him floundering in the dating pool, the fool who thought he knew how to swim but in reality had a life jacket keeping him afloat for years.

"You expecting some hot sexts?" Matt Baxter, the young starting quarterback, asked.

Seth sure as hell hoped so. Maybe not sexts, but at least flirting. Maybe even hot.

"Sadly, no." He wasn't telling Baxter. "Seeing if any crises popped up with my daughter. First week at a new school, and twelve-year-old girls are all drama."

“Doesn’t her mom take care of that shit when you’re out of town?”

Seth hitched his carry-on bag higher on his shoulder. It was an innocent enough question. He didn’t know any other football players who were single dads with sole custody.

“Her mom’s not around,” he said, voice tight.

Baxter put his hand on Seth’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, man. That must’ve been hard for you, losing your wife.” The kid’s big blue eyes dripped with sympathy. “Shit, me and Celia’ve only been together a few months, and I’d rather get sacked a thousand times in a game than go through that.”

He was so sincere, Seth couldn’t help chuckling. “Last I knew, Jessa was perfectly healthy. She couldn’t handle having a kid, so she split. Terminated her parental rights a week after I got drafted.”

“Oh. Shit. My bad.” Baxter’s cheeks pinked.

“No sweat.” Seth stood back so Baxter could precede him onto the bus. “She was a lousy mother. It’s the best thing for all of us. It was a poorly chosen one-night stand that ended up being the best mistake I ever made.”

Seth followed his teammate onto the bus.

“You like being a dad?” Baxter asked over his shoulder.

“Only thing I love more than football.” Seth chose a seat and dropped his bag onto it. Because they were all oversized men, the team hired enough buses that each player got his own pair of seats to himself. Trying to squeeze two 300-pound men into the tiny seats would be comically uncomfortable.

“Sorry, man.” Baxter gestured to Seth’s phone, which was still in his hand. “I should let you check on your daughter. And I’ll check in with my girl.” He wagged his phone at Seth.

Seth settled into his seat and opened his messages. Nothing from Mads, but his gut tightened when he saw a message from Carrie. Thinking of her set off a stirring in his groin.

*Carrie: I suppose if I wait any longer, this goes from anticipation to just plain mean. Again, this is out of character*

*for me . . . so imagine my face pink and very hot.*

Seth preferred to think of her flushed and hot for other reasons. Like his hands running over the soft curves he'd zeroed in on the second he got in line behind her. He tried not to be a total Neanderthal, but he was still a single guy with a healthy sex drive. He appreciated a great pair of tits and hips he could get a good grip on.

Carrie had both.

*Carrie: Last night, I had some . . . dreams about you.*

Seth nearly choked on his tongue, then started coughing. His thighs tensed as desire jolted through him.

Fuck, that idea was hot. He pictured her in a plain white T-shirt, in a bed with all white linens. Waking up, thinking of him, aching. In his imagination, her nipples were hard and her hand moved under the sheet that covered her lower body.

*Carrie: Apparently my subconscious thinks you have incredible skills.*

Jesus. He barked another cough and had to shift positions to accommodate his growing hard-on. Only Lemalu, across the aisle from Seth, would be able to see him; Seth shot a glance over at his friend.

Just his luck, Lem was watching him with eyebrows raised and a wry smile.

“What’s wrong?” Lem asked, his voice all teasing. “Maddie accidentally send her sext to you instead of her boyfriend?”

That was all it took to kill Seth’s erection. The heat in his limbs was for a different reason now. “Fuck you.” Lem thought he was hilarious.

The idea of Mads talking to a boy about sex—hell, even *thinking* about sex—was panic-inducing. Yeah, it was an old-fashioned, overprotective dad reaction, but he couldn’t help it. When it came to his baby girl, he wanted the best of everything. And while he would never regret having her, he was keenly aware that her conception had been less than ideal.

“Girls grow up so fast these days.” Lem laughed, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“How old is Iris?” Seth asked, even though he knew the answer. She was his goddaughter, after all.

All humor fled from Lem’s face. “Suck it, asshole.”

Seth shrugged. “She’ll be twelve before you know it.” Lem’s oldest, of four, was only eight. He’d been smart to wait until he was a professional football player before marrying Sarah, the woman of his dreams, and reproducing.

Lem flipped Seth his middle finger. Donning his headphones, he leaned back in the seat.

Seth followed his friend’s lead, relaxing and getting lost in his music as he imagined all the skills Carrie’s subconscious might have bestowed upon him.



SETH FLIPPED through the channels but there was nothing worth watching, so he switched off the TV and tossed the remote onto the other side of the hotel bed. He picked up his phone to check the time. Almost seven o’clock in Miami, which meant almost six in Milwaukee.

They had a team meeting at eight, so he had time to call Mads before she ate dinner and he headed downstairs. Because he also wanted to talk to Sarah, he called her and Lem’s house phone rather than his daughter’s cell.

“Hello?” Sarah answered.

“Hey, it’s Seth. Just checking in. Everything go OK tonight?” Mads had still been at his parents’ during his two preseason away games, so this was the first time he was leaving her overnight.

“Everything’s good,” Sarah said cheerfully. Fortunately, Mads liked her and the kids.

“Mads around?”



“She’s in the guest room doing homework. I’ll get her.”

“Thanks. We won’t be back until very early Friday, so I’ll pick her up Friday morning.”

“That’s what you said.” Her voice held a smile. “But I appreciate you reminding me several times. Like I haven’t been doing this for years.”

Point taken. “Sorry. It’s her first time staying with someone other than my parents.” He trusted Sarah, but he still had first-time jitters.

As he waited for his daughter to come to the phone, Seth propped his tablet on his knees and scrolled through tomorrow’s game plan. Miami had a new starting running back, and if his performance in training camp and preseason was any indication, he would give Seth and the rest of the defense a hellish workout.

“Hey, Dad.”

Seth switched off the tablet. “Hey, baby. How’s everything going with the Feu’us?”

“Good. Sarah made homemade pizza for dinner, and I don’t know what she puts in the crust but it’s amazing. She promised she’d send some home for you.”

Seth grinned. She sounded like his lighthearted girl again. “Looking forward to it. You have homework already?”

“Some reading for English. He wants us to get started on *Red Badge of Courage*.” She sighed the long-suffering refrain of tween girls. “It’s soooooo boring.”

Seth chuckled. “I don’t remember finding that one all too fascinating either.” He’d never been a huge reader, except for articles about his favorite teams and athletes. That hadn’t changed. “Make you a deal. Suffer through that book and I’ll give you twenty bucks to spend on comics.”

“Deal!”

Pizza and comic books. His daughter wasn’t that hard to figure out.

“How are the rest of your classes?” he asked. “You meet anyone you’d like to hang out with? Everything going all right?”

Silence met his questions.

Was he being too nosy? He just wanted to make sure she was settling in at her new school. He wasn’t blind; just because he thought she was the most perfect girl in the world didn’t mean kids her age would. She was into drawing, comic books, and costumes. She’d carried a certain level of respect from her peers at her old school because she’d grown up with them, and because of who he was. But this was a whole new situation.

“It’s fine.” The tight, almost angry tone of her voice said things were anything but fine.

“Is there—”

“Sophie’s calling on my cell. I gotta go. I promised I’d talk to her tonight. Love you, Dad. Bye.”

“I lo—” Before he could finish, the line went dead. Mads was off to talk to her friend from Houston. Maybe. She could very well have made it up to avoid talking to him.

“I love you, baby,” he said to his silent phone. He dropped it on the bed and, chest heavy, resumed reviewing his playbook.

A little while later the phone beeped with a text.

Sarah: *Give her time. Seventh grade is the hardest year for girls—at least it was for me.*

Seth: *Thanks. I just want her to be happy. You know how that goes.*

Sarah: *I certainly do.*

Since he was already in his texts, maybe he’d answer Carrie’s latest. The one that had nearly made him swallow his tongue. He still had fifteen minutes until the team meeting, and he couldn’t cram any more blocking schemes into his brain. If he didn’t know it by now, he wasn’t going to learn it tonight.

Seth: *I might need you to tell me what skills your subconscious thinks I have. You know, to confirm if I have them for real.*

He stared at the phone, waiting for her reply. Except he had no idea what she was up to. She could be out. She could already be in bed.

She could be in the shower, running her hands over her wet, naked body. Playing with her nipples and imagining it was him. She could—

Shit. He did not need a hard-on for his meeting. He thought about the biggest, hairiest teammates he'd played with and what they looked like wandering the locker room naked.

As always, that did the trick. Guaranteed erection killer.

He checked his phone again. Ten minutes until the meeting. He ran a hand over his head, tugging on his ponytail. He hated this antsy, restless feeling.

He was considering heading down early and taking the stairs to kill time when his phone beeped. He practically dove on it like it was a loose, live football.

Carrie.

The jittery sensation slipped away, replaced by a tightness under his skin.

Carrie: *You have a while? Because dream-you had a LOT of skills.*

Damn.

Seth: *I have a meeting in a few minutes. Start with one or two and the rest will have to wait.*

Carrie: *It's not a skill so much as . . . an observation, I guess? Your chest was as muscular as your arms. (For the record, I'm back to feeling like a human torch.)*

Seth: *That one is true. (I hope that's b/c you're excited, not embarrassed. I love that you're sharing this. Confidence is sexy.)*

Seth adjusted himself, letting his hand linger over his revived erection. The jolt of lust that shot to his toes startled him in its intensity. When was the last time he'd been this turned on by a woman he'd done nothing but talk to?

Possibly never.

Carrie: *Really? THAT toned? (It's a mix of the two, but I'm working on shifting the balance.)*

Seth: *Yes. That toned. And now I really do have to go.*

It was a perfect opportunity to mention why he was so muscular, since she seemed to have no idea he was a professional athlete. But it would have to wait.

Carrie: *A meeting this late at night?*

Seth: *No rest for the wicked.*

Considering he'd probably be up half the night jacking off while imagining her dreaming about him, those words were truer than she knew. But she'd probably cease all communication if he said that.

Carrie: *And are you? Wicked?*

Oh, hell. He loved flirting with this woman.

Seth: *When the situation calls for it.*

Carrie: *Noted.*

Seth: *Sleep tight. I look forward to hearing about tonight's dreams.*

Smiling, a comfortable warmth humming through him, Seth slid his phone in his pocket, grabbed his tablet, and headed out. He'd think about hairy men in a minute. For now, he wanted to enjoy the buzz of anticipation.

"Chamberlain, hold the elevator!" Reid Sutherland called from down the hall. He was the left outside linebacker, the counterpoint to Seth at right OLB.

Seth pressed the button to hold the doors open as he waited for his teammate.

As Sutherland entered, he nodded. "Thanks, man."

“No problem.” Seth held back a rueful smile. No more need to conjure up a hairy man in his imagination. Sutherland fit the bill perfectly.



HEART BEATING A LITTLE TOO FAST, Carrie tapped the email icon on her phone. All summer, checking email had been like this, knowing that among the random marketing emails and newsletters she subscribed to could be either a job rejection or a request to set up an interview.

She'd left a voicemail the previous day with the head secretary at the school that was her last chance, but she hadn't heard back. Checking the websites of every school district in a five-county radius had yielded no open positions for her to apply to.

Her pulse hammered when the dean's name rolled onto her phone screen. But before she could even open the message, she knew what it would say. As she skimmed it, her eyes only caught a few words:

*. . . my apologies . . . another candidate . . . best of luck . . .*

She dropped onto her couch, staring at her phone unseeing. She wasn't even disappointed she hadn't gotten the job. She hadn't wanted that one.

But it represented her last chance. She'd spent four months applying to and interviewing for every teaching job she could find. She had six years of experience and good recommendations. Her annual reviews were overwhelmingly complimentary. And science was an in-demand field.

For every one of those jobs, she'd been second-place material at best. Maybe some of it was because of intangibles like connecting better with the interviewer. But at the end of the day, it meant the same thing: no one picked her.

It was like grade school gym class all over again. But with much higher stakes.

On her coffee table, the Starbucks application she'd grabbed stared at her. But she didn't want to make lattes for a living. Even if it was only for a year.

Or she could call Jason. Have him set up an interview with Lainie. It inevitably paid better. And included rent. And electricity. Probably cable and Internet.

Before she could talk herself into and out of it a dozen times, she called her brother.

"Yep?" he answered. The noise around him was so loud, Carrie could barely hear him.

"This a bad time?" Usually Wednesday night wasn't busy for him.

"Nah. Just watching tape with a few other guys," Jason said distractedly.

To punctuate his point, two voices in the background started yelling. "You see that, Heron?"

"Bullshit. Take him off the list," Jason said. To Carrie he added, "Sorry. What's up?"

"I didn't get that last job."

"Sorry."

"It's OK. I didn't really want it. Anyway, it's down to Starbucks or your friend. So can you go ahead and set up an interview?" Her throat squeezed a little, making it hard to get the words out. She leaned forward, elbows on knees, and rested her forehead on her free hand.

"Sure. They're in M— Damn, did you see that spin? We gotta look closer at Beaty."

"Fuckin' poetry," someone in the background agreed.

"Jason!" Carrie snapped. She just needed his attention for another minute. He couldn't look away for that long?

"Sorry." He cleared his throat. "The team's out of town tonight, season opener tomorrow. But I can text him. Pretty sure they're off Saturday, so I'll tell him ten o'clock. That good?"

She and Amy had planned to go to a yoga class, but this was more important. “Perfect.” She paused for a moment, then added, “Thank you, Jason. I really appreciate this.”

“Hey, beats having my little sister crash in my living room.”

She could picture the uncomfortable expression on his face. She and Jason got along, but they’d never been super close and they weren’t vocally affectionate with each other. Her laugh was as awkward as his words. “Right. Anyway, let me know if Lainie needs to meet another time.” Though couldn’t she just meet with his wife? Surely she would be around on a Saturday, along with the daughter.

It didn’t matter. At this point, she’d interview at three in the morning if she had to. This job was her last option.

Carrie: *How was your meeting?*

Seth: *Fine. Standard stuff. Shouldn’t you be sleeping? It’s almost midnight.*

Carrie: *Can’t sleep. My brain won’t let go of things for the night.*

Seth: *You want advice, commiseration, or to take your mind off it?*

Carrie: *I’m impressed. Most guys jump right to the advice.*

Seth: *I might not know feminine hygiene products, but I have paid some attention.*

Carrie: *LOL.*

Seth: *So which is it?*

Carrie: *I don’t want to keep you up.*

Seth: *Got at least another hour before I wind down enough. And talking to you is much more interesting than what I’m reading. Lay it on me.*

Carrie: *I’ll take distractions for \$200, Alex.*

Seth: *LOL. Friendly distraction, flirty distraction, or . . . a step beyond flirty distraction?*

Carrie: *I'm not sure we've known each other long enough for sexting.*

Carrie: *I can't believe I said that.*

Seth: *No need to be shy on my account. But I was thinking of something between flirty and sexting. I'm just not sure what you'd call it.*

Carrie: *In the interest of being confident . . . go a step beyond.*

Seth: *Can I ask for more details about these dreams you had?*

Seth: *If it makes it easier, I never remember my dreams, but I've been thinking about you when I'm awake. I'd imagine there's some crossover with your dreams.*

Carrie: *You're really going to make me say it. Well, type it.*

Seth: *I can't make you do anything. But I can encourage it. Should I tell you something first?*

Carrie: *I think you've already shared about 4x more than me. Still, it might.*

Seth: *Provided you're agreeable, the first chance I get, I plan to slide my fingers into your hair and kiss the hell out of you. You have lips I think I could kiss for hours. . . .*

Seth: *You there? Did I freak you out?*

Carrie: *No. My fingers were too shaky to type. That sounds perfect. Beyond perfect.*

Seth: *I wish you were here right now.*

Carrie: *In my dream, you started with basically that. Kissed me until I could barely stand. Until every part of me wanted every part of you.*

Seth: *I don't think I'm breathing right now. Pretty sure I'm more turned on than if we actually were sexting.*

Carrie: *So it won't turn you on more if I tell you I slid my hand under my pajamas?*

Seth: *Did you?*



Carrie: *OMG I typed that.*

Seth: *Did you???*

Carrie: *No . . . but I might have to before I fall asleep.*

Seth: *You're killing me.*

Carrie: *That's no good. Then we'll never get to try this out.*

Seth: *This is definitely happening.*

Carrie: *I'll hold you to that.*

Seth: *I damn sure hope so.*

---

## Chapter 3

---

INTIMIDATED DIDN'T BEGIN to cover how Carrie felt making her way up Lainie's front walk. She didn't know what architectural style his house was—Colonial, maybe? Bungalow?—but it was big, made of the cream-colored brick that had earned Milwaukee the nickname “Cream City.” The house wasn't as big as the mansions along Lake Drive, but they were only a few blocks off the lake. It was definitely in mini-mansion territory.

Maybe it wasn't the huge house so much as the idea of working for a millionaire, doing a job she'd never done before, that had her twisting her birthstone ring around and around her right ring finger. Her toes wriggled inside her flats. She forced them to stop as she took the three steps to the concrete slab porch.

Dammit, she could do this. If she could keep twenty-five seventh graders interested in the difference between meiosis and mitosis, she could wow one football player and his wife, and take care of one little girl. Squaring her shoulders, she rang the doorbell.

As she waited, she turned and glanced down the street. Her brother's friend lived on a quiet street in one of the nicest suburbs in Milwaukee County. The surrounding houses were equally large, all with sprawling, well-landscaped lawns, many with circular driveways leading to three-car garages like Lainie's. At ten o'clock on a Saturday, the neighborhood was alive with activity. Like any other neighborhood in any suburb.

She could fit in here.

The sound of the door opening had her turning back to the house and the man standing in the doorway to greet her. “Hey, you must be—”

“Carrie?”

She stopped and stared at the blond, bearded man in front of her. Except he couldn’t be her brother’s friend; he was the man she’d met in the grocery store last week. Seth, the man she’d been exchanging scorching texts with. The man she’d pictured as she got herself off, more than once.

The man whose last name and profession she didn’t know. Who had been in Florida Wednesday night for work, the same night the Dragons were in Miami for a game. Who had a twelve-year-old daughter and no wife. Who would undoubtedly need a nanny when he traveled to games.

Despite all the signs pummeling her in the head like a cast-iron skillet, she shook her head. “No. You can’t be Lainie. That’s not possible.”

“Harry always calls you his sister.” Seth sounded equally stunned, holding up his hand in a *duh* gesture. “I don’t think I’ve heard him use your name since college. Damned if I remembered it until just now.”

“Harry?”

“Sorry. It was a Longhorns thing. Guy on the team gave every freshman a nickname, derivative of his last name. Jason’s Harry, from Heron. I’m Lainie . . . Chamberlain.” He ran his hands through his loose hair, gathering it in one fist at the nape of his neck. “No one calls me Lainie anymore except Har—uh, Jason.”

Carrie didn’t much care about college football nicknames. She was still trying to come to grips with having sexted with one of her brother’s best friends. With whom she was supposed to have a job interview.

With a deep breath, Seth dropped his hair and stepped back, gesturing for her to come inside. “Well, come on in. If you still want to do this, I can give you a quick tour and we

can talk a little about the job. Madison's outside reading, but I'll have her come in to meet you when we're done."

So they were going to pretend they hadn't exchanged steamy texts. Sure, she could fake that.

She followed him into an open, airy room that served as living room, dining room, and kitchen. A breakfast bar separated off the kitchen, which was sleek and modern and well-equipped enough to make her jealous of her future self, should she get the job. She didn't love cooking that much, but even mac and cheese out of a box would feel fancy when made in that kitchen.

A giant TV hung on the far wall, with seemingly every electronic accessory and game console on the entertainment center below. The gray suede sofa and love seat faced the setup, with remotes and game controllers littering the coffee table, along with several videogame cases.

"Mads is more into gaming than I am, but she's gotten me hooked on all the Lego videogames." His sheepish smile was both sexy and adorable.

*Bad Carrie.*

She had to stop thinking about him as sexy if she were going to take this job. Just because he'd promised to kiss the hell out of her didn't mean she could hook up with her employer. That would be a disaster.

He rubbed the side of his beard, the rasp of his whiskers drawing her attention to his face. To his mouth. To lips that looked firm yet—

"You don't play Madden NFL?" She grabbed her brother's favorite videogame out of her memory, to cut off her wayward thoughts.

"Nah. Some guys I know are into that, but I'd rather keep my football on the field." He shrugged.

He gave her a quick tour of the first floor, which consisted mostly of the great room and pointing out the door to his room. She had to shove away thoughts of herself on the other side of that door with him.

He also showed her the laundry room, tucked away in a hallway leading to the garage. “Mads does her own laundry, and I can do mine in the off-season, but it’s a huge help for someone else to do it during the season. So that would be one of your jobs.” He scratched his beard again, not meeting her eyes. “If that’s a problem, I suppose I can talk to Mads—”

“No!” she cut in a little too quickly. She could suck it up and fold his underwear. That wouldn’t be totally weird. “I mean, that’s fine. If it’s part of the job, it’s part of the job.”

His shoulders loosened a little. “Right.” He turned and led her back toward the kitchen. “I guess this job is really part nanny, part housekeeper. I can’t cook, and it seems silly to hire a separate cleaning service, so . . .”

“I get it.” Carrie didn’t mind cleaning. She hated scrubbing bathtubs, but other than that, she mostly found it soothing. And she’d have to clean a bathtub if she lived on her own, so it wasn’t a big deal. “Two bathtubs?”

“Huh?”

“Sorry. I don’t mind cleaning, except I hate bathtubs. Just wondering how many you have.”

“Oh. Uh, yeah, two. Mine in the master bath and one upstairs.”

She nodded.

Seth leaned back against the kitchen sink and watched her. She rested one hand on the breakfast bar and forced herself not to meet his gaze. She was afraid if she did, she’d throw herself at his chest and beg him to kiss the hell out of her like he’d promised.

But maybe it wasn’t a terrible idea. Maybe the kiss would suck and they could break the heavy tension between them.

Her eyes drifted to his big hands, curled around the edge of the counter. He could easily fill those hands with her breasts. And his lips looked even more kissable than she remembered.

Her skin felt electric as she, against her better judgment, did meet his gaze. His blue eyes looked as hungry as she felt.

Like he was holding the counter to keep himself from grabbing her. Like he too had pictured her on the other side of his closed bedroom door.

Shit. How was this ever going to work?

Job. No rent. Nearly empty bank account. She didn't have a choice.

She snapped her eyes shut, breaking the hypnotic connection between them. "You said you also suck at cooking. I assume I'd do that?"

He cleared his throat, and when Carrie again opened her eyes, he'd pushed away from the counter and was pulling open the refrigerator. "Right. I eat at practice a lot, but we have pretty high calorie requirements, so I eat here too."

He showed her where various things were kept in the kitchen, adding in bits about what he liked when he ate at home and what Maddie's favorite foods were.

"How did your last nanny handle it?" Carrie asked as he shut the walk-in pantry door. Of course he had a walk-in pantry. A huge one. "Did she make a weekly menu? Or wing it from a mental list of favorite foods?"

She envisioned a long session on Pinterest for herself if she took the job. She knew nothing about how to run a household of more than one. And her menu planning was firmly in the wing-it category.

"Actually, in Houston, my mom did most of it." He laughed dryly. "Which sounds pretty pathetic for a thirty-one-year-old guy. But we lived in the same neighborhood as my parents, so they watched Mads when I was at practice and out of town. Mom fed her and sent home leftovers for me. I had a weekly cleaning service, but that was the only person who came into the house."

So this was new territory for him too. Interesting. Certainly many football players had kids, probably even plenty of single dads. But how many of them had physical custody?

She didn't feel comfortable yet asking where Maddie's mom was, but she was clearly not part of the everyday picture.

“Couldn’t convince your parents to move north?” she joked to cover up the oddly unsettling feeling her realization gave her.

“Dad doesn’t do snow. Refuses to own a shovel.” He smiled, his eyes shining in a way that made the unsettling feeling turn warm and tingly. Still unsettling, but decidedly more pleasant.

“And I can’t ask them to uproot their whole lives for what right now is a one-year contract.”

“But Maddie had to.” As soon as the words were out, Carrie wished she could take them back.

To his credit, Seth hid his wince well enough that she almost didn’t notice it. “I thought about letting her stay with my parents instead of moving her away from all her friends. But they’ve already done so much for me, and they don’t need to raise another kid. And she’s my daughter. She belongs with me.”

This time she managed to keep her mouth shut and not comment on the edge in his voice. It was clearly a touchy spot for him.

“All right then. Two bathtubs, meals, dirty socks.” Time to get back on neutral footing. She slid onto one of the stools lined up against the breakfast bar. “Let’s talk schedule. I know half your games are out of town, and you’re gone the night before.”

Another throat clear, another scratch of his beard, then Seth came and leaned against the counter on the other side of the island. Looking at her, but with a bland expression. No heat, no awkwardness. Just a man interviewing a potential employee.

Which was what they both needed.

“And we stay in a hotel the night before home games as well.”

“Really?” What a weird thing to do.

“Gets us away from the distractions of home life. So we can focus on the game. No staying out late at the bars or getting picked up for drinking and driving and missing the game because we’re in jail. Hell, we have a curfew. And no waking up at two with the baby. No fighting with wives. The NFL pays us a lot of money to make them even more money. They want to make sure they get quality product every Sunday.”

That was a cynical way of looking at it.

Before she could comment, Seth held up a hand. “I’m not complaining. Once I got used to it, I preferred it. And I get to do something I absolutely love. If I can’t handle some rules sixteen nights—well, ideally twenty if we get to the Super Bowl. But if I can’t handle that a handful of nights out of the year, I don’t deserve to be here.”

“Very mature for a man who plays a boys’ game and has a curfew,” she teased.

He chuckled. “That’s me. A man-boy.”

No, he was all man.

They spent the next few minutes going over the details of his practice schedule, plus Maddie’s schedule for school, lessons, and the private swim team she was going to be on starting the following week. They were looking at the schedule of swim meets when the glass door at the back of the living room opened and a lanky girl with waist-length brown hair walked in.

Carrie could see immediately that she had Seth’s nose and blue eyes. If she was twelve, the same age as the seventh graders Carrie used to teach, then Maddie was tall like her dad too.

“Hey, Dad,” she said, casting a curious look at Carrie.

“Mads, this is Carrie Heron. I told you we’d be talking to her about maybe taking the housekeeper position,” Seth said.

Maddie’s gaze lingered on Carrie, then she moved past them to the refrigerator. “Sure.” She pulled out a can of Diet Dr Pepper.



A girl after Carrie's own heart. "You have Diet Dr Pepper!" she said with a little more enthusiasm than was warranted but that she knew could start the long process of breaking the ice with a preteen. "Do you think I could have one? They're kind of my weakness."

Maddie didn't say anything, just got another can out. She set it in front of Carrie before heading to the love seat. She tossed a book on the coffee table and slumped back onto the cushions.

"You want to get to know her a little bit?" Seth asked in a low voice. "Since you'd be spending most of your time with her, not me."

Carrie nodded, taking her soda and heading for the couch. She sat on the edge, angling her legs toward Maddie. But when she opened her mouth to speak, no words came to mind.

She knew how to slowly get to know a classroom of thirty students. She knew what to say on the first day of school to ease the awkwardness. She knew how to give advice to students who came to her for help, knew how to reprimand them when they broke rules, knew how to commend them when they did well.

But she had no clue what to say to a girl she was potentially going to live with and take care of.

Carrie's eyes strayed to the coffee table to see what Maddie had been reading. A frisson of excitement ran through her when she discovered it was the second volume of *Ms. Marvel*, a comic book about a Muslim teen who suddenly developed superpowers. Carrie had read all of them.

As she turned back to Maddie, Carrie noticed the girl's T-shirt was of Harley Quinn and the Joker. The girl was clearly into comic books.

Grinning, Carrie said, "You like comics." No need to pretend it was a question.

Maddie raised her eyebrows, cautious but interested. She nodded, then took a sip of her soda.

“I have tons—I can’t even keep most of them at my apartment. There’s no room, so they’re still in my old bedroom at my parents’ house. Along with all the action figures and most of my costumes.” Carrie held her breath, waiting for Maddie’s reaction. If they could bond over comics, she had to take the job, attraction to her boss be damned.

“Costumes? Like for Halloween?” Maddie’s tone said her entire opinion of Carrie rested in the answer to this question.

“A few. But mostly for cosplay.” *Please be the right answer.* She hadn’t known for sure until that moment, but she wanted this job. The perks were many and the only negative was her crush on Seth. Which could easily be ignored and would eventually go away.

Maddie sat up straight, her jaw dropping almost comically. “You do cosplay?”

It made her incredibly uncool, but Carrie couldn’t stop herself from grinning at Maddie’s enthusiasm. She nodded, saying, “Any chance I get. In fact, if I take this job, we’ll have to work something out.” She turned to look at Seth, who had sat down at the other end of the couch. “I’m supposed to be giving two workshops at a con in October.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out,” Seth said, a wry smile on his face. He was clearly amused by the two of them hitting it off over superheroes. “But what’s a con?”

Maddie made a disgusted sound only a tween could pull off. “A comic book convention. You know, nerds.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re not a nerd. Carrie’s not a nerd.”

“Yes I am, Dad.”

“Science teacher who dresses up as an evil botanist? Total nerd.”

Maddie’s attention whipped back to Carrie. “You do Poison Ivy? I *love* her.”

Carrie and Maddie discussed comics for nearly a half hour, and Maddie took Carrie upstairs to show off her Funko Pop!

collection.

Before they headed back downstairs, Maddie also pointed out the bedroom that would be Carrie's. "It's totally generic. I'm sure my dad will let you decorate however you want."

It had white walls and a hardwood floor, with whitewashed wood furniture and pale green bed linens. Carrie would probably replace the bedding and curtains, but the furniture looked nicer than hers. She'd have to figure out what to do with her furniture. Unless Seth had changed his mind, she was taking the job.

Back downstairs, he'd turned on the Wisconsin Badgers football pregame show. Grinning college students filled the screen, all making Ws with their fingers.

Relaxed, with his bare feet on the coffee table and his hair now back in a low ponytail, Seth looked . . . She didn't even have a word for it. Masculine. Sexy, but that was a permanent state for him.

He looked at home. Which he was, of course. But for a moment, it felt like she was part of that home. Not as a nanny, a live-in employee. But as part of that family.

Which was absurd. It wasn't like she was an orphan who'd spent years alone, or even that she had reached a point where she longed for a family of her own. But for the briefest of moments, that's what she'd felt.

"Hey." Seth rose and muted the TV as she and Maddie joined him in the living room. "You two seem to be hitting it off."

From Maddie's pocket, a poppy boy band song started playing. She pulled her phone out and read the screen. "It's Sophie," she told Seth, then pointed at Carrie. "But we need to hire her, Dad. If you hire someone else, I'll be the worst-behaved daughter ever."

With those parting words, she swiped the screen and headed for the back door.

With a shrug, Seth chuckled. "You heard the girl. You still want the job?"

“I’d hate to be contributing to the delinquency of a minor,” Carrie said. “I guess I have to.”

His smile faded, expression turning serious. “You don’t have to. I understand if it’s . . .” He waved a hand between them.

“I know. But I want to. I need the job, I need a place to live, and she seems like a great kid. Where else will I get a chance to influence an impressionable young comic book fan?” She understood why he was being more serious, but she had to keep it light or the awkwardness would kill her.

“You know this means we can’t—”

“I know,” she cut him off before he could finish. She didn’t want to know how he was going to finish the thought. Because if he’d said the word *sex*, she probably would have spontaneously combusted. Sure, spontaneous combustion was technically scientifically impossible, but inexplicable things happened all the time. Look at deep-fried butter on a stick.

Seth grinned. “Well, great.” He let out a heavy sigh. “That is a huge weight off for me. She stayed with a teammate’s family when we were in Miami, but they have four kids, so I can’t keep doing that to his wife.”

“Your next game is next weekend?” She was happy to start right away, and since she had to move no matter what, she’d already started packing. She could be ready to move by tomorrow if she had to.

“I know it’s rushed, but would it work for you to move your stuff on Tuesday? We have a short day, so I’m done by eleven. But if that’s too—”

“No, Tuesday’s great.” Shit, she sounded way too eager. Or desperate.

But in her defense, it was only because she was eager and desperate.

“I’ll talk to Jason. I’m sure he can help me bring stuff over.”

“Let me pay for a moving truck. It’s no problem. Half the basement is unfinished, so we can put whatever furniture you want to keep down there.”

“Sure. That sounds good.” Politeness probably dictated she should at least offer to pay for the moving truck herself. But she was almost out of money. And she’d Googled his salary: he made more per game than she had in six years of teaching.

“I should get going, then. Lots of packing to do.”

He snapped his fingers, drawing her attention to his strong hands. Hands she would never get to feel running through her hair as he . . .

*Bad Carrie!*

“I saved some of the boxes from our move. I’ll go grab them for you.”

“That’d be great.”

He headed toward the basement stairs. As he went, she couldn’t stop herself from checking out his perfect ass. Heat pulsed down her arms, and she longed to reach out and squeeze each tight cheek. The man had a perfect body.

But so did plenty of other guys. And she’d have to find one of them, because Seth Chamberlain was now her boss. And officially off-limits.

---

## Chapter 4

---

SETH HANDED a bottle of Sprecher Amber to Carrie and another to Harry, keeping the third for himself as he dropped onto his couch. He didn't drink much during the season, but after hauling a table and sofa to his basement and three small bookcases up to Carrie's room, not to mention the dozens of boxes the three of them had carried, he needed something cold. Sometimes a beer hit the spot in a way water, lemonade, or a sport drink couldn't. And Milwaukee had a million excellent local beers. It would be a shame not to try them out.

"You got a nice place," Harry said. "Can't say a McMansion is my style, but if you gotta do the family thing, this is all right."

"You haven't been here yet?" Carrie asked. "Some best friend you are."

Harry—Seth's nickname for Carrie's brother—gave her a look that could only be described as brotherly disdain. "Some of us were working our asses off over the summer instead of going on beach vacations with our besties."

"A weekend in Door County is hardly a beach vacation," Carrie shot back with an equally disdainful expression.

Seth didn't have sisters, but he had two younger brothers. He could see sisters were just as good as brothers at doling out insults.

"Door County has beaches."

“On Lake Michigan. That’s hardly Jamaica. And applying for seventy-four jobs, then interviewing for twenty-seven of them, qualifies as working my ass off.” Carrie leaned forward and set her beer bottle on the coffee table. “So fuck.” She lifted her right hand and extended her middle finger in Harry’s direction. “You.” She repeated the gesture with her left.

Seth almost snorted beer into his nostrils trying not to laugh at the unexpected move. Ignoring the burn at the back of his throat, he swallowed, then released the laugh.

Harry grinned. “Should you use that language around your new employer?”

Carrie said nothing, instead glaring as she picked up her beer and took a long drink.

“Did you really have that many interviews and not get a job?” Seth regretted the question the second it came out of his mouth. It had to be a sore spot for her.

Sure enough, her expression hardened, her eyes going flat. “I tell myself I was a close second for all of them. With my experience, they have to pay me more, so it’s better to hire a new grad.”

She didn’t look like she believed it, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to pry further.

“Their loss,” he said, because what else could he say?

“So.” Harry drew out the word, clearly looking to change the subject. “You told me you met some chick you wanted to ask out, and things were getting hot and heavy over texts with her. How’s that going? You move things past typing last weekend?” He had a lewd smile that provided all the subtext they needed.

Carrie’s cheeks turned red and she immediately looked down so her hair fell around her to hide her face.

Shit. Seth wouldn’t have talked about her with Harry if he’d known he was her brother. Hell, he wouldn’t have sent her text messages about how he wanted to kiss the hell out of her. He wouldn’t have told her he was wicked and asked if she

---

He had to stop thinking about it. He needed to delete those texts from his phone so he couldn't reread them the way he had several times in the past week. Even after hiring her.

"Nah," he said, trying to sound casual and not at all like the object of his desires was sharing a couch with him that moment. Or that he still very much wanted to make good on all the explicit and implied promises they'd made in their texts. "That fizzled out."

Carrie turned her head toward him the slightest bit, enough he could see her eyes.

"It's better anyway," he said, as much to her as to Harry. "The season is insane. I don't have enough time for Mads, let alone for dating."

Carrie lifted her head all the way, her hair sliding back. A faint smile touched the corners of her lips. God, did he want to kiss those lips.

"Probably for the best," Harry said.

"How's that?" His friend was right, but that didn't mean Seth had completely bought into the idea yet.

"You said she seemed awesome. Like one of the good ones." Harry studied the label on his bottle. "We've always said girls like that deserve a hell of a lot better than asshole jocks like us."

They had. It had started as a way to justify taking advantage of the ample supply of willing college girls. Though in retrospect, if they'd considered all those girls unworthy, it said more about what assholes they truly were than it did about the girls' character.

Now, well, he was a decent enough guy. He treated his dates well. But he was up front with all of them that he wasn't in it for anything serious. Mads and football were his life, in that order. And because of how devastated nine-year-old Mads had been when his last serious relationship ended, he no longer brought women around to meet his daughter. He wouldn't do that to her again.

Another reason he could never get involved with Carrie.



“They do,” was all he said to Harry.

“Just make sure you keep your hands to yourself around my little sister.”

Fuck, Harry hadn't actually said that, had he?

“Jesus, Jason. What the hell?” she practically shouted.

Harry shrugged unapologetically, his gaze focused on his sister. “What? You deserve a hell of a lot better than some football player getting his rocks off with the nanny—”

“Fuck you, Harry.” Seth tried to keep his temper in check. Half the reason this got to him was because he wanted to get his rocks off with the nanny. If he weren't interested, it wouldn't piss him off half as much.

“—then firing you when it doesn't work out.”

“Fuck you, Jason.” Carrie repeated Seth's sentiment.

Another shrug from Harry. Jason. They'd been out of college for a decade. Probably time to drop the idiotic nickname.

“Hey, jackass, contrary to popular belief, I can keep my pants zipped. I don't need you to remind me that I need a nanny more than I need to get laid.” Seth's words were directed at his friend, but he kept his gaze focused on Carrie, hoping she understood the emotion underlying what he said. It was absolutely not personal. And he understood it wasn't personal for her either.

They were adults. They could move past their attraction.

“Sitting right here,” Carrie sang out. “No one is sleeping with anyone, none of the three of us in any permutation.”

“Eew,” Jason tossed out.

Seth had to agree on that one.

“Let's drop this subject and move on.” Carrie glared at her brother for a long moment, and Jason's expression turned almost sheepish.

“Agreed,” Seth said. The longer they discussed him not sleeping with Carrie, the more he had to think about it. And thinking inevitably led to wanting.

Thank God the season would be ramping up quickly. He was off to a good start with his new team, but if he wanted it to continue, there wasn't time to lust after a woman he couldn't have. He'd be spending all his time lifting weights and memorizing plays. And sleeping like the dead because he was exhausted from practice.

And Mads. It all came back to Mads. She was his top priority. The reason Carrie was even there.

He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his daughter's happiness.



DURING THE DRIVE TO swim practice on Thursday, Seth tried to pay attention to Mads' chatter. He really did. But his mind kept drifting to the woman riding along in the backseat. To her sexy text messages, which he still hadn't deleted.

To that flame-blue look she got in her eyes that made his mouth dry and his cock throb. They'd been alone in the kitchen for just a moment last night, after Mads went to bed. And she'd looked at him with those eyes.

All he'd had to do was take one step forward and he could have touched her. Even better, kissed her. But he couldn't. They couldn't.

“So is it OK if I stay for Ms. Gordon's club next week?”

“Huh?” Seth forced his attention back to his daughter.

“Ms. Gordon told me about a comic book club after school on Wednesdays. And I was talking to Emilia tonight—she's in a couple of my classes and seems pretty cool—and she said the club is fun. I know Wednesday's usually a late day for you, so can I ask Carrie to pick me up after the club?”

“Absolutely. I'm glad you're making a new friend.”

She looked at her lap and mumbled, “Yeah, I guess.”

How was that something to make her awkward?

Mads was silent the rest of the drive to the swim club. After a minute, Seth gave up trying to figure out what he’d said wrong. He didn’t understand Mads’ moods these days, but both Carrie and his mom reassured him that her behavior was typical of girls her age.

“Did you do a comics club at your old school?” Carrie asked. She sat behind Seth, and he caught a glimpse of her in the rearview mirror as she shifted her body toward Mads’ seat.

Mads twisted around to answer Carrie. “Yeah. My best friend, Sophie, and I got it started. Last year was the first year, and I didn’t even get to stay.” Her voice was an odd mix of excited and petulant.

“That’s too bad. I ran one at my old school, and we had a lot of fun. If you ever need ideas, let me know.”

“That would be awesome.”

As he turned the car into the lot for the swim club, Seth caught Carrie’s gaze in the rearview mirror. He smiled to indicate his appreciation that she could pull Mads out of her tween girl funks. Carrie smiled back.

Seth pulled up in front of the low, drab building that housed Mads’ private swim team facilities. Everyone in Houston said the West Suburban Aquatic Club was the best in the area, so he’d signed her up. After two practices, she’d declared the coaches “OK” and the other kids “fine.” For Mads lately, those were akin to raving endorsements.

“This is it,” Seth said for Carrie’s benefit. She’d tagged along so she would know where the facility was.

“Pretty straightforward,” she said.

Mads shoved open her door. “See ya.”

“I think we’ll run and grab takeout. Anything you’re in the mood for?” Seth asked.

Mads gave an always-helpful shrug, then slammed the door.

Before he could pull away, Carrie opened her door and got out. She circled the car, then settled into the front passenger seat beside him.

Suddenly the front seat of his BMW X5 felt claustrophobic. He scrubbed a hand over the side of his beard, trying to rub away the tension. He had to get over this. There was no way he could live with this level of awareness every time he was around her.

Surely it would start to fade. It had only been two days.

Huffing out a breath, he said, “I could go for a burger. Something better than McDonald’s, but doesn’t have to be fancy.”

“There’s a Culver’s nearby,” Carrie offered.

He gave Carrie a questioning look; he didn’t know that name.

“Local chain. The usual fast food, plus they have frozen custard.”

He could definitely go for frozen custard. He’d eaten far more than his share of the local dessert treat that was more popular than ice cream in Milwaukee.

He put the car in drive and pulled away from the curb. “Point the way.”



RIDING in the front seat with Seth was torture, but she’d felt like an idiot in the back by herself. Carrie’s skin buzzed and her muscles were antsy. Everything in her strained toward the man in the driver’s seat.

The drive was silent except for her telling him when to turn. Her mind kept flashing back to the previous night, when she’d gone to get a cup from the kitchen and found him there, hunched over a tablet and nibbling grapes. She hadn’t been

able to stop the hungry way she'd looked at him. And the answering fire in his eyes said he saw her hunger and shared it.

But they couldn't. They knew that. And surely after a few more days, the attraction would die down and they could comfortably cohabit.

Seth took them to the drive-through, again only speaking to her as necessary to get her order. He got more food for himself than he did for Maddie and her combined.

"I'd forgotten how much more football players need to eat."

Seth chuckled as he lifted his hips to pull out his wallet.

Carrie almost choked on her tongue, watching him move like that. She quickly looked the other way, staring at the pavement outside her window.

She was pathetic. She needed to go on a date, have some hot sex so she wouldn't obsess over her new boss. Maybe she could have a fling at the cosplay convention next month.

"I won't even get into how much we eat at the practice facility." He flashed a quick smile as he handed over his credit card.

Ms. Manners would probably say Carrie should offer to pay for her own meal. But she was broke and he was a millionaire and her employer. He could cover it.

"Some of the guys, especially linemen, could probably put away an actual dragon, all on their own."

The mental image had her laughing out loud. "How big are we talking? I have no idea how big the Milwaukee Dragons' dragon even is. Horse-sized? Elephant? Woolly mammoth?"

Seth grinned as he rolled the car to the next window to get their food. "That's an excellent question that I have no answer to. But I'm pretty sure Kendall Allen could eat all three of those in one sitting."

The drive back to the pool was more relaxed, light conversation continuing the whole way. They'd both gotten

dishes of double strawberry, the flavor of the day, and since it would melt if they waited, they ate their dessert first.

Carrie was nearly done with her frozen custard by the time Seth parked the SUV along the tree-lined edge of the parking lot.

“I’m gonna get out and enjoy a gorgeous evening while we wait,” he said.

Carrie slid out of the car and joined him, leaning against the hood of the SUV. It was a perfect September evening, warm but not hot, the sun low in the pink-streaked sky, with just enough breeze to ruffle her hair. She was wearing a tank top, and the air on her skin felt almost sensual. Which was probably because Seth was so near that she could almost touch him.

“Nights like this are why I’m happy to stay in Wisconsin when it’s forty below zero in January.”

Seth’s head whipped around to stare at her. “*Forty* below? No one mentioned it gets that cold.”

She shook her head. “Texas boys. You need thicker skin.”

“I’ll need a thicker coat, that’s for damn sure.”

“Forty below is usually wind chill. It rarely drops past twenty below for actual air temperature.”

“Oh sure, I can see where that would be much better. Practically balmy.”

She knocked her shoulder into his side. Solid man that he was, he didn’t move at all. “OK, but what’s it like right now in Houston?”

“Eighty-five and humid,” he mumbled.

“And that is why I stay in Wisconsin.” She smiled triumphantly as she slid the last bite of custard into her mouth. As if it meant something that today her home state had better weather than his.

As she drew the plastic spoon from her lips, something in Seth’s gaze shifted. It went from Milwaukee warm to Houston

sweltering. And breathing became Houston-humidity difficult.

For a long moment that stretched out endlessly, much like their moment in the kitchen the previous evening, they remained like that, gazes locked together. Unconsciously she angled her shoulders toward him and was both gratified and terrified when he did the same. Her skin was so alive with awareness of him, she was hyperconscious of the brush of her loose hair against the backs of her arms as she moved.

She needed to lick her lips, it was almost a compulsion, and doing so while caught in his stare would be torturous. So she closed her eyes and turned her head away, breaking the spell. Only then did she allow her tongue to trace over lips that she swore felt kiss-swollen. Except that was impossible.

“I guess we should all summer up here and winter in Texas.” Seth’s voice was thick, like he had something caught in his throat.

“It would be nice,” she agreed softly. They had to get their crazy attraction under control. Her system couldn’t handle daily jolts like that.

She took several long, slow breaths with her eyes still closed, trying to ground herself and remember all the reasons she couldn’t throw herself at Seth and kiss him right that instant. When she finally got her pulse back in the vicinity of normal, she opened her eyes, scanning the lot for a trash can. She didn’t want her mostly empty cup to drip in Seth’s car.

She spotted one near the building and pushed off the hood to walk away. “I’m going to—”

The rest of the words died on her tongue when Seth’s hand wrapped around her upper arm and turned her back toward him. She looked up, taking in the six feet four inches—yeah, she’d looked up his stats—of broad, delicious man filling her vision.

She didn’t breathe as she watched him rake his gaze over her. The hunger she felt in it made her nipples harden to the point of visibility, but she was too turned on to care. As if he didn’t already know what he did to her.

Huffing out a breath, he took the step into her space. Another step forward and her back pressed against the SUV's hood, his hand slid into her hair, and his lips descended on hers.

It all happened so fast, she didn't have a chance to process everything. Her body simply reacted, her mouth moving under his as her arms slid around his large body. She clutched his back, pulling him closer; they both moaned.

With her lips parted, Seth's tongue slid into her mouth and began a wild exploration. She stroked her own tongue against his and elicited another moan. All the while, the coarse hairs of his beard scraped at her skin, adding to the myriad of sensations vying for her attention.

But overshadowing them all was the feel of his body pressed to hers. He slid one arm around her, the other tangled in her hair as his thumb caressed her cheek. His arm held her tightly against him, his hand splayed low on her back.

Such a bad idea. But so, *so* good.

Restless and reckless, she needed to touch more of him. She wanted to feel all those muscles, feel the power coiled up in his athlete's body. She slid her hands up his arms and he shuddered against her.

"Carrie," he groaned, then gave her lower lip a little nip before sinking in deep once again. Lights burst behind her eyelids and she dug her nails into his biceps, drawing a moan that vibrated from him into her.

A domino effect of sensation and reaction, sensation and reaction.

What would be his reaction to the sensation of her running her hands over his shoulders until they met at the nape of his neck?

He deepened the angle of their kiss and traced his tongue along the edges of her teeth. She nipped playfully at his tongue, and he chuckled and pressed tighter to her.

Pressed his solid erection against her, a little higher than where she wanted it most. But she didn't chase after it. Not in



a public parking lot, no matter how much she wanted to.

“You are too fucking sexy,” he bit out, his voice a rough rasp over her ear.

And his kiss was too good. Too much from just a little kiss. Her muscles twitched as heat coursed through her. She couldn't take it. They needed to stop.

Before she could say something, he drew his face back enough to look into her eyes. His own were dark blue and stormy, the lines of his face tense.

“Seth.” She mouthed it more than spoke, barely a whisper escaping. She didn't have enough breath for more.

“Jesus, Carrie. I don't . . .” He searched her face for another hot moment. “You are so sexy.”

He made her sexy. She'd never felt this wild with a man before, this uninhibited. No other man could have inspired her to make out against the hood of a car. But Seth connected with something hidden deep inside her, a woman unafraid to grab what she wanted and take it.

Except she couldn't take it. Not now. Maybe not ever.

He huffed out a frustrated sound, his breath hot over her lips.

A new wave of desire rolled through her and it took all her restraint not to pull him back down to her and again get lost in his kiss.

“I think I finally understand what singers mean when they say they're drunk on a woman.” His voice was raw and thick.

She trembled inside at his words, unsure what to think of them, unsure how to respond.

So she said, “We can't do this.” Her voice came out breathy, but with his chest still pressed to hers, her nipples hard, her breasts heavy and aching, she couldn't pull in enough air. “But I still . . .” She lifted her lashes and made herself look directly into his eyes.

This close, they were impossibly, intensely blue. Something softened in her chest, leaving a hot, melted ache she didn't understand.

He felt drunk from kissing her. Holy swoon. No man had ever said something so bluntly honest to her. And she felt it too, a dizzying high buzzing through her simply from having his mouth pressed to hers.

Sex with him would probably be better than the highest-quality narcotic. All the fun, none of the illegality or addicting side effects.

Too bad she needed a job and a house more than she needed great sex.

“I know.”

Seth's words jerked Carrie out of her head and back to the sensation of his fingers on her cheek.

He traced her bottom lip with a long, thick finger. “I shouldn't have done that, but I said I was going to kiss the hell out of you, and I couldn't take the chance that I wouldn't get to. And you . . .” His voice trailed off, the rest of his words left unspoken.

It wasn't beautiful poetry, it wasn't romantic or sweet or seductive. But it was honest. His words made her knees a little weak.

“I'm glad you did.” A smile flirted with the corners of her mouth. “I liked you kissing the hell out of me.”

He huffed out a startled chuckle. “Good.”

They remained forehead to forehead, looking into each other's eyes, smiling until the moment approached awkward. Before it could get there, Carrie caught Seth's hand, pulled it away from her face, and pressed their palms together.

“Your hands are really big.” With their wrists aligned, her fingertips barely reached his first knuckle.

“You know what they say about the size of a man's hands,” he said in a deliberately smarmy voice.

“Better for catching a football?”

He grinned. “Something like that.” The intensity of their kiss finally dissipating, he stepped back.

Carrie noticed her blue plastic spoon on the ground, the empty custard cup nearby. Apparently she’d dropped them. She bent and picked them up, then took Seth’s off the hood. “Be right back.”

She was a few steps away when he called, “Hey.”

She turned back, eyebrows raised. She would *not* notice how delicious he looked, leaning against the truck, legs crossed at the ankles, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his phone.

A faint smile played over his face. “I should say I’m sorry. But I’m not.”

Her stomach hollowed out at his admission. “Me neither.”

“But it won’t happen again.”

She was an idiot to feel disappointed. He was right and they both knew it. “I know.” Her mouth stayed open, like she was going to say something more, though she had no clue what it would be.

Since nothing good could come of that, she forced it closed and walked away.

---

## Chapter 5

---

MADDIE FLOPPED down on the couch next to Carrie and propped her bare feet on the coffee table. “You were a science teacher, right?”

Carrie pulled an article of clothing out of the basket on the floor by her feet, keeping her attention on the girl. “Yep. For six years.” Automatically she started folding the huge black undershirt.

Chatting with Seth’s daughter and folding his laundry. It was so domestic, so wifely. Too bad she didn’t get other wifely benefits, like regular kisses. A week later, she could still feel the press of his lips on hers. Still imagined what could have happened if they’d been somewhere more private.

If he weren’t her boss.

She shoved the thoughts out of her head. “Why, what’s up? You need help with some homework?” After a week as Maddie’s nanny, she’d figured out that English, Spanish, and math were the girl’s strong subjects, science was in the middle, and social studies was her weak link.

“No, I finished my lab report in study hall. But, um, I was wondering what you think about me maybe starting a sort of environmental club at school?” Maddie stared at her hands as she spoke, worrying a ring on her right pinky.

“I think that would be great. I know swimming keeps you pretty busy, but as long as you keep up with homework, there’s no reason not to do a school club.” She sounded like a mom.

“Did you do any kind of club like that? Like run it at your school?”

“I got involved a little in the Greens Club. But another teacher had been running it forever, so I was definitely second fiddle.” *Second fiddle?* Since when did she use expressions like that?

“I guess I should talk to my science teacher. But I don’t think there is one already.” Maddie continued twisting her ring, round and round and round. “My best friend and I were in a club like that in Houston. We were supposed to be co-presidents this year. But my dad got traded, so now it’s just her.”

The disappointment pulled heavily at the girl’s expression.

Carrie took another garment out of the basket and deliberately kept her focus on it rather than Maddie. “You miss Houston?”

Maddie gave a long-suffering sigh, the anthem of seventh-grade girls. “Yeah. Sophie was, like, my best friend since we were in preschool. And no offense, but my grandma’s the best. It kinda sucks needing a nanny.”

Carrie rested her arms in her lap and met Maddie’s eyes with a rueful smile. “No offense taken. I can’t say I was planning on being a nanny either. I like you and your dad, but I do wish I could have found a job teaching.”

“What do you even, like, do all day?” Maddie asked.

Good question. She’d cleaned every room in the large house, including scrubbing the tubs. Which had caused a major case of tub envy. Seth’s bathroom had both a walk-in shower and a soaking tub with jets. Since she’d discovered that feature, she’d had more than one daydream about relaxing in a bubble bath. But it was way too weird to use his bathtub, even when she knew he was gone for hours. Maybe after a few months she’d feel comfortable enough to use it.

“Well, I’m doing an hour of yoga each morning. And I’m going to start using your dad’s weights.” He had a sweet exercise room set up in the basement. Might as well get in

shape. “I’m putting together ideas for dinners so I can plan those in advance. And I’ve caught up on a lot of my comic book reading.” And her Netflix queue. And the articles she’d bookmarked on her phone to read later.

“So you’re basically a stay-at-home mom.”

Oh God. She totally was.

“I mean, Sophie’s mom always read magazines like *Martha Stewart Living* instead of comics. But otherwise you sound like her.” Maddie’s expression was a mix of amusement and pity.

“I should work on my comic book series idea.” The words were out before Carrie knew she was thinking them.

Maddie sat up a little straighter, pushing her brown ponytail over her shoulder. “You’re gonna write a comic book?”

“I’m not sure. And it wouldn’t be a typical one, with superheroes or aliens or anything.” She and her best friend, Amy, had toyed with the idea for years, ever since they took their first education classes in college. “I won’t bore you with details, but I’d like to make graphic textbooks. For kids who don’t learn as well by reading.”

Maddie’s face lit up, her wide smile so much like her dad’s. Except without the devastatingly sexy element that made Carrie’s stomach feel like she was on a roller coaster.

“That would be so cool! Like, I don’t mind reading in some subjects. But man, if I could have a graphic novel for history instead of that blah blah blah boring crap, it would be so much better.”

Which was exactly what she and Amy wanted.

“Can you draw?” Maddie asked.

Carrie gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I do a passable stick figure. But my best friend is also a comic book geek and an art teacher. It would be a joint project.”

Maddie bounced in her seat. “You totally have to do that! And I can be, like, your test subject. Ooh, and my new friend

Emilia would too, I bet. She's in the school comics club with me, and we're in some classes together. She's really good at social studies, but she hates science and math. So she could be the guinea pig for those." The girl's head nodded so fast, she seemed in danger of losing it.

Carrie laughed again, this time at Maddie's unbridled enthusiasm. "I'm doing a panel about comics in curriculum at C3PCon. Maybe I'll see what the feedback is from that and go from there."

"Wait, you can't go to C3PCon." Maddie's face fell. "Who's going to take care of me?"

Carrie sighed. That was the one conflict she had. She could cancel her panels. But she really didn't want to. "I need to talk to your dad about it." She set the last folded shirt on the pile and transferred the folded clothes into the now-empty basket.

"I could go with you," Maddie said shyly.

There was no way Carrie was signing on to be in charge of a twelve-year-old at a comics and cosplay convention. Too much potential for bad things to happen. Plus, cons were her one time to let loose. Embrace the anonymity given by her costume and flirt and have fun in a way she couldn't when she was regular Carrie in Milwaukee. Her only one-night stands had been at cons.

She couldn't do any of that and look after a child. She could always be more responsible, take Maddie with her, and act more like a nanny. But that was more responsibility than she was willing to take on.

"I'm not sure that's a great idea. . . ."

"I guess I can stay at Lem's."

Carrie recognized the name of Lem Feu'u, one of Seth's teammates who had been friends with him and Jason in college. Seemed like Jace was using his position as a talent scout to bring all his college buddies to Milwaukee. Or at least two of them. Seth had also given Carrie Sarah Feu'u's phone number in case she ever needed anything and couldn't reach Seth or Lem. Sarah juggled four kids when her husband was

on the road. Carrie would be a horrible person if she foisted a fifth on her.

“Wait, what weekend is C3PCon?” Maddie popped up and headed to the kitchen.

“Second weekend in October.” Which was coming entirely too quickly. Carrie needed to update her talk.

Good thing she had infinite time on her hands, it seemed.

Maddie flipped to the next month on the huge calendar that hung on the pantry door. “That’s Dad’s bye week. We could totally go!” She bounced up and down again, clapping her hands. “Ooh, that would be so fun!”

We? As in Maddie . . . and Seth? No no no no nonononono. That would be very bad. Then Seth would see her in her sexy Poison Ivy costume. And she wouldn’t be able to flirt and hook up if he were there.

Her eyes snagged on the microwave clock: 4:35. Shoving the cosplay convention out of her head, she pushed the laundry basket aside so she could join Maddie in the kitchen. “We need to leave in forty-five minutes, so I better get started on something to eat.” She and Maddie had worked out that their big dinner should wait until after Maddie’s swim practice. But she always needed a little something before to get her through. The girl couldn’t go until after seven o’clock on an empty stomach.

Carrie consulted the list she’d made of good pre-workout snacks. “You want peanut butter toast with a banana?” she asked.

“Fine.” Maddie rolled her eyes. “You’re a total stay-at-home mom.”

Carrie rolled her eyes right back. Sometimes the best way to deal with tween behavior was with tween behavior. Even if she did feel a little silly. “Get the banana.” She nodded at the fruit bowl on the island as she opened the pantry door to get the bread and peanut butter.

As they waited for the toaster, Maddie said, “I mean, I guess you’re like a stay-at-home mom. It’s not like I’ve ever



had a mom.”

“Never?” Carrie didn’t want to pry, but she was curious about Maddie’s mom.

Which in no way was because she was Seth’s ex.

Maddie shook her head. “She moved away when I was a baby.”

Carrie couldn’t stop her surprise from showing. “Really?”

Maddie’s expression hardened, the cheerful girl gone. “She and Dad never actually dated. He doesn’t say it, but I know I was a drunk hookup.”

Carrie bit hard on the inside of her cheek to keep from wincing.

“She couldn’t handle it, so she moved back to her dinky little West Texas town before I turned one. I never talk to her.” She toyed with the stem of her banana, not meeting Carrie’s gaze.

Carrie’s heart ached for the girl. It was obvious how painful the rejection was for her.

“I just wish I could talk to her. Know a little more about her. What she’s like. Maybe she’d even—” Her voice caught. “Want to meet me now that I’m grown up.”

This poor, poor girl. Of course Seth loved her very much, and undoubtedly so did her grandparents and other family. But no one could replace a mom.

“Maybe you could talk to your dad.” She cringed almost before the words were out. She should not get involved in stuff about their family. It wasn’t her place.

But she would have given a student the same advice. Trying to keep the frustration off her face, Carrie shoved her hand into her hair. How could she steer the conversation back to cosplay?

“Nah, he doesn’t like talking about her. And when she calls, he doesn’t let me talk to her.”

That didn't seem like something Seth would do. Then again, how well did she actually know him? "Well, maybe you can talk to him about that. See if you can get in touch with her. Maybe he knows her email, if you think the phone would be too much to start."

She needed to shut up. It really wasn't her place. But that forlorn look in Maddie's eyes was devastating.

The toaster popped, startling Carrie. And saving her.

This conversation was a good reminder that though her new job might make her feel domestic, like a stay-at-home mom, she wasn't Maddie's mom.

And she definitely wasn't a part of the family.

---

## Chapter 6

---

THE DRAGONS' facility was massive. Carrie didn't know a ton about sports facilities, but she'd been to Bucks basketball games and Brewers baseball games. Neither Miller Park nor the Bucks arena downtown were as overwhelmingly impressive as MacArthur Field. As a newer team, the Dragons didn't have the storied history attached to their stadium, unlike Lambeau Field to the north or Soldier Field to the south. But Carrie was willing to bet they might in another decade.

She was far from shy, but she still felt incredibly awkward wandering the halls with Seth's tablet. He'd left it at home that morning and sent a text begging her to bring it before his afternoon meetings, when he would need his playbook and all the notes he'd made during his day off yesterday. Wasn't like she was doing anything else. Season four of *Charmed* could wait.

She needed to find another hobby.

An older man, probably a coach, had directed her toward the practice field. He suggested she ask her husband for a family access pass, then walked off before she could correct him. For possibly the millionth time in two weeks, Carrie was struck by how domesticated her life had become since becoming a nanny. In hindsight, it probably should have been obvious. But she was still a single woman with no kids, so it was a major adjustment.

It had been two weeks now. Two weeks they'd been living in the same space. Two weeks since he'd backed her up

against a car and kissed the hell out of her. Two weeks of making him dinner and folding his T-shirts and bidding him good night. Two weeks of domestic bliss.

Except he was her boss. Darn that pesky detail. Unfortunately, that detail had done nothing to dampen how much she wanted him. She still fell asleep reliving that one amazing kiss. Still woke up wondering what could happen if she snuck into his room before Maddie woke up.

Surely her desire would start to fade as the kiss got farther behind them.

Finally she turned the corner and saw the entrance to the field. After the dim hallways, the sunlight was glaring. Carrie tipped her sunglasses down from where she'd pushed them onto her head, but she still needed to squint.

Gradually the picture unfolded in front of her. A few dozen men milled around in clumps, working through various football moves. Older men in Dragons caps yelled instructions at them.

A group of seven men ran sprints up and down the end zone closest to her, all shirtless. Among the shirtless men, Carrie caught the flip of a golden ponytail.

Her stomach bottomed out.

Of course he was in the half-naked group. Of course she was going to be forced to look at all those muscles, damp with sweat. And she had to do it without drooling on her boss or pressing her lips to his chest.

Damn his forgetfulness. She should be at home right now, watching *Charmed* and doodling stick figures as she brainstormed her earth science textbook.

She forced her attention to the quarterback, number 16, who was practicing short tosses to number 27. Twenty-seven took the ball, tucked it into his side, and ran.

Carrie watched practice and tried not to choke on her tongue at how hot Seth looked. A few minutes later, one of the coaches told them all to break for lunch. Carrie watched Seth

jog across the field, his face breaking into a grin when he saw her.

He stopped in front of her, his chest all muscles and sweat and tanned deliciousness. “Hey. You have any trouble getting here?”

It took a moment too long for his question to register; she was distracted by his flat pecs. They were perfect—toned, but not bulging and veiny. She wanted to run her nails down them, just to see how he’d react.

When she finally processed what he’d said, she had to mentally shake herself. “Yeah, no problem. I ran into someone who helped me out.”

Silence hovered between them, edging on awkward.

“Your tablet!” She was so smooth.

Seth gave her a confused look.

She shoved the device at him. “You needed your tablet. The whole reason I’m here.”

“Right.” He took it from her, shaking his head. “Sun must have gotten to me while I was running.”

He took a few steps back, moving in the direction his teammates were wandering off the field. Then he stopped. “You want a tour or anything?”

She couldn’t care less about the layout of the stadium, yet when she opened her mouth to decline, “Sure” popped out.

What?

His mouth didn’t move, but there was a smile in his eyes. “Great.” He gestured for her to follow him. “Let me grab a towel and a shirt, and I can show you around a little bit.”

Before she could stop herself, she said, “My imagination didn’t do you justice.” Immediately her face heated. Her cheeks were probably approximately the same flaming color as her hair.

Seth frowned, tipping his head to the side in question.

She couldn't look him in the face, but when she dropped her gaze, that was no better. Because now she was staring at the beautifully sculpted chest she was referencing.

“A, uh, a few weeks ago I told you I'd had, um, I imagined what your”—she gestured weakly to his torso—“muscles might look like.” She cleared her throat to try to get rid of the tightness there. She wasn't prone to unthinking outbursts, so what the hell was she doing today?

“Oh, right. Sure.” He shifted his weight, his hand lifting to scratch his beard. She'd already identified that as his go-to move when he felt awkward.

*Perfect. Good job, Carrie.*

“So, uh, tour?” Another weak hand gesture, this time in the direction of the few remaining players.

“Right.” He turned away and started toward the field exit.

Silently Carrie followed him, glancing up at the massive stands. She didn't know the seating capacity, just that it was one of the largest in the NFL. MacArthur Field boasted the newest and best of everything. *Jumbotron* seemed a misnomer for the monstrosities in both end zones; *gigantitron* would be more appropriate.

They ended up in another concrete passageway, this one sloping downward to yet another corridor. Players came in and out of a pair of metal doors. On the adjacent wall, a burgundy sign read *Dragons Locker Room* in silver letters.

“Locker room, obviously.” Seth pointed at the door. “Wait here, I'll be back in two minutes.”

“No problem.”

Except the moment he disappeared, she was again struck with awkwardness. Every man who walked past her gave her an assessing look. Carrie leaned against the far wall and focused on not chewing her lip. Trying not to stare, she noted the men trickling out. They'd changed out of their pads and jerseys and now were wearing athletic shorts and tees, most with the Dragons' logo.

She recognized the quarterback, Matt Baxter, walking with two massive men who had to be linemen. They were each easily over three hundred pounds. Between them, Baxter looked almost slim.

Other players had faces she had seen on billboards or in TV commercials, but she couldn't put names to them.

Thankfully Seth returned within a few minutes. He'd put on a gray tee with a small Dragons logo on the left chest, his hair still damp at the temples but his cheeks less flushed. He carried a plastic water bottle in one hand.

"So you saw the field and the locker room. I can show you where we get our PT and the cafeteria." He started down the hall, gesturing for her to follow. "I gotta head that way for some lunch anyway."

"Sure."

They walked in silence for a minute, then reached a set of glass double doors. Through them, padded tables, massage tables perhaps, were scattered around the large room, along with workout stations. It looked similar to the physical therapy clinic she'd gone to briefly after breaking her ankle in college. A sign above the doors read *Physical Therapy*.

"This is where I spend more time than I'd like, but we have great trainers, so they at least make it pleasant."

Before Carrie could ask why he spent so much time in PT, a tall—who was she kidding? They were all tall—black man with dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail came out the doors.

"What's up, man?" the guy asked Seth, though his gaze lingered on Carrie.

Even she recognized tight end Marcus James. His face was all over local ads, and given her attraction to men with long hair, she took notice.

"Heading to lunch in a minute." Seth gestured to Carrie. "Carrie was nice enough to save my ass and bring my tablet, so I'm showing her around. Carrie Heron, Marcus James. Marcus, Carrie."

Marcus grinned, showing off straight white teeth. “Pleasure to meet you,” he said, offering his hand.

Carrie returned the grin, because holy shit, up close Marcus was even more attractive. He didn’t make her heart pound or her skin buzz the way Seth did, but still. She wasn’t immune to other sexy men.

A good sign, if she was ever going to get over Seth.

Marcus’s hand was huge—the better to catch footballs with, my dear—and hers disappeared in the handshake. Again, it excited her a little to be touching his hand. But also again, it lacked the zing of Seth’s touch.

Dammit.

“Nice to meet you.”

Another hand rested on the small of her back, and double dammit, there was that zing. “We should get going.” Seth used gentle pressure to move her along.

“See you around,” Marcus said as he headed in the opposite direction.

Seth didn’t take his hand away once they were moving again. Carrie refused to enjoy it. Instead, she decided to do maybe a little teasing.

“He’s even better-looking in person. Billboards don’t do him justice.”

Seth shot her a hard glance. “I think he’s married.”

At least they were in the same boat, both still fighting their attraction. Only jealousy could be fueling his sudden surliness. She tried not to smile as she said, “Nope. No serious girlfriend either.”

“Yeah? When did you become an expert on James?”

Because he was Amy’s favorite player, and even though she lived with her boyfriend, she kept up to date on all Marcus James news. But Carrie wasn’t going to admit that.

So she shrugged and changed the subject. “Can you take me up to Jason’s office? Maybe I’ll see if he wants to grab



lunch.”

Seth’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “Sure. No idea if he’s around today, but I can take you up there.” He took his hand away and Carrie tried not to be disappointed.

On the way through the winding concrete corridors, Seth introduced her to three more players, including his good friend Lem Feu’u. Lem had played at Texas with Seth and Jason, so she’d heard about him over the years as well. She also met head coach Tom Kelsey and another coach.

It didn’t escape Carrie that, with the exception of Lem, every man she met gave her an odd look when Seth introduced her as his nanny. As if they expected her to be his girlfriend or wife. After all, she had access to his house and was willing to swing by and drop off his tablet, and she was getting a tour of the stadium.

Another entry in the “Carrie and Seth Playing House” column. Except that pesky part where she slept in a different bedroom.

It was almost a relief when they got in the elevator to go up to the offices where the scouts resided. Except then the doors shut, and they were alone.

In the enclosed space, Seth’s size became even more apparent. Carrie didn’t consider herself petite, being a little over average height and not fine-boned or skinny, but next to his linebacker body, she felt tiny. Maybe a little more feminine than her yoga pants and T-shirt warranted.

She glanced up at him and caught him watching her. Immediately he looked away, his hand going to the back of his neck. Her heart hammered against her ribs but she didn’t say anything. What was there to say? Acknowledging their attraction wouldn’t make it go away any faster.



SETH PULLED his lips between his teeth, deliberately inflicting pain so he wouldn’t wince at the unnatural positions

he was being forced into. Not only was his hip screaming, the pain shot down to his knee and up his back almost to his shoulder.

“How’s that feel?” Tyler Branch, the trainer responsible for Seth’s current contortion, asked.

With a grunt he tried to make sound positive, Seth nodded. If he stopped biting his lips and tried to speak, he’d end up yelling profanities at the guy. Because it really fucking hurt. Sweat popped up along his hairline and upper lip. At least his facial hair hid the lip part.

Tyler eased Seth’s leg back onto the padded table. The pain in Seth’s knee changed to the good kind, signaling relief for the joint. His hip still throbbed, but it had been doing that since Sunday, when he took a nasty hit from a San Francisco tight end. It had cost him an interception and mobility. He’d spent most of his day off yesterday in his home gym, trying to rehab the muscles and ligaments. Now it was Wednesday, and if he didn’t get his pain under control, he’d land himself on the bench for the upcoming game against Arizona. He was having one of the best seasons of his career, and he didn’t want to waste a week sitting on the sidelines.

“That bad?” Tyler probed the area with his fingers.

“It’s an old injury from college.” Hey, look at that—he’d managed to make his voice sound relatively normal. “The hit I took aggravated it. Just need a couple days to heal and it’ll be fine.”

Sure, a few days would do it, when it had been sore the better part of eleven years. It would get better during the off-season, but that was months away.

“Flip over.” Tyler rotated his hand in a circle, indicating what Seth should do.

Seth rolled to his stomach and settled back down, resting his head on his arms.

“Let’s try ultrasound on this, see if that gives you any relief.” With a pat on Seth’s back, Tyler walked across the room, presumably to get a machine.

Seth had tried ultrasound before—hell, he'd tried everything at some point except narcotics, because he hated what they did to his head—and it usually worked temporarily. But when he woke again tomorrow, he'd be hurting. Still, if Tyler could patch him up enough that he could practice for the rest of the week, he could get Toradol for the game and not have to sit out.

Tyler returned with a rolling cart. He tucked a towel into the waistband of Seth's shorts, which were pulled down so his ass hung out. After squirting some gel, which almost felt good since they kept it in a warmer, Tyler used the wand to spread it over the focal point of Seth's pain.

Using firm pressure, the trainer moved in slow circles over the area. The pressure hurt at first, causing Seth to tense his muscles and resume digging his teeth into his lips.

“Try to relax,” Tyler said in a soothing voice. Then he chuckled. “I know, easy for me to say, right?”

Seth grunted in agreement. Still, he relaxed his jaw and pulled his lips from between his teeth. Doing a full-body inventory, he mentally scanned himself from head to toe, progressively relaxing his muscles as he went.

When his legs loosened, Tyler said, “There you go. Now this might actually do some good.”

“It usually does. Until I wake up tomorrow morning.” Now that he'd gotten used to it, the warmth and pressure almost felt good.

They chatted as Tyler continued his slow circles, letting the waves or vibrations, or something like that, do their thing with Seth's body. The science of how it all worked had been explained to him a few different times, but it was over his head. Science hadn't been his strongest subject in school.

Carrie probably understood how it worked, why it loosened the tightness and pain that gnawed at his right side. For a moment, he imagined she was the one holding the wand, her other hand sliding back and forth over the small of his

back. He could almost hear her voice explaining the technology to him.

Shit. He needed to get her out of his head. It did him no good to obsess over her. The only female he should be thinking about was his daughter and how to bridge the widening gap between them.

Other than Mads, he couldn't afford to concentrate on anything but football. This aggravation of his bad hip did him no favors in trying to keep his starting job. Rookie linebacker Cedric Moore looked better and better every practice. Seth still had the advantage of experience at reading offenses and making adjustments. But Moore was a smart guy; he'd sharpen that tool soon enough.

There was simply no room in his brain for a woman, and especially not one who worked for him.

"You got a girlfriend?" Tyler asked.

"What? Nah." Seth shot a questioning look at the trainer. Was he reading Seth's mind now? "Why?"

"Some massage wouldn't be a bad idea, but that's a tough spot to reach on your own."

A thrill chased down the skin of his arms as he pictured Carrie standing next to his bed, her fingers digging into his flesh. He wouldn't last two minutes before pulling her onto the bed with him and devouring her.

"Just me and my daughter. I don't see a twelve-year-old jumping at the chance to massage her dad's ass." Mads would run away screaming at the mere hint. "And pretty sure asking her nanny could get me sued."

Tyler chuckled. "The nanny cute?"

*Only if you're a straight man with even remotely good taste.* "Haven't thought about it. She's the nanny," he lied.

"Gotcha."

"Wait, you tellin' me that hottie with you earlier wasn't your girlfriend?" Marcus James' voice drifted over from the next table. He was doing knee exercises with another trainer.

“Carrie? No, she’s my daughter’s nanny.” Seth struggled to stay relaxed. He had no claim on Carrie, but that didn’t mean he liked the idea of her with one of his teammates.

Or anyone else. Which made him an asshole, but he couldn’t help it.

“Damn, man, hook me up.”

No. He couldn’t do it. It would be bad enough if Carrie started dating someone else. Which she very well could. As sexy and smart and kind as she was, she should have her pick of men. It was only a matter of time before one of them showed up at his door to take her out. And he would hate it.

He had no power to stop her from dating, but he didn’t have to set her up with his teammates. He wasn’t blind; he’d seen the interest in her eyes when she met Marcus earlier.

“I’ll talk to her.” Another lie. He wasn’t going to ask Carrie if he could give the tight end her number. Besides, Jason would have Seth’s head on a platter if he set her up with a football player.

Yeah, that was the reason.

“You assholes have all the luck.” Tyler set the ultrasound wand on the cart and used the towel to wipe up the gel. “Well, plenty of ice, alternating with heat. You know the drill. You’re not officially on the injury report, but I talked to Kearney, so he knows to take it easy on you.”

Seth couldn’t stop himself from clenching his jaw. He didn’t want to be limited at practice. He’d practiced hurt before, and he could do it again. Hell, every player had something bugging him.

If he was limited, he might not play. If he didn’t play, he had too much time to think about the two females in his life driving him crazy. The only time he had peace was on the football field. And now Tyler had told the linebacker coach to limit him.

Fucking hell.

---

## Chapter 7

---

CARRIE WAS PAST DISGUSTING. She'd passed it about a half hour ago, when the roots of her hair went from damp to wet. But she'd pushed on, biking until her legs felt like jelly.

Another perk of living with Seth: she was going to be in phenomenal shape. He had more free weights in his basement workout room than the last gym she'd belonged to. Plus four weight machines, an exercise bike, a treadmill, an elliptical machine, a huge mat, a forty-seven-inch TV, and more home exercise accessories than the workout aisle at Target.

She and Maddie had started doing yoga every morning before school, and Carrie usually followed it up with weights and cardio. Maybe it was knowing she would be wearing her skimpy Poison Ivy costume in another week, but today she'd pushed extra hard.

And now she was sweaty and gross and had body odor strong enough to offend herself. She peeled off her damp clothes—even wicking fabric had been no match for today's workout—pulled on her bathrobe, and headed back downstairs to Seth's bathroom.

It felt beyond weird to be in his bedroom wearing nothing but a short, thin robe, but they were having work done on the pipes in the bathroom she shared with Maddie. So for a few days they all had to shower in Seth's.

Fortunately, he was at the practice facility. It was Seth's day off, but he'd still gone to get in a workout with the team trainer. And he said he preferred the weights at the stadium to

his own. They must be phenomenal, because she was impressed with his setup.

She hurried through the huge master bedroom, forcing herself not to look at the unmade king-sized bed. His bathroom was ridiculously large and fancy, with a walk-in shower bigger than the walk-in closet in her room, and a whirlpool tub big enough for at least two. Probably up to four, but that would be awkward.

She'd intended to take a shower, but the bathtub almost seemed to call to her. She was hot and sweaty, sure, but how amazing would it feel to soak in that tub, let the hot water and jets soothe muscles aching from her new exercise regimen? There was even a huge bag of Epsom salt sitting on the counter.

Which meant Seth must soak in that tub.

She absolutely was not imagining his wet, naked body relaxed in there. Nope. Not at all. Her nipples were hardening because of . . . the stiff breeze in the room?

Yeah, she was totally imagining it. And the idea turned her on, big time.

Bathtub it was.

She started the water, scooped in a generous amount of salt, and let her robe fall to the floor. As she pulled out her ponytail holder, she turned to her reflection in the wide mirror that hung over the double sink. Her flushed cheeks she could write off to exercise, but the blotchy pink covering her chest was pure arousal.

Watching her reflection in the mirror, she lifted her hands and pinched each nipple. Pleasure shot to her belly and between her legs. Eyes drifting shut, she did it again. This time she couldn't stop a soft moan from slipping out.

Her eyes opened and she stared at herself as she pinched one more time. It felt so good. And it had been too long since she'd had a man touch her like this.

Frustration simmering under her arousal, she turned away and climbed into the half-full tub. The heat seeped into her

sore muscles, and it felt almost as good as playing with her nipples had. She moaned again.

Soon, the tub was full and she was able to relax a little. Except the insistent pulse between her legs was a constant impediment. With the jets teasing her hypersensitive skin, she closed her eyes and let her imagination take over. One hand found her nipple again, the other slid down to cup between her legs. She exhaled a heavy sigh.

She imagined Seth there with her, his mouth at her nipple and his hand between her legs. Her fantasies of late were always a variation on this, though she'd never imagined them in his tub before. But oh, she would love to slide her hands over his wet chest, press her lips to the hollow of his throat as he leaned back against the tub, as she did now.

She could drag her mouth up to find his, and they could kiss. The way they had when he kissed her outside Maddie's swim club. But so much more, because they'd be naked and she could straddle him and their bodies would slide together.

And he could slide inside her, the way her fingers did now, and she could ride him and he could touch her and kiss her and overwhelm her with pleasure until her body came apart around him. And the orgasm would go on and on, intense and wonderful and everything she needed in that moment.

Her fingers stilled and slipped from her body, her other hand flattening against her pounding heart. It never took her long to bring herself off when she pictured herself with Seth, but today might have been a record. It couldn't have been even five minutes.

Now her body felt truly relaxed, the muscles loose. She could doze off if she let herself. Which was a bad idea in the tub, but it didn't hurt to keep her eyes closed for a few more minutes.

As good as she felt, afterglow warming her from the inside while the water warmed her from outside, she knew she needed to stop indulging in fantasies of Seth. If she was going to get over her attraction to him, picturing him naked was the



wrong approach. She'd gotten off plenty of times imagining her favorite celebrities; she should go back to that.

Even better would be if she could meet someone who took her mind off Seth. Maybe she should ask Jason to set her up. Or Amy. Except Amy knew the same people she did, so she'd start with Jason. She could text him when she got out of the bath.

Maybe he would even—

The sound of the door opening, followed by footsteps, cut off her train of thought. Panic thumped her in the stomach as her eyes flew open.

Affording her a prime view of Seth standing with his back to her, shower door open. The tub was at the far end of the room, the shower next to the door, so it wasn't impossible that he hadn't seen her when he walked in.

She couldn't stop herself from staring as he turned on the water. The man did have an amazing butt. And she was getting her best view of it yet.

Because he was bare-ass naked.



HE NEEDED A SHOWER. Big time. He probably should have showered at the stadium instead of driving home in his gross, sweaty clothes, but he needed privacy today. He had things to take care of.

Namely, the beginnings of a hard-on he'd developed during the drive home, courtesy of the fantasy he'd allowed himself to spin in his head about exactly what they could do in the hotel suite next weekend, if only Mads and her friend weren't going to the convention too. He sure as hell wasn't going to jerk off in the locker room shower. And after a punishing session with Tyler, then a grueling workout, he needed the release of an orgasm even before he'd let his imagination run wild.

In his bedroom, he stripped out of his workout clothes and flipped them into the laundry basket. He headed for the bathroom and went immediately for the shower. He opened the glass door and stuck his hand in, twisting knobs to get the setting he wanted.

All the while, his mind continued the hotel room scenario he'd been imagining. Sure, he'd already pictured himself coming twice. But the beauty of fantasies was he didn't need recovery time. He could screw like a teenager on Viagra in his imagination.

A yelp from the other end of the room had him spinning around, his heart jumping to his throat. For a long moment he stood frozen, staring.

Carrie was sexier than even his generous fantasies had imagined. Only the tops of her breasts swelled out of the water, but he could see her dark pink nipples beneath the surface. Her legs seemed impossibly long, though that was probably a trick of the water. And between them, he could make out the dark red triangle of hair that he'd spent far too much time thinking about. He'd wondered if she was the same shade of fiery red down there as the hair on her head; now he knew she wasn't. And it also answered the question of whether she waxed or went natural.

Shit. As he gawked at her, he'd gone from half-mast to full boner. And she was gawking right back, reminding him that he was bare-assed naked.

"Shit. I'm sorry." He forced himself to turn away and grab a towel. He wrapped it around his waist, though the way it gaped away from his body did little to hide his arousal.

He really hoped she was as turned on as he was.

No, he didn't. They weren't supposed to want this. He clearly did, but maybe she found his reaction so offensive that it cured her of any remaining attraction she had for him.

"No, I shouldn't . . . it's your bathroom."

He heard the water sloshing as she moved, and when he allowed himself a peek at her, she had drawn her knees to her

chest and wrapped her arms around them. Between her legs and the side of the tub, he couldn't see anything she hadn't already displayed in his kitchen.

He was not going to be the asshole who was disappointed by that. He'd invaded her privacy.

Except he totally was that asshole. He'd really liked looking at her naked.

"I'll go." He started backing toward the door. Except that gave her a prime view of his only slightly deflated cock, so he turned as he slapped off the water in the shower, then headed back to his room.

He pulled the door shut with a little too much force, slamming it. Shit. This was a disaster.

"I'm really sorry," he said through the door. About slamming it, about walking in on her naked, about his stupid cock and his stupid hormones having a mind of their own. "I'll go get a snack. Take your time. Let me know when you're done in there."

He pulled on a clean pair of athletic shorts and a T-shirt, picturing the offensive line all in the shower together. He needed to get rid of his fucking hard-on.

And later, when he finally got his shower, he was going to have one hell of an orgasm.



EVEN THOUGH SHE was expecting him to call and check in, Carrie's pulse spiked when her phone rang promptly at nine. Seth's name and an image she'd downloaded of him from an awards show, wearing a suit and looking entirely too sexy for words, popped up on her screen. She waited to the count of four, then picked up the phone.

"Hey." She tried to sound breezy, like she'd been doing something other than chewing through her lower lip as she waited for his call. After Maddie had gone to her room for the night, Carrie got out her green corset to repair a rip before the

convention, but her fingers were too shaky to sew. She'd had this annoying, ever-present case of nerves around Seth since their bathroom encounter two days ago.

Maybe she should channel her inner Poison Ivy and put on the corset. It was part of her Ivy costume, and when she wore the entire ensemble she became a different person. Someone bold and sexy and fearless. Heavy emphasis on fearless.

Part of her wished she could be bold and fearless enough to take the risk and sleep with Seth. She wouldn't be able to date someone else until she got over him, and who knew how long she would continue to work for him. Plus, it would wreck her to see him with someone else, and there was zero chance a guy with as many interested women as he undoubtedly had would wait until he was no longer her boss, just for a casual hookup.

"This still a good time?" Seth asked. The phone connection made his voice sound gravelly. Sexy and masculine.

Carrie shuddered. "Yep. Just hanging out."

"You and Mads do anything after her meet?"

"We talked about going to a movie but there's nothing good playing, so we stopped at the comic book store and picked up a few new ones. Then we grabbed some Thai takeout and were trading and . . . I'm rambling." He was going to think she'd never talked to a guy on the phone before. "Anyway, it's been a low-key night."

"Low-key is good." Amusement lurked around the edges of his voice.

Great, he was laughing at her.

"Amy's a teacher too, right?"

"Yep, an art teacher. Maddie knows her. She's come over a few times. She runs the comics club at her school, so I thought she and Maddie would get along. I've known her since middle school. We bonded over comics, like Maddie and her new friend Emilia." Oh look, she was rambling again.

“Speaking of comics, Mads mentioned I’m supposed to talk to you about this convention we’re going to.”

He’d registered Maddie, Emilia, and himself for the comics convention and gotten a suite for the four of them. Which Carrie was both elated and horrified by. With him at the convention and her in full Ivy gear, she would be a goner. She’d toss away her job as quickly as she’d toss away her clothes.

Thankfully, they’d be sharing their room with two tweens. They couldn’t hook up with Maddie and Emilia right there. It would be a continuation of the usual torture of having him around, made worse by her being in costume. And by knowing exactly how delicious he looked naked.

“C3PCon? What are we supposed to talk about?”

“C3PCon?” Now the amusement didn’t just lurk around the edges. It coated every word in bright neon humor. “That’s quite the acronym. What’s it stand for?”

“Chicago Comics and CosPlay Convention. I assume you get the C-3PO reference.”

“Yes, even I’ve seen *Star Wars*.”

Their conversation was going better than she’d expected. Maybe they could forget the bathtub incident more easily than she’d thought. Hell, maybe it would end up being the thing that broke the tension between them so they could move forward with a regular employee-employer relationship.

“Is it anything other than comic book fans hanging out and wearing costumes?”

Carrie fought her natural urge to get defensive when someone mocked her love of comics. He was a concerned father and wanted to know the full scoop before taking his daughter there. And to be fair, his voice hadn’t held even a hint of mockery.

“That’s a lot of it. Some of the comics vendors will be there, along with writers and artists. There won’t be actors from the major superhero movies, like *Wonder Woman* or

*Batman* or the Marvel stuff. But smaller shows with cult fandoms will send people. They do autographs and panels.”

“Mads said you dress up, and that you do workshops?”

“Um, yes. I’m doing two panels.” She smoothed her hand down the front of her T-shirt, trying to calm her anxious stomach. She used to spend her days talking in front of people, albeit kids, and never got nervous giving a talk at a convention. But the idea of Seth being in her audience unsettled her.

“On what?”

How did he manage to make two small words, one short sentence, sound like he was asking her the color of her panties? There was no reason that question should sound sexy. But in his deep voice, right in her ear, it flustered her enough she had to clear her throat before she could answer.

So much for moving past the sexual tension between them.

“How we can use comic books to engage kids who are reluctant readers. And using comics as teaching tools for subjects like science and politics.”

She waited for his response, but none came. Great—now he probably thought she was an even bigger nerd. Attendance at her panels was always low because people didn’t want to think about academic ideas like hers. They wanted the celebrity panels, or the talks on how to break into the comic book business. But someone valued her ideas, since she kept getting asked back.

“I know nothing about teaching and very little about comics, but those sound like fantastic topics.”

“Really?”

“Mads bitches and moans about the dull books she has to read for English class, but I can’t pry comic books out of her hands. She’s supposed to have lights out at ten, but many nights they’re still on at eleven, and if I go in to check, it’s always because she’s reading one. It’s a good thing I make a disgusting amount of money, because if I had a regular job, we’d be broke from her habit.”

Carrie laughed. “I was the same. Got a job at Dairy Queen when I was fourteen so I didn’t have to count on the library to have the one I wanted. And Amy and I shared all of ours.”

“Guess I have to get a costume for this thing, then. I probably can’t get away with smuggling out a uniform and going as a Dragons linebacker.”

“That doesn’t really say comic books. Maybe save the smuggling for Halloween,” she teased. “You could get a Thor costume.” With his long blond hair and beard, all he needed was a red cape and a big hammer.

Big hammer. Or a big something else to hammer her—

“Iron Man, I think.”

“Huh?” Her cheeks flamed. She fought the images in her head of Seth in nothing but a cape, doing some hammering.

“When I was in Houston, a local reporter started calling me the ‘Iron Man of the Gridiron.’ It caught on. There were T-shirts. It was a thing.” He sounded mildly embarrassed. “I’m sure I can find an Iron Man costume.”

He didn’t look anything like Tony Stark, in the comics or the movies, but she could understand where the nickname came from. “Iron Man works.”

There was a long pause, during which more hammering images flipped through her mind. In that fantasy she wore her corset and nothing else. Her green corset and his red cape. Together they were Christmas.

A sexy, wild, naughty Christmas she needed to stop imagining before she did something dumb, like describe the scene out loud.

She should get off the phone. He probably had to prep for his game, and she needed to do anything but fantasize about him.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it. “Who do you dress up as?”

Once again, he made the question sound sexy. Her breasts felt heavy and too full for her bra. “Poison Ivy. She’s one of

the *Batman* villains.”

“I remember the movie. She was hot.” If his voice had been sexy before, now it was like a pinch to her nipples. The words tingled down her spine.

How did he do that?

“Tell me what your costume looks like.”

Another tingle ran through Carrie at the subtle command. Would he be like that in bed, dominating her, taking control?

Her stupid brain *had* to stop.

“She’s a redhead, so I don’t have to wear a wig, which is nice. They get hot and itchy.” Her skin felt hot and itchy, her soft pajamas too rough for her sensitive skin.

“Your red hair is gorgeous. A wig would be a shame.” There was a catch in his voice. “What else?”

“It’s pretty much all green. Sheer green tights. Green satin elbow gloves. Knee-high leather boots. You would not believe how hard it is to find decent green boots. Most are cheap and vinyl or way out of my price range.” It had taken two years and three cheap, ruined pairs before she found the ones she had now, a soft suede pair she loved. “Green shorts, satin with a subtle leaf pattern. And a matching—” Her voice caught in her throat. He’d see her in a week, but admitting out loud that she walked around in a corset seemed impossible.

“A matching what?” His voice was so low and thick; it was basically sex.

“A matching corset.” Without thinking about it, she reached into the neck of her tank top and pulled it and her bra cups down, freeing her breasts in the cool air. The release of her swollen nipples sent sharp pleasure through her. She dropped her head back to the wall behind her and swallowed a moan.

“Jesus,” Seth hissed. “Darlin’, if you’re half as sexy as I’m imagining, I’m gonna have a hell of a time keeping my hands to myself.”



She was going to have a hard time making him. She clearly had no self-control with him, as evidenced by how her fingers had found one nipple and were pinching it. The resulting jolt of arousal had her pressing her thighs together.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I know we . . .”

Not wanting to think about how they couldn’t be together, Carrie tucked the phone against her shoulder to free her other hand. Working in unison, she cupped both breasts and savored the skin-on-skin contact.

She needed to end their conversation before they crossed yet another line and had full-on phone sex.



HAD CARRIE JUST MOANED? Fuck, even if she hadn’t, imagining it had Seth’s balls practically sitting up and begging for attention. He pressed his hand to the hard-on in his shorts and swallowed his own moan at the sweet torture. Her description of her costume and his resulting mental picture had him primed and ready.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I know we . . .” He pictured himself, already naked, ripping off her all-green outfit and tossing her down on the hotel bed. Because he was at that moment in a hotel room, the fantasy became a hybrid of them at the costume convention and having her in his room with him at that moment.

Shit. He was not going to jerk off with her on the phone. That was beyond tacky, unless she also participated in the phone sex. And he suspected that was a line she wouldn’t cross. But hell, since walking in on her in the bath two days ago, he hadn’t been able to get the mental picture of naked Carrie out of his head.

Which meant it was time to cut the call short. He loved talking to her, loved her gentle voice in his head, but his erection wasn’t going anywhere. Even thinking about Lemalu wasn’t going to kill this one. That trick hadn’t been working this week.

“I should get going.” Carrie’s breathless voice had his hips shifting to press against his hand. Jesus, she sounded as turned on as he felt.

What if she was touch—

Seth jerked the phone away so she wouldn’t hear the groan he couldn’t hold back. If she was touching herself while on the phone with him, he wanted to know.

No he didn’t. Maybe it was best it remain a fantasy. That certain knowledge would kill him, knowing he couldn’t have her.

He brought the phone back to his face. “Yeah, I need to get some sleep.” He would sleep like the dead after the orgasm he had building.

“Good lu—uh, good luck tomorrow.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He only vaguely registered her words. How sad was it that he was rushing to get off the phone with her so he could jerk off while imagining her? “Sleep well.”

New mental picture: her stripping out of a skimpy green lace bra and panty set, then climbing onto a bed with green satin sheets. Instead of pulling the blankets over herself, she immediately slid one hand between her legs, the other pulling at a rosy nipple.

“You too.”

He couldn’t end the call fast enough.

As soon as he was certain the call was disconnected, Seth jerked down his shorts. Kicking them away, he wrapped his fist around his cock and gave a hard pull.

Yes. Perfect.

Sweet bliss burned through him, spreading as his other hand took a turn. He quickly set up a hand-over-hand rhythm, tightening as he reached the head and swiping his thumb across the taut surface. He was already dripping; he had a minute left, tops.

Behind his closed lids, he imagined Carrie there with him. She wore the green bra and panties set he'd pictured earlier, bending over him, her long hair brushing his thighs and belly as her tongue, not his finger, circled his tip.

"Fuck," he moaned. "So good."

In his head, she moaned back as her hot, wet lips closed over him. His hands became the suction of her mouth, just the right amount of pressure to drive him mad.

Jesus fucking hell, he was going to burst something when he came. The need gathering in his balls was as sharp and intense as any he'd ever felt.

"Carrie." Grunting her name, he gave a final stroke as the orgasm exploded through him. It rolled and crashed, pleasure so sharp it cut him to pieces and he loved every second of it. Unintelligible sounds poured from his mouth, harsh and guttural, and occasionally her name. Time stopped and he was suspended in his state of ecstasy as the orgasm rolled on and on.

When it finally receded, he went limp on the bed, spread-eagle over the bedspread. His bare chest was splattered with come, but he'd clean that up later. Somewhere in the middle of that amazing orgasm, his skeleton had dissolved, leaving him unable to move. He probably should tell Coach he couldn't play tomorrow. A linebacker needed his skeleton.

If there was a better reason to land on injured reserve, he couldn't guess what it would be.

Goddamn. If talking to her did this to him, how the hell was he going to survive a weekend in the same hotel room as her, with her dressed up as a sexy bad girl scientist?

---

## Chapter 8

---

IRON MAN MAY HAVE BEEN a cool gadget-oriented superhero, but Seth's costume was uncomfortable as hell. He wore a jockstrap and got tackled by three-hundred-pound men for a living, so he knew uncomfortable.

Not to mention he was sweating enough to fill a goddamned rain barrel. Why hadn't any of the online reviews mentioned how fucking hot the costume was? It didn't help that there were approximately seven million people packed into the sprawling expo center room, nearly every one of them dressed as a superhero or villain or fantasy character or any number of other things Seth didn't recognize.

They'd passed at least a dozen other Iron Men as Mads and her friend Emilia dragged him along the aisles, squealing and giggling, eyes wide under their eye-mask thingies as they took it all in. As grumpy as the awkward plastic, metal, and non-breathable fabric costume made him, he loved watching his little girl having so much fun.

He wished Carrie had been able to come with them, but she'd stayed in their hotel room to make updates to the talk she was giving tomorrow. She was supposed to get into her costume and meet them later.

"Dad, omigod!" Mads grabbed his arm, jumping up and down and making a high-pitched noise only tween girls could pull off. "Omigod, Dad."

She repeated the words several more times before Seth laughed—which sounded hollow and far away inside his mask

—and awkwardly put his hand over hers. “Omigod, what?”

“Ashley Hearn.” She spoke with absolute awe in her voice and on her face.

“Should I know who that is?” The mask filtered the amusement out of Seth’s voice, which was for the best.

“She’s only ...”

Seth tried to listen, he really did. But his gaze snagged on a sexy Poison Ivy as she walked by. She had legs a thousand miles long and her leaf-covered top lifted her breasts up in offering. When he looked at her face, though, he had the same reaction he’d had to the handful of other Poison Ivys he’d already seen. His blood halted in his veins, no longer needing to rush to his groin, and the sweat on his back chilled.

Not Carrie.

This woman was probably the most attractive Poison Ivy he’d seen yet, but it didn’t matter. He was only interested in one.

The one who was off-limits. But tell that to his libido. His brain might have understood that he couldn’t get involved with her, but his dick still had other plans.

“... let me get a copy of her new one and get it signed. *Please, Daddy.*”

Seth blinked as he looked down at his daughter. She was giving him her sweetest smile, the one she knew he’d never say no to.

Sure enough, his chest felt warm and squishy, and he grinned. Not that anyone could see it. He put his arm around her shoulder and gestured with the other for Emilia to follow. “I guess we’re buying comics.”

They found the end of Ashley Hearn’s line and for the next half hour inched closer to the revered comic book writer. Mads and Emilia continued to look around in awe, making their tween noises and clutching each other excitedly. Seth scanned the room for every Poison Ivy he could find.

Fortunately, with most of the women he discovered dressed as the villainous scientist, it was easy to tell almost immediately they weren't Carrie. They wore wigs that looked fake, whereas Carrie's fiery hair was perfect for the character. He tried not to look for her, but he couldn't help himself.

He really, *really* needed to get her out of his mind. But he had no idea how to even begin doing that.

By the time an hour passed, they'd moved maybe one-third of the way through the line. To her credit, Hearn took the time to chat with her fans. But Seth was growing more uncomfortable by the second, and he needed a drink of water. Not to mention he had to take a piss.

But there was no way he'd leave Mads and Emilia alone, even for the fifteen minutes it would take him to do those things. He'd seen enough Han Solos and Supermen leering at the girls—both of whom looked much older than their twelve years—to have his protective dad instincts go into overdrive. The only time he was letting them out of his sight was if Carrie was with them.

“Carrie!” Mads' arm shot into the air, waving excitedly.

Seth's head jerked around in the direction she was looking. His gaze fell on possibly the sexiest woman he'd ever seen.

Carrie's mouth, painted a loud orangey-red that almost matched her hair, pulled up in a smile as she waved back and headed their way. She wore all green, of course, which looked phenomenal with her hair. Her hair was curled and teased into a style that was bigger and bolder than she usually wore. Her corset top and short shorts were made of a fabric that had leaves woven into the pattern, with a fake vine of ivy leaves winding around her. She finished off the costume with green tights and the knee-high green boots she'd told him about.

She looked smokin'.

Thank God for his helmet, so she wouldn't see him staring. But his gaze was glued to those bright lips, watching as she greeted the girls. His imagination quickly jumped in to supply several scenarios involving her bright lips, and he had to shift

to accommodate all the extra blood that was again rushing south.

Lem naked in the locker room. Thanksgiving dinner with his family, his dad and brother arguing about politics. The hit he'd taken last Sunday that jolted his spine so hard he thought it had come out his ass. The sick, crushing disappointment of losing the AFC Championship game in overtime because of one missed tackle. The rest of the linebackers naked in the locker room, especially Sutherland, who was as hairy as Chewbacca—whom Seth had seen several times this afternoon.

OK, he could breathe again. And the danger of getting a hard-on in a hard plastic suit had passed. Just in case, he pictured the locker room one more time. It really was effective.

“Where’s your dad?” Carrie asked, looking around the area.

“Right here,” Seth answered for Mads.

Carrie started, then laughed. “Wow. Nice costume. I definitely wouldn’t know it’s you.”

“You can see his hair in the back.” Mads reached up and pulled on a piece of Seth’s hair.

“So you can.” Carrie looked at him, amusement dancing in her blue eyes. Seth was pretty sure she was trying to catch his gaze, so he looked back, letting his own amusement show. Except she couldn’t see it, of course.

Fuck it. He was suffocating in the damn thing. He tugged off the mask and took the opportunity to shake out his sweaty hair. Cool air rushed over his face. So much better.

“Jesus, I’m not going to last all weekend in this thing,” he said, sounding like himself again. No more faraway echo.

“Don’t you, like, wear a helmet all the time?” Emilia asked.

“Those don’t cover the entire face. I can see and talk and breathe in my football helmet.” Seth held up the red and gold

mask. “This thing is stifling.”

Carrie reached over and smoothed the ends of his hair over his costume-covered shoulders. “Now you look like Thor stole Iron Man’s suit and is trying it out.”

Though she was touching his costume and not him, Seth could have sworn he felt her fingers on him. Her gaze caught his again, amusement lingering, but now mixed with something else. Still playful, but darker. Hotter.

He wanted to bury his hand in all that hair and kiss the orange right off her mouth. It was hell to be near her and pretend there was nothing between them except common interest in Mads and casual friendship.

“That totally works, Dad,” Mads said, oblivious to the way Seth was trying to devour her nanny with his eyes. “I say you leave the helmet in the hotel next time we go back there, and be Thor playing in Iron Man’s suit the rest of the weekend.”

“They’re both Avengers. You can totally do that,” Emilia agreed.

“And Thor would totally do that, to mess with Iron Man,” Mads added.

Carrie’s gaze strayed to his lips, then back up to his eyes. “I think the girls are right. I mean, unless you want to go back to not breathing.”

“Breathing is good. I guess I’m Iron Thor this weekend.”

All three females laughed at his dumb joke, which made him smile.

“If you need to go cool off or use the restroom or, I don’t know, check in with your coach or something, I can wait in line with the girls,” Carrie offered.

For that alone, he could kiss her. “You don’t mind?”

Carrie shook her head, her hair moving with her in one connected mass. It was the slightest bit creepy. “I want the new *GalactiGirls* too, so I have ulterior motives. This lets me skip an hour of waiting in line.”



“We’re fine, Dad.” Mads waved a dismissive hand. “Go pee, or whatever.”

“Who am I to deny you ladies your favorite comics?” He dropped a kiss to the top of Mads’ head. He’d given her a debit card and some cash, so she would be able to buy the comic for herself and Emilia. Inevitably she’d get some of the other trinkets stacked on the table around the group signing. He’d been informed that sitting with Hearn were the artist, the inker, and the letterer. He only vaguely understood what an inker or a letterer did, though he could guess.

“See you in a little bit. After you get this comic, we should probably head back to the hotel and get dinner.”

“We should go to bed early, so we can get up early tomorrow,” Emilia said to Mads.

“Yes. Like, right away,” Mads agreed.

Seth bit back a groan. Sharing a hotel suite with Carrie would be difficult enough. Staying up with her without their young chaperones would be even harder. And while he understood that logically it wasn’t different from living in the same house, it still felt about a million times more intimate.

He quickly made his exit, or as quickly as he could in his clunky suit through a sea of bodies. The atrium was far less crowded, as everyone seemed to be shoehorned into the main expo room. He raised his arms and worked out his joints to ease the building stiffness as he headed for the restroom.

After discovering that a simple act like pissing was a complicated maneuver in his costume—it was safe to say cosplay was going to remain Mads’ thing and not become his—he decided to head down a floor to the lower atrium, which acted as a sort of lounge and gathering place for people not in the main hall and not attending a panel. Small groups sat around in passionate discussion, some with giant decks of cards or board games in front of them. Others were absorbed in their laptops; from what Seth could tell, most were playing videogames. A few typed away furiously.

Most of his life, he'd fit in wherever he went. Everyone wanted to be around the football players, whether in high school, college, or the NFL. His attention was constantly demanded.

So the sense that he didn't belong was novel. These people were here by and large because they were passionate about some character from a comic book or TV show or movie. The way Mads was about several of her favorite fandoms.

The way many football fans were about their favorite players, defending their teams with a blind loyalty that didn't wane even when the team was terrible. The star players were given the status of superhero, and fans from one day old to one hundred years old dressed in the jerseys of their favorite player.

The way these people dressed in the likeness of their favorite character.

Maybe it wasn't such a different world. There was no designated NFL fan convention, not like this. But every game was, in essence, a fan convention. Like-minded people came together to share their common interest. Instead of panels, they got a game. They could buy plenty of merchandise, and sometimes even get the opportunity to meet their favorite player. He'd done plenty of pregame photo ops with people for various reasons.

The difference here was, he wasn't being mobbed by those fans. No one wanted him to sign their breasts, no one asked him to go ahead and tackle them since they really could take it. (Not once had he ever taken someone up on that last one, because he knew they couldn't, even if he went easy on them.)

As odd as it felt to blend in, it also felt good. He didn't have to be *on* all the time when he wasn't in the limelight. He could just be Iron Thor and Mads' dad and an anonymous guy in the crowd.

And a guy who was suddenly hungry enough to eat one of the lounge chairs. A half-dozen food vendors had set up in the lobby, and the aromas of Mexican and Indian and Italian foods all combined to make his stomach growl.

Maybe he should grab dinner and take it back for the girls. He headed for the lobby, texting Mads to ask what she and Emilia wanted.

Standing in line for burritos for himself and the kids, he shot off one more text.

*Seth: You hungry for Mexican? There's also Italian, Indian, or subs.*

“Hey, aren't you Seth Chamberlain?”

Surprised, Seth turned to see a group of four guys in line behind him. The one who'd spoken was dressed as a zombie, and his friend looked like some sort of post-apocalyptic zombie hunter, wearing drab, worn clothes and dirty boots and carrying a realistic-looking axe and rifle.

The other two guys looked kind of like elves, with pointy ears and huge, hairy feet. Both wore brown capes. He vaguely recognized the characters from a movie Mads watched on occasion.

“Hey, you totally are,” the taller elf said.

“I am. Nice to meet you guys.” Seth grinned, instantly slipping into his public persona. So much for anonymity.

They chatted for a few minutes as they waited for food and Seth signed each of their program booklets. They were college students in Chicago, but three of them had grown up in the Milwaukee area and remained loyal to the Dragons.

When the zombie hunter started spouting stats from Seth's college days, he felt his smile slip. He loved talking to fans. But some went overboard with the stats. Sure, he liked being good at his job, and it was reflected in various numbers. But he'd never been hung up on those things. Mostly he wanted to win football games because, like most athletes, he was driven and competitive. He tried to get to the quarterback and make a sack because it was good for his team, not because he had his eye on some record.

*Carrie: Get me the same as Maddie's having. Thanks!*

Seth wanted to send back a flirty text, but he wouldn't be rude to the guys he was talking with, even if the conversation wasn't his favorite.

Fortunately, it was his turn to order, and by the time he had all four burritos, the group of guys was ordering. "See y'all later," he said, then headed for the stairs.

Back to Mads and Emilia. And Carrie.

And more wonderful torture.



THE BUZZ of her phone was loud enough in the silent bathroom to startle Carrie into dropping her comb. She picked it up, and as she resumed carefully arranging her hair for bed, she read the text.

*Seth: You look damn sexy in that costume. Thought you should know.*

Heat flashed through her, pulsing low in her belly and between her legs. She should probably tell him not to send texts like that, but she couldn't bring herself to be upset. She liked them too much.

Besides, she knew she looked good as Ivy. Most women would if they had the confidence to pull off the outfit. Because she knew it was such a crucial element in making a costume work, Carrie had spent her first few cons faking it, until it became genuine.

She pinned the last strands of her hair to her head and pulled a hairnet over it. As much as she would love to wash out all the gel and hairspray, it would be infinitely easier to style tomorrow if she didn't wash it.

Considering she was sharing the bathroom with two seventh-grade girls, mirror time would be at a premium the next morning. Maddie and Emilia were sleeping on the hide-a-bed in the living room area of the two-bedroom suite Seth had booked for them, but they were using Carrie's bath. So her privacy was limited.

After scrubbing her face clean of makeup, she answered Seth's text.

Carrie: *Thanks. I'd say the same, but mostly you looked uncomfortable.*

Seth: *I hate the damn thing. If I ever do this again, I'm picking a character who wears jeans.*

Carrie: *LOL.*

She quickly finished her bedtime routine of dabbing on eye cream and brushing her teeth. Then came the awkward task of twisting her arms into an unnatural position to unhook her corset.

After the first two hooks popped free, she could draw a full breath, all the way into her belly. A third and her breasts were no longer mashed to her chest. By five, she felt human.

She'd finally unhooked the last one when her phone buzzed again. Running her hands up her body until she reached her breasts, she read the text.

Seth: *I was going to check out the pool while the girls watch a movie. Care to join me?*

Several steamy scenarios raced through Carrie's head. She massaged her breasts, as she always did after removing her corset, reveling in the feel of the cool air on her skin after the heavy, stifling satin. But tonight she added a flick to each nipple with her middle fingers. A zing shot from her breasts to her clit; her body began to hum as she repeated the move until her nipples were hard and needy.

She slipped off her shorts and tights, her boots already discarded by the door. After pulling on a camisole and shorts, she took her phone and slipped into bed. The crisp, cool sheets felt luxurious on her heated skin, the contrast making her skin tingle.

Carrie: *Can't. Didn't bring a suit.*

Seth: *In that case, g'night.*

Carrie: *Night.*

She set her phone on the nightstand and flipped off the light. In the darkness, she slid her hands over her body in what had become a regular part of her bedtime ritual.

With one hand attending to her breast, the other slid between her parted thighs. On a swallowed moan, she closed her eyes and let her mind run wild, imagining all the things she and Seth could do if she joined him in the pool with no bathing suit.

---

## Chapter 9

---

CARRIE KNOCKED on the hotel room door, then nervously toyed with her hair as she waited for one of the girls to answer. It was ridiculous to be nervous, but it felt naughty to be knocking on Seth's hotel door, even if it was also her room and she'd simply forgotten her keycard.

The door swung open, revealing Seth in his Iron Man costume pants and plastic underwear-codpiece thing with a plain black T-shirt that molded to every ridge of muscle on his chest and abs.

Oh. Wow.

His mouth slid into an easy grin. "Hey."

"Hey." Pulse throbbing in her neck, she smiled back, then looked past him into the room. "I forgot my key."

He stepped sideways to move out of her way, but she moved at the same time, and they ended up doing an awkward dance that ended up with her standing entirely too close to that enticing chest, looking up at him.

Carrie braced herself for the contact, then put a firm hand on his arm so she could move around him unencumbered, and stepped into the room. It wasn't like anything would happen with Maddie and Emilia around.

With a chuckle, he stepped back and out of the way.

"Where are the girls? I thought I could take them to a panel and let you have a little time off."

“I appreciate that, but they decided they wanted to check out the pool before we have to leave. You just missed them. I’d say it’s a good hour, at least, before they’re back.”

“Oh.”

Oh shit. They were . . . alone. In a hotel room. Sure, the bed wasn’t right in their faces, announcing its presence. But she could see into his room, where a wide bed with a thick white comforter and dozens of pillows beckoned.

It was beyond ridiculous to feel this insane pull just because they were in a hotel. They lived together, for God’s sake.

But he was in that tight shirt that she now could see was made of material with a slight sheen, which somehow made him look even more appealing. She wanted to run her hands over his chest and feel the soft fabric. She’d washed the shirt and folded it for him. But she wanted to know what it felt like against the hard muscles beneath.

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth as she imagined the scenario.

He made a sound that broke her out of her fantasy, one that could have been a groan, but was probably him clearing his throat.

Why had she come back to the hotel room?

Running a hand through his hair, which she hadn’t noticed until now was loose around his shoulders instead of pulled back in its customary ponytail, he said, “You’re welcome to wait until they’re back. But I understand if you want to get back over there. I’m happy to bring them over for the last few hours.”

A half dozen ways they could entertain themselves while they waited flashed through her mind. She didn’t mean to do the seduction move where she looked up at him through her heavily made-up eyelashes, and as soon as she realized she was doing just that, she lifted her chin and widened her eyes.

He was close enough that she could see his nostrils flare. And smell his warm, male scent.



“I probably shouldn’t wait here.” If she did, she was going to tunnel her fingers through all that hair and beg him to kiss her until she didn’t remember her own name, let alone why they shouldn’t get naked.

He nodded, but neither of them moved. Instead they remained just beyond the threshold, watching each other. She waited for him to make the first move as the air between them grew heavy and electric. Despite the heat flowing through her, goose bumps dotted Carrie’s arms.

“I meant to tell you, your panel yesterday was great.”

A different sort of warmth bloomed in her chest. “You went?”

“Of course I did.” He shrugged like he attended nerd-themed academic talks all the time. “I know next to nothing about education theory, but everything you said seems like common sense. Kids should get to read what they want when they’re young, to get them excited about reading. I’d probably be more of a reader if I’d had teachers like you, who encouraged me to read Superman comics or Stephen King books instead of whatever boring story was in our textbook.”

Words didn’t exist to describe how much his praise pleased her. Not just because she was hot for him, but because he was part of her target audience: parents who were open to an unconventional curriculum. If she could get him not only on her side but as an advocate, maybe she could test out her curriculum at Maddie’s school. A private school might be easier to start with than a public one.

“Thank you.” Her cheeks twitched from grinning so wide. “It probably sounds silly, but it means so much that you got it. That it makes sense. I felt like mostly I was preaching to the converted.”

“Consider me a new convert.” His voice came out soft and husky, doing warm, wonderful things low in her belly. His hand came up and he gently brushed a strand of hair out of her face and tucked it behind her ear.

The touch sent fire shooting through her. She needed to get her keycard and get out of there.

Except one look into his flame-blue eyes, and she needed his kiss more. Not pausing long enough to allow herself time to think, Carrie closed the short distance between them, slid both hands into his hair, and pulled his face to hers.

The first point of contact was mostly his facial hair grazing her skin. She tightened her hands and went on tiptoe to mash her lips to his. The skin-on-skin, lip-on-lip contact jolted through her, a lightning bolt that ignited a deeper need.

Seth's arms came around her back, drawing her into his body, but his lips barely moved. He simply waited, letting her kiss him. So she lifted her gaze to his and saw his question reflected back.

After nipping at his lower lip, which earned a groan from deep in his throat, she pulled back just enough to see his face without going cross-eyed. "Can you, maybe, just for a minute, kiss the hell out of me?"

Something unreadable flickered across his face, then one side of his mouth curled into a lazy smile. "Who am I to turn down an evil scientist such as yourself? I'd hate to find myself poisoned."

The joke startled a laugh out of Carrie, but he cut it off by sealing his mouth to hers. They spent a moment nipping and nibbling, then with a groan, Seth slid his tongue along the seam of her lips until she opened for him.

He tasted hot and male and perfect, with a hint of pizza, and the heady combination turned her liquid inside. She held tighter to his shoulders, trying to get closer. She needed to feel his body against hers.

Instead, she felt his costume. The hard plastic underwear-shorts dug into her middle, preventing her from getting as close as she wanted. She would have laughed if he weren't kissing her so deeply and thoroughly.

It was a reminder that in that moment, they were supposed to be different people. She was the science villainess, he the

gadget-obsessed billionaire. Carrie and Seth had very good reasons they couldn't get involved. But nothing was stopping Iron Man from having a little fun with Poison Ivy.

So she scraped her nails through the coarse hair on his cheek, then held his face between both hands as she devoured him. A sound of need floated through the air, and she wasn't certain which one of them made it.

Abruptly Seth ripped his mouth away, looking down at her with glassy eyes. He sounded a little breathless as he said, "If you don't want this to go any farther, we should stop now."

Despite his words, he dropped his head to the crook of her neck and sealed his lips to her pounding, uneven pulse. "I can't kiss you like this and not need more."

Carrie—no, she was Ivy right now—rocked her hips against him, wanting to feel how much he needed her. Instead, again, she rubbed her hips against his plastic costume. She whimpered in frustration.

Mouth behind her ear, hitting that awesome spot that made her want to climb his body and beg him to do whatever he wanted to her, he murmured, "Tell me about it. You have no idea how uncomfortable it is to be this hard in this fucking costume."

"You can't take it off?"

He didn't answer right away, instead licking along her skin, pulling her hair to the side so he could reach further around her, almost to the back of her neck. He bit at the line of muscle where her back met her neck, and her knees went liquid.

She clung to him to keep her balance. "Seth."

"You like that?" He repeated the move and she whimpered.

"Don't stop. Please don't stop."

He answered with a flick of his tongue, then feasted on her magic spot until her whole body was gelatin and she grew lightheaded from need.

“If I try to take it off”—he dragged his mouth back to her ear—“it’ll take twenty minutes. It’s the most”—he sucked her earlobe into his mouth; she yelped—“pain-in-the-ass thing. It’s why I”—he left a trail of nips and kisses along her jaw and around her chin—“left it on.”

He sampled her pulse on the other side now and for long minutes she simply held on as his lips and teeth and tongue dissolved her body and her willpower. Carrie—no, Ivy—wanted him too much. Damn the consequences. She could have a man if she wanted; she was a powerful, desirable villainess.

But a boneless villainess. “We have an hour?”

He made a sound that was probably assent, muffled by her hair.

She pulled back slightly, fisting his shirt to tug him with her as she moved across the room to his bedroom. His arms still held her tightly, one finger tracing the bottom edge of her corset where it met her leafy shorts. The touch walked the thin line between tickling and arousal.

When her legs hit the bed, she wriggled out of Seth’s arms and scooted across the mattress until she could fall back into the mound of pillows.

His chest rose and fell rapidly as his hungry gaze raked over her. “Jesus, darlin’. You are so fucking sexy in that outfit.”

She swallowed hard, overwhelmed by the frank appreciation on his face. No man had ever looked at her like that, his desire so raw and unchecked. She knew what it was like to be wanted, to have a man want sex with her. But never had it been this blunt, dizzying need, this urge to do anything necessary to have this man and hold on to this feeling forever.

His need made her powerful, even as his power over her body consumed her.

Instead of joining her on the bed, he sat on the edge and bent to do something on the floor. After a minute, he turned to her again. “Better.”

With a predatory grin, eyes focused on hers, he crawled up the bed until he was over her on all fours. The glint in his eyes, like he was going to devour her whole, stole her breath. Vaguely she noticed he'd removed his plastic boots, leaving his lower legs encased in shiny gold pants.

She reached for him, grabbing a handful of his shirt.

His resistance was subtle, a flex of his broad shoulders, and he remained in place. "To be clear, I'm not fucking you today. For several reasons, none of which has the least bit to do with how damn much I want to be inside you."

Again with that blunt hunger. She opened her mouth to speak but only a squeak came out. She took a slow breath, then tried again. "The girls."

"Yes. Reason two: this fucking costume," he added. "Reason three: I don't have a condom with me. Reason four: your job. Reason five: my desire to have your brother not castrate me."

Though they were discussing *not* having sex, the idea of him rolling on a condom made her body flush warm. It was better if they didn't, but that didn't stop her from wanting it. "So just kissing the hell out of each other."

Again he gave her that one-sided smile that made her stomach feel hollow and warm. Slowly he lowered himself until his chest pressed against hers, his hips angled to the side so his plastic belt wouldn't jab her.

His lips brushed hers, forehead resting against hers. He smoothed back her hair, then traced the line of her face. "I really like kissing the hell out of you."

"I really like you kissing the hell out of me. I probably shouldn't, but I do."

"It's OK to like it. We just shouldn't be doing it."

"Right. Definitely not."

"Do you want me to stop? I can—"

In answer, she kissed him and they quickly fell into a rhythm that matched the rhythm of their bodies as they rocked

against each other, the rhythm of the soft sounds coming from the back of her throat.

“So that’s a no?” he mumbled into her mouth.

“Do not stop kissing me,” she panted.

“Gladly.” He sucked hard on her tongue, shooting pleasure straight to her clit.

She would have told him to do it again if she could talk. But the way she squirmed against him must have conveyed the message, because he repeated the action. Again and again until she was writhing and desperate.

Needing to feel his skin, she tugged at his shirt until she could slide her hands across his smooth chest. His muscles tensed under her touch, his breathing shallow.

Wrenching himself away, he sat up to tug off the T-shirt. Carrie’s gaze raked over him, taking in each ridge of muscle, the sprinkle of blond hair between his pecs, and that delicious line that led down his center and disappeared into his damn codpiece. She licked her lips, but in her mind she was licking down that trail of hair until—

“Don’t look at me like that,” Seth growled.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to find a way into these stupid, fucking uncomfortable shorts and put that delicious mouth on my cock.”

“It . . . it shouldn’t be this hot,” she stammered.

“What shouldn’t?” He settled back down, this time more on his side. With a hand on her hip, he rolled her body toward his.

Without thinking, she slid her leg up and over his, pulling herself even closer. “When you talk like that. It’s so crude.”

“It’s honest. I don’t do flowery language.”

No, it wouldn’t suit him. It didn’t suit much of anyone. In her experience, most men simply avoided talking about it at all. Which was a shame, because she was wild with desire.

He took her mouth again, and as they kissed, Carrie's hands explored the long planes of his back, enjoying the way his muscles bunched and pulled as he also explored.

One of his large hands slid up her side and covered her breast. Except that in the thick fabric of the garment, she couldn't feel it. At the same time, they both made sounds of frustration.

Undeterred by the setback, Seth skimmed down her back, fumbled for the waist of her shorts, then slid his hand in until her butt cheek filled his palm. His long fingers reached far enough to arouse a gasp.

"Yes," she breathed.

"Jesus, you have a great ass." He squeezed, kneading and teasing, until she had to pull her mouth away and simply breathe.

And then, from behind, his long finger slid between her legs until he found the slick opening that told him exactly how much she wanted him.

"Damn." His voice was hoarse as he shifted his arm to get a better angle, the tip of his finger sliding inside her.

The sharp pleasure was so intense, she scraped her teeth on his chest, wanting to sink them into his muscle, barely holding back so she wouldn't hurt him. "Please," she managed to gasp.

His lips brushed her temple as his finger continued to tease. "Please what?"

"Make me come," she whispered against his hot skin.

He stroked her again, slow and firm, turning up the heat inside her. "Gladly." His hand slid from the back of her shorts and she whimpered. She was so close. Why was he taking his hand away?

He nudged her hip away from him just enough so he could fit his hand between them. It took him a moment to find the divide between her corset and shorts in front, eliciting a frustrated growl from him. Then finally, *finally* his fingertips

teased the sensitive skin of her belly, the coarse curls between her legs, then the swollen, wet folds of her pussy.

He didn't waste time with teasing. "Now," he groaned before kissing her roughly, his tongue in her mouth as frantic as his hand between her legs.

Her shorts were made of stretchy fabric, allowing him unfettered movement. He easily slid two fingers inside her, thrusting fast and deep in a rhythm that made Carrie scrape her nails down his back, her hips rocking to add to the pleasure.

The world narrowed to the two of them, the rough sounds of their breathing punctuated by the occasional moan, the heat and taste and feel of his desperate kiss, and above all, the way he could work her body, taking her higher and higher without letting her fly.

She felt a gentle pinch to her clit, followed by his teeth grazing her lower lip, and she choked out a sob. "Yes," she moaned, and he swallowed the sound in his kiss.

The pleasure grew and grew until she thought she might break from the enormity of it. Then, with another pinch of her clit, Seth sent her over the edge.

Carrie jerked against him, pressing hard against his still-thrusting hand that felt so good. Her teeth sank into his lower lip and he hummed his approval as she shuddered against him. Delicious release rolled over and through her, blocking out everything except the man pressed against her.

As the last waves ebbed away, leaving her dazed and relaxed and more satisfied than she'd been in her life, he slowly drew his mouth away. Forehead resting against hers, he eased off the pressure of his hand, then slid it out of her.

She could feel his gaze on her as she shuddered with one last aftershock. But before she opened her eyes, she wanted another moment to revel in the perfection of what had transpired between them.

Seth laced their fingers together and lifted their joined hands to brush a kiss over her knuckles. He squeezed her and asked softly, "You still in there?" A smile was evident in his



voice, with a hint of tension. He had to be aching for his own orgasm.

She made a long sound of contentment and let a grin slowly spread across her face. Finally, her eyes fluttered open.

His faint smile widened to match her grin. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

They stayed like that for a long moment, simply looking into each other’s eyes. Carrie didn’t know exactly what she was thinking or feeling, other than deeply satiated, and she didn’t want to delve into it further. The situation between them was complicated, but this, right here in his hotel room, was simple.

Eventually he gave her a soft kiss. “The girls might decide to come back earlier than I expect.”

Carrie’s face and neck heated in a way entirely different from the heat she’d felt a few minutes ago. “Right, of course.”

Before she could scoot away, Seth’s arm draped over her middle, anchoring her to the bed. “This was a bad idea, wasn’t it?”

Awful. Terrible. The worst. Now she knew what it was like not only to kiss him but to have his hands all over her. Inside her. “Yeah.” She frowned as a thought occurred to her. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, definitely not.”

She couldn’t stop a small smile. “Me neither.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers, the touch so light she barely felt it. “But it can’t happen again.”

Carrie closed her eyes to savor the moment a little longer. “I know,” she whispered against him. “That’s the only part I regret.”

“Me too.” He nibbled at her lower lip. Then, making a sound of frustration, he rolled away. “We should get up.”

“Yeah.” She tried to keep most of the disappointment out of her voice. She sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed.

With her back to Seth, she straightened her clothes and smoothed her hair as best she could. As swollen and whisker-burned as her mouth felt, she needed to fix her makeup before heading back to the convention center.

Forcing a smile she didn't feel, she turned back to him. "OK. I'm gonna get my key and go before this gets more awkward."

He raised one side of his mouth. "Probably for the best." He pushed to his feet and gestured for her to precede him to the door.

They remained silent as they walked back to the living room, which suddenly felt miles long. Seth paused by the couch, but instead of moving out of her way, he lifted his hand to cup Carrie's cheek. A pained expression crossed his face, then he lowered his forehead to hers.

"I know you know this, but you're really fucking sexy as Ivy. You're always sexy, but that outfit . . ."

She closed her eyes, allowing herself to absorb every detail of having him so near. This would be the last time she could touch him like this. "Thank you," she managed to whisper.

She brushed a final kiss over his warm lips, then slipped away. Without looking back at him, she opened the door to her room, slipped through it, and tried to ignore the heaviness in her chest.

---

## Chapter 10

---

"I CAN'T MAKE it for dinner tonight. You want to catch a movie tomorrow instead?" Carrie said into her phone as she pulled into the lot of the swimming facility.

"Sure, sounds good," Amy said distractedly. "What's up tonight?"

"Seth got a flat, so I'm picking up Maddie at swim practice." She turned off the car and started across the dark parking lot, definitely not looking at the spot where she and Seth had leaned against his car when he kissed her. The same way she didn't look at that spot every time she dropped off or picked up Maddie.

Dammit, Thursday was supposed to be her night off from the torture of visiting this lot twice in one day. And she'd really been looking forward to two evenings in a row off. She'd hoped to have enough wine while eating dinner with Amy to justify staying until well past when Seth went to bed. Carrie hadn't seen him before he left for practice that morning, so she could go an entire day without being around him. Sure, the idea seemed torturous. But it also sounded incredible.

Ever since Chicago, all she seemed able to do was relive the feel of his hands on her body and fantasize about what could have happened. She couldn't handle another night at home, wishing she were naked and with Seth. Or, worse, wishing she were fully clothed and cuddled against his big body, hanging out. Thank God Amy didn't have a Friday night date with her boyfriend.

“A nanny’s work . . . ,” Amy said.

Carrie laughed. “I feel that.” She yanked open the door to the building. “I’ll look up movies tomorrow and text you.”

“Sounds good.”

Carrie ended the call and slid her phone into her back pocket as she rounded the corner to the hall leading to the girls’ locker room. Except it was empty, so she had to wander. She finally found Maddie hanging out in her head coach’s office.

Eric rose from his desk when Carrie stepped into the doorway. “Carrie, hi. It’s so nice to see you.” He smiled, wide enough to show off straight white teeth.

“Hi, Eric. Maddie, are—”

“Before you go, I wanted to ask you something.” Eric raised his voice to speak over her.

“Sure,” Carrie said, struggling to keep her annoyance out of her voice. She didn’t like being talked over.

“Are you free tomorrow night? I know you don’t usually come to practice on Fridays, but I was hoping maybe we could grab a drink?”

Wait, what? The swim coach was asking her out? In front of Maddie? Holy awkward, Batman. “I don’t—”

“I know it’s short notice.” Eric’s words barreled over her. Again. “If you’re busy, maybe next week? Or Saturday? Some other time?”

“My dad is always gone on Saturdays,” Maddie supplied. “She can’t do Saturdays. But she’s always free on Fridays.”

“Well, I’m not—”

“Friday, then. Does tomorrow work for you?”

Carrie was aware of not just Eric waiting for her response but Maddie as well. “I have plans tomorrow. . . .” Nor was she interested in going out with Eric the swim coach. He seemed like a nice guy, someone she was happy to chat with briefly in

her capacity as his athlete's nanny. But she wasn't the least bit attracted to him.

The feel of Seth's beard tickling her cheek flashed into her head. A vivid reminder she needed to find someone she could be attracted to and go on a date with.

She and Amy should go somewhere other than a movie tomorrow. Somewhere they might meet some eligible men. Was there a nerdy singles group in town? A geek bar?

Eric's smile faltered, but to his credit, he recovered quickly. "Next Friday?" His brown eyes roamed her face.

From her chair, Maddie looked back and forth between them.

Carrie tried to make her smile and voice as gentle as possible. "That's really nice of you, but I . . . can't." *I don't want to. I want to want to, but I don't want to.*

"I understand."

He did have a nice smile. And his eyes were warmer than she deserved, given she'd just rejected him. But it wouldn't be fair to either of them if she accepted a date when she wasn't interested.

"I should . . ." He gestured to the laptop on his desk.

"We need to go too." She gestured for Maddie to get up.

"See you tomorrow, Coach." Maddie's voice was almost as gentle as Carrie's had been.

He gave a thumbs up as they left the office.

"Don't want to date Eric?" Maddie asked once they were outside.

"He seems nice, but he's not my type." Carrie unlocked the car and got in.

"What is your type?" Maddie asked as she settled into her seat.

Big. Blond. Bearded. Athletic. Fierce competitor and dedicated father. Amazing kisser.

Shit.

“I’ve always liked Jason Momoa,” Carrie said instead. He was gorgeous, but also seemed nerdy and funny. And she’d watched a trailer for his next movie that afternoon, so he was the first guy she thought of, besides Seth.

“Omigod, he was so great in *Justice League*.”

“That movie was fantastic,” Carrie agreed. Now, if she could steer the conversation to comic book movies and away from dating, that would be perfect. “I can’t wait for more of that series.”

“Big guys with long hair, huh?” Maddie’s voice was teasing.

Shit. *Nice job, Carrie.* “I’m a sucker for tall, dark, and handsome,” she lied. “And that wicked grin.” Things the actor did not have in common with Seth. Except tall and handsome; Seth was definitely those things. But he wasn’t dark, and his grins were always friendly.

“Speaking of those movies, did you hear the latest rumors about the sequel?” she went on, in another attempt to redirect the conversation.

They chatted the rest of the drive about the latest superhero movies, and Maddie told a story about her school in Houston. As she always did, Carrie tried not to seem nosy when she asked questions about Texas. She was simply getting to know the girl she was in charge of. And since Seth was Maddie’s father, it was natural to sometimes ask about him too.

Asking simple questions didn’t mean she was curious about Seth. It wasn’t like she’d fallen asleep every night for the past ten days—but who was counting?—masturbating to the memory of their afternoon in the hotel room. The past three nights, she’d been able to rub out two orgasms by imagining where things could have gone.

Nope, she didn’t wonder about Seth at all.



WHAT KIND of dumbass got nervous about walking into his own house?

Probably the same kind of dumbass who made out with a woman when they had solid reasons not to get involved.

Mentally slapping himself, Seth pushed open the door and stepped into the back hall. He tossed his bag through the open laundry room door, then continued into the house.

Before reaching the entrance to the kitchen, he stopped when he heard Carrie's voice.

"The independent variable is the one that you changed. The dependent variable is the one you're measuring so you can see how the independent variable changed it."

"So dependent is whether we used land or water, and temperature is independent?"

"No, you're measuring temperature, and changing land or water. Temperature is *dependent*," Carrie said with infinite patience.

There was a pause. "Oh!" Mads exclaimed. "I totally get it. The dependent variable depends on which independent variable I use. Duh. Thanks."

"No problem. That's what I'm here for."

Was he imagining the hint of frustration in her last sentence? She clearly enjoyed teaching; was she still looking for teaching jobs? Maybe then . . .

What, she'd quit and they could immediately hook up? Never mind that she wasn't the kind of person who'd leave him and Maddie in a bind like that. He was thinking with his dick, not his brain.

Enough lurking in the hall. "Hey, Mads." He cut through the kitchen to where his daughter sat with Carrie, books and papers spread on the table in front of them. He bent to kiss the top of Mads' head. "Tire's all fixed. Sorry you had to scramble today."

Mads shrugged. "'S OK. Carrie's helping me with my lab report."

“I heard.” Too late, he realized he’d admitted to eavesdropping. Shifting uncomfortably, he met Carrie’s gaze over Mads’ head. “Sorry I’m so late. It took both me and Lem to wrench the damn lug nuts off. A couple linemen joined in to try. It became a thing.” A macho display of strength, the group of them acting like boys. Stupid, but fun. A good way to blow off a little steam.

Carrie’s lips curled up, a warm but distant smile. The smile she’d been giving him for the past ten days—not that he’d been keeping track.

“No problem.” She stood and gathered dirty dishes. “I didn’t feel like cooking, so we ordered Chinese. I got an order of veggie delight for you.”

“Thanks, but I ate already.”

“Yeah, but you always have a snack before bed.” She opened the dishwasher and loaded in her and Mads’ dishes.

“Good point.” He ignored the warmth in his chest at the realization that she knew his routine so well. Knowing his late-night snacking habits wasn’t part of her job, yet she still paid attention. To him.

“What’s your lab about?” Seth turned his attention to his daughter, ruffling her hair.

She smacked his hand away. “Dad. Cut it out.” She managed to make *dad* a three-syllable word.

Carrie closed the dishwasher and started for the back hall. “I’m going to throw in another load of laundry, then head upstairs. Night, guys.”

“I’ll get my stuff out of my bag for you.” It was a dumb excuse to follow her, but he had to be alone with her for just one minute. One second.

If he were smart, he wouldn’t. He’d find a way to never be alone with her. But he’d rarely been accused of being a smart man.

In the small laundry room, Seth stood a half step closer than he would with anyone else as he scooped his clothes from



practice onto the top of the washer. He couldn't help it. He needed to be close to her.

“Thank you for covering for me tonight.”

With a rueful smile, she straightened after shoveling an armload of her clothes from the washer to the dryer. A strand of her hair fell in her face, and his hand automatically lifted to brush it away. But he caught himself before touching her, and yanked it back.

“Sorry.” He shoved the offending hand into his pocket.

“Yeah.” Her word came out a sigh.

“I do appreciate everything you do for Mads. And me. As frustrating as this is”—he waved his hand between them—“I'm glad she has you.”

“I am too. And it's my pleasure. She's a great kid, and you two make this an enjoyable job.”

Job. Fuck. He didn't want to be her employer. He wanted to take her out to dinner. Maybe have a double date with Lem and his wife, Sarah.

Seth's throat felt choked with frustration. He had plenty of experience wanting a woman he couldn't have, but always because she wasn't interested. He'd never been in a situation where he couldn't act on mutual attraction.

Now, as he looked down into Carrie's blue eyes and saw her lips part as she looked up at him, tension rippled through him. When had they gotten this close, where her chest was only a breath from his? His hand fisted in his pocket, gripping the fabric so he wouldn't again reach for her face.

She dropped her head and rested her forehead against his chin, red strands catching in his beard. Her shoulders sank.

Following her lead, he unclenched his fist and smoothed his hand over her hair, down her back. Her hair was so soft; he wanted to tangle his fingers in it and hold her against him.

His shoulders relaxed as he curved into her. Even this simple, nonsexual touch felt so right.

A soft, contented sound escaped her as she stepped back. “I need to go upstairs.”

“You really do.” His voice was thick.

“Good night, Seth.”

He held the door for her and watched as she walked away.



“YOU ALMOST DONE WITH HOMEWORK?” Seth closed the dishwasher and set it to run.

Mads gave a grunt he couldn’t interpret. So she was playing sullen tonight. She had so many personalities these days, he never knew which version he’d get.

He sat next to her at the table, adopting a pose he hoped looked more natural and casual than it felt. Inside he pulsed with tension. Sullen Mads was one of his least favorite versions.

“I’m sorry about tonight.” Not only had he missed picking her up, but he’d promised to watch the last ten minutes of practice. Her coach was going to have them doing sprints, and since he couldn’t get to her meet on Saturday, she’d wanted him to see it.

With a giant sigh, she put down her pencil. “It’s not a big deal. It’s the season. I’m used to you not being around.”

Ouch. She wasn’t wrong, but her words still stung. This had been easier when it was his parents taking care of her. He suspected that was one of the few things his daughter would agree with him on.

“Well, I’m here now,” he said, forcing his voice to stay upbeat. “You wanna pop in a movie while you finish that up? What about one of the old Batman ones you like? What’s the one with Arnold as Mr. Freeze?” And Poison Ivy, but he wasn’t going to be that obvious. Uma Thurman was no Carrie, but it was as close as he’d get.

He waited, but Mads ignored him, returning her focus to her homework. Which he should be glad about, but he didn't appreciate her being rude. He may be MIA more often than he wanted, but he was still her father.

“Mads, I expect you to answer when I'm talking to you.”

She heaved a sigh. Did all girls her age sigh this much? “Can you stop calling me Mads and just call me Maddie like everyone else? It's so dumb. I'm not five anymore.”

He swallowed down the hurt at her admonition. In its place, irritation rippled through him and he stood. To keep himself from pacing, he went to the kitchen, grabbed a sponge, and started wiping down the counters.

He'd been calling her Mads since she was born. It had come out the first time he held her, and he'd liked it. It was something special between him and his daughter, something no one else called her. But still part of her name, not generic like “baby” or childish like “pumpkin.”

But if she didn't like it, who was he to force it on her? He might not know much about twelve-year-old girls, but he'd figured out enough to know she would resent it if he insisted on continuing to call her Mads.

“All right. Maddie.” The word felt awkward on his tongue, like he was talking to an impostor. “I'll do my best to make the change. But be patient with your old dad. It might take me a little bit.” He forced a laugh at his pathetic attempt for a joke.

Had he just made a dad joke? He wanted to drop his head onto his arms and groan. How much had he and his friends made fun of their fathers' dad jokes?

Seth glanced over at Mads—Maddie, shit—in time to catch her rolling her eyes.

“Go on, take your homework over to the couch. I'll heat up one of my packs and we'll watch *Batman* while you do your lab and I nurse my hip.” He pulled open the drawer full of cloth bags of varying sizes, all filled with rice. After his first hip injury in college, his aunt had made him a dozen of the things, some with dried flowers mixed in with the rice to smell

nice. He could toss them in the freezer to use as an ice pack, or microwave them for heat therapy.

At twenty, he'd thought the gift silly, but after years of sore and strained and just plain beat-up muscles and joints, he was a convert. And now that he was away from Texas, it made him smile to look at the various fabrics Aunt Wendy used. One had a chicken and apple pattern, one kittens in a basket. There were leprechauns with beer mugs, flannel fire engines. They all said "crafty country mom," and he'd take them over a commercial heating pad any day.

He grabbed the one that fit his hip best, a large rectangle made with red fabric printed with candy canes, and tossed it in the microwave. Maddie still hadn't moved from the table.

"If you're not into *Batman*, we can watch something else. Your pick." He could guarantee he'd be spending plenty of time with a different imaginary Poison Ivy after he went to bed. He didn't really need the movie.

He thought back to various texts he'd exchanged with Carrie at his hotel last Saturday. She'd all but admitted she got herself off thinking about him. He blamed that for his inability to stick to his resolve to keep her out of his mind.

Like they had when he first read the text, his balls now got heavy and his groin felt tight.

Lem had a hairy ass. Today in the rehab room, one of the safeties had shown Seth the deep gash in his biceps from last weekend's game. During their team meeting today, Coach had a giant booger.

Erection averted.

"Dad, I don't—"

The blare of her cell phone interrupted her. Maddie looked at the screen and instantly her face morphed from irritation to grinning. "Hey, Emilia."

Her new friend, whom he knew almost nothing about, even after a weekend with her. Back in Houston, he'd known most of Maddie's friends for years. Knew their personalities, talked

frequently with their parents. Was friends with some of their parents.

He'd talked to Emilia's dad on the phone briefly, before they went to Chicago. He was an engineer and had been only vaguely aware Milwaukee had a football team. Safe to say they probably wouldn't become friends.

"Omigod, Em. You totally won't believe this." Mads—fuck, no, Maddie—got up and wandered over to the kitchen. Without even glancing at Seth, she moved around him to the cabinet where they kept cups.

"I told you Carrie had to pick me up and I was hanging out in my coach's office. So she comes in and finds us there. And Coach was trying to be all cool and subtle, but he totally asked her out."

Seth felt like he'd been punched in the chest. Maddie's swim coach had asked Carrie out? Had she said yes? How could she even consider it when they were—

Not together. They were nothing. He should be happy for her, going out with some other guy. Someone she could actually have a relationship with.

Right now, he was so fucking happy for her, he wanted to put his fist through the wall.

He snatched his rice pack from the microwave and stalked to the living room. He tossed himself on the couch, fully aware he was sulking in a way not at all befitting a thirty-one-year-old man. He didn't care.

"Nah, she totally shut him down. It was kinda brutal. Said she can't. No other explanation."

Seth was not doing an end zone dance in his head. That would be immature. He was thinking about his touchdown celebration because he hoped to get another pick-six sometime soon. It was just common sense to be prepared.

"Omigod, no way! He did not. That's so cool. Are you going to— Um, hold on a second. Let me get my homework and go up to my room."

Seth closed his eyes with a slow exhalation. Message received. He and Maddie would not be hanging out tonight. At least now he was free to watch *Batman* if he wanted. Except watching anything alone held no appeal. He wanted to spend time with his daughter.

He needed to be studying Sunday's game plan anyway. He'd been willing to put it off to hang with Maddie. But not to watch a mediocre movie so he could see a different woman dressed in the costume Carrie chose.

Seth lifted his head from the back of the couch and turned to see Maddie. "Tomorrow after school, let's do something. Should be an early day for me."

To her credit, Maddie's eyes only did a half roll when she looked at him, though the rest of her expression was impatient. "I'm going over to Noah's after school. His mom's taking us to the comic book store. I told you about it on Monday."

He vaguely recalled the conversation. "Why don't you guys come here? I can take you." If he didn't think about how desperate he sounded, he wasn't actually desperate, right?

This time her eyes did a full roll. "Pass." Textbook and papers gathered from the table, she headed toward the stairs.

"Good night, Mads. Maddie. Sorry." He forced himself not to wince at the withering gaze she shot him. "I love you."

In response, she tossed him a thumbs-up, then disappeared.

Adjusting his rice pack with one hand, he dragged the other down his face with a groan. His kingdom for a manual on twelve-year-old girls. Or, since he didn't have a kingdom, his football contract.

When had being a dad gotten so much harder?

Match him up against the meanest, most brutal offensive linemen in professional football? No problem. Didn't ruffle a single one of his feathers. Date with an MMA fighter turned movie star? He'd done that once and had been relaxed enough to enjoy himself. She'd even wanted a second date, but they couldn't make their schedules line up. But have a conversation with the girl he'd raised for nearly thirteen years?

He was lost.

---

## Chapter 11

---

CARRIE WAS SO LOST in thought, she nearly jumped out of her chair when the garage door banged shut and she heard Seth come in. A moment later, he was in the kitchen, which did little to help her racing heart.

“Hey,” he said, going straight for the refrigerator. He pulled out a sports drink, twisted off the cap, downed half of it, replaced the cap, and set it on the counter.

She was absolutely not staring at the play of his arm muscles as he twisted, lifted, and twisted.

Except she was.

“Late night,” she said. Wednesdays were always his latest night, but usually he was home by the time she and Maddie returned from the pool around seven. Tonight they’d been home well over an hour.

He took another long swallow. “Coach Brandt has a few new schemes he’s installing for this week’s game. The Scorpions have some of the best offensive linemen in the league, so if we want to have any chance of getting a sack, we need a new tactic. And their running game is second in the league, so our read options on the run increased. And their quarterback loves to improvise. So we . . .”

His voice trailed off and he gave her a self-deprecating half smile. “Sorry. I’m probably boring you. I know you’re not a football fan.”



“No, it’s interesting. I never paid much attention to Jason in high school since he was my dumb older brother. And he was so far away for college, I ignored it.” She absentmindedly spun her pencil on her fingers as she spoke. “But getting an insider’s view, it’s actually sort of interesting.”

He made a face like he suspected she was humoring him. Which she wasn’t. She was starting to enjoy watching the games on TV with Maddie, and they’d gone to two at the stadium. Those were a lot of fun. Understandably, Maddie knew a lot about the game, and she pointed out the things her dad did well every play, not just the big plays like when he caught an interception. Carrie was learning a lot about the sport.

“Anyway, lots of new stuff to learn.” He brought his tablet and drink and sat down across from her at the table. “I’ll be up late with this tonight.” He tapped the tablet.

A dozen ideas for ways they could stay up late together jumped into her head, heating her cheeks. She bit the inside of her lips to keep them from slipping out. Without thinking about it, her hand started doodling on the paper in front of her.

Seth cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. Was he thinking the same thing?

She needed to look for another new job. And a new nanny for Maddie. The awkwardness and the tension were going to suffocate her soon, and her plan to meet a new guy to divert her interest was a nonstarter. She’d even dragged Amy out to a club last Friday, and while she’d talked to and even danced with some attractive, interested guys, she hadn’t been able to make herself even give out her phone number. Her hormones were only interested in one man.

“Whatcha working on?” Seth nodded at her notebook.

“It’s nothing, really.” A silly idea, but one that would never go anywhere.

He twisted his head, trying to see her paper better. “That’s not your diary or something, is it?”

“No!” That would be embarrassing. If she kept one, it would likely be nothing but lamenting how she couldn’t have Seth even when she wanted him so badly. “I think I told you, I did a panel about using more illustrative texts, almost like comics or graphic novels, to teach reluctant learners.”

“Sure. I went to your talk. I remember.”

Again, the knowledge that he’d attended her panel and actually paid attention to what she said both warmed her and excited her.

He was a dangerous man. And they were edging into dangerous territory. Because if they became friends before she got over her idiotic lust for him, she’d be a goner.

But other than Amy, no one in her life gave a crap when she talked about her ideas. So she couldn’t stop herself from continuing. “Amy and I have been toying with the idea of actually making a textbook. We’d start with one targeted for seventh- or eighth-grade science, since that’s what I know best. I’d write the text and ideas for the illustration, and she’d do the actual drawing.”

“And that’s what this is?” He nodded at her notebook, where she’d sketched images so rough they’d embarrass a four-year-old, interspersed with blocks of text.

She shrugged. “It’s really rough. I was goofing around while Maddie worked on her math. And when she went upstairs, I kept playing.”

He shrugged back at her. “Gotta start somewhere. I bet Spider-Man wasn’t Stan Lee’s first doodle.”

He knew who Stan Lee was?

At her startled look, he laughed. A full, hearty sound so warm and welcoming, she wanted to wrap herself in its warmth.

“I’ve paid a little attention to Maddie over the years.”

“I guess he is pretty well known.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, her making absent doodles on the page, him finishing his drink. Every second

that passed made her feel more at ease. More like she belonged in his home, as a part of an odd little family. It didn't erase the tension stretched between them, didn't make her want him any less. But it made it a little less uncomfortable.

"You think you'll do this textbook instead of going back to teaching?" He pushed back from the table and took his empty bottle to the recycling bin in the pantry.

"I honestly haven't considered that." She and Amy had never had a serious conversation about actually making their book.

"You do want to go back to teaching, right?" He paused at the pantry door, watching her. Lines creased his forehead, but she couldn't interpret his expression.

With a sigh worthy of Maddie, she said, "I don't know."

Now his expression was easily read: surprise. "Really? I assumed . . ."

"I love science, obviously. And I love the kids. Or most of them. There are always a few you want to strangle." Because she couldn't sit still with him watching her, she took her empty cup to the kitchen to refill her Diet Dr Pepper.

"But . . . ?" he supplied for her.

"But I hate the politics. Both the administration and the district, and how rigid the curriculum is. Teaching to standardized tests instead of developing kids' critical thinking." She wasn't going to think about the circumstances and politics and funding cuts that had led to her losing her job. She'd spent too much of the summer angry.

She took a large swallow from her drink and leaned back against the counter. Seth wandered over to lean against the opposite counter.

"Would a private school be better?"

"Doubtful. From what I could tell at the ones where I interviewed, the politics are sometimes different, but still prevalent."

He looked thoughtful, working his mouth in a way that drew attention to his beard. Which made her think of how those rough whiskers felt against her skin when he kissed her.

Her stomach hollowed and she had to look away from him so she wouldn't close the distance between them and shove her hands into his hair. He usually wore it back in a ponytail, but tonight it was loose around his shoulders, which was torturous.

“So what's your plan? I mean, Maddie and I love having you here, but I assume this isn't a long-term career plan for you.”

She looked up and their gazes connected. She couldn't quite catch her breath. Something stretched between them, some kind of acknowledgment that neither of them wanted her to stay his daughter's nanny forever. So they could be other things.

Which was an idiotic reason to make career decisions.

He looked away and pushed off the counter. “Much though I hate the idea, Maddie will be an adult in far too few years. Off to college.”

Five and a half more years seemed like an eternity of living with him and fighting her attraction. But to a parent, it probably did feel like nothing.

He grabbed his tablet off the table and headed for the living room.

She should answer his question and head up to her room. Get away from him, douse the heat that had surrounded them since he sat down at the table with her. It was the smart thing to do.

Instead, she picked up her notebook and joined him in the living room. Since he was on the sofa, she took the love seat. But it was still close enough for the tension to arc between them. Her skin buzzed with awareness of him.

She should have given her number to one of the guys she danced with on Friday.

“I don’t know. Schools aren’t really hiring teachers at the moment, so I guess I’ll keep feeling things out and see what pops up.”

He shot her a sideways glance. It took her a moment, then she realized he was side-eyeing her word choice.

*Feeling things out. What pops up.*

Oh, hell. Her subconscious was evil.

She laughed self-consciously. “So to speak.” At least they could have a sense of humor about a frustrating situation. “Anyway, for what it’s worth, I wouldn’t take any job until your season is over. I don’t know what the off-season is like, but I assume you don’t travel as much.”

“Not really.” He swiped at his tablet, not looking at her as he spoke. “Occasionally I have to go somewhere for a charity thing or an endorsement deal. But my mom could always come. Or I can find someone else.”

He shot her a glance, his eyes hooded and heated. “Another sitter.”

“Right.” Deep breath in. Deep breath out. The image of him with someone else in a non-nanny way sat uncomfortably in her gut. She couldn’t be with him, but it would kill her if she thought those whiskers were scratching up another woman’s cheeks.

Her thighs twitched with the need to crawl over the ottoman and straddle his lap.

A choked sound escaped her throat, absolutely without her permission, and he turned to her. His blue eyes were full of fire. Again without her permission, her legs straightened, lifting her to her feet. She took one involuntary step forward and he sat up a little straighter, his gaze never leaving her face.

“Bed,” she blurted out.

The flame in his eyes scorched her and he set his tablet on the couch next to him. “Carrie.” His voice was low, a gentle caress over her skin.

God, she wanted what would be so easy to take. What he was clearly offering. She couldn't breathe from how much she wanted him.

"I need to go to bed." She licked her lips; his eyes snapped to them, making her instantly regret her action.

"We shouldn't—"

"Alone."

The silence hanging between them was heavy. Palpable. Tense.

"Yes. You should do that now." His voice was tight, a warning.

She snatched up her notebook and soda. "Good night, Seth."

"Sweet dreams, Carrie."

*Sweet* didn't describe the dreams she would likely have. But he would star in all of them.

---

## Chapter 12

---

IF SETH HAD to look at his playbook for one more second, he was going to go out of his mind. He tossed the tablet onto the bed beside him and shoved to his feet. He needed to get out of his bedroom. It wasn't doing him any good to sit there staring at a screen. No more information was soaking into his brain.

As he stalked out of his room and to the kitchen, his phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket to see a text from his teammate Marcus James.

Marcus: *Coupla us goin to Bubble if you wanna come.*

He'd never been to Bubble, a swanky club downtown that Marcus was a financial backer of. He knew Marcus went every few weeks, but Seth hadn't joined him, since Friday was typically the night he spent with Maddie. But tonight she was sleeping over at Emilia's. So he was home alone with his tablet and his big, empty house.

"There's a *Seinfeld* marathon on, if you're looking for irreverent comedy."

Not alone. Seth looked over to the couch where Carrie was sprawled out, watching TV. He'd thought she was going out with her friend Amy, but apparently not.

In his hand, his phone buzzed again.

Marcus: *Baxter and his girl, Trask has a date, and Kendall. Be there bout 8. You in?*

Going out would be good for him. A group of players would inevitably draw the attention of women. Maybe he could meet someone to take his mind off Carrie. He wasn't a fan of one-night stands, but making out with someone might help. He had to do something. Having Carrie so close and not having her was driving him batshit. The other night when she'd told him about her textbook idea, he'd barely been able to keep himself from hauling her into his arms and kissing the hell out of her.

Seth: *I could be talked into it.*

"There's leftover chicken in the fridge," Carrie said, sitting up to peek over the back of the couch. Her hair was tousled around her face, making her look like she'd just rolled out of bed.

Heat flashed through him. Hell, she could probably stop showering for a week and he'd still find her sexy; he was that into her. Picking up a random woman in a bar wouldn't help.

"Thanks." So he didn't have to keep looking at her, he turned to the refrigerator and pulled out the container she'd put the leftovers in. Even though he often ate at the players' cafeteria after practice, she always made enough for him and left it with a sticky note on how best to reheat it.

He loved that about her.

He stood by the microwave as the meat and a side of rice heated, then took the plate to join her in the living room. He should sit at the table. He should text Marcus back and say he'd join the guys. He should absolutely not sit at the other end of the couch and watch reruns with Carrie.

But he did.

She moved her feet as he sat, scooting back and sitting halfway up. She had on a fitted T-shirt with superheroes on it, as she did most days, and a throw blanket over her legs.

She totally didn't look like the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. She looked like a woman he could hang out with on a Friday night, keeping his hands to himself and remaining professional and friendly.



Yep. He definitely could do that.

“You ready for your game on Sunday?” she asked when the show went to commercial.

Seth finished chewing. “More or less. Can’t seem to cram any more plays in there right now. There’s always time tomorrow, when I’m fresh.”

“I never realized how much non-athletic stuff goes into football.”

He glanced over at her. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not just running drills and lifting weights. All the time you spend reading your playbook and watching game tape is what I mean by non-athletic. You’re not working out, being physical.”

He liked that she was learning more about football. Liked that his job interested her enough to bother. “There’s a lot to know. Strategy. You can’t just run at a guy and hit him. You gotta know which guy to hit, or tackle, or block. And it changes every week. Hell, every play. And you have to know how that guy plays, so you know the right way to tackle him.”

Her attention stayed on him as the show returned to the TV. He liked that. Too much.

“Is it super different when you change teams?”

He chewed his last bite of chicken as he considered her question. “Sorta. I mean, some of it is the same no matter where you are. Fundamentals. But every coach, every coordinator, has a different style. So coming here has been a bigger change than, say, when we got a new defensive coordinator in Houston.”

“You just . . . I don’t know.” She poked him with her foot.

Before he could stop himself, he grabbed it and set it on his lap. Dangerous. Probably inappropriate. But he couldn’t help himself. He needed to touch her.

What he really needed was to hold her. Kiss her. Strip her naked and slide inside her. But he’d settle for having her foot rest against his thigh.

Totally professional and friendly.

He shifted a little, angling toward her and putting his arm along the back of the couch. “I just what?”

Her other foot poked out from the blanket and slid toward him. She didn’t seem aware of it when she started sliding her toes back and forth along the side of his thigh. He looked down, watching her subtle caress. Willing himself not to get hard and ruin whatever was unfolding between them.

Yep. Professional and friendly.

“I knew athletes worked hard. I just thought it was all hard physical work. I never realized how much hard mental work there is too.”

She needed to stop saying “hard.”

Because he couldn’t take the torture any longer, he grabbed her roaming foot and pulled it onto his lap next to the first.

“But you’re just here for one year, right? I think that’s what Jason told me.”

Her brother. A good reminder of the other reason Seth had to stop himself from crawling across the couch and stretching his body out on top of hers. No matter how much the idea turned him on.

“My agent is already working on an extension. Get me another year.” He tried not to think about that. That was for Mike to worry about until he had something solid to bring to Seth. Fortunately, he was continuing to have one of his best seasons, giving Mike leverage.

Her face softened as she considered him. “Would you go to another team if he doesn’t?”

He exhaled heavily. “I don’t want to uproot Maddie again. This move has been hard on her. She wasn’t always so . . .” He didn’t even have a word to describe how his daughter had changed in the past few months. “Moody.”

“Part of that is her age. She’ll outgrow it.”

Without realizing, Seth had dropped a hand to Carrie's ankle and begun slowly sliding his palm over the top of her foot. Now he looked down and watched as he touched her. It felt good to be near her, even if his skin did hum with a desire to grab her.

Professional and friendly.

“Yeah, but another move won't help.”

“What, then? Would you retire?”

He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat. He was old and beat-up by NFL standards. He'd already outlasted the average career span of a linebacker. But he didn't feel done.

Besides, what the hell would he do with himself if he didn't play football? He had no other marketable skills.

When he met her gaze, there was the usual heat that seemed inevitable between them. But along with it, he saw understanding. Caring. No woman had ever looked at him like that, and he wanted to reach for it, grab it, and hold it close to his heart. Not thinking about what he was doing, he moved her feet off his lap and sat forward.

The buzz of his phone stopped whatever he'd been about to do. Which would inevitably have been something dumb, like kissing her. He scrubbed a hand over his face and pulled his phone from his pocket.

Marcus: *Your name's on the VIP list if you decide to join us.*

“Let's go out.” Before he could talk himself out of it, Seth stood. He grabbed Carrie's hand and pulled her up too. She ended up too close to him, her body a breath away from touching his.

He took a step back but didn't let go of her hand.

“Couple guys are going out to Bubbles. Asked me to meet up.”

Confusion crossed her face. “OK. That should be fun.”

He pulled out his best playful smile. “It should. Go change. Come with me.” It was a bad idea. He should go out without her, leave her to her *Seinfeld* marathon. Even if he didn’t meet a woman, he’d put some distance between Carrie and him. Cool the lust that blazed inside him. It was making him feel a little reckless. Which was probably why he wanted her to come too.

He couldn’t be sure, but it looked like panic flashed over her features.

“No, I . . . I don’t have anything I could wear to Bubbles.”

“That green corset you have would work.”

He didn’t mean to say it out loud, but the surprise on her face was worth it. She looked almost scandalized.

He couldn’t help grinning. “Come on. You’ll look amazing.” Hell, she looked amazing now.

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth and Seth had to swallow a moan. Did women do that on purpose, to drive men out of their minds?

“Yeah, OK. Give me ten minutes.” She took a few steps back, gaze locked on his.

His heart pounded hard enough he could feel his pulse in his jaw.

She blinked hard, breaking the connection. “Be right back.”

As soon as she disappeared, Seth headed for his room to change as well. He pulled out his phone to text Marcus.

Seth: *Leaving soon. Carrie’s coming too.*

He’d changed from his sweatpants to dark jeans when he got a reply.

Marcus: *The nanny? Nice. The night’s looking up.*

Seth shoved down his irrational irritation as he rolled up the cuffs of his blue button-down shirt, cursing himself for inviting Carrie.

He was in for a hell of a torturous night.



THE MUSIC in the club pulsed loud enough, Seth could feel the beat in his teeth. It made him think of his dad's saying about how it made you glad to have a good dentist.

He missed his parents. Until moving to Milwaukee, he'd never gone more than two weeks without seeing them. Now he hadn't seen them in three months. But Thanksgiving was coming, and luck had the Dragons playing his old team on Thanksgiving Day. Coach had given him permission to stay an extra day in Houston so he could have a holiday meal with his family, and he was flying back Friday morning.

A waitress showed up with their drinks. Seth stood to settle the tab with the woman, since he'd offered to get the first round. He was only having one drink since he had to drive, and he wasn't about to let one of the other guys pay for it.

He handed the waitress enough cash to cover the eight drinks plus a generous tip, then took his gin and tonic and Carrie's white wine from the low table. Handing her the glass, he sank back into the cushions.

Damn, did she look hot. She'd worn a sparkly sweater over her corset, but the press of bodies made it warm enough she'd taken it off and draped it over the back of the couch they were on. Her jeans were tight in all the right places, so he could see how perfectly round her ass was. It made him think about digging his fingers into that perfectly round ass as she slid up and down his cock. Which did not help his resolve to think of her as only an employee and friend.

"A toast, guys. To kicking some St. Louis ass on Sunday." Marcus raised his pint glass and held it over the center of the table. The rest of them held up their drinks, and a series of clinks and murmured agreement followed.

"Is St. Louis good?" Baxter's girlfriend, Celia, asked.

Seth nearly spit out his drink. But he didn't feel too bad about almost laughing at her since Baxter was laughing the hardest of any of them.

"I might be a little off, but I think the Stallions have won the division seventy-three times in the last decade. Give or take," Carrie teased.

Something that felt oddly like pride niggled at Seth's chest. He liked that Carrie immediately felt comfortable enough with his teammates and their girlfriends to joke around.

"They ain't winning it this year. That title is ours. Hell, the Lombardi Trophy gonna be ours." Marcus flashed his lady-killer grin at Carrie. Seth liked that a lot less.

Celia rolled her eyes. "I know so little about football. I know I embarrass Matt."

Baxter kissed her temple. "Never. Not embarrassing at all for a professional quarterback to have to explain what a field goal is to his girlfriend."

Jeremy Trask, the team's kicker, slapped a hand to his chest. "You wound me, Celia. I take that one personally."

She made a *sorry-not-sorry* face at him.

"I promise, I don't know much more," Carrie said. "My brother played with Seth in college and has worked for the Dragons for almost a decade. I absorbed a few things growing up, but I remembered next to nothing until I took Maddie to a few games."

"Who's your brother?" Marcus asked.

"Jason Heron. He's a talent scout. I'd imagine you guys don't work with him too much." Carrie shrugged. "I don't know. Do you?"

"We know who he is," Kendall Allen said. "I went to Texas A&M. Played these clowns in college." He kept his expression stern as he jerked his chin at Seth.

Seth grinned, knowing Kenny was joking around. College rivalries dissolved once players were teammates with former

enemies. And Kenny was a hell of a player. Seth was glad to be on the same side of the ball as him.

The group spent the next hour drinking and chatting. Carrie and Celia discovered a mutual interest in some kind of brain research and talked about that while Seth spent more of the time discussing defensive strategies for Sunday with Kenny.

They'd just shifted to which quarterbacks they thought were the easiest targets to sack when a beautiful black woman came over and sat down next to Kenny. She crossed her long legs and Seth couldn't help staring, even though she was clearly interested in Kenny. Seth was still human, and the woman had fantastic legs.

Speaking to Kenny, she said, "You play for the Dragons, right?"

Kenny grinned lazily and said, "We do."

She leaned close to him. "My friend didn't believe me, said y'all would be at home resting. But I knew you looked familiar." She held out her hand. "Gwennie Morton."

Kenny took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he bent to kiss it. "Kenny Allen. The rest of these jokers don't matter." Still holding her hand, he stood. "Would you care to dance with me, Ms. Morton?"

When she rose, she was nearly as tall as Kenny. His official stats had him at six foot five.

After they headed for the dance floor, Carrie broke off her conversation to ask, "Does that happen a lot?"

Seth paused before answering. Might as well be honest. "All the time. Not just here."

She frowned. "Women hit on you everywhere you go?"

There had been the woman at the gas station on Tuesday. The grocery store was rapidly becoming a minefield; Carrie did most of the grocery shopping, but he still stopped in to pick up a few things on his own. More than one mom at school had made it clear she was interested in him. He'd taken

Maddie out for dinner a few weeks ago and two different women came over to talk to him. The waitress had written her phone number and “Call me, let’s get a drink” on the bill.

His anonymity in Milwaukee hadn’t lasted long.

“Not everywhere.” No one had asked him out when he took Maddie to the comic shop. And it only happened the one time when getting gas.

Carrie’s frown deepened. In the dim, blue-tinted lighting, it somehow made her freckles more prominent. He had an urge to kiss every one of them.

“Sometimes I wish I had that kind of confidence. I get shy enough with regular guys, let alone famous athletes.”

“Technically, didn’t you hit on me at the grocery store first? I seem to recall you giving me your number in the feminine hygiene aisle.” It was corny, but he winked at her.

She put her hand on his chest and leaned back, mock indignation on her face. “Who bought whose groceries? Pretty sure *you* made the first move. Besides, I didn’t know you were famous.”

He grinned, and she grinned back.

God, he loved her smile. It made him equal parts happy and horny.

“Seth, come here a sec.” Trask stood at the bottom of the three steps leading up to the VIP Lounge. “Couple ladies from Texas out here, one of ’em wants to meet you.”

Seth chanced a glance at Carrie and was more pleased than he should have been at the tight expression on her face. He didn’t want to meet a woman from Texas. He wanted to dance with Carrie.

But he always tried to make time for fans. He could sign an autograph. Carrie would be fine for a few minutes. She was hitting it off with Matt’s girlfriend.

He gave her a wry half smile. “Be right back.”



Her answering smile didn't make her eyes shine, the way they had a minute ago when they were flirting.

He most definitely should not be flirting with his nanny.

Seth pushed to his feet and followed Trask out of the lounge and through the press of bodies in the club. Maybe he'd have instant chemistry with one of these women, and one look at her would make him forget all about stripping Carrie naked and kissing every inch of her skin, then sliding inside her and giving them both ecstasy.

Fucking hell. Sure, with thoughts like that every seven seconds, he'd totally fall for some other woman. It seemed about as likely as Houston having six feet of snow for Christmas.

Sure enough, Seth did not have an instant attraction to either of the fans Trask introduced him to, Gina and Brianna. They were nice enough, and it turned out Brianna had gone to the high school that was the rival of Seth's, though a few years before him. Both women were married, so not looking for a hookup, which was a relief. They were simply fans of both the Texans and the Dragons who were outgoing enough to approach Trask when they saw him at the bar.

Knowing Carrie was fine on her own, and that Gina and Brianna weren't interested in him as anything but a star athlete, Seth was content to chat for a few minutes. He grabbed coasters from the bartender and both guys signed one for each woman. Seth and Brianna compared favorite restaurants in Austin.

They hung out for ten or fifteen minutes, then Seth excused himself to hit the restroom before heading back to the lounge. As often happened, he got snagged twice more by Dragons fans. One guy who was clearly drunk insisted on telling Seth exactly what the Dragons were doing wrong in their running game and how they could fix it. Seth had to assure the guy four times that he would pass on the information to Jaron Edmonds, the starting running back, and the coaches. Only after Seth pretended to text Jaron while the guy watched did he let Seth go back to his friends.

Back in the lounge, Marcus had moved into Seth's spot on the couch. The tight end had his body angled toward Carrie, his arm stretched along the back of the couch behind her.

But it was her wide smile and shining eyes as she listened to Marcus that really felt like a punch in the gut to Seth. She was flirting with his teammate, a man he knew she found attractive. And Marcus had asked about her more than once since meeting her at the practice facility.

Something an awful lot like jealousy burned in Seth's chest. It was an unfamiliar sensation; he didn't know what to do with it. His relationships were always casual, even if they agreed to be exclusive. He didn't get jealous. But seeing Carrie and Marcus flirting had Seth wanting to grab her and kiss her, to mark her as his.

Except she wasn't.

Maybe he needed to find a new nanny. His plan to simply get over his attraction to Carrie clearly wasn't working.

Trying not to show how grumpy he suddenly felt, Seth dropped onto the chair across from Carrie and Marcus. "Hey."

"Back so soon?" Carrie's expression was hard to read as she glanced over at Seth. Was he flattering himself, or was her voice sharper than usual?

He shrugged one shoulder. "They weren't looking for a hookup. Just fans who wanted autographs."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Trask has to get you to talk to two women, and neither wants to get wit' you?"

"Both married."

Marcus cut his gaze to Carrie, then back to Seth. Christ, were they that transparent? When Seth did the same back to Marcus, glancing at Carrie, then back to the tight end, Marcus's smile turned into a grin. His gaze seemed to be challenging Seth.

"Dance with me." Seth rounded the table to Carrie, took her hand, and tugged until she rose to her feet.

Where had those words come from? He didn't even particularly like dancing. But from their position in the VIP lounge, they could see the dance floor. Something about all those bodies pressed together, moving in a rhythmic mass, made him feel like he had to take Carrie and join them. Had to hold her against him and torture them both as they rubbed against each other.

And he wanted her the hell away from Marcus. Which was asinine. But he didn't want her hooking up with one of his teammates.

Maybe he should take her home so they could have desperate, needy sex and get it out of their systems. Maybe they wouldn't even make it to his bedroom; he could shove her jeans down and fuck her against the front door. Or toss her on the couch, throw her legs over his shoulders, and eat her delicious pussy until she came on his face.

Shit. He had to stop these fantasies. It would be embarrassing as hell to blow his load in his pants in front of his teammates. But he was so turned on, it wouldn't take much more than the brush of Carrie's hand over the front of his pants.

Still, maybe he was on to something. Maybe it was time they stopped fighting their attraction. Because it sure as hell wasn't going away.

Carrie tugged her hand away from him. "I don't really dance." Her gaze darted to Marcus, then back to Seth. "I have the rhythm of a cactus."

He took a breath to calm his irrational jealousy over her talking with Marcus. "I bet we can find a rhythm."

Shit. That was way more sexual than he'd intended.

Marcus snorted; Seth shot him a glare over Carrie's shoulder.

Her cheeks pinked. She dragged her lower lip between her teeth.

Seth swallowed a groan. He wanted to bite that lip.

Maybe they should skip dancing and go home.

But dammit, he liked being out with her. And it wasn't like anything had changed. They still shouldn't sleep together. Even if he was willing to risk it, he had no indication she'd changed her mind. They could still dance, though.

He ran his hand down her back and leaned down to speak softly in her ear. "Bring Ivy. I bet she's got moves."

Now her expression turned skeptical. "Her moves run more toward poison than hip gyration. But I guess we'll see what she's got."

Seth had no doubt that even if they were the two worst dancers in the place, he'd still get turned on by her. More than he already was.

He was screwed.

He laced their fingers together—a possessive show that felt better than it should—as he led her out of the lounge and to the floor. The crowd was dense and he used his large body to make a path. People tended to move for someone his size. She followed close behind him, hooking two fingers her free hand into his belt loop.

Something about that felt intimate in a nonsexual way. To his surprise, he liked it.

He liked even more when he turned to pull her into his arms and she slid against him willingly, her curves pressing against him exactly like they were made to fit him. He let the pounding beat of the music guide him as he began to move.

Before long, Carrie's body moved in perfect synchronization with his. He no longer needed the music; his movement triggered her countermove, which had him moving, going in an endless circle.

He couldn't tell when one song ended and the next began but it didn't matter. He bent his mouth to her ear to be heard over the music and said, "I'm not sure what you were talking about, darlin', because your dancing feels perfect to me."

Her eyes smiled as much as her lips as she looked up at him. “You make it easy.”

He pulled her tight against him. “Whereas you make it hard. Very, very hard.” Fuck. He should not have done that.

Except the spark in her eyes as she stared up at him said she didn’t mind. And the way she moved her body against him said she might even like it. He felt like he couldn’t breathe from how near she was and how much he wanted her.

Gripping her waist, he turned her so her back was to him. Maybe he’d have a little more control this way. He stepped back just enough to let a breath of air move between them.

Except instantly he missed the touch of her body against his. Apparently so did she, as she backed into him, her back sliding against his chest, her feet slipping between his.

*Ah, fuck it.* He pulled her even tighter against him and was rewarded with her ass rubbing against him. His hand slid from her hip to around her waist, holding her in place.

Carrie turned her head to look at him, her hair brushing his chin and catching on his beard. Tangled up in him; that’s where he wanted her.

He’d reached his limit. Again gripping her hip with one hand to spin her, he thrust his other hand into her hair and kissed her. Hot, hard, hungry, his lips claimed hers. He didn’t have to ask permission—her lips parted for him and his tongue slicked into her mouth. The contact seared him.

Jesus, he wanted her. Wanted every bit of her, and he was done fighting it. Nothing else he’d tried made his hunger for her go away. Maybe it would complicate things. Maybe it would ruin their working relationship. But in that moment, he didn’t care.

She tasted like wine and desire, and Seth never wanted to stop kissing her. Her arms wound around his chest, palms flat on his back, holding him as tightly as he held her. Her body molded against him, and he could feel every curve of her. He wanted to explore all of them, with his hands, with his lips,

with his tongue, and finally with his naked skin sliding against hers.

When his hands started to slide down over her ass, he stopped himself and reluctantly drew his mouth from hers. But his hand remained in her hair, his forehead pressed to hers, as he slowly opened his eyes.

Hers were still closed, and in the dim, pulsing light of the club, he could see her red, swollen lips. A fresh wave of desire rolled through him. He'd done that. He'd put that debauched look on her face.

He needed her. Now.

He looked deep into her eyes. "I think we need to go. Very, very soon." She couldn't mistake his intent, not with his throbbing cock pressed against her and his fingers digging into her hips to hold her against him. If they didn't get out of there soon, there was a very real chance he was going to take her to a dark corner and fuck her against a wall.

"I think you're right." Her hand covered his on her hip, fingers sliding between his, entwining them.

Goddamn, there was too much sexual imagery in his head. "How about now?" He trailed a kiss down the slope of her neck. He couldn't stop tasting her.

"I think—" She broke off on a moan when he nipped at her collarbone.

He pressed his lips to the side of her neck and breathed in deeply, taking a moment to gather his scattered brain before they hurried back to the VIP lounge, gathered their things, and said hasty goodbyes.

He managed to get Carrie outside before he lost his latest battle with self-control. As soon as he handed his keys to the valet, she fell into his arms, tilting her head up in a silent request he couldn't resist.

Her mouth was somehow more delicious this time as he sucked hard on her tongue. She let out a squeak that had him pulling back with a smile.

“You like that?” His whiskers were probably scratching up her face, his lips brushing hers as he spoke.

“Yes.” Her word was barely more than a breath, and he got a thrill that he turned her on that much. It was only fair, since he wasn’t sure he could safely drive home in his state of arousal.

When his car arrived, he pressed a kiss to her forehead, then helped her in. They didn’t talk as he drove toward his house. She took long, slow breaths, as if she were trying to control herself.

Finally they reached his house and pulled into the garage. He turned to face her, and forced himself to ask the question nagging him the whole drive.

“Are you positive you want to do this?”



YES. Hell yes. She wanted him to take her inside and strip her naked and screw her brains out. She wanted him to magically change things so she wasn’t his nanny and he wasn’t her boss.

But what she wanted and what she should do were two very different things.

She couldn’t look at him as she said, “I can’t afford to fuck up this job.”

With those eight words, all the false calm she’d managed to build up on the drive home shattered. The desire came back, the lightheaded hunger, the driving need.

Without a word, Seth got out and came around to her side of the car. His movements were stiff as he offered a hand to help her out. She accepted it, because she had to touch him. He made her feel so good. Amazing. Beyond amazing.

She needed to know how good it could be between them. If it fucked up her job, they’d deal with that later. She would throw caution to the wind, consequences be damned,

tomorrow was another day, and all those clichés. She wanted him too much to give up this one night.

She didn't let go of his hand as they walked to the door. When he started to pull away, she tightened her hold until he relaxed.

She shoved open the door and stepped inside. Once they were in the living room, she faced him and grabbed his shirt, pulling him to her. "I can't afford to fuck up this job," she said again, "so we'll have to figure out how to do this without fucking it up. But I need you," she said. Then her lips met his and she kissed him with all the hunger she felt, the desire she'd been trying to hide for too long. Her arms went around his neck and her tongue slid along his lips until he opened to her.

He groaned and hauled her against him, kissing her with as much fervor as she kissed him. Abruptly, he pulled away. "You're sure?"

"Positive." It wasn't smart, but his kisses were like a drug, her own personal blend. She couldn't say no.

He lifted her, guiding her legs around his waist. His mouth found hers as he started toward his bedroom.

She ran her hands over his shoulders, then one hand went to his ponytail. Too aroused to be gentle, she tugged at the band until it slid free. Once his hair was loose, she ran her fingers through it.

As he walked, Seth held her with one hand squeezing her ass, sending sharp pleasure up her spine. His other hand slid up her back, caressing the bare skin above the top of her corset. She felt like she was on fire, in the best way. As if he were the oxygen feeding her.

He tweaked open the hooks along the back of her corset, then the garment loosened and her breasts seemed to overflow from the cups. Amazing. She was sleeping with the only man alive who knew how to unhook a corset.

"Impressive skills," she murmured against his lips.



Grinning, he pulled back. Slowly he bent over to lay her on his bed. “Darlin’, I got all kinds of impressive skills,” he said, laying his Texas accent on thick.

With one hand, he gripped the back of his shirt and yanked it over his head. Tossing the shirt on the floor, he reached over to turn on the bedside lamp.

The dim light cast shadows over him, highlighting each individual muscle of his sculpted torso. His flat pecs with a dusting of hair, his sculpted six-pack, and that sexy line at the bottom of his obliques, along his upper hip.

Her mouth watered as her eyes traced that line. She wanted to taste him.

“Hey, eyes up here. What am I, a piece of meat?”

She couldn’t help laughing, not at his dumb joke but because she loved how easy it was between them. Had she ever laughed during sex? Maybe a few nervous titters her first time, back in twelfth grade. But never real humor that she felt deep inside.

When she looked up to meet his eyes, they shone with humor and lust. In contrast to his words, his hands went to work on his belt, then his pants. A few more smooth, efficient movements and he was naked.

She probably would have drooled at the sight if she weren’t swallowing repeatedly.

Not wasting any time, he grabbed her ankle and pulled off her black heel. He paused, turning the shoe to the side. “I like these.” Then he tossed the shoe over his shoulder, plucked off the other one, and did the same.

She laughed. “Yeah, I can see they’re very special to you.”

He pressed a kiss to the inside of her ankle, then started his way up her leg. “I like them.” He nipped at the apple of her calf through her jeans. “But I like this more.”

He had her jeans around her ankles in seconds and without warning, he slid a finger under her panties. “I like this even

more.” He circled her wet opening, sending electric sensation shooting out from her core. Her hips raised, seeking his touch.

“Do you know how hot it is to know how much you want me?” His mouth found its way to her knee, then started along the inside of her thigh.

Probably about as hot as every time he’d pressed his erection against her while they were dancing. “Yes,” she breathed.

“I don’t think I have the patience to undress you.” Without further warning, he covered her with his mouth. Even through her now-drenched underwear, the sensation was intense. She arched into him, needing more. It was crazy that she could be this close to orgasm already, but the dancing had turned her on as much as any other foreplay, and the weeks of pent-up desire had only fed the need for release.

“I knew you would taste amazing.” Seth’s hot breath burned her thighs, but it wasn’t direct enough. If he wouldn’t take care of things, she’d do it herself.

She lifted her hips, rolling slightly away so she didn’t hit him in the jaw, and slid her panties down her legs. A few kicks of her feet and they, along with her jeans, hit the floor.

Then she shoved her fingers into his hair and pulled him back into position. “Come on, Iron Man. Stop screwing around. Make me come.” Who was she? She’d never talked to a lover like that. But he set something free inside her.

Maybe that was why she couldn’t get over her attraction to him.

With a grin, he touched his tongue to her and licked her from back to front. His eyes stayed on hers the entire time as the intensity inside her built. To say nothing of the intensity in the air, wrapping around them, holding them together in his bed, and shutting everything else out.

He gave her clit a gentle kiss. “With pleasure, Ivy.”

He sucked her. Hard.

The sensation burst through her, white-hot and delicious. When he did it again, she flew so high, she could almost feel the orgasm, just beyond her fingertips. It was too soon, yet she needed it now.

Her fingers dug into his scalp and she pulled him tighter to her. He licked her again, followed by another two hard sucks. He repeated the pattern until she was so close she could taste it.

“Please,” she sobbed. She didn’t know if it was tears or sweat running down her cheeks and into her ears. All she knew was the pleasure Seth’s mouth brought her and the need it created inside her.

“Please what?” he asked between sucks.

She was too busy moaning to answer right away. But when he licked her yet again, she dug up the strength to say, “Please make me come.” She fisted her hands, twisting his hair and tugging hard enough to show she wasn’t messing around.

She felt his chuckle against her pelvic bone an instant before two thick fingers slid inside her. He immediately curled one and massaged her in a way that made her see stars.

He withdrew his fingers, then plunged them back in, all while circling her clit with his tongue and sucking hard. In an instant, she was lifting to him, shifting to find just the right angle so she could—

“Yes! Oh God, Seth, yes.” She pulled his hair and yanked his face tight to her and shamelessly ground against his mouth as the orgasm poured over her, sharp and intense and so, so beautiful. She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t see, she couldn’t hear anything but the pleasure rushing through her and somewhere, far away, Seth’s voice encouraging her and telling her how sexy she was.

Then everything released. The pleasure, the tension, her stress, her worries, her skeleton, her muscles—everything went limp. She flopped onto the mattress, vaguely aware of Seth’s gentle kisses on each hip.

He tugged at her corset and it disappeared over his shoulder. Once she was naked, his mouth returned to her skin, pressing firm, openmouthed kisses in a line up the center of her body. He ran one hand in a long stroke from her knee, over her hip and up to her waist, then back down again.

Carrie was just getting her mind back, at least a small piece of it, when Seth reached the valley between her breasts. His beard tickling the delicate skin, he sucked one nipple into his mouth.

She cried out, arching into the sharp pleasure. Already her mind was slipping away again as the pulse between her legs returned. He was a master at playing her body; he knew exactly how to touch her to bring maximum pleasure. It was almost unreal how quickly he could make her want him again so desperately.

By the time he moved to her other breast, she was squirming and writhing against him, gasps and moans spilling from her mouth. She rocked against him, seeking friction and some measure of relief. But what she really wanted was the solid erection pressed against her thigh.

She needed it now.

Using his hair, she tugged Seth's head up. Her nipple popped out of his mouth, sending another jolt of pleasure from her breast to her clit and pulling another cry from her throat.

Seth grinned down at her. "I think I could spend an entire day exploring your body and finding new ways to make you squirm."

Carrie's chest burst with heat, a decidedly non-sexual sensation that spread to mingle with all the sexual ones flowing through her. "I would be OK with that," she managed. "But right now, I need—"

He cut her off with a kiss that instantly turned desperate. Their mouths fused and their tongues explored. She liked the way she tasted on his lips and how his mustache was damp as it rubbed against her.

He shifted his large body on top of hers, spreading her thighs wide. Without thinking, her legs wrapped around to the backs of his, her feet tracing up and down the tense muscles there.

His thick cock stroked between her legs, sliding through her wetness, teasing her clit until she thought she might go crazy if he didn't get inside her.

Abruptly, Seth ripped his mouth from hers and pushed up on his hands. "Fuck, Carrie. You are so damn hot tonight." His hand came up and skimmed over her hair, down the side of her face to her shoulder, finally resting on her upper arm. His flame-blue eyes searched her face for a long moment, so intense she forgot to breathe. She met his gaze, and the hunger and passion and other unidentifiable elements there made that heat in her chest swell until it felt like she might burst.

When she couldn't take it a second longer, she slid her palm up his neck, over his beard and rested on his cheek. "Please. I can't wait."

But before she could give him a chance to find a condom, she leaned up for a kiss. Because damn, his mouth drove her crazy. He dove into her, his lips against hers sending zips of pleasure all through her. Her hands explored, sliding down his back and over his hips until she could grab his fantastic butt. She squeezed and he moaned. A second squeezed caused him to flex into her, which again slid his cock between her wet folds. His root caught her clit and she cried out as he moaned deep.

"Jesus, you're killin' me." He pulled her lower lip between his teeth, nipping gently. His hand cupped her breast, thumb flicking back and forth over her nipple.

Which was killing her. She bucked her hips, a reflex she couldn't have stopped even if she wanted to. And it caused more friction and sliding and moaning and pleasure and already she was getting dangerously close to the edge.

"Now. Please, now," she breathed, unable to make her voice more forceful. "I need you."

Seth lifted his head and looked down at her, body stilled for a moment. His gaze searched her face, lingering on her lips, until it came back to hers. He smoothed her hair off her face. "You are so beautiful."

She was imagining the reverence in his voice. She had to be. This was just sex. She didn't doubt he found her attractive. But it was lust that made him sound like he meant anything more than he found her beautiful because she was naked and begging him to have sex with her.

She didn't know how to respond. Thankfully, he gave her a quick, firm kiss, then twisted his upper body away from her to get a condom from his nightstand. She watched as he rolled it down his length. He was already dripping, the head a deep purple. He wasn't going to last long, but she didn't need long either.

Talk about beautiful. She'd never been with a man who was in shape the way he was, and as much as she didn't want to admit she could be that shallow, it did hold major appeal. She wanted to run her tongue over every dip and ridge of muscle, explore him for a hidden spot where he was still soft, where she could sink her teeth into him.

Intertwining their fingers, Seth held her hands beside her head as he lowered himself onto her. Her legs automatically came around his waist, like they'd done this a dozen times before. Like their bodies already knew each other.

He shifted his hips until he nudged her entrance, then slipped inside her. Just a little. Not enough to even come close to filling her need. With her feet on his ass, she pulled him in farther. They both groaned, and his hands tightened on hers.

"You feel so damn good."

She clenched her muscles, squeezing him tighter.

His jaw went slack, his eyes rolled shut and his neck sagged. "Oh, fuck, that feels good."

Carrie could only grunt in response.

Slowly, he pulled back, then thrust in deeper. Before she could even process the sensations, he did it again, pushing in

to the hilt. They were joined as deeply as two people could be.

She couldn't have explained why, but she was overcome with a frantic need to touch him. She yanked her hands free and held his face between her palms. "Seth."

He rocked against her. "Good?"

She smoothed her thumb over his lower lip. "So good."

His mouth twitched, like he was going to smile, but he never quite got there. He just kept watching her with an intense expression she couldn't decipher. Like this was more than sex.

Except it wasn't. It couldn't be. It was the secrecy they would have to maintain, the thrill of the forbidden, that made it seem like more than it was. She had to remember that or she risked being swept away, mistaking one emotion for another.

He moved in a series of shallow thrusts. Each move caught her clit and she automatically tightened on him.

His face came down to hers as he rolled his hips back, nearly withdrawing from her. "I hope you're close, because this ain't gonna last long."

"Fuck me already."

With a chuckle, he obliged. He slammed into her and the crash of his hips against hers sent sharp pleasure spearing through her. Within a few strokes, all humor was gone as they pounded together and jerked apart, their passion raw and primal and the hottest damn sex she'd ever had.

His teeth scraped her throat, his whiskers burning her skin. She pressed her mouth to his shoulder to muffle her screams.

When the orgasm gripped her, throwing her high and wild into the most perfect ecstasy she'd ever experienced, her own teeth sank into the firm muscle and smooth skin.

"Fuck, baby. Oh Jesus, fuck." With a final heave, Seth joined her in the ultimate pleasure, his body jerking and shaking in her arms as hers tightened around him. They each drew out the other's orgasm for what felt like eternity. Minutes

ticked by as they lay together, limp and exhausted and thoroughly satisfied.

Finally Seth heaved himself off her and, after pressing a gentle kiss to her temple, headed into the bathroom. She pulled back his quilt and slipped under it before she had a chance to get chilled.

He returned a minute later, slid into bed next to her, and pulled her close. She snuggled against him, reveling in the warmth of his skin.

She pressed a kiss to his chest, just above his nipple. “This is nice.” She wasn’t going to think about how close to real intimacy they were walking. She would enjoy the moment while it lasted.

He murmured his agreement and kissed her hair. “Since you’re meeting Mads—” He cleared his throat. “I mean Maddie. Not Mads. Since you’re meeting *Maddie* at her swim meet and she’s getting a ride there, you don’t have to go back to your room right away.”

A thrill rippled through Carrie. She shouldn’t want it, but the idea of spending the night with him had major appeal. Did he like morning sex as much as she did? Would he wake her in the middle of the night and take her, sweet and lazy, in the darkness?

Or maybe she could wake him with long, slow licks of his cock until he came alive in her mouth.

“Do you want me to sleep in your bed?”

His muscles tensed under her hand. There was her answer. She’d pushed too far. He considered actual sleeping together outside the boundaries of their new arrangement. He just wanted her to stick around for a second go.

He shifted onto his side and propped himself on his elbow. “Are you sure?”

Carrie lifted her gaze to meet his. Something in it encouraged her. “I thought it might be nice . . . sex is never a bad way to start the day. But I totally understand if that’s more than—”



He cut her off with a kiss. It was warm and sweet, without the usual seductive fire that sparked between them. Drawing back only enough to speak, he said, “I can’t imagine a better start to the day than sliding inside you before I’m fully awake. But are you sure this is what you want? Is this more than tonight?”

Heart pounding so hard her ears felt like they were vibrating, she said, “I’m not ready for it to be over.”

“I’m not either.” The corner of his mouth twitched, like he might smile. But his face fell back into a neutral expression. His hand slid around the back of her neck and he kissed her. They spent long minutes exploring each other’s mouths, in no hurry to take things further if they had all night. Carrie rolled toward him and ran her hands over his chest and shoulders as his tongue slid along hers.

Eventually they drew apart and settled together under the blankets. “Tired?” Seth asked.

She should be. It had to be well past midnight. The lazy, lethargic effects of her orgasms lingered, making her not want to move. But she wasn’t sleepy.

“Yes. But not enough to sleep.”

He kissed her again, hot enough to kindle a flame in her belly, but still not enough to have her craving him. So they made out some more.

After, they chatted about things of little import. Somewhere around two o’clock, he got up to get a glass of water. Carrie openly ogled him as he crossed the room. He seemed entirely comfortable walking around his house naked.

Given the powerful spread of his shoulders, the defined muscles of his back, and his tight, perfect, holy-shit-amazing ass, he should be comfortable. The only thing marring the perfection was a large bruise, fading from purple to brown and green, on his right hip. She cringed in sympathy.

Her mind drifted, imagining ways she might ease some of his pain, until he returned. He was impressive from the front too, even without the mouth-watering erection she was

desperate to get inside her again. Hopefully she could inspire a revival soon. After waiting so long to get him naked, two orgasms weren't nearly enough. She was greedy.

Something in her expression must have given away her thoughts. His mouth curled into a grin as he took her hand and allowed her to pull him down. He slid his arm around her and tugged her into his side; she went willingly.

“You cold?” he asked.

She had been a moment ago, but as big and muscular as he was, snuggling the man was like snuggling a space heater. “I'm good. Are you?”

“I'm never cold.”

She chuckled. “Wait until you have to endure a Wisconsin winter, Texas boy. You'll discover cold.”

“I did play a December game in Chicago my rookie season. Thought my balls were going to climb up inside my body, it was so damn cold.” He brushed a kiss over her temple. “Guess you'll have to keep me extra warm this winter.”

She let herself get excited at the prospect of snuggling under flannel sheets and quilts with him, undressing each other under the covers and having sex in a warm, cozy cocoon.

Sex cocoon. OK, that was a little gross.

Also, as much as she didn't want to, they probably needed to discuss a few things if this was going to be a regular occurrence, lasting into winter.

“About that . . .”

Tension rippled through his body. Which was actually a bit distracting, what with all those muscles tightening against her and growing more defined before her eyes. But it wasn't the right moment to appreciate his physique.

“I didn't mean . . . I'm not . . .” Shit. She was so bad at talking about sex stuff face-to-face. It was why she rarely did casual sex

“Obviously you’re seeing this as more than a one-time thing. I want that too.” She gave him a smile she hoped was encouraging. “That is what you want, right?”

He released his tension as his blue eyes intensified. “Let’s see, do I want a repeat of the best sex I’ve ever had? Let me think about— Yes. I definitely do.”

Best? “Best sex? You’ve ever had?” He had to be flattering her. There were women far more experienced than she was who made a habit of hooking up with athletes. He’d told her he’d slept with more than one of them early in his career, before he changed his focus to football and Maddie.

He smoothed his thumb over her eyebrow. “Don’t look so shocked. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. Something about us just works.”

She swallowed hard, gathering her resolve. She couldn’t get swept up in sexy words. He was talking about them working physically.

“OK, so this works for both of us. And we’d both like to keep doing it.”

“Agreed.” His voice came out thick. He cleared his throat before adding, “Anything else?”

“I’d appreciate it as long as we’re sleeping together, you weren’t with anyone else.” She felt the blush move up her chest and neck until her cheeks burned. It was a perfectly reasonable request; she had no reason to be embarrassed.

“Darlin’, you are more than enough to satisfy me.”

His eyes were so hot on her, she couldn’t stop herself from grabbing the back of his neck and pulling him down to her. She pressed her mouth to his, running her tongue over his lower lip. He made an appreciative sound and slid his arm around her back.

One kiss bled into the next, a leisurely exploration of lips and tongues. For the moment, Carrie was content to learn the landscape of his mouth, what made him groan, what made him suck in his breath, and what made him clutch her back and tighten his arm around her.

When they drew apart, both were breathing hard. Seth's renewing erection lay against her thigh. She ran her hand down his side and over his hip. She intended to take him in hand and stroke him back to fullness, but he suddenly arched his back and hissed through his teeth.

Her eyes flew to his face to find his features tightened in pain. She snatched back her hand. "Sorry!"

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "It's OK. You just hit a particularly bad spot. Must have done something else at practice today."

After another deep breath, he opened his eyes and his face relaxed.

She cupped her hand over an older bruise on his ribs that she hadn't noticed before. "Does this one hurt?"

Circling her wrist, he lifted her hand away and looked where it had been. "Nah. That's an old one."

"You say that like you expect to be covered in bruises."

He gave her an odd look she couldn't read, then shrugged the shoulder he wasn't leaning on. "Occupational hazard."

"Really?" She probably sounded hopelessly naive, but it was such a foreign idea to her. She was a wimp about pain.

"I get paid to hit three-hundred-pound men as hard as I can, so I can get around them to take their quarterback's head off. They get paid to stop me at all costs. Yeah, I get a few bruises."

"That's so . . . violent."

"That's football." He frowned, a deep crease forming between his brows. "You really don't know football, do you?"

"I've been watching with Maddie. I guess I thought since you have all those pads on . . ." Of course the pads didn't do as much as she assumed. She understood forces and mass and all the other science that went into two huge bodies colliding the way he'd described.

She'd cringed every time she saw him get hit, but most of the time the cameras focused on the other team's quarterback, or wherever he threw the ball. She hadn't actually gotten to watch much of Seth's play, except for the home games she'd taken Maddie to. But it wasn't always easy to see him. "Did it hurt? When you got these bruises?"

He scrubbed his hand over his beard. "To be honest, during the season I'm never not in pain."

Carrie winced in sympathy. Why would he do that to himself?

"But I'm so used to it, most of the time I don't even notice, unless I stop to think about it. So sure, the impact hurts. But then it . . . assimilates, I guess. And it doesn't register anymore. Plus, during the game, there's so much adrenaline, you don't feel any but the most brutal hits."

She couldn't imagine, even a little. If she got a hangnail, it was in the back of her mind no matter what she was doing. Tension headache? Forget it, she was useless. And when she broke her ankle in high school, she'd driven her parents and Amy nuts with her complaining.

At least she could admit she was a wimp.

"You never stop hurting? Ever?"

"Not during the season." He pressed his lips to her shoulder, moving over her skin with wet, openmouthed kisses that made her shiver.

"I do have"—he grazed his teeth along her collarbone—"a tendency"—his tongue drew a path to the hollow beneath her chin—"not to notice it so much"—wrapping her in his arms, he rolled to his back and settled her on top of him—"when I've got"—his lips found hers, tracing her lower lip with his tongue—"my mouth on you."

He sealed his mouth to hers and kissed her breathless. Her body came alive for him, her breasts lying heavy against his chest, nipples aching for attention.

His big hands gripped her hips, guiding her movement as she rocked against him. His erection slid between her legs

where she was hot and wet and ready for him.

“You feel so good,” he murmured into her mouth.

Their sex was more desperate this time, and they quickly found a frantic rhythm. For every time Carrie lifted her hips, then slammed back down, he pulled back, then lifted his hips to meet her. The result was a white-hot, breathtaking frenzy, two bodies desperately racing for completion.

When he came, his fingers dug into her ass, hard enough she knew she would have marks tomorrow. It could have hurt if she didn't love the possessive nature of it.

Enjoying pain. Huh. Maybe she did get it. The adrenaline of sports wasn't the same as the endorphin flood of orgasm, but ultimately, both she and Seth were enduring, almost enjoying, discomfort in order to experience something they enjoyed.

Panting, she collapsed on his heaving chest. As his breathing slowed, he idly stroked her hair along her back. The rhythmic touch nearly soothed her to sleep. How nice would it be to drift off curled against the warmth of his body, wrapped in his arms, every night?

Except she didn't get to do that with Seth, for so many reasons. He wasn't her boyfriend; this was just sex. She would have to remind herself of that every chance she got.

Otherwise, it would be far too easy to forget.



THE SUN WARMED Carrie as she sipped her coffee on Seth's back patio. She tried not to indulge in fantasies, like Mother Nature blessing the night of hot sex with an unseasonably warm morning after, but the silly idea did make Carrie smile. As if the previous night needed a reward. Multiple orgasms were their own reward.

“There you are.” Seth's voice drifted over, followed by the sound of the back door shutting.

Carrie leaned her head back and watched him approach upside down.

He bent over and kissed her, a soft, lingering brush of his lips against hers. He tasted like mouthwash and smelled like soap; his ponytail was still damp.

She, on the other hand, was still in the flannel pants and sweatshirt she'd put on when they got out of bed. Too bad they couldn't spend the whole morning together, making out, having sex, and boycotting clothes.

"I gotta go." He stood and moved to her side.

"Stupid job," she mumbled. "What kind of terrible employer would make someone work on a gorgeous Saturday like this?"

"You're a riot." He had practice and meetings in preparation for tomorrow's game. Which meant Carrie would be meeting Maddie at her swim meet. Maddie had convinced Emilia to join the team with her, so her parents had taken the girls to the early morning warm-up, saving Carrie from having to leave before sunrise.

She did need to get moving, though, if she was going to get there before Maddie's first race.

Beside her, Seth's posture stiffened. He cleared his throat.

Uh-oh.

"Look, uh, it's probably best if we keep this . . . thing with us"—Seth waved his hand between the two of them—"between us."

Carrie didn't know if she was relieved he hadn't changed his mind about continuing whatever it was between them or offended that he wanted to keep it a secret. She settled for being glad he looked ridiculously uncomfortable.

He scrubbed his hand over his beard. His gaze landed on her face, and his expression softened. "Not because I want to hide you. I promise."

Like his expression, something in her chest softened. A softness she liked a little too much. Which was dangerous.

Seth stepped closer, cupping her cheek and stroking her skin with his thumb.

Dangerous, but delicious.

“I just think it’s best if Maddie doesn’t know. This move has been hard on her, and I don’t want to unsettle her more. Is that OK?”

She didn’t love it, but it wasn’t like they could make out in front of Maddie anyway. “Yeah, I get it.”

One side of his mouth turned up in a half smile that made her insides feel gooey.

“Thanks. She’s gotten attached to women I’ve dated before, and takes it really hard when things end. I know this is different, but . . .”

Carrie stood, only a breath of space between them. “I get it. You’re a dad. Maddie comes first.” She went up on tiptoe to press a kiss to his lips.

He slid his arm around her waist and drew her closer. “Thank you for understanding.” His whiskers tickled her lips.

As he sank in for a deeper goodbye kiss, Carrie let herself stop thinking and simply enjoy the taste and feel of him.



---

## Chapter 13

---

SETH HELD the door to the comics shop open for Maddie. She didn't need more of them, since her room was filled with stacks of the thin books, but it was the only olive branch he'd been able to think of. And he'd reached the point where there was a permanent ache in his chest caused by the ever-widening gulf between his daughter and him.

"Hey, how's it going?" the skinny guy behind the register said.

"Hey," Maddie mumbled, staring at her feet. She hurried off to the left side of the store.

Seth turned to follow her.

"Hey, are you . . . Chamberlain?" the cashier asked.

Seth closed his eyes. Dammit, of all the times for him to get recognized. This excursion was supposed to be about Maddie.

But he wasn't going to be a jerk just because the guy had bad timing.

"Yeah. Hey." He held out his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Brian." For as skinny as he was, the guy's handshake was solid. "I had no idea you were a comic book fan."

"I'm not really. But my daughter is. She lives for comics." Seth inclined his head in the direction Maddie had gone.

“Oh, that’s cool.” Brian nodded, head bobbing up and down in a way that made him resemble a chicken. “Let me know if you need any help finding something. And great meeting you. Good luck this weekend.”

Seth smiled. “Thanks. Nice meeting you too.”

Heading toward the back corner, he went in search of his daughter. He found her inspecting a large display of plastic figurines with small bodies and large squarish heads. She balanced four boxes against her chest as she reached for a fifth. Wonder Woman. Except she had strange, muted colors.

Whatever. If it made Maddie happy, he’d buy it. Which felt suspiciously like trying to buy her affection, but if it garnered him even the slightest bit of goodwill, or opened the door to a non-hostile conversation, it was worth it.

“One of your adoring fans?” she asked, her sarcasm so thick it was practically visible.

Apparently he’d have to purchase the figurines before getting a chance for non-hostility.

Ignoring her snark, he tried to see the boxes she held. “Who’ve you got to go with Wonder Woman?”

Maddie sighed. “Batgirl, Harley Quinn, Katana.”

Which made four, and she held five boxes now. But he wasn’t going to argue math details. “Don’t you already have Wonder Woman and a few of the others?”

“Not the Bombshell versions,” she said in a *duh* voice.

“Oh, right.” Because he knew what that meant.

His gaze caught on a figure with orange hair, dressed in green. Poison Ivy. His heart rate picked up and he put his hands in his jeans pockets to keep from reaching for the toy. Carrie probably already had one. And there was no way he could explain to Maddie why he wanted to get that particular one. Yet the idea of getting one for himself, to put on his computer desk to remind him of Carrie, was compelling. They probably made Iron Man too. He could get the pair.

Which was a ridiculous idea. It was the sort of sappy thing men in love did to remind them of their wives. Lem had gotten a pair of bobbleheads made of him and Sarah for their tenth anniversary and they kept them on a bookshelf in their family room. He and Carrie weren't even a couple. They were sex buddies.

Sex buddies did not buy action figures to remind themselves of them as a couple. Because of the whole not-a-couple part.

"Here." She shoved the white boxes at Seth. He barely managed to catch them all before she disappeared around the back of the display.

"Hey, can I get a couple for Carrie?"

A present for Carrie? Hadn't he just decided that was a bad idea? Or sort of, anyway.

But this was different, because it would be from Maddie.

Seth joined his daughter on the other side of the shelves. "What did you have in mind?"

She handed him a box containing a female superhero with brown skin and hair, a red, white, and blue costume, and a blue mask over her eyes. "Ms. Marvel. Carrie really likes her." She gave him her winningest smile. The one she knew would get her whatever she wanted.

He reached for the shelf. "Let me guess, you want one too?" He grabbed another and added it to the stack he held balanced on his forearm, leaning against his chest.

"Thanks, Dad." She wandered down another row of shelves, all containing action figures and other collectibles.

For the first time in days, Seth could almost draw a full breath as he followed her through the store. She was smiling, and had managed to go a whole five minutes without rolling her eyes or making a snotty remark.

"How come you never tell me about my mom?" she asked matter-of-factly as she rounded the end of yet another aisle.

Her tone was so casual, it took Seth a moment to realize what she'd asked.

When he did, it felt like a punch caught him right under the rib cage. He could barely breathe for a second. Everything in him tensed, bracing for a fight.

"Because she left when you were a baby," he spit out. The few pleasant memories he had of Jessa were vastly overshadowed by her abandonment of her own infant. "Why would you care?" He loved Maddie enough for two parents.

She stopped and gave him a withering stare. "I don't know. Maybe because she's my *mother*?"

Only in the strictest biological sense of the word. "I've told you everything I know about her." Maybe that wasn't 100 percent true. He'd glossed over details about how cold Jessa could be. The lack of emotion she'd shown toward their child.

He definitely wasn't going to tell Maddie how Jessa called every few months asking for money, but rarely asking about their daughter. The first few times, Seth had asked her if she wanted to know anything about Maddie. Her answer had always been a genuinely confused "Why?"

"She took off before I got to know her very well."

"You knew her well enough to have a kid."

"Two stupid-drunk college kids don't need to know much of anything for one of them to get knocked up." As soon as the words came out, Seth regretted them, even if they were true.

Maddie winced, closing her eyes. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and tell her he hadn't meant that the way it sounded, that his bitterness was all for Jessa and not at all for her, but he couldn't. Besides the stupid figures he carried, everything about Maddie's posture screamed not to touch her.

"So I'm a mistake," she whispered.

Fucking hell.

He shoved the damn toys onto a shelf and took Maddie's shoulders. He turned her toward him, but she didn't open her eyes. He wanted to scream at her, he wanted to hold her

forever, he wanted to puke. How had tonight gotten so royally fucked up?

“No. Absolutely no. We didn’t plan you, but you have never, *ever* been a mistake, Madison.”

When she finally opened her eyes, her glare was sharp enough that it felt like glass tearing through his heart. “Coulda fooled me.” She jerked out of his grip and stalked away.

Seth reached her in two large steps, grabbing her arm. “You can stop this tantrum right now. I know this move has been hard and the season is tough on you. I hate that it’s so hard for you. But never, not once in your life, have I treated you like a mistake. I love you more than anything. You might not believe it, but even football is a very distant second to you, Madison Deanna Chamberlain. From the second I first held you, you have been the best, most important thing in my life. You can be mad at me for plenty of things, including dragging you to a new city. But treating you like a mistake isn’t one of them. Treating you like I don’t love you so much it hurts sometimes isn’t one of them. So go right ahead and stay pissed at me for the shit Jessa did if that’s what you need to do. But you don’t ever tell me again that you’re a mistake.”

They stood in weighty silence for endless moments, Maddie staring at her feet, Seth trying to get his temper under control. Finally Maddie turned away from him. “I’m gonna go find a few comics.” She shuffled away.

Empty and deflated, Seth gathered up the stupid action figures and headed for the register.

---

## Chapter 14

---

THE CROWD ROARED as the Dragons ran onto the field for the second half. Carrie and Maddie stood with everyone else, clapping. Carrie's eyes scanned the players' jerseys as they jogged out of the tunnel to her left. Even with seats so close—second row, forty-yard line—she couldn't really tell one player from another. They all looked huge in their uniforms, though admittedly some were bigger than others.

Finally her gaze found number 52, with his long hair loose and flowing out the back of his helmet. To keep from grinning and giving herself away, she opened her mouth and yelled, "Let's go, Dragons!" The sound blended in with the rest of the whoops and hollers around them but drew a suspicious look from Maddie.

Carrie pretended not to notice. She couldn't explain the sudden increase in her interest in football to a twelve-year-old. Working for Maddie's dad only explained so much.

The Dragons kicked off, one of the Kansas City players caught the ball and waved his arm, and then men flowed onto the field as others returned to the bench. Then the Chiefs' offense and the Dragons' defense lined up at the seventeen-yard line.

Seth was on the far side of the field, pressed up against a massive guy—even compared to all the other players—and trying to get around him; since Carrie couldn't take her eyes off him whenever he was on the field, she missed whether anyone caught the ball.

It was torture, watching Seth crash into his opponents on each play, especially knowing how much his hip hurt him. When she and Maddie watched games on TV, there was a distance, the violence a step removed from the living room. Plus, the camera rarely focused on Seth except when he was making a play.

Everything was so much more immediate, seeing the game in person. So close to the field, she heard the crash of the players' gear as they made contact, the grunts the impact pulled from them.

“What’s with the sudden interest in football?”

There it was. Of course Maddie wasn’t going to let it go without asking.

Carrie opened her mouth, hoping a credible answer would come out. None did; fortunately, the Dragons made a good play and the crowd cheered, giving her an excuse to wait until Maddie could hear her answer. Those few seconds gave her time to think of something to say.

“I’ve been doing a little research, about all the science involved in the game,” Carrie said. It wasn’t a complete lie. She had dug into the physics and math involved in the game, because she was that nerdy. It just wasn’t the reason for her newfound fandom. It was more a result of it.

She couldn’t imagine Seth or Maddie would find her newfound knowledge as fascinating as she did, but who cared? Between her research and watching a few Monday night games with him, she could almost imagine herself enjoying the sport. She was at least starting to understand it better.

On the field, Seth wrapped himself around a Chiefs player carrying the ball. Holding on to the other man’s waist, Seth dragged them both to the ground. Maybe it was Carrie’s imagination, but it seemed like she could hear the thud as their bodies hit the turf.

“So you’re only into the math and physics?” Maddie asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t say that.” She needed to pull a statistic out of her head quickly, to appease the girl. “But it got me more interested. I’d explain all the nerdy stuff I find fascinating, like force and acceleration and torque, but you’d—”

“Be bored to tears,” Maddie finished. Shaking her head, she grinned. “Wow, I thought I was a nerd.”

Carrie grinned back. “Gee, thanks.” She looked back to the field in time to see Seth and his teammates jogging to the side, while other Dragons ran onto the field. It appeared as if the Chiefs were setting up to kick a field goal.

When Seth and she had watched the *Monday Night Football* game together last week, he’d explained that the defense’s job was to stop the opponent from scoring a touchdown. But if the team on offense got far enough down the field, sometimes they tried kicking a field goal rather than punting the ball to their opponent. A field goal was worth three points, half as many as a touchdown. From his perspective, the worst case was when the other team scored a touchdown, best case when they had to punt. A field goal was somewhere in between.

The kick was low, but it had enough velocity to squeak in over the bar, adding three points to the Chiefs score, making it 21–17, with the Dragons in the lead.

As the offense took the field, Carrie’s gaze went to the sideline. Seth had removed his helmet and was sitting on the bench with number 50, whose jersey read “Feu’u.” Carrie knew that was his friend and college teammate Lem. The two talked animatedly, gesturing and squirting water into their mouths.

Around her, the crowd cheered, and Seth and Lem jumped to their feet, along with the rest of their teammates on the sidelines, yelling about something happening on the field.

Carrie dragged her attention away from Seth to see number 80 sprinting down the field with the ball, toward the Dragons’ end zone. Only one Chiefs player was near him, and he was losing speed.



The crowd roared and a chant of “James” vibrated through the stadium. The team celebrated the touchdown as they headed for the bench, knocking helmets with Marcus James, clapping him on his back, and giving him high-fives.

Again Carrie’s attention was more focused on the sideline than the field, so she paid little attention to the extra-point kick and the following kickoff. When Marcus reached Lem and Seth on the bench, Lem pretended to punch him in the gut while he and Seth bumped fists. All three talked as Seth gathered his hair and twisted it up at the nape of his neck.

Marcus wandered off. Seth and Lem bumped fists, then both pulled on their helmets as they jogged back to the field.

Immediately the nerves twisted up in Carrie’s belly. She liked it better when the offense was on the field. As cool as it was to see Seth play, it was also a chance for him to get hurt.

As the Chiefs’ next drive got under way, Maddie made an annoyed sound that pulled Carrie’s focus from the field.

“What?” she asked.

“I don’t like that guy,” Maddie said. “Number 66.”

The behemoth offensive lineman who was in Seth’s face almost every play. “It is his job to keep your dad from getting to their quarterback.”

“He’s a dirty player,” Maddie insisted.

Carrie looked from Maddie to the field, where for once 66 was entangled with a different Dragons defender. The way they were grabbing at each other and dancing in a circle looked like every other play to Carrie. But she didn’t understand the intricacies of all the rules.

“It’s not just me.” Maddie’s tone grew defensive. “He gets fines all the time. So I don’t like him playing against my dad.”

Now Carrie didn’t like it either, but she ignored the pressure building in her chest at the idea of Seth facing a dirty player. Instead she smiled. “Look at you, all worried daughter.” She slung her arm around Maddie’s shoulder and pulled the girl against her side.

“Uhhhh, stop,” Maddie protested, though she leaned against Carrie for a moment before pulling away. “Come on, defense! Get a stop!”

“I like coming to games with you,” Carrie said, not willing to let Maddie escape the moment entirely. “I promise I won’t tell any of your friends that you get excited and cheer for your dad.”

Maddie gave her a deadpan teenager look, but Carrie could see humor dancing in her eyes. “I do have a reputation to uphold.”

Laughing, Carrie turned back to the game. The teams were lining up around the ball, which was placed almost directly in front of Carrie and Maddie. The scoreboard showed it was third down, with four yards to go. If the Chiefs didn’t get those four yards, they would have to punt it to the Dragons.

And Seth could go safely back to the bench. Carrie cupped her hands around her mouth. “Let’s go, defense!”

Kansas City’s center—look at her, knowing the positions—hiked the ball to the quarterback, who dropped back and held it near his shoulder as he scanned for an open guy. Seth darted in a wide arc around number 66, aiming for the quarterback. The lineman got in Seth’s way and the two danced around each other until Seth was able to spin around him and continue toward the quarterback.

Coming up on his right side, Seth dove at the quarterback just as the other man pulled his arm back to throw the ball. The impact of Seth connecting with the other player’s shoulder jarred the ball out of his hand. As Seth and the quarterback hit the ground, a half dozen other players from both teams dove for the loose football.

It all happened in the span of about five seconds, but for some reason, it felt like it played out in slow-motion detail. Carrie’s eyes never left Seth, even though the action was in the pile of men scrambling for the ball.

The quarterback extracted himself from beneath Seth’s body and stood. Without offering Seth a hand up, he backed

away from the chaos and disappeared from Carrie's sight.

Still on the ground, Seth rolled to his back, one hand tucked under his right side. His right leg kicked in and out, as if he were in pain.

Though he was only a few feet from where the referees were sorting out who had the ball, no one seemed to notice Seth still lying on the turf. Carrie wanted to hop the railing and go scream at his coaches. Couldn't they see he was hurt? He needed help.

She couldn't breathe. One hand went to her throat, the other covering her mouth, holding in a pathetic cry.

"My dad," Maddie choked out. "He's not getting up. I think he's hurt."

*Of course he's hurt! He has a bad hip that's been bugging him for weeks. Stupid idiot athletes, playing hurt.*

But Carrie didn't say that out loud. She put her arm around Maddie's shoulder and pulled the girl close. It was on the tip of her tongue to say he would be OK, but she bit it back. She didn't know that.

Finally some of the guys from the Dragons' staff jogged onto the field, all wearing matching maroon pants and silver windbreakers. One carried a water bottle. Because water would help fucked-up muscles and ligaments?

Most of the other players cleared the field, but Lem and two other guys hovered nearby as the medical staff—that's who Carrie assumed the men in windbreakers were—knelt next to Seth. One offered a hand to help him sit up, and even from the far side of the field, Carrie could see him wince with the movement.

"That was a great sack he had," Maddie murmured, pointing up at the Jumbotron. From the corner of her eye, Carrie could see the replay, but she didn't take her eyes off the man sitting on the field, talking, each word appearing as if it were knives ripping from him.

It was possible Carrie was imagining it to be more dramatic than it really was.

Eons passed before the doctor/trainer/whoever guys stood. The two bigger ones squatted and got their shoulders under Seth's so he could drape his arms over theirs. As one unit, they got to their feet.

Carrie didn't breathe as they helped Seth to the side. He appeared to be putting a little weight on his left leg, but each step caused him to squeeze his eyes shut. Each step also had Maddie digging her nails into Carrie's side, but Carrie didn't say anything. Of course the girl was worried.

Finally the trainer guys eased Seth onto what looked like an extra-wide massage table, set up behind the metal benches the players sat on. It was probably Carrie's imagination, but as the three guys started doing their thing, it seemed like Seth was looking up into the stands, his gaze scanning the crowd.

Almost like he was looking for her.

Or his daughter. Carrie mentally rolled her eyes at herself. Of course he was looking for Maddie, not her. Just because she could feel her heart pounding in not only her chest but her temples and her stomach didn't mean Seth was thinking about her too.



THE COLD WATER felt good on her face, even though it was a chilly afternoon. Near the beginning of the fourth quarter, Seth had disappeared into the locker room with one of the medical guys. Which couldn't be a good sign. If he hadn't been hurt that badly, he'd have gotten some ibuprofen and gone back in the game.

To give herself something to do, Carrie wet her hands and ran them through her hair to tame a few strands that had gotten frizzy. But she'd really just come to the bathroom so she could be alone and freak out for a few minutes. Because, of course, she couldn't let Maddie know exactly how panicked she felt.

Never mind what Carrie's level of panic said about her involvement with Seth. She wouldn't be this frantic about a man she was casually sleeping with. She had feelings for Seth, whether she liked it or not.

Her mind flashed back to a phone conversation she'd had with Amy earlier in the week. Even though Carrie and Seth had agreed to keep things discreet, she couldn't keep it from her best friend.

"*I'm begging you, don't fall in love with him,*" Amy had said.

*"I'm not in love with him."*

She'd told her friend the truth. But she definitely felt more than attraction.

So when she turned away from the mirrors and pulled out her phone as she leaned back against the sink, she could tell herself she was texting Seth for Maddie. But she had to admit, at least to herself, that Maddie was only part of the reason.

*Carrie: I know you probably won't get this for a while. But please let me know you're OK.*

Even though she knew he wasn't allowed to use his phone during games, she waited for a full minute, watching the phone for the gray bubble that meant he was responding. It never appeared, of course. He was probably getting his hip worked on. A painkiller injection, a massage, maybe an X-ray? What did they even do for that injury?

What if it was an entirely new injury? She'd seen the scars from the ligament repair surgeries he'd had on that hip, and knew he put heat on it almost every day. But what if this was something else entirely?

She huffed out a frustrated breath. She wanted to make some kind of growl or yell too, but there were other women in the bathroom and they didn't need to hear that.

This was why she'd always dated men with boring jobs, like fellow teachers, or IT geeks, or graphic designers. Well, that and she'd never actually met a professional athlete before Seth.

“He’s so hot. I could tangle my hands in all that hair and yank on it. And I love when bearded guys go down on me.”

Two women stepped up to the sinks next to Carrie, examining their makeup. The brown-skinned woman who’d spoken pulled a tube of lipstick out of her purse.

“Twitter said he’s out the rest of the game with a hip injury,” the tall, willowy blonde said.

Were they talking about Seth? That was good to know, at least.

“I’d be happy to help nurse him back to health.” The blonde gave a hearty laugh. “I bet he’s fantastic in bed.”

Carrie’s cheeks flamed. They weren’t just talking about Seth. They were talking about having sex with Seth.

For some reason, her heart pounded almost as hard as when he’d been lying on the field surrounded by medical staff. She shouldn’t be embarrassed. They were the ones talking about having sex with a man they didn’t know.

The man *Carrie* was having sex with.

“Not tonight, he’s not.” The dark-haired woman pouted at her reflection. “I love this color.”

Carrie snuck a glance at her. The maroon lipstick did look fantastic on the woman, who was gorgeous, with long hair that fell in perfect waves. She had a round butt shown off perfectly in tight jeans and a V-necked Dragons tee that showed off just the right amount of cleavage. Carrie could never achieve that look.

The blonde nodded her agreement about the lipstick, then held out her hand. Her friend handed over the tube.

“I bet he’d still be up for some good times, even hurt. And he’d make sure you got yours. More than once.”

The blonde wasn’t wrong. Even the one time Seth had needed to stop in the middle of sex because of his hip, when they returned to pleasure, he’d gotten her off twice.

Maybe she should blow their minds and tell them that.

Or she should keep her mouth shut and get back to Maddie. The poor girl had been stiff with worried tension, and Carrie had felt terrible leaving her. But besides needing a moment to freak out herself, they'd shared a giant soda in the first half and Carrie had been desperate to use the restroom.

"Yeah, you know this how?" The first woman took her lipstick back and slipped it back in her purse. "He could be one of those cocky assholes who's only about his own pleasure."

The blond shrugged. "He seems like a decent guy. And decent guys make sure you enjoy it as much as they do."

"Maybe you should hang around the player entrance after the game. Ask him if you can take him home and pamper him." Sarcasm dripped from the dark-haired woman's voice.

Carrie shoved her phone in her pocket and pushed off the sink. The jealousy in her chest was totally irrational. She and Seth had agreed to be exclusive as long as they were together.

But if she didn't get out of there, Carrie would do something dumb, like tell that blonde to back the fuck off her man.



SETH SAT at his locker and stared at the activity around him. It had a surreal I'm-on-a-shit-ton-of-painkillers quality, like he was watching it through a misshapen tunnel. He hated what pain meds did to his head.

On the other hand, he no longer wanted to claw his skin off, so that was a plus.

Somewhere in the distance, it occurred to him that he should check on Maddie. He stood, and immediately got skewered in the ass with burning hot spears.

With a groan, he sank back to his seat, his hip throbbing again, his pulse pounding so hard he could feel it in his temples; he could swear even his teeth pulsed.

“Jesus, man. What the hell are you doing?” Lem shot Seth a look like he was the dumbest guy on the planet. Which he was, trying to stand on this hip.

Fucking college injury.

On the plus side, the surge of pain had cleared some of the mental fog. He could almost think again.

“Hand me my phone. I should text Maddie. Let her know I’m OK.” Seth pointed up at the shelf in his locker.

Lem ambled over to get the phone. “They at the game, or you need a ride home?”

Seth’s knee-jerk reaction was to insist he could drive home just fine. But he immediately swallowed that response. Not only was he too fucked in the head to be behind the wheel, but the injury was to his right hip. The simple act of pushing his foot on the accelerator would be excruciating.

“Carrie brought Maddie to the game. They can take me home.” He woke up his screen to find a message from Carrie. None from his daughter, but she’d likely been next to Carrie when she sent her message. And Carrie would update Maddie.

Still, it stung.

*Carrie: I know you probably won’t get this for a while. But please let me know you’re OK.*

*Seth: I’m fine. Aggravated my hip again. Locked up like it did the other day.*

He wanted to say more, but it was entirely possible Maddie was close enough to see Carrie’s phone. He couldn’t risk it. But this was vague enough that Maddie would assume something had happened at home and Carrie had been around to witness it. Which was technically true.

A response came through almost immediately.

*Carrie: Can you play?*

*Seth: I won’t practice until Thu. Then take it day to day.*

*Carrie: That sounds like the company BS line.*



Seth: *I'm heavily medicated. Icing my ass. I'm not practicing. Doubt I'll play next week.*

Lem dropped onto the bench next to Seth. "What's the verdict?"

Seth leaned his elbows on his knees and scrubbed a hand over his face. "Muscle spasms. I'll get an MRI tomorrow. Go from there. Same old same old."

"We're old."

"Yep."

The two men stared at the Dragons logo in the center of the room in silence.

"You think about what you're gonna do when this is over?" Lem asked.

Not if Seth could help it. He felt like he couldn't breathe when he did. When his contract in Houston ended, his agent and his manager had tried to get him to discuss life after football. But he wasn't ready to give it up yet.

His body, on the other hand, seemed to be on Mike and Donny's side.

"I try not to. But I guess we both need to do that soon, huh?"

Lem sighed, his massive shoulders sagging as he exhaled. "Sarah's been on me about it lately. And she understands why I'm resistant, but she doesn't *get* it. Ya know?"

Yeah, Seth knew.

His phone pinged with another message.

Carrie: *Sorry. Wish I could help.*

Seth: *You can wait around and give me a ride home. I'm too drugged to drive.*

Carrie: *Sure thing. FWIW, Maddie's worried about you. She'd die before she'd admit it, but she's worried.*

That admission warmed Seth more than he liked. He didn't want his daughter worried about him. And he didn't want to

need an injury to get her to give a shit about him.

But hell, he was only human. He'd take what he could get.

Seth fired off another text telling Carrie where to meet him, then groped around for the fucking crutches he was going to need for at least a few days.

"You set?" Lem stood and moved back to his own locker, a few down from Seth's.

"Yeah. Maddie and Carrie are meeting me." Seth steadied the crutches and used them to leverage himself to his feet. Or his foot, anyway.

"I got this." Lem reached into Seth's locker and pulled out his bag. He slung it over his shoulder with his own. Together, they headed for the exit.

Fuck, even with the crutches, the minimal amount of weight Seth was putting on his leg hurt like a motherfucker. Fucking hell. Why couldn't he get a morphine IV to knock him out until the damn thing was healed?

"You should come over this week," Lem said as they moved down the corridor at Seth's pathetically slow pace. "The girls have been asking about Maddie."

"Yeah, maybe Friday." For years, Friday had been his night with Maddie, but she'd clearly given up on that. The past two weeks, Friday had been all about sex with Carrie. But after multiple injuries to the same place, Seth knew how his recovery would go. He would not be doing any hip thrusting by Friday. Any sex would be him lying there while she did all the work. And as much as he loved any and all sex with Carrie, it wasn't worth the risk that he might lose control and injure himself worse. Then he'd be out of commission from football and sex even longer.

So alternative entertainment for Friday would be not only pleasant but necessary to his recovery.

They reached the parking lot and Seth could see Carrie's car parked next to his. The sight of her, even from a distance, eased something inside his chest. A little of the panic about his injury slipped away.

Maddie looked over and caught his eye, then waved. As Seth and Lem approached, Seth could see the worried expression on her face. “You OK, Dad?” She cast a glance at his crutches, then looked back to his face.

Seth balanced on one crutch, wrapped his free arm around her neck, and pulled her to him. Let her try to object. But she didn’t, and he pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

“Yeah. I’m good, baby girl.”

And he meant it.

---

## Chapter 15

---

“ENJOY YOUR TURKEY. And say hi to your parents for me.” Lem bumped fists with Seth as they walked out of the visiting team’s exit at NGR Stadium in Houston.

Because they’d been roommates in college and because Seth’s parents were local, Lem had known them back in the day. “Will do. Tell your family happy Thanksgiving.”

Lem nodded, then headed for the charter bus that would take the Dragons to the airport so they could fly back to Milwaukee.

Seth exchanged goodbyes with a few other teammates, wishing them a happy Thanksgiving, then headed in the opposite direction, to where his dad and two brothers waited by Logan’s F250. Seth’s agent, Mike, had arranged for them to get access to the reserved lot so Seth didn’t have to find them in general parking. He still had plenty of fans in Houston; he’d have been mobbed.

Much though he usually enjoyed chatting with fans, today he just wanted to get to his parents’ house, catch up with family, gorge himself on his mom’s stuffing and his aunt Wendy’s pies, and maybe even coax a few smiles out of Maddie. Hopefully being back at her grandparents’ would help his daughter chill out a little.

And after dinner, once everyone else was gone, Maddie was asleep in her room, and he was alone in the guest room, he could call Carrie and fall asleep with her voice in his head.

All that, on top of a win where his fourth-quarter sack of his former teammate had moved Houston out of range for what would have been a game-tying field goal, made for a damn good Thanksgiving. It felt good to be back on the field after missing two games. As usual, he had a lot to be thankful for this year.

As he approached the truck, he knew something was wrong. Panic rippled through him. *Where's Mom? Maddie? Who's hurt?*

His dad held up a hand, palm toward Seth. "No need to panic. We've run into a little snag."

Seth's thoughts must have been showing on his face. "Is it Mom? Maddie?" His memory flashed to the year they'd spent Christmas Eve in the ER when he was eleven. Mom had fallen off the chair she was climbing on to get the roasting pan off a high shelf. She'd landed on her elbow and chipped the bone, plus broken her upper arm bone. She'd needed surgery two days later.

His dad and youngest brother, Beau, climbed into the backseat of the extended-cab truck, leaving shotgun for Seth. He tossed his bag and small suitcase into the covered bed of the truck, then swung up into the front.

"Someone gonna tell me what's up?" he snapped as he pulled on his seatbelt.

"Maddie ain't coming," Beau said. "Weather."

Seth glowered at his brother. "You wanna expand on that?" Beau looked how Seth imagined he would if he didn't work out for a living and kept his hair short. The two had the same blond hair, blue eyes, and facial features as their mom's family. Slim with brown hair and brown eyes, Logan favored their dad.

"Ice storm in Chicago and Milwaukee," Logan explained. "Airport's shut down."

Fuck. Hell fucking shit. "She can't be stuck at home alone. It's Thanksgiving."

It also meant the Dragons weren't getting home tonight, but that was a much lesser concern for him. Team management would take care of that.

"She's not alone." Dad reached forward and patted Seth's shoulder. "Carrie took her to dinner at her parents'. Your mom said they were glad to have her."

Sighing, Seth scrubbed his hand over his face, exhaustion rolling over him. It wasn't the exertion of the game catching up with him. It was a mental exhaustion, the fatigue of feeling like he constantly came up short where Maddie was concerned.

"She's in good hands," Dad added.

"I know. I trust Carrie as much as you and Mom." In ways he couldn't begin to explain, and many he wasn't ready to think about himself. "But it's Thanksgiving. She should be here. With family." His voice sounded both weary and wary.

"Hey, we miss her too. You're the jackass who moved away," Beau said.

The words rankled, even though Seth knew the idiot was joking. Someday Beau would grow up and develop a better sense of when to keep his mouth shut. Today was not that day.

"Really, dickhead?" Logan snapped. "You're gonna give him shit for that now? Have some fucking decency."

"Boys, let's tone it down," Dad said sternly. "Or I'll have to whup every one of your pansy asses."

Seth forced a smile he didn't feel. He appreciated their attempt to lighten his mood. "I'd like to see you try, old man."

By the time they reached the house, he almost felt normal, though he was acutely aware of the guilt lurking at the base of his skull. But there wasn't time to indulge it, as he was greeted by hugs from his aunts Wendy and JoJo, a manly greeting from Uncle Tony, and a beer salute from his cousin Clint.

Finally he was able to make his way to the kitchen. "Hey, Mom."

Deanna Chamberlain's face broke into a wide smile as she wiped her hands on her apron. "Get over here." Despite her words, she came to him, wrapping her arms around his wide shoulders.

Seth returned her hug, letting himself briefly enjoy the familiarity of the moment. He loved the Dragons and planned to explore more of his new hometown when the season was over. But being home made him realize how much he'd missed Houston. Not the city so much as the family: his dad, his idiot brothers, and especially Mom.

Maybe if he didn't get a contract extension and no one else wanted to sign him—which seemed unlikely given the spectacular season he was having—he and Maddie would come back. He'd sold their house, but they'd easily find a new one.

Except as he thought about it, something hollow opened up in his chest. Milwaukee was starting to feel like home too. Lem and his family were there, and Seth was making new friends on the team. Maddie was finding a place at her school, with the comics club and the ecology club and her new friends, and having a fantastic swimming season.

And there was Carrie.

His mom pulled back and held his face between her hands. He got his height from her; she stood just shy of six feet. So she could easily look him in the eyes.

"What's wrong? You had a fantastic game. Mike must be exploding your phone." She knew his agent had a habit of sending dozens of texts and voicemails whenever a client had a good game.

"Blowing up my phone." He tried not to laugh at his mom getting the phrase wrong. "Blowing up my phone."

"Scuse me?"

"The expression is 'blowing up my phone.' Not 'exploding.'"

With a "hmph," she patted his cheek a little harder than she needed to. "Still, you gonna tell me what's got you so grumpy

after your sack was the winning play?” She moved to the island and resumed cutting the green beans.

He didn't bother pointing out that every play was the winning play, because without Baxter's touchdown passes and Trask's field goal, they couldn't have won. Without the defense forcing punts and field goals instead of touchdowns, they couldn't have won.

As his biggest fan, his mom would naturally focus on that final defensive play.

“I'm worried about Maddie.” He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. Except, given how moody she'd been, it was a big deal. He had no idea how she was reacting to the situation.

“I should call her. I'm gonna go upstairs and do that.” He put his arm around her shoulder and kissed the side of her head. “Then I'll come help you finish dinner.”

Deanna snorted. “As if I'm letting you anywhere near my food.”

Seth laughed as he headed for the stairs. Once in the guest room, he shut the door, pulled his phone out of his pocket, and dropped down on the bed. As predicted, he had nine texts and two voicemails from his agent. The two texts at the time of his final sack were in all caps with several exclamation points. Classic Mike.

Seth also had several messages that fell into the “great game” category and a handful of “Happy Thanksgiving” ones.

Two messages were from his mom, explaining the Maddie situation. He had a similar message from Carrie. Noticeably absent was anything from Maddie.

The most recent text was another from Carrie. Despite his frustration, seeing the notification warmed his chest.

*Carrie: Great game. Happy Thanksgiving. This year, I'm grateful for gaining a more intimate knowledge of certain aspects of football. ;)*

He barked out a startled laugh and typed a reply. He loved when she got flirty.



Seth: *Thanks. Happy Thanksgiving to you too. I'm pretty grateful for learning more about comic books. Particularly Poison Ivy.*

Her response came almost immediately.

Carrie: *I'm also thankful for men who know what they're doing in bed. And multiple orgasms.*

Damn. She was going to make him swallow his tongue. The headline flashed in his mind: "NFL Star Found Dead in Parents' Home. Cause of Death: Extreme Sexting."

Seth: *Do you want me to have a hard-on in front of my mom and aunts?*

Carrie: *I'm laughing at you.*

Seth: *I'm sure you are.*

Their quick conversation had done wonders to relax him. He almost felt prepared to call Maddie and apologize.

Seth: *Can I call you in a little bit? I need to call Maddie first, but I need to hear your voice.*

Carrie: *Call whenever. I'm watching It's a Wonderful Life with her and my mom.*

Seth shoved his hand into his hair, yanking strands free from his ponytail. Restless, he got up and paced the small room as he waited for Maddie to answer. Two steps across, two steps back. It did little to calm him, but it was better than lying on the bed until he shook apart from impotent frustration.

"Hey, Dad." Maddie's voice held a sigh.

"Hey, baby. I'm so sorry about this. Everyone here misses you."

"I bet Clint doesn't," she said dryly.

"You're probably right." His cousin was only interested in females he could bang and had no use for kids. In twelve years, he'd barely even spoken to Maddie. But it was no loss for her. The guy was a classic sexist pig. Seth did his best to avoid talking to him as well.

“I know I don’t control the weather, or my game schedule, but I really am sorry you’re not here.”

“I know. It just . . . sucks. I miss Grandma and Grandpa.”

Seth’s heart squeezed at her pitiful tone. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to hug his little girl and make her feel better.

“I bet your meal was great, though. Right?” he said, attempting to cheer her up. “Carrie’s a good cook, so I bet she helped put together a fantastic feast.”

“It was *amazeballs*.”

“Amazeballs? Wow, that’s high praise.”

Maddie ignored his teasing and continued. “No cream of nasty snot soup on the beans, no Red Number 40 marshmallows on the sweet potatoes. And Carrie’s mom cooks the stuffing outside the turkey, so we don’t all get hospitalized with salmonella.”

“OK, first, cream of tasty deliciousness soup is fabulous when cooked with green beans and topped with crunchy onions. Second—”

“Dad, I gotta go. Your friend Jason is dishing out pie. It’ll be gone if I don’t hurry.”

Seth didn’t bother pointing out that at home, she wandered all over the house while talking on the phone, and that she had no qualms about talking while she ate.

“I wouldn’t want to stand between you and pumpkin pie. I love you. I’ll get the flight stuff sorted out so you can still get down here to see Grandma and Grandpa, hopefully tomorrow.” He was ridiculously excited about having an entire weekend alone with Carrie. She could spend two nights in his bed with him.

Saturday was his day off, which was rare, and they planned to spend it mostly naked or in lounging-around clothes, watching movies or binge-watching a show. And taking lots of sex breaks. But he couldn’t do that if Maddie stayed in Milwaukee.

He was a terrible father.

“Mike already took care of it. Carrie’s taking me to the airport for an eight-thirty flight. Goes through Denver.”

“Help me remember to get Mike and Carrie something extra nice for Christmas.” He could think of several things to get Carrie, but none he would discuss with his daughter.

And while Mike could be overwhelming with his enthusiasm, that enthusiasm had translated into some amazing contracts and a couple of lucrative endorsement deals that had already paid for Maddie’s college.

While other agents might not send their best clients multiple texts during a game, Seth liked knowing Mike was paying attention. And he knew not all his teammates had agents who would spend their Thanksgiving making alternative travel arrangements for a twelve-year-old who wasn’t his kid.

“He forwarded the email to you.” Seth could almost hear her roll her eyes through the phone.

“Guess I better check my email.”

“OK. Pie. Gotta go.”

“Love you. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“You too.”

The call dropped before he was ready to let her go. But the girl had her priorities straight. He’d never had Carrie’s pie, but it had to be amazing.

Or amazeballs.

Before he could call Carrie, a fist pounded on the door. “Time to eat, asshole,” Beau’s voice came through the door.

“Be right there.” Damn. He really wanted to talk to her.

He wasn’t going to think too hard about what that meant.

As he headed down to the dining room, he shot off a text to her.

Seth: *Time to eat. I'll call later. Plus, I hear you're having pie.*

Her response came as he took his seat between Aunt Wendy and Logan.

Carrie: *Maybe we can relax each other before bed.*

He half laughed, half choked at the thought. With one hand he reached for his water while the other shoved the phone in his pocket before anyone else could read the text.

This was going to be his fastest Thanksgiving dinner ever.



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY. You don’t look a day over twenty-nine.” Seth used one arm to pull Carrie away from the washing machine and against his chest. His other arm held a sweater-box-shaped present and small shopping bag. He brushed his lips over hers, then slid over her cheek to press a wet kiss beneath her ear.

She shuddered, pulling him inside so she could kick the door shut behind him. It was definitely December, with the below-freezing temperatures and gusty winds.

“That’s because I am twenty-nine.”

Grinning, he shrugged out of his coat and hung it on a hook. “Must be it.”

They wandered into the living room and sat on the couch. He’d dropped Maddie at Emilia’s for the night, so they were free to touch and kiss as much as they wanted.

He set the present and bag on the coffee table, then slid his hand into Carrie’s hair. “Come here so I can give you a proper birthday kiss.”

She opened her mouth to give a flirty reply, but his lips covered hers before she could. Instead, a squeak escaped her throat as his tongue slid against hers, quickly chasing away any lingering chill that had followed him in.

Her arms found their way around his neck and she pulled him with as she sank back into the cushions. They shifted against each other, finding the most comfortable position, their lips never coming apart. He lifted her legs over his so he could scoot closer, and pressed his chest to hers.

The kiss went on and on, one blending into the next. They were both content not to take it further. At least for the moment.

Seth's hand slid down her back, over her butt and down the back of her thigh. Then he reversed course until he reached her shoulder. He repeated the long, slow caress three more times as their tongues tangled and their lips clung.

Finally, hand splayed wide over the center of her back, he pulled back enough to whisper her name. His forehead rested against hers and she could feel him watching her.

A faint smile curved her mouth, but she wasn't quite ready to open her eyes. "Thank you. That was probably the best birthday present I got."

"Probably?" She could hear the smile in his voice.

"My mom got me a new e-reader. So it's a tough call."

"Nice to know where I rank."

Grinning, she finally lifted her lids and immediately lost the small amount of breath she'd regained. She wasn't prepared for the intensity in his flaming blue eyes. His features were relaxed, lips turned up, but his gaze bored into her. Telling her all sorts of things he'd never put into words.

"I . . ." She didn't know what she wanted to say, so she pressed a quick kiss to his swollen lips, then pushed gently on his chest so he would sit up.

With a few inches of space between them, she could breathe easier. "What else did you get me?" She inclined her head toward the present and bag.

"You want your present or your birthday cake first?"

She sat up straighter. "You got cake?"

“Of course. Do you people in Wisconsin have something else for birthdays I need to know about?” He cocked a blond brow at her.

“You say that like we’re an alien species. Of course we do birthday cake.” She backhanded him in the chest, then stood. “You get any for yourself too?”

“Like I’m gonna sit here and watch you eat cake without having any.”

“Be right back.” She put an exaggerated sway in her hips as she headed for the kitchen.

His low whistle made her laugh.

A few minutes later, they dug into two decadent-looking pieces of cake. After dropping off Maddie, he’d picked up slices of cheesecake and carrot cake from a local bakery that specialized in both. Because Carrie couldn’t pick one over the other, they shared both.

Seth forked off a bite of cheesecake and held it out for her. Carrie closed her mouth over the creamy treat, letting the slightly tart flavor coat her tongue. The thin layer of raspberry and the chocolate ganache top were perfect complements to the cake.

Looking up at Seth through her lashes, she smiled around the fork and moaned. She didn’t normally moan over food, but it was fun to tease him. Holding eye contact, she pulled her dessert off the fork. Heat flared in his eyes as he watched her, his expression tense.

“Mmmmm, that’s delicious.” She made a production of licking her lips even though there was nothing left on them.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

She grinned. He growled.

Hunger flared low in her belly, a hunger the cakes couldn’t satisfy. But she wanted to draw this out. It was her birthday, and she’d make him crazy if she wanted to.

She scooped up a bite of carrot cake and offered it to Seth. “You gonna eat?”

“I’d rather eat you while you eat the cake.”

His blunt words painted a clear picture in her head. How debauched would it be to lie back on his couch, eating cake while he went down on her? Cheesecake and orgasms—two great things that would be amazing together.

As much as she now throbbed between her legs, however, she advanced the fork toward his mouth. She wasn’t ready to move on yet. “Maybe another time.”

He snatched the bite off the fork, tiny bits of frosting catching on his mustache.

“You have a little right here.” She traced her finger over his upper lip, pressing the coarse hairs against him. Then she ran her nail along the seam of his lips until he drew her finger inside.

His tongue wrapped around her fingertip, stroking and sucking and feeding the fire in her belly. Maybe she should consider his offer to have all the cake while he feasted on her. The way his tongue played over her finger was reminiscent of how he used it on her clit.

With a shudder, she pulled back. “Eat the cake. I want my other presents.”

She deliberately used the plural, even though there was only one wrapped gift. Because, of course, he was the gift she really wanted.

They made quick work of the cake, with some chatting about their weeks. It had become their routine, as much as they had one. Maddie usually spent the night at Emilia’s on Friday, allowing them to be together, to touch and kiss and have as much sex as they wanted.

Sometimes Carrie wished they could go to a movie or out for dinner, instead of eating in and watching movies. But it was hard to be too upset when she got so many mind-blowing orgasms out of the arrangement. Some nights they even cuddled on the couch while she sketched ideas for her comics textbook and he studied his playbook. It beat the hell out of sitting alone while she half watched a rom-com and wondered

why she couldn't find a guy like Billy Crystal or Ryan Reynolds.

Seth wasn't Hugh Grant in any of his dozen aw-shucks roles, but since the sex was more out of something NC-17, she was quite content.

"We gotta stay on top of our game for the rest of the season. St. Louis is two games behind us, but they have a cakewalk schedule the rest of the year, except next week against us. Colorado Springs is just one game back. And they're our last game."

He set his plate on the table and ran his hand absently up and down her thigh. It sent pleasant warmth to her core.

"And you need to be ahead of St. Louis and Colorado Springs to go to the playoffs?" She was still figuring out how it all worked. He'd mentioned wild cards a few weeks ago and she still didn't understand what that meant.

"And Vegas. But if they lose one more game, their record is too bad to make the playoffs at all. Even if we lose our last four, we'd be ahead of them."

She shook her head. "I never knew how much math was in football."

He huffed out a laugh. "It's all about numbers. Player stats. Team stats. Odds. Hypothetical scenarios."

"Math and physics. I should have become a fan years ago."

He curled his lips into a smile that made her go soft inside. "You a fan now?" He swung her legs over his again and tugged her over until her butt rested against his thigh.

She slid her hand up his chest, resting it on his shoulder. "It would appear so."

Grinning, he leaned in for a kiss. His tongue slid along her lips, then inside, and she melted into him.

"You taste like cake," he murmured against her mouth.

"So do you."



“How about I give you your birthday orgasm now?” His beard scraped her, making her shiver, as he dragged his mouth to her neck.

“Just one?” She put a pout in her voice even though she knew what his response would be.

“For your birthday. Maybe another to make up for not being able to give you one on your actual birthday Wednesday. The rest are because you make me crazy and I can’t keep my hands off you.”

“Well, if that’s the case . . .”

She let him drag his mouth down her neck until he reached the spot where it met her shoulder. He sucked hard, knowing it made her squirm. The pleasure was intense. She dug her nails into his shoulder and made a desperate sound.

His hands slid up the back of her shirt, warm on her skin but still making her shiver. With a twist of his fingers, he had her bra unhooked, and shoved both garments over her head and off. They dropped out of sight as he arched her toward him and closed his lips over one tight nipple.

Carrie let out a long, low moan. She wanted to collapse onto the couch, but the way they were sitting, he wouldn’t be able to come with her. So she clung to his chest and let him hold her up as he feasted on her breasts.

“Screw cake. You’re delicious.”

The compliment made her shudder; he moaned his approval into her skin.

It was good. So good. Like it always was. But he was derailing her plan. Maybe it was silly, but she wanted to know what was in that box.

Still, maybe another minute. He was too good at playing with her breasts.

He was so good at everything involving her naked body.

When he slid a hand between her legs, stroking her through her yoga pants, she couldn’t help rocking into him.

But then she clamped her thighs on his hand so he couldn't move.

“Stop a second.” She hated how breathy she sounded. She was aiming for firm.

Seth lifted his head and sat back, pulling her up with him. His eyelids were heavy over his blazing eyes. “For the record, I love your tits.”

Again his blunt words turned her on more than they should. “And you can have them back as soon as I get my other present.”

“My cock isn't all you need?” This time, his grin was over the top and made her laugh.

“Much though I love it, and definitely plan to enjoy it very soon”—his eyes narrowed and his hand tightened on her thigh—“girls like gifts.”

He made a frustrated sound, but reached for the box. “I do want to see it on you.” He set the box in her lap, then traced a light finger up her side.

She shuddered.

He gave her nipple a flick before returning his hand to her thigh.

What did it say about her comfort level around Seth that she could sit there with him, topless, and not get self-conscious? She generally liked her body, but that didn't mean she was comfortable sitting around half naked.

Shaking off the musings, she ran her hand over the heavy wrapping paper. “Nice touch.” He'd found a glossy dark green paper with a subtle vine pattern in it. It was a little different from ivy, but she appreciated the sentiment.

He winked at her. “I saw it in the airport gift shop, of all places. You better appreciate it, cuz I took some serious shit for buying that. Fortunately, it also worked well to beat back the jackasses on the flight back from Seattle.”

She laughed softly. “I do appreciate it.”

“Do me a favor?”

“Hum?”

“Laugh again.”

Carrie gave him a strange look. “I can’t laugh if there’s nothing funny. That’s weird.”

“Yeah, but it makes your tits bounce and it’s really hot.”

For the second time that evening, she backhanded his chest. “You’re terrible.”

“Never said I wasn’t.” His gaze didn’t leave her breasts. Her nipples ached, the heavy desire approaching the line where desire became painful.

“Stop distracting me and let me open my present. Then you’ll get back to delivering my other presents faster.” She was getting a little breathless.

Seth tore his focus away from her chest and looked back to the box. Carrie neatly sliced through the tape with her fingernail and removed the wrapping paper in one piece, revealing a white Macy’s box.

“It’s not from Macy’s. I actually got it at this boutique in Houston.”

“I’m intrigued.” She lifted the lid and pushed apart the green tissue paper.

Before her appeared the most beautiful green and black corset she’d ever seen. She lifted it out of the box and held it up.

The main bodice was a heavy green silk brocade, with a subtle pattern of black vines winding over the green. The fabric that covered her breasts had a bit of stretch to it, which she’d never seen before.

Up the center, six silver buttons held it closed. It also laced up the back with a black satin ribbon.

It was gorgeous and perfect and so thoughtful and intimate, and dammit, she was going to cry.

“It’s beautiful,” she managed to stammer, her voice barely a whisper.

“So are you,” he returned, just as softly. He smoothed hair off her face, tucking it behind her shoulder.

“Thank you. I can’t begin to tell you how much I love it.” It felt like he’d reached inside and read her heart. Which was ridiculous; he’d seen her do cosplay. Of course he knew she liked Poison Ivy clothes.

But he’d paid attention and knew her current corset was wearing out. She’d bought it secondhand, and the fabric was starting to fray. She’d had to re sew in several of the boning strips because they kept poking through the fabric.

His smile was so brilliant, genuine, and warm, full of casual affection and for the moment none of the sexual spark that burned so strong between them.

He’d bought her sexy lingerie, sure. But it wasn’t about sex. It was because he knew her as a person. And he cared.

She swallowed hard and pushed the thoughts out of her head. She wasn’t prepared for where they could lead.

So she swung her legs off his lap and to the ground, turning her back to him. “Tie me up?”

She held the corset to her front, the brushed cotton lining so much softer than the polyester of her old one. The lining even had underwire sewn in to give her more support, rather than being crushingly tight like many of the corsets.

“I’d love to.”

He gathered her hair in one hand, then slid it over her shoulder. His fingertips trailed along her bare skin, making her shiver.

Then he went to work on the laces, gently tugging and adjusting until the garment hugged her snugly but not too tight.

When he was done tying it at the bottom, he set his hands on her shoulders, leaned his chin on one next to his hand, and spoke softly into her ear. “It’s perfect.”

It felt perfect. Like it had been custom-made for her. “I can’t believe how perfectly it fits.” She turned back to face him, letting him see his gift from the front.

His finger traced along the edge, making her suck in her breath as it dipped into her cleavage. “It better. I had them customize it for you.”

“How do you know my measurements?”

His cheeks got red, and even his nose and ears looked a little pink. With a sheepish smile, he said, “I might have dug up your Ivy corset and measured it. I noticed in Chicago that yours was getting a little ragged, then at the club I saw you had to keep pushing that one stick-thing back in place.”

“Boning,” she corrected, almost choking on the word. He’d paid so much attention.

He knew her so well, he’d thought of the perfect gift. And he’d gone out of his way to make it even more perfect for her.

Oh God. Oh God, not good. Red alert. She was so dumb. Part of her had known it would happen, but another, much larger part had convinced herself it was OK, she wouldn’t be that careless. That larger part was wrong.

She was in love with Seth.

---

## Chapter 16

---

HIS GIFT, and so many other things about how he treated her, said their relationship had evolved into more than sex for him too. His gift was a clear indication he cared. But the idea that she was alone in her love for him was frightening.

She looked up at him and found him watching her, his expression so tender and beautiful, she could barely contain all the emotions pressing out against her chest. Trying to escape.

“What are we?”

The words flew out of her mouth before she knew she was going to speak. Instant regret surged through her. They’d already established what they were: two adults having casual sex because of mutual attraction. She was the idiot who’d gone and broken the rules by falling in love.

At least she hadn’t blurted that out.

Seth blinked a few times, like he was processing the question. Or stalling for time, wondering how to get out of the conversation she’d sprung on him.

Except maybe it was good to get it out there. He obviously hadn’t fallen in love with her. But the lengths he’d gone to for her present, the way he watched comic book movies and rom-coms with her, how he listened to her talk about wanting to work comics and graphic novels into the curriculum, they all indicated he cared. She was more than a hookup.

“Are you asking about our relationship? Is that what you mean?”

They had a relationship. That was something. “I guess. Um, yes.” She shook her head. “Never mind. I don’t even know where that came from. It just flew out of my mouth before I knew I was going to say anything. Let’s forget I did.”

She started to stand. “Let’s—”

“Carrie.” Seth wrapped his hand around her wrist and gently tugged, asking her to sit back down.

She did, and met his serious gaze. Her heart pounded so hard she thought it might burst through and tear a hole in her brand-new corset.

“Do you want to be my girlfriend? Is that what you’re asking?”

*Yes!* “No.” She shook her head for emphasis. She wouldn’t be clingy and push him into more than he wanted. “I mean, we agreed this was casual. We don’t need to . . .”

Something in his expression dropped, causing her words to trail off.

Looking at his hand on her wrist, he said, “Yeah, OK. I mean, you’re right. That’s what we said.”

Thick, uncomfortable silence settled over them and Carrie struggled to fix what she’d done. She wanted sexy, playful Seth back. Not confused, disappointed-looking, silent Seth.

“Wait, do you—”

“It’s just that—”

He chuckled, rubbing his thumb back and forth over her wrist.

The small touch warmed her, bringing back a little of the lighter mood.

“You go,” she said quickly. Because she wasn’t entirely sure what she’d been about to say. And blurting things out had worked so swell last time.

He kept watching his hand on her wrist, his thumb soothing her wild pulse. “I guess I kinda already think of you as my girlfriend.”

“Oh.” She sat up straighter. “Um, OK. I didn’t realize that.”

She was his girlfriend! The most amazing man she’d ever met, the man she’d fallen in love with, thought of her as his girlfriend. Hallelujah, praise the angels, her heart squeezed happily.

Slowly he lifted his head and met her gaze. His expression shifted from sad to puzzled. “Do you . . . is that OK?”

She nodded rapidly. “Yes. Yes, that’s more than OK.” Oh my God, he was nervous. Seth Chamberlain—her big, brave gladiator, the Iron Man of the Gridiron—was nervous that she might not want to be his girlfriend.

His beard tickled her palm as she laid it against his cheek. “It’s still gotta be secret, I understand that. But having a secret boyfriend sounds all kinds of naughty fun.” Messed up, but naughty fun.

He covered her hand with his, pulled it to his mouth and pressed his lips to her palm. One side of his mouth curled up in a roguish smile. “It does.”

He kissed her palm again, this time scraping his teeth along the skin. Then he dragged his tongue up her arm until he reached her collarbone, where he settled in to feast on her skin.

She shuddered, sliding her fingers into his hair to hold him close. “Cheesecake, carrot cake, a beautiful new corset, and a boyfriend.” Her words came in breathy gasps.

How was he so good at sucking her just the right way? If she tried to stand, she wouldn’t be able to. She had no skeleton.

He lifted his head, his expression playful. “So I win?”

“Win what?”

“My presents are better than an e-reader? Keep in mind, there are several orgasms yet to come.”

A shiver ran down her spine. “Still a tough call, but yeah, I think you edge out the tablet.”



He searched her face for a long moment, stretching it out until it was almost uncomfortable.

Just before she wanted to avert her gaze and squirm away, Seth stood, then scooped her up.

The weightless sensation of falling had her clutching Seth's shoulders. "What are you doing?"

"I think I'm gonna have sex with my girlfriend now." His long strides ate up the space as he headed for his bedroom.

"Oh. OK." She was in favor of that. She was always in favor of him having sex with his girlfriend.

The spark in his eyes was positively wicked. "And I think I'm going to see how many times I can make her come before she passes out."



CARRIE'S BREATH came in pants, her chest heaving, aftershocks from her third orgasm still ripping through her. They'd started with a sixty-nine, then before she'd had a chance to recover, Seth had flipped her onto her back and continued using his mouth to shoot her up and over a second time.

Then, tasting sharply of her, he'd kissed her. And continued to kiss her, taking a few detours down to suck her nipples and drive her wild, while he fucked her with two thick fingers.

Now she felt thoroughly satisfied and unable to move. But as she sprawled on his bed, trying to find her breath, she could feel Seth watching her. As spent as she was, she still wanted to take him inside her.

She loved the way he felt, pressed against her from chest to knee, using his whole body to give hers pleasure. She loved the tight clench of his ass cheeks as he moved in and out of her. She loved the way he gasped her name when something felt good.

She loved him.

Drawing from strength reserves she didn't know she had, probably because they were reserved for sex and no one else had every worked her this hard, she opened her eyes and rolled her head in his direction.

Seth lay on his side, his body only inches from hers, head propped on his hand. She'd yanked out his ponytail sometime while he had his hand buried between her legs, so his hair hung loose around him.

His smile was tender, the glint in his eyes a little bit cocky. "You're not done yet, are you? I still have more birthday presents to give out."

She smiled as broadly as her energy level allowed. "Give me a couple minutes. The last one was . . . intense." She'd felt pleasure in her teeth and the roots of her hair.

He scooted closer, pressing himself along her side. His arm came over her waist and he stroked up and down her side. He'd requested she keep her new corset on, and because it made her feel sexy, and because the way he looked at her when she wore it took her breath away, she agreed. Also because the design allowed him to free her breasts, unlike her old corset.

The slide of his hand over the heavy fabric was pleasant, but she wanted his touch on her skin. All of her skin.

Movements languid and lazy, eyes shut, she unclasped the bottom buttonhook. Seth's hand paused over her ribs, then slid to the center of her chest, flipping open the top hook. Together, they opened the corset until it fell away.

"Lift up," he murmured. She complied, and he slid it out from under her. A moment later she heard the metal buttons clink against the wood floor.

His lips grazed her where her ribs met her sternum. His large hand splayed across her waist and belly. "That corset is damn sexy," he said into her neck. His breath made her shiver. "But I really love your skin."

He trailed his tongue along the underside of her right breast, the side closer to him, then raised his head. Carrie felt and heard him shifting, his long body rubbing along hers.

A shadow passed over her closed eyelids, and she felt his breath on her face.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” His voice was soft and reverent, almost pained.

Carrie opened her eyes to find his burning into her. His hair fell around them like a curtain as he propped himself on his elbow to look down at her.

He smiled, as soft and reverent as his words. Carrie’s chest swelled until she thought she might burst from the overabundance of emotion inside her. Or worse, she might destroy this beautiful, special moment they were having by blurting out that she loved him.

Instead, she smiled back and stroked her hand over his cheek, memorizing the feel of his whiskers on her palm. The shape of his mouth as he smiled at her. The look in his eyes when he looked at her with something beyond lust. Something so far beyond, she wanted to crawl inside him and let him make her safe and warm forever.

Maybe he did love her. Maybe he, like she until a few hours ago, didn’t realize it. Even if he didn’t yet love her, he cared deeply. If they continued on their path, he would. He wasn’t one of those closed-off men incapable of letting go and loving.

The idea that he could love her back, that they could build something together, a future out of what started in the tampon aisle, thrilled her so much, she had to slide her hand into his hair and pull him down for a kiss.

They sank into each other, the touch rapidly growing heated and hungry. She rolled to her side, pressing against him, and his arms came around her to hold her tight.

Their hands roamed and caressed, but their mouths stayed fused. They’d done plenty of oral exploration leading up to this moment.

Finally, unable to stand being without him for another second, Carrie slung one leg over his and tilted her hips so she could stroke her throbbing clit against the root of Seth's cock.

He moaned long and deep into her mouth.

"I need you," she whispered against his lips as she wrapped her hand around him, guiding her toward her entrance. She circled his head around her clit a few times before advancing. She was so wet, it took no effort to slip him inside her throbbing pussy.

She used her leg on his ass to try to pull him farther inside.

"Fuck, Carrie. That feels amazing." Nevertheless, he pulled back, slipping out of her when she wanted him to shove in.

"What's wrong?" She needed him to fuck her now. This was her birthday celebration, dammit.

Seth started to push himself up. "I need to get a condom."

She stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Wait."

He looked down at her, lips deep red from kissing, hair untamed and tangled around his head, eyes heavy-lidded and questioning.

"I haven't been with anyone else since my physical this summer, and I got a clean bill of health." Would he get what she was trying to ask? She'd thought a lot about this in the past few weeks, and scripted in her head what she would say. But when it came to the moment, she was more nervous than she'd expected.

"My last test was all good, and no one but you since." His brows eased back into their usual neutral positions. "But I'm not ready for another kid, I—"

"I'm on the pill. Have been for years." Did she sound as desperate to him as she did in her head? It wasn't that she wanted to feel sex without a condom. She hadn't noticed much difference with the one other boyfriend she'd done it with. But she wanted the trust involved in taking the step. She wanted the intimacy.

Seth's arm relaxed until he again lay face-to-face with Carrie. He stroked her hair back from her forehead. "You're sure?"

She held his gaze as she nodded. "Positive." Then, because the emotional tension around them was starting to overwhelm her, she chuckled. "Seems like a decent way to officially become boyfriend and girlfriend."

He breathed out a half-laugh, then leaned in for a kiss. It immediately turned hot and desperate and his dick pressed hard against her belly, the root once again tormenting her clit.

"Yes," she moaned. "Please. Now."

Seth moaned into her mouth as he lifted her leg over his again. Then he guided himself to her entrance and slipped inside.

OK, maybe there were subtle differences. She felt the slick of his pre-come as his tip grazed her clit before he entered her. And he did seem to slide more smoothly as he pressed forward.

"Jesus fuck, darlin', you feel fucking incredible." With a snarl, he shoved the rest of the way in one firm thrust; at the same time, he closed his mouth over hers for a frantic kiss.

He spread his hand over her ass and began to move, long, slow glides out, with firm thrusts back until he was as deep as he could go. It was a perfect rhythm to catch all Carrie's most sensitive spots on the way out and again on the way back in.

Needing air, Carrie pulled her mouth from his, panting, but kept her forehead pressed to him. She watched the tense expression on his face, knowing it was how he looked when the pleasure was intense.

He dragged open his lids, his eyes wild and desperate, but somehow still soft. Tender.

"This is . . ." He slammed into her hard, then rolled his hips in a circle that had her gasping. "This is really fucking good. You're so beautiful and you feel amazing."

With every thrust, his chest grazed her nipples just enough to keep her on edge. She wanted to play with them, wanted to pinch her nipples until they reached—maybe even crossed a little—that precarious line between pleasure and pain.

But she couldn't stop touching his face. His hair and his beard and the smooth skin below his eye, where his whiskers stopped, and the fleshy pad of his earlobe, and the crease between his eyebrows that he always got when he was deep in focus on bringing her pleasure.

“Haven't you—” Her words broke off on a moan when he pinched her nipple, distracting her from her question. She had to fight the urge to arch into the touch. His gaze locked on hers was too much to look away from. Like everything else that night, there was a deeper connection building between them. An understanding of the other, an intimacy, that was impossible to break.

“Haven't I what?” he panted, followed by a long, guttural moan.

He shifted his hips, hitching her closer as he rolled in a circle. Pleasure detonated throughout Carrie's body, so intense she almost wanted to pull away. It was too much. Yet it wasn't enough.

“Haven't you . . . done . . . this . . .” She could barely find air to push the words out. “Before?”

For several moments, he didn't answer. The only sounds were their labored breaths and the slap of his groin against hers. Occasionally one of them moaned or cried out.

She used her legs to pull him tighter, flexing her thighs for leverage as he slid back and shoved home.

His hand left her ass, trailing up her back and over her shoulder until he cupped her cheek. His thumb caressed her cheek as he said, “Never. Even with Maddie's mom, we used one.” His words were tense, huffed from his mouth into hers.

With as much of a smile as she could dredge up, she squeezed him with her inner muscles.

“Fuck!” he barked out. His eyes rolled back in his head and it was a good thirty seconds before he looked back at her. “Don’t do that again unless you want me to come.”

She was so close. She did want him to come. She wanted him to shove inside as deep as he could go, and find ultimate pleasure in her arms, while giving her the same. She wanted him to look in her eyes as he did, so she could tell him without words exactly how she felt.

And maybe she would see the same in his eyes.

She tilted her face so her lips brushed his as she said, “I want you to come.”

Groaning, he claimed her mouth. His tongue mirrored his cock, thrusting strong and sure. As he pulled back, Carrie clenched hard.

Seth groaned her name. So she did it again. Now with each thrust, she squeezed as hard as she could as he tried to pull back. And with each thrust back inside, she yelped, the pleasure immense as he teased all her best spots.

Forehead to forehead, nose to nose, sharing the same breath, they raced to completion. As tense as Seth’s face was, there was a softness in his eyes, in the slight upturn of his lips that was tender. It made her own lips curl even as she was drowning in pleasure. This was not merely fucking.

This was making love.

The realization was the final push she needed. Her orgasm crested, her whole body trembling from sensations so amazing, so intense, a sob broke from her throat.

“That’s it, baby. Come on.”

She started to arch her head back, but Seth’s hand in her hair was an anchor. Keeping her grounded, keeping her with him for this moment.

He continued thrusting as Carrie’s orgasm tossed her high and wild. She was weightless.

With a final thrust so hard it made her teeth rattle, Seth slammed into her as his body began to shake. His groan filled

the room, followed by him panting her name as he pulsed and shook in her arms. “Motherfucker, that’s good, Carrie. Oh shit, that’s so good.”

The pleasure seemed to go on endlessly, one crest rolling into the next. Finally she dragged her lids up to find Seth watching her. She smiled shyly, embarrassed to be caught in such an intimate moment, even if he’d been the one to cause her orgasms.

Four times.

“I love your face when you come.” He said it so quietly, she at first wasn’t sure she’d heard him right. His thumb stroked her cheek and she leaned into the touch. After the intensity of their sex, the gesture was dichotomous, but sweet.

She’d managed to keep her eyes open for part of the explosions. “I like yours too. I like knowing I did that to you.”

They spent long, lazy minutes caressing each other. A perfect ending to their first time making love. Thinking the word made her chest swell and ache, in the best way.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, soft and wet and undemanding. She felt his smile as he returned the kiss.

“You know what’s the best part of not wearing a condom?” Each word formed against her mouth.

“One less thing going in the landfill, so we’re saving the planet by having sex?”

He leaned back to look at her for a moment. She gave him a playful smile. Face opening up in laughter, he wrapped his arms around her and rolled to his back. He’d gone soft, but he was still somewhat inside her. Another new intimacy that thrilled her deep inside.

“I never considered the conservation angle, but I’m willing to do my part to save the Earth. If we must, I’ll make that sacrifice.”

Carrie rested her chin on her fist, her other hand sliding lazily up and down his arm. “Tell me the best part.”



The humor slipped from his face, his expression turning tender but intense. “I get to stay here with you. I can hold you until we fall asleep.”

He had to say the exact right thing to make her fall a little farther, didn't he? Did he even realize what he did to her?

They shifted around on the bed until they were snuggled together under her blankets. The December wind rattled the gutters outside, but inside she was cozy and warm.

Before they drifted off to sleep, Seth tilted her face to his and gave her a soft, lingering kiss. “Happy birthday.”

Something about the way he touched her cheek, the way he said the words, like they meant so much more, had her wondering what else he might be thinking but not saying.

But there was time another day to figure out if Seth had fallen as deeply in love as she had.

---

## Chapter 17

---

DAMN, Carrie was one sexy woman. Seth needed to leave, but he couldn't seem to tear himself away from the woman in his arms. She was warm and soft and fit so nicely against him as he leaned against the refrigerator, waiting for his breakfast burrito to heat up. He loved the feel of her arms wrapped around him. He loved the way her skin tasted, loved how she shivered when he kissed her behind her ear. Loved that little sound she made when his teeth grazed her lobe.

Seth lifted his head and looked deep into her eyes. Her expression was sleepy and seductive, and even after an entire night with her, even after having her again this morning before they got out of bed, he wanted nothing more than to drag her back to his bed and lose himself inside her once more.

He was falling in love with her. There was no other explanation for how he felt with her. Even when he wasn't with her.

She brushed her sweet mouth across his. "You need to go."

"I know." Without his permission, his fingers threaded into her hair and tilted her head so he could kiss her more deeply. She made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a moan, and opened for him.

His tongue tangled with hers, flooding him with heat and an overwhelming sense of peace. This was where he belonged.

Somewhere in the distance, the microwave beeped, but they ignored it. He needed to get his fill of her. He wouldn't be

home until late tomorrow, too late to see her until Monday morning. He likely wouldn't get to hold her and kiss her again like this until his day off on Tuesday.

Saturday to Tuesday was a long time.

“Dad?”

Seth's kiss-drugged brain struggled to make sense of the interruption. Carrie made a confused sound.

“What the hell?”

*Oh. Shit.*

Understanding slammed through him, and he jerked away from Carrie. Standing in the foyer, eyes blazing, expression furious, his daughter gaped at him.

“I can't believe—” Her voice choked off. Her big brown eyes filled with tears. “How could you?”

Seth took long strides toward her. “Maddie . . .”

She shrank away from him. “No.” Her head swung back and forth, a violent denial. “No, get away.”

He didn't stop her as she raced past him. As she passed the kitchen, she paused to turn her fury on Carrie. “I hate you.”

“Madison, that's enough,” Seth warned.

“Leave me alone!” she yelled as she stormed up the stairs. There was a moment of tense silence before her door slammed.

Seth leaned his elbows on the kitchen counter and dropped his head into his hands. “Fuck. This is exactly . . .”

Carrie's hand sliding over his back soothed his temper more than it should. Shit. What was he going to do about this mess?

“I'm sorry.”

He turned to look at her. Her face was lined with concern. For him, for his daughter, for the mess they'd made.

God, he was wild about her. Was he crazy to think they could talk to Maddie and he could have everything he wanted?

Maybe this was a good thing, getting their relationship out in the open. Maybe . . .

His eyes snagged on the clock. “I’m late. I gotta go.” He straightened and cupped her cheek.

“I know.” Her eyes were full of understanding. And sympathy. She gave him a soft smile.

“Sorry to leave you with this.”

Carrie shrugged. “We’ll deal with it. I’ll make a Starbucks run, get her an apology Frappuccino.”

He bent to brush his lips over hers. “You’re the best. Seriously.”

“I have my moments.”

His last kiss was firmer, but when the urge to lick into her mouth took him, he pulled back. He didn’t have time for that. “See you tomorrow night.”

“Kick some Stallion ass.”

Grinning, he headed for the door. Damn, he was crazy about her.



CARRIE SHOULDERED open the garage door, balancing her mocha in one hand and Maddie’s Frappuccino in the other. As olive branches went, she hoped it would at least get Maddie to talk to her. She had tried to coax Maddie out of her room so they could go to Starbucks together, maybe talk about the situation while they sipped their drinks. But when Carrie knocked on Maddie’s door, the girl had yelled at her to go away. She still sounded furious, so Carrie had made the coffee run alone.

Now she took the drinks upstairs to again knock on Maddie’s door. With some luck, the promise of sugary caffeine would at least earn Carrie a few minutes of Maddie’s time.

“Salted caramel mocha Frappuccino delivery service for you,” Carrie called as she reached the top of the stairs. “I even asked for extra caramel drizzled on the whipped cream.” Oh, to be a twelve-year-old athlete and be able to eat like that and stay thin.

To Carrie’s surprise, Maddie’s bedroom door stood open. Carrie went in, expecting to find the girl at her desk, or maybe sacked out on her bed.

Instead the room was empty.

Dread crept over her. “Maddie?”

No answer.

“Maddie!” she yelled. Maybe she was in the bathroom.

Still no answer.

Dread turned to panic, chilling her from the inside. Carrie surveyed the room, looking for an indication where the girl could be.

Her laptop was gone from its usual spot on the desk. What’s more, both the laptop charger and Maddie’s cell phone charger were also gone.

*Not good. Not good.*

Frantic now, Carrie rushed to the bed. To her dismay, the beat-up stuffed bunny that Maddie slept with was gone from its perch on the pillow.

*Oh shit oh shit oh shit.*

A glance back at the desk confirmed that Maddie’s carved wooden box where she kept her spending money was open and empty.

Doing her best not to collapse in a heap of terrified tears, Carrie sank onto the bed and pulled out her phone. She almost ripped her hair out, waiting for an answer, but of course Maddie didn’t pick up. So Carrie tried a different number.

“Hello?” Emilia’s voice sounded wary.

“Emilia, it’s Carrie. Maddie’s nanny.”

“Oh. Hi.”

“Do you know where Maddie is? I came back from Starbucks and she isn’t here. I’m sure she left a note, but I can’t seem to find it.” Carrie was positive Maddie hadn’t left a note, but she didn’t want Emilia to think she would get her friend in trouble if she told Carrie where she was.

“Um, I don’t . . .”

Carrie knew preteen girls well enough to be sure Emilia had at least an idea where Maddie might be. In fact, Carrie would bet Emilia knew exactly where Maddie was.

“Emilia, she’s not going to get in trouble. I promise. I just need to know she’s OK.” Carrie paused for effect. “But if I have to call her dad and make him miss his flight to St. Louis . . . .”

“I don’t know exactly where she is. I’m sorry!” Emilia sounded as worried as Carrie felt. “She said something about how her mom would understand.”

A wave of dizziness rolled over Carrie. Her mom. She didn’t know if she wanted to scream or cry or panic. Probably panic. But she couldn’t, not if she were going to find Maddie before she did something even dumber.

“Did she say anything else? Please, Emilia, it’s important.”

“Just that she was really mad at you and her dad.”

“OK. Thank you. I appreciate you telling me this.” Thank God Emilia was willing to talk to her. “If you hear from her again, will you tell her that her dad and I really want her to come home? And will you let me know if she tells you anything else about where she is or where she’s going?”

Why couldn’t Maddie simply have stormed out and gone to Emilia’s house? No, she had to have ideas in her head about finding her absentee mom, who lived somewhere in Texas. Only a thousand miles away.

Did she think she was going to take her spare cash and buy a plane ticket? This was, at least, the advantage to tracking

down a distraught twelve-year-old: she wouldn't get far with only a half-assed plan.

Carrie hung up with Emilia, then made the call she truly dreaded.



SETH STORMED INTO THE HOUSE, slamming the door as hard as he could behind him. Fury and panic warred for control, and he let the anger have free rein. If he allowed the fear to surface, he'd stop being able to function.

He'd fucked up. Big time.

"How the hell did you let this happen?" he roared at Carrie, who stood at the kitchen counter, in almost the same spot she'd been when he left a few hours earlier.

Her face turned pink, her eyes flashing as she stared at him. "*Let* this happen? What, you think I gave her a wad of cash and drove her to the airport?"

It was unfair to blame her, but dammit, she was the adult. He'd left her in charge. And now his daughter was missing. He wanted to punch his fist through the wall several times. He wanted to beat the shit out of something.

What he really wanted was to yell at his daughter to stop acting like a brat and maybe for once see things from his perspective instead of throwing a tantrum because one time he'd put his own needs ahead of hers.

But he couldn't do any of that. So he yelled back at Carrie. "How the hell did she get out of the house without you even noticing?"

"I went to Starbucks," she bit out through her teeth.

"Oh, you went to Starbucks. Because why wouldn't you indulge your caffeine need when the child you're supposed to be looking after is upset?"

He needed to shut the fuck up. He felt so out of control, he didn't even fully understand what he was saying. But he

couldn't stop himself.

“She wouldn't speak to me!” Carrie shoved away from the counter and rounded to him. “I asked her to come with me, and she refused, so I went to get her an apology drink. I was *trying* to fix things!”

“Well, you've done a bang-up job.”

“Fuck you. This isn't my fault.”

No, it wasn't.

They stared each other down, seething. Something shifted in her eyes, something hidden behind the anger, something that looked an awful lot like hurt.

Fuck.

Seth let out a slow breath, his shoulders deflating like a balloon. He scrubbed his hand over his face, scratching at his beard.

“How long has she been gone?”

“Less than an hour.” Carrie's voice was cautious. Like she didn't trust him not to explode at her again.

He felt like shit. He wanted to gather her against him, say he was sorry, and kiss her until she believed him. But there wasn't time for that.

He headed for his bedroom, where his laptop sat on the dresser. God bless his paranoid mom for making him install one of those apps on Maddie's phone so that he could track her on GPS at all times. Hopefully she was too upset to think to turn it off.

“I called Emilia.” Carrie hovered in the doorway. Seth hated that she didn't come into his room. After everything they'd shared in this room, now she felt she had to stay on the threshold.

How had it been only a few hours ago he'd felt like everything was perfect?

“She said Maddie said something about her mom would understand.”



Motherfucking fucker on a stick. Maddie could not seriously be thinking of going to find Jessa. If there was one person on the planet who absolutely would not empathize with their child, it was Jessa. Seth had assumed Maddie was going to try to go to Houston, get his parents to take her in.

“Thanks.” He managed to keep his frustration out of his voice. He didn’t need to lash out at Carrie about that. Jessa had nothing to do with her.

He pulled up the website for the GPS tracking app and entered his account information. Within seconds, his laptop screen filled with a map of downtown Milwaukee. The pulsing red dot showed Maddie’s location—or at least her phone’s location—at the Amtrak station.

Relief was intense, buckling his knees. He leaned heavily on the dresser. He hadn’t realized until that second just how powerful his fear had been. His eyes burned, but he willed back the tears. He could cry once he had his baby girl in his arms. He wasn’t there yet.

A gentle hand on his back startled Seth back to the moment.

“You OK?” Carrie asked gently.

He looked at her and his heart felt like it was cracking in his chest. He yelled at her, blamed her for Maddie disappearing, and yet here she was, understanding and compassion making her eyes practically glow.

He was so in love with her.

He wanted to tell her. Wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her and beg her forgiveness and promise they’d find a way to work things out.

But first he had to find his daughter.

Because he didn’t trust his voice, he nodded tightly. “She’s at the Amtrak station.” He hesitated, then decided fuck it, and kissed her. A hard, brief kiss, just a press of his mouth to hers. But he needed at least that.

“I gotta go.”

Nodding, she pulled her lips between her teeth, as if pulling his kiss inside her. Or at least that's what he told himself to make himself feel a little better.

"I gotta make another call on the way. Can you call the train station and let them know what's up? Make sure they don't sell her a ticket?" He needed to call his agent, plus he should call Jessa and give her a heads-up. Just in case.

Another nod from Carrie.

He paused in the doorway, searching her face. He didn't even know what he was looking for.

"I'll see you soon."



OUT OF BREATH, lungs burning from sprinting from the lot to the door in the cold, Seth shoved through the doors of the Amtrak station and looked around frantically. His gaze landed on an information desk and he started for it.

Then he drew up short.

Sitting on the floor against the wall, arms wrapped around her long legs, face hidden in her knees, was his baby girl. Everything inside him stilled, his chest aching as he took a moment to really see her for the first time in too long. She looked so small and alone. And he'd let that happen.

Pressing the heel of his hand into his eye to hold back a tear, he crossed the space in long strides. When he got close, he could hear Maddie's crying, and the cracks in his heart deepened.

"Maddie." His voice came out thick, and this time he didn't bother holding back the tear that rolled down the side of his nose. He sank to the floor next to her and pulled her against his chest. She stiffened at first and tried to pull away, but he held her tightly and whispered, "I'm so sorry, baby."

With that, she collapsed against him, sobs racking her thin frame. Seth held her tightly and rocked her as she cried. As he

cried a little too. With the panic of her running away over, the full weight of what could have happened set in and his hands shook as he stroked her hair.

He could have lost everything.

He dug his fingers into his opposite palm to distract himself from the overwhelming sadness that swept through him. He'd failed his daughter so deeply, but he would do whatever he needed to fix things and do better in the future. Even if that meant leaving Milwaukee after the season ended and moving back to Houston; even if it meant leaving the Dragons and Carrie.

Carrie. Fuck. He couldn't even think about her right now. He'd fucked that up too, but he could worry about that later.

"Baby, what's going on?" he asked gently. He was probably supposed to be angrier with her, for running away, for upsetting everyone who cared about her, for making him miss his flight and for turning his day completely upside down. But he couldn't dredge up that emotion. He was too damn glad to have found her and too aware that he shouldered some of the blame.

Maddie didn't lift her head, instead speaking into his wool coat. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I just . . . I don't know." She shuddered against him.

Seth took her face in his hands and pulled back so he could look at her. Her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks wet with tears. And her expression was pure agony.

He took a deep breath, trying to dislodge some of the lump in his throat so he could speak. "I didn't realize how unhappy you were here. I know my schedule is crazy during the season, but I'm still around. You can still talk to me."

"It's not that. It's . . ." She dropped her gaze, still refusing to look at him. "It's dumb. I never should have tried to go see—to go away."

He sighed, then scooted back to lean against the row of windows next to her. He stretched his legs out and crossed his ankles. When she mirrored his posture, he almost smiled.

“Your mom.” Might as well toss the elephant out in the open so they could tackle it. “Carrie talked to Emilia. She was really worried.” He barely kept his voice from cracking when he mentioned Carrie.

Maddie picked at her cuticle, concentrating hard on her hands. “It was a stupid idea. Don’t worry, it won’t happen again.” This time, instead of misery, her voice held bitterness. Which wasn’t any better for the state of Seth’s shredded heart.

“If you want to know more about your mom, ask. We didn’t know each other real well, but I can try to help you.”

“I did!”

She had? Oh, hell, she had, and he’d blown her off. “Maddie –”

She sniffed. “Um, but, I sort of decided to find her on social media instead. And then I was mad about Thanksgiving, and she seemed so cool and friendly online. And then a bunch of bullshit happened at school and then I found you and Carrie and I was so mad I didn’t know what to do so I grabbed as much money as I could find and got an Uber here and it felt wrong not to tell anyone anything so I texted Emilia and then I got here and was waiting and then my mom sent me this awful text and I don’t ever need to think about her again ever and I’m so sorry Daddy so sorry I promise I won’t ever ask about her again or try to run away just please don’t be mad at me I’m so sorry.”

Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks as Seth stared at her. He didn’t even know which point to address first from her mini-outburst.

She shoved her phone at Seth, the text from Jessa on the screen.

*Jessa: You show up here, we won’t let you in. You’re not welcome.*

Fuck. He’d known for a long time that Maddie’s mom was cold, but he’d hoped his daughter would never have to find out quite so directly.

Sniffing, Maddie wiped her cheek. “Sorry, I know I’m not supposed to swear.”

What? “I think we can let that slide.” That was the least of his worries.

He should probably get up, help her to her feet, and take her home so they could have this conversation over hot chocolate. He could picture her curled up on the couch under her Batgirl blanket, the Christmas tree lights casting a glow over them as they worked through everything.

But it also felt important to address at least some of it right away. Even if that meant spending two hours sitting on the cold floor of the train station.

“Let’s start with Carrie.”

Maddie’s face hardened. “I want her gone. She can’t be my nanny anymore.”

Fuck. “Mad—”

“No!” She shook her head vigorously, cutting him off. “She can’t. Please, Dad, just get a new nanny. You ruined it with her.”

Seth opened his mouth to protest, but he didn’t know what to say. This was exactly why he’d insisted he and Carrie keep things from Maddie. His daughter always had to come first.

Except things had changed. He was in love with Carrie now.

“I hate her, Dad. She . . .” Maddie’s voice choked off as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks.

Oh, hell. He couldn’t let anything come between him and Maddie. He had to get his priorities back in order. Football and Maddie were his life. If Maddie wasn’t OK with it, there wasn’t room for anything else.

Not even the woman he’d fallen in love with.



THE SOUND of the garage door jerked Carrie out of the dark place inside where she'd been stewing since Seth left. She'd allowed tears to fall as the sofa swallowed her. She tried not to worry about anything except relief that Seth had found Maddie and the three of them could begin the process of working things out.

But she couldn't get past the amount of anger it must have taken for Maddie to attempt to run away. How could they possibly work past that? Yes, Maddie was a child, and at a tough age. But she was old enough to have a say in what happened in her life and in her home.

How could Carrie let herself come between a father and daughter?

But how could she walk away from the man she'd fallen in love with?

The door slammed shut, and Carrie pulled herself from the couch in time to see Maddie storm right to the stairs and stomp up them. She didn't so much as glare at Carrie.

Seth followed, pausing in the doorway to look at her. He looked more stressed and tired than she'd ever seen him.

Dread hollowed out Carrie's chest. She already knew what was happening.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you before." Seth's voice was heavy with fatigue. "I was upset and wanted to lash out. It wasn't fair to you. Maddie's old enough that you can leave her alone for a coffee run. So, I'm sorry."

His apology did nothing to soothe Carrie's tension. "It's fine."

"I have to go, so we'll have to talk more about this tomorrow. Or I can call tonight. But I think it would be best if we find a new nanny." He didn't look at her as he spoke.

Carrie's blood turned cold in her veins. She'd expected as much, but it still shocked her to hear the words spoken aloud.

"She's angry. And if there's one thing I know about my daughter, she's a stubborn kid. She gets that from her dad."

His laugh lacked enthusiasm or humor. “I’m sorry. But I have to put her first. I thought I could . . .” He sucked in a sharp breath, then finally looked at her.

The hurt reflected in his eyes cut deep inside her. It was the same pain she felt. He wasn’t saying it, but they both knew he meant things were over between them. She wasn’t losing just her home and her job, she was losing her boyfriend too.

She swallowed a sob, biting down on her lips to keep the sound in.

“So when I get back tomorrow, you—”

“What? Where are you going?”

He frowned, looking at her like she’d lost her mind. “Mike worked it out with Coach. I gotta get to the airport so I can meet up with the team in St. Louis.”

“You’re *leaving*?” Hadn’t he just said he had to put Maddie first? How could he claim that, then leave town?

“I don’t have a choice.” His voice took on a sharp edge.

“So you’re firing me, but first I have to stay with the kid you said hates me? And you’re putting her first, as soon as the season is over?”

Seth’s face hardened. “It’s my job. Maddie gets that. I thought you did, but I guess I was wrong about that too.”

“I get that. But you can’t wait a few minutes?” She took a step toward him. How could he throw away what they had without even trying to fix it?

He moved back from her, refusing to look at her. “This is the only flight Mike can get me on. I have to go.”

“So what we had doesn’t mean anything to you? You’re just giving up?” Carrie blinked hard to keep the tears at bay.

“I didn’t say that,” he snapped, head whipping up to glare at her.

No, he didn’t get to be hurt by all this. He was the one choosing to get rid of her.

“So then tomorrow, when you get back, we’ll talk to Maddie, tell her we’re together.” Yes, just a few minutes ago she’d been wondering how she could come between father and daughter. But now, faced with the actual prospect of losing him, she couldn’t let him go. She was in love with him. And Maddie would come around. She and Carrie had been friends; they could be again.

Seth’s eyes were cold as he finally looked at Carrie. “No. I’m sorry, but Maddie has to come first.”

For a long, charged moment, they stared at each other. Carrie thought she saw a flicker of warmth, of relenting, in his gaze, but it was gone before she could even be sure it was real.

“Seth. Please don’t do this.”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I have to go.” He moved closer to her. Close enough to touch. But instead of reaching for her, he shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’m sorry.”

Carrie held her breath as he walked away. The pain sliced deep into her and she didn’t know whether to scream or cry. How dare he give up on them so easily, without even trying?

She needed to talk to someone. She needed a friend. So she got a soda from the refrigerator, took it to the couch, and called Amy.



---

## Chapter 18

---

CARRIE STEPPED OUTSIDE into the early evening chill and instantly regretted leaving her scarf in the car. The wind had picked up off the lake, and by the time she reached the sidewalk, her nose and chin were numb.

January in Wisconsin was not for the weak. Or the forgetful.

Still, even the freezing air couldn't dampen her excitement. She officially had her offer letter in hand, and in a few weeks she would begin teaching two sections of Comics as Literature at Milwaukee University. After leaving Seth's house and moving into Jason's living room, she'd put together a class proposal and approached every local college. Nothing like sleeping on an air mattress for motivation.

Only the small college had been interested, but the two class sections were a start.

As she hurried to her car, she called Jason and told him to pick up sushi from their favorite place so they could celebrate. Once in the car, she cranked the heat as she finished the call, waiting for the car to warm up before she started the drive to her brother's apartment.

Once she hung up, she pulled off her gloves and swiped and tapped through screens on her phone until she had a new text message open. Her heart started thumping as she stared at the screen.

He would be so excited for her. Amy and Jason and her parents were all happy for her that she was getting interest in her proposed class. And Amy was encouraging when Carrie talked about working on their textbook, though she hadn't gone as far as to commit to doing the artwork half of things.

But Seth was different. He'd done more than smile and nod and say "good luck." He'd listened when she talked in detail about her ideas. He'd asked questions that showed he was interested. In his unassuming way, he'd challenged her to go after what she wanted.

Except at the end of the day, what she wanted was him. A month apart hadn't lessened her feelings for him. She'd been angry at him when she left, but that had faded. She was left with hurt that he hadn't wanted to fight for her, even if she understood his reason.

And of course she still loved him.

Which was why she wanted to share her news. But as she started to type his name into the address field, she hesitated.

He didn't need the distraction of a text from an ex. He was in Pittsburgh, getting ready for tomorrow's playoff game.

So she texted Amy instead.

*Carrie: I got the job! Want to get together and celebrate tomorrow?*

Amy's reply came through almost immediately.

*Amy: Can't. We're going to a football party. I'd invite you, but wasn't sure you'd be up for it . . .*

That was the million-dollar question. She'd watched every game since leaving Seth's house, needing any way she could to feel close to him. Which was dumb. She should be trying to get over him, not trying to feel connected.

But she wasn't ready to give him up yet.



SETH CLOSED the door behind Paula Grayson and turned to his daughter with a questioning look on his face.

The girl's expression was hard, same as it had been after the other four nanny interviews they'd conducted.

"Nope." Maddie turned and flounced back to the living room. She flopped onto the couch and banged her feet onto the coffee table.

She'd been in the same surly mood since the day she insisted he get rid of Carrie. Which was perfect, because so was he. Even getting to the divisional round of the playoffs and playing well enough to give his agent serious leverage for negotiating a one-year contract extension with the Dragons hadn't been enough to put Seth in a good mood.

He missed Carrie.

On the plus side, being in a perpetually foul mood had made last week's season-ending two-point loss to Pittsburgh less painful. It had simply brought the rest of the team down to his level.

"What the hell is wrong this time?" Seth snapped as he stalked after Maddie. Even though the season was over and he wouldn't be traveling as much didn't mean he didn't need help. He still had commitments, and Mike had secured him a new endorsement deal that would involve some evening hours.

Without Carrie, Seth had struggled with juggling Maddie's care and the end of the season. His mom had visited for a few weeks, and Maddie spent her winter break in Houston, but now that football was done for the year, they needed a reliable routine.

But the lack of childcare was far from the cause of Seth's perpetually foul mood. He didn't miss Carrie because she took Maddie to swim practice or did his laundry. He missed *her*. Her smile, her ability to get Maddie excited about school, her laugh, her passion for science, her kisses. The way she felt curled up on the couch next to him. The lazy, sexy look she got in her eyes when she wanted him.

Most of all, he missed the way he felt around her. Like he'd finally come home.

But the fact was, Maddie was his life. Maddie and football.

“She’s like the rest of them. Boooooor-ing.”

Maddie might be his life, but she was pissing him off. “Well, I’m sorry you kicked out the only possibility you deemed interesting enough to pick you up from school and oversee your homework,” he snapped.

She jerked her feet off the table and sat up straight, her eyes shooting daggers at him. “Hey, I’m not the one who banged the babysitter and ruined everything.”

Hot fury shot through Seth, and it took everything he had to remain in his seat on the couch. “First of all, that is none of your business. Second . . .” He didn’t have a second. But Maddie had the wrong idea about him and Carrie. Even if she was gone, he didn’t want Maddie thinking it had been casual between them.

“You made it my business when you screwed my nanny. Like you can’t get a million other chicks who throw themselves at football players. I’m not stupid. I know how things work.”

She certainly thought she did. But she didn’t know the half of it. “You think I was with Carrie just to have a little fun? You really think that little of me?” No sense asking about Carrie, since he knew Maddie thought Carrie was worse than school cafeteria meals.

Maddie crossed her arms and glared at him. “I know you’ve hooked up with jersey chasers before. But no, you couldn’t stick to them. Why not, when Carrie was so convenient?”

“That’s enough!” he yelled, no longer able to contain his anger.

To her credit, Maddie shrank back and almost looked sorry she’d pushed him so far.

“We’ll discuss another time that you’re too young to be talking about hooking up and banging.” She wasn’t, not really. But no dad wanted to think of his little girl as old enough to know about hookups. “And I don’t care how mad you are at her, you will stop talking about Carrie like what we had was some cheap fling and I didn’t care about anything but sex.” He nearly choked on the last word. He so did not want to be having this conversation with his daughter.

“Oh, what, like you were in love with her or something?” Maddie scoffed.

“Yes, I was in love with her. I still *am* in love with her.”

Weighty silence fell over them. Seth closed his eyes and scrubbed a hand over his beard. He hadn’t meant to say that. He didn’t go ten minutes without thinking about Carrie. And every time he did, it hurt. The sharp feeling, like his chest was cracking apart, was starting to get a little better, but it would be a long time yet before he could picture her face without wanting to both punch something and sob.

He opened his eyes to find Maddie watching him, her expression puzzled.

“Really? You love her?”

His chest was too tight to speak, so he nodded.

“Then why did you make her leave?”

Seth swallowed a groan of frustration. “Because you didn’t want her here anymore.”

“And you did that . . . for me?”

“Everything I do is for you, Mads. Nothing is more important.”

“I—” Her mouth worked up and down, like she wanted to say something else but didn’t know what.

“How can I be with a woman you hate? It doesn’t matter how much I love her.” Even if it sucked the joy out of his life. He would get that back, slowly, as he got over Carrie.

“I don’t hate Carrie. Why would you think that?”

He wanted to shake her. He loved his daughter more than anything, but in that moment, he wanted to smack her or do something to jumpstart her common sense.

“You said you hated her,” he bit out. “Used that actual word.”

Maddie stared down at her knees and picked at a thread on her leggings. “Oh, well, I guess . . .”

“You ran away, Madison. Of course I was going to do anything I needed to do to fix things for you.” Had he fucked up again?

Seth moved from the love seat to the couch to sit next to Maddie. He took her hand and waited until she looked up at him. “Do you understand that everything I do is for you? I know it doesn’t always seem like it, but every decision I make is because it’s the best choice for you, at least in the long run.”

“How was leaving our home the best thing for me?”

He knew that would be the first one she asked about. “If we’d stayed in Houston, I would have had to retire. Yes, we have money. But I still have a few more good years before I can’t play anymore. And I have to work. We don’t have enough money for us to live on for the rest of our lives. So moving was a long-term plan that allows me to keep earning money so you don’t have to worry about taking care of me when I get old. And so I have enough to send you to college. Wouldn’t want to use your college fund to cover our lavish lifestyle.”

“I’m getting a swimming scholarship, so that doesn’t matter.”

Despite the tense mood, Seth chuckled. “Then we’ll use your college fund for something else. Like our lavish lifestyle.”

She giggled.

“Mike has had offers from three other teams who wanted me to work out for them,” Seth said.

Her shoulders immediately tensed, her face getting surly.

“I told him I’m not playing anywhere but Milwaukee. Even if the money isn’t as good, he’s going to negotiate the best deal he can with the Dragons, and take it. I like this team, I like Milwaukee, and most important, I’m not dragging you to another city to start over again. I’m sorry we had to this year, but I promise, until you finish high school, we’re staying right here.”

A hesitant smile played at the corners of her mouth. “Really?”

“Really. I don’t know how else to tell you. You’re the most important thing in the world to me.”

She caught him off guard by throwing herself at his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck. He held her tightly, rocking her a little, like she was still his little girl. Because in some part of his heart, she always would be.

---

## Chapter 19

---

“YOU KNOW you don’t have to make *everything* about me all the time,” Maddie said as the AFC Championship game cut to commercial at the two-minute warning.

Pittsburgh was trailing Kansas City by a field goal, and Seth couldn’t help rooting for it to stay that way. He always harbored a small resentment toward whatever team knocked him out of the playoffs.

“We’re watching the game, aren’t we?” he teased. She’d wanted to watch the latest superhero movie.

She threw a piece of popcorn at him. “I’m talking about Carrie.”

His chest squeezed at the mention of her name.

“We need to get her back.”

“She already found another job.” He’d talked to Jason the other day, and learned she was staying at his place until she could find her own. And Jason mentioned she would be teaching a comics class at Milwaukee U.

“I don’t mean as my nanny.” Maddie rolled her eyes. “I mean as your girlfriend. Boy, you must have taken a lot of hits to the head this season.”

“Haha.” He couldn’t get her back now. She’d moved on, going after what she really wanted.

Without him.



Except the reason they'd ended things was so she wouldn't come between him and Maddie. And now Maddie was apparently on board with them dating.

It couldn't be as easy as calling her up and asking her out, could it?

"You're gonna have to do some serious groveling," Maddie said, answering his unspoken question.

"Excuse me?" For the second time that day, he was entering a conversation he wasn't prepared to have with his seventh grader. At least this one was about romance, not sex.

"You basically told her that she's second-best. Since it's second-best to your child, that's forgivable. But only with the proper amount of begging for that forgiveness."

Was this true? What the hell did Maddie know about dating and winning over women, anyway?

"And you need a grand gesture," Maddie added. "There's always a grand gesture."

Seth tried to puzzle through what she was saying as the game returned on TV. He watched the two teams line up, Pittsburgh with the ball. They had two minutes to score and secure a spot in the Super Bowl. They at least needed a field goal to force overtime. They were already to the Chiefs' forty-yard line; it seemed likely they could get to the end zone.

"What do you mean, 'there's always a grand gesture'? Where is there always one?"

"In movies."

Of course that was where she got her notions about romance. "I don't think I'm up for saving the planet this week, so maybe a less-than-grand gesture."

"It doesn't have to be saving the planet. You could stand in her driveway with a boombox."

Seth chuckled at the image she conjured. "She's staying with her brother in his condo. Plus, it's negative fifteen wind chill right now."

“Then we’ll have to think of something else.”

*We.* She was in this with him. Giving him her stamp of approval on trying to win Carrie back.

“And ya know, Dad, I’m not a little kid anymore. Maybe stop doing everything for me. Instead do, like, most things. But occasionally do things for yourself too. Take what you want.”

Seth glanced over at the young woman who was still the center of his universe, and probably always would be. But maybe she was right; maybe it was time to add a few other things in that center with her and football.

Maybe that’s what he’d been trying to do with Carrie. And he’d let her get away. He needed to do exactly like he’d told her to do, exactly like his daughter was telling him to do. Hell, even his coaches told him to go out and go after what he wanted. They just meant a good tackle or a sack or an interception.

On the TV, from the twelve-yard line, the Steelers’ quarterback let loose a perfect spiral. It sailed down the field toward a wide receiver waiting at the one-yard line. No defenders were close enough to stop him from making the catch, then turning into the end zone. It was Pittsburgh’s ball game.

Out of nowhere, from the corner of the screen, a player in a red shirt dove in front of the receiver. The Kansas City cornerback plucked the ball out of the air, cradling it against his chest as he crashed to the turf.

Interception. Chiefs’ ball on the two-yard line. With twenty-six seconds left, they’d be able to kneel it out and go to the Super Bowl.

With one unexpected move, that cornerback had seen something he wanted and was about to lose—the Super Bowl—and done what he had to do to seize control of the outcome.

Seth needed to be that cornerback. For the sake of the metaphor, he could ignore that he played linebacker and focus

on making an interception to change the outcome. Did that make Carrie the football?

Well, it was an imperfect metaphor. But the point remained. He needed to fight for what he wanted, and he wanted Carrie.

He sat up and leaned toward Maddie. Clearly his creative thinking was lacking. He needed his daughter's help.

“OK, no saving the world, no boomboxes. So how do I get Carrie back?”

Maddie grabbed her laptop off the coffee table. “Think we can get you a Batman costume overnight?”



CARRIE TRIED to focus on her lecture notes for tomorrow, but she was so tired, her eyes kept drooping shut. Jason's air mattress was uncomfortable, plus it made a weird rubbery friction noise every time she rolled over, which often woke her up. After a month of sleeping on it, she was perpetually exhausted. Not to mention she had a chronic ache in her shoulders.

The ping of a new text message jerked her awake, and she grabbed her phone from where it rested on the couch next to her.

Maddie: *I'm sorry I was so awful. I miss you. Please come back?*

Tears welled in Carrie's eyes, blurring the words on her phone screen. Seconds ticked by as her thumbs hovered over the screen, prepared to type a reply. But she didn't know what to say. That she already had a new job? That Seth had been the one to end it? That maybe Maddie missed her, but Seth had given no indication he did?

Instead of typing any of those things, she set the phone down and swiped at the tears that had escaped. No, just because Maddie missed her didn't mean she'd be welcomed

back to their home. He hadn't fought for her, for their relationship. He'd let her walk away.

Except she hadn't fought for them either. The thought unsettled Carrie, enough she had to set aside her laptop and get off the couch. She suddenly felt restless, like she needed to do something.

She hadn't fought for Seth, even though she loved him. She'd simply accepted he had to put Maddie first.

Not good enough. He'd been the one who'd inspired her to go after what she wanted. She had the job; now it was time to get the other thing she wanted.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she dug her Poison Ivy corset out of her suitcase. As she adjusted the laces and hooked the snaps, she let herself remember the way Seth had looked at her when she put it on for the first time. His eyes had shone with more than lust. The present itself was an indication that his feelings for her had been more than casual.

Carrie smoothed her hands over the rich silk. Maybe his feelings had started to fade in the month they'd been apart. But they couldn't have disappeared completely. She had to hold on to that. He had to still care.

The rest of the Ivy costume was a no-go. Shorts, even with tights, weren't happening in subzero weather.

She shrugged into a black cardigan, because as sexy as she wanted to be, it was still Wisconsin in January. Plus, late on a Sunday afternoon, there was a good chance Maddie was at home.

A knock on the door interrupted her hunt for her keys. She stared at it, frowning. Who would be at Jason's? He was out of town, and he never had people over. Only her parents and Amy knew where she was staying, and they would call or text before coming over.

Another knock, louder this time. Like the person had pounded with his fist.

"Carrie?"

Her stomach hollowed at the sound of Seth's voice. Her hand went to her chest, as if she needed to keep her pounding heart from bursting out.

On unsteady legs, she went to the door and twisted the deadbolt. Her fingers shook as she slid the chain. Why did Jason need so many locks? The building had a security buzzer to get in.

Speaking of, how had Seth gotten past it?

She yanked open the door, the question on the tip of her tongue, but froze when she saw him.

He was decked out head-to-toe in a Batman costume. Her mouth hung open as she stared at him.

Batman?

“Wh . . . wha . . . I . . .” She couldn't even find words.

He looked up and down the hall, then back at her. “Can I come in?”

She stepped back, still in shock. “Sure.”

He came in, movements stiff, presumably because of the costume. His mask obscured most of his face, only his beard and mouth showing. Batman with a blond beard was an odd look.

They stood in Jason's entryway, watching each other. Through the eyeholes, she met his gaze, and she couldn't look away. Her whole body flushed, her skin tingling from awareness.

His mouth twitched. “You look good.” He gestured to her corset and sweater. “Going out?”

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he sounded as though he didn't like that idea.

“I was, um . . .” She bit her lip and inhaled deeply. She could do this. “I was actually going to your house.”

“Oh?”

“Why are you here?”

He took a step toward her, lifted his hand as if he were going to reach for her, then dropped it back to his side. “To say I’m an idiot.”

How was she supposed to interpret that? “Excuse me?”

He lifted his hand again, then made a frustrated sound. He ripped off the gloves, leaving his arms bare to his elbows. Stepping into her space, he slid his hand around the back of her neck. “I miss you. The way things ended with us, I was an idiot.”

Carrie set her palms against his chest, instantly hating the fake foam muscles keeping her from feeling his real muscles. His heat.

Him.

So she slid her arms around him and laid her hands against his back. Thankfully the costume was no more than a piece of fabric. “I miss you too.” She could barely push the words past the tightness in her throat. “I was coming over to tell you that. And to make it harder for you to walk away.”

“It was so hard. And I’m an idiot for doing it.”

She smiled. “You already said that.”

“It bears repeating.” He slid his hands into her hair and tilted her face up to his. “I’ve cared about women I’ve dated before, but you’re the first woman I’ve ever loved. And I threw it away because of a teenage tantrum.”

Her heart sputtered. Had she heard him right? “First woman you . . .”

He leaned his head toward hers, and when the hard plastic of his mask knocked her forehead, he made another frustrated sound. He ripped the mask off his face, letting it hang behind him like a hood. His loose hair spilled around his shoulders.

Looking deep into her eyes, he leaned his forehead against hers. “I love you, Carrie. I am so madly, crazy, wildly in love with you. I’ve been miserable since you left. I thought I had to let you leave to make Maddie happy, but she hasn’t been

happy either. And I realized that sometimes I have to take what I want. Not just what Maddie wants.”

She couldn't form words to go with all the thoughts and feelings inside her, so Carrie went on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his. Seth's hand fisted in her hair, holding her in place as his tongue slid into her mouth, tasting and exploring everything they'd denied themselves for the past month.

They clung to each other, slowly walking backward until Carrie's back touched the wall. Seth pressed into her, his big body stroking hers, turning her on in a way only he could.

Ripping his mouth away, Seth stared down at her, panting. “Say you want this too. Say I didn't screw up too badly.”

Carrie's chest ached at the vulnerability on his face. That she could do that to such a solid, strong man made it easy to be vulnerable herself. “You didn't screw up. I want this too.” She cupped his cheek, loving the scratch of his whiskers on her skin. “I love you too. So much.”

He made a desperate sound as his mouth took hers again. Hunger filled Carrie, a need to have what she'd denied herself for a month. Judging from the erection pressing into her, Seth matched her need.

“No codpiece this time?” she asked as he trailed his lips down her neck.

He chuckled against her skin, making her shiver. “No, I had limited options for overnight delivery. It was this cheap version or the \$1,400 one.”

“Why Batman?”

He lifted his head and made a confused face. “Maddie insisted I needed a grand gesture to make you forgive me. And got it in her head that wearing a costume was the best way to achieve that.”

Carrie laughed. In teenager logic, it made an odd sort of sense. “But why not use the Iron Man costume you have?”

“Something about mixing worlds and Poison Ivy belongs with Batman.” Seth shrugged. “It was all kind of over my

head. But I figured she understands how female brains work better than I do. Especially women who love comic books.”

“I like it. But for the record, it’s the loving me part that won me back, not the costume.”

“Noted.” His mouth took hers again, and as they kissed, she walked them until they reached Jason’s couch. She tugged off his cape and helped him peel off the one-piece polyester outfit. Underneath, he wore a Dragons tee and sweatpants with a pronounced bulge in front.

“Please tell me Jason won’t be back soon, because I desperately need to make love to you.”

“He’ll be back Tuesday.” Carrie gave Seth her best seductive smile as she lay back on the couch.

“Thank God.” He came down on top of her, pulling down the cup of her corset on one side. His mouth found her hard nipple and sucked.

Carrie squirmed and cried out. Desperate to feel his skin against hers, she tugged at his shirt until he pulled away to yank it off. He made quick work of the rest of his clothes, then Carrie’s. He lowered himself back to her, and she moaned at how good it felt to have him warm and naked against her.

“I didn’t think we’d have this again.” Her voice came out a whisper. “I—” She broke off, unable to say more.

“Come home with me.” Seth used his thighs to press hers wider. His erection teased her, making it hard to think. “Not as Maddie’s nanny, not as our housekeeper, not any of those things. Come home with me as my girlfriend. As the woman I love. As the woman I want to fall asleep with and wake up to every day. As the woman who makes my house a home.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

A strained smile teased Seth’s lips as he shifted his hips to enter her.

“Yes,” Carrie breathed again.

“Yes to sex or yes to moving in with me?” Seth groaned as he pressed in farther.



He felt so good, filling her in all the places that had been empty for the past month.

“Both,” she moaned as he reached the hilt. She wrapped her arms and her legs around him and used her nose to nudge his face up so she could see his face.

Opening herself completely, putting everything she had on the line, she looked deep into his eyes. “I want that too. I love you. You are my heart.”

He was everything she wanted. He was home.



THANK you for reading Carrie and Seth’s story. I hope you enjoyed it!

Want more of the Milwaukee Dragons? You can get [\*Delay of Game\*](#), book 2 in the Milwaukee Football Club series, now!

Want a sneak peak of what happens next for Seth and Carrie?  
Get that [here](#)!

To stay up to date on sales, new releases, and exclusive content, subscribe to my [newsletter](#). You’ll get a free copy of my novella *Kiss Me*.

---

## Thank You

---

I would love to hear from you, or connect on social media. You can email [lizlincoln@gmail.com](mailto:lizlincoln@gmail.com), find me in my [Facebook Reader Group](#), or follow me on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) or [TikTok](#).

Honest reviews help authors and other readers. Obviously, I hope you loved the book, but tastes are subjective. I would greatly appreciate it if you left a review, love or hate, on Goodreads or a retail site.

# Other titles by Liz Lincoln

## *Milwaukee Dragons*

Book 1 [On the Line](#) — Seth & Carrie's story

Book 2 [Delay of Game](#) — Marcus & Bree's story, rereleasing November, 2023.  
Previously published as *Swagger*

Book 3 [False Start](#) — Quinn & Natalie's story, rereleasing January 2024.  
Previously published as *Home Field Advantage*.

## *Milwaukee Wolfpack*

[Scoring a Spouse](#)—Erika & Nate's story

[Meeting Her Match](#)—Lauren & Pete's story

[Loving a Keeper](#)—Rose & Cassie's story

## *Milwaukee Men at Work*

Prequel novella 0.5 [Kiss Me](#) — Becca and Tariq's story

Book 1 [Watch Me](#) – Nina & Kam's story

Book 2 [Make Me](#) – Grace & Josh's Halloween story

Book 3 [Find Me](#) – Laura & Brady's Christmas and Hanukkah story

Book 4 [Love Me](#) – Claudia & AJ's story

[Box Set](#) — all 5 stories for 40% off

## *Standalone*

[Friendsgiving Getaway](#)—Annie & Chris's Thanksgiving story

## *Audiobooks*

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Kiss Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Watch Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Make Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Find Me](#)

Milwaukee Men at Work: [Love Me](#)

Milwaukee Dragons: [On the Line](#)

Milwaukee Dragons: [Swagger](#) (Now Delay of Game)

# Acknowledgments

I am so grateful to my friend Ashley Hearn, who met me at a coffee shop in the suburbs and helped me conceive of this book. This series has been in my head for more than a decade, and without her guidance, it might have stayed there.

My critique partner and good friend Liz Czukas, I owe you endless thanks for helping me plot this book, walking me through the “I hate this book” phase, and just generally being a fabulous support system.

All my other writer friends – way too many of you to list by name, sorry! – thank you for all the love, support, and free guidance you offer. Writers kick ass.

Thank you to my mom, who has been my biggest champion since I wrote my first book at age ten.

Thank you to my therapist for keeping me from being eaten alive by my anxiety. And to my many doctors and the meds they prescribe to keep me mostly functioning.

There are so many other people and I’m sure I’ve forgotten more than one. If that’s you, I’m so sorry. I thank you too.

And always, always, thank you to my family. To my kids for letting me work when they wish I could play, for celebrating my accomplishments with me, and for just being great kids. And Dan, for being an amazing father, an understanding writer-spouse, my biggest support and cheerleader, and my very own happily ever after.

## About the Author

Liz Lincoln has been concocting stories as long as she can remember, and from the beginning they involved two people falling in love. When she's not writing, she spends her time rooting for the UW Badgers and the Green Bay Packers (or yearning for the return of football season), watching the US women's soccer team, embroidering sassy sayings, and drinking too much Diet Coke. Or reading one of the many romance novels in her TBR pile. She also works part time as a therapist. Liz lives in Milwaukee, WI, with her husband, two kids, three cats, and a turtle.

Find Liz online at: [lizlincoln.com](http://lizlincoln.com)

And subscribe to her [newsletter](#) for a free copy of the novella *Kiss Me*.



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious way.

On the Line

Copyright © 2023 by Liz Lincoln Steiner

All rights reserved. No part of this publication or portions thereof may be reproduced in any form or otherwise transmitted without written permission from the publisher. You may not circulate this book in any format.

✿ Created with Vellum