

THE TIKTOK SENSATION

Caught Up

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, and hockey.

She herself is a flight attendant, but 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.

Also by Liz Tomforde

Mile High
The Right Move

Caught Up

Liz Tomforde



www.hodder.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

Copyright © Liz Tomforde 2023

The right of Liz Tomforde to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the
publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or
dead, is purely coincidental.

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

ebook ISBN 978 1 399 72858 4
Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 72859 1

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

October 10th (*Caught Up*'s release date) would have been my dad's birthday. Kai and Monty are for him because he was the blueprint for writing my two favorite fictional dads.

And to Allyson—Miller is for you.

Contents

[Playlist](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Acknowledgements*](#)

Playlist

Caught Up – USHER 3:44
Wild – Carter Faith 3:36
Juice – iyla 3:27
Save Me The Trouble – Dan + Shay 3:20
3:15 (Breathe) – Russ 3:03
Wild as Her – Corey Kent 3:18
Lil Boo Thang – Paul Russell 1:53
Lovely – Arin Ray 2:57
Best Shot (Acoustic) – Jimmie Allen 3:12
Miss Shiney – Kaiit 3:11
Stay Down – Brent Faiyaz 3:26
Come Over (Cover) – JVCK JAMES 2:21
Grateful – Mahalia 3:05
I Just Want You – JAEL feat. Alex Isley 4:00
Snooze – SZA 3:21
If You Let Me – Sinéad Harnett feat. GRADES 3:51
Until The End Of Time – JVCK JAMES /
Justin Timberlake 5:22
BRB – Mahalia feat. Pink Sweat\$ 3:37
My Boy (My Girl Version) – Elvie Shane 3:25
So Gone – Vedo 3:01

Chapter 1

Kai

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Ace.” Monty drops the scouting report onto his desk in the hotel room. “You fired him on a game day? What the hell are you planning to do with Max tonight? It’s your night on the mound.”

I made sure to bring my son in for this meeting partly because I didn’t have anyone else to watch him and partly because I knew Monty was going to be pissed I fired another nanny, but would be less furious with Max’s chubby-cheeked smile staring back at him.

“I don’t know. I’ll figure it out.”

“We *had* it figured out. There was nothing wrong with Troy.”

Like hell there was nothing wrong with Troy. After my early morning workout with the team doctor and training staff, loosening up my shoulder for tonight’s start, I came back to my room to find my son with a diaper that was hours past due for a change. Add that to the weeks he spent fanboying over my teammates instead of focusing on his job, and I was done.

“Not the right fit,” is all I say in response.

He exhales a long, defeated breath and Max giggles at my field manager’s frustration.

Monty eyes him from across the desk, leaning in. “You think this is funny, kid? Your dad is making me go gray.”

“I think that’s all you, old man.”

My fifteen-month-old son smiles back at my coach while sitting in my lap, all gums and baby teeth. Monty drops the tough guy act as I knew he would because Max is a soft spot for him. Hell, he’s a soft

spot for the entire team, but especially for the man sitting across the desk in this hotel room.

Emmett Montgomery, or Monty as we call him, is not only the field manager of the Windy City Warriors, Chicago's MLB team, but he's also a single dad. He's never told me the details of how his family came to be, but I would be shocked if his situation were anywhere as absurd as mine. That is, unless he also had a past fling fly across the country almost a year since he last saw her, only to drop the bomb that he's a dad and she wants no involvement before leaving him as a single parent to a six-month-old baby boy.

I try not to take advantage of Monty, knowing he and the entire organization have bent over backwards to make my new family situation work, but when it comes to my kid, I refuse to compromise on who takes care of him while I'm working.

"I'll talk to Sanderson," I offer, referring to one of the trainers on staff. "He'll be in the training room all night. I can get Max situated there. As long as no one gets hurt, the room will be quiet. He can sleep."

Monty rubs his thumb and forefinger over his brows. "Kai, I'm trying here. I'm doing everything I can for you, but this isn't going to work unless you have childcare we can all rely on."

Monty only uses my first name when he's wanting me to take his words to heart. Otherwise, he and the whole team call me by my nickname—Ace.

But I *have* taken his words to heart. They're the same ones he's been preaching to me for the past three months, ever since the season started. I've already rotated through five nannies. And the reason for that is because, well . . . I'm not sure I *want* to make it work.

I'm not sure I want to play baseball anymore.

The only thing I'm positive of is that I want to be the best possible dad for Max. At this point in my life, at thirty-two and after ten years in the majors, nothing else matters to me.

A game that I once loved, that I thought of as my entire existence, I now view as time away from my family.

“I know, Monty. I’ll figure it out when we get back to Chicago. I promise.”

He exhales another defeated sigh. “If your brother weren’t also on my roster, you’d be the biggest pain in my ass, Ace.”

I roll my lips in, trying not to smile. “I’m aware.”

“And I’d trade you if you weren’t so damn talented.”

I can’t help but laugh at that one because he’s full of shit. I’m one of the best pitchers in the league, yeah, but regardless of my talent, Monty loves me.

“And if you didn’t like me so much,” I add for him.

“Get out of here and go talk to Sanderson about watching Max tonight.” I stand from my seat, situating my son over my hip before turning to leave his hotel room. “And Max,” Monty calls out to my kid, who can’t respond to him. “Stop being so dang cute all the time so I can yell at your dad every once in a while.”

I roll my eyes, leaning in close to speak to my son. “Wave goodbye to Monty and tell him he’s getting grumpy and kind of ugly in his old age.”

“I’m forty-five, you dick, and you can only hope to look this good in thirteen years.”

Max giggles and waves at my coach, having no idea what we’re talking about, but he loves Monty as much as Monty loves him.

“Hi!” Max hollers from across the room.

Close enough.

“Hi, buddy.” Monty laughs. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

I didn’t think I’d ever be as close to a coach as I am to Monty. Before last season, I was playing for the Seattle Saints, the team I was drafted to and spent the first eight years of my career with. I respected the staff there, and I liked the field manager enough, but our relationship was all business.

Then, last season, my free agency brought me to Chicago, solely because my younger brother is on the roster—starting shortstop for the Warriors, and I missed playing ball with the little shit. When I met Monty, I instantly liked him, but our working relationship became more like family when Max came into my life last fall. I can't thank him enough for what he's done for me. It's because of him, understanding the kinds of sacrifice it takes to be a single parent, that made this situation work.

He told the team executives that my son would be traveling with me this season, and he wouldn't be taking no for an answer. Knowing if he was denied, I'd be going into early retirement. I refuse to be without my kid for half the year when his own mother abandoned him at six months old. He needs someone constant and stable in his life, and I won't let something as trivial as a game be the reason my son doesn't have that.

I should probably stop firing everyone we hire so I can make Monty's life a little easier, but that's a different conversation.

My brother, Isaiah, jogs down the hall and hops into the elevator right after us. His disheveled, light brown mop of hair is still formed into whatever shape the bed he slept in gave it. I've been up for hours, between waking with Max and getting my morning workout in, but I'd bet good money he just left his bed.

And I'd bet my life there's still a naked woman in it.

"Hey, man," he says. "Hi, Maxie," he adds, blowing a raspberry on my son's cheek. "Where are you guys going?"

"Gotta go beg Sanderson to watch him tonight during the game."

Isaiah doesn't say anything, simply waits for me to elaborate.

"I fired Troy."

He laughs. "Jesus, Malakai. Make it a little more apparent you don't want to make this arrangement work."

"Troy sucked and you know it."

Isaiah shrugs. “I mean, I prefer your nannies to have tits and a strong desire to sleep with me, but besides that, he wasn’t terrible.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Max . . .” Isaiah turns to my son. “Don’t you want an auntie? Tell your daddy that your next nanny needs to be a woman, single, twenties or thirties. Bonus points if she looks banging in my jersey.”

Max smiles.

“Wouldn’t mind being a mother to a thirty-year-old man,” I add. “Is okay with a disgusting apartment. Knows how to cook and clean since you’re a literal man-child and refuse to do so.”

“Mmm, yeah, she sounds perfect. Keep your eyes out for someone just like”—the elevator doors open—“that.”

My brother’s attention is glued straight ahead when we arrive on the lobby level.

“Shit, I missed Sanderson’s floor. *Shoot*,” I correct. “Don’t say *shit*, Max.”

My kid is too distracted to listen to me curse as he chews on his fingers and watches his uncle. Said uncle stays standing in the middle of the elevator, dumbstruck.

“Isaiah, are you getting off or not?”

A woman walks onto the elevator, standing between him and me, which makes his sudden state of shock a bit more obvious. Pretty girls tend to make him stupid.

And this one is real pretty.

Dark chocolate hair falls over tanned skin that’s covered in intricate black ink. And there’s a whole lot of skin. She’s got a little tank or bra thing under a pair of cutoff overalls, thick thighs spilling out past the frayed hem. Those thighs don’t have the same artwork that covers her arm and shoulder though.

“Hi,” Isaiah finally spits out, all dazed and distracted.

Reaching behind her, I lightly smack him on the back of the head, because the last thing he needs is another woman in another city to

keep him occupied. I've lived the life he's currently indulging in and now I have a fifteen-month-old on my hip to show for it. I need the added responsibility of my younger brother following in my footsteps like I need a root canal for fun.

"Get off the elevator, Isaiah."

He nods, waving and walking backwards into the lobby. "Bye," he says with hearts in his eyes and not to me or my son.

The woman in the elevator simply lifts one of her two Coronas in a farewell.

"Floor?" she asks, all raspy and deep before lubricating her throat with a swig of beer. She reaches past me, pressing the floor I just came from before looking back over her shoulder for my answer.

Eyes are jade green and thoroughly confused, a tiny gold septum ring shines just under the bridge of her nose, and now I get why my brother turned into a dumbstruck teenage boy because suddenly I am too.

"Should I just guess? I can press them all if you'd like and we could take a nice long elevator ride together."

Max reaches for her, finally snapping me back into reality as if I've never seen a good-looking woman before.

I twist my hip to keep him from getting his little fingers tangled in her hair in a way that sounds awfully fun right about now, but this woman is not only drinking one beer at 9 a.m. on a Thursday, she's drinking *two*.

I clear my throat and press Sanderson's floor myself.

Miss Double Fisting on a Weekday flips her hair over her shoulder as she retakes her spot in the elevator next to me. Regardless of her morning beverages of choice, she doesn't smell like booze. She smells like a cake and suddenly, I have a sweet tooth.

Out of my periphery, I catch her looking at Max with a little smile.

"You've got a cute kid."

You've got a cute everything, is what I want to say in response.

But I don't because, as of last fall, that's no longer me. I no longer have the luxury of flirting with every pretty woman I pass on the street. I don't have the chance to throw back a beer at 9 a.m. I can't take a random woman back to my hotel room without exchanging names, intending to never see them again because said hotel rooms are cluttered with cribs, highchairs, and toys.

I especially don't need to be throwing out flirty statements to *this* kind of woman. It doesn't take a mind reader to know she's a wild one.

"Does he speak?" she asks.

"Him?"

She laughs to herself. "I was referring to you. So, you just make it a habit of ignoring people who talk to you?"

"Uh, no." Max goes to grab her again and I turn further away to keep him from grabbing a stranger. "Sorry. Thanks."

My kid catapults his body across my waist, continuing to reach his chubby fingers towards her, going for either her or one of her beers, I'm not quite sure.

The woman chuckles to herself again. "Maybe he knows you need one of these."

She offers me her second Corona.

"It's 9 a.m."

"And?"

"And it's a Thursday."

"We're judgy too, I see."

"Responsible," I correct.

"Jesus," she laughs. "You need something stronger than a Corona."

What I need is for this elevator to move a little quicker, but she might be onto something. I do need a beer. Or ten. Or a few hours rolling around with a naked woman. I can't remember the last time I

did that. It sure as hell hasn't happened since Max came into my life, and that was nine months ago.

"Dadda." Max squishes my cheeks together before pointing towards the woman again.

"I know, buddy."

I don't know shit.

All I know is my kid won't stop trying to throw his body off mine to get to her. Which is weird, because in general, Max isn't big into strangers and even more so, he isn't all that comfortable with women.

I blame it on the fact the one who gave birth to him left him to be raised by a single dad, a reckless uncle, and a team of rowdy baseball players. The only presence of a woman that's stuck is my buddy's fiancée, but even then, it took him a minute to warm to her.

But for some reason, he's into this one.

"Come on, Max," I exhale, readjusting him. "You've gotta stop squirming."

"I know it's weird to offer, but I can hold him if you wa—"

"No," I snap.

"Geez."

"I mean, no, thank you. He doesn't do well with women."

"Wonder where he got that from."

I shoot her a pointed glance, but she just pops her shoulders and takes another swig.

Max laughs again. At literally nothing. This kid is just oddly into her, and this elevator ride is taking too fucking long.

"Did you get your smile from your mama?" she asks him, tilting her head and admiring him. "Because I don't think your dad knows how to."

"Funny."

"I'll pretend that wasn't sarcastic and you actually have a sense of humor."

“He doesn’t have a mom.”

The space goes eerily silent the way it typically does when I say those five words. Most people are concerned they crossed a line because his mom passed away tragically, not because she didn’t tell me she was pregnant then showed up six months post-partum to flip my world upside down before leaving.

Her teasing tone immediately shifts. “Oh God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“She’s alive. She just isn’t around.”

I can physically see the relief wash over her. “Oh, well that’s good. I mean, that’s not *good*. Or maybe it is good? Who am I to say? Goddamn, this elevator is taking forever.” She slaps a palm over her mouth, her eyes darting to Max. “I mean, gosh dang it.”

That finally makes me chuckle, a small grin sliding across my lips. She softens a bit. “He *does* smile.”

“He smiles a whole lot more when he’s not being berated by a stranger in an elevator while she’s double fisting beers first thing after she wakes up.”

“Maybe she never went to sleep.” Another casual pop of her shoulders.

Dear God.

“Maybe they should stop talking about themselves in the third person like a couple of pretentious a-holes.”

The elevator finally opens on the floor she needs.

“Maybe he should loosen up every once in a while. He’s got a cute-ass kid and an even cuter smile when he shows it.” She lifts her Corona to me before chugging the rest and exiting the elevator. “Thanks for the ride, Baby Daddy. It was . . . interesting.”

That it was.