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Liz Tomforde is a *New York Times* bestselling author of sports romance novels that depict realistic and healthy relationships. Her books offer a mix of witty banter, undeniable chemistry, a healthy dash of spice and swoon-worthy men who look good in a uniform.

Born and raised in Northern California, Liz is the youngest of five children. She loves all things romance, travelling, dogs and hockey. When she's not travelling or writing, Liz can be found relaxing at home or listening to a good audiobook while on a walk with her golden retriever, Luke.

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A WINDY CITY SERIES SPIN-OFF

IN HER OWN LEAGUE

LIZ TOMFORDE



HODDER &
STOUGHTON



EMMETT

Is this the beginning of the end?

It feels like the beginning of the end.

At what point do I *know* this is my fate? That this is my last first day here. My last first staff meeting. My last first “hello” to the coworkers I haven’t seen in months.

An offseason has never felt shorter.

Typically, I’m itching for baseball to return, counting down the days until winter is over, but not this year. This year, I’ve dreaded the idea of returning to my office at the field, knowing my every move is going to be analyzed.

Because this season, I have a brand-new boss—one that no longer sees me as the right fit to be the field manager for Chicago’s MLB team, even though I’ve held the position for seven years now.

This morning, the film room is buzzing with noise. Every person who works for the Windy City Warriors, outside of the players, is packed in the stadium-style seats. This is the room we use to go over game film to prepare for an upcoming opponent, or when a one-on-one session is needed to make corrections.

Today though, we’re sandwiched in here for our first meeting with the new team owner.

Reese Remington.

The thirty-five-year-old is the granddaughter of the previous owner, a guy who held the title almost as long as

I've been alive, an owner who allowed me to run my team the way I saw fit.

His granddaughter, however, judging by our interactions last season when she was simply training to take over, will be anything but hands-off.

Kai nudges my elbow with his from his seat next to mine. "What time do you want to meet tomorrow to go over the potential pitching lineup?"

"Let's say eleven thirty."

"I might have Max with me. I hope that's okay."

I give my future son-in-law a deadpanned glare. "Of course that's okay, Ace."

"I don't think you can keep calling me Ace. You're going to have a new ace pitcher this season. We just need to figure out who that is."

"You're always going to be Ace. Good luck to the next guy."

Kai, or Ace as we call him, was the Windy City Warriors' ace pitcher ever since he joined the team a few years ago. That is, until he retired at the end of last season, leaving me without my go-to guy on the mound.

But as much as I'm going to miss being able to count on him every few starts, I'm even more proud of him for making the decision that was best for his family. Especially because that family now includes my daughter.

A couple of years ago, the two of them met when Miller spent the summer nannying for Kai's son, and the rest is history. I couldn't imagine a better man for my girl. And now seeing Miller so calm and at peace here in Chicago with him and Max, it's hard to remember the wild child I raised who once never felt settled in one place.

As proud of Kai as I am for calling it quits when the timing felt right, he was missing the game before spring training even

ended. So, though I may not have him on my roster anymore, I now have him on my coaching staff.

That's a perk of being the field manager of a Major League Baseball team. I get to hire my own staff, and there's no one more qualified to be my new pitching coach than Kai Rhodes.

The door to the packed and rowdy room opens and my body instantly tenses, expecting *her*, but when a short redhead with a bouncing ponytail and three coffees balanced in her hands ambles through the entry, I relax back into my chair.

"Did I miss anything?" Kennedy asks, taking the empty seat on my other side before passing Kai and me each one of the coffees.

"Not yet." I hold my cup up. "Thank you for this."

"Anytime, Monty."

"Happy official first day, Dr. Rhodes."

My words cause Kai to beam from the seat next to me, looking over at his sister-in-law.

A heat creeps up her cheeks. "Thank you."

Kennedy is not only the new team doctor, but she's also married to one of the players—Kai's little brother, Isaiah.

The Rhodes brothers have become a part of my family since we all landed in Chicago. There are times I take on a more fatherly role for them when they need it. There's not a huge age difference between us, just over a decade, so other times, I'm simply their friend.

Yes, they've both been my players and me their coach, but our bond is a whole lot tighter than that. It just so happens that Kai is marrying my daughter soon and Isaiah married the team doctor who I work with closely, so it's one big cluster of non-blood-related family.

"We'll see you guys for dinner tonight?" Kai asks.

She nods. "We'll be there."

“Same,” I confirm.

Even though the film room is loud, I can hear the squeak of the door perfectly clear, and the sound has tension rippling through every one of my muscles.

Reese is the last to arrive and as soon as one high heel is past the threshold, my attention is immediately on her.

Short blonde hair cuts sharply below her jaw. A charcoal-gray pencil skirt paints her curves. Navy-blue eyes that are impossible to read coolly assess the room.

And when they slice to me, they silently scream how much she doesn't like me.

Well, I take it back. I guess she's pretty easy to read when it comes to me.

The unimpressed stare lasts only a second before she pulls her attention away and continues to the podium at the front of the room.

I don't know what it is about me that bothers her so much, that's caused such a bad taste in her mouth, but I feel the same way toward her.

However, I have my reasons.

First of all, the woman spent the entirety of last season informing me that her first year as the official team owner is the same year I'm up for a new contract. Like she needed to verbally remind me that the fate of my career lies in the palm of her hand this season.

Secondly, she's already been on my ass about schedules, budgets, and reallocating funds, as if *I'm* the reason certain departments of the organization are operating in the red, and not because her grandfather didn't have the energy to keep up. Truthfully, there's not an ounce of me that wants anything to do with the back end of how the club is run as long as my players are taken care of. I just want to coach baseball.

And lastly, her biggest fault of all . . . she looks like *that*.

My new boss is not only a pain in my ass, but she's also *stunning* and the first woman my body has decided to pay attention to in God knows how long.

Eventually the rest of me will get the memo that we don't like her. It just might not be until I'm packing up my desk at the end of the season because my new boss refuses to extend my coaching contract.

“You good?” Kai nudges my arm.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, of course.”

“Okay.” The word is laced with this annoyingly knowing tone that doesn't go unnoticed when he leans over to Kennedy and the two of them share a look.

“I saw that,” I mutter.

Kennedy laughs. “We weren't trying to hide it.”

Standing in the front of the room, Reese says something to the audience, but the crowd is so rowdy, everyone excited to see their coworkers after the offseason, that no one pays attention or tries to hear her.

I watch as her throat works its way through a swallow, like she's pushing down the nerves, hands tightly fist to the podium. And I get it. Not only is she the first female team owner that the MLB has ever seen, but she's also the youngest.

But Reese is a boss. Not just *my* boss, but a gets-things-done, doesn't-take-shit-from-anyone *boss*. I saw it last year while she was training for this new role. She's the reason Kennedy is here and taking over the position she should've had years ago. Reese saw what her grandfather didn't—that the previous team doctor was a sexist piece of shit—and handled it. She fired him and gave Kennedy his job, making her the first female team doctor in the league.

As much as I don't love the idea of working for someone who doesn't want me here, Reese will be a breath of fresh air for

this organization. But first, she needs to get through this staff meeting.

She opens her mouth to speak again, but no words come out, nerves holding her back, the room too preoccupied with their own chatter to realize she's here and asking for their attention. Her knuckles go white from her firm grip around the podium, her knees slightly shaking, which I can only see because I'm sitting in the front row.

The laughter and chat behind me is pissing me off for her.

Fuck. I internally berate myself for what I'm about to do. Blame it on my daughter. She's the reason I'm so damn soft.

"Hey!" I stand up, turning to face the room from my seat, and all eyes immediately fall to me. "Let's have a little respect, why don't we?"

The room goes silent at my tone.

"Fuck's sake," I mutter under my breath.

Sure, I come off like a grumpy bastard most of the time, a little intimidating with my build and tattoos, but anyone who knows me knows I'm a nice guy until you piss me off. And this is pissing me off.

I retake my seat, feeling Reese's attention on me, and it takes a moment for me to return the eye contact and look up at her.

She gives me a curt nod, her tone all professional when she says, "Thank you for that, Emmett."

And then there's that . . . *Emmett.*

She's the only person in all of Chicago who uses my first name when everyone else calls me by my nickname. And I know she does it on purpose, like she's refusing to allow any sort of comfortability between us. It's as if she's once again reminding me that she's my boss, I'm her employee, and regardless of how much time we're about to spend together this season, we aren't friends and we're never going to be.

It'll make it that much easier for her to fire me at the end of the year.

Fucking great.

"For those of you who don't know me, I'm Reese Remington." With the room silent, she confidently begins her first staff meeting. "The new owner of the Windy City Warriors."

"Emmett."

I'm mid-conversation with a few of the guys from my coaching staff. The meeting is over, so most everyone is simply catching up before calling it a day.

"Can I speak with you?" Reese continues.

I take a sharp inhale through my nose, gathering myself as I turn around to face her. "You're the boss."

"Surprised you remember that." Her eyes trail to the group of my video coaches. "In my office, please."

Reese shifts on her high heels, heading straight for the door, expecting me to follow.

Which I, of course, do.

Hands in my pockets, I trail her out of the film room down the hall and up two flights of stairs, headed for her office.

I keep my head down, partly to avoid watching the way her sinfully thick hips sway from side to side with each step she takes, but mostly because I feel like a kid in trouble, being called to the principal's office, and not like a long-tenured field manager with a winning track record and a World Series ring.

My jaw is tense for the entire walk to her office, but my chewing gum acts as a good distraction to anyone who might be watching this interaction. My players and staff have always known me as easygoing and confident.

But when it comes to Reese, I feel the complete opposite.

Who knows what she's going to throw at me on day one of this new season. All I know is that it's starting. Her mission to

prove to herself that she doesn't need to renew my coaching contract next year starts today.

Once we reach the top floor, she turns the corner to her office and I follow, but stop short at the empty receptionist desk that lives just outside her door.

"Where's Denise?" When Reese doesn't answer, my eyes find hers. "You fired Denise? Are you serious?"

I get that the woman is wanting to make this place her own, but firing her grandfather's receptionist that worked here as long as Arthur did? What the hell?

Reese narrows her eyes at me. "Of course I didn't fire Denise. I've known her since I was born, but she wanted to retire, regardless of how many times I begged her to stay. I just haven't found her replacement yet. As much as you might not believe this, I'm not a monster, Emmett."

Reese doesn't give me a chance to respond, which is probably for the best, before she continues into her office and closes the door once I enter too.

The massive windows that look over the field are the first thing to draw my eye, the same way they have whenever I met with Arthur over the past seven years. The view from up here is probably one of the best in the city, and I can't imagine a better spot to watch a baseball game from.

Well, other than my prime spot against the railing in the dugout.

Even though the view is the same and this office is technically the one that I've been in countless times, it looks unrecognizable from the one Arthur used to occupy.

Reese has updated her desk to one that's sleek and modern, unlike the clunky one Arthur used to sit behind that was always covered in piles of papers and housed an outdated computer. Her chair is ivory and gold, unlike the cracked dark-brown leather one that used to reside there.

The piles of clutter that Arthur had accumulated over the past four decades are nowhere to be found, and Reese's office is now bright and light and clean. Sleek, modern, and neutral.

Exactly how I'd describe her fashion sense if I ever let myself admit that I noticed.

"Take a seat," she says, gesturing to one of the new chairs that sits opposite of hers.

For a split second, I let myself believe that maybe she's calling for a truce between us. That she knows as well as I do that this year is going to be a nightmare if we can't get along. But that idea is quickly dispelled when she says, "You need to fire one of the video coaches."

"Excuse me?"

"You have three on staff, when we've only ever had two. We don't have the salary space to pay three people."

What the hell?

"Arthur gave me permission at the end of last season to add a third. I just hired someone. I can't fire him."

"Can't or won't?"

I look her dead in the eye. "Won't."

"He should have never allowed that. The budget is a mess because my grandfather stopped paying attention to it. We don't have the funds to pay three people."

"Then take it from my salary."

Reese jolts back at my words, staying silent for a moment as she mulls over my quickly spoken statement. "No. It's not only the salary. It's the added expense of hotel rooms and food on the road. We don't need a third."

"Well, I'm not firing one of my guys. Two of them have been with me forever and the third I just upgraded from the triple-A team. His family just moved here, and his wife is expecting soon. He needs the salary raise."

Reese shows absolutely no emotion, those dark blue eyes unflinching. "I'm only paying two, so it's your choice who goes."

So much for "I'm not a monster, Emmett."

I can feel my grip tighten on the armrests of the chair, can feel my jaw tense so tightly I should probably be concerned for my teeth. "Not happening, Reese. Find money from somewhere else or take it from my salary. Your grandfather never would have asked me to fire someone who needed a job."

Exasperated, she pulls her attention from me, refocusing instead on something on her computer. "You may have had my grandfather wrapped around your finger, but I'm not him. Things are going to be different this year, Emmett, so you should probably get used to that idea."

Yeah, no shit things are going to be different.

And I hate that idea.

"Monty!" is the first thing I hear as I open the door to my daughter's house. "You color with me?"

"Absolutely I will." I lift my favorite three-year-old, slinging him on my hip and closing the front door behind me. "Missed you, Max."

He melts into my shoulder, already in his pajamas for bed as I carry him to the kitchen to find his parents.

"Hi, Dad," Miller says with a quick hug to my side.

I pop a kiss on the top of her head before she grabs the pasta dish she made for dinner and we slip into the dining room.

I knock fists with Kai and Isaiah when I find them at the table, setting Max on his feet. He pulls at my hand to take the chair where his coloring book and crayons are set up, climbing into my lap and picking a color for me, silently asking me to help him fill in the outlined image.

"Sorry, that was the new athletic trainer I hired." Kennedy hangs up her phone before taking the last empty seat next to her husband. "Her flight was canceled so she won't be here until tomorrow." She sighs, looking at the food on the table. "Thanks for making us dinner. We still haven't unpacked enough to find our dishes."

Max looks up from my lap. "Ken," he says, smiling up at his aunt.

"Hi, Bug."

Kai makes a plate of pasta and salad for his fiancée. "We'll come over tomorrow and get it finished."

"I can make it mandatory," I cut in. "Tell the team they need to get over to your place and help the new team doctor."

"Or they could just come help their teammate because they love me," Isaiah adds.

"Kennedy is in charge of their medical treatment," Kai reminds him. "I think they're going to be a bit more inclined to kiss her ass rather than yours."

"Monty. More." Max nudges my tattooed hand, the one with the crayon that's not working fast enough for him.

I quickly fill one of the outlined trees on the page. "House is good?" I ask Kennedy and Isaiah.

"It's perfect." She smiles.

Isaiah looks to his older brother and a content understanding passes between them. "I'm glad we're living closer."

Miller passes the breadbasket across the table, her eyes latched on me for too long as she does.

"Yes?" I ask suspiciously.

"Nothing."

"Since when do you have a filter, Miller? Spit it out."

"I just think it's nice that Kennedy and Isaiah are moving out of the downtown area and bought a house down the road from us."

"It is nice," I agree. "For them."

She focuses on the plate in front of her. "Nice enough that maybe you'd want to do the same."

I bark a laugh. "Nice try. I'm perfectly happy in my apartment in the city that's walking distance to work. I practically live at the field during the season anyway."

"I'm just saying, Dad, your whole family is out in the suburbs now."

"And I'm glad you four are all happily paired-off suburban couples."

"You could be happily paired off too, you know."

The disbelieving laughter keeps coming. My daughter has never been one to shy away from exactly what's on her mind. "Geez, Millie."

Kai shakes his head. "Let the man eat his dinner in peace."

"Oh, no, no, no." She holds a finger up. "You don't get to play Switzerland right now. You agreed with me when we talked about this last night."

I raise a brow. "You two talked about me last night? Nothing more exciting going on in your lives?"

"We just want you to be happy, Dad."

"And what makes you believe that I'm not happy? I've got my dream job and my daughter finally lives nearby. What more could I want?"

"A lady friend," Isaiah cuts in, talking over a full mouth.

"A *lady* friend?" Kennedy asks, unimpressed by her husband's choice of words.

"Yeah. A lady friend. A girlfriend. A wifey." He winks at her. "Or just a fuck buddy."

I palm both of Max's ears to cover them.

"Gross." Miller grimaces.

"Oh, come on, Miller. Look at the man. You think your dad looks like *that* and doesn't have fuck buddies? *Please.*"

"Rhodes." I shake my head at him. "Shut up."

He smiles to himself before taking another forkful of pasta. "Sure thing, Coach."

"I'm happy, and I'm too busy to worry about anything other than work and you four." I uncover Max's ears. "Five," I correct.

"Just saying," Miller mutters under her breath. "Maybe it's your turn."

Until Miller met Kai, she had never mentioned the idea of me dating before, but now she won't let it go. Like she's so happy, she wants the same for me.

And I get it, I do, but I've already had my turn.

Sure, it's been twenty years since I was with Miller's mom, and I only had her for a year before we lost her, but I've experienced it. And then I was suddenly a twenty-five-year-old dad to a kindergartener who just lost her mom and wasn't biologically mine, and I was too busy to worry about anything else.

Now, I'm in my mid-forties and focused on my career. Happily, if I do say so myself, and too busy living at the field to meet someone.

With the stretched silence, Miller lets it go. "How was the meeting?" she asks us instead.

"Good," Kai exhales. "It sounds like there's going to be quite a few changes this year, but Reese was well-spoken. She's smart."

"Dad, it went okay?" Miller's tone is full of apprehensiveness. "It was fine."

I don't mention the little conversation Reese had at me—yes, *at* and definitely not *with*—in her office afterward to inform me she was cutting a video coach position. I couldn't tell you if that's a good business move or not, and I don't necessarily care. All I know is the salary she wants me to cut belongs to a soon-to-be father who needs it.

A smile blooms on Kennedy's mouth. "It was really amazing to listen to Reese's vision for the team. I'm excited she's taking over as owner."

And even when the conversation shifts to subjects outside of work, the only thought that goes through my mind for the rest of dinner is . . . *that makes one of us.*

2

REESE

"Reese, are you with us?"

Hearing my name pulls my eyes up to find five too-intimidating stares mirrored back at me.

I have no idea what I missed from this meeting, focused instead on the printout sitting on the conference table in front of me. The column of red numbers has been stealing all my attention.

I clear my throat, finding Phil, one of the five members of the advisory board my grandfather had assembled when he was in charge. "I'm sorry," I say, holding up the red-riddled papers. "We need to go back to this. These are our yearly projections?"

"Correct."

"Most of the departments are operating in the red."

Phil laces his hands together, resting them on the table, a wholly unimpressed look on his face. As if he's about to have to repeat himself for the hundredth time to a child who can't seem to grasp a basic concept.

Except, I fully understand what's going on here. I simply don't understand how this has been going on for as long as it has been. Or why my grandfather's so-called "advisors" are so nonchalant about the club bleeding money.

And by the club bleeding money, what I actually mean is me. *I'm* bleeding money.

Because now that my grandfather has passed along our family legacy to me, I am the sole owner of the Windy City Warriors, and this money we're losing is coming straight from my own pocket.