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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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Rewind It Back



HODDER &
STOUGHTON

I

Rio

“I prefer an emerald cut.”

With my fork and knife in hand, I slice my steak. “I don’t know. This porterhouse cut is cooked to perfection.”

“Diamonds, Rio.” Chelsea’s tone holds no patience. “Not meat.”

No shit, she’s referring to diamonds, but I’m trying my best to play dumb because preferred ring style is the last thing I want to talk about on a second date. I’d like to know if she’s a kind person. If she and her mom are close. If she enjoys traveling. Shit, I don’t even know if she has any allergies.

“I’m lactose intolerant.”

Her face morphs into confusion at my sudden change in subject. “What?”

“Dairy.” I take another bite of my steak. “It fucks me right up. Sometimes I take a pill beforehand and sometimes I just raw-dog it and deal with the consequences.”

“Did you just say you raw-dog it when referring to your dairy intake?”

“Yeah. If there’s ice cream and I don’t have a pill on me, I’m not going to *not* eat it, you know? Are you one of the lucky ones with a stomach that can handle dairy?”

“I was asking what kind of rings the wives from the team have.” She swerves the conversation right back to where I don’t want it to be, but I keep eating and refuse to answer. “Do any of them have to work?” she tries instead. “Probably not.”

"Some of them work, yeah. One of my closest friends is married to my teammate and she works for a senior dog rescue."

Chelsea's nose scrunches up before she schools it and forces a smile back on her face. "Well, that's nice. I guess."

"What do you do for work?"

A quick moment of worry passes through me that maybe she's already told me before and I'd forgotten.

We had gone to dinner shortly before I left for the summer, but it had been so long ago, I couldn't remember anything bad about the date. So when she asked if I was interested in going out again, I figured why not give it another go?

Well, it wasn't exactly an ask. The text read, "*When are you taking me out again? I'm free on Friday.*" But same thing, I suppose.

"I create content," she answers without missing a beat. "Influencer-type stuff. Mostly fashion and lifestyle."

"Very cool. So you work for yourself. Do you like it?"

She shrugs before polishing off her glass of chardonnay and waving it in the air to silently ask our server for another one, lifted brow and expectant stare included.

Don't like that, I think to myself.

Maybe she doesn't realize it's rude, I try to justify.

"I like the perks of it," she continues. "I make my own schedule. I'm given free products. That kind of thing."

I almost expect her to ask what I do for work, but she knew before we ever went on our first date.

"Do you have any pets?" I ask.

"No. Too much responsibility."

"Are you close with your family?"

"Not particularly."

Are you close with your family, Rio? Why yes, I am. I just got back from three months in Boston, spending quality time with my ma during the off-season. Thank you so much for asking.

Her chardonnay is set on the table before our server clears our now empty plates and I'm that much closer to this being over.

I scold myself for feeling that way.

For *always* feeling that way.

I can't remember the last time I even made it to a second date, so I should focus on that small victory I suppose. But this is what tends to happen. I'm eager to meet someone, desperate, you could say. We go on a first date, I don't feel that spark, and that's where the connection dies.

Try harder.

"What do you do for fun?" I continue.

"I'm almost always out with my friends. I get invited to a lot of events, so that keeps me busy. I enjoy working out. I like trying new restaurants—"

"I love trying new restaurants!" I sit up, way too stoked about finally finding some common ground.

Chelsea eyes me, thoroughly unimpressed by my excitement. "Cool."

Shit.

"Do you like music?" I try again.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"We should pick a song." Pulling out my phone, I begin to scroll through my music library.

"Pick a song?"

"Yeah, you know, since it's our second date. We should pick a song to remember it by. That way, when we hear it, it'll remind us . . ." My words die when I see her face.

Her eyes go wide, practically screaming how fucking weird she finds me, and when she opens her mouth to respond, it quickly closes without anything to say.

Because she's not *her*. No one else has been.

"Or not," I decide.

That forced smile is back. "Let's not."

Chelsea looks around the restaurant, for the exit I would presume, and I don't blame her.

"Do you want to get dessert?" I ask.

It takes a moment for her to decide until eventually she surprises me by leaning over the table and slipping her hand over mine. "Actually." Her tone has gone all soft. "I was thinking we could do dessert back at your place."

Oh.

That is . . . not what I was expecting.

"I just got back today from spending the summer in Boston, so unfortunately, I don't have any groceries right now."

She smirks seductively. "That's not the dessert I'm referring to."

Yeah, it's perfectly clear that's not the dessert she's referring to, but I was hoping for a "he's fucking clueless and has no game, so never mind" kind of outcome.

But it's once again one of those situations where it doesn't matter if I say all the wrong things, or hell, if I don't say anything at all. At the end of the day, I'm a professional hockey player and that alone gets me more first dates and overnight invites than I let anyone know about.

But I know what I'm looking for and this connection isn't it.

"Chelsea, I'm—"

"It'll be fun."

I chuckle. "Chelsea."

"You're really going to say no?" She smiles knowingly. "Rio."

She says "Rio" in a tone that may as well mean "you're out of your goddamn mind to turn me down," and I've gotten that tone from more women than I'd like to admit.

There's no denying she's a beautiful girl, and if I were the type to bring someone home without seeing a future, maybe I would.

But I'm not.

I discreetly pay the bill when it's set on the table before saying, "Thank you for coming to dinner tonight."

It's then she realizes I'm serious about this date ending here. Her eyes slightly roll, but I don't let that change my mind, and when she pulls out her phone, she types away at the screen without answering me.

"Should we get going?"

She doesn't look up from her phone. "No need. I'm going to meet up with friends at a party around the corner."

"Oh, okay. I picked you up, so I thought the least I could do would be to—"

Her smile turns pitying as she stands and slips her arms through her coat. "I made backup plans but have a good night alone, Rio. Thanks for dinner." She waggles her fingers in a careless wave before slipping out of the exit she was eyeing earlier and leaving me alone.

Maybe I should feel shocked or offended, but it's not the first time I've been left at a table by myself after deciding not to continue the night back at my place, and I'm sure it won't be the last.

But fuck it, this glass of red wine I've been nursing all night is delicious and I'm not embarrassed enough to let it go to waste. So instead, I sit back in my chair at my solo table and enjoy it while fishing out my phone, only to find it flooded with texts.

Zanders: *Rio, did you make it back?*

Indy: *Please say yes! I miss you!*

Stevie: *Taylor asked where Uncle Rio was every Sunday dinner this summer. It was very sad. You should never leave again.*

Kai: *Welcome back, man!*

Miller: *Girls' nights were not the same without you!*

Kennedy: *Is this the first Sunday dinner we're all going to be at since May? Looking forward to seeing everyone.*

Isaiah: *But is Rio back? He's not answering.*

Zanders: *He better be back. We have our first practice of the season tomorrow.*

Me: *I will not answer until every single person has asked about my well-being and I'm waiting on one . . .*

Zanders: 🌀

Kai: *Some things never change.*

Indy: *Baby, that's your cue.*

Ryan: *I'm not doing this.*

Miller: *He could be hurt or lost or stranded without food and water and we would never know because you won't ask a simple question, Ryan.*

Isaiah: *I didn't know the group adopted a puppy.*

Stevie: *He's our puppy.*

Kennedy: *Our sweet little puppy that just wants to know if Ryan cares about him.*

Me: . . .

Ryan: *Fine. Rio, you back or what?*

Me: *Your care and concern for me hold no bounds. Honey, I'm home!*

Ryan: *I hate this.*

Me: *I know. The distance was hard for me too, Ryan.*

Ryan: *I'm leaving this group chat.*

He does for only a split second before his wife adds him back.

Indy: *See you all at our place on Sunday!*

Regret churns in my gut that one of their houses wasn't my first stop when I got back to town. Instead, I was home only long enough to drop my bags before picking Chelsea up for our date.

Part of me thinks I should stop trying. I've looked nonstop

for years, ever since I moved to Chicago, and I'm starting to believe the real thing doesn't exist anymore.

Then there's the reminder that I got to watch eight of my friends find it over the years, so I know, firsthand, that it's still out there.

I finish off my glass of wine before texting Indy separately.

Me: *I'm stopping by on my way home.*

Indy: *Yes, please! Missed you. Don't leave home for so long again.*

"I take it the date didn't go well?" Indy surmises as we sit on her couch in the living room.

Ryan comes back from checking on their sleeping two-year-olds before joining us for my debrief.

"Do they ever?" I ask in return.

"Where did you take her?"

"Sullivan's on Eighth."

Ryan stiffens in his seat and a playful smile tilts on Indy's mouth. "Oh, I love that place. I've been there on a da—"

"Watch it, Blue," he says gruffly, pulling her onto his lap.

They grin at each other as if they're sharing a secret and maybe I'd find the whole thing a little too sickeningly sweet if I didn't want it so badly.

But also, there really is no secret. We're all aware that before the two of them were together, Ryan pulled Indy out of a date from the same restaurant I was at tonight.

Indy was a flight attendant for my hockey team years ago and she's been my best friend since. She met her now-husband when Ryan's sister offered Indy his spare room to live in, and the rest is history. Ryan is the captain of Chicago's basketball team and even though I've been a massive fan of his for years, he's also become a good friend of mine.

"What was the issue?" Indy asks me.

"She . . ." I hesitate. "Wasn't into it. Not interested. You know me. I either friend zone myself or scare them away."

Not a complete lie. She wasn't interested in what I'm looking for.

But I don't fill my friends in on how often I *don't* scare them away. I don't tell them just how often I try to friend zone myself and that doesn't work. I let them believe that I'm some hopeless idiot with absolutely no game because that seems easier to explain than the fact that I'm twenty-seven years old and have never once hooked up with someone that I didn't have a deep connection with.

I'm a slow burner. Always have been. Shit, I didn't lose my virginity until I was nineteen and even then, it was to a girl who I had known since I was twelve.

"Sorry, man," Ryan says. "It'll happen."

"Yeah, maybe." I stand and stretch. "Well, I'm heading out. Just wanted to pop in and say hi. Love you guys."

"Love you, Rio."

"Did you hear that, Ryan?" I ask from the front door. "Did you hear how easily she said that?"

He shakes his head at me. "Never going to happen."

"Never say never, Shay!"

It's late by the time I pull into my driveway, but my neighbor's new front yard lights illuminate the house next door plenty for me to see it's not the same house I lived next to three months ago.

"Has your house always looked that much better than mine?" I ask, getting out of my car.

Wren laughs from her mailbox, looking over her shoulder at her place. "No. I spent the summer having it renovated, but for a poor grad student, I do have a much prettier house than the pro hockey player living next door, don't you think?"

We meet on the sidewalk, halfway between our houses, and I bend to give her a hug.

"Good summer?" I ask.

"As good as I could've asked for my last summer before graduation to be, which means I lived in a classroom, never saw the sun, and spent my weekends studying in a construction zone. Yours?"

"It was good. Nice to spend some time with my family. Nice to spend a few months in Boston, too."

She gets a knowing look on her face. "How much are you hating the idea of leaving another Northeastern fall behind?"

"Let's not talk about it."

She gestures to my house. "I left your mail on the kitchen island. Opened the windows a couple of times a week to keep it from getting stuffy inside. Your one and only plant is thriving, so you're welcome for that."

"It's a succulent, Wren. All you have to do is leave it alone."

She nods approvingly, clearly proud of herself. "Well, I did a great job of that."

Wren has been my neighbor for years. Her brother bought the house directly next to mine so she had a place to live while in school, and we've been good friends since.

"Good friends" as in we talk shit about our other neighbors over a beer every once in a while, or offer a cup of sugar if the other is out. Or in this case, we look after the other's property if one of us is traveling out of town.

Her brothers are professional athletes, so she's never once batted an eye at me or my teammates who come over, and I always liked that about her.

We're the only two who live alone on the street, all the other homes filled with families. Which makes a lot of sense, seeing as all the houses are massive and sporting four or five bedrooms. There's a university nearby, so a few houses rent rooms to graduate students, but they're so busy studying I never see them.

Wren's older brother, Cruz Wilder, is a big-name basketball player who bought the place next to mine so his sister

could live rent-free during school. They always had a plan that they would customize the builder-grade house and sell it for a profit when she graduated. He calls it an investment, but I've met Cruz. He simply didn't want his sister stressing about finding a good living situation while in school.

I like to tell myself that I too was making an investment when I purchased this new-construction home at twenty-one years old and not because I was a fucking idiot. My rookie year, not a single guy on the team lived outside of the city. They all had apartments. Some of the guys with smaller contracts roomed together, but they were a quick drive, walk, or rideshare to the arena.

But my dumbass thought it was a great idea to buy a four-bedroom house twenty minutes outside of town. As if I thought I would be settling down with a family and not a still single twenty-seven-year-old all these years later.

At least I have a bit of space, a nice yard with a hot tub, and I will say, my house has become the go-to place for the team to hang, mostly because it actually fits everyone.

And who knows? Maybe my *investment* will end up paying off next year.

I point to Wren's house again. "So, you redecorated? Like you got the walls painted?"

"Something like that. You want to see?" She checks the time on her phone. "I have exactly five minutes left on my study break."

"We'll make it a quick tour." I follow behind her. "Next time you have a study break, dinner is on me. I'll get takeout from that Greek place you like, and you can fill me in on all the neighborhood gossip I missed out on."

Over her shoulder, she lifts a brow.

"The next two times?" I try again.

"I did watch your house for three months and you're filthy rich."

"Fine. Three nights of takeout and I'll take your trash out to the curb every week for the next month."

"And this is why you're my favorite neighbor."

That's all we've ever been to one another—platonic neighbors. Don't get me wrong, Wren is great, but I've never looked at her as more than a friend, and I know she feels the same way about me. I have a lot of friends who are women and she's one of them.

She opens the front door—the freshly painted front door. It's a deep brown that contrasts nicely against the new sage-green siding and crisp white trim.

Her flooring is the first thing I see. Brand-new hardwood in a light but warm shade. Accented walls, some covered in modern wallpaper, others painted in subtle yet inviting colors. Her stairs sport a new banister, the kitchen cabinets got a fresh coat of paint, and the countertops have been upgraded to something that feels a bit more custom. Even her light fixtures are shiny and new and seem to pull the whole space together.

"Jesus," I exhale, spinning in a slow circle and taking it all in. "I hardly recognize the place."

"She did an incredible job."

"And who is *she*?"

Typically, I ask my friends that question in a way that silently adds: *Is she single? Is she nice? Would she be interested in someone like me?*

But right now, I'm more so wondering who the hell turned this plain house into a magazine-worthy home and if she's available to do the same to mine.

It's a far cry from the builder-grade box Wren's brother originally bought, and if I end up putting my place up for sale at the same time as him next summer, I'm going to be fucked. No one is going to take a second glance at my house when his looks like this.