

# Back in Charge

By

Dinah McLeod

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Published by Blushing Books®,  
a subsidiary of

ABCD Graphics and Design  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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McLeod, Dinah  
Back in Charge

eBook ISBN: 978-1-68259-312-7

Cover Design by ABCD Graphics & Design

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# Chapter One

Sadie Miller was trying really, really hard not to have a meltdown. She could feel it; the steam of injustice making tears of frustration and anger rise to her eyes. She blinked them back, even though she knew how good it would feel to let them flow freely. She couldn't do that, not here. She'd never been one for crying, much less in *public* of all places, but it seemed as though here, lately, it was all she wanted to do.

"What do you mean you're out of honey chicken biscuits?" she asked, pleased that her voice only wobbled a little as she spoke.

The cashier she was addressing barely glanced at her. He was either bored, stoned out of his mind, or both. "Ma'am, we stop serving breakfast at ten-thirty."

Sadie scowled at her watch, which read 10:32, then at the cashier for being the bearer of bad news. She could remember a time when she would have been up for hours already, not just getting up and rushing out the door in clothes she'd worn the day before, with two chubby toddlers and a baby in tow. She'd put herself through a half-marathon this morning, just in hopes of sinking her teeth into a delicious, moist, tender chicken biscuit drizzled in golden honey. Her stomach rumbled impatiently as she eyed the lunch menu scornfully.

"Ma'am? Are you gonna order something?"

No, I'm not gonna order *something*, she thought, disdainfully. What I *want* is a honey chicken biscuit! She blinked back the tears again and shook her head. "No, thank you," she replied crisply, before stepping back out of the line. She was clutching a suspiciously sticky three-year-old hand, while her other hand maneuvered the stroller.

"But, Mama! I want chocolate milk!" the bearer of the sticky hand wailed.

"I know, honey. I'll get you some at home."

"Do they have strawberry milk?" her daughter asked from the other side of the stroller.

"No, but we have strawberry syrup at the house," Sadie replied, trying to keep her voice upbeat and cheerful when she felt anything but. Was she imagining it, or were those moms in the corner looking her way? No, they definitely were giving her side-eye, probably because of the

day-old sweats and tennis shoes she was wearing, while they each sported perfectly made-up faces and immaculate hair-dos. She imagined that, if she ventured closer, she'd see nail salon manicures and matching pedicures in this season's new sandals. But she didn't dare get any closer, lest they wrinkle their noses at the orange Dorito stains on her *Hunger Games* tee shirt. Of course, they might be able to smell her from here. God only knew when she'd last showered, because Sadie herself couldn't recall.

"But I wanna biscuit!" McKenzie yelled, yanking her chubby hand free of the stroller.

Sadie caught it quickly, terrified at the idea of chasing a toddler around the restaurant. Talk about insult to injury—or maybe it was the other way around? "Me too, baby. Me, too."

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She'd texted Robert about the incident on the way home, but she shouldn't have bothered. For whatever reason, he just couldn't see what the big deal was. So she couldn't have her favorite breakfast. There were worse things. So the kids were a little out of hand. That was her *job*, and he hadn't forced it on her—she'd *wanted* to be a mother. God knew that there were moments in every single day when she wondered why.

Once upon a time, she'd had a job outside the house that had started at a set time and ended—actually *ended*. She hadn't had to get up in the middle of the night to soothe nightmares, or stay up with a colicky baby who never, not even for a second, stopped crying. It had paid well, too. She could go and see a movie if she wanted to, or go for ice cream without having to bargain with two girls who didn't want to share. Now, if she wanted to see a film, she had to pay more than a movie ticket cost just to get a sitter—or else, ask around for a week just to find someone who would be willing to do it for free. By the time she'd done that, more often than not, she didn't feel like going out at all.

She suspected that was why the tears came so quickly these days. She loved being a mom, she really did. Or, at least, she was supposed to. That was what every Hallmark movie told her, and society plastered images of perfect moms with their perfect kids all over the place. Moms like the ones she'd seen at Best Burger this morning. Years ago, she'd thought she'd *be* one of those mothers. She'd breastfeed and use cloth diapers, and still smell fresh as a garden full

of prize-winning roses, in perfect, designer clothes that never, ever bore the telltale stain of spit-up. Instead, she found herself on the outside looking in, wondering how it had all gone so wrong.

Her iPhone pinged on the pillow beside her, making her groan aloud. Just once, just *once*, she'd kill to get through a nap without either one of her daughters demanding yet another snack, the doorbell ringing, or someone deciding to wake her with a text. She supposed she could turn it off, but what if it was actually *important*? It never was, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be, one day.

Sadie decided to just ignore it when the phone pinged in her ear again, prompting her to reach for it. It was just Robert. She rolled her eyes when she saw his name pop up, and when she'd read his message, she rolled them again.

'*Why don't I make honey chicken biscuits for dinner?*' it read. She loved him with all her heart, she really did. He was the sweetest, most thoughtful husband a woman could have, and she was very lucky. But that didn't mean he wasn't also a complete idiot.

She thought of all the snarky replies she could make, ranging from, '*Forget it*', to '*What is that going to fix? Do you think you can placate me like a child?*' Neither seemed appropriate, so she took a deep breath and counted to fifty—ten hadn't been enough for some time now. It seemed like the count was getting higher and higher with each passing day. She texted back a simple, direct, '*No thanks!*' and left it at that.

There'd been a time when she never would have even considered sending such disrespectful, argumentative replies to her husband, but things had changed there, too. In the past, they'd actively practiced a domestic discipline relationship, and he'd been the head of their household. She supposed that, if someone asked him, he'd say nothing had changed. Then again, he didn't seem to notice that she was at the end of her ever-fraying rope.

Her morning utterly and completely ruined—she'd gone to bed dreaming of that delicious biscuit and practically drooling into her pillow—she plopped the twins down in front of the television and gave LJ his mid-morning bottle. She really needed a few minutes to unwind and de-stress, or she was going to lose it. She knew that she couldn't go anywhere before the twins had their chocolate and strawberry milk, respectively, or they'd come upstairs to find her before she'd even sat down. She gave them a plastic bowl full of cheese balls to share, too. Sure, the shag carpet covering the tiled living room floor was white, but not for long, she imagined. It was bound to get beat-up and stained before long, did it really matter when it happened?

"Be good, girls," she told them, silently adding, *please, oh, please!* Neither of them even looked up from the television. She started to walk away, then hesitated. For a moment, she just stood and watched them as they got that familiar glazed look kids wear when they watch cartoons. They had their heads bent together, the way they often sat. Maddison had Sadie's blonde hair, while McKenzie had inherited her father's chestnut brown. For a minute, as she watched them push cheese puffs into their mouths, she was caught off-guard by how breathtaking they were. She was so lucky—so very lucky. She knew that; so why did she feel so miserable lately?

Shaking her head to get rid of the thought—she really didn't want to contemplate it just then—she quietly slipped out of the room and made her way upstairs. Once there, she looked helplessly around. She was so unaccustomed to even a moment's freedom that, once she had it, she didn't have the faintest idea what to do with it. She eyed the book on her nightstand that had lain there untouched for so long, it had begun to gather dust. She used to love to read, BK—before kids. Now, she just couldn't seem to find the time.

Her eyes slid over to the laundry basket at the foot of the bed next, and though the sight of it made her groan aloud, she decided she might as well get to it. She hated folding laundry, but she knew that Robert was running low on boxers, and remembered having to put McKenzie in mismatched socks that morning for lack of clean ones.

No time like the present, she surmised. She heaved the basket with a sigh and, in one quick motion, dumped the load of clothes onto the bed. She used to take one piece out at a time, but now she'd found that the easiest way was to cover her bed with it. She'd much rather get it put up than risk her husband coming home and throwing the clothes on the floor, so she tended to get it done rather than letting it sit.

Once the laundry was put away, she noticed that the floor needed to be vacuumed. Then a cobweb in the corner drew her attention to the fact that it had been a long time since she'd dusted. She took to the task with a vigor that surprised her. She took her worn-out rag to every piece of furniture until it shone, and beat the dust out of the curtains that covered her windows. She was feeling much better about life—accomplishing things seemed to do that.

She thought she'd make the bed and, as she eyed the country-flower quilt that her grandmother had given her as a wedding present, she saw the thin layer of dust covering Robert's nightstand. It was the one place she'd forgotten. Her lips setting in a grim line, she walked

toward it, determined to be done with the dusting once and for all. She wiped away the dust easily enough, but when she went to open the drawer, her hand began to shake.

Come on, Sadie. This is ridiculous, she told herself. But she just couldn't do it. Before the baby had come, part of her usual dusting routine had been to organize Robert's nightstand. It seemed like he never could keep things nice and neat, even though she did it once a week. But that had been before, and now she didn't know if she could bear to look at the implements he kept there. She didn't have to open the drawer to see them in her mind's eye. She knew every single one by heart—or by the back of her ass, rather. Yes, she'd been well-acquainted with each one; from the small, wooden ruler to the riding crop.

Now, simply looking at them would make her break down, and she just didn't feel like crying. Not for the first time, she thought she just throw them all out. It wasn't like Robert would even miss them!

Discouraged and suddenly drained of energy, Sadie threw down the rag. She lay on the bed and curled into the fetal position. Without realizing it, she'd chosen Robert's side of the bed, and when she smelled the sweet scent of his shampoo that lingered on his pillow, she couldn't hold it in any longer. Even though she hadn't wanted to cry, that was exactly what she did, sobbing over and over again until her eyes slid shut.

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"Honey, I'm home," Robert called out as he opened the door. He'd been surprised to see the porch lights out. Sadie normally turned them on by now, even though it wasn't dark yet. "Sadie?" Instead of his wife, he was greeted by his two twin daughters as they came running to greet him. Just the sight of them toddling to him on their chubby legs made him smile. "Hey, girls. Where's Mama?"

"Shh," McKenzie said with a finger to her lips. "Mama's sleeping."

"Sleeping?" he echoed.

Maddison's doe eyes were wide as she nodded her agreement.

Huh. That was strange. It was almost five o'clock. Just then, he realized that his daughters' faces were orange. "What have you two been eating?"



"Cheese balls!" McKenzie called out joyfully, as though it was the best news in the world. Maddison scowled, as though afraid he was about to ask her to share.

"I see," he replied solemnly. "Where's baby brother?"

"Upstairs."

"He's been throwing a tantrum," McKenzie added, as though she'd been waiting all afternoon to deliver this bit of news.

"Throwing a tantrum?" he echoed. Just then, he thought he heard something. When he strained his ears, he realized it was the scream of a *very* unhappy baby. "I'll be back in just a minute, girls." He raced up the stairs, throwing a look at the closed bedroom door. Where *was* Sadie? He'd handle that later—right now, he needed to get the baby.

Lucas James was throwing quite a tantrum, as his sister had predicted. His face was redder than the skin on a cherry as he kicked his legs and waved his arms for all that he was worth.

"Hey, little man," he whispered as he crouched over the bouncer he lay in. "Don't worry, fella. I've got you." He scooped him out of the bouncer and noticed that his diaper was more than a little heavy. It looked like he hadn't been changed in a while—when was the last time he'd been fed? He took his son to the changing table and made quick work of the diaper as well as changing his onesie. He'd soaked through it with sweat, it looked like, despite the fan blowing overhead.

He went into the bedroom none too quietly. He spied the form of his sleeping wife on the bed easily, but she didn't stir. "Sadie." When she still didn't move, he sat down beside her and shook her shoulder.

At his touch, she awoke with a start. "Wha... Robert? What are you doing home?"

"It's five," he told her, trying to keep the frustration out of his voice.

"No. It can't be." She took her time sitting up, running her fingers through her mussed blonde hair, but when she caught sight of the alarm clock on her nightstand, her blue eyes widened. "Oh, no!"

*See? I can tell time*, he almost said, but didn't.

"Oh, *no!*" she said again. "I can't believe... Maddi... Kenzie..."

"Have the girls eaten?" he asked, even though he was betting he knew the answer, if their faces had been anything to go by.

"Um..."

"Have *you*?"

"Ah, no, actually."

"Do we have anything we could make for dinner?"

When she winced, he suppressed a sigh. It looked like they'd be going out—again.

"Go ahead and get dressed."

"I should probably feed the baby."

"Yes." He held their son out to her and she took him. "I guess you should. I'll go get the girls washed up."

"Thank you." The words were spoken quietly, with more embarrassment than gratitude, it seemed to him.

"You're welcome."

When he got back downstairs, he sighed and ran his fingers through his hair as he looked at the living room. There was a bowl lying on its side and cheese balls scattered along the carpet. There were also orange streaks on the couch. Looked like the girls had been given free rein this afternoon. It made him wonder what Sadie had been doing all day, but he knew better than to ask. No man asked that question unless he wanted to be sent to the firing squad.

These days, it seemed like no matter *what* he said he got sent there. Sometimes, when she looked at him with that swell of anger in her normally gorgeous green eyes he could picture himself facing a dozen armed soldiers, ready to fire on her order. He tried to help—he really did, but it seemed like he was always in the way. So then he'd back off to give her space, and she'd scold him for being an absent husband. His dad had always been a man of few words, but on Robert's wedding day he'd given him advice that he'd never forgotten: a woman was like a hen. If you crowed her too often, she'd nip your fingers, but leave her alone too long and she'd pluck you to death. He'd gotten the message loud and clear: some days, you just couldn't win. Of course, some days felt like most days here lately.

Robert got the twins washed up and packed into the car. He was just climbing into the driver's seat when he saw Sadie coming toward him carrying the baby.

"Strap him in?" she asked, sounding exhausted despite her nap.

"Sure." He hopped out and took the baby from her arms, doing as she'd asked. "You got the diaper bag?"

"Oh, crap," she muttered, plopping into the passenger seat with an annoyed sigh. "I forgot."

"Don't worry. I'll get it."

"You don't have to. I'll get it."

"I said I'll go," he said, walking back towards the house with the keys dangling from his hand before she could object again. It seemed like that was all she did these days—protest without making a move to change anything.

It wasn't like he didn't understand—he did. Or, at least, he tried to. She had three kids, all in diapers—though he was often regaled with the tales of the girls' potty-training misadventures. McKenzie, it seemed, expected M&Ms every time she went potty now—even when it was in her diaper. And Maddison had found the stash of stickers and wall papered the house with them while Sadie had been napping one afternoon. And that was just the tip of the iceberg—to hear his wife tell it, she often found the house strewn with toilet paper, so at least they were interested in that. He found it all quite humorous, but she didn't seem to, so he tried to keep his amusement to himself.

He had to do that a lot here lately. His wife didn't seem to see the humor in a lot of things. It was as though having LJ had sucked the fun right out of her. Which was a shame, because the kids sure kept him laughing. He wanted nothing more than for his wife to join in.

Once he'd opened the door and found the diaper bag, he decided to make a quick detour in the kitchen. He opened the fridge and immediately stepped back when a foul odor engulfed their small kitchen. With a frustrated sigh, he plugged his nose and bent down to search out the culprit. He saw some chicken pooling in its own juices in the bottom crisper, and knew that it had to be the culprit.

"Not again, Sadie," he muttered to himself as he fished it out and threw it in the trashcan. He removed the tray to be cleaned and pulled the trash bag out of the waste basket, even though it was only half full.

There had been a time when she never would have let food go bad. She wasn't as money conscious as he was, but she used to pride herself on cooking good, healthy meals for her family. And on top of that, she knew that he'd bend her over the counter and paddle her bottom until she cried if she let food go to waste like that. It was like throwing money into the garbage can—he'd explained that to her more than once with her pants at half-mast and spoon in hand.

And while part of him definitely missed the relationship they'd had—not only did he miss disciplining her, but the intimacy that seemed to come along with it—he knew that this wasn't the time to scold her over one mistake. She'd just had a baby. She was still recovering. She was tired. Things would go back to normal... eventually. They just had to.