







*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



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## 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.

## Chapter 2

### Miller

I love butter. Imagine being the person who created God's greatest gift to mankind. I could kiss them for their discovery. With bread? Perfection. Melted onto a baked potato? Heaven sent. Or my personal favorite, baked into my famous chocolate chip cookies.

Now, you might be thinking it's a chocolate chip cookie, they're all the same. Wrong. Dead wrong. I might be known throughout the country for my ability to fix a Michelin star-seeking restaurant's underperforming dessert program, but I wish one of these fancy restaurants would say "fuck it" and let me bake them a goddamn chocolate chip cookie for their menu.

They'd sell out. Every night.

But even if they'd let me fancy up a classic like that, that recipe is mine. I'll lend out my creativity and my tips and techniques. Hell, I'll even create an entire fresh and inspiring dessert menu for a restaurant that has a yearlong waitlist for a table. But the classic recipes, the ones I've honed for the last fifteen years, the ones that make your body melt into a sigh as soon as the sugar touches your tongue, reminding you of home, those are mine.

No one is asking for those recipes anyway. They aren't what I'm known for.

But I'm fairly certain that the only thing I'm going to be known for is the mental breakdown I'm about to have in the middle of this Miami kitchen, simply because for the past three weeks, I haven't been able to create a single new dessert.

"Montgomery," one of the line cooks calls out. He, for some reason, doesn't feel the need to call me by my title, so I haven't concerned myself with learning his name. "Are you coming out with us after our shift tonight?"

I don't honor him with eye contact as I clean up my workstation and pray that the soufflé in the oven makes it through without sinking. "I'm going to assume you forgot my title is Chef," I say over my shoulder.

"Sweetie. You just bake cakes. I'm not calling you Chef."

As if a record scratched, the entire kitchen goes silent, every prep cook freezing with their tools in hand.

It's been a while since I've been disrespected in my profession. I'm young, and at twenty-five, it's not easy to stand in a kitchen of adults, typically men, and tell them what they're doing wrong. But over the last couple of years, I've earned a reputation, one that demands respect.

Three weeks ago, I won the James Beard Award, the highest honor in my industry, and since being named Outstanding Pastry Chef of the Year, my consultation services have been booked solid. I'm now sitting at a three-year-long list of kitchens I'll be spending a season at, including this Miami stint, fixing their dessert programs and giving them a shot at earning themselves a Michelin star.

So yes, I've earned the title of Chef.

"You coming, Montgomery?" he starts again. "I'll buy you a beer or something with an umbrella you'll probably like. Something sweet and pink."

How this guy isn't picking up on the fact his co-workers are silently begging him to shut up is beyond me.

"I know something else sweet and pink that I wouldn't mind a taste of."

He's only trying to get a rise out of me, to get the one woman working in the kitchen to snap, but he's not worth my time. And luckily for him, my timer beeps, pulling my attention back

to my work.

Opening the oven door, I'm greeted by blazing heat and yet another sunken soufflé.

The James Beard Award is only a piece of paper, but somehow, the weight of it has crushed me. I should be grateful and humbled that I won an award most chefs strive for their entire lives, but the only thing I've felt since winning is a crippling pressure that's caused my mind to go blank, rendering me unable to create anything new.

I haven't told anyone I'm struggling. I'm too embarrassed to admit it. All eyes are on me more than ever before and I'm flailing. But there will be no hiding in two months' time when I'm featured on the cover of *Food & Wine* magazine's fall edition, and I'm sure the only thing the article will have to say is how sad the critics are to see yet another new talent unable to live up to their potential.

I can't do this anymore. As embarrassing as it is to admit, I can't handle the pressure right now. It's just a bit of burnout, a creative rut. Like writer's block for a pastry chef. It'll pass, but it sure as hell isn't going to pass while I'm working in someone else's kitchen with the expectation to teach others my craft.

With my back to the staff so they can't see my newest fuck-up, I plop the soufflé ramekin on the counter, and as soon as I do, a hand lands on my waist, every hair on my neck standing up in alarm.

"You've got two more months here, Montgomery, and I know a good way to pass the time. A way to get the staff here to like you." The line cook's hot breath brushes the back of my neck.

"Get your hand off me," I say coolly.

His fingertips dig into my waist, and they feel like my breaking point. I need to get away from this man and this kitchen. I need to get away from *every* kitchen.

"You've got to be lonely, traveling around the country the way you do. I bet you find a friend to keep you warm in that little van of yours in every city you visit."

His palm slides down my lower back, heading towards my ass. I snatch his wrist, turning my body and kneeing him in the balls, hard and without a second of hesitation.

Instantly, he keels over in pain, a pathetic whimper escaping him.

"I told you to get your fucking hand off me."

The staff is silent, letting their co-worker's cries echo off the stainless-steel appliances as he remains folded in half. Part of me wants to make some comment regarding how little his dick felt against my knee, but his actions made it obvious that he's overcompensating already.

"Oh, come on," I say, unbuttoning my chef's coat. "Get off the ground. You look pathetic."

"Curtis." Jared, the head chef, turns the corner in shock, staring down at his line cook. "You're fired. Get the fuck up and get out of my kitchen."

Curtis, as I've come to learn his name, keeps holding his balls and rolling around on the ground.

"Chef Montgomery." Chef Jared turns to me. "I am so sorry for his behavior. That is completely unacceptable. I promise you, that's not the kind of culture I'm cultivating here."

"I think I'm done here."

For a multitude of reasons, I'm done. The line cook who will never be hired in a high-end restaurant again was simply the straw that broke the camel's back, but I know in my bones I won't be any help to Chef Jared's menu this summer.

And I sure as shit don't need others to learn that I'm struggling. This industry is cut-throat, and the moment critics learn a high-end chef, let alone a James Beard recipient, is drowning, they'll start to circle like vultures, blasting my name in every one of their food blogs, and I don't need that attention right now.

Chef Jared cowers slightly, which is strange. The man is revered in the food world and is twice my age. "I completely understand. I'll make sure you're paid out for the entire contract, including the next two months."

"No. No need to do that." I shake his hand. "I'm just going to go."

Curtis is still on the floor, so I offer him a simple middle finger as I make my exit because yes, I'm an awarded pastry chef who sometimes still acts like a child.

As if my inability to do my job wasn't suffocating enough, the moment I'm outside, the late June humidity chokes me. I don't know what I was thinking when I agreed to spend my summer working in a South Florida kitchen.

Quickly hopping into my van parked in the employee lot, I crank the AC to full blast. I love this van. It's completely renovated inside and out with a fresh coat of deep green paint on the exterior and my own little kitchen on the inside.

I live in it while I travel the country for work, hair down and without a care in the world. Then when I get to my destinations, I turn on work-mode and spend the following months with my tattoos covered, being referred to as "Chef" for ten hours of my day.

It's the weird juxtaposition that I call my life.

And if we're being honest, it's not exactly what I saw myself doing. I had once dreamt of running my own bakery, making all my famous cookies, bars, and cakes that I had baked for my dad while growing up. But I was lucky enough to be plucked fresh out of school to train under one of the best pastry chefs in Paris, followed by another internship in New York City.

My career took off from there.

Now, it's bite-sized tarts, mousses most people can't pronounce, and sorbets that we all like to pretend are more fulfilling than ice cream. And though there are parts of the high-end world that feel pretentious and ridiculous, I'm grateful this is where life has taken me.

My career is impressive. I know this. I've worked endless hours to be impressive, to reach these borderline unattainable goals. But now that I've achieved most of them, I'm floating without direction, looking for the next checkmark to chase.

And that's exactly what my chaotic mind has reminded me over the past three weeks. I either maintain success or quickly take my spin through the ever-revolving door that names the newest and hottest chef in the industry.

With my mind reeling, I merge onto the highway headed towards my dad's hotel just as my agent calls.

I answer on the Bluetooth. "Hi, Violet."

"What the hell did that little prick do that made you, of all people, quit a job early? Chef Jared called me to apologize and tried to forward three months' pay for you."

"Don't accept that check," I tell her. "Yes, his employee is a raging douche, but the truth is, I wouldn't have been any help to him this summer anyway."

She pauses on the line. "Miller, what's going on?"

Violet has been my agent for the past three years, and though I don't have many friends due to my hectic lifestyle, I'd consider her one of them. She manages my schedule and lines up my interviews. Anyone who wants to write about me in their food blog or have me consult on their menu must go through her first.

And though there are very few people I can be honest with about what I'm dealing with, she's one of them.

"Vi, you might kill me, but I think I'm going to take the rest of the summer off."

If the Miami highway wasn't so fucking loud, you'd be able to hear a pin drop.

"Why?" Her tone is frantic. "You have the biggest job of your career in the fall. You have the cover booked for *Food & Wine* magazine. Please don't tell me you're backing out of that."

"No. God no. I'm still doing it and I'll be in Los Angeles by the time my next job starts, I just . . ." Shit, how do I tell her that her highest-paid client is losing it? "Violet, I haven't been able to create a new dessert in three weeks."

"You mean you haven't had the time?" she assumes. "Because if you're needing more time to perfect the recipes for the article, I could understand that."

"No. I mean I haven't made something that didn't fall apart in the process or burn to shit in the oven. It'd be comical how bad I am at my job if I weren't on the brink of a mental breakdown because of it."

She laughs. "You're fucking with me, right?"

"Violet, a five-year-old with an Easy Bake Oven could make a better dessert than me right now."

The line goes silent once again.

"Violet, you still there?"

"I'm processing."

Taking the exit for my dad's hotel, I wait for her to speak.

"Okay," she says, calming herself. "Okay, this is fine. Everything's fine. You're going to take the next two months to breathe, gather yourself, and get out to Luna's by September first."

Luna's is Chef Maven's restaurant that I'll be consulting at in the fall. Maven did a seminar while I was in culinary school, and I've been dying for my chance to work with her, but she left the industry shortly after we met. She became a mother, then came back into the food world by opening a restaurant named after her daughter and asked me to come help with her dessert menu. The interview for *Food & Wine* magazine will be taking place in her kitchen in Los Angeles, and I couldn't be more excited for the opportunity.

At least, I *was* excited until everything turned to shit.

"You'll be at Luna's by September first, right, Miller?" Violet asks when I don't respond.

"I'll be there."

"Okay," she exhales. "I can sell this. You're celebrating your new award by spending the summer with family and you're looking forward to being back in the kitchen in September. God, the blogs and critics are going to be up my ass about this, wondering where the hell you are. Are you sure your dad isn't sick? I could spin that."

"Jesus, Violet," I laugh in disbelief. "He's perfectly fine, thank God."

"Good. That man is too beautiful to be dying so young." Finally Violet laughs through the receiver.

"Gross. I gotta go."

"Tell Daddy Montgomery I said hello."

"Yeah, I won't be doing that. Bye, Vi."

The Windy City Warriors, Chicago's professional baseball team, have been in town for a couple of days. My dad has been the field manager, which is essentially the head coach, for the past five years. Before that, he worked with their minor league team after being snatched up from our local college back in Colorado.



Emmett Montgomery rose through the baseball ranks quickly. As he deserved to. He was already on the fast track to making a name for himself in the sport when everything changed for us. He gave up everything to become my dad, including his thriving career, refusing to leave his local coaching job until I graduated from high school and was off doing my own thing.

He's one of the good ones. In fact, I'd argue he's the very best.

It's been just the two of us most of my life and, though you'd think I left home at eighteen to spread my wings, I really did it so he could. I knew then, just as I know now, that the moment I stop moving, he'll tie himself to whatever city I settle in to be close to me. So, for his sake, I haven't stopped running since I left home at eighteen, and I have no plans to. He's given up everything for me. The least I can do is make sure he doesn't give up any more.

I stop at a convenience store, grabbing a couple of Coronas, one for me and one for him, before trading my kitchen pants and non-slip shoes for a pair of cutoff overalls and flip-flops. I peel off my long-sleeved shirt, replace my septum ring to its rightful home, and take the furthest parking spot from the entrance to the stunning hotel my dad is staying at.

Even after watching him coach in the majors for the past five years, I still can't get over seeing him like this. We never had fancy or expensive things growing up. He didn't make a lot of money being a college coach, and he was only twenty-five when he became my dad. In a lot of ways, we grew up together.

He fed me mac and cheese from the box more nights than not because he wasn't the most proficient in the kitchen. Which is why, when I was old enough to, I took over in that department, learning to cook and finding my love for baking. I lit up whenever I impressed him with a new recipe, which, let's be honest, was every single time. He's easily my biggest fan.

But seeing him here, thriving, doing what he loves most and being so good at it that he's already got a World Series ring, makes me infinitely proud of how well he's done without me around.

I want to make him equally as proud, especially after everything he sacrificed for me, and I have the opportunity to. After being one of the youngest recipients of the James Beard Award, I've been booked for an eight-page spread in *Food & Wine* magazine, including the cover and three brand-new featured recipes that I can't find the inspiration to create. All happening in two short months when I get to LA for my next project.

No pressure, whatsoever.

I twist the cap off one of the beers to swallow down the sky-high expectations I put on myself as the elevator opens on the lobby floor. The two men inside don't get off, so I slide in between them.

The one to my left has a head of light brown hair and what seems like the inability to keep his jaw from hanging open.

"Hi," he says, and I don't know what it is about him, but I can almost guarantee this guy plays for my dad. He's somewhat tall, athletic build, and looks freshly fucked.

My dad's roster tends to be equally as invested in the women they take home from the field as they are in the game itself.

"Get off the elevator, Isaiah," the man to my right says, and while yes, they're both objectively good-looking, this one is offensively attractive.

He's got a backwards hat on, dark-rimmed glasses, and a toddler in his arms with a matching cap for goodness' sake. I try my hardest not to look too closely, but I can see the dark hair spilling out around the edges, ice-blue eyes framed by those glasses. Scuff slopes over his jawline, screaming "older man," and that alone is my kryptonite.

Then you add the cute-ass kid he's got slung on his hip and he's almost begging to be drooled over.

"Bye," the man to my left says as he gets off the elevator, leaving me to ride with the two cute boys to my right.

"Floor," I ask, taking a swig of my beer as I press the number for my dad's room.

There's not a chance in hell he didn't hear me, but still, Baby Daddy doesn't respond.

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

He doesn't laugh or even crack a smile which is a red flag if you ask me.

His little boy reaches for me, and I've never been one to fawn over kids, but this one is especially cute. He's happy, and after the morning I've had, a toddler smiling at me like I'm the greatest thing to ever exist is surprisingly what I need.

His cheeks are so chubby that his eyes almost disappear from his beaming grin as his dad continues to ignore me, pressing his floor number himself.

*Well, okay then.* This should be fun.

The longest elevator ride of my life has me concluding that the gorgeous man I rode with has a giant stick up his ass. And when I make it to my dad's room and knock, I couldn't be more thankful that our brief encounter is over.

"What are you doing here?" my dad asks, his face lighting up. "I thought I wasn't going to get to see you again this trip?"

I hold up both beer bottles in faux excitement, one empty, one still full. "I quit my job!"

He eyes me with concern, widening the opening into his room. "Why don't you come in and tell me why you're drinking at 9 a.m.?"

*"We're drinking,"* I correct.

He chuckles. "You seem like you might need that second one more than me, Millie."

Crossing the room, I take a seat on the couch.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"I suck at my job. I don't even enjoy baking right now because I'm so bad at it. When have you ever heard me say I don't enjoy baking?"

He holds his hands up. "You don't have to justify it to me. I want you to be happy and if that job wasn't making you happy, then I'm glad you quit."

I knew he'd say that. And I know when I tell him that my new summer plans consist of driving around the country and living out of my van to get some fresh air and a fresh perspective, he'll say he's happy for me even though there will be concern laced in his tone. But I'm not fazed by his concern. What I'm worried about seeing is disappointment.

In the twenty years he's been my dad, he's never once shown it so I'm not sure why I constantly look for it. But I'd work my ass off and stay in every miserable kitchen for the rest of my life if it meant I could avoid disappointing him.

I'm self-aware enough to know that I have an innate need to be the best at whatever checkmark or goal I'm chasing. Right now, I'm not the best and I don't want to give anyone the opportunity to watch me fail. Especially him. He's why I strive for perfection in my career, which is a stark contrast to the wild, unattached, and go-with-the-flow attitude I have towards my personal life.

"Are you done for good?" he asks.

“Oh, God no. I’m taking the summer to get my groove back. I’ll be back and better than before. I just need space without prying eyes to get it together, and to give myself a little break.”

His eyes lighten with excitement. “So, where are you spending this summer break?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve got two months and my next job is in LA. Maybe I’ll take my time driving to the West Coast and see some sights along the way. Practice in my kitchen on wheels.”

“Live out of your van.”

“Yes, Dad,” I chuckle. “Live out of my van and try to figure out why every dessert I attempt to create since I won that fucking award has been a complete and utter disaster.”

“Every dessert is not a disaster. Everything you’ve made me is phenomenal. You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Basic cookies and cakes are different. It’s the creative stuff that’s giving me a hard time.”

“Well, maybe it’s the creative stuff that’s the problem. Maybe you need to go back to the basics.”

He’s not in the food world the way I am so he doesn’t understand that a chocolate chip cookie isn’t going to cut it.

“You know,” he starts. “You could come spend the summer in Chicago with me.”

“Why? You’ll be on the road half of the time for work, and when you’re home, you’ll be at the field.”

“Come on the road with me. We haven’t been in the same place for more than a few days since you were eighteen and I miss my girl.”

I haven’t had a holiday, weekend, or more than a single evening free in seven years. I’ve been endlessly working, killing myself in the kitchen, and even tonight, my dad’s team has a game in town. It never dawned on me to take the night off to go watch.

“Dad—”

“I’m not above begging, Miller. Your old man needs some quality time.”

“I just spent three weeks in a kitchen full of dudes, one of whom was practically begging me to file a sexual harassment complaint with HR. The last thing I want is to spend my summer around another team full of men.”

He leans forward, tatted arms propped on his knees, eyes wide. “Excuse me?”

“I handled it.”

“Handled it how, exactly?”

“With a swift knee to the balls.” I take a casual sip of my beer. “Just how you taught me.”

He shakes his head with a small laugh. “I never taught you that, you little psycho, but I wish I had. And now I’m even more adamant about you coming on the road with me. You know my guys aren’t like that.”

“Dad, I was planning . . .” My words die on my tongue when I look up at him across the couch. Sad and pleading eyes, tired even. “Are you lonely in Chicago?”

“I’m not going to answer that. Of course, I miss you, but I want you to come hang out with me for a couple of months because you miss me too. Not because you feel obligated to.”

I don’t feel obligated. Not in that regard, at least. But everything I do, in some way, is an attempt to erase the guilt I have towards our situation. To repay a debt he paid by giving up his entire life for me when he was only twenty-five years old.

But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss him too. It’s why I ensure all my jobs overlap with his travel. I pick kitchens in big cities with MLB teams that my dad will be coming through for work. So of course, I miss him.

A summer with my old man does sound nice, and if having me nearby for a bit will make him happy, it's the least I could do after everything he's done for me.

Except there's one problem.

"There's no way upper management would allow that," I remind him. "No one on the team or staff is allowed to have family members with them while they travel."

"There is one family member who's allowed to travel with the team this season." A sly smile slides across his lips. "I have an idea."

## Chapter 3

### Kai

**Monty:** *Leave Max with Isaiah and come back to my room. We've gotta chat.*

**Me:** *Am I leaving Max so you can yell at me?*

**Monty:** *Yes.*

**Me:** *Cool, cool. I'll be sure to rush right over for that.*

"I found Max a new nanny," is the first thing he says before I've even closed the door behind me.

*Huh?* I take a seat across the desk in Monty's hotel room, eyeing him with confusion. "How? I fired Troy an hour ago."

"I'm just that good, and you're going to hire her because you clearly have shit taste in nannies since you won't stop firing them all, so I'm taking over."

"Her?"

"My daughter."

My eyes shoot to the framed photo sitting next to him. It's the same picture he has back in his office in Chicago. The same photo he props on his desk in every city we visit.

I knew the girl in the picture was his daughter, that much was clear, but even though he and I are close, he's never told me much about her. I always assumed it was because he felt guilty leaving her and traveling for work as much as we do. That, or he knows talking about his kid who he misses will only reaffirm what I already believe—that it's nearly impossible to do this job as a single parent.

The girl in the photo can't be more than thirteen or fourteen years old. She's in that awkward phase we all had in our early teens, donning both braces and acne. Dark hair is slicked back in a tight ponytail, visor shading her face and a bright yellow T-shirt with number fourteen centered on the front. Softball player, with her too-big sleeves cinched together with some sort of band on each shoulder. A pitchers' glove rests on a single knee as she poses for her season photo.

Monty *would* have a softball-playing daughter.

"She's free for the summer and I want her to travel with us," he continues.

Makes sense, she's out of school for the summer.

"Yeah, but Monty, this is my kid we're talking about."

"And mine." His brows raise, daring me to say something against this plan. "It's not a question, Ace. I'm telling you this is happening. I'm tired of you finding something wrong with every single person we hire. We're doing background checks every few weeks for someone new, and changing names on the hotel rooms and plane manifests is becoming a pain in the ass for the travel coordinators. She's Max's new nanny, and the best part about it is she's my kid and you can't fire her."

*Shit.*

"She's only free until September so we'll have to find someone else to finish the last bit of the season, but we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

It's clear there's no getting out of this. I owe him for everything he's done for Max and me, and he fucking knows it.

If I have to leave my son with someone who isn't me, I guess this isn't the worst possible solution. This is a nanny that's probably too young to give a shit about a bunch of pro baseball

players, and her dad will most likely be watching her like a hawk anytime she's not taking care of Max, which takes that responsibility off my shoulders.

What's two months? *Just double the time I've gone without firing someone.*

"Can she drive?" I ask.

His brows furrow in confusion. "What?"

"Like if something happens to Max while I'm not around, can she get him to the hospital?"

"Yeah . . ."

Okay, that's good. She's at least sixteen. That photo is probably a couple of years old at this point.

"Is she responsible?"

"She's . . ." he hesitates. "She's responsible at work."

Weird answer.

The door to his hotel makes that noise when the electric lock is being undone by a keycard. Over my shoulder, dark hair enters first as a woman walks in backwards, using her ass to open the door.

Chocolate hair. Frayed hem to her shorts. Thick thighs.

She turns around and Miss Double Fisting from the elevator is standing in my coach's hotel room. And she's double fisting again, only this time it's with a couple of coffee cups.

I adjust my glasses on my face to make sure I'm seeing this correctly. Green eyes connect with mine.

"You." The word comes out part seething, part shock.

She sighs, her shoulders dropping. "I had a feeling it was going to be you."

*Huh?*

"Ace, meet my daughter, Miller Montgomery. Max's new nanny."

My head whips back in his direction. "You're kidding me."

"Miller, Kai Rhodes. You'll be taking care of his son this summer."

"Absolutely not," I quickly interject.

Miller rolls her eyes, handing her dad one of the two coffees.

How is this possible? She sure as hell isn't thirteen or fourteen. She's a full-grown woman who drinks beer and apparently doesn't sleep. The acne is long cleared up, leaving tanned, flawless skin, and her braces have created perfectly straight teeth in a mouth that says whatever the hell it wants.

She looks like a Miller, though. That wild tomboy thing she's got going for her with her cutoff overalls and tattoos.

"She's not watching my kid."

Miller takes the seat next to mine and points at me with her thumb, giving her dad a look that says, *this fucking guy*.

Monty laughs—traitor.

"You two have met already, I see."

"Yeah, she was double fisting beers in the elevator at 9 a.m."

"*Dear God.*" She throws her head back, and that raspy voice mixed with the sexual way my brain took that phrase has my cock betraying me. "They were Coronas. Do you know the alcohol content in those? That's some people's form of hydration."

"I don't care." I face her dad. "I won't leave someone like that in charge of Max."

"Lighten up, Baby Daddy." She takes a casual sip of her coffee—or rather her chai tea

latte per the tag on her paper cup.

“Don’t call me that.”

“I had a beer to celebrate me quitting my job this morning. You’re acting like I was doing lines of coke off the handrails in the elevator, which yeah, now that I’m saying that out loud, I realize sounds oddly specific, but I promise I’ve never done that.”

I turn back to Monty. “This your kid?”

“The one and only,” he says with pride.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

I didn’t realize Monty became a dad at such a young age. That’d put him at . . . twenty years old when she was born? Damn. I thought this was hard at thirty-two.

“How old are *you*?” she asks.

“I’m asking the questions here. I’m trying to figure out if it’s worth risking my kid’s safety just to hire you and get your dad off my back.”

“And I’m trying to figure out if it’s worth ruining my summer by spending the next two months working for a guy with a giant stick up his ass.”

“I’m being responsible. I don’t have a stick up my ass.”

“Probably been lodged so far up there and for so damn long that you forgot it was even inside of you.”

“Miller,” Monty interjects. “You’re not helping.”

“Do you have any childcare experience?”

“Adult children, yes.”

I shoot a pointed glance towards Monty. “We don’t know if Max will even like her. You know how he is with women.”

“He was practically throwing himself at me in the elevator. I think we’re fine in that department.”

“I’m pretty sure he was going for your bottles. They look a lot like his.”

“You’re not going to get over the beers, are you?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Monty claps his hands together. “This is going to be interesting.”

“Do you smoke?” That voice of hers suggests she might.

“No, but it seems you might drive me to if this is how the rest of the summer is going to go.”

“Miller,” Monty interrupts like a stern dad breaking up a fight between his kids. “Thanks for the coffee. Can you give me a minute with Kai?”

Miller sighs, quickly tying her long brown hair up in a knot on top of her head, giving me a better view of the artwork on her arms and shoulders. It’s mostly intricate line-work making up a sleeve of florals. Almost like the outlines of a coloring page.

Max will like those.

“Fine.” She stands from her seat, taking her chai with her, that sweet scent of dessert wafting from her again before she turns to me. “But so you know, I’m doing this as a favor. So, try to be less of a dick about it, yeah? See you later, Baby Daddy.” She stops at the door, her hand on the knob as she cocks her head in contemplation. “Or should I say, *Baseball* Daddy? Oh yeah. Much better. Baseball Daddy, it is!”

She leaves us alone with that.

I shake my head in disbelief. “Your daughter is unhinged.”

“She’s the best, right?” Monty’s chest rumbles at my annoyance.

“You can’t be serious about this. There’s no way she’s the right person to take care of Max.”

He leans back in his chair, tattooed hands crossed over his stomach. “I’m not just saying this because I’m biased, but you’d be lucky to have her. She might be my wild child and not know what the hell a filter is, but when it comes to work, she’s the most driven person I know. She will do everything for your boy.”

I toss my head back. “Come on, man. Let’s be serious about this.”

“I am being serious. Trust me on this, Kai. I know my daughter. If for some reason, she ever gives you a *valid* reason to fire her, I’ll even offer to be the one to do it. That’s how much faith I have in this situation.”

Staying silent, I eye him, searching for any sign of bullshit.

I might not know Miller, might not trust her, but I do trust Monty with both my life and my kid’s. And I know he’d never put Max at risk, even if this situation benefits him.

I can’t believe I’m even considering letting him talk me into this, but I owe him. “She gets one strike,” I say, holding a single finger to reiterate.

“Baseball puns, Ace? You’re better than that.”

“Shut up.”

He puts his hand out to shake mine. “One strike, and she’s outta here!”

“Okay, way too far.”

I put my palm in his, but before I can pull away, he tightens his grip, willing my eye contact.

“I’m gonna give you a word of advice, son. Knowing her, she’ll make sure you have the time of your life this summer, both you and Max, but don’t even think about getting attached to her.”

My brows cinch in confusion. “Did you not see that interaction?” I free my hand, gesturing towards the door Miller left through.

“I did, and I’m telling you this, not as her dad but as your friend. She will leave when the summer is over. I love my daughter to death, but she’s a runner and the last thing she wants is to get caught.”

Monty should know me well enough by now that the last thing *I* want is for her to stay. In fact, if it weren’t for Max growing up far too quickly, I’d be wishing the summer away already.

“Trust me, Monty. You have nothing to worry about.”

He hums, unconvinced.

Standing, I tuck my chair into the opposite side of his desk. “See you at the field.”

I’m almost out the door when he stops me.

“And Ace,” he calls out. “Keep your dick in your pants. We all know how fucking fertile you are, and I’m too young and too goddamn attractive for someone to be calling me Grandpa.”

“Jesus Christ,” I huff, leaving his room.



## Chapter 4

### Kai

Max makes a jumbled sound that I've come to know as meaning "snack" as he points towards the kitchen in my hotel room.

I adjust him on my hip. "You want a pouch?"

He points to the kitchen again.

"Can you say *pouch*?" I prompt, but he just keeps pointing in that direction.

I grab his favorite flavor of pureed fruit, undoing the top and letting him feed himself as I carry him around my room, tidying up before Miller comes over to watch him for the first time.

"Is that good, Bug?"

He smacks his tiny lips together.

He still only has a handful of words in his vocabulary, but it's wild when I get to hear them. It's even wild to watch him feed himself though he's been doing it for months. It might sound pathetic, but the small changes I see in him as he learns and grows are the most exciting moments of my everyday life.

And right on cue, I have to push away the lingering disappointment and questions, wondering what moments I missed for those first six months of his life when I didn't even know he existed.

I should probably put him down. Let him chill in his highchair or something but I'm always a needy little fucker on game days. I hate knowing I'm leaving him behind for the rest of the day. I miss dinner with him, and bedtime. So yeah, I'm a bit helicopter-y on afternoons I have to go to the field.

A knock sounds at the door and I find myself checking out my room, making sure it looks okay before answering it for my coach's daughter. Except when I open the door, it's not Miller waiting for me on the other side. It's my brother.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as he barrels inside.

"Heard the new nanny is hot." He looks around my hotel room, for her I guess. "And a woman, thank fuck."

"Don't curse in front of my kid."

Who am I kidding? Max is being raised by a baseball team. He's heard worse already.

"Sorry, Maxie," Isaiah says. "Thank frick. Better, Dad?"

I roll my eyes.

"So where is she?"

"How do you even know about her or that she's hot?"

"So, she *is* hot? I didn't actually know that. I was *manifesting*."

Isaiah takes a seat at the small kitchen nook, his feet up on the stool next to the one he's sitting on. I tend to get the biggest rooms on the road because I have another person living with me, and all of Max's stuff eats at any available space I have. Additionally, there's always an adjoining room connected to mine for Max's nanny to stay. Now that Troy's gone, it's empty, but Miller will stay in there while I'm at the game tonight.

"She's not *not* hot."

"Oh my God," my brother says, accusatorially. "You're gonna bang the new nanny, aren't you? So cliché, my guy."

"No, I'm not. And neither are you because not only is she Max's new nanny, but she's

also Monty's daughter."

Every muscle in Isaiah's body freezes. "You're kidding me. Monty has a hot daughter? How old is she?"

"Twenty-five."

"And she's good with kids?"

"Doubtful. She's like a goddamn hurricane, but Monty's adamant about me hiring her, so I don't really have a choice." Isaiah nods in understanding. "How the hell do you know about her? I've only just met her."

"The team's group chat is going off." He holds up his phone and I adjust my glasses to look at it. "You should take it off mute every once in a while."

**Travis:** *Heard Max's new nanny is a woman. Fucking finally, Ace.*

**Cody:** *Troy was cute, but his replacement is cuter. I think I saw her in the hallway earlier. I wouldn't mind her being my nanny. Feed me. Tuck me into bed. Take my temperature too.*

**Isaiah:** *She's not a nurse, you idiot.*

**Cody:** *I call dibs on her being my seatmate on the plane.*

**Travis:** *What the hell? That's my seat.*

**Cody:** *Wait until you see her. You'll understand.*

**Isaiah:** *You can have the plane seat. I call dibs on everything else.*

An odd sense of annoyance rattles through me because this is Monty's kid and Max's new caretaker. She's not here for them. They're acting like a pack of starved dogs going after a single bone when, in reality, they have a buffet in every city we visit.

I would know. I used to have a buffet too.

"Okay." I usher him off the stool. "You need to leave before she gets here."

"No way. At least one of the Rhodeses needs to make a good impression and you're too stressed and grumpy lately to do it."

"If there's one Rhodes I can count on making a good impression, it sure as hell isn't going to be you. Max will do it." My brows cinch. "And I'm not grumpy, you dick."

I'm just *tired*. Tired of doing it all alone. Tired of feeling like I'm not doing enough.

"Really?" Isaiah asks with a huff of a laugh. "Because you used to be the happiest dude I knew, but I couldn't tell you the last time I saw you genuinely having fun. Back in the day, you were a bigger flirt than me, with shockingly more game. When's the last time you let that side come out?"

"There are ways to have fun other than screwing around in every city."

Like watching the same YouTube video of farm animals singing and dancing on repeat. Or playing peekaboo behind a napkin for an hour straight in an attempt to get Max to stop crying while he's teething. My new definitions of fun.

"Yeah, but that way is the *most* fun." A smirk quirks on his lips.

In my twenties I was a massive flirt, and I did my fair share of fucking around, but responsibilities crept into my life again, shifting my priorities. The flirty side pops out occasionally, when I'm out at work events alone, but then the reminder of who's waiting for me at home brings me back to reality and I squash my former self.

But I'm not getting into that conversation with my little brother right now because as much as I love him, he'll never understand. Our teen years were terrible, but he has no idea just how hard they were because I sheltered him from it all. It's what I do. I take care of my responsibilities.

"Are you feeling okay?" I ask.

“Huh?”

“You look sick. Maybe you should call out tonight. Stay home. Watch my son.”

He rolls his eyes. “Says the guy who plays once every five days.”

“Exactly. And look how much I get paid for it. I’m *essential*.”

Isaiah barks a laugh. “I’m the shortstop. I play every single game. There are four more starting pitchers waiting for their night.”

“Which is why I should retire early. The Warriors will be fine without me.”

His brown eyes narrow. “You’re just running in circles hoping one of your points sticks, huh?”

“Worth a shot.”

“If Monty’s daughter is anything like him, she’ll be great with Max. What are you so worried about?”

A knock at the door sounds, cutting off that conversation.

“You’ll see.”

Isaiah turns back to me with a mischievous smile. “Who is it?” he calls out in a sing-song voice.

*Shut the fuck up*, I mouth.

“Don’t curse in front of my nephew.”

“Your favorite person in Miami,” Miller deadpans from the hallway.

“Sexy voice,” Isaiah whispers, and I find myself annoyed that he noticed.

He opens the door, casually leaning on the frame and blocking my view of the girl in the hall, but I watch as his spine stiffens before his head whips around to me, slack jaw and wide brown eyes.

I know that guy better than he knows himself, so it’s not hard to understand that he’s silently asking why I didn’t tell him that Miller is the girl he fell in love with from the elevator this morning.

“Isaiah, Miller. Miller, Isaiah. My brother.”

“Buy one, get one. Fun,” I hear her say, but I still can’t see her because my brother is frozen in the entryway.

“I’m the uncle,” he finally blurts out.

She laughs, a deep throaty sound that goes straight to my dick. “I put that together from the whole brother thing.”

“Isaiah, move.”

“Yeah. Welcome. Come on in.” He ushers her inside as if it were his room to welcome her into. “Can I get you anything? Water? A snack? My number?”

She completely ignores him.

As soon as he’s out of the way, she comes into view, still wearing those cutoff overalls and I’m not quite sure what’s so fascinating to me about her thighs, but they’re thick and muscular, the kind you get from years of playing softball.

And I can’t stop imagining how blissfully constricting they’d feel around my waist. Or even better—my face.

But then I remember this is Monty’s kid I’m thinking about, and I have to close my eyes to keep myself from looking at her.

“You good, Baseball Daddy?”

Isaiah cackles.

My eyes shoot open to find her looking at me like there’s something very, very wrong

with me and clearly there is if I'm looking at *this* woman like *that*.

She's borderline certifiable.

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "This is Max." I nod my head towards him, shifting my hip so he can see her better.

"Hi, Max," Miller says, her eyes softening.

That wild-girl edge I saw this morning is calmer now, maybe for Max's sake or maybe for mine, I'm not sure, but a small amount of my hesitation about this situation eases away.

Max blushes, burying his head into the crook of my neck, knocking off his little ball cap in the process. He's being shy, vastly different from his desperation to get to Miller this morning, but he's not afraid of her the way he is with most strangers. I think he's simply aware of her attention, and even though he's acting like he doesn't, he likes it.

But there's a part of me that's loving that my son wants me regardless of the pretty girl calling out his name.

"He's being shy."

"That's okay, Max. I tend to have that effect on boys."

My eyes dart to Isaiah. Case in point—my brother, who is frozen like a statue in the kitchen, silent but mesmerized.

"Should we show Miller all your stuff?" I ask my son.

Max reaches up to use his hat to cover his pink cheeks, but it's on the floor so his giddy smile is pretty obvious behind his arm.

"Come on, Bug." I take his empty pouch, setting it on the kitchen counter before placing him on his feet.

"Bug?"

"It's his nickname. The first time I ever saw him, he was wearing a onesie that was covered in a pastel bug print. So, Bug kind of stuck."

With Max's hands in the air, I hold on to each of them with my own, letting him use me to balance himself as he takes slow, wonky steps into the kitchen.

"He's not walking on his own yet?"

My head snaps up to Miller, looking for a judgmental glare to accompany her statement, but there isn't one. In fact, nothing in her tone was judgmental either.

It's a me thing, thinking others are judging my parenting skills or my son's progression. He's fifteen months old. Maybe he should be walking. Maybe he should have more words in his vocabulary. I don't fucking know. To be honest, I don't *want* to know because I'm doing my best. Am I failing as a parent? Possibly. But he's healthy and I'm trying.

"Not yet. It'll happen any day now, though." I shift my attention back to Max as he continues to take shaky steps into the kitchen, not letting her see the concern on my face that I'm screwing up this whole "dad" thing.

"That's kind of nice. I'm glad I don't have to worry about him running away on me," she chuckles.

Looking up at her, I catch her watching my son with a soft smile. She's not judging us.

She's not judging me.

"He's a hell of a crawler though." Letting go of his hands, Max immediately folds onto the ground before he takes off crawling. "He'll be on his hands and knees most of the time."

"As all men should be."

Isaiah makes his presence known with a childish squeak of a laugh. "I like her," he says.

"Well at least one of the Rhodes boys does."

“Two,” I interject.

A flash of confusion and maybe a bit of hope washes over her face.

“Max.”

She barks a laugh, and that fucking sound is so frustratingly sexy to me that I have to clear my throat and turn away from her.

“Emergency numbers,” I say, pointing to the list attached to the fridge. “Mine. The team’s travel coordinator. Hotel front desk. The local hospital—”

“You added 9-1-1.”

“They’re emergency numbers.”

“I think I’ve got that one down already.”

I continue down the list. “Your dad.”

“Got that one too.”

Isaiah barrels his body between us, pen outstretched. “Mine,” he says as he sprawls his number on the very bottom, ten times the size of the rest. “Text me anytime. Call me. Emergency, non-emergency.” He blocks me by turning his back to me, arm leaning on the fridge to create a barrier she can’t see behind. “I’m Max’s favorite and I have a feeling I’ll be yours too.”

Miller chuckles. “Thirsty.”

Well, that’s new. I’m used to women falling for my brother’s charmingly easy playboy thing.

Isaiah doesn’t move, keeping his body between ours. “I like to call myself eager.”

“Parched. Dehydrated,” she continues.

“Desperate,” I add for her.

“Hey.” Isaiah holds up a single finger. “If I wasn’t getting any, I’d let you call me desperate, but I’m doing just fine in that department, so I would say I’m *enthusiastically available*.”

“Sounds like you keep yourself plenty busy then. No need to try for your coach’s daughter, right? Don’t think he’d like that all too much.” Miller tilts her head.

Isaiah stiffens, his voice dipping to a whisper. “Please don’t tell your dad.”

“Then please don’t make it awkward for me while I’m watching your nephew.”

Okay, maybe there are three Rhodeses that like her.

“You heard the woman.” I usher him to the door. “Stop harassing her and leave so Max can get to know her.”

“But I wanna get to know her!” he says as I push him out of the room.

I shut the door behind him, turning back to the kitchen. “Sorry about him.”

“Was I too direct?”

“Nah. A little rejection is good for his overgrown ego, but by turning him down you probably made him fall in love with you. So, good luck with that.”

“Great,” she deadpans before finding Max sitting at her feet, staring up at her.

She gets down on her haunches, making herself as eye level as she can. “Hi, Bug.”

Max smiles and I lean against the wall, watching them.

“What do you say? Wanna hang out with me while your dad is working? We can watch his game and make fun of how tight his pants are.”

“You’ll be watching?”

“The game? Or your ass?”

“Both.”

Miller's greens dart to me over her shoulder.

*Shit.* The old me popped out without thought, two seconds after she gave my brother a warning for hitting on her.

A smirk lifts on her lips, but she doesn't fully answer my question. "Yeah, I'll be watching."

"*Shit. Shoot,*" I correct myself. "You probably have tickets. You should go to the game. Hang out with your dad afterward. I'll get Sanderson from the staff to watch him."

"It's fine." She waves me off, clearly not picking up on the fact I'd rather have Sanderson watch him tonight. I trust him enough and, that way, Max will be at the field where I am. "It seems I'll be around all summer now. Plenty of baseball to watch."

*Yeah, we'll see about that.*

Part of me wants to set her up for failure, give her dad a reason to fire her, but her failing only hurts Max in the long run.

Right on cue, as that disapproving thought passes through my mind, Max reaches his hands up for Miller to hold him. She takes him with ease, and he buries himself into her shoulder, something he never does with strangers, least of all a random woman.

My son looks over to me, a little grin on his lips as if he were silently telling me that, despite my best efforts, she's staying.

Taking my hat off, I give myself a moment between pitches, running my thumb over the small photo of Max I keep tucked into the inner band.

Travis calls for change-up, but I shake him off. I was lucky enough that this guy skimmed my last change-up. I'm not risking it again.

Two outs and the third is coming two pitches from now. Bottom of the seventh inning and we're up 3-1 on Miami. That run pissed me off. I lost focus and pitched right into the batter's pocket, where Miami's second baseman sent it flying into the bleachers past right field.

Thankfully, no other runners were on the bases, but that's the last time I think about Miller fucking Montgomery while I'm on the mound.

It's her first night with Max, and I'd assume from the glimpse I got of her this morning, it'll also be her last. There's no way she won't fuck this up.

Travis, my catcher, changes his call, giving me what I want—a four-seam fastball. I need this inning over. No unnecessary runners on the bases, no extra time spent running through pitch sequences. Just up and down. Three at-bats. Three outs.

Giving him a nod, I straighten my body and align my fingers over the laces of the ball in my glove. Deep breath and I go through my mechanics, sending a fastball high and outside. Just high and outside enough that the batter swings and misses, earning me my second strike.

He's pissed at himself, and I love that. I can see the frustration even from the mound. And when Travis gives me my next pitch, I know he's going to be real pissed when I get my final strike on a slider.

It's similar to my curveball, but my slider is deadly. This is only the second season that Travis has been my catcher, but he knows this is how I like to end an inning. It's effective, and right now I need efficiency so I can get back to the dugout and check on my son.

Like clockwork, the batter swings as the ball takes a downward curve, cutting inside.

Three strikes. Three outs. Inning over.

Travis meets me halfway between home plate and the pitchers' mound, connecting his

catcher's glove to my own. "Damn, Ace. You're going to bruise my palm with that speed. How's the arm?"

I round my shoulders. "Still feels good."

I would add that I've got at least another inning in me, but I wouldn't dare speak that out loud. Superstitions and all that.

"That's what I like to hear."

"Let's go, big bro!" Isaiah jogs in from his position between second and third base, smacking my ass with his glove. "What's gotten into you tonight?"

I steadily jog to the dugout with them. "Just ready for this game to be over. Would like for it to happen as quickly as possible."

"Fucking hell," he laughs. "Is this because of the hot nanny?"

"What the hell did you say, Rhodes?" Monty yells out as we pass him, taking the stairs into the dugout where I'm met with ass slaps, shoulder claps, and endless praise for tonight's pitching.

"Nothing. I don't think I said anything." He looks around. "Nope, didn't hear anything either."

"Good. I like you a whole lot better when you don't speak." He palms the back of my head. "Nice pitching, Ace."

Nodding, I find the first staff member who isn't busy.

"Sanderson," I call out to one of our trainers as I take a seat on the back of the bench, high enough to give me a view of the field. "You got your phone on you?"

His eyes bounce to mine nervously, probably because he knows better than to speak to a pitcher between innings. In fact, I typically don't talk at all, and my teammates know not to break my focus once I take a seat on the bench, but tonight is the exception.

Seven innings down which makes this the seventh text I've sent to Miller. Only I can't be the one to do it because there are too many cameras focused on me in the dugout.

"Send a text for me," I call out before rattling off Miller's number I memorized this afternoon.

"What should I say?"

"Checking in. Ask her how Max is and remind her she can bring him here if she's having trouble with him. You can take him off her hands, right?"

"Ace!" Monty calls out. "Stop texting my daughter and focus on the goddamn game."

"Hey, you're the one who not only raised an absolute wild card, but also hired her to watch my son. This is your fault."

A crack of a smile peeks through his lips.

Sanderson clears his throat. "She texted back." He reads from his phone with absolutely no inflection in his voice. "She says, 'Tell Kai if he doesn't leave me alone, I'm going to feed his kid all the sugar I can find in this hotel, sit him in front of a screen so he can get brainwashed by whatever the hell a Cocomelon is, then leave his grouchy ass to deal with Max all night.'"

"Not funny." I go to grab his phone.

"Ace," Monty says under his palm so outsiders can't read his lips. "Cameras."

Exhaling a resigned sigh, I say, "Text her back and tell her she's fired."

Monty chuckles under his breath.

Sanderson holds up his phone for me to read as texts continue to roll in.

**Miller:** *I got fired in the third and sixth innings too! This must be a new record.*

**Miller:** *Tell him his change-up should get him fired. That was ugly.*

**Miller:** *Oh, and tell him his baseball pants aren't doing anything for his ass.*

**Miller:** *Actually, don't lie. His change-up though, that's not a lie. It really was ugly.*

"Jesus," I huff out, shaking my head. "Just ask her if my kid is alive."

Sanderson's phone dings. "Alive."

A small weight lifts from my chest. Seven innings down, two to go.

"I can't wait to meet her," I hear Travis chime in from down the bench, talking to my teammates.

"About time Max got a hot nanny," my brother says.

"About time *we* got a hot nanny. We deserve this," Cody, our first baseman adds. "This is far more exciting for the boys than it is for Maxie."

Monty turns around to rip my teammates a new one, but I beat him to it.

"Watch it," I say from my isolated seat. Standing, my jacket falls from my shoulder as I project my voice loud enough to be heard from the other end of the dugout. "I'm going to say this only once, so listen up. No one better try anything with her. I don't give a shit if you think she's God's gift to this team, she's not here for any of you. So let this be the one and only warning that if you mess with her in any way that makes her feel uncomfortable or unwelcome, you will be answering to me. You think Monty is scary when it comes to his kid?" I chuckle condescendingly. "You don't even want to know what I'll be like if you fuck with mine, and messing with Miller, or anyone who is watching my son, is the same thing as messing with Max, so don't fucking try it."

Sinking back onto the top of the bench, I re-cover my shoulder with my jacket to keep it warm.

The dugout is eerily quiet, probably because my teammates are shocked to hear me speak. Baseball's unspoken rules and superstitions are no joke—you don't mess with them, but making sure Max is okay is more important than any superstition.

"Yeah!" my brother calls out, breaking the awkward silence. "Only Ace is allowed to make her feel unwelcome, isn't that right, Coach?"

"Isaiah, stop being such a kiss ass and get on-deck. You're batting next."

"Yes, sir!"

He swaps his hat for his batting helmet, scurrying out of the dugout to the on-deck circle, while I sit and wait for this goddamn game to be over.



## Chapter 5

### Miller

“Max, there’s your dad.” I point to the television screen across the room.

He squeals and claps, his eyes wide with excitement.

“Is your dad the best baseball player ever?”

His icy blues grow and glint, so I’ll take that as Max’s version of a yes.

“I wonder who’s gonna break the news to Babe Ruth and Willie Mays?”

He giggles, though I know he doesn’t have any idea what I’m asking.

Over the past few hours with him, I’ve learned that I’m the funniest person to ever exist and if he keeps laughing at everything I have to say, I’m going to need an ego check by the time the summer is over.

When my dad proposed the idea of me nannying for his pitcher’s son, I was hesitant. I’ve never really spent time with a kid before, and sure, there are some major fears of not being good at this role, but what’s different about this job compared to all the others is that, no matter if I’m the best or not, I’m directly helping my dad. Other goals I strive for are to impress him, reassure him I’m doing something with my life after he gave up his. But this, this is me having the opportunity to make his life easier.

Max continues to look at his dad on the TV as he stands in some kind of contraption that keeps him upright and level with the counter so he can hang out with me as I get his dinner together. He reaches for his sippy cup of water, chugging it back while I cut up a bit of avocado and brown some toast, putting it on his food mat so he can eat and make as big of a mess as he’d like.

I’m not sure if I suddenly gained a knack for working with kids or if Max is the easiest fifteen-month-old to exist, but he’s really boosting my confidence here. In his own way, he responds to my questions, as long as the answer is yes or no. He eats the food I put in front of him and was fully entertained by the castle of wooden blocks I made earlier.

As if I wasn’t already convinced that Kai was the problem and not the nannies themselves, spending my afternoon with Max is proving my point. They’ve got an entire MLB organization catering to their new family, but I’m starting to feel like maybe Kai isn’t all that eager to make this situation work.

My attention is pulled back to the television. Top of the eighth and the Warriors already have two outs. Number twenty-one is on the mound, looking stunning in that royal blue uniform. Scruff slopes over his sharp jaw, perfectly proportioned lips, full brows. He must be wearing contacts at the moment, but his usual glasses really add to that “uptight but fuckable” vibe he emanates. Clark Kent look-alikes do it for me apparently.

Kai shakes off a call and then another before accepting the third option his catcher gives him.

I roll my eyes. I’m glad to know I’m not the only one Kai likes to disagree with.

Winding up, that tall and lean body stretches out, releasing a curveball that’s speed is surprisingly fast for the type of pitch, but it moves so much over the plate that there’s no denying it’s a curveball. And it’s a nasty one too.

Third strike. Third out.

“Max, why didn’t you tell me your dad was so good?”

He smacks his lips around the bit of avocado before smiling at me, all green baby teeth.

“Dadda.” Once again, he points his avocado-covered finger at the screen as a camera zooms in on Kai jogging off the field.

The guy is annoyingly easy on the eyes. His cap is pulled low over his brow, but the blue of his hat makes his piercing eyes shine even from here.

“Kai Rhodes is having a heck of a season,” one of the announcers says in the background. “He looks better at thirty-two than he did at twenty-two.”

I’m assuming they’re talking about his talent, but there’s no denying that Kai Rhodes looks damn good at thirty-two.

Another voice cuts in. “I’d say those fans in Chicago are feeling awfully lucky right about now. He signed with the Warriors last season to play with his brother one final time before moving into retirement in the next handful of years, but with how he’s playing lately, retirement is the last thing anyone is thinking about. And I’d assume it’s not even on Kai’s radar.”

The little boy next to me with dark brown hair and wistful blue eyes looks at the screen in awe as his dad slips into the dugout. Not only does Kai look like a superhero, I think he might actually be one to his son.

You can see it in the way Max looks at his dad. In the way Kai looks at him. I’d bet good money Kai thinks about retirement every single day.

“Max,” I say, pulling his attention back to me and the food on his mat. “I made you something.”

I’m versed enough to know that crust is a hard no for most kids, so while cutting it off, I made it a little more exciting by turning his square of white bread into a piece of doggy-shaped toast.

Look at me using my kitchen skills on day one of this gig. Who the hell needs cookie cutters?

“Woof! Woof!” Max barks, pointing at the bread.

“Do you like doggies?”

He slaps at the toast in excitement before tearing off a leg and popping the bread in his mouth.

Glad to know I’m still in debt from pastry school when I could get this kind of reaction by cutting some store-bought bread into the shape of a Labrador.

I lean my elbows onto the counter to get on his level. “Max, what do you think is wrong with me?”

Damn. Loaded question for a fifteen-month-old. I guess I really am losing it.

He doesn’t answer, continuing to chew away at the bread and avocado. Little does he know there are people in certain parts of the world willing to pay twenty-five dollars or more for some avocado toast and he’s over here mashing it into his mat long before it ever makes it to his mouth.

I rephrase my question. “Do you think I’m going to get my life together by the end of summer?”

He looks at me with shiny eyes.

“Do you think I’ll stop sucking in the kitchen?”

He giggles.

My eyes narrow. “Do you think I’m going to figure out these recipes?”

He smacks his lips as he chews before giving me his biggest smile.

“Wow.” I straighten. “Hanging out with you is going to be excellent for my self-confidence. Did you know that?”

He squeals and I chuckle, brushing his hair away from his eyes. “All right, little man. I’ll be sure to keep phrasing my questions so I like your answers.”

My phone dings on the counter. The eighth time in eight innings.

**Unknown:** *This is Sanderson . . . again. Ace wants to know how Max is doing.*

I can’t help but roll my eyes at the unknown number accompanying the exact question I received during all seven of the previous innings. Kai is ridiculous, pulling these poor employees into his overprotective insanity.

**Me:** *Good. He’s sleeping really well after the whiskey I slipped into his bottle.*

**Unknown:** *Oh okay. Well, um . . . Ace wants me to tell you that you’re fired.*

**Me:** *Weird. I was fired three times already tonight, yet I’m still at the hotel with his son.*

**Unknown:** *I’m sure he’ll reach out again in the ninth.*

**Me:** *I’m sure he will.*

When I agreed to this gig, I wasn’t fully convinced I was ready to spend my summer taking care of anyone other than myself, but I said yes because my dad is almost impossible to say no to. Whatever convincing I needed was solidified by Max and how easy he is to be with, but his dad’s overly concerned parenting style is causing me to question my decision.

My attention falls back to the little boy who is an absolute mess covered in avocado.

“Max, is your dad the most overbearing parent of all time?”

He squeals and from now on, I’m taking that as a definitive yes.

“That’s what I thought.”

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