



play along

LIZ TOMFORDE

About the Author

Born and raised in Northern California, Liz Tomforde is the youngest of five children. She grew up watching and playing sports. She loves all things romance, traveling, dogs, hockey, and basketball.

When she's not traveling or writing, Liz can be found reading a good book or taking her golden retriever, Luke, on a hike in her hometown.

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The Windy City Series

Mile High

The Right Move

Caught Up

Play Along

Liz Tomforde



www.hodder.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Hodder & Stoughton Limited

An Hachette UK company

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Cover design by Ever After Cover Design

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 72861 4

Ebook ISBN 978 1 399 72860 7

Hodder & Stoughton Limited

Carmelite House

50 Victoria Embankment

London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

To being perfectly imperfect

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Prologue

Isaiah

Three years ago

It's the worst day of the year.

It's the worst day of *every* year.

I typically spend this day traveling with my teammates on a preseason bonding trip. I should be in Cancun or Miami, sipping on a cocktail by a pool, entirely distracted by the party surrounding me.

Only this year, I'm not poolside, drunk, or distracted. I'm hiding in the women's restroom outside of the team's clubhouse because this season starts early, and unfortunately, the first day of baseball isn't enough of a distraction for me.

The women's restroom is immaculate and endlessly cleaner than ours. They've got a velvet couch in here and little perfume bottles on the counter. Pretty folded hand towels and dinner mints in a glass bowl. It smells infinitely better than the men's restroom, and my only hope is that the other boys don't realize how fucking nice it is in here because this is *my* secret hiding spot and has been for the past six years—ever since I got drafted to play shortstop for the Windy City Warriors.

There are no women on the staff here, so no one ever uses this bathroom other than me, when I need a moment to myself.

You could say I'm the wild one on the team. The one who is a little bit reckless and a whole lot cocky. The guy who will make himself the butt of the joke as long as it makes everyone around him smile. So, starting the season off by having a breakdown or potentially crying like a little bitch in front of my teammates wouldn't exactly be on brand for me.

I'm a twenty-eight-year-old man and I'm not ashamed to admit that even after all these years, this day is tough for me. I was only thirteen years old when my brother, two years my senior, had to break the news that our mom's car wrapped around a tree while she was driving home in a storm, and we'd never get to see her again.

So yeah . . . it's the worst fucking day of the year.

With bouncing knees, I sit on the closed toilet lid in one of the stalls, needing to get my shit together. Needing to get back to goofy, everything-rolls-off-his-shoulders Isaiah Rhodes. The one who knows how to make everyone around him happy. The one that everyone here expects to see when I enter the clubhouse.

I like being that guy. Ninety percent of the time, I naturally *am* that guy. I figured out when I was young that I could make my brother laugh even when he was too stressed to smile, and I thrived off that shit. It was as if I had found my purpose in life—to make those around me happy, so I tend to keep the sad, sappy moments private.

I give myself one last moment of sadness before I leave the stall, splash a bit of water on my face at the sink, and exit the women's restroom.

But as soon as I open the door, voices sound just outside. This part of the clubhouse is usually empty, so I pause, recognizing Dr. Fredrick's voice. I keep myself hidden and out of sight, not wanting anyone to know that I just had myself a private cry.

"You lied on your application."

"I didn't lie," I hear a woman say in retort.

Dr. Fredrick lowers his voice in an attempt to keep this conversation between only them, but I can hear him perfectly clear. "You misled, and you know it."

"Kenny is a nickname for Kennedy."

At that, I peek around the small partition to see Dr. Fredrick looking down at a woman, annoyance plastered on his face.

I can't see what she looks like since her back is to me, but standing at full height, she barely makes it to Dr. Fredrick's chin, and he's not considered a tall man. Her hair is tied up in a thick ponytail, falling mid-back. I can't make out the color, though I can tell it's a different shade than an ordinary blonde or brunette. I'm just not sure what you'd classify it as.

Dr. Fredrick's eyes flick over his surroundings, ensuring they're alone, so I quickly duck behind the partition to listen once again.

"This is not the place for you. I suggest you decline the job offer and find a position somewhere more suitable for . . . someone like you."

"Someone like me, meaning a woman?"

What the hell?

Dr. Fredrick has never been my favorite. He's the head of our Health and Wellness Department and the lead doctor for the team. All other doctors, nutritionists, and athletic trainers report to him, and any respect I may have had for the guy flies right out the window at his insinuation.

A moment of silence lingers, as if he's calculating the right thing to say without getting himself into trouble.

"The job I was originally hiring for is no longer needing to be filled. From what human resources tells me, I cannot rescind the offer, but I can change it. At this point, I'm only looking to hire an athletic trainer."

"What?" she asks behind a shocked laugh. "But I'm an M.D. You're expecting me to come on board as an athletic trainer?"

"I'm not expecting you to come on board at all."

"Dr. Fredrick, I just moved to Chicago for this job. You've seen my references. You've seen the externships I've done. It's why you hired me in the first place."

"I had a different idea of who I was hiring at the time."

"Because you thought I was a man."

"I'm not going to discuss this with you any further. If you want to work for the Windy City Warriors, you may do so as an entry-level athletic trainer. That's the position I'm hiring for."

She hesitates and I can almost picture her shoulders straightening with the way she confidently asks, "When do you need my answer?"

"By the end of the day."

"Fine. I'll let you know my decision soon."

There's a moment of silence, leading me to believe that the conversation is over, but then I hear Dr. Fredrick cut in and say, "Ms. Kay, if you do decide to come on board, this will be the one and only warning I give you. If there's even a hint of some kind of nonsense between you and one of the players, your position will be terminated. There's a reason I don't hire women to work for me. You'll be in locker rooms, on airplanes, and in hotels with them. I expect you'll make sure you're not a distraction."

There's a reason I don't hire women. Fucking asshole.

"With all due respect, Dr. Fredrick, I just spent the last two years as one of only three doctors for the entirety of the University of Connecticut's athletic program. There's nothing in my history that would have you questioning my professionalism."

"Those were children. These are men," he says in response. "I think you know exactly what I'm getting at here."

She clears her throat, and there's something to be said about her professionalism he's questioning, because if this were me, I'd probably be delivering a right hook to his jaw.

I'm a little impulsive that way.

"You'll have my answer by noon," she says to finish.

Footsteps putter in the distance, and they grow louder with each step, heading in my direction. There's no route for me to leave without getting caught eavesdropping, and though I have every intention to bring this information to Monty, our field manager, I don't plan on clueing in Dr. Fredrick beforehand.

So, to be safe, I duck back into the women's restroom until I know the coast is clear of him.

I already wasn't a fan of our lead doctor. He's a bit of a kiss-ass if you ask me, always wanting to be buddy-buddy with the guys on the team, but the way he just spoke to this woman, as if he were better than her, has me eager to tell every person in the Warriors' organization what a sexist piece of shit he is.

"Sexist piece of shit."

I hear my own internal dialogue spoken back to me in a terrifying tone just on the other side of the bathroom door.

The woman from the hallway pushes into the never-used restroom just as I hide myself behind a stall. I don't sit. I stand like an absolute creep because I have no idea how I got myself into this situation.

Watching through the crack in the stall door, I find her reflection in the mirror. Hands bracketed on the sink counter, and head hung low, still hiding her face I've yet to see.

She laughs to herself. "What the actual fuck just happened?"

Then, she takes a deep breath and finally stands up straight, looking right at herself in the mirror and giving me the same view . . . only for any gut-wrenching grief I was feeling about this day to be put on hold, because now I'm thoroughly distracted.

This tiny woman, with hair color I can't categorize and a tone in her voice that would make any man's balls shrivel up in fear, is fucking *stunning*.

Freckles dot every inch of flushed, creamy skin. Eyes that I could make an educated guess and call them brown, seeing as they look a lot like mine. And lips . . . lips tucked under teeth to keep herself from crying because she's clearly willing herself to be angry instead of sad.

Call it instincts, but I'd imagine her smile could light me up if it wasn't currently turned down in a frown.

Those eyes begin to gloss over as she watches herself.

"No," she pleads. "Not here. Get your shit together, Kennedy."

Kennedy.

Inhaling a deep breath, she shakes her head. "And stop fucking talking to yourself, you weirdo."

And just like that, on the worst day of the year, I feel my lips tilt up in amusement.

I watch with rapt attention as she pulls out her phone and calls someone, placing it on speaker while she paces the restroom.

I should probably announce my presence. This feels like an invasion of privacy, but I have no idea how to explain my current situation.

Hey, I just like hanging out in the women's restroom. Don't worry about me. I'm going to wash my hands real quick. Can you move over?

I eavesdropped on your conversation with the Head of our Health and Wellness Department. I can go to HR with you if you'd like. Also, you're like really pretty.

"Hey, what's up?" a man's voice says on the other end of the phone.

I immediately hate him.

"Do you have time to talk?" she asks. "I kind of need to talk."

"I have team photos right now, and I'm up next. Are you okay?"

She closes her eyes for a moment, composing herself. "Yeah, of course. I just wanted to say hi to my stepbrother."

Stepbrother. Noted.

"Well, hi. I miss you. Is your first day going well?"

She stares right at herself in the mirror and lies. "It's going great."

"Good. Hey, I've gotta go. I'm up for pictures but call me later and we'll catch up."

She plasters on a smile that even I, a complete stranger, know is fake. "Will do." Kennedy hangs up the phone, then drops her head with a quiet "*fuck*."

I know nothing about this girl, but I do know she needs someone to make her smile, and that's my specialty. I'm also a bit of a believer in fate, and though this day is my least favorite date on the calendar, I tend to find meaning in things on this day.

Maybe I was supposed to overhear that conversation.

Maybe I found myself stuck in the women's restroom because she needs someone to talk to.

Maybe my mom sent me on her path today.

That last belief has me closing my eyes and opening my mouth before I've fully thought it through. "If you need someone to talk to about that job offer, I can help."

God, how fucking creepy was that?

I reopen my eyes to watch hers shoot to the mirror before they find my feet in the reflection.

"What are you doing in the women's restroom?"

“Did the size thirteens give me away?”

“Are you spying on me?”

“Well, technically, I was here first. Remember?”

Her eyes narrow as they trail up the stall, finding mine through the narrow crack. “Are you going to answer any of my questions or just keep responding with your own?”

A bark of a laugh escapes me. I like this one.

“I’m hiding in the women’s restroom because I’m having a shit day, and from what I overheard, so are you.”

Her shoulders, which were up by her ears, settle back into place. “Oh.”

Unlocking the door, I swing it inward until she comes into full view.

Black leggings hug every inch of her toned legs. A dark gray quarter-zip bunches around her elbows, finishing with perfectly clean white sneakers on her feet. Her freckles continue down her forearms and ankles, making me believe her pale skin is painted in them.

Polished for wearing athletic gear. And pretty. So, so pretty.

Her tone is less intimidating when she asks, “How much of my shitty day did you overhear?”

Meeting her at the sink, I rest my hip on the counter and face her. “I heard your conversation in the hallway with Dr. Fredrick. I came back in here so he wouldn’t see me.”

“Oh.” She nods, eyes pulled away from me. “So, all of it.”

“We should talk to HR, or I can talk to the field manager, Monty. He can take it to the team owner—”

“No. No, I don’t want to say anything. This isn’t the first time I’ve dealt with a sexist boss. I’m a woman working in sports, after all.”

I pause. “Boss? So you’re taking the job?”

“I don’t—” She freezes, eyes examining my entire body. I tower over her with my 6’4” build, but wearing my normal clothes, I don’t uniquely stand out. “Who are you?”

It’s then I realize she has no idea that I’m the starting shortstop for the team she may potentially work for, and I have every intention to use my unknown identity to my advantage.

“Right now, I’m simply someone to talk to. You said you needed to talk.”

There’s this untrusting question in her eye as she attempts to assess me, but the need to work through her predicament outweighs any suspicion she has towards me.

“I can’t get a job anywhere in professional sports.” Her admission hangs in the air for a moment. “It doesn’t matter that I graduated at the top of my class at Columbia. It doesn’t matter that the doctors I did my residency

under sing my praises when called for my references. It doesn't matter that I was the youngest person to become Lead Doctor at a division one school with national championship winning athletic programs. No, none of that matters because I have two tits and a vagina."

My eyes go wide at her candor.

"Oh my God." She grimaces before covering her face with her right hand. "I can't believe I just told a complete stranger that I have two tits."

"I would've been a lot more impressed if you said you had three."

She peeks through her fingers, and I plaster on my most mischievous smirk. Those glossed-over eyes are nowhere to be found when her hand slips off her face, revealing a sheepish smile.

Sheepish, yes. But a smile, nonetheless.

I hold out my hand to shake hers. "Isaiah."

She returns the gesture. "Kennedy."

"Well, Kennedy, now that I'm no longer a stranger, tell me more about these two tits of yours."

She tries to bite back her smile, but this time it's big and genuine, attempting to break through. "I'm going to carry that one with me for a while, aren't I?"

"Absolutely." I cock my head to the side. "I thought I heard your name was Kenny?"

She chuckles, this beautiful but somewhat self-conscious sound. "No one has ever called me Kenny. I just adopted that name after I received six different denial letters when I used the name Kennedy."

"Well, Kenny—"

"No—"

"Talk me through the job offer."

She huffs an exhausted breath. "I've been trying to get into professional sports since I finished my residency. My goal is to be a lead team doctor one day, but I haven't been able to get my foot in the door anywhere. Guys that I went to school with, that barely graduated and have much poorer references than me, are getting jobs that I'm applying for. So, when I got offered the position to be the second doctor here, I jumped on it. I packed my things and moved into a building in downtown Chicago this past weekend. Dr. Fredrick and I have only spoken via email because he was taking time off during the off-season. My references must not have alluded to the fact I'm a woman, I'm not sure. But this morning, when I introduced myself to him, he immediately rescinded the job offer."

So, she's pretty *and* insanely smart. Got it.

“When he told the head of human resources there had been a mistake and the job wasn’t available, Dr. Fredrick was informed that, legally, he had to hire me in some capacity. I don’t think HR knows that his sudden decision of not hiring a second doctor on staff had anything to do with him accidentally hiring one who was a woman.”

The words roll out of her, and she can’t seem to stop.

“And now I’m being offered the job of an entry-level athletic trainer, which, don’t get me wrong, is a great job, but I didn’t spend my entire adult life becoming a sports medicine doctor to have to go to someone else to create treatment plans, you know?” She looks me over from head to toe. “And why the hell am I telling you all of this?”

I chuckle. She’s flustered. It’s endearing.

“Because I’m a good listener.”

That shy smile lifts again. “So, what do you think I should do?”

She’s asking *me*? Clearly, she knows nothing about me because I’m typically the last person someone comes to when they need advice. I’m the guy they come to when they need a laugh or someone to show them a good time.

My brother is the serious one, and if Kai were here and not off playing baseball for the Seattle Saints, I’d ask *him* what advice I should give this girl. He’s my sounding board and I miss the hell out of him.

But he’s not here, so this advice is on me.

I personally think she should walk up to Dr. Fredrick and knee him in the balls, but I also really like the idea of her working here. I like the idea of that freckled face showing up at every one of my games.

She’s easy to talk to, and on the worst day of the year, she’s made it bearable. Good, even.

“What do you want to do?” I ask instead of giving her my opinion.

“You really do love to answer a question with a question, huh?”

I smirk at that.

“I want to work in professional sports,” she states plainly. “Jobs rarely become available because this is a lifelong career for most people.”

“You want to work in professional sports,” I echo for her to hear.

She nods at the realization. “I should take the job. At least I’ll be getting my foot in the door. But God, Dr. Fredrick is the worst and if he treats women that way, I can’t even begin to imagine how horrible the players on the team are.”

Fucking *ouch*.

Granted, we’re a bunch of idiots, but none of the guys are disrespectful.

“I’ll um . . .” I clear my throat. “I’ll make sure none of the other guys on the team give you a hard time.”

Her eyes narrow in confusion, but still she’s got that pretty smile plastered on her lips and it’s doing all sorts of things to my insides.

“Who are you?”

“Two tits and a short-term memory, huh, Kenny? I already told you my name.”

“Do you work in the front office or for—”

“I should get out there.” I gesture to the bathroom door. “Can I walk you out?”

Her eyes latch onto me suspiciously, and all I can do is smile like a fucking dork just from having this smart girl’s attention on me.

I’m not naïve. I know she’s going to learn I’m one of the players, and if Dr. Fredrick’s warning was any indication, once she knows the truth, she’ll never give me the time of day again. So, for now, I’ll take advantage of what little time I have left.

I open the bathroom door for her, and without having to duck, she walks right under my arm and into the hallway.

“You can’t tell anyone,” she quickly says.

“About what?”

“If I take the job. You can’t tell anyone about what Dr. Fredrick said or about my qualifications.”

“You might be the first doctor I’ve ever met who doesn’t want everyone to know she’s a doctor.”

“Isaiah, please.”

Those two little words stop me in my tracks.

My name. She sounds good saying my name.

She sounds good begging too.

I search her face, desperation plastered on it. “I won’t say anything.”

“And about what you overheard?”

“You mean the part where I learned that Dr. Dick is a woman hater?”

“Yes, that part.”

“No, I’m saying something about that. Right now, in fact.”

She grabs my forearm to stop me with her pale and freckled hand, starkly contrasting my suntanned skin from all my time playing baseball outside.

But before I can memorize the differences, she pulls away in an instant. “If I’m going to work for him, it’s going to be difficult enough. I can’t start off this working relationship with a complaint to the field manager or team owner. I can handle this on my own.”