

Rivals

When I met Zach and Abby at the Maxwells' housewarming party, I noticed "the look." I mentioned it to them.

"What look?" Zach was puzzled. Abby smoothed her hair.

"The look' you give each other across a crowded room. Like you share something special. What's your story? I'm doing qualitative research for my thesis."

Zach smiled. "We met at a game."

"Football," Abby put in. "It was a preseason game--"

Zach took over. "The first time I saw her, I knew we were meant to be together, even though she showed up at Soldier Field wearing a Green Bay jersey. She had on a Packers hat, too, with her ponytail sticking out."

"I already had a boyfriend," Abby said.

Zach wasn't fazed. "Sure, she was with another guy, but he wasn't right for her. She stepped into my row, locked eyes with me, and immediately sat next to me. That's when I knew."

"I sat there because it was either you or the guy with a loose hold on a cold one. Lesser of two evils. You looked less likely to splash beer on me."

"I told myself she couldn't be a Packer fan in that oversized jersey. It had to be his, and she just borrowed it to fit in with the crowd."

"Fit in? We were on the Bears side of the field. If anything, I'd have been clobbered for wearing it. I'm a third generation Packer fan," she smiled. "I moved to Chicago from Milwaukee. I always wear my oldest and rattiest to games in case some doofus spills on me. I made the mistake of wearing my favorite hoodie to a game once, and the bozo in the next seat dropped his hotdog. The mustard stain never came out."

Zach wasn't letting her get sidetracked. "We brushed elbows more than once--"

"You were in my personal space more than once--"

"Sparks flew. She smelled like rosebuds--"

"Gardenias."

"Heavenly. I'd never known anyone like her before."

"Most women wear perfume."

"I mean a woman who really knew the game. When she screamed encroachment--"

"It was clear! Those officials must've been taking payola!"

"--and cheered on the defensive end, I knew she was someone special."

"I thought you were kind of cute."

"Then her escort--"

"Boyfriend."

"The creep cheered when our quarterback got sacked and broke his leg!"

"I don't think he really meant--"

"He tried to high-five you! So I told him, 'Dude, it's a preseason game! It doesn't even mean anything!' He sneered and said, 'It means your season's over.' Then he laughed an evil laugh."

“He does kind of have a creepy laugh,” Abby admitted.

“So I whispered, ‘Why are you with such a king-sized jerk?’”

“And I couldn’t hear him, because the Bears kicked a field goal right then and the crowd went crazy. So I said, ‘What?’ and he yelled, ‘WHY ARE YOU WITH SUCH A KING-SIZED JERK?’”

Conversations around us immediately died. I shrugged and smiled. The buzz gradually resumed.

“And then he decked you,” Abby continued.

“He sucker punched me!”

“And security hauled him off. When you came to--”

“He barely knocked me out--”

“When you came to, I went with you to first aid.”

“And missed the rest of the half--”

“It was the least I could do.”

“She held the ice pack to my head.”

“He had quite a lump.”

“And said she was sorry I got hurt.”

“I said you ought to know better than to insult someone at a game. Packer fans are very passionate.”

“I gave her a lift home.”

“Actually he was in no shape to drive, so I drove his car.”

“And when she dropped off the keys the next day, I asked her out. And she said, ‘yes!’”

“It was the least I could do.”

“It hasn’t been easy. My dad was against her from the start.”

“It was nothing compared to what my dad said about him. I wouldn’t repeat it in mixed company.”

“They almost came to blows at the wedding.”

“It’s a good thing they live in different states.”

“We’ve had to get creative to make it work.”

“We watch the games in separate rooms.”

“And after the first year, we had to agree to stop watching the division games altogether.”

“Yeah, we learned that one the hard way.”

“So your secret is compromise?” I said.

“I guess. But we’re still rivals.”

“Packer fans can be beautiful.”

“Bear fans aren’t too shabby either.”

“Love at first down.”