

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
WILLOW ASTER

AUTUMN  
NIGHTS



# AUTUMN NIGHTS

---

WILLOW ASTER

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# CONTENTS

[A Note from Willow](#)

[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](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)  
[Chapter 47](#)  
[Chapter 48](#)  
[Chapter 49](#)  
[Chapter 50](#)  
[Chapter 51](#)  
[Chapter 52](#)  
[Chapter 53](#)  
[Chapter 54](#)  
[Chapter 55](#)  
[Chapter 56](#)  
[Chapter 57](#)  
[Chapter 58](#)  
[Chapter 59](#)  
[Chapter 60](#)  
[Chapter 61](#)  
[Chapter 62](#)  
[Chapter 63](#)  
[Chapter 64](#)  
[Chapter 65](#)  
[Chapter 66](#)  
[Chapter 67](#)  
[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Other Books by Willow Aster](#)

[ASL Learning Resources](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Copyright © 2022 by Willow Aster  
ISBN-13: 979-8-9861179-6-6

Cover by Emily Wittig Designs  
Proofreading: Christine Estevez

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

*To my deaf friends who make it way too easy for me to cheat with sign language—thank you, and please don't give up on me!*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# A NOTE FROM WILLOW

Thanks for purchasing *Autumn Nights*! I hope you'll fall in love with these characters!

Four sensitivity readers helped me with a deaf character who is central to this story. Since there are varying thoughts on how to properly write sign language in fiction, please know I tried to study them all thoroughly and leaned heavily on the advice of my sensitivity readers, but any mistakes I've made are mine, and I hope you will trust my heart that I really tried to get it right.

American sign language—ASL—is a language with its own syntax, grammar rules, and structure that's different from written and spoken English, so some phrases may jump out if you're not accustomed to communicating with someone in sign language.

To make it clear while reading, here's a little info about what to expect formatting-wise. Because the deaf character in this story can speak and read lips to an extent, most of the time any dialogue is spoken and signed, and on the page, it looks the same as most spoken dialogue—quotation marks around the dialogue, no italics. Occasionally, I describe what the signs look like, but not always, and then there are times when conversations between the characters will be in sign language only and that will be in caps and italicized.

I hope that helps!

Love,  
Willow

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 1

## WEDDING BLUES



### Autumn

I set the bouquet of flowers on the bar and try to catch my breath. It's been the most beautiful day, the most beautiful wedding, the most beautiful bride and groom, in the most charming place I've ever seen. We're on a beach in Nantucket and last night we stayed in a house that surrounds a lighthouse. We had the place to ourselves last night and today and I've made sure to investigate every inch of the place—the house is a dream in design and elegance. I even love my dress, a feat in itself. It's in a shade called Desert Rose and is the prettiest dress I've ever worn.

All of this romance in the air would normally make me nauseated. It's not that I'm not a believer in love, but I leave the *sunshine and unicorn* idealism to my sister—speaking of the most beautiful bride—while I'm more of a *dark underbelly, see life as it is* kind of girl.

I swallow down the lump in my throat. I'm so happy for my sister Summer and her hottie movie star. I've been rooting for them since the day I met Liam Taylor, so it's not sadness or jealousy that I'm feeling, but immense satisfaction and gratitude that one of us got it right.

My phone buzzes in my jeweled clutch and I pull it out, turning off the sound and rolling my eyes when I see that it's Dominic. *Again*. I shove it back in my purse and turn when I hear a low whistle.

"Do texts always make you angry or is this a special occasion?" the guy asks.

Calling him a guy feels like it lessens him somewhat. It's the tall, sturdy like a rock, hunk of a man that I noticed when I walked down the sandy beach aisle as maid of honor. He's hard to miss with shoulders so broad he could probably lift a car or some other such foolishness. He's so not my type. Summer says I go for the starving artist types that look like they could either have a drug habit and need to eat...or both. She's not wrong. I once accidentally put my ex's jeans on, and they fit...only he's eight inches taller. Dominic is said ex and he's decided that since I'm done with him, he wants me now. Which also seems to be my type.

"Special occasion," I say.

Hunka man grins and his hazel eyes sparkle in the sunshine, his perfectly straight white teeth with obnoxious full lips that are like pillows such a contrast with his boulder man body.

"Remind me not to get on your bad side," he says, his eyes falling to my lips, and I feel shaken and stirred.

As much as I don't want to feel either shaken or stirred, coming out of a string of bad relationships and even worse first dates, the last thing I need right now is my nether regions to wake up over anyone.

I turn back toward the bar, and he sits beside me. I'm surprised the stool doesn't break in half with the pure muscle he's throwing down.

"Are you related to the bride?" he asks.

"Summer is my sister," I tell him.

"Sounds like a song," he says, grinning.

When the bartender turns and sees him there, her eyes double before she braces herself and puts on a flirty smile. She walks over and leans on the bar, giving him her full attention. He tells her he wants a ginger beer and turns back to me. She turns, disappointed, and I can't help but feel a little flutter in my chest when he leans a little closer to me.

“Does the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen have a name?” he asks.

His eyes are intense, and I lift an eyebrow. “As I said, Summer...” I turn back and look at her and Liam. *People* is doing a spread on them and the photographers are in their faces, but they seem oblivious to everyone but each other.

“I know Summer’s name,” he says, amused. “I’ve gotten to know her a little bit too. Liam and I go back a few years. I meant *you*. I apologize if I didn’t make that perfectly clear.”

My face flushes slightly and I shake my head. Summer’s the one who usually flushes, not me. What is even happening right now? I frown at him, and his grin slips a little before his eyes crinkle with his next adorable smile.

“My name is Autumn, Autumn Winters.”

I wait for a seasonal joke or two. Our parents did not do us any favors with our names.

“It fits you,” he says, nodding. “I’m Zac...Zac Ledger.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say, getting lost in his eyes that are looking at me so intently, it’s like he’s caressing my soul. I frown again and then jump when someone says his name loudly behind us. I turn and one of the photographers is there with a long lens.

“Mind if we get a few shots of you?”

Zac glances at me and the tips of his ears get pink. I take this opportunity to stand and take my bouquet and drink with me, because I know a man with that much confidence who suddenly blushes is dangerous for any woman, no matter if he’s my type or not. He must be an actor if he knows Liam and the photographers are drooling over him.

I don’t wait around to hear what he says, hurrying over to Summer when I see her waving at me.

“Take a few more pictures with us?” she asks.

She looks like a dream in her Ines Di Santo gown. It’s an embellished sleeveless trumpet gown with an incredible textured skirt. The back is low, and the gown has a textured overskirt that I love. I think that’s coming off once the dancing begins and it’s the part of the dress I would’ve put over my head as a kid and pretended to be a bride...or a nun with a tragic romantic past.

We smile while the photographers click away.

“You look so gorgeous, Auto,” Summer says. “That color is perfect with your amber hair and those sweet brown eyes.”

I snort. “We know nothing about me is sweet. Thank you for doing me right with this dress though. I’m grateful you didn’t make me wear something hideous.” I lean my head on hers. “I’ve never seen you look so beautiful or so happy, and I cannot even express how happy I am for you.”

She puts her hand on my cheek and then our heads part as we wave hands over our faces and try not to cry.

“I saw you talking to Zac,” Summer says through her teeth as she smiles.

“Excellent subject change.” I lay on the sarcasm.

She beams. She’s gotten quite good with posing for photo shoots. I was the one giving her pointers when she first started dating Hollywood’s It movie star, but she’s the one to watch now, as she pivots and leans into me, her back to my chest. She’s my favorite person and it’s easy to smile back when she looks at me over her shoulder, but it falters somewhat when she mentions Zac again.

“Zac is staring at you right now.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” I whisper.

“What? He’s only the hottest player in the NFL right now,” she says.

“Speak a language I understand,” I tell her.

“Football,” she says, laughing.

“Oh, that tracks. You know sport and I don’t go together. Remember? I tried dating that baseball guy...” I shake my head and then remember we’re supposed to be posing.

“You know he’s the one who owns this pl—”

Liam walks over from where he’d been photographed with his groomsmen by another photographer and swoops Summer back with a staggering kiss.

Summer squeals but then gives in to the kiss and it’s so romantic I have to look away.

I glance up and sure enough, Zac Ledger *is* staring at me across the beach while that photographer is snapping away. He grins when our eyes meet and I turn, blushing furiously. *Nope*, I tell my pounding heart.

*You’re not into sporty guys.*

*You like the artsy, skinny, emo guys with angst and colossal emotions, and yes, flakiness, but hopefully one day you’ll come across one who is not flaky, just everything else.*

When we’re done with pictures, I steer clear of Mr. Biceps on Crack and chat with Mama and Sven, a guy my sister works with.

“Dance with me?”

My stomach drops onto the sand and I turn to see Zac standing there. I start to shake my head no, but he nods and holds out his hand, grinning when I take it.

We walk toward the canopy of lights, where a handful of couples are dancing, and when Zac’s hands go around my waist, I forget to breathe. My hands aren’t sure where to land because I’m concerned that if I touch him, I really won’t think clearly, but they end up on his chest. I was right to be hesitant. He feels too damn good. *Solid*.

He smiles down at me. “I’m not one to dance usually, but you’re making it easy.”

We move slowly, our eyes never leaving each other’s, and the heat between us feels like it could blow up this whole island.

“What are you thinking right now?” he asks, with a sexy smirk like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

“I’m thinking you are *dangerous*, Zac Ledger.”

He chuckles. “Me? Why is that?”

“You’re entirely too smooth,” I whisper.

“Oh, you like my dance moves?” His hands grip me tighter around my waist.

“No. I mean, yes. No...I wasn’t referring to your dance moves at all. But you do have...skills.”

He looks like he wants to laugh again but leans in, his forehead on mine. “You’re feeling this too, right? I’m thinking you’re the one who’s dangerous, Autumn.”

I feel shaky inside. We dance like this as one song goes into the next and the next. My body is at war with my mind because I know I should bolt, but I just can’t. He feels too good. When he lifts his head to look at me again, I think he might kiss me, and it shakes some sense into me. I take a step back and smile at him, smoothing my dress. He looks confused.

“Thank you for the dance,” I tell him, backing away.

He nods and takes a step toward me. “Hey, I really want to see you again...”

One of the photographers from earlier calls his name and he looks over his shoulder at him, while I turn and walk away.

My dad is making moon eyes at my mother, so I tell myself I can’t be distracted with a guy when my dad and my mom are in the same proximity.

We are crazy about Augusta, my dad's little girl, and we like his now ex-girlfriend, but the last thing my mom needs is to get hooked by my dad. His absentee father skills have vastly improved with Augusta compared to how he was with us, but still.

I'm standing guard over my mom when I hear that low, rumbly voice. It sounds like he's on the phone, but his sexy voice has me on alert.

"I love you too, babe," Zac says. He laughs and I turn back to see the football player of all players, eyes all lit up. My eyes narrow on that asshole and I'm glad he doesn't seem aware that I'm standing right here because I am catching that cheating liar red-handed.

"I'll be home before you know it," he says. "My sweetest girl," he croons.  
*Bastard.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## 2

### NEW LEAF



Autumn

I am unreasonably livid.

I don't know the guy, so there's no reason I should want to squeeze his perfect face until a blood vessel pops, but I do.

Especially when he walks right over to me just as my dad swoops in on my mom.

I do not think so.

My dad is a good-looking man for a dad. Okay, some would say he's hot for any age, which is just disgusting, but I guess I should just be grateful since I've been told I look like him. He's a director, successful ad nauseum, and the magazines (and some of my friends) have compared him to that dark-haired guy with the beard on *Magic Mike*. Joe-something, or Big Dick Richie in the movie. *Ew. Ew. Ew.* Totally ruined him in that movie for me since he

does look like my dad. Thank God, Channing was in there.

I hear my dad say something in low tones to my mom at the same time as this cheater puts his hand on my elbow. I pull my arm away fiercely, and Zac looks surprised and amused.

“You left your purse at the bar,” he says, handing me my clutch.

“Oh...thank you.” I turn away from him and want to walk away, but I’m stuck because Dad is telling Mama how incredible she looks. I lift my eyes to the heavens because I’m needing backup with the overload of pheromones that must be darting all through the air right now. Everyone looks like spring in *Bambi* when they’re twitterpated.

“No problem. It gave me an excuse to get away from those photographers,” Zac says.

“Must be rough,” I say, my voice as cold as I can manage.

“It’s...something,” he says.

I see a photographer out of the corner of my eye, snapping one of us talking and I glare at Zac. His smile fully drops this time, and he takes a step toward me.

“Did something happen?” he asks quietly.

I put my hand on my hip, my bouquet tickling my side through the sheer fabric of my dress.

“You’re really gonna pretend like you don’t know?” I snap.

His eyes widen as his mouth falls open and then closes. “Yes?”

I growl and his eyes get wider before a smile takes over his face. He chuckles and it’s raspy and deep and sexy as all sin.

I flounce off, leaving Mama to fend for herself and sexy man to get a clue. But my heels are slowing me down, so I take them off and walk away, heading farther down the beach.

“Hey, wait up,” he calls. He jogs over and falls into step next to me.

“Are you serious right now?”

“I don’t know how *serious* I’d say I am. I’m usually more of a go-with-the-flow, embrace life kind of guy...I don’t take anything too serious.”

I humph and he chuckles, his hand going up to his hair in a way that makes him seem somewhat less confident-manwhore, more tentative, *sensitive*-manwhore.

“I can’t help but feel like whatever I say is suddenly the wrong thing. And we were getting along so well. Where did I go south?” he asks.

I turn and face him, jabbing my finger in his chest. “If you have to ask



that, buddy, you really *are* a piece of work.”

He lifts both hands and I notice his ears turning pink again. “Okay, I don’t know what’s happening right now.” He turns and looks around, his eyes narrowed when he looks at me again. “Did Liam put you up to this?” His lips curl up into a grin again and I roll my eyes and shake my head, taking off as fast as I can.

The more distance I can put between the two of us, the better.

Because my penchant for the dark, artistic types seems to always include cheaters too. It doesn’t matter where I go—I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, studied abroad in London, have lived in L.A. not quite a year, and even at a wedding in Nantucket—the common thread seems to be that I attract grade-A jerks.

Summer and I have come to this realization the hard way—the fact that we seem to go for men who have attributes like our father. Unavailable types who talk pretty and can seem so convincing, but who ultimately don’t want to commit. Well, Summer *used* to do this and then she fell in love with Liam, who is a reformed player who fell hard when he met my sister. But they’re a once-in-a-lifetime kind of story.

I’m still learning apparently. But I made a deal with Summer *and* myself after I saw nudes on Dominic’s phone from the girl at the bar where he plays...and then realized they’d been exchanging photos and then some for at least a month while we were dating.

No more.

I’m turning over a new leaf. I don’t need to settle down with anyone. I can focus on my job, and it’s a damn good job. I got hired on at Winthrop Designs not long after I moved to California, my degree in art and design under the tutelage of Clarabelle Armstrong in London working its magic with Jane Winthrop. Jane is a beast to work for, but I love my job so much, and I love the challenge of getting her to crack a smile or to tell me she likes what I’ve picked out for certain projects...well, she very rarely smiles and never outright *says* she likes something I do, but I think she must since she keeps giving me big projects, right?

I’m choosing to believe she’s happy with my work.

Anyway. I have no time to waste on people who are not worth my time. I am too busy for that mess. Summer says I have so much to offer someone, but that’s what everyone in a happy relationship does. They want to see you settled too. I can’t blame her for that. I’ve never seen her so happy before,

and I must admit, the thought is appealing. To find your person and never have to go through another sad breakup again.

Not dwelling on that.

I walk until my temper has cooled off a few degrees. I turn and walk back toward the wedding, where the twinkle lights are showing more than ever against the setting sun. The music is going full swing and the guests are either dancing or watching on the sidelines. I catch myself looking for Zac and stop, determined to not let him invade another second of my thoughts.

New leaf. Job. Make money. Establish my career. And maybe someday, I can think about a relationship. Until then, I will remain laser-focused, and no amount of muscle and sexy will sway me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 3

## HOBNOB



### Autumn

I show up to work only five minutes early on Tuesday, rather than my usual fifteen. I survived a wedding across the country, flew back to L.A. late last night, and am still on time this morning. I'm impressed with myself. Until I see my boss.

Jane lifts an eyebrow as I walk past her office and then take the steps backward to her door.

"Rough weekend?" she asks.

"My sis—"

She waves a hand and I stop mid-word. I know better than to think she really wants to hear any personal anecdotes. If Jane Winthrop knows my sister is a successful screenwriter and just married an Oscar winner, she doesn't care, that's how singularly dedicated Jane is to her interior design

firm. Actors are only on her radar if she designed their houses, and discussion is only important when it relates to the latest job we're working on at Winthrop Designs. It took me a minute to realize this because my roots are in Charlotte and we can jaw on about the weather and clothes and weddings and the last sweet tea we had, all the livelong day.

"Did you touch up the plans you made for the Garcia space?" she asks.

"Yes, I'll email that right away." I inwardly groan that I didn't already do it. I worked on it during every second of downtime over the weekend, which was difficult to fit in and still be fully present for my sister. The bulk of the work was done on the whole flight home.

"I think they're wanting to change the coral to more of a salmon tone," she adds.

I nod briskly. "Okay, I'll make those changes and send it right over."

"Great. And I'm going to need you to meet with the contractor over at Leonardo's beach house."

Yes, Leo, as in DiCaprio, but I've already met him and while charming, he's as old as my father. Stop those dirty thoughts. He's also not angsty enough to be my type. And as soon as I think that, my phone vibrates in my purse.

"Sounds good. What time?"

"Eleven."

I wait to see if Jane has any more details before I head to my office, but she's forgotten I'm here already. Her phone rings and she picks it up while I walk down the hall. I check my phone and it's Dominic. I lift my eyes to the ceiling in annoyance. I can't believe he's even awake this early. I'm not ready to block him yet. That always feels so final and kind of mean.

*The guy cheated on you for at least a month that you know of. You can afford to be mean.*

I sigh and walk into my tiny office, putting my purse and phone in the top drawer and opening AutoCAD, the program I use most. I find the Garcia file and make the changes before emailing it to Jane. I hear a throat clearing and look up, startled when I see Jane staring at me from the doorway.

She never comes to my office. I'm always summoned. Uh-oh. I think back to all the projects I've worked on in the past month and what could've possibly gone wrong on one of them.

She assesses me and I stand up, moving toward her as she stares me down, terrified she's about to fire me.

“You didn’t tell me you were hobnobbing with the rich and famous over the weekend,” she finally says.

Taken aback, I stare at her in confusion. I can’t tell if she’s pleased or angry with me. Or if this is her idea of a joke?

I open my mouth to speak, and she lifts a hand. “I’ve cleared your schedule for the next few months. You’re heading to Boston. Congratulations,” she says, her voice as dry as a desert.

When she doesn’t say anything and looks at me as if she’s waiting, I lean back against my desk, needing the support.

“What do you mean?” I finally ask.

“Whatever you did to convince Zac Ledger to use Winthrop Designs worked. I wish you’d been more of a team player and mentioned that *I* was the owner of the company and therefore more skilled to do this job...” She holds a hand up when I sputter out nonsense due to shock. “However,” she says firmly, trying to force out a smile, “he is convinced you are the best person for the job and would only agree to hiring us if I sent you out there.” She leans in. “I want to stay abreast of every decision and told him as much, which he agreed to, of course.” Something about the way she says this while glancing around the room makes me wonder if he really agreed to that or if she’s just throwing that out there for my benefit.

“This will be a huge account. He just bought a ten-thousand-square-foot house, and I could imagine this job lasting anywhere from three months to nine months, probably longer. Your accommodations will be covered.”

I’m still stuck on the fact that she said it was for Zac Ledger, but when her last sentence sinks in, I shake my head.

“I can’t just move there, I just got *here*—”

The look on Jane’s face stops me cold. “When you work for Winthrop, you go wherever the job takes you, and he insists on you, so *you* will be going to Boston. He’s paying an astronomical figure, so we really can’t refuse.”

I don’t even have words. I’m stunned speechless.

Jane takes that as acceptance and presses her hands together. “I’ll book your flight to leave first thing in the morning. I’ll take care of the meeting with the contractor today, don’t worry about that. Send me the Garcia file and then you’re free to go home and pack for your trip.” She turns and leaves the room and I’m still standing there gaping.

Since I’ve already sent her the file and am on autopilot, I get my things

and walk out of the office, unsure of how I get to my car. I drive to my nearby condo and by the time I walk inside, my temper and words are back. I call Summer and she answers on the second ring.

“Hey. You okay?” she says groggily.

I slam my hand against my forehead. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. Go back to your honeymoon bliss.”

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Do you by any chance have Zac Ledger’s phone number—does Liam?”

“Ooo. I knew something was going on. Zac was asking about you too,” she sings. “Hold on a sec.” I hear her asking Liam for Zac’s number and he chuckles and says something about Zac being persistent.

No shit.

Summer rattles off the number and I write it down, tell her I love her, and hang up while she’s yelling at me to tell her *everything* the first chance I get.

By the time I’m picking up the paper to put the number in my phone, Jane has texted my flight information. I take a closer look. No freaking way. It leaves tonight at 10:38 and I’ll get there at 7:18 in the morning. A nonstop, five hours and forty minutes red-eye flight that sounds torturous. Especially after I *just did* a similar flight. I curse a long streak at the top of my lungs and then hope my neighbors didn’t hear.

Something tells me I’ll only get Jane off my back if I go deal with this guy in person, so instead of calling him, I go to my room and toss out the dirty clothes in my suitcase and replace them with enough for a twenty-four-hour trip to Boston. I’ll give this oversized football ninny a piece of my mind and then I’ll come home and somehow convince Jane we didn’t need his dirty money anyway.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 4

## ALL BUSINESS



Zac

I barely slept last night, thinking about Autumn Winters flying in this morning. I got up at the crack to get my workout in and could use another cup of coffee, but I don't even feel tired. I make the trek into Boston early enough that I miss most of rush hour, and even though I want to be the one to pick her up at the airport, I don't want to make it seem like I'm anxious for this meeting.

I haven't been able to understand this draw to her myself, so arranging a driver and meeting her at a neutral location is partly for me to get my bearings. She will hopefully hear me out and be willing to take on this job.

I'm assuming she is since she's coming all this way.

I don't know what it is about her. Well, besides the fact that she's fucking stunning. But I've been around stunning women before, should have learned my lesson about staying far away from them, in fact. There's just something unapologetic about her. I get the feeling she's exactly who she appears to be and that's refreshing. And she's quick-witted as hell.

The thing is, I saw her the morning of her sister's wedding, before any reasonable person was awake, outside working on the flower arch that already looked perfect to me. I drove to my place early that morning, unable to attend all of the wedding festivities like I'd hoped, and her vivid hair against the backdrop of the ocean water stood out like a beacon.

Later, when I got my coffee after sleeping a couple of hours and glanced out the window, she was hauling an elaborate rug that looked ten times her size, toward the flower arch. It had also been moved up maybe a hundred feet, which meant she must have rearranged all the chairs too. I glanced around for more people helping her, but she was alone, and I was about to go help her myself when I saw Summer go out there and hug her, dragging her toward the house. *So that's Summer's sister.*

If I hadn't gotten a call from my agent at that moment, I might have met her then, but something tells me she would've been off to fix something else. Something about her dedication to making everything perfect for someone else...her sister...and her dogged persistence carrying that heavy rug by herself—I don't know. It intrigued me.

I've put more effort into seeing her again than I should, based on how brief our interaction was, but my friend Liam clearly adores his new sister-in-law, and I trust him. And my intentions are legit, even as I'm sitting here thinking about how beautiful she is. This is all business with a side of interest on my part, at least that's what I'm telling myself. I simply want her design expertise...and to get to know her and find out why she went from smiling at me without any restraint at the wedding to shooting daggers into my spleen with her pretty brown eyes. All within a matter of minutes.

I could've just called her, but when I found out she's an interior designer, it felt like another sign that I'm meant to get to know her. Football might be my profession, but remodeling houses is right up there dueling for first place with what I love to do.

I glance at my watch and feel a twang of apprehension. This is madness. She's gonna think I'm a creeper or some other shit and she'd have every right



to be concerned. I've thought of her way too much since the other night. It's just that it's been so long since I've had any interest in pursuing a woman at all, beyond a hookup here and there with women who aren't looking for anything beyond that.

In fact, my phone buzzes and I glance down, seeing a text from Caroline, the woman I've had a mutual arrangement with occasionally.

Caroline

Are you free tonight?

Sorry, no.

But I'm already thinking that I need to move on. She texted yesterday too and I told her I was busy, but now I get the feeling she's expecting more than what we'd agreed to.

I've enjoyed our time together, but I think it's best if we don't see each other again.

I put my phone face down on the table, already feeling better now that we've moved on, but she immediately texts back.

Caroline

Have I done something to upset you?

I swipe a hand down my face, the lack of sleep suddenly hitting me.

No, you've been great.

I blink at my phone, feeling like a dick. She's probably just horny and I'm wrong to assume she's caught feelings.

My phone vibrates again.

Caroline

Then it should be fine if we see each other again, if I've been great.

She sends a smiley face emoji and I sigh. What do I tell her? That I have no interest in seeing her again? Because that's the truth.

Take care, Caroline.

I press send and feel like an asshole but also relieved. I've never had a lack of female attention, but it's gotten a little out of hand since I became the quarterback for the New England Patriots. For someone who was in a long-term relationship throughout my senior year and part of college, I never expected to be this way now, but I never expected a *lot* of things.

I see Autumn walk into the bakery and enjoy the moments of watching her before she spots me. She looks entirely too put together for someone who just flew in on a red-eye from California. Her hair is long and wavy, a shade I don't know the name of...something darker than blonde, but not fully red or brown either...it's all those shades combined into something I want to sink my fingers into.

I give myself a mental shake as I stand up and try to remind myself this is business, strictly business. Besides my spinning thoughts, my dick also has other thoughts in mind, of course, but the last thing I intend to do is get off on the wrong foot with Autumn again.

I can tell the moment she sees me and it's obvious it's not the warm fuzzies mixed with adrenaline and nerves that I'm feeling right now. Something I'm not used to feeling either, which is exactly why I've asked her to come.

I mean, that and the house proposal, of course.

No, when she sees me, her eyes narrow as she assesses me and her shoulders straighten and stiffen as she approaches.

Damn. I've got my work cut out for me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 5

## SEXY GENES AND FRENCH TOAST



### Autumn

I land in Boston as scheduled the next morning and take an Uber to Tatte Bakery & Cafe. Jane sent the address of the bakery last night, saying to plan on meeting Zac there. I see the cute bakery on the pretty street and look for that burly bastard but don't see him. I've been thinking of what I'm going to say to him since I was packing yesterday, arming up for whatever argument he has to convince me to do this. Bottom line is that I'll insist that he smooths things out with Jane for me, and that he has her do the project instead of me. That way Winthrop Designs won't be out any money, Jane will be happy she's leading the project, and I won't have to deal with the devil.

I walk inside and Zac is sitting at a table near the front. He smiles and stands when he sees me, stretching out his hand. Oh, he's good. He's really good, acting all innocent and hotter than any one male specimen deserves to

be. I shake his hand, being the professional that I am, even though I'm both seething and unsettled at how attractive he looks to me this early in the morning after a very long flight.

"Before I order you whatever you're having," he says, motioning for me to check out the display of bakery goodness, "please accept my apology that I didn't reach you before you flew all the way home, that it was a red-eye flight, and for the exhaustion you must be feeling right now." His palms press together in a plea for forgiveness.

Some of my anger wilts. He seems so sincere. My eyes narrow on his and he just looks back at me like we're two people meeting for coffee in the middle of the week. Easy-peasy.

I sigh and move past him, ordering the Tatte house latte.

"Their breakfast sandwiches are really good too," Zac says over my shoulder.

The girl taking my order can hardly function, she's swooning so hard at Mr. Ledger.

I see a plate of French toast going past me and I swallow hard, nodding at the girl. "French toast, please."

"Sweet or savory?" she asks.

"Uh, sweet." I file that away later, to find out what savory French toast is, because I haven't met a French toast I don't like.

Zac pays and I let him, figuring it's the least he can do since I'm about to turn around and fly back home as soon as I can. The least he can do is spot breakfast...and the outrageous plane ticket.

"Thank you," I say primly.

He grins his sparkly-white smile. "Pleasure is mine." He motions for me to sit down and I do, some of the exhaustion from the long night hitting me.

"Do you forgive me?" he asks, leaning toward me.

"What?" I put my hands together to keep from fidgeting. The man's attention fills me with nervous energy.

"For the godawful flight. There's an airport closer to my place, but it wouldn't have been a direct flight, and I hated to do anything to add to your time on a plane, since you just..." His voice dies off when I don't say anything. He slumps back against his seat. "Tell me what I did. I have to know. We were getting along so well..."

"I can't take this job, Zac. I just got settled into a condo and I like working at Winthrop. Jane says this project could take anywhere from three

to nine months, and it'll be like starting over at work when I get back."

"But you'd still be in contact with Jane. She insisted on that," he says, eyes brightening.

"I'm sure you're used to convincing women to do everything you want, no questions asked." I fold my arms over my chest and I can tell it's a struggle for him to keep his eyes on my face and not my chest. These girls have gotten me into trouble plenty, so that's nothing new.

He presses his lips together like he's trying not to laugh, which makes steam feel like it's literally going to explode out of my head. I lean forward and pound my pointer finger on the table, ready to tell him off, when the most amazing plate of French toast appears. Seriously. It's challah bread with some kind of whipped mousse, raspberry jam, and fresh strawberries on top. And then the latte.

I decide to sample the latte before I chew him out. For stamina purposes.

I gasp when I taste it. "This tastes like Baklava," I whisper.

"Is that not heaven?" he asks, leaning in. A mug of coffee is set in front of him—from what I can tell just a no-frills cup of coffee—and he doesn't touch it, choosing to stare at me instead. With that dumbass charming grin on his stinking face.

I'm too in love with my latte to chew him out just yet. His breakfast sandwich is placed in front of him and he waits until I've taken a bite of French toast and closed my eyes in rapture as I take in the flavors, before he picks up his mug.

"Heaven," I agree.

He nods, pleased.

I take a few more bites and he finally takes a bite of his sandwich. So big of a bite, half the sandwich is gone when he sets it down.

I take a long sip of the latte, gearing up again to set him straight.

"The last thing I want to do is make you feel forced into this. I can see how going about it the way I did would make you feel that way," Zac says, looking at me earnestly. "Let me make this right. Let's start over. You don't even have to decide today. I could show you the place, you can see what you think, how you feel about it, and then decide from there?"

"I'm not even sure why you'd trust me with your place. You don't even know my work."

"But I do. Liam told me you did the work on Casey Wallis's house and that blew me away. I love what you did there."

I want to roll my eyes so hard. Of course he'd know Casey Wallis's house. She's the model-turned-actress that everyone is talking about right now.

"She's my cousin," he adds. "Her mom is my mom's sister. I was out there for the family reunion, and she raved about you. I just didn't know you were the same Autumn from Winthrop until I tried to convince Liam to give me your number. I wasn't able to talk him into it, but I kept asking him to tell me more about you and he let it slip that you were working for an interior design company that is topnotch. When he said Winthrop, it all came back to me." He smirks when he takes a breath after that ramble and even that makes him look too studly for words. It's disgusting really.

I sigh into my French toast and mutter under my breath about sexy genes and whatnot.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asks, before taking another bite of his sandwich. Oh, there it went. Two bites and it's gone.

"How do you manage to inhale that sandwich in a way that's not disgusting?" The words are out before I can stop them.

He lifts a shoulder and a loud laugh bursts out of him. "I don't know. Big mouth, I guess? I can fit a lot in there."

His eyes drop to my chest when he says that and he swallows hard, those ears going pink again, dammit.

And I know then that I am in deep trouble.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 6

## TRACK RECORD



### Autumn

“Look, I realize you’re not used to the word no, but I’m gonna stop you right there,” I say, lifting my hand.

He looks confused since he hadn’t been speaking, but he nods, contrite even. Maybe because he knows *I* know he was just checking me out.

“I’ll take a look at the property because I’m a professional and I want Jane to know that I am, but then you need to tell her you’ve changed your mind and would like her to do the project instead.”

He opens his mouth and I shake my head. He closes his mouth, his eyes narrowing on mine for the first time.

*You think you can pull my move, buddy? I don’t think so. I own the Winters’ stare like nobody’s business.* I don’t know how true that really is, but it sounds good in my head as I try to bolster up my reserves and knock

this man down a few notches.

“Are we understood?” I ask.

He tilts his head to the side, his eyes twinkling a little too much for my comfort, and he leans his massive, impressive forearm on the table. “Let me be sure I do understand. You are turning down a job that will pay an obscene amount of money...because you like your job *and* apartment in California?”

He waits and when he puts it like that, I realize I haven’t done a good job of explaining myself at all.

“It’s more than that and you know it.”

One eyebrow quirks up and it annoys me. I’m also the only one allowed to do the sardonic eyebrow quirk in this twosome.

This twosome that is *not*.

“I’m hoping you’ll tell me about the more because that’s the part I’m not understanding,” he finally says. “Look, I apologize if I came on strong at the wedding. You were stunning and in my backyard, so I admit, I was more comfortable than I should’ve been. I assure you, I will be on my best behavior. I’m a decent guy—Liam can vouch for me.” He lifts a beefy shoulder, shrugging, and I’d feel bad if I hadn’t heard him whispering sweet nothings to whoever was on the phone in the midst of being hella flirtatious with me.

But something he said snags me. “What do you mean, your backyard?”

“The lighthouse and that beach? You didn’t know that was my place?” He takes a long swig of his coffee while I think about that dream of a setting in Nantucket.

“No,” I say, feeling winded. Any man that could put together that kind of place, with help or otherwise, is my equivalent of salmon to a bear. Water to a camel. Cup to a cake. I shake my head, disturbed by my downward spiral and lack of ingenuity on idioms. “But you were around so little.”

“I hated to miss the rehearsal dinner...but I was around for the bachelor party,” he adds.

Of course he was.

“I *love* that place,” I whisper.

He looks so pleased, it shakes some sense back into me. “Thank you. It was quite an undertaking, but I enjoyed every second. It wore me out though. I don’t think I’m cut out to do that by myself again...and frankly, I don’t have the time. I have a couple of months before my schedule picks up more, but it won’t be enough time to complete the house.” He smirks. “Not the way



I like to immerse myself in a remodel anyway.”

God, I am so turned on right now. I squirm in my seat, anxious to get out of here and see the place Zac Ledger had to buy. Now that I know what those hands are capable of—

I put my thoughts to a screeching halt.

*Down, libido. Down, girl.*

“Let’s take a look,” I say coolly, no hint of the excitement raging through me at the prospect of ten thousand square feet of potential.

“Would you like to finish your French toast first?” He grins and I look at my plate in a daze.

I have never left French toast uneaten. What sort of mad magic is this guy weaving?

I stand up, still looking at my plate sadly. My stomach is topsy-turvy with adrenaline and fatigue and lust. And some sadness that I already know I’m going to love this property and can’t do anything about it. “I’m done. I’ll see the place and then I’ll go.”

Zac’s mountainous shoulders droop sadly, and I don’t let the zing of elation that he seems to be into me hang around for too long.

*Cheater, cheater, cheater,* I remind myself.

We walk outside and the weather is slightly cooler than L.A., but lovely. It’s the end of May and it feels more like spring is taking its sweet time getting here. I expect Zac to lead me to a flashy sports car, but instead, he leads me to a black Audi SUV. Classy and practical, check.

The first few minutes are quiet as he navigates out of the traffic and eventually onto 93 South. I feel fidgety and concerned that if I’m too still, I’ll fall asleep.

“You didn’t have to practice today?” I ask.

“I got a workout in about three this morning,” he says.

“Wow, that’s dedication.”

“It was a couple of hours earlier than usual, but I wanted to be sure I met with you first thing.”

That was nice of him. In fact, I think it’s his niceness that keeps throwing me off. I chalk it up to my horrific track record with men.

“I hope it’s not too personal to ask...you don’t have to answer if it is. Are you dating someone? Is that part of the reason you don’t want to leave L.A.?”

I glance at his profile and take in the way his knuckles are gripping the steering wheel. Almost as if he’s nervous, which is just crazy talk.

“No.” I think of Dominic and how nice it is to have the sound turned off on my phone so I can’t tell if he’s texted or called yet today. And it’s because of Dominic and the way he treated me that I say what I do next.

“Zac Ledger, I don’t want to work with you because *you* are a Hottie McCheaterton and I am so sick of cheating bastards, I can’t even stand the sight of you.”

That last part is a lie, I like the sight of him far more than I should, but he looks like I’ve just punched him in the gut. His face even goes a little pale.

“What?” His voice is a husky bass that I feel all the way down to my toes.

“Um, I think you heard me.” I fiddle with the seat belt and ignore the heat in my cheeks.

He gets in the right lane, letting other cars pass him, and turns off the aching, haunting melody of “Damage” playing by H.E.R.

“We need to get a few things straight,” he says, his voice colder than I’ve heard it. “Explain yourself. Now.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 7

## ZIPPETY-ZING



### Autumn

It's quiet for a few beats and he glances at me, his eyes fiery. Damn. He looks more beast than teddy bear right now. He must see something in my eyes because his expression softens before he turns to face the road again. He swallows hard and in a quieter tone, he repeats, "Explain, please."

"I heard you, you know," I tell him.

"Heard. What?" Like he's speaking to a child and forcing patience into his tone. He's driving faster now, like maybe his aggression is finding its way out by speeding down the highway.

"Right after saying,"—I lower my voice to mimic him—"Does the most stunning woman I've ever seen have a name?" I roll my eyes for good measure. "You were saying,"—and I raise my voice here to singsongy and seductive—"I love you too, babe,' and 'I'll be home before you know it..."

my sweetest girl.”

I lift my eyebrows when he turns to me in shock, daring him to even try to deny it.

“*Busted,*” I mouth.

He stares at me for what must be at least a minute before the loudest, heartiest laugh I’ve ever heard roars out of him, making me jump in this enclosed space. He laughs so loud and so long I start to get mad. Really mad. Madder than I already was, which is saying something.

I cross my arms and stare out the window as we book it down the road. He wipes his eyes like I’ve brought him to literal tears and I want to chew him out so bad, but I’m afraid my voice will sound shaky, and he’ll just laugh harder. I tend to cry when I’m this livid and that’s the last thing I want right now. I need to cool down, take ten, and then I’ll politely tell Mr. Football God’s Gift to Himself to go to hell.

He does not make it easy to cool down, laughing off and on for the next forty-plus minute drive. I want so bad to tell him to turn around and take me back to the airport, that I don’t even care to see his stupid house anymore. It probably sucks royally anyway. And if I lose my job with Jane, so be it. But I’m still waiting for my temper to cool.

Mama has always said my temper would try to get the best of me if I didn’t learn to channel it, and I’ve tried, I really have, but this guy is unbearable. I can’t believe I was ever turned on by him.

We drive through a quaint little town, a white steepled church and charming old buildings and houses, the grass looking especially green. I’m surprised when he pulls into the driveway of an old church and goes to the back where kids are playing outside on a playground. A few ladies are out there with them and one blows on a whistle, the kids lining up quickly. Zac parks and opens his door, glancing over at me, still looking on the verge of laughter, the creep.

“Do me a favor and come along for this detour,” he says. “We won’t be long.”

I huff and get out, my unease building. Zac waits for me to reach the front and then we walk toward the playground. I can tell when one of the teachers notices him because she straightens and flushes watermelon pink, but then everyone’s attention is drawn to a little girl who steps out of line and screams, “*Daddy!*”

I look around for the dad because this little girl is the cutest thing I have

ever seen and if someone called me *anything* with that much joy and affection, I would move heaven and earth to bolt by their side.

“Hey, my sweetest girl,” Zac booms next to me, waving. He then repeats it for my ears only...in the same tone I used when I was mocking him.

My heart does a deep dive into the asphalt and goes *splat*.

Oh, shit.

We reach the chain-link fence and Zac opens the gate, waiting for me to go first because apparently, he’s a daddy and a gentleman.

The little girl’s long dark curls fly as she runs and slams into Zac, wrapping her arms around his knees, her sunny face beaming up at him.

She starts moving her hands as she speaks, and if my heart hadn’t already turned upside down with how cute she is, it really would now, when I realize she’s using sign language. She’s completely animated and her excitement is infectious. She’s speaking out loud too, but I only catch words here and there, while she signs. She has an accent that only adds to her charm.

“Happy see you, Daddy,” she says. “New turtle. Come see. See Egg?” She motions behind her to the building.

“Egg, huh? Stellar name choice,” he speaks as he signs too and then hugs her and bops her nose and chin. “I’ll have to see Egg next time. I can’t stay. I just wanted to see you for a minute.” He glances at the teacher, continuing to speak and sign. “I’m sorry, Ms. Michelle. I know I shouldn’t interrupt like this, but I wanted to make sure Ivy met my friend, Autumn. She’ll only be in town for the day.” He looks at me then with an expression so loaded with zingers, I don’t even know what to do with myself. They meet their mark, zipping around my body in a firework display of humility, awe, and a hefty amount of embarrassment.

He’s not gloating exactly, but the humor in his eyes is overflowing and I press my lips together, trying to hold it together a little longer.

Ivy grabs his hand and shakes it side to side before dropping it to sign something quickly, without saying anything out loud. He grins and waves his hand toward me in a grand sweep.

“I’m getting to it,” he says, laughing. “This is my friend, Ms. Autumn. She’s here all the way from California.” Ivy’s eyes get wide, her mouth forming into an O. “Autumn, I’d like you to meet my *daughter*, Ivy.” He looks like he’s trying not to cackle like he did in the car. “She’s becoming quite a good lip reader,” he adds.

“Pretty hair,” she says, ducking her head.

“Thank you. I like yours too.” I feel silly over-enunciating my words and wish that I knew even a little bit of sign language. I know the alphabet and that’s it. But she seems to understand what I’ve said. “It’s very nice to meet you,” I tell her.

I notice then that Zac is signing what I say to her.

She beams at me. “See you later?”

She and Zac both turn their full attention on me, as well as the rest of the class and Ms. Michelle.

“Uh…” I stare at my watch and still don’t have an answer for her.

“We’re not sure yet,” Zac jumps in. “Which is why we stopped by, so she could make sure to meet you before she has to go.” I’m amazed by how fast he signs. He smiles at me and I feel faint. He turns to Ms. Michelle. “Sorry again for the interruption.” He wraps his arms around Ivy again, smoothing back her hair as he bends down and kisses a wayward curl.

I die.

When she pulls away, she holds up her hand and wiggles her fingers and he wiggles his fingers in front of hers, some little father-daughter secret thing that lodges my heart right into my throat. She waves at me and then starts furiously signing.

Zac nods. “She says, ‘Bye, Ms. Autumn. I hope you’re still here when I’m done with school.’”

She smiles at me again and then gets back in her place in line and they walk in single file toward the building.

Zac and I stand there watching until the last child is inside and the door is closed behind them before we look at each other again. He looks at me sternly and I want to sink into the pavement. But then his lips twitch and his head falls back as he laughs.

This time I laugh with him.

When we stop laughing, his voice is gruff, but his eyes are still bright. I’m glad he’s not furious with me.

“When you heard me on the phone, my mom was putting Ivy to bed and I was telling her what to sign to her.”

“I don’t even know what to say.” I make a face. “I feel terrible for how I reacted. I was just so angry that you’d have someone waiting for you at home and then come back to flirt your ass off with me.”

He chuckles again and groans. “You went from looking at me like you wanted to tear my shirt off,” he lifts an eyebrow and my face heats, “to

looking at me like you wanted to tear my shirt off and feed me to the sharks one piece at a time.”

I hold up my hand, stopping him right there. “Let’s be clear. I did *not* look at you like I wanted to rip your shirt off. Before or after.”

Liar, liar.

He smirks and lifts a shoulder like he doesn’t believe me.

Bastard. I don’t believe me either.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 8

## STANK



Zac

Fuck me.

I've never been on such a roller coaster of emotions. If this is what being interested in a woman is like, I'm out. Except all my senses are heightened and alive. I haven't been so concerned about a woman's perception of me, the flood of anger that she'd call me a cheating bastard when I might be a lot of things but *not that*...and then to turn around and laugh my head off in both relief and awe that we've managed to get to the root of what was bothering her.

She was so far off base it's not even funny.

It's fucking hilarious.

I know I need to reel it in now, but everything about her keeps luring me in more.



Ivy is my world and therefore, I assume that anyone who meets me knows about my little girl. Shows how wrong I am to assume. Shit, have I really gotten so built up with this career that I think everyone knows who I am? I'm disgusted with myself and the giant ego I seem to have acquired since being named the MVP of the league. Who the fuck cares?

I chuckle under my breath. Apparently not Autumn.

I'm already bending my own rules by having a woman I'm interested in meet my daughter—that's been the groundwork I've laid for every casual hookup, even any friends that I make...you don't meet Ivy until you've proven yourself. My daughter has had enough disappointment in her life without me adding relationships that come and go.

But if there's a possibility Autumn is taking this job, and I'm still holding out hope that there is, there's no way around Ivy getting to know her. And God knows, I needed to set Autumn straight.

My chest tightens and I can't hold it in, I laugh my head off. Again.

She's laughing again too and the buzzing in my chest is similar to the high of a touchdown except I feel a little nauseated at the same time.

"Well, hopefully that settles a few things," I say when we finally stop laughing. I motion for her to walk ahead of me to my SUV. I take a deep breath and try not to stare at the way her hips sway so perfectly. Like she's got her very own soundtrack she's moving to...

She gives me a gritted-teeth smile over her shoulder and I hope and pray my eyes were where they should be in time. I don't think they were.

"About that," she says. "I owe you a massive apology for jumping to conclusions and assuming the worst about you." She reaches the passenger side and ducks into the car before I can open the door for her, buckling up as I go around to my side.

"She's beautiful, Zac. I'm still in...shock. She's absolutely adorable." She gets a wistful expression on her face and I pause, wondering what that's about. "The love bouncing off of the two of you..." She stops and grins, but there's something almost sad about her eyes now. "The pride on your face. Shining like a moonbeam," she adds.

I shake my head, thinking about my girl. "She's something else. I am *crazy* about her."

"It's very evident, and I can tell she feels the same about you. How old is she?"

"She's six."

“Has she always been deaf?”

“No, she lost most of her hearing at three. She got meningitis and...lost all of her hearing in one ear and 80% in the other. It was...the scariest time of my life. I thought we were going to lose her.” I take a deep breath. “But she fought and is the most resilient person I know.”

“She’s so beautiful. I wish I knew sign language,” Autumn says softly. And damn it, if that doesn’t make me like her even more. “She speaks really well...”

“She gets shy about using her voice sometimes, but she’s always been a talker.”

Autumn laughs and I can tell she has more questions, but I know this has already been a lot. “I thought she had a cute accent.”

My heart thumps in my chest. This woman just keeps surprising me in the best way. I smile at her and this time she fully smiles back. Damn. “She’s in year-round school, so the schedule is a little different.”

“Oh, right. It is a little late in the summer to be in school now that I think about it.”

“Yeah, she likes having the time with kids and being in that environment, so it’s working for us. And she still has time off...it’s just different.”

“That’s great.”

I tap on the steering wheel and try to lighten the mood. “And all is forgiven. I’m just glad to know what had you shutting me down so fast after I thought we had a moment.” I grin and enjoy the way she squirms when I look at her mouth before I reach her eyes again. “Had me checking my deodorant and my breath for a second there. But the hostility superseded any stank.” I shudder and start the car.

She giggles, and I swear, the sound shoots straight to my dick. This is gonna be a problem.

“Well, don’t get any ideas, pal,” she says. “You would’ve eventually gotten shut down anyway, just maybe not as harshly.”

I glance at her, hoping like all hell that she’s joking and frown when she lifts a shoulder in a shrug.

*Pal?* She’s already *friend-zoned* me.

I don’t know why I thought this was a good idea. Why would I suddenly be okay with bringing anyone around Ivy, all because we had a few moments of chemistry? I must have lost my mind.

# 9

## THE ESSENCE



### Autumn

He's incredulous and I can't say I blame him.

The guy is arguably hotter than my brother-in-law—weird, I know, to think of family as hot, but let it be known that I called it with Summer about Liam. I knew my gorgeous sister belonged with him. And also, I'm just saying what the whole world thinks about Liam Taylor—he's paid millions for how attractive, and yes, how talented he is.

But Zac is *next level*.

"You are not my type," I say softly. Reiterating it in my head so I don't get any ideas, but also making sure he's clear on where I stand. Even though my heart is even more unclear about this stance after seeing him with his daughter. But really, all the *more* reason not to get involved with someone who isn't my type.

“Right,” he says softly. I’d think he looks gutted if his voice didn’t still sound so calm. “That’s fair. I...like friends.” He hesitates and then says, “Mind if I ask what got me there?”

“Well, you’re into sport, for one. That’s actually a big one.”

“Sport, as in singular. A sport...period?”

“Yes.” I nod briskly, watching the pretty trees whir past as Zac’s speed picks up once again.

“And the problem with that is—?”

“I’ve never even been able to sit through a game, even with someone trying to tell me how it works. I’d rather do just about anything than go to a game or sit down and watch it on TV.”

Zac processes that like he’s solving life’s great mysteries. “Have you ever been to a game?”

“I went to a baseball game once. It was thirteen innings. How many ways can you say torture?”

He laughs. “I can understand that.”

“Like if it were three innings, at the most five, perhaps six if there was any action...I’d find that a lot more delightful. I could have a hot dog, people watch, get excited if maybe a home run happened, but...nine with the possibility of more?” I shake my head. “Nope.”

“So it’s not football specifically that you despise?” he asks hopefully.

“It’s the essence of all sport.”

“The essence of all sport,” he repeats, his voice hushed. He makes a turn and the landscape becomes more lush with trees and the houses are few and far between. And then he turns down a long winding driveway lined with trees, and a sprawling Nantucket house comes into view, sitting regally at the end of the driveway and overlooking a large lake.

“It’s beautiful. Did you move this house straight from Nantucket?”

He turns to me, distracted, and shakes his head. “Looks like it, right? It’s almost more Nantucket than my Nantucket place with the grey shingles and flat-board trim.” He points at the posts. “All the way down to the square posts and double-hung windows.”

“She just needs a little loving care.”

“Yes. And an updated porch...among other things.”

I was excited to see it when I realized he owns the lighthouse, but now that I’m here, I cannot *wait* to get inside. I hop out of the SUV and have to restrain myself from bouncing up to the front door.

“Who knew the way to your heart was to show you the house first?” he teases.

“No, you did it right, always lead with your daughter. She’s a keeper.” I gasp when he opens the front door, taking in the hardwood floors, the odd but beautiful angles on the ceiling that, with the right attention, could be spectacular.

“Noted,” he mutters under his breath.

“What?” I turn toward him and see the water past him and rush into the other room where there are windows here and there, the view outside each one spectacular. Just not enough. I turn back to get a better look at the living room and then duck into the kitchen, both rooms facing the water. “I’d tear this wall down, open it up, make that whole wall over there windows.”

His eyes are gleaming as he nods, waiting for me to keep going.

“Porch in the back to carry out the Nantucket feel.” My mouth drops when I see an Olympic-size pool and hot tub. “You have a pool too? So swanky, Mr. Ledger.”

He laughs. “The pool is the best part of the house right now...and the workout room.”

“How many bedrooms?”

“Eight,” he says, somewhat embarrassed. “I have a large family who visits frequently.” He shrugs. “Well, not so much large in numbers, but *we’re* all large and require a lot of space. Besides Ivy, it’s just my parents, my brother, and my cantankerous grandpa, but you’d swear there are twenty of us when we’re all in a room together.”

No mention of Ivy’s mom has been made yet and my skin is itchy with the desire to ask questions about her, but that might give him the wrong impression. That I’m interested. And I’m so not. Not even with finding out he’s not the lying cheat I thought he was.

Now I have a professional reason to keep those boundaries up because seeing this place for myself, I’ve just decided maybe I was a little rash in trying to get out of it. Everything is outdated, but there is so much potential and so much to work with, my body is buzzing. Every room has something that grabs my attention. The bathrooms all need to be gutted, but with windows and the right fixtures, new flooring—it will be a showstopper.

“Curious...what was the other one?” he asks nonchalantly as I step into the master bedroom that takes over the entire third floor.

“The other one?”

“Sport was the big one...what was the other reason?”

I laugh, thinking he’s joking, but he crosses his ankles as he leans against the wall and assesses me.

I raise my hand and start ticking off reasons, finger by finger. “Well, I have horrible taste in men, so I never trust them but still manage to go for skinny artist types who don’t want to commit—you are not my first run-in with cheating—” I shake my head when he tries to interject. “I now know I was horribly wrong, but...” I look at my fingers, uncertain of what number I was on.

He waves his hand. “I think you were just moving to the next hand.” His smirk is sinful and playful, and you’d think we were talking about the ways he’s going to kiss me senseless rather than all the ways he’s not my type.

I suddenly feel hot and fan my face. “Forget the hands. I have the ultimate reason right here.” I hold my arms out wide. “If I take this job, we will be required to keep things friends only.”

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and pretends to make a phone call. “Jane? Yeah, I’m going to need your help. Autumn isn’t going to work out here after all.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 10

## SMITHEREENS



### Autumn

My whole body heats, but I laugh it off. I'm certain he's just a huge flirt and doesn't mean any of this anyway, but it's sweet and makes me feel good, especially after the slump I've been in since Dominic.

He lowers his phone and grins and damn, he is too good-looking to think straight.

"Let me put you at ease by saying, if you mean it and you want to work on the house, I'm ecstatic. Can't wait to get started. I've looked at the projects you've worked on and feel like you'll be the perfect fit for this place." He stalks closer to me and my breath hitches in my throat. "I promise I won't make you uncomfortable." He winks. "Full disclosure: I was dazzled by you at the wedding, and Liam had talked you up before I ever even saw you, which never works for me. I don't do setups. Ever. But everything about

you has surprised me. Which will be *great* for our friendship,” he adds, rolling his eyes but then chuckling to show me he’s joking. “I’ll be the best friend you’ve ever had.” He stops talking and I stare at him, too stunned to utter a peep.

Well, now I want him to back up and keep talking about being dazzled. Crazy talk. He’s some wealthy, hotshot football star and he was dazzled by me?

I’m too flustered to say anything and our staring feels suspiciously *un-*friendlike, so I walk over to the door on the far end of the room and open it, yelping when it walks out onto a balcony.

“This house just keeps getting better,” I tell him.

“Wait until you see the workout room,” he says.

“Mmm, I feel toward workout gear about the same as I do about sport,” I admit. “It’s a no-go for me.”

“You’re certainly the most opinionated of my besties.”

I snort in an extremely undazzling way.

His eyes light up like he’s filing it all away and he tilts his head. “How do you stay in shape?”

“Walk, run, swim, yoga, dance. All things that I can do anywhere.”

He nods. “Good thing I have a pool.”

The thought of him without a shirt diving into that water, his shoulders peeking out over the water as he gracefully glides...

“Hey, are you okay?” he asks gruffly. “Is it too hot out here?”

I move past him and go back inside. “Are you not staying at the house? I haven’t seen much furniture.”

“We’ve been staying off of the gym.” He motions for me to go down the stairs and we go down two flights to the main level, past the kitchen and butler’s pantry and down another flight of stairs. It’s like a bachelor pad collided with fairies, unicorns, My Little Pony, and lots of sparkle. There’s an elaborate gym with water views galore, another room with a pool table, a comfortable sectional, and a massive TV screen, and two bedrooms side by side. And in every room I see Ivy’s presence. I walk through the rooms, grinning from ear to ear. In what I’m assuming is Zac’s room since it’s *not* the one with pink everything, his bed is made and on top is a stuffed animal.

“Ivy likes to put the embellishing touches on my bed each morning as a little surprise while she’s at school,” he says sheepishly.

“What is that?” I ask, unable to tell what kind of animal he’s got on his



bed.

He grumbles under his breath. “I’ll let Ivy tell you the name, should you choose to stay. If you hear me say it, you’ll think I’m making it up or that you were right about me being a bastard.” He takes it to her room and I watch from the door as he tucks it under her mountain of stuffed animals and picks another out that is similar coloring, placing it on his bed instead. “She’ll never fall for it, but it’s worth a few more minutes of peace.”

“Well, now I’m really curious.”

“Were you serious about taking this job?”

“And now it seems like you’re just changing the subject.”

He laughs. And screw me to smithereens, if he doesn’t get the most seductive look when he says, “I’m just ready to make us official.”

My blood thrums through my body, liking the sound of that an awful lot.

“Our working friendship, of course,” he adds.

I war with myself, wondering how I can possibly put up with the gymnastics my brain and body and heart will be going through if I take this job.

I know I should discuss budget and the scope of all he hopes this place becomes to know a realistic timeframe before agreeing to anything, but I also know I really want the job. I could say Jane won’t be happy with me if I don’t take it, and that would be true, but I’d want to do it even if she wasn’t fully on board.

I’m about to hold out my hand to shake his hand—probably a bad idea even if it sounds professional in theory—when I pause.

“Where would I stay?”

He blinks at me slowly, his tongue coming out to wet his lips. I tug my shirt away from my neck, feeling simultaneously sweaty and chilled.

“There are options,” he says finally. “And I’m sure you know from the contract that your housing will be taken care of on top of your \$250,000 retainer.”

I put a hand on my chest. “My \$250,000 retainer?” I squeak.

“You didn’t look at the contract I sent over?”

Jane had been too busy sending me out the door for me to see any contracts.

I shake my head.

“Oh, well, I have it here for you to look over. I insisted on waiting for you to sign it also. There are several nice hotels in town, not too far from Ivy’s

school. My other car is in the shop, but once it's out, you can use that to get back and forth. Or you could stay here—you'd have your pick of the entire house. Ivy and I could go stay with my parents...they're also near Ivy's school. You'd be welcome to stay there too, if you'd prefer to be close to home-cooked meals. They have a lovely guesthouse that would be completely private...although my mom would absolutely find ways to rope you into as many visits as she could. There are Airbnbs nearby too...just endless possibilities for you." He smiles.

"I wouldn't want to disrupt Ivy's schedule. And I hate to make you spend all that money for months at a time." I still feel sort of sucker-punched about such a large sum of money. I've done well with Jane so far, but I'm just getting started. This just doesn't happen for newbies.

"It's not a problem. It will all be worth it. How about I make it simple and say, if you were Jane, I'd put you in a nice room at the Renaissance, maybe the Residence if you'd like to have a kitchen, or a great Airbnb..."

"That does help," I say, smiling. And I don't know what makes me say this. I'll surely regret it later, but it's like the words are pouring out of me faster than I can breathe. "How about this? Since I'm *not* Jane and we're... friends, could I take a look at your parents' guesthouse? And if it feels like I'd be imposing too much, I'll stay at the Residence. *But* it's to be deducted out of my pay."

"Done." And he holds out his hand to me, gripping mine firmly in his as we seal the deal. "Except for the deducting part."

He leaves my mouth hanging open as he moves past me and motions for me to follow him outside.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 11

## MODEL STATUS



### Autumn

After seeing the yard and the contract and a list of contractors he's heard good things about, the giddiness of possibility churning around in my gut, I realize how unprepared I am. I arrived expecting to turn around and go home. I did bring my laptop and planner, as well as my measuring devices, but I have no clothes or comforts from home. Even before he mentioned the price tag on this for *me personally*—what is this life?—I was *in*. There's no way I can miss out on this.

When I get settled wherever I end up tonight, I need to make a few calls and see if anyone can ship some things to me while Summer is on her honeymoon. A little online shopping in the meantime, and I'll be good as new. I'm holding the plans to the house as we get in his SUV and I look over them as we drive the less than five-minute drive to his parents' house.

Their white colonial is set back on a couple of acres, and I'm happy to see a pool here too.

"Did you grow up here?"

"This was my grandparents' place. We lived in Boston and between my time at Notre Dame and getting drafted here, Gran passed away and my parents moved in with Pappy. He's healthy as an ox, but he's been so down without Gran and he needs help taking care of the place."

We walk toward the house. "Did you and Ivy live here before you bought the new house?"

"No, they tried to talk us into it and there's plenty of room, but we were in a townhouse about five minutes from here. My parents and Pappy are awesome and I don't know what I would do without them, but I want them to have grandparent status and the luxury to spoil her within reason versus her having me and three other full-time parents. This feels like the best balance for all of us." He makes a face. "Are you ready for this?"

I nod, my nerves kicking in now.

He taps the front door three times before opening the door. "Hey," he yells. "Anybody home?"

Still no talk of Ivy's mother and I am dying of curiosity here. We step inside and the house is quiet. It's spotless and tastefully decorated, the dining room with a large cherry wood table on the left and the living room with a fireplace and grand piano on the right. The kitchen has been updated with a large island and granite countertops and a wall of framed portraits of Ivy, Zac, and another good-looking guy.

"Is this your brother?" And on the bottom right side of the wall is a picture of Ivy as a toddler with a beautiful woman. My mouth drops. I recognize her.

"Yep, that's Jamison. He lives in Boston so he's around—" Laughter from down the hall stops him and he grins. It drops when he sees the look on my face. "Ah, are you a Halle Reid fan?"

"Isn't everyone?" My voice sounds hollow. I swallow hard and Zac watches my reaction closely. "She's only right up there with Bella Hadid and Cara Delevingne in the supermodel territory."

He rubs his hand over his face and looks relieved when he hears someone come in the back door. He walks toward the back hall and looks at me over his shoulder. "Halle is Ivy's mom," he says, leaving me to stare after him.

I chalk it up to one more reason Zac Ledger is not my type. How could I

ever date a guy who's been with Halle Reid? I'm a confident person, but there are limits.

He walks back in with a couple, obviously his parents based on him being the perfect combo of the two.

His mom beelines it to me, her arms outstretched. "Oh, Autumn, we're so excited you're here. Zac has needed help with the house and he says you're the perfect person for it. Call me Daisy," she adds.

Zac and his dad exchange a look and chuckle.

She waves them off, beaming at me. "Don't mind them. Yes, I was born with the name Tammy, but Ivy made me a Daisy and I've decided I prefer it. Don't you?"

"You do look like a Daisy," I tell her, which makes her smile wider. She leans over and flicks Zac on the arm.

"Did you hear that, Zac?" she asks. "I can already tell that I like you," she tells me. "And that guy over there is Papa Daniel."

"Nice to meet you," Daniel says, reaching out to shake my hand. "How did you get roped into working with this guy?" he asks, pounding Zac on the back and squeezing his shoulder.

Zac laughs. "Watch it. You guys are supposed to make me look good."

Daniel's expression is pure mischief and I've already decided I like Zac's parents. "Have you met Pappy yet?"

I shake my head.

"We haven't seen him, but we haven't been here very long," Zac says.

"What did you think of the guesthouse?" Daisy asks.

I open my mouth and she gasps, giving Zac a look. "Have you not shown her the guesthouse yet? Is my son not being a good host?"

I laugh. "He's been very hospitable."

Zac tilts his head toward the door. "Come on. Before Pappy shows up and starts adding his two cents about me."

"Oh, you know we adore you, dear heart," Daisy calls as Zac hustles me out of the room.

"About the guesthouse, bad idea," he says under his breath as we walk down the brick path toward the cottage next to the pool. He smirks to let me know he's being playful and my heart stutters over itself.

"I was just thinking it seems like the perfect setup." I laugh at his dramatic pained expression. Inside, I'm thinking staying in his parents' guesthouse will be one more deterrent to keep from falling for the hot

football player whose ex is a freaking supermodel.

Something tells me I'm going to need all the barriers I can possibly construct to get through this.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 12

## SMOOTH



Zac

She looks around the place, peeking in the bedroom and patting the couch when she walks back to the main room, stopping to lean on the counter where there's a small fridge, microwave, and coffee pot.

“This will be great,” she says.

“Are you sure? If my family gets to be too much or if you just need a change of scenery, just say the word and we'll move you somewhere else, no questions asked.”

“I'll need to pick up a few things...” She looks slightly embarrassed when she says this, and I know it's because she never intended on taking this job. I didn't miss the fact that she brought nothing more than a small overnight bag with her. It doesn't bother me. I'm more impressed that she sussed out the situation before agreeing to it.

“I could take you to lunch and wherever you need to go before I have to pick up Ivy...maybe show you some of the places you’ll probably be frequenting if we have any time left.”

“Don’t feel like you have to entertain me,” she says. “I can rent a car until yours is out of the shop and get my things on my own.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re entertaining *me*.” I stop myself from saying any more than that because I’ve already made a fool of myself over this woman. I see the way her eyes eat me up, but if she says she wants a friend, I will respect that. It’s just foreign territory for me.

My phone buzzes and I glance down, seeing a text from my brother.

Jamison

When am I going to meet this girl?

I swipe a hand down my face. I don’t know why I said anything to Jamison about Autumn coming into town. I just knew he’d meet her eventually if she stayed, and I’d warned him that he couldn’t pull his normal player shit on her. He’d love that she put me in my place. He’ll also give me all kinds of shit if he so much as catches a whiff of interest on my part.

No idea. She’ll be busy working.

Jamison

Mom said she’s my age and HOT.

I shake my head and groan. My brother is a few years younger than me, and I hadn’t given Autumn’s age much thought, but I suppose she is more Jamison’s age than mine. Maybe even a little younger than him. I’m twenty-nine and he’s twenty-five.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Just my brother being himself. How old are you?”

She looks slightly confused by my verbal whiplash. “Twenty-three.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. She’s younger than I usually go for, but not *too* young, although she might disagree. And from what she’s said about her lack of love for sports—*sport*—my younger brother might be her type in more ways than one. He’s fully supportive of my career and loves the game, but he’d rather discuss portfolios and hedge funds over throwing a football any day.



“When’s your birthday?” I ask.

“Geez. I’m surprised you didn’t get that out of Jane. When’s *yours*?”

“I’m twenty-nine.” I avoid the birthday question, which isn’t really playing fair, but she still hasn’t answered me either.

“Knock, knock.” Pappy peeks his head in the door after knocking and when I motion for him to come inside, he does, smoothing down his wavy white hair and smiling at Autumn. He used to be the tallest of the Ledger men at 6’5”, but at eighty, his back hunches and I feel like I loom over him.

“Pappy, this is Autumn Winters. Autumn, meet Pappy.”

Pappy ambles over to Autumn and holds out his hand, grasping hers in both of his. I grin when she beams up at him. I should’ve taken him with me this morning to pick her up. He would’ve convinced her to stay in two seconds flat.

“Why, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” he says, patting her hand. His voice sounds perkier than it has in a while.

*Smooth, Pappy.* And the way her grin widens and her cheeks flush, I realize I could learn a few things from Pappy.

“Tam—I mean Daisy...” He shakes his head, chuckling. “She says you’ll be staying with us for a bit, getting our boy’s place in tip-top shape.”

“That’s right. I hope I won’t be in the way at all, out here in the guesthouse.”

Pappy’s eyes grow wide and he’s still patting her hand. “In the way? Never. You could stay in the house and we’d be *delighted*. We don’t get nearly enough company around here. And you seem just as nice as can be.”

Autumn glances at me and her eyes are shining. My breath catches in my throat for a second, taken aback by how pretty she is.

“Well, he’s the sweetest man I’ve ever met,” she tells me before turning back to him.

Pappy laughs and lets go of her hand to prop his arm around my back. “This one isn’t too bad himself. And just wait until you meet our girl. Sweetest thing you ever did see.”

“Oh, I got to meet Ivy earlier today,” Autumn says, nodding. “She is *magical*.” She shakes her head and Pappy and I both stare at her, entranced.

“That accent would melt the hardest heart.” Pappy leans closer to her. “My wife grew up in North Carolina—do I detect a bit of that?”

“Yes, sir!” Autumn lights up. “I grew up in Charlotte and it’s funny—when I was in London, everyone wanted to know where I was from before I

even got *hello* out, but when I went back to Charlotte, everyone thought I'd lost it." She laughs.

"We probably sound funny to you," Pappy says. "Zac's gran thought it was her calling in life to tone our accents down a bit...which could get quite comical since her accent was so strong too." Pappy and I both laugh, remembering her feistiness. "Let me know if you need any help over at Zac's place. I'm not as skilled as he is at all the renovating, but I'm good with the busywork that no one else wants to do. I can pick up lunch or make store runs. You just say the word." Pappy glances over at me. "Everyone keeps telling me to slow down, but I've already slowed down so much, I'm barely crawling."

Autumn laughs and Pappy's cheeks lift with his smile.

"Pappy works harder than all of us," I say, squeezing his shoulder.

"Don't let him fool you," Pappy says. He points at me. "Hardest worker in the NFL right here."

"She doesn't know what the NFL is," I pretend to whisper, but it's loud enough for Autumn to hear and she laughs.

"I didn't until my sister tried to brag on you. It was wasted on me," she says, laughing.

"You're not into football? Not even an occasional Sunday game here and there?" Pappy asks.

She shakes her head. "Is Sunday the day?" She laughs when I snort. "My dad never lived with us growing up, and Sundays at my house were HGTV marathons with my mom and sister. I never even considered watching a game."

My grandpa looks stunned speechless. *Welcome to my world, Pappy.* But he rallies.

"Well, we will have to change that." Pappy claps his hands together and slides them back and forth like he means business. "If anyone can convince you to appreciate football, it's Zac Ledger. This boy is the finest there is."

I lift my thumb toward him. "Says my grandpa here."

Pappy's eyes narrow and he gets a far-off expression in his eyes. "Gran never missed a single game and even when she didn't know a thing about it at first, you would've thought she knew all the ins and outs." He chuckles, but his eyes are watery and I pat his back. "One time we weren't in our usual seats—we'd given ours to some friends who were visiting—and we were surrounded by the rival team." He shakes his head. "Hoo, boy, when a group

of them had the audacity to boo her grandson...watch out.” He holds his hand up to his chest. “She came to about right here. Fiery little thing.” He grins and I do too, picturing Gran. “You did not mess with her family. She stood up on the seat, wagged her scrawny finger at those boys, and yelled...”

I start laughing and Pappy looks over at me and laughs too. And then we quote what she said together, because it’s been repeated over and over since the night she said it, the way stories in families tend to repeat familiar material until it becomes a mantra.

“Sons of bitches, you better watch your britches.”

Autumn’s mouth drops as she bursts out laughing, and Pappy laughs so hard he wheezes.

“I don’t know why she thought that would instill terror in them,” he says, “but when they ignored her, she just yelled it louder. Once they got a good look at her face, I tell you what, they shut their traps and didn’t say another negative thing about Zac or his team again.”

Autumn cracks up and my heart does this weird dive thing. I have to look at Pappy to distract myself from this girl who feels like a Christmas present in the springtime. I can’t remember the last time Pappy was this animated or chatty. Autumn’s still smiling when I look at her and it drops when she sees how serious I am. To make it even weirder, I mouth *thank you*.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 13

## THERAPY TIME



### Autumn

For not wanting to come on this trip and being so resistant to staying, I sure am having a great time and it's only the first day. I'd planned to turn right around and get on a plane going back to California after convincing Zac to still go with Jane, but it's not even dinnertime yet and I'm not restless to go anywhere. Zac's family is so warm and welcoming, it's hard not to sink into them like a cozy robe. The sensation is so not-my-typical response that I hardly know what to do with myself. I'm close to my mama and my sister. That's it. I've let Liam in because I've seen how good he is with my sister, but my track record with men hasn't gone well, and I'm happy with the inner circle I have.

Take me out and I'll keep a party going. I'm a fun time. I've had friends from school, but none that have lasted the long haul. And because my sister

fits that best friend role better than anyone else ever could, I haven't felt the lack for even a second. When I was in London at school, I was too busy to look for friends. Working with Clarabelle Armstrong was a dream come true and after my long hours, I'd come back to my flat wiped out and eat takeout while I FaceTimed Summer, who'd be getting ready to start her day.

But somehow, guys have managed to sneak into my life without me looking and I have a harder time staying away from them. I blame lust for this, pure and simple. Dominic, for example. Summer and I went out to dinner and he was the guy singing onstage. He kept talking to me between songs in the microphone like it was just the two of us, and when I gave him my number later that night, I thought he'd be a hookup at most. I'm not on any dating apps, that's not my thing either, but I should've known when he wasn't the first moody musician I'd gone out with that I should stay far, far away. How he managed to take over my apartment in a short amount of time and then act offended when I told him he had to get out after cheating on me...well, just one example of what a disaster my dating life has been.

Summer and I know we have daddy issues, our dad having left our mom not once but twice after impregnating her to follow his dream of being a successful director in Hollywood—which obviously worked out for him—but it seems my issues have carried over into more extreme disasters than Summer's ever did. She's always been wiser than me to begin with, but she was also fortunate to meet Liam when she did.

Which is why all of these heartwarming feelings I'm having after one lunch at Zac's parents' house are turning me upside down on our drive to pick up Ivy. Daisy insisted on whipping up an "easy" steak sandwich with mushrooms and cheese and peppers on a buttery baguette that tasted like heaven, and then Daniel, Daisy, and Pappy basically competed with who could make me laugh the hardest while Zac laughed along with me.

"Have you talked yourself out of staying yet?" Zac says a few minutes into our drive. He's been quiet while I've been trying to conduct an emergency, self-induced therapy session over here.

"Your family is incredible." I see a few familiar landmarks that let me know we're close to the school, and sure enough, a second later, Zac turns into the parking lot.

"We can be a lot," he says, chuckling.

He pulls up alongside the curb and I see Ms. Michelle standing with Ivy and a few other students. Ivy jumps up and down when she sees him, and her

smile goes even brighter when we get closer and she sees me.

“Don’t forget, you can switch up where you stay if it gets to be too much at the house,” he says softly.

Ivy opens the door and jumps in, quickly settling into her booster seat and buckling up.

“Hi,” she squeals and her hands move rapidly.

Zac laughs and looks at me, turning toward Ivy to sign as he says, “Yes!” He points to me. “She’s staying to help make our home beautiful.”

I watch his hands, appreciative that he’s speaking so I can understand, but also hoping some of the signs stick and that I’ll remember them. I especially love the one for *beautiful*.

She puts her hand to her chest and brushes it up twice. “Happy,” she says.

I repeat the sign and smile. “Happy,” I repeat.

Her smile is like thousands of lightbulbs going off at once. I don’t know why it makes me so emotional, but it does. I turn around so she doesn’t see me getting teary at her smile. I must be overly tired.

“Music, Daddy,” Ivy yells and Zac chuckles when I jump. He motions for Ivy to lower her voice and she giggles. “Sorry,” she says, quieter.

He motions toward the center console. “I hope you don’t mind...can you put those in? You’re gonna need them. Squeeze them and then let them expand...”

I pick up the container and study it for a second, not sure what’s inside right away. When I realize it’s earplugs, I grab two and glance at Zac. He’s already put some in his ears. He waits until mine are in and lifts his eyebrows.

“Are you good?” he shouts.

I nod and he turns on the music. Loud. I grin when I hear the opening to Lizzo’s “About Damn Time.” The bass is cranked and the whole SUV is vibrating with the sound. I look at Zac, who’s looking back at me like he’s wondering if this is okay, before I turn around to see Ivy dancing her little heart out in the back seat.

I nod at her, scrunching up my nose as I start doing the dance moves with her. The girl has got rhythm and I don’t know why that surprises me so much. She laughs and digs in harder, as do I, shaking my body as much as possible while sitting in a car, and when the song ends, she signs for Zac to play it again, which he does another two times before we reach the house.

I take out the earplugs when he stops the car and slip them into my purse,

just in time to hear him say, “Fuck me,” with great emphasis, I might add, under his breath.

I turn to him in surprise and his look is heated as he gives me the sexiest smirk.

“You are full of the best surprises, Winters,” he says, his voice gruff.

And I have to say, I’m thinking the exact same thing about him.

“Can she hear the music when it’s loud like that?” I ask, hoping it’s not bad to ask about some of these things that I feel so clueless about.

He takes my hand, putting it up to his chest, and my heart catapults around in my chest until I’m lightheaded. “She can *feel* it.”

I should probably run right now, that’s how intense whatever this is between me and this guy I barely know. Good thing I have a job to focus on and his little girl and extended family to keep the whole thing rated PG.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 14

## CYNICS



### Autumn

I'm in my cozy bed in the guesthouse, belly full after another delicious meal with the Ledgers, the new shortie pajamas I'm wearing freshly washed along with all the other new things that I bought on my brief shopping excursion with Zac and Ivy.

My Zoom meeting with Jane is done. The plan is for us to talk once a week and I'll send her a report at the end of each week.

I've FaceTimed Mama already tonight and normally would've FaceTimed Summer too, if she weren't on her honeymoon right now. She keeps texting to see how it's going though. She's asked a ton of questions about Zac and Ivy—she knew Zac had a little girl but didn't know she was deaf and was stunned to find out that Halle Reid is her mother.



Summer

So what is THAT story?

I stare at her text for a long minute before answering.

I have no idea. They have her picture with Ivy, but so far no one has said anything about her...except Zac when he said she was Ivy's mother.

Summer

I wonder if she's around much. I can't believe Liam didn't tell us! He knows how OBSESSED we are with her.

I've had a few wow moments since Summer has been with Liam—meeting him, for one. I was a big fan before we ever met. And there have been a few celebrities Summer's worked with as her career has grown too, that have been amazing. It's always fun when they're down-to-earth and nice people in real life too. I've also been disappointed.

But there are few I follow on social media or even that I really want to meet at this point. My dad has always had the rich and famous around him when we've had visits with him over the years and even with my job, there have been many clients I've helped Jane with that I could have fangirled over, but I've just never been wrapped up in all that. Summer and I can thank our mama for our balanced approach to celebrities, I guess.

Halle Reid though. *Halle Reid*. I own her skincare and makeup line. I have at least three pairs of shoes and a handbag from her collection. The only reason I don't have any of her three signature fragrances is because Summer beat me to them every time a new one came out, damn her, and that's where I draw the line. I don't mind borrowing an occasional outfit from my sister, but I don't want to smell like her too.

There's just something about Halle. She's stunning and yet seems to not take herself too seriously. How much of that is true since I've only ever stalked her Instagram account and watched her countless times on E! News? I have no idea.

My phone beeps again.

Summer

Liam says he didn't know. And when I looked up—does Halle Reid

have kids?—just now, Ivy doesn't come up.

I almost look it up myself because that can't be right. But then Summer texts again.

Summer

Wait a minute. Here's something. When I look up Zac and Halle, there's a picture of the three of them together. Ivy's a baby. And it does say here that she's theirs.

I type Zac Ledger and Halle Reid on my laptop and it comes up but not right away. It feels strange to see them together. He looks young and is smiling down at Ivy in his arms. She's so cute, her cheeks round and pink. Halle is looking at something in the distance and I study the picture for a long time, trying to see any signs of what could've happened between the two of them. There are a few more pictures of the two of them without Ivy, but not many.

Summer

It's like someone went to a lot of effort to hide whatever went down between the two of them. I wonder if that was Zac's people or Halle's. I'm kind of surprised he told you about it on the first day.

I know. That's what I'm thinking too. He could've played it off or ignored the picture of her holding Ivy, but he was upfront about it. This is weird.

I toss my phone next to me on the bed and sink under the covers, my energy from having a surprisingly great day draining with the feeling that something isn't quite right.

Summer

Now hold up.

I roll my eyes.

Summer

Being upfront is a good thing. And I don't think there's anyone Liam has spoken more highly of than Zac. Give him a chance, Auto.

I'm here to do a job. Nothing more.

I can practically hear Summer's sigh from here and we're *texting*. I just know her that well.

And of course, she can't leave it alone.

Summer

He's gone to an awful lot of trouble for it to just be a job. I'm telling you, Auto, I have a good feeling about him. You know I am the first to call you out on your shit dating choices, but I think this one could be different.

Go do your honeymoon thing and get off the phone, Sum. Have all the sex you can get before he puts babies in you!

She sends six heart-eyed emojis and I send back a vomiting one, but I'm smiling when I set my phone down and grab my laptop. Tomorrow, Zac will pick me up at nine and I'll measure the house and get more specific ideas on what Zac is hoping to achieve with this project. But in the meantime, even though I'm exhausted, I'm still on California time, and I go down a deep dive studying and taking notes, watching video after video, and I finally set my laptop down around three. I wish I'd had a few *months* to prepare for this job instead of barely a day.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 15

## QUICKSAND



Autumn

When I open the door the next morning, Zac is standing there with a small basket. He looks slightly embarrassed.

“Oh,” I say.

I did too much overthinking about Zac last night and it’s coming back to bite me. When I look at him, I’m flooded with what must be pheromones that seem to highlight every sexy thing about him. If pheromones were gif arrows, they’d be pointing to his sexy hair in bright yellow. His beefy shoulders and arms would both have neon arrows saying LOOK HERE, and the way his chiseled chest narrows into a fine, tapered waist would be highlighted in black. I glance up at his face after my long detour down his body, and his full lips and eyes would each have their own arrows dancing on either side.

I give my head a shake. I’m losing it here.

“Uh, I told my mom to not wake you up—did she?”

I shake my head again.

“Good. She wanted to make sure you didn’t go hungry this morning, and there are three varieties of muffins in here.” He cringes and my smile grows, the more awkward he gets. “We can take them with us if you want.”

“You think she intended for me to share with you?”

He looks thrown for a second, but my laugh seems to shake him back into the confident swagger he’s exuded the most.

“Once you taste them, you probably won’t want to share, which will please Tammy to no end, let me tell you. Any time for her to get back in the kitchen is her catnip.”

“Daisy,” I remind him.

“Right,” he says, making a face. “Daisy. I do call her Mom, which I think annoys her almost as much as me calling her Tammy. Should I have hang-ups about that?”

“If you don’t already, I wouldn’t start now. She seems pretty happy to be your mom.”

He grins and I do too, and for a second we just stand there smiling like two fools.

Pappy hustling outside toward us, waving his arm, draws our attention from one another, and we turn.

“Oh, good, I caught ya,” he says. “I was afraid I might’ve missed ya.”

“You want to go to the house?” Zac asks in surprise.

“If that’s okay with you two,” Pappy says.

“Of course. It’s great.” Zac looks at me and I can see that he means it. He seems elated to have his grandpa around and my heart just keeps snagging at how sweet this family is.

From the few things Zac has said, Pappy hasn’t been himself since he lost his wife, and even last night with everyone at dinner, the relief was palpable. They kept exchanging smiles with each other when he’d tell another funny story.

“I don’t want to ruin any...shall we say...*romance in the air*,” Pappy cuts off, his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Pappy! Don’t be messing with my game here,” Zac says, laughing as we walk toward his SUV.

I tell Pappy to get up front, but he insists I do, and the three of us drive the few minutes to Zac’s place. I’d started a drawing of the floorplan last

night on AutoCAD, but now that I'm measuring everywhere, I make the corrections with the right dimensions and take more pictures so I can finetune it even more later. It takes time going through each room and before I know it, it's time for lunch. Zac runs to pick up takeout and the three of us go out and eat it by the pool. He touches base with his mom who says she'll pick up Ivy from school.

In the afternoon, Zac sets up a time for the general contractor to stop by to meet me. Right before he arrives, Zac says, "I had a hard time settling on someone, but if you don't feel comfortable working with who I chose for any reason, we can go back to the drawing board."

"I'm sure I'll be fine with him if you are."

When the man walks through the door, I'm surprised to see a blond Viking lookalike. He has long hair and looks like he should be running next to Uhtred in *The Last Kingdom*. I swallow hard. I don't know why I expected someone older and less...stunning...but it seems like my new destiny is to be surrounded with hotties, which I guess isn't the worst thing.

"This is Magnus Evensen," Zac says, and Magnus takes my hand. "Magnus, this is Autumn Winters."

There's a guy who looks like this named Magnus? Goodness. He grins, somehow making that smile the most seductive thing I've ever seen.

"You can't be from around here, I would've remembered you," Magnus says in his low, rich voice.

"Uh, right. I'm not," I manage to say.

Zac clears his throat and when I look at him, he's frowning so hard it looks painful. I let go of Magnus's hand and Zac's expression softens somewhat. My face heats when I notice that Magnus is still looking at me.

"Shall we show you what we've been thinking?" Zac asks, motioning for us to sit at the table.

It gets easier after that. Magnus is obviously knowledgeable about the house and he likes the ideas I present. I feel a bit over my head since at work, Jane is the one who does all of this, but I quickly find my rhythm, making notes on everything we discuss. I would imagine in most situations, Magnus would be commanding the room—he just has that presence about him—but here he defers to Zac and it's obvious they have a lot of respect for one another. Seeing the way Zac engages with him has me a little starstruck myself. I never knew kindness would be such a turn-on.

I should've run from Dominic the first time he was rude to our waitress at

that little rundown diner we hit after one of his shows.

Once Magnus leaves, it's quiet. I look out the back window, taking in the view. This will be such a peaceful place to live. It already is, I'm sure. The remodel will only enhance what's already amazing about the place.

Zac moves next to me and looks out before turning to face me. "Do you think you'll be able to work with Magnus?"

"Yes, I think he's great. He has a lot of good ideas and was open to all of mine."

"He seemed to like everything about you," he says dryly. "But, I mean... who wouldn't?"

I flush and glance back out the window. "We'll get along, I think." I exhale in relief.

"Yeah, I probably should've thought that part through a little more," he says under his breath. "If this project takes as long as it could, once things pick up more with my schedule, I won't be as accessible. I will be to you, of course...but it's important that you and Magnus are able to communicate easily." He smiles and I have to look back out the window because I'm sure he's going to hear my heartbeat blasting out of control if I look at him another second.

"Oh, I haven't gotten a chance to talk to you about this, and we'll get into it more as we talk about your vision for the house...the time went so fast today we still haven't gotten there. And I should've brought it up with Magnus too." I take a deep breath and face him. "Are there any things I wouldn't think about with regard to making the house more comfortable for Ivy? I tried to read up on DeafSpace as much as I could during the night. Light switches at the end of hallways and outside bathroom doors, wider hallways in case the two of you are signing while walking side by side... making sure there's excellent visibility in every room, so that will affect our color choices, walls and flooring...oh! And I didn't realize how the acoustics might play a part, depending on how much she hears or if she uses any sort of hearing device. We'll need to take that into consideration. Open floorplans are best, so she has the best visual—"

I stop in mid-sentence. He's staring at me with such intensity, I start fidgeting.

"Is that okay to talk about?" I ask weakly.

"Autumn." He breathes out my name and I find myself holding my breath until he speaks again. "You've already put so much thought into it when you

didn't even know about Ivy until yesterday. I wasn't able to do everything I wanted for Ivy in the lighthouse due to a slew of more restrictions than I knew what to do with, but I looked into all of that before I ever bought this place. I do have some ideas about how we can make it work optimally for her...I can't wait to see what you think. But *thank you.*" He reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "I'm blown away that you've already researched as much as you have, given how exhausted you must be after your sister's wedding and all the travel back and forth, not to mention the time difference."

His hand drops and my skin feels the loss immediately.

"Of-of course." I press my lips together and try to rein in my nerves. "I want to make this good for you both. Better than good...exceptional."

His hazel eyes are warm, a constantly evolving green, brown, and gold that I feel like I could sink into and not mind at all if I was sucked up like quicksand. On second thought, I should probably *not* get sucked up. I suddenly envision him looking up at me from between my legs as his tongue inflicts an onslaught of pleasure, and my eyes close to erase the vivid image as I reach out and grab the wall to make sure I stay firmly planted.

Is it possible to be comfortable around someone and yet also feel like I'm about to explode?

This can't be normal.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 16

## JUGGLING



Zac

I touch her shoulder again and she jumps, her eyes flying open. “Are you okay?” I step closer and hear her gasp, the sound making blood flow straight to my dick. I stop right there, not trusting myself to not kiss her senseless if she makes that sound again.

Her eyes flutter to my lips and she licks hers, making me bite back a groan. This is new territory to me—letting someone in my space like this—and I’m about a hundred percent certain it wasn’t the wisest decision, if the state of my dick is anything to go on.

“What is it about you?” I whisper.

Her lips part and I reach out and touch her cheek as her breathing staggers. My heart is pumping fast and I want to kiss her more than anything.

“What...do you mean?” Her voice is husky, and I take another step

closer.

“I’ve already broken all the rules with you.”

She blinks, and my eyes are drawn to her mouth as my thumb moves back and forth.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she finally says.

I open my mouth to explain myself when Pappy walks in, talking.

“Got the pool cleaned up, wasn’t too bad,” he says. “Oh—”

My hand has already dropped and I’ve taken a step back from Autumn, but when I turn to look at Pappy, he’s grinning at us like he hasn’t missed a thing.

“I’ll just see what else I can get up to outside,” he says, pointing behind him.

I shake my head and grin, turning to look at Autumn. She’s taken at least a dozen steps away from me and her fists are clenched. And she’s not looking at me. Shit. How do I keep blowing it with this woman?

“I should get you both home,” I say. “It’s been a long one. We covered a lot of ground today and it will all be here tomorrow.”

“I don’t mind putting in long hours,” Autumn says. “The sooner we get to work, the sooner this can all be *done*.”

She looks at me with those last words, her tone cold and her expression resolute. She doesn’t plan on letting her heart get entangled here and I need to do the same. I’m not sure why I felt so much when I saw how hard she was working on Summer’s wedding, like we were cut from the same cloth...and when we spoke at first, it seemed like she felt that same draw to me.

Just because she loves her sister and would do anything for her doesn’t mean she’s anything like me...or even if we’re fucking twinsies, it doesn’t mean she’s my fucking soul mate. My jaw clenches and I will my heart to stop this nonsense. I can’t believe I even entertained the possibility of a relationship with someone, period, much less with someone I barely know.

We’ll be friends, nothing more.

It’s what’s best for Ivy and me anyway.



The drive to my parents’ place is quiet. Even Pappy seems to feel the chill in

the air between Autumn and me. He looks at me apologetically when I glance at him in the rearview mirror, and I want to tell him this is my own fault. I got myself into this mess and I'll be fine. I always have been.

The positive to all of this is that Autumn is excellent at her job, and the fact that I'd hoped there was a possibility between us does not overshadow the fact that she really is the best for the job. Her thoughts about making the house more comfortable for Ivy are spot on. I don't have the time to invest like I did for the lighthouse renovation, but between her and Magnus, they should get the job done. But dammit, the way Magnus looked at her—why the hell did I practically hand her over to him for the unforeseeable future? I groan. Well, the bottom line is, I think they'll do a great job on the house.

I take a deep breath and try to relax my shoulders. I worked out this morning, but I'm feeling the need to hit it again. The phone rings right before we reach my parents' and when I see it's Ty Hardy, my teammate and best friend, I click accept, letting the sound fill the car.

"Practice was a bitch today, man," he says. He never bothers with hello. "I can't wait until I'm hot shit like you and don't have to go to all these early practices."

I laugh. "How's Dylan looking out there?"

"Kid is solid. He's thinking ahead, quick on his feet, and adaptable. I like him a lot."

"Great. I've been watching the footage and the team is looking great. I'll be out there on Monday."

"No shit? I thought you weren't scheduled to come until the end of next month."

"I'm not, but you know I can't stay away that long. I'll be in and out before then." Truth is, I've never liked the divide in the team with coming in sporadically for practices during an offseason.

"You know no one holds it against you—there's not another player out there who won't happily skip offseason workouts when their time comes."

"I know. It's just the way I operate. I don't like special treatment."

He laughs and I do too.

"Because you're a class act," he says. "And I guarantee no one is worried that you won't be ready. We trust you, man."

"I appreciate that." My face heats when Autumn shifts in her seat. I should've waited to take this call. "It takes practice to operate as a team, through and through, which is why I can't seem to stay away."

“Well, I don’t need to be arguing with the MVP, but I think we’re gonna be okay.” He laughs again.

I’m grateful for the privileges I’ve been given with time. I like being the one to take Ivy to school and pick her up—today being an exception with Autumn. But that won’t be the norm. Ivy will be out of school for a couple of weeks and I don’t want to miss out on being with her either.

You’ll never hear me complaining about the struggles of being a dad, ever. But it’s a constant juggling act, trying to be a good dad while also being a pro player, and I don’t think I’m ever quite keeping up with any of it. My mom says every parent feels that way.

“You there, Ledger?” Hardy asks.

“Sorry. I spaced out for a second there. I’m pulling into my parents’ driveway. Call me after practice tomorrow?”

“No worries. Tell Ivy I’ve got a stuffed animal with her name on it. I’ll try to remember to bring it Monday when I see ya.”

“You’re too good to us,” I tell him. Most people don’t know what to do when they realize Ivy is deaf, but Ty has always had an easy rapport with her, treated her like she’s a normal kid, which she is. Just because her normal isn’t someone else’s, it doesn’t mean *she* isn’t. “Love you, man.”

“Back atcha.” And he hangs up.

“He sounds nice,” Autumn says.

“One of the best people I know.”

I park and turn to look at Autumn. Her expression is impenetrable. I don’t know how to read her at all. And the sooner I stop trying—like she said, the sooner this can all be done.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 17

## FEVER



### Autumn

The more I'm around Zac, which admittedly has still not been very long, but...he just looks and sounds and feels better and better. And it was already challenging to be around him with the little I knew before. But the guy is just so...*incredible*.

That can't possibly be real, right?

My phone vibrates on my lap and it's good timing because the way Zac is staring at me right now as we're sitting in his parents' driveway...I can't tell what he's thinking even a little bit. Until now, he's seemed like a fairly open book, but I'm the last one I trust when it comes to reading men.

My phone vibrates again and I glance down, seeing Dominic's name on the screen. My teeth clench out of habit. I don't want to talk to him right now. Ever. But especially not right now.

“We’ll let you get to that,” Zac says quietly, and he and Pappy get out of the car and go inside.

I’m not sure whether I should just go to my place or whether Daisy is expecting me for dinner. She said last night no less than five times that I should plan on supper—or with her accent, *suppah*, which just tickles me to no end—here at the house when we’re not working. She also tried to make it seem like there was no pressure, but I could tell she really wants me around. And I enjoyed last night so much, I’d planned on it.

My phone stops vibrating and starts again. I roll my eyes and answer it this time.

“Dominic, why are you still calling?” I don’t try to soften my tone. We’re way past that.

“Baby, you know I’ll do anything to get you back. Don’t you miss me? Miss us?”

“No,” I admit. “Lose my number and move on, Dominic. You were able to find plenty of opportunities while we were together, I think you’ll be just fine now that we’re not.”

“That’s just it. I don’t want to get over you.”

“Well, too bad.” I get out of the car and slam the door and hear Ivy yelling from the front door. She’s waving me toward the house and jumping up and down. She puts her hand over her mouth when she sees that I’m on the phone and makes a face, giggling. I smile at her, the tension from this phone call draining out of me like magic.

“Who is that?”

“I’ve gotta go.”

“Where are you, Autumn? I went by your place and Megan said she thought you were out of town.”

“I’m not your business anymore, and I won’t be again. I’ve tried not to be rude. I didn’t have to answer this call...not sure why I did really, except to reiterate that you need to leave me alone.”

“I’ll be here when you get back. Or, you know, when you’re ready. We just need time to heal, baby.”

“Have you never had anyone break up with you before? Is that what this is? Because I feel like I’ve been very clear. You know what?” I turn back and smile at Ivy, who is still watching me from the door, trying to decipher if I’m close to wrapping it up or not. “I’m hanging up. Don’t call me again.”

He’s saying “baby” again when I hang up on him and I grin at Ivy,

waving. She jumps up and down and runs toward me, grabbing my hand. Her hands are flying as she signs. I look at her in confusion and her hands move slower, like she's putting something in her mouth.

"Suppah?" she asks.

I nod. "Yes," I say, and then I lift my hand into a fist and move it like it's nodding.

Her eyes brighten when she sees the sign and she points at me. I think she's asking if I know sign language. First, I shake my head, but she lifts her hand and does the sign for *yes*. I laugh, happy that we're communicating without Zac here to translate. I shrug and put my thumb and pointer finger together to show the tiniest amount. She holds both hands out and when I look at her hesitantly, not positive I'm reading her right, she grins and says out loud, "What?"

I put my hand on my chest. "Me? What do I know?"

She grins even wider if that's possible and nods. I bite my bottom lip, trying to remember the few signs I tried to cram into my brain at two this morning.

I sign *no* and her smile never leaves her face. She's the cutest thing I've ever seen. She nods like, *yeah, what else you got?* And I laugh and repeat the sign for *yes*, cracking up when she makes a face. And then I try to remember the letters to the alphabet, my fingers slowly forming the shapes, but I get stuck on the letter E. Not very impressive.

She shows me E, F, G, and H, and I copy her and then I sail on the letters I through O because they're what you'd expect. She stopped signing with me around L and then picks back up on P, patiently showing me the rest of the alphabet, one letter at a time. When we're done, she does a sign I don't recognize and then speaks it out loud.

"Again."

So I start from the beginning, making it all the way to Q this time. The third time, I get all the way through it and she holds both hands up and mouths the word YAY.

She grabs my hand and we walk into the door, smiling happily at one another even though I'm strangely on the verge of tears. I didn't know my heart could feel as full as it does right now.

The door closes behind us and Ivy yells, "Daddy," so loud it makes me jump. Her eyes widen and she giggles, saying, "Sorry," out loud as she also signs it.

Zac comes around the corner and pauses when he sees us standing there together. “Why do the two of you look like you’re up to trouble already?” he asks, as he signs too.

Ivy points at me and signs something without saying it out loud, and Zac’s head tilts to the side.

“You know sign language?” he asks.

“No!” I say it too loud and turn to Ivy, giving her a look as I shake my head at her. “I don’t. Ivy was just teaching me the alphabet.”

She looks confused but doesn’t wait around to discuss it anymore, running into the other room.

“My mom has a feast in here if you’re hungry at all,” he says.

“Sure, why not.” I follow him into the kitchen and Daisy, Daniel, and Pappy are carrying things to the table. “What can I do to help?” I ask, looking around to see what’s left.

“Have a seat. Tell us if you prefer white or red...that is, if you like wine at all. Now that I think about it, you only drank water last night.”

“I like either, so whatever you’re opening will be good with me.”

“You really don’t have a preference?” Daisy asks.

“Maybe white a little more than red, but—”

“White it is.”

Zac smirks at me and lifts an eyebrow as he passes me. “Best tell Daisy the truth. She’ll get it out of you one way or the other.”

My face flushes at that. Because if that’s true, I’m sure she can tell that her son is wreaking havoc on my nervous system. I think I’ve felt feverish since the night I met him.

How the hell do I work under these conditions?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 18

## DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE



### Autumn

Supper is another joyous evening with the Ledgers. I'm obsessed with their accents. At first, I didn't think Zac sounded like them very much...until he's had a drink and is around his family for a while. His accent is toned down compared to Pappy's and his dad's, but he's still got that relaxed *R* that I find so charming. They like my accent too, so we have fun trying to sound like each other. This family is hilarious, and there's not a second when I'm not having a good time. It's for these very reasons that I stand up to leave at exactly nine o'clock and thank them for the food and hospitality before I bolt to the guesthouse.

Seeing Zac with Ivy...it's something I only ever dreamed of having with my dad. And even then, I didn't have a well-rounded picture of what it *could* be to know to dream of *this*. It's a level of adoration I didn't know was

possible between a dad and his little girl.

My nose stings as I close the door behind me and close my eyes. The lump in my throat doesn't dissolve as I take deep breaths, but it hurts a little less after a few minutes. I try to shake it off and move toward the shower, turning the hot water on. I wish I could soak in a hot bath right about now, but instead, I envision what I want to put in Zac's master bathroom and the guest suite, maybe even in Ivy's bathroom, if Zac is okay with that. I should look into kids' bathrooms and if that would be a health hazard for her to have a deep-soaking tub. There's probably a reason no parent has asked me to put one in their kids' bathrooms before. I had no idea all the thought that went into having kids and as I lather my hair and try to clear my head from the way my mind is ping-ponging all over the place, Ivy's mom comes to mind again.

Where is she?

I get through my shower and do a little work before going back to the ASL website I found the night before. I practice the signs on there, losing track of time. And then, when I can't avoid it another second longer, I give in to what I've been dying to do. I google Halle Reid again, trying to figure out where she is and when she might've seen her daughter last. It's much easier to get a possible location—Morocco last week and New York two days ago—than it is to find out anything about her and Ivy.

And then I look up Zac and there are fewer pictures of him out there than Halle but still a ton. He's usually with his team or alone, but there is an occasional shot of him with an actress or a pretty girl, there's even speculation about him and one of the Patriots' cheerleaders, Ava Langdon. But I manage to only find one picture of the two of them and they're with a group of people.

I feel ridiculous for cyber-stalking a guy I'll be spending a lot of time with when I could just ask him face-to-face, but I still feel the need to maintain distance. And call it pride or self-preservation, but something tells me that if I ever let Zac Ledger in, I've never known the likes of the devastation it'd bring me when he walked away. Because he would. Walk away.

Men always do.

---

I'm dragging the next morning. I should've been catching up on sleep last night and instead, I lost another night. I put on the cheap jeans and a cute button-down blouse I bought on our run into town on my first day here and hope that the things I ordered and the shipment Frieda from work went to pick up from my apartment will come today or tomorrow. Summer has promised she'll send more of my things when she gets back home from her honeymoon in another week, but with the money Zac has already paid me, I figure I may as well update my wardrobe. I think I could wear leggings and a sweatshirt and Zac wouldn't mind. I'll be more professional than that, but it'll be good to round out my wardrobe more. I'll need warmer clothes too once the weather changes.

Zac takes one look at me and seems to know I'm lacking more energy than normal. "Should we drive through a coffee shop on the way?"

"I could definitely use more coffee."

We get in his SUV, and he leans forward, looking out all the windows. "Just making sure Pappy isn't hoping to go."

"He seemed pretty tired last night, but I did think he wanted to go today."

"Yeah, me too," he says. "Let me just go check and make sure. I wouldn't want him to be disappointed."

There goes the pang in my heart again. *Cool it*, I tell myself. Thoughtfulness does not make a man anything special. I roll my eyes and look out the window, worry building when five minutes pass and then ten. I open my door finally, getting ready to go see if something's wrong, when the two of them walk out of the house, laughing.

Zac looks hotter than anyone should ever look, his clothes hugging his body in a way that feels all kinds of wrong, it's so right. And then Pappy... what in the world?

They open the SUV doors, Pappy taking the one behind me in the back, and I glance at Zac as I tell Pappy good morning.

Zac shrugs and I stifle a laugh.

Pappy's wearing button-down blue plaid pajamas, the pants tucked in his tan suede work boots and the tails of his pajama top hanging out from a red World's Greatest Pappy sweatshirt, with a navy sports coat finishing off the look. His white hair is barely contained under a green beanie. He leans up and pats my shoulder.

"How are you this fine morning? I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I slept right through my alarm."

“It’s no problem,” I say, smiling back at him.

“You sure are a sight for sore eyes,” he says.

“You seem to think that every time you see her, Pappy,” Zac says.

“Well, I’m not blind,” he says, pinching his lips together, both eyebrows up.

I laugh and so does Zac.

“No, you are certainly not, Pappy.” Zac grins over at me.

“And it just so happens to be *true* every time,” Pappy adds. “Gran always said people didn’t pay attention to one another anymore. That they don’t really *see* other people. I just want our girl Autumn here to know that I see her and think she is a *fine* sight,” he says emphatically.

“Damn straight, she is,” Zac says, making my face heat.

I brave another glance at him and the way his eyes are all twinkly makes my heart do too many weird things, so I don’t let my eyes stay there.

I turn around and reach out my hand toward Pappy. He puts his wrinkled, veiny hand in mine and squeezes it, his lips lifting in a smile.

“Thank you, Pappy. I think you’re a fine sight too. Especially this morning. You’ve got it *all* going on today.”

He beams. “Well, Gran would’ve been after me yesterday for going into that drafty house without layers.”

“Gran sounds like the wisest woman ever,” I say, squeezing his hand one more time before I turn around.

“She was,” he says softly. “She was.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 19

## MISSING MANHOOD



### Autumn

Over the next couple of days, we have a few more meetings with Magnus and go over the plans for the house with him and just the two of us, over and over and over again. By the end of the weekend, I feel like I have a solid idea of what Zac wants this place to be. Ivy too. When we go to his parents' house at night and have supper, Zac interprets what Ivy has to say about the house, and when I go back to the guesthouse each night, I put in any new tweaks based on what she's told me in my software program. I love how Zac is including her in the process.

Tonight, though, she's in a silly mood, and she's tired of talking about the house. After supper, the three of us go into the guesthouse and sit at the table like we've done the past few nights. But Ivy puts her head on the table and groans when Zac tries to show her updated plans of her room.

She signs something without lifting her head and Zac chuckles.

“What did she say?” I ask.

“She said just make it princessy and she won’t care.” His face flushes when she signs something else. My eyes narrow when I see the letters she spells out.

I couldn’t have read that right. I’m still nowhere close to confident with any sign language, with how fast they sign back and forth, even the alphabet still doesn’t register with me right away.

Zac clears his throat and stands up, avoiding eye contact with me.

She taps her hand on the table and looks up, signing slower and emphatically. *P-U-S-S-Y*. And then she says it, clear as day.

My face flushes. Uh, yeah, that’s exactly what I thought she was saying. Maybe I’m picking up on some of this better than I realized.

Zac looks at me and swallows hard. “That’s the name of her platypus. The one I was careful not to say when you still thought I was an a-s-s-h-o-l-e.” It’s the only time he’s ever *not* signed what he’s saying when Ivy is in the room.

I snort and then cover my mouth when Ivy looks at me in confusion. “What makes you certain I don’t still think that?”

His eyes zero in on my mouth as he smirks and I start sweating. “Fair enough. Pussy is lost and she says she can’t focus on anything else until we find him,” he says, signing again too.

“Pussy is a he?” I cackle and Ivy stands up and puts her hands on her hips, scowling at both of us. “I’m sorry,” I say, trying to remember the sign too but screwing it up because whatever I’m signing is not softening her at all. In fact, she looks more distraught.

Zac studies me and frowns. “Are you trying to use sign language right now?”

“Uh. Maybe? I don’t know.”

He points at my fingers. “That can be a sign for choke.” He looks like he’s about to laugh when I shoot him a horrified look.

I shake my head at Ivy. “I didn’t mean to say Pussy was choked.”

She keeps staring at me. I fling my arm out at Zac. “Tell her.” He starts laughing, but I can tell he’s trying to hold it in because Ivy is *not* pleased. I groan. I need to up my ASL lessons because this is not cutting it.

Zac signs and talks at the same time, pointing at me. “She didn’t mean Pussy is choking. She was saying sorry that Pussy is missing...his manhood,”

he adds under his breath.

Ivy takes a deep breath and moves closer to me, looking more like herself. “I find him.” She moves to the door and looks at Zac, motioning for him to come on.

“I’m sorry,” he tells me. “She has so many stuffed animals, but that’s the one she sleeps with at all times. Her...mom gave her that one the last time she visited and she hasn’t slept without him since.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” I nod.

“Are you okay here?” He moves toward the door. “I should probably get her home. I sense an impending breakdown if we don’t find Pu—uh, the platypus.” He wipes his hand over his smile.

“Of course, I’ll be fine.” I move toward Ivy and lean down, hoping she can read my lips instead of botching up another sign. “You’ll find him.” I squeeze her shoulders and she reaches out and hugs me hard. I melt like butter and smile widely at her when she pulls away.

“You come too?” Ivy says.

“Oh.” I shake my head. “No. I don’t think so. I’ll see you tomorrow though, right?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come hang out at the house with us?” Zac asks. “It’s early. We’ll be hunting for Pussy, but that shouldn’t take too lo—” His ears turn red and my face does too. He swipes his hand down his face and looks away.

“I’ll try to go to bed earlier tonight. Catch up on some sleep,” I say.

I think he might be relieved that I say no, the way he nods briskly with my response.

“I do feel bad that I made you work all weekend.” He opens the door. “Tomorrow will be a little different. I’ll pick you up and drop you off at the house and then I’ll be training with the team for a few hours.”

“Daddy, we find...” Ivy says.

He grins apologetically and puts his hand on her shoulder. “Eight o’clock, okay?”

I nod and the two of them leave, hand in hand.

With the way the two of them are making my heart trip over itself with all the warm fuzzies, I think a night in by myself is exactly what I need.

# 20

## NUISANCES



Zac

With all the talk of Pussy, stuffed or otherwise, I am in need of a long shower and some time away from Autumn. When we pull into the driveway and go inside, I already feel the lack of not having Autumn here. Her presence fills up every space she's in, and even though I will always be content when it's just me and Ivy, I can't deny that it's exhilarating having Autumn around.

Ivy signs for me to hurry up and help her, so we go to all the usual places Pussy would be. I go to Ivy's room first and she rushes past me, tossing stuffed animals behind her back. The girl has way too many animals cluttering up her room and insists there are never enough. Between my family and friends like Hardy, they're happy to keep her stocked. But since Pussy is from her mom, he's always been extra special to her.

She turns to look at me, her eyes full of tears.



“Don’t give up,” I say, signing it before I wipe the tears off of her cheeks. “You take somewhere?”

Her eyes light up and she runs to my room. I don’t think he’s in there. After I hid him the other day, I thought I put him back in her room, but she runs back out clutching Pussy to her chest. She’s laughing and hugging him but then turns her glare on me.

“You hid him,” she says out loud, along with emphatically signing *you* and *hid*.

“I thought for sure he was in your room,” I insist, reaching out to pet the wonky-looking platypus.

“Okay, we see Autumn,” Ivy says, dancing around the room.

“No.” I shake my head. “We already said goodnight to her and we have a busy week ahead.”

And my dick can’t handle more time around the woman tonight without making a nuisance of itself.

I feel like a terrible person for even thinking about my dick and Autumn while having a conversation with my daughter.

*BATH TIME*, I sign.

Ivy groans but runs into the bathroom and starts the water. I follow behind her, checking the temp while she props Pussy on the countertop so he doesn’t disappear on her again. My phone vibrates in my pocket and I check it, disappointed when it’s not Autumn but Caroline. She texted one other time since I said it was best if we moved on, something along the lines of this one.

Caroline

Hey, sexy. Miss you.

I put my phone back in my pocket, unsure of how to respond to that since I didn’t even know her well enough to miss her, and the last thing I want is to make her think I’ve changed my mind and want to see her again.

I stay within hearing distance once Ivy gets in the tub. We used to do elaborate bubble bath hairdos and Peppa the Pig shows, me trying to fit my long, bulky legs in the small space between the toilet and the tub, holding up whatever animal she’d pass me next or making bubble shapes and mustaches. Now that she’s a little older and doesn’t have to be entertained as much, she sings or talks loudly when she’s in the tub so I can hear that she’s fine.

She yells when it’s time to wash her hair and I’m already in the doorway. She grins when she glances up and I’m right there. I feel like the biggest

accomplishment of my life isn't being called the GOAT or the money in my bank account—the biggest accomplishment is when I finally conquered Ivy's long, curly hair. And making her *happy*, of course...that's obviously the most important thing, but working through my little girl's hair and getting the tangles out without making her cry, that's right up there with getting the Heisman. It used to be our only awful time together. She'd cry and stomp her feet, and I'd feel like the biggest asshole of all mankind. My mom didn't even know what to do about it since my mom's hair is stick straight. Thank the Instagram gods for getting this dad through it because I was clueless.

I get down on my knees and rinse her hair with the shower head, going light on the shampoo and heavier on the conditioner. Once it's all rinsed, I grab the detangling brush we keep in a little basket suctioned to the tile and brush each section carefully. She sings and splashes her toys around while I get the job done and once every strand has been brushed through, I hold my fist out and she bumps it with hers.

“Good job, Daddy,” she says.

“Good job, you,” I tell her. I wave my hand from the bathtub to me to indicate I want her to get out of the tub and she nods, so I undo the plug to drain the water. She stands and I hand her a towel to wrap around her body while taking another towel that at least a dozen Instagram accounts recommended for curly hair to gently squeeze out the water. I swear I'd rather endorse these products than Under Armour and Tag Heuer, that's how grateful I am. Once she's standing in front of the mirror, I grab the bottle of leave-in conditioner and scrunch it in, and then another product on top of that, doing the same. I dab the excess water out and then plop it in an old T-shirt of mine, so it's a little turban on top of her head. She looks so stinking cute and it keeps her hair out of the way while she sleeps...and most importantly, her hair is a helluva lot easier to deal with in the morning.

The first hundred times I tried the plopping, I was all thumbs, but we've got the process down to less than a minute now. If the guys on the team knew I was a curly-hair connoisseur, I'd never hear the end of it.

We look at a few books, Ivy doing most of the reading to me, which is something new and fun for us, and I kiss her goodnight and am about to turn down her lamp to the lowest setting, but she reaches out to stop me. As usual, this is the time of day when she wants to dive into all the important discussions.

“Autumn stay?” She raises her eyebrows in question, her sweet voice

loud in the room.

“She lives in California, so when she finishes working on the house, I think she’ll go back there.” I watch as she processes that and she frowns.

“Know Mommy?”

“I think she’s heard of Mommy, but I don’t think she knows her.”

Ivy thinks about that for a moment before signing, *I LIKE A-U-T-U-M-N. SHE STAY.*

My heart clenches—I’d never known this feeling before my daughter came into my world. I’m certain as a parent, I’ve made a colossal mistake bringing Autumn here.

“Let’s just be happy for her help. We have a good life here, right? We have our family and your friends at school. Autumn will eventually have to go back to *her* home and her family and friends.”

Ivy shakes her head no, glaring at my hands as I sign and tension in hers as she presses her lips together and signs back: *YOU. ME. HER FRIENDS. HER OUR FAMILY.*

I swallow the unease because I feel the same way as my little girl, while knowing it’s a really bad idea to be so invested this soon. “You’re right, she is important to us, but that doesn’t mean she’ll want to live across the country from her family. She’ll be our friend when she goes back to California too.” I speak twice as much out loud compared to what I actually sign, a habit I fall back into most when I’m tired or when I’m signing and speaking around people who don’t understand sign language, but Ivy is only watching my hands at the moment.

When I’m done, she folds her arms across her chest and lifts her eyes to scowl at me, and I sigh as I lean down to kiss her forehead.

“I love you,” I tell her. “Sleep. Autumn isn’t leaving yet.” I grin to soften my statement, but Ivy just looks troubled as I switch her lamp to the dimmest setting.

*Fuck.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 21

## SUCH A SHAME



### Autumn

The next day feels a thousand times longer without Zac at the house. Magnus is in and out and we get really close to finishing the plans, but I miss Zac more than I'm comfortable admitting. When he comes to pick me up that evening, he's quieter than usual and somewhat subdued.

"Did you have a good day?" I ask.

He nods and smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Worked hard. It was good to see everyone. I'm a little bit sore, but it's all good. What did I miss around here?"

"Not much. Magnus and I got a lot done. He can tell you all about some of the tweaks we're thinking about."

"How about you tell me over supper out?"

I look at him in surprise. "No family affair tonight?"

“Well, my mom asked if she could take Ivy to a movie they’ve wanted to see, and I agreed as long as they go on the early side so Ivy is home at bedtime...”

“Oh, okay, supper sounds great then. I’m not super hungry—Magnus and I had a late lunch.”

He runs his hands through his hair. “Oh? Where did you go?”

“He went and grabbed sandwiches...”

His jaw clenches as he nods. His expression is bleaker than I’m used to seeing and I take a step closer. On a whim, I reach up and rub my thumb over his furrowed brow, smoothing it out.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

He puts his hand on my waist and my breath hitches. When he takes a step toward me, I think I stop breathing for a few seconds.

“I’m getting too attached to you in my space,” he says, his voice husky. His words, along with the heat in his eyes and voice, have my heart pounding out of my chest.

“Yeah?” I whisper, uncertain where all my sexy bravado has gone.

“Yeah,” he echoes. His head dips toward mine and my lips part, willing him to come closer so our mouths meet, but he just hovers there, so close that if I move, my lips will brush against his. “It’s really unfair how beautiful you are.” When he says beautiful, his lips touch mine and I shiver. He pulls me in closer so our bodies are flush against each other and still his lips don’t make that final move to kiss me already.

“You’re pretty beautiful too, you know,” I whisper. “It’s really a shame you’re a jock.”

We both laugh then and the next thing I know, his hands are on my face and his mouth is on mine and he’s giving me the hottest, sexiest kiss I’ve ever known. It starts out slowly, his tongue and teeth teasing my lips, his lips cushiony soft but then determined is the only way I know how to put it—like his mouth has no other purpose but to make every body part I own weaken into mush. His tongue strokes mine, the heat pulling a whimper out of me and unleashing a fire in him. His hand slides down my side and to my thigh, hitching my leg over his thigh. I feel his hardness against my stomach and his leg against my apex makes my core clench and I swear he can feel it by the way he groans into my mouth. It takes every ounce of restraint I possess to not climb the man like a tree. I keep my hands in his hair because I don’t trust myself, as we kiss like it is our *job*. And *damn*, he is most excellent at this

job.

His other hand winds through my hair as he angles to get better access, and I take a chance and move my hand down his neck and then down his chest where I feel his heart pounding against mine. The rest of my inhibitions go out the window when I feel the way I'm affecting him and I stand on my tiptoes, kissing him harder. He picks me up then, like I weigh nothing, and this time I really whimper when I feel him against me. He sets me on the kitchen counter and I miss having him against my body, but then he's kissing down my neck and I can't think straight. My back arches and his thumb brushes over my nipple, and then suddenly he's gone. He steps back, his chest heaving, his lips puffy from our kisses. I try to keep my eyes on his face, rather than the massive tent in his pants that I see out of the corner of my eye. He runs his hands through his hair and lets out a shaky laugh.

"I intended on feeding you, and..." He studies my face, his eyes landing on my mouth. He groans, tearing his eyes back up to my eyes. "Are we okay? I want to be respectful of you and our working relationship. You've made it clear that you're not really...uh, well, I should just apologize for being entirely inappropriate. I'm sorry, Autumn."

I gulp, still trying to catch my breath and surprised by the direction this has taken, by the direction the whole night has taken. I jump down from the countertop and smile, waving my hand like it's no big deal. Like he didn't just turn everything I've ever thought about the intimate times I've had with others upside down and make me realize I've never experienced explosive chemistry like this with anyone before now.

And now I want it and he's pumping the brakes like he can't get out of here fast enough.

He lifts his eyebrows and smiles back at me, and I smooth down my shirt, willing my nipples to go back undercover.

"You don't need to apologize," I say finally. "Please don't. We've been...working great together so far, and this won't change that, I promise. I suppose we needed to get that out of our system."

He nods, relieved. "I guess so," he says. "Supper then?"

"You know what? I might just microwave a baked potato or something and call it an early night."

He looks disappointed, but I can't help that. *I'm* disappointed, and the longer I'm around him, the more I'm going to want to press my body against his and ask him to take me hostage, so really, I think he's the winner on this

disappointment scale.

“Sure,” he says. “Do we need to stop by the store and pick up potatoes?”

“Daisy asked me to make a list this morning, so I think I’m set.”

“Great,” he says softly.

*Great.*

I just had the kiss of my lifetime. I remember my sister telling me about experiencing that next-level kind of kiss and I thought I’d never know what that’s like. Having my dad leave my mom twice when Summer and I were babies and never settling down *or* being a great dad, and dating guys who are obviously not smart choices...the combination has made me quite the cynic, and now I know why.

I’ve been trying to avoid *this*.

This feeling in the pit of my stomach and ache in my heart that hurts.

I didn’t ask for this.

The guy who’s been pursuing *me* suddenly gets a strict ethical code and thinks the kiss I’m still reeling over was entirely inappropriate.

He apologized, for crying out loud.

My brain and body feel whiplashed. Exhausted. Vulnerable.

It’s hard to be around Zac Ledger and not give in to these feelings... especially now that I know how he kisses.

It’s best I bolt out of here while I still have my underwear on and my dignity intact.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 22

## TENSE JOYFEST



### Autumn

The ride home is a joyfest of warm fuzzies. If you call warm fuzzies tense silence and a joyfest both of us staring miserably out the window. I've never been so glad that it's a short distance between the two houses, and when Zac pulls into his parents' driveway, the SUV is still rolling when I hop out.

"Thanks for the ride. See you later!" I say as I'm closing the door.

He says something, but I lift my hand in a wave and hustle to the guesthouse. I check my phone to see today's date because since I've been in Massachusetts, I've lost track of time. Dammit. Summer is still on her honeymoon, so I can't call her right now. Mama and I FaceTime just about every day, but I don't really want to tell her about it yet. I need to get my game face on before I see her. Even on a small phone screen, she'd pick up my distress within seconds.



I fall back on the couch, regretting that I didn't get in my lounge pants before sitting down because I don't think I can get up now, when there's a knock at the door. I groan internally just in case these walls aren't soundproof and open the door.

Pappy stands at the door grinning. "Didn't get to see that smile today and I missed it."

I smile, touched that he's being so sweet.

"The girls are out, but there's someone you've gotta meet. Zac said you're taken care of for dinner, but I thought I'd try to change your mind." He waits patiently while I try to come up with a way out of it. He seems to know that because he tilts his head and smiles bigger. "Come on, it'll be fun, and we won't keep you out late."

"Keep me out? Where are you going?"

"Well, truthfully, I don't know if we're ordering takeout or going out, but...hopefully they'll have decided that by the time we get inside." He points over his shoulder to the main house. He rubs his hands together, excited, and I have to admit, I'm curious about who he wants me to meet.

"Okay, I'll hang out for a little bit, but I should go to bed early tonight. I'm dragging..."

He throws his hands in the air. "Excellent. Come on. Let's go."

Pappy turns and I have to jog to catch up with him.

"Do I need to change first?" I look down at my jeans and cute blouse and Pappy frowns.

"Why would you want to do that? You look beautiful," he says.

"Thanks, Pappy," I say, patting his back. "You sure know how to make a girl feel good."

He opens the door to the kitchen and I hear a deep voice saying, "Where are you hiding her? Is there a reason you're keeping me from meeting the mysterious Au—"

"There you are," Zac says, moving forward and putting his hand on my back before dropping it like he's burned when I stare at him. I might have been shooting some venom in that stare, not sure.

"So you are real." The voice I'd heard speaks up again, and I turn to see a guy almost as tall and broad as Zac but with lighter hair and the same excellent genes, smiling at me. He's dressed in a suit and it's a nice look. It doesn't make my heart pitter-patter the way Zac does in his workout clothes, although I would love to see Zac in a suit...

I try to shake myself out of the Zac fog.

“Hi. I recognize you from the pictures,” I say, lifting my head toward the family wall of photographs.

He holds out his hand and we shake. “I’m this guy’s younger, smarter brother,” he says, his grin widening as he glances at Zac. The two of them have that same mischievous look in their eyes when they grin. “Jamison.”

I laugh. “I’m Autumn.”

“Oh, I’ve heard,” he says, his eyebrows raised as he laughs. “This family has been *shaken* by you.”

Zac groans. “Ignore everything he says.”

“How is that bad?” Jamison asks, holding up both hands. “Do you deny that Pappy hasn’t fallen head over heels over our Charleston slash Southern California girl?” He glances at me, smirking.

“Charlotte, but yes to California,” I say.

Zac chuckles and so does Pappy. “Get it right if you’re gonna act like a suck-up,” Zac says.

Jamison rolls his eyes, but it’s obvious he’s not done teasing. Daniel walks in while Jamison is saying, “And don’t even get me started on Ivy.”

“What’s going on with Ivy?” Daniel asks, hugging Jamison.

“I’ve probably gotten twenty texts from Ivy that mention Autumn,” Jamison says, making me flush.

“I’ll talk to her—I didn’t realize she was texting so much,” Zac says.

“Don’t you dare. Do you know how long it took for her to text me back at first? I’m just happy to be talking about something other than *Encanto*.” He looks at Zac. “How long do you think we’re going to be stuck on this one?”

“Uh...” Zac glances at me, flustered.

Jamison’s mouth parts and I can see that he’s trying not to laugh. “I’m talking about *Encanto*, not Autumn.” He looks at me and says, “FYI, he’s not been stuck on anyone in a very long time.”

Zac looks downright hostile. This must be what he looks like when he’s out there on the field facing an opponent...or whatever they call it in football.

“Since when are you so chatty?” Zac says.

Jamison nods. “I know. I’m supposedly the quieter one too.” He holds up his hand and does a stage whisper, “Better looking one also, but I didn’t want to make him feel bad.”

I can’t help it, I cackle, and even Zac can’t help but join in when we’re all laughing.

“Are we going to eat or not?” Zac looks sheepishly in my direction and my cheeks grow warmer.

I point toward Pappy. “He talked me into it. Are you sure you don’t want a guys’ night out?”

“Hell, no,” Jamison says, putting his arm around my shoulder. “Is it okay if I escort you out?”

I nod, laughing, and he tugs me toward the door.

“Get your hands off her,” Zac growls.

Jamison winks at me and leaves his arm where it is. “This is going to be so fun,” he says.

“No, it’s not,” Zac mutters.

“I feel very underdressed.” I look back at Daniel and he’s dressed nicer than usual too, not a suit but a button-down shirt and pants.

“Trust me, where we’re going, you’ll be fine,” Jamison says.

We get back in Zac’s SUV and I tell Pappy to get in the front and I sandwich between Daniel and Jamison in the back. I can tell Zac is trying to assess my level of anger toward him about the kiss, but I choose to put it aside for now.

It’s too fun to make him squirm.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 23

## SEXY POISON



### Autumn

Tipsy Hank's isn't exactly what I expected of this group. We pull into the full parking lot and the music sounds like a good time before we even open the car door.

"I shoulda brought my own earplugs," Pappy says, reaching into the stash Zac keeps in the car. "I have a hard time making these fit in my honkin' ears."

"Your ears are wicked cool, Pappy," Jamison says, reaching up to flick Pappy's large, dangling lobe.

Pappy turns back to look at Jamison. "The betta to hear you with, Little Squirt," he says, waggling his eyebrows.

Zac laughs. "Little Squirt...how did I ever let that nickname get out of rotation?"

Jamison bops Zac on the back of the head and from the gleam in Zac's eye when he turns to face him, I almost expect a wrestling match right in this vehicle.

"It's a good thing we've got a lady with us," Zac says, smirking at me.

"Oh, don't let me stand in the way of a fight." I turn to Jamison. "So you're Little Squirt and what's Zac's nickname?"

Zac stiffens and Jamison cracks up, nodding as he tries to stop laughing to tell me. "Ballzac."

Zac rolls his eyes and gets out of the car when I start giggling. I slide out after Jamison and my laugh tapers off when Zac is standing there with his hand out to help me step down from the SUV.

I'm glad his family's attention is on each other and not us as the tension heats up between us. I take his hand but drop it as soon as I step down.

"Are you mad at me?" he whispers.

"Come on, you guys, I don't want them to sell out of chowda before we get in there," Jamison calls.

"Chowda?" My eyes narrow at Zac.

He grins. "They make the best clam chowder."

"Ahh. How did Jamison end up with a heavier accent than you?"

"He's spent more time right in Boston and he's more impressionable," Zac says that last part louder and Jamison groans.

"Don't let him fool ya. Ballzac tried to tone down his accent when he started doing all the interviews."

Zac laughs. "Because if we weren't playing locally, no one could understand a word I said."

Jamison swings the door open and Zac puts his hand on my lower back for me to go ahead of him. Of course, it makes me want to sink into his side and cozy up to his warmth, but that would probably be *entirely inappropriate* as well, so I settle for hurrying inside, which makes his hand drop and I instantly miss it on me.

Tipsy Hank's is hopping. There's a dance floor up by the small stage, and the rest of the large room is filled with high-top tables and booths along the outer edge. Two girls—actually maybe my age, it's hard to tell—greet us, both beautiful and overflowing out of their red and blue crop tops, stomachs toned, and their long, tan legs highlighted by teeny-tiny jean shorts.

One squeals when she sees Zac, and the other jumps up and down, her breasts saying HELLO, HOW ARE YA. I glance at Zac and he looks like a

deer in the headlights. He glances down at me and I wonder how well he knows these two. They sure seem to know him.

The squealer hurriedly pours shots in the glasses already set out and lifts a tray, beelining to Zac first.

“Hanky-panky?” she asks, positioning the tray in front of Zac.

“It’s the name of the shot,” Zac tells me under his breath.

“Believe I will,” Jamison says, grinning at the girls and then at me. “Shall we?”

I lift a shoulder and glance up at Zac. “I could use a little hanky-panky.”

It’s fairly dim in here, but I swear his cheeks get red. He picks up two glasses and hands me one, clinking them together. “To a successful pro—”

“To hanky-panky,” Jamison cuts in, clinking all three of our glasses together.

The other girl is pouting because she’s in charge of the beer tub and that’s what Daniel and Pappy are having. She looks longingly at Zac and Jamison, and I feel bad that she’s on beer duty on the night the Ledger brothers come in.

We throw the shots back and I’m making a face when we’re done. I’m not sure what was in that, but whew. Strong.

“I’m Lonna and I just have to say, you are the one who made me like football,” the squealer purrs to Zac.

I choke back a laugh that sounds half snort, half gag and Zac looks at me. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I tell him icily.

“One more,” Jamison says, handing Lonna cash for all of us. He leans in and when he clinks his glass to ours, he sings softly, “To loosening up the Ballzac!”

I think Zac is already loosened because I expect him to groan or possibly give Jamison a fist in the gut, but instead he laughs and we down the second round of shots. After that, Jamison asks what else I’d like to drink and I tell him I’m stopping at the shots. He heads off to the bar and Zac and I follow Pappy and Daniel to a table to the right of the stage. Every person in the bar manages to either shake Zac’s hand or call his name out from across the bar. He’s gracious to every single person, but I can tell it embarrasses him to have attention drawn to him.

“This was a bad idea,” he says when we sit down.

“Is it like this everywhere you go?” I ask, fascinated. I’m used to seeing

people fawn over my brother-in-law and even my sister now, but I didn't know people were this gung-ho about athletes. Shows what I know.

"Not really," Zac says.

"Don't let him fool ya," Daniel says. "He has a little more privacy in Boston than here, but it's not because they don't all know who he is. They're just a little more chill about it."

"It's not as bad as it is for someone like Liam though," Zac says. "People in town are glad to see me, but I don't have paparazzi staked out around my house at all times or anything like that. They're friendly but respectful," he adds.

Just then I jump when the music starts playing and a woman does a shrill run of notes. We all turn to face the bar and she starts the verse of "Dangerous Woman."

"Sandra always goes big, doesn't she," Jamison says, glancing at the singer before setting a tray with a variety of drinks in front of us. "Okay, we have a gin and tonic, an old-fashioned, rum and Coke, and a couple of beers." He shifts the beers to Pappy and Daniel, and motions for us to pick from the other three drinks.

"Are you off tomorrow or what?" Zac asks him.

"I have a later start tomorrow, and I know your days like this are few and far between. Zac doesn't drink during the season," he says. "Or much during the off-season either, for that matter."

"Is that hard?" I ask Zac.

"No, not at all. Sometimes I miss having a beer to relax at night, but I try to eat healthy year-round so I'm not having to play catch up when it's time to start playing again." He flings his hand toward the tray of drinks. "Not having any of that...not after the hanky-panky."

Jamison catches my eye and grins. "Lightweight," he mouths. "Guess that leaves more for me and the beautiful Autumn. What's your poison?" he asks. "I've got a bunch of apps coming, by the way."

"I'm feeling good on those shots," I say. I watch a couple dancing with Sandra's song and dance a little in my seat.

Two waitresses come over and pile our table with wings, loaded potato skins, and sky-high nachos.

"That was so fast," I exclaim and giggle by how hyper I sound. "What was in those shots?" I ask, giggling again. "I am feeling *so good*."

"Good enough for karaoke?" Jamison asks.

“No, but good enough to dance.” I take a few bites of nachos and then stand, gripping the table for a second. Jamison looks like he’s going to stand too, but Zac beats him to it, his hand returning to my lower back.

“I’ll dance with you,” he says.

I look at him in surprise, and his eyes are glittering with that same fire they had right before we kissed. I swallow hard and take his hand.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 24

## FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION



Zac

The shot girl comes by with her tray of shots just as I'm leading Autumn to the dance floor.

"Knocking boots?" she says, holding the tray toward me.

Autumn laughs. "What else you got—afternoon delight?"

"Makin' whoopee," I add.

"Tap that," she says.

"Doing it," I say, putting my hands on Autumn's waist and enjoying the way she seems to lose her breath every time I touch her.

I vaguely notice the shot girl huffing away as Autumn and I start to sway back and forth.

"Jumping bones," she whispers, not even cracking a smile despite this little game we're playing.

“Getting lucky.” I tug her body closer, not letting any space between us if I can help it, and she sighs, her body slowly relaxing into mine.

“You really know how to move,” she says.

“It’s you, I swear it.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. “Yeah, you tried to make me believe that when we met too, but I don’t think I’m capable of making you dance so well. Must be those skills you’ve got on the football field coming in handy here too. What else you got?”

I grin, leaning in closer, ready to let her know that our kiss blew my mind earlier, when I hear my name from the microphone. I freeze and look at the stage and Jamison is saying something to Ollie, the guy who’s usually here playing guitar.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Zac Ledger,” Ollie says.

Autumn takes a step back and everyone starts chanting my name. I point at Jamison and he knows my look is saying I’m going to fucking kill him without me saying a word. The bastard just smiles cockily and motions toward the stage.

It’s been a while since I’ve been here and even longer since I’ve gone on that stage, but Ollie greets me like no time has passed. Good guy. We grip hands and he tilts his head up. He’s way too cool for Tippy Hank’s with the hipster beard, button-down shirt, and fitted jacket, sleeves pushed up to his elbows.

“Good to see you, man,” he says.

“You too.”

“Whatcha feeling tonight?” He tunes his guitar and grins at me.

“Earned It.”

“Damn,” he says, grinning. He sets his guitar down and moves to the keyboard.

“You know it’ll need to be lower than The Weeknd does it, so do me right,” I tell him.

He laughs and starts the chord progression. I step up to the microphone and glance at Autumn, seeing her eyes grow huge when I start singing. I give it my best shot, glad for all the days I sing in the shower. Autumn says something to Jamison when I nail the falsetto and then she clutches her heart when I hit that chorus in full voice. When I sing *you’re my favorite kind of night*, I feel like it’s just the two of us in the room. Her body lures me in with her seductive sway, and there are times I have to look away so I don’t say the

wrong words.

When I'm done, the crowd goes crazy, clapping and stomping their feet. Autumn still looks shocked, but she's smiling so big, throwing her head back to laugh when the crowd starts yelling, "More, more, more. Zac, Zac, Zac."

She starts chanting it too, and in the mic, Ollie says, "You heard them, Ledger, let's hear another one. You know you can sing all night."

He's right. I've never believed I was good enough to make a career in music, but I've always loved to sing.

"One more," I say, and the crowd erupts. I look back at Ollie. "Best Part?" I know he knows this one because he's a huge Daniel Caesar and H.E.R. fan. He bends down to grab his guitar and once his guitar strap is in place, he starts playing, nodding his approval. This one is less seduction and more romance and I'm almost afraid to look at Autumn when I sing the line about those brown eyes because I know she'll see how much I want her.

I do it anyway. In our short time around each other, I'm finding that whenever she's in the room, I can't look away for any length of time. Her gaze heats me up and I feel ten feet tall. The words to the bridge are *if you love me won't you say something*, and I swear, the earth stands still, everyone else falls away, and I'm singing to her and only her.

I don't pretend to believe she's in love with me or anything close to it yet, but after the kiss we shared earlier, and the way she's made me feel since the moment I laid eyes on her, I can't help but feel like extending the invitation to her to *consider* me. Consider us being *something*.

She still has no idea how huge that is for me. What I've been through. What my life has been like. I think she can see that my entire focus is my daughter, my family, and football...in that order. But I want to find ways to fit Autumn in that lineup.

Whatever it takes.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 25

## SURPRISES



### Autumn

When Zac first opened his mouth to sing, nothing could have surprised me more than to hear that he can *actually sing*. Like he could sing anything and everyone would stop what they were doing and listen. Professional musician level—hell, I’ve dated a handful of musicians who are doing well in the music industry and their voices don’t touch his.

So, I’m shocked, to put it lightly.

But now that he’s walking toward me after throwing *down* on that stage, I am completely speechless and my body is attuned to his, my hands dying to reach out and touch him, pull his head back down for a repeat of that kiss...it doesn’t help that every word he sang seemed meant for me.

Pappy and Daniel reach him before he gets to me, pounding him on the back.

“Now that’s what I call *singing*,” Pappy says. “I don’t know about that first song...I couldn’t tell if you were cussing or not, but your dad said you were. In which case, Gran would’ve said to bring that hiney near her so she could skin that hide for using such language, but you know a curse word never bothered me too much.” He laughs, his eyes twinkling as he and Daniel get closer to me. “How ‘bout that second song though?” He shakes his head, his brow furrowing as he sings, “And those brown eyes,” in a shaky falsetto, winking at me. He nods and nudges me with his elbow. “Our boy’s got a voice on him, doesn’t he?”

“He does. And here I thought you were just a jock,” I say, feeling my heart flutter as I smile up at Zac.

“Gotta have a few surprises up my sleeve to keep it interesting.” He shrugs. He looks back at the stage and laughs into his fist when Ollie announces Jamison singing next. Jamison shakes his head and points at Zac. “It’s only fair,” Zac yells and the crowd laughs.

People swarm around Zac telling him how great he did, and the shot girls sidle as close as they can get to offer him another shot, but he takes a step toward me, polite as he turns down the drinks.

Jamison starts singing “Tennessee Whiskey” and damn, he’s great too. I don’t want to rip all his clothes off and beg him to sing to me while we have sex like I might’ve fantasized doing to his brother once or twice while *he* was singing, but Jamison does have a really good voice.

“You having fun?” Zac asks.

“What other surprising skills do the Ledger brothers have? You were amazing up there.” I lean up to say it in his ear so he can hear me over the music. I don’t know why I feel shy all of a sudden, but it’s hard for me to even look at him right now without feeling shaky.

I shift back to my feet and his eyes are hooded as he stares at me with a smirk.

He leans toward me, his voice husky in my ear, “I think I’ll unveil my skills one by one to keep you on your toes.” He puts his hand on my lower back and tilts his head toward our table. “Did you get enough to eat? We can order something else if it’s gotten too cold...”

“I could handle a few more bites of nachos,” I say, heading toward the table, anything to catch my breath from the heat Zac is putting out.

We sit down and eat while Jamison works the crowd. He must have a trail of broken hearts a mile long around here and Boston.

“Is he dating anyone?” I ask.

Zac’s shoulders stiffen and he scowls at me. “Why, are you interested?”

“No.” I laugh. “But he’s cute and charming, and I’m sure plenty *are* interested.”

“Mmhm,” he grumbles, taking a long drink of water.

“Entirely inappropriate,” I mutter under my breath.

His gaze sharpens. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” I bite out. I need to just get over the kiss and his reaction afterward already. I told him I wanted a professional relationship and I meant it.

It’s just...I didn’t expect his kiss to be that good.

No, that’s not quite true. I’ve had a feeling all along that it would be that good...it’s everything else he’s making me feel that absolutely terrifies me.

I focus on the stage where Jamison is finishing his song and I clap along with everyone else. When they want another song from him, he tries to get Zac to come sing one with him and Zac shakes his head, playfully putting his hand across his throat in a cutting motion, and Jamison doesn’t push it this time. He sings one more and then moves to the table, collapsing into the seat next to me and popping a fry in his mouth.

“You sounded great up there,” I tell him.

“Thank you,” he says, nudging Zac. “How about this guy though?”

I nod my agreement and Jamison looks between Zac and me, a small frown forming between his eyebrows.

“What did I miss?” he asks.

Zac and I shift uncomfortably in our seats, saved from answering Jamison when Pappy and Daniel move back to the table and sit down. Pappy lifts his arms high over his head and circles his neck, stretching.

“This body isn’t made for dancing anymore,” he says.

“Are you and Daniel singing next?” I ask him.

“Lands, no,” Pappy says. “Sadly, the musical gifts did not come from the Ledger side of the family. Tammy—or Daisy, God bless her—she’s the one who can belt out the songs like nobody’s business.”

Daniel gets a wistful look in his eyes. “I first fell for her when I heard her sing ‘Express Yourself’ at a Halloween party just off campus. She was even dressed like Madonna in that video—short, platinum-blond hair and the black double-breasted suit.”

“With nothing but a black lacy bra underneath, according to the pictures,”

Jamison says, grimacing.

“I thought she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen,” Daniel continues, unfazed by Jamison’s interjection, “begged her to go out with me, take a picture with me, go home with me...”

Both guys groan, “Dad...”

“Oh please, you’re adults. Don’t act like you don’t know what it’s all about,” Daniel says, laughing. “I was even more captured when I saw her natural long, dark hair.”

“I love that so much.” I lean in, fascinated that he still speaks about his wife with such awe...same with Pappy too. “Did you get together right away?”

“No, she wasn’t as convinced about me as I was about her.” He laughs. “I had a bit of a reputation around campus, and despite her freedom of expression onstage that night—God, she was bold and so talented—she didn’t have time for any of the flakiness I brought to the table.”

“He was quite the stud muffin.” Pappy nods sagely and I cover my mouth as I giggle. “Before Tammy, Daniel would go out with a different girl every night.” He squeezes Daniel’s shoulder. “Like that one right there,” Pappy adds, pointing at Jamison.

“Pappy! What are you talking about? I do no such thing.” Jamison snorts, but Pappy rolls his eyes and continues.

“I’ve always told all three of them, once they find the one, it’ll all be over, they won’t want anybody else, and boy, was that ever true for Daniel. He started wooing Tammy and that was it.” Pappy cackles, his eyes shining with the memory. “First time he brought her over to meet me and Gran, the poor guy was so nervous and excited, he couldn’t sit still through dinner.” He wipes his eyes and turns to look at Daniel. “I knew then that he had it bad. And when Tammy just simply placed her hand on top of yours at the table, you went completely still, gulped hard, and got the most peaceful expression on your face. Gran and I exchanged a look, and did what we could to win Tammy over to the family.” His shoulders shake as he laughs. “She saw right through us, but the little dahlin’ was gracious enough to open her hearts to us too. You did good, son,” he tells Daniel. He sniffs and his eyes get that faraway look I’m learning to recognize as when he’s thinking of Gran. “She sure did love your mother. Like her own. And did it ever do your mom’s heart good, always wishing for a girl of her own.” He looks at me and grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “She woulda loved you.”

Zac shifts uncomfortably, but I just smile, touched by Pappy's sweetness.

"I think Autumn fits right in too," Jamison says, eyes gleaming with mischief as he looks between me and Zac.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 26

## THE BIG O



### Autumn

I manage to make it out of Topsy Hank's without singing, but I do feel tipsy when I crawl into bed, reliving the best moments of the day. Who am I kidding? I replay the kiss with Zac over and over until I fall asleep and dream X-rated dreams about him all night.

When I wake up the next morning, there's a knock on the door and I open it to find Ivy standing there. She giggles when she sees that I'm still in my shorts and tank top, and I look at the time in confusion, uncertain if I overslept or forgot something.

"I'm so sorry," Zac says, rushing toward us. He signs something to Ivy and she ducks her head, chastised. "She shouldn't have woken you up. She's just excited that she got a surprise day off of school—they're having trouble with the pipes over there. We'd stopped by to drop something off for my

mom and she was back here before I knew it.”

“Oh, no school? That’s fun!” I smile at Ivy and her expression brightens.

“Come with us,” she says, reaching out her hand. When I take it, she does a little dance and I laugh.

“Where?” I ask, knowing the sign for it but feeling shy to use it yet. I’ve been staying up way too late every night practicing with videos, but I still know so little.

I think Ivy makes the sign for fish, but I’m not positive and she spells it out for me slowly.

“Are you going fishing?” I ask.

“We’re going to the aquarium in Boston. We’d love for you to come with us…” He sounds nonchalant, so I’m not sure if he wants me to say yes or no.

Ivy, on the other hand, jumps up and down, and rubs her hand over her heart a few times. “Please,” she says, and that’s all it takes.

I nod and she squeals. “Okay, I’ll go.” I do a little dance with her and her laugh is so infectious, Zac and I start laughing too. I glance at Zac. “I was supposed to meet Magnus at noon. We were discussing some plans over lunch.”

His expression darkens. “Magnus will be fine. I can let him know you won’t be making that lunch today after all.”

My eyes narrow. “No, I’ll handle it. How soon are we leaving?”

Zac tilts his head toward Ivy, who is dancing around the garden now. “If she has her way, we’ll be leaving in ten seconds.”

I laugh. “Well, I got a shower last night, so I’ll throw something on quick. Think she can handle ten minutes?”

“You take all the time you need,” he says, his smile warming up my insides. His eyes wander down the length of me. “You don’t have to change on my account. This look is…” He takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly while my face gets hotter. “Yeah, maybe you should change.” He laughs and takes a step closer, causing me to lose my breath. “Is it wrong for me to admit that I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that kiss?” His eyes land on my mouth and my heartbeat stutters in my chest.

“Not wrong per se,” I whisper.

“But?”

“Well, you apologized and said it was entirely inappropriate, so I wasn’t sure how you really felt about the *kiss*.”

He drags his hand through his hair and sighs. “I fucking loved it.”

My heartbeat trips over itself again.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he adds. “I don’t do this...dance of wondering...” He points his finger between the two of us and then shakes his head, grimacing. “I’m so glad you’re here and I don’t want to do anything to make you uncomfortable. Based on what you’ve said, I shouldn’t have kissed you, simple as that. Sometimes I just wonder if—” He looks at me sheepishly and jumps back when Ivy barrels into his side.

“Let’s go,” she yells.

“To be continued,” I tell him, looking at him over Ivy’s head before leaning down to her level. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Yay,” she yells. “Hurry. I *need* to see the penguins. Seals. Sharks. *Sting rays*.” She’s signing faster and getting louder with each word.

“She *needs* to, Autumn,” Zac reiterates, laughing.

“Well, by all means, let’s get this girl to the aquarium!” I lift my hands in the air, dancing toward the door, and then remember how little I’m wearing and get my booty inside. Once the door is closed behind me, I hustle. It helps to have few clothes to work with—the choices are limited. I put on a cute blouse and jeans and rush to the bathroom to brush my teeth and fix my hair in a cute loose side braid. I dab a touch of concealer under my eyes, add mascara and a pale pink lip color, grab my cross-body bag and go out the door.

Zac and Ivy aren’t outside my door any longer, but I hear them out front and smile. I haven’t seen Ivy this excited and it’s so cute. I shoot a quick text to my mom and Summer.

I miss y’all. You’d love this family.

Ivy’s mouth drops when she sees me. “Love your hair.” She takes my hand. “You do mine sometime?”

“Sure.” I smile and she gives me a hug before climbing into the SUV. Zac smiles at me from the driver’s side and we both get in.

My mom and sister both text back in close succession. Summer first.

Summer

I need more. Has Zac won your heart yet? Have we lost you to the East Coast? I’m back from my honeymoon and ready to SEE YOUR FACE and get MORE DETAILS THAN THIS.

Mama's is also to the point.

Mama

Anybody in particular you're loving in this family? ;)

I smile at my phone and look up to see Zac watching me as he starts the car.

"Good news?" he asks.

"My mom and sister are just being their usual comical selves."

"Tell them to come for a visit if they're missing you too much," he says. "We've got plenty of room."

"That's so sweet of you. Thank you. I want to do my job well though and they're a distraction for sure," I say, laughing when my phone goes off again. I turn the sound off. "See what I mean?"

Summer

Oh, look at that, she's silent again.

I text back.

What are you even doing awake? It's an ungodly hour in California.

Summer

I'm jet-lagged and my husband woke me up early for a romp and is sawing logs while I'm wide awake. Have you ever found that orgasms wake you up instead of knocking you out?

Mama

What is an orgasm?

I snort at my mom's text and cover my mouth, glancing at Zac whose eyes are twinkling.

"Must be good if you're snorting," he says.

"Oh, they're something else all right."

Ivy asks for the music and Zac reminds me to put in earplugs before turning it on. I text back, still trying to hold in my laughter.

I wouldn't know, Mama. I'm your well-behaved daughter.

And I'm on my way to the aquarium with Zac and Ivy, so I'm gonna disappear because of that, NOT because I don't want to discuss orgasms with you. Not.

Of course, Summer can't let this just slide by.

Summer

I wasn't aware the aquarium was part of an interior designer's job description. Interesting.

Mama

Have fun! I want pictures of today and pictures of the honeymoon. AND both of you owe me a long FaceTime. SOON.

Love y'all. I'll try you both tonight.

I stick my phone in my bag and glance back at Ivy who is rocking out hard to Lizzo.

"I promise I'll try to move on from this song. Otherwise, she'll listen to it the whole way there."

"Has she heard Bliss or Dua Lipa yet?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think I know Bliss's music. She'd like Dua though, I know that." He motions for me to scroll through his playlist.

"Will she be upset with me if I change it?"

"Not if you do it. With me, yes." He laughs.

"Can I show you a song?" I ask when she's looking at me.

She nods, still flying high back there. I wait until Lizzo's wrapping it up to switch the song to "Levitating" by Dua Lipa. I wink at Ivy when she pauses for a moment to see if she can feel the groove and then starts dancing again once she does.

"The rhythm on this girl," I tell Zac, dancing a little bit in my seat.

Zac's lips twitch as he grins and then he breaks into the chorus, singing way too good for my libido to stay in control.

"More," Ivy says when the song is over.

I switch to "Don't Start Now" and Ivy's brow furrows as she really gets into it.

"My song," she yells.

"I don't know if I should thank you or be angry," Zac says. "Looks like

we've got a new song to play a thousand times a day." He starts puffing out his chest and jutting his head with it in the goofiest dance.

I crack up and Ivy giggles and yells, "Daaaaad, stop," which just makes him do it more emphatically. I laugh until my stomach hurts.

When the song ends, he repeats it, lifting an eyebrow when I turn to look at him. "What? I'm just *starting* to get my dance on."

"I think you should stick to sport and singing," I tell him.

He snorts when I say sport and jerks his shoulder forward along with the beat, those full lips puckering. I lose it again. I manage to change the song to "New Rules" for a few repeats, but they're both chanting "Don't Start Now" after the third play, and I groan.

"I've created two monsters out of you. On the way home, I need to find a calming soundtrack." I place my palms out and face down, lifting up and down twice, and Zac grins.

"Hey, did you know that's the sign for *calm*?" he asks, lowering the music a touch to Ivy's protests.

"I thought so. I like it when the signs are what they seem they should be or ones that I recognize."

He looks like he wants to say more, but Ivy asks for him to turn the music up and he grins at me apologetically.

"Is this hurting your ears?" he asks.

"No, the earplugs are great."

We dance all the way to Boston.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 27

## DISGUISE AND BLINKING EYES



### Autumn

The aquarium is such a fun experience. I would enjoy it any time, but with Ivy...and Zac...it's right up there with the best days I've ever had.

We cover the entire place, staying at certain exhibits longer than others, but managing to see everything. The penguins are Ivy's favorite and so is touching the stingrays. She laughs so hard when I shudder every time one swipes past my hand.

"Slimy." I make a face, and she starts saying *slimy* every time one touches her too and shows me the sign for it, so I sign it every time she says it.

Zac takes a ton of pictures of Ivy throughout the day and we do selfies together in front of our favorite exhibits. I can't get enough of the sea lions and seals, Zac is all about the colors in the Olympic Coast sanctuary, and we

must take at least a dozen pictures standing in front of the penguins.

I keep pinching myself to be sure this isn't a dream. My face hurts from smiling. I feel light and carefree, the worries that I carry on a regular basis stripped away with pure joy.

We're taking our time through the Olympic Coast sanctuary when Ivy clutches her stomach. She's so stinking cute, so dramatic, as she signs that she's hungry.

"Uh-oh. She rarely thinks about food when we're at a place like this, so she must really be." Zac's face drops. "Oh shit. In all our excitement about the day off, we didn't eat. I totally didn't feed my child this morning." He makes a face and signs back that he's sorry, and he drags us both out by the hand. Now that he's concerned about his hungry daughter, it's hard to keep up with him.

"I know a place you'll like," he says, dropping Ivy's hand to sign with it. When I try to let go, he stops walking and gives my hand a squeeze before letting it go. "Can you handle a ten-minute walk?"

He points to his shoulders when Ivy's whole body sags and she lights up, nodding. He lowers himself and she gets on his shoulders, looking as happy as can be now. I grin and take a few pictures of them with my phone.

On the walk to the restaurant, several people call out to Zac, and he smiles and says hello, but keeps us moving.

"We should've driven over here," he says under his breath.

I can tell he gets more anxious the more people recognize him, and by the time we're at James Hook & Co, he looks queasy.

"Are you okay?" I ask as we sit down outside.

"I don't know what I was thinking," he says, looking around. "I wasn't, apparently. I usually disguise myself when I'm out with Ivy like this. And we have a guard if we're at public events." He nods and smiles at a family who walks by and gawks at him.

"I wondered how there was so little about Ivy on the internet," I admit.

He leans in and I can tell he's about to say something flirty by the way his mouth quirks first, but the waitress walks up and he pulls back.

She just stares at him for long, awkward seconds, clearly starstruck. Geez. It's like going to dinner with freaking Liam and Summer.

He smiles at the waitress and she blinks slowly three times in a row. I don't know whether to wait it out or try to save her. Ivy saves the day by tapping on Zac's arm and pointing at something on the menu. It seems to pull



our waitress out of her trance and she clears her throat, blinking once more.

“Hello, I’m Tonya. I’m your server. Can I get you started on any appetizers or drinks?” By the time she’s gotten the words out, she’s moved closer to Zac and is grinning wide. “Big fan, by the way,” she says in a lower husky voice.

My eyes widen. “I’ll have a Coke and the regular lobster roll, please,” I say.

She doesn’t say anything or look away from Zac as she writes something on her tablet.

“Thank you,” he says after a moment of no words and more staring. He glances at me, looking at a loss for words.

“What would you like to eat?” I try to help but really just want to laugh. He gives me a pointed look when I start to and I rein it in.

“I’ll have the same thing except the large lobster roll, and she’ll have the clam chowda with a Sprite,” Zac says.

Again, Tonya scribbles on her tablet without looking away from Zac and it’s a long, uncomfortable silence. Ivy is happily watching the birds come closer to her feet, so I think she’s oblivious to the waitress crushing on her daddy. Or maybe she’s just used to it. *I wonder if I look that obvious*, I think as I stare at Tonya.

“I think that’ll do it,” Zac finally says, and Tonya blinks, dazed.

“Great,” she says. “Hey, do you think I could get my picture with you? My phone is inside, but if I bring it back with me...”

“Sure,” Zac says, glancing around uncomfortably to see everyone watching him. “We’ve got a shorter window of time than I thought though, so if you wouldn’t mind sticking our order in and *then* the picture?” He lifts his thumb over his shoulder. “I think we’ve gotta bolt pretty quick here.”

“Right,” she says. “For sure. I’ll get this in and be right back.” The thought of a picture with Zac gets Tonya hustling.

“Is that okay?” he asks me. “I don’t want to rush you in any way. It just seemed like she was stuck and once pictures start...it can be a long haul.”

“She was stuck lusting after her favorite quarterback,” I sing.

Ivy glances at me, grinning as she sees me swaying back and forth.

“If only my prowess on the field wasn’t lost on *some* people,” Zac says in that sexy voice that makes me shiver.

I lift a shoulder. “Well, some of us have never even seen you play, so...” I smirk when he rolls his eyes.

“I kind of love and hate that you’ve never seen me play,” he says, leaning forward. He’s so large that he makes any space feel small, but especially at this table that wasn’t very big to begin with.

“How come?” I ask.

“You give me shit and don’t think twice about it,” he says, smirking.

I laugh. “Oh, is that rare?”

He tilts his head. “You’d be surprised. I think my family, the team and their families, and a few rare people like Liam and Summer are the only ones who are just normal with me. I think that’s the only thing that I didn’t see coming with this career.”

“So you don’t enjoy the—” I stare at him, giving him several slow blinks like Tonya, before he catches on to what I’m doing and starts laughing.

“If I had food, I’d throw it at you right now,” he says.

I pretend to be horrified. “And chance getting photographed? Madness,” I whisper.

Ivy taps my hand and when I glance at her, her eyes are huge. A bird is practically touching her foot, and Ivy can barely contain her excitement.

“Look at that, my little bird whisperer,” Zac says, signing it too.

My heart turns over. It’s one thing, the things he does to my heartbeat, but the way he loves his little girl—I had no idea that seeing this man love his daughter would be a sure way into my heart.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 28

## DIFFERENT STROKES



Zac

That night when I get in bed, thinking about the day, I pick up my phone and go through the pictures. I can't stop smiling going through each one. We'd gone back to the aquarium after lunch and stayed until it closed and besides the time at the restaurant when I didn't take any pictures, I got so many great shots of Ivy and Autumn. The ones where I'm in the picture I barely glance at, but when I do, it stops me cold. I look about five years younger and so happy I almost don't recognize myself.

Shit. I'm like an open book around Autumn. If the woman doesn't know that I'm mad about her, she's not looking at my face. She's such a weird mix of open and guarded though. It's possible the barriers she's put up are keeping her clueless to my feelings. She'd said we'd continue that conversation about the kiss, but we never revisited it despite the time together

on the drive home. We got burgers through the drive-thru on our way out of town which kept her busy for a while, and the drive home was much quieter since Ivy fell asleep as soon as I got on the highway, but Autumn seemed tired too, leaning her head against her seat, her head facing the window. She might've fallen asleep, I'm not sure.

My phone buzzes, and I turn off the sound but open the texts, smiling when I see Autumn's name.

Autumn

Best day I've ever had. Thank you.

Damn. Makes me want to take her on every fun outing I can think of and fill all her days.

So glad you went with us. You made it so much better.

I wait for a few seconds and when she doesn't say anything back right away, I text again.

Sounds like they got the pipes all worked out at school. Ivy will be out of school for a couple of weeks soon. Pretty sure we can arrange more best days like today if you're game.

I frown after I send it, unsure if I've pushed too much when she's quiet. But then...finally...another text comes through, and it's worth the wait.

Autumn

I loved the kiss too, Zac.

I stare at my phone for a few long beats, not sure how to respond. So much I want to say.

Do tell.

Lame, but I'm totally out of my league here and *she loved the kiss*. What am I, fucking fourteen? Since when did I care about a kiss? Not since at least fourteen, maybe even longer than that. I try to remember if I liked kissing Halle. I know I must have, but we were usually more about the next thing.

Autumn

Are you needing some strokes to your ego?

*That's not the only place...* is all I think, but of course, I don't say that.

I wouldn't mind some elaboration.

Autumn

I'll just say that it seems you're good at everything you do, Mr. Ledger.

As are you, Ms. Winters.

I'm hard as a rock after this little exchange, again with the fucking fourteen. I take care of the situation and again the next morning before I pick up Autumn. It's become a necessity.

I'd hoped our conversation last night meant Autumn was ready to entertain the thought of something with me, but she's all business throughout the day. Magnus is there and the bastard can't take his eyes off of her. Twice I have to tell him to focus on the plans when he's checking out her ass in those jeans. Once, he's staring at her tits and I just about clock him. He meets my eyes and grins like *oops, caught me, what are you gonna do about it, cocksucker?* And in my look back at him, I try to thoroughly convey, *get your mind out of the gutter, ya blond overgrown motherfucker, or I'll take you off of this project so fast you won't know what hit you.*

"How does that sound?" Autumn says, pressing her hands together as she looks at me expectantly.

I shake my head and she frowns. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I asked if we could go pick out a few things, maybe over the next day or two while Ivy's still in school? I doubt a trip to pick out furniture would be very exciting for her...except when we get hers—I totally want her involved with that," she says excitedly.

I grin. "Whatever you want."

"I thought you had to be at practice camp tomorrow," Magnus says.

"I'll go early and get back in plenty of time. And technically, I don't have to be there for a couple more weeks."

Magnus's lip curls up and it makes me grin. With all teeth showing.

Autumn looks confused by us and jots something down in her notes. "Great. Just let me know when you're on your way tomorrow and I'll be

ready,” she says. “I think I’m gonna find a spot to FaceTime my mom and sister, if you don’t mind me doing that from here,” she says. “I had to cut it short with them last night because I was so tired.” She smiles and it’s the most she’s seemed as relaxed as yesterday.

“Of course, I don’t mind. Go ahead.”

She glances at Magnus. “Come find me when you’re ready to go.” She looks at me and motions toward Magnus. “Magnus is taking me to dinner to discuss an update on the kitchen plans.”

I think my blood might boil. I always thought that was an exaggeration, but I really think the anger is stirred up inside and bubbling over.

“Seems like I should be around for that,” I say, pinning Magnus with my stare.

He grins smugly. “Nah, we’ll get all the details fleshed out and then show you tomorrow. I know you’ve got your hands full in the evenings.”

I fold my arms over my chest but deflate slightly. He’s right. I don’t like being away from Ivy at night when she’s been at school all day, and I promised her I’d take her to get some new shoes. I’d just hoped Autumn would be with us too.

“Okay,” I say quietly.

Autumn glances at me before she leaves the room, the area between her brows crinkling slightly. I go out the opposite way before I can make a bigger fool of myself. This is not the time for me to have a pissing contest with Magnus. I’ll just have to get better at figuring Autumn out. Because as it stands, I can’t tell from one day to the next if we’re on the same page or full libraries apart.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 29

## WAKE UP



Autumn

“So, what’s going on over there?” Mama asks.

“Just working on this house,” I say.

Summer holds the phone closer to her face. “Talk louder, there’s a plane going over.”

“I just said I’m working on this house.”

Summer and Mama both make goofy faces.

“What?” I ask.

“Are you seriously going to try to get out of talking about Zac?” Summer whispers Zac’s name, but I still look around to make sure Zac hasn’t stepped outside to hear this conversation.

“I’m not trying to get out of talking about anything,” I say.

*I’m totally trying to get out of talking about Zac.*

“Oh, don’t even try to pretend you’re not,” Mama says, laughing. “Your face is too wide-eyed and innocent to be in any way innocent. You think we don’t know our girl?” The two of them cackle and I roll my eyes, glancing around again. Coast is clear.

“Okay, fine,” I sputter into the phone. “We kissed, okay? And he’s wonderful. In every way. The guy is like a saint with his daughter. He worships the ground she walks on and it’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever experienced.”

I get a lump in my throat. And to my horror, my eyes well up with tears. They both sit up straighter, the concern evident. I gulp hard, waving my hand.

“I don’t know why I’m getting emotional about it, it’s just...super sweet,” I finish quietly.

“Can you rewind to the kiss?” Summer asks, putting her hands together in a plea.

It makes me laugh even though a tear drips down my face and I hurriedly wipe it off. “You know he’s not my type,” I whisper. “He’s so amazing. He’s nice all the time, in a non-annoying way. And yet, he’s got a spine.” I lean closer to the phone. “I’m pretty sure he’s jealous of Magnus, the hot contractor who might be trying to make a move on me.”

“Whoa, there’s another hot guy in the mix? No, don’t you dare sabotage this with Zac, Autumn,” Summer yells, her face contorted with panic.

I put my finger over my lips, shushing her. “I’m not dating him, so there’s nothing to sabotage,” I insist. “He apologized for the kiss, but then later said he loved it. *Fucking* loved it,” I add, sniffing.

Summer does a little dance and Mama smiles. “So why aren’t you dating him?” Mama asks. “Oh yeah, because he’s not your type. We all know your type hasn’t been amazing, hot guys who are nice all the time...” She laughs and I roll my eyes again. “But there’s always time to raise your standards.”

“There’s no way someone like Zac Ledger would ever stay interested in someone like me,” I say quietly.

“Why the hell not?” Summer says.

“He’s got a daughter...with *Halle frickin’ Reid*. And name one guy who has ever stayed. With *me*. Just one. Go ahead, I’ll wait.” I laugh, but it sounds shaky and hollow and I try to shake off the sadness that tries to tighten around my heart.

“Autumn,” my mom says, her voice choked with tears. I start blinking fast because I may not usually cry on my own, but the moment my mom or



sister cry, I am a tears-streaming-down-my-face mess. “That has nothing to do with you and everything to do with the guys you go out with. It doesn’t mean every guy will leave.”

“Well, it’s all I know. Right? So I don’t know how to unknow that.”

We’re all quiet for a minute. When Summer begins to speak, she pauses, wiping her face and trying not to cry harder, and I groan, making all of us laugh.

“Sorry,” she whispers. “I’m just so happy right now, and I want so badly for you to experience this kind of love. You deserve it more than anyone I know, Autumn. You too, Mama. You both deserve it and I just wish you both knew it.”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted for you girls. I’m good with the way my life is,” Mama says, “and I thank God every day that you’ve found the love you have, Summer. Nothing could make me happier. But, Autumn...Summer’s right. You deserve this too. And if there’s any part of you that believes Zac has feelings for you and you feel the same way, please promise me you’ll give him a chance.”

“I’m not sure I can promise that,” I admit, my voice cracking.

“If you’re 100% happy with your life exactly the way it is, then I wholeheartedly support you moving on once your job there is over,” Summer says, her voice rising with how passionately she’s feeling this.

I sigh because I knew I shouldn’t have told them what’s been going on... and yet, I think a small part of me wants to be excited about the possibilities. I squash that feeling down, trying to not let it penetrate too deep into my longing heart.

“But I have to tell you, Auto, I’ve never seen you get such a dreamy look on your face when you’re talking about a *guy*, any *guy...ever*,” Summer continues, and I try to focus on her and not my wandering thoughts. “And I know,” she gives me a pointed look, “the way that man tracked you down and got you there, he is *into you*. I don’t know why you’re trying to make it seem like no big thing that he invested in getting you there for an extended time. He has you staying with his family and getting to know his daughter, who he is notoriously quiet about, and He. Kissed. You. How is this not registering for you? If roles were reversed, you’d be giving me such a hard time right now.” She scowls at me.

“Sort of feels like you’re filling in nicely,” I tease.

“I mean it, if any part of you wants what you’re finding there with Zac,

then you absolutely cannot leave there without giving him a chance.” Summer folds her arms over her chest and tries to glare at me but can’t hold it for more than a second.

“Is this what tough love feels like?”

They both laugh and the tension eases. But I know the way that queasy feeling is trickling over my insides that the words they’ve said are going to hound me relentlessly.

I finally say out loud what has been building in me since the moment I met Zac Ledger and experienced what it’s like to be in his orbit, how wrapped up in him I felt from that very first moment. Exhilarated and terrified.

“Here’s the thing,” I say, and they both lean in as if they know I’m about to confess something important. They know me so well. “With Zac, I already know it would hurt too much when he decides to go, and we all know he would, right? Because...” My throat closes up and I pause to swallow down the lump building.

They wait for me to say more and when I don’t, Mama’s mouth opens to say something, but her expression changes and she snaps it shut. Summer subtly lifts her chin and I feel the worst kind of panic well up in my chest.

“He’s right here, isn’t he,” I whisper.

I turn and Zac is standing there.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 30

## BARE



### Autumn

I'm so flustered, I accidentally hang up on my mom and sister and try to skirt past Zac. He reaches out and puts his hand around my arm. I nearly drop my phone and he holds onto it until it's clear I have it and I tuck it under the snug waistband of my jeans.

"Autumn, wait. I'm sorry I—I wasn't trying to listen in on that conversation. I came out to tell you it's supposed to storm and—"

"And you heard your name and stayed?"

"I only heard the last thing and I want to—"

I move away from him, his hand dropping from my arm, and walk toward the house, but he stops me again.

"Please, Autumn, hear me out."

"This is so embarrassing." I shake my head. "And we don't need to talk

about it at all.”

“We do, though.” He leans in and I can’t help it, I gasp, and it’s obvious he hears it. His eyes soften and he reaches out to push my hair back, his thumb lingering on my cheek.

I take a step back, shaking my head. “I can’t do this.”

His jaw clenches, but he doesn’t look angry...more...at a loss. He lifts his hands and starts signing, and these are the words I catch: *YOU. ME. HOME. MY BED. LET YOU GO? NEVER!*

Out loud he says quietly, “You scare me too.”

I can’t possibly have understood that right. In trying to learn sign language, one of the struggles for me has been that every word isn’t signed. When he speaks and signs, he says complete sentences, but skips signing a lot of the connecting words. It’s way more to the point, which will take getting used to. Sometimes where I expect the word to be in a sentence is not where it’s signed. Did he really just say that he wants me in his bed? I clock through the signs one at a time—home, bed, never, go—as heat trickles down my chest and spine, flooding me with warmth. He can’t possibly know that he never wants to let me go, and yet, I know the effect he’s had on me in such a short amount of time. What if he means it? How would it feel to know someone chose me? I can’t imagine.

I don’t even realize I’m working my bottom lip with my teeth, until he puts his thumb on my lip and smooths out the skin. I take a hesitant step toward him.

“Zac?” Magnus calls from the doorway and I jump, looking past Zac’s shoulder as Magnus leans out the door. “I’m gonna head out.”

I can’t keep my eyes off of Zac for long as I wait for him to respond. He doesn’t turn around, his eyes still on my mouth as he calls out, “Okay, thanks, Magnus. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll swing by and pick you up here in a few hours, okay, Autumn?” Magnus asks.

“Would it be okay if we discuss everything tomorrow?” I ask, my voice shaky.

“Uh, sure.” Magnus sounds slightly disappointed, but he smiles and seems okay. “See you tomorrow.”

I have no idea if he stays or goes in the next second because the force drawing me to Zac is so strong, I can’t think of anything else. I thought I was too shy to sign in front of Zac and Ivy, but now saying the words out loud

feel even harder to say, so I sign, ***You want me in your home and bed?***

His eyes flare and I didn't even get to the *never let me go* part, which is really the clincher for me. A crack of thunder rips through the sky and neither of us jumps this time, the current between us too strong. We crash into each other, his mouth firm and yet he has the softest cushiony lips. He sucks my bottom lip until I open for him and sighs into my mouth, tasting like candy even though his kiss is not sweet. It's debauchery, his tongue pillaging mine with ownership.

Rain pours down on us and he laughs into my mouth, tugging my hair back to get better access, his other hand hot against my drenched shirt. He bunches my blouse up and then his hand is on my skin, sliding from my waist and up my back. I lean on my tiptoes, my body flush against his, every part of me straining to touch every part of him.

Water pelts our heads and backs and he lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his waist, his hands gripping my backside, as he runs inside. Once the door is shut behind us, he sets me down and I barely register that he brought me into the lower level where his room is. The level of lust on his face is intoxicating. I glance down at the shirt plastered to my skin and groan when I realize he can see right through my blouse and the lacy bra. I look up shyly, my head still lowered, and his grin is pure seduction.

His index finger traces down my neck and between my breasts, my nipples pebbling more than they already were. He watches the path his finger makes and then dips his head, closing his mouth around the peak right over the material. He sucks and then drags his tongue around my nipple, glancing up at me while he does it, his eyes lighting up at what he sees on my face. I can't even try to hide what he's doing to me, what the words he said have done for me. My mouth goes slack and his lips quirk up around my breast as his fingers cup over my other side. He lifts my shirt, and I feel the rush of cool air on my damp skin. I feel his question as he keeps lifting my shirt and I answer, pulling the material over my head and dropping it to the floor. He leans back and looks at me, the reverence in his expression taking my breath away. I reach back and unhook my bra, letting it fall too, and Zac whispers, "Beautiful."

At the first contact of his mouth on my bare breast, I'm embarrassed by the sound that comes out of me. He smiles against my skin.

"Is this okay?" he asks.

"Yes," I squeak. I clear my throat and repeat the word, but this time it's

breathy.

Again, he smiles.

And my heart dives a little bit more.

I put my hands on his waist and his mouth pops off of my breast as I lift his shirt, at first pressing my fingers against his taut abs, marveling at the definition in each one. He's so much more *substantial* than the scrawny men I usually date. I have to see more of him and quickly pull his shirt over his head, eyes widening when I take in the expanse of his bare chest.

He grasps my hips and when our chests brush against each other, all of our patience evaporates. He walks me backward to his room, his mouth dragging up to my ear as he directs my steps. His door is open and when the back of my knees bump into his bed, he puts his hand on my chest and nudges me back, leaning over me. He places open-mouthed kisses along my collarbone and down my chest, his hand squeezing my breast before he bends to suck me deep.

I undo his jeans, wishing this was a day he had on the athletic pants he often wears so I could just pull them down, but it's tedious, trying to get my fingers to work when they're trembling.

He helps me, undoing his jeans and standing up to drag them down his legs. His boxer briefs are depraved, the way the massive bulge in them, the head peeking out the top as he quickly tries to adjust himself, leads my thoughts to all the most indecent places. That smirk of his too, it will be the death of me, as he bends over me to work on my jeans, pulling them down my legs, his breath a hiss as he sees my black lace boyshort panties.

"Those are...*great*," he says, wincing at the word great. "Better than that. So...sorry, words are leaving me. You're killing me, Autumn. That's what you're doing."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing, but a laugh still bursts out.

"Are you sure you're okay with this? We should talk about this, right? What you said to your mom and—"

"We should definitely stop talking," I say, putting my hand on the back of his neck and pulling him to my mouth, effectively silencing him.

I pull his briefs off, his staggering erection too much to contemplate at the moment, even though the desire in me is at its breaking point. His fingers drag the lace down my legs just far enough for his fingers to have easy access to the apex between my legs. I groan into his mouth, a little embarrassed about how wet he's finding me, but he thrusts into my hand, hard as steel.

“You’re as perfect as I imagined,” he whispers against my lips, his eyes meeting mine and the truth I see there leaves me lightheaded and more than a little awed.

His fingers move in and out of me and he leans in to kiss me again, his tongue teasing me in the same rhythm as his fingers, and I arch into him. It feels too good to be real—this has to be a dream, but no...I open my eyes and his open at the same time. Our kiss breaks and his mouth parts as both hands work me over, rubbing the perfect spot while also dipping in and out of me.

“You’re safe with me,” he whispers, his fingers urgent as I buck against him.

And I don’t know why I believe him, but I do. In this moment, there’s no doubt in my mind that I can trust him.

I have both of my hands around him too, somehow knowing just what to do to make him feel good if his shaky breaths and jerking thrusts are any indication. I want to taste every part of him. I want to kiss him until my lips are raw and sore, but I can’t stop watching the way my hand alone affects him, can’t slow the fall into oblivion that he’s sending me on. I can’t possibly stop now and neither can he, and we stare into each other’s eyes as our hands do their most primal work. My head falls back and I let go, free-falling into bliss.

He lets out a choked sound. “I feel you coming,” he whispers as I clench around him.

It has never felt like this, a desperate chase into ultimate relief. I whisper his name and pulse around his fingers again as he surges in my hand, growing even harder before warmth covers my hands as he follows.

We’re still for a moment as we take in what just happened. He slowly drags his fingers out of me and I shudder at the loss. His lips brush mine in the sweetest of touches and then it builds into a deep, quenching kiss. When we pull apart, we’re both breathless.

“I’m ruined,” he says, his forehead against mine, eyes suddenly shy.

# 31

## SECRETS



### Autumn

God, if he only knew how ruined *I* feel. I smile bashfully and gasp the next second when he trails his wet fingers up my body, and then dips them into his mouth, his eyes closing as he savors the taste.

*SWEET*, he signs. His eyes flare with lust and I know I am such a goner because I already want more. I want everything he will give me and most likely way more than that.

“You knew what I signed before,” he says, pressing his face in my breasts and inhaling. “How did I not realize you knew more sign language than *Pussy choked?*”

I snort out a laugh and his face breaks into a dizzying smile.

“I’ve been trying to learn ever since I met Ivy,” I tell him, and he props up on an elbow, studying me.



“How? I’ve kept you so busy with everything else, how could you possibly be learning sign language at the same time?”

“Now you know why I’m ready to crash every afternoon around three o’clock.” I laugh. “I’ve been staying up too late practicing. I was starting to think I needed to convince Pappy to tutor me though...because he signs slower than the rest of you and half the time, I don’t catch what you’re saying. I think I understood very clearly today though.” I flush when I think about his expression as he said he wanted me in his home and his bed and that he’d never let me go. I wonder if that was just something he said in the heat of the moment.

His expression is indecipherable as he looks at me, leaning in to kiss my brow. He gets up and goes to the bathroom, and I hear the water running for a while before he comes back with two warm washcloths. One he places between my legs and the other he uses to clean my hands. Once my hands are clean, he gently swipes the washcloth between my legs and then takes them both back to the bathroom. I watch him walk away and toward me with utter fascination, the blood heating throughout my body. He is the most outstanding masterpiece—smooth, hard expanses of muscle, satiny steel, and soft edges. Such a tactile contradiction and one I am already addicted to. I know now that I’ll never be able to look at another man without comparing him to Zac Ledger.

My cheeks flush because I also know how deeply I never want to look at another man again. Not after this.

“I don’t know whether I should apologize or be shocked that we only got as far as we did,” he says sheepishly. “I just want you more than I can say. And honestly, nothing has ever felt better than what we just did.”

Those words dance around in my head like a love song and I want to swoon, but I also want to appear somewhat sexy instead of just sex-drunk.

“No apologies between us, remember? And I’m shocked in the best way,” I whisper. My skin flushes as he pulls the covers back and gets in next to me, his naked body heaven against mine. “I can’t imagine feeling any better than that.”

He turns to pull me closer and I feel his hardness along my hip. When our eyes meet, he looks vulnerable and I lean up and kiss him, melding my body to his. He pulls back after a few moments and whispers, “You want this?”

I nod and he leans over me, his hard sliding against my soft and making my head fall back. He places a kiss on my jaw and reaches over to his

nightstand, grabbing a condom.

“You’re the only one who’s been in this bed,” he tells me. “Or in this house at all, period. This is just where I put my stash.”

I wasn’t asking, but I’m really glad for the information.

I watch as he tears the packet and slides the latex over his long, thick length. My mouth waters, everything about me goes wet actually, as I wait in anticipation. When he shifts over me and drags the tip in and out like a little tease of a kiss, I put my hands on his hips and pull him closer, but he still doesn’t rush into me like I want him to. He sinks just a tiny increment deeper and then pulls out, and I know I should be grateful that he’s taking it slow since he’s enormous, and despite being so turned on I can’t think straight, I’m still tight, but I want all of him. Desperately.

His face is tense focus as he lets out a shaky breath. “You feel so fucking good, Autumn,” he whispers. “How is it possible that you feel this good?”

“I know. It’s so good,” I whisper. “It’s you.”

“It’s us,” he says.

He leans down and kisses me, his lips and tongue a direct link to the fire he’s stoking between my legs. I moan and try to pull him deeper inside of me, but he maintains that agonizingly slow pace. When he goes slightly deeper, I arch into him and he opens his eyes, his lids heavy and his gaze filled with want. His teeth slide over his bottom lip and his eyes squeeze shut as he pushes in the rest of the way, going so deep that it takes my breath away. I cry out and arch into him, both of us going still as our eyes meet each other’s. He moves the damp strands of hair off of my forehead and his eyes clamp shut when he twitches inside of me. When his eyes open again, we start moving together, a slow grind that quickly escalates into a frantic pace. He thrusts deeper and deeper, his slides out almost as good as when he dives back in, and it doesn’t take long before I’m coming again, my hands fisting his hair and then down his back, landing finally on his perfect, chiseled ass. He gasps into my mouth as I squeeze him as hard as I can with my hands and on the inside too, and his breathing staggers as he goes faster and faster. I’m certain he’s close to the edge when he pulls out of me, and sits up, his backside on his heels. I’m so shocked I lean up on my elbows, and he gathers me in his arms, his hands on my hips as he places me on top of him, entering me with a single devastating thrust.

I scream at the sensation, and he curses into my neck. “I knew we would be good together, but I didn’t know it could be like this,” he says.

In the next breath, my breasts bounce as he lifts me up and grinds me back down on him in one, two, three long thrusts.

“Look at me,” he says when my head falls back, and I force my eyes to open.

“I don’t want it to end yet,” he says.

“I never want this to end,” I whisper, all shyness abandoned.

But the way he looks at me, his gaze steady except for the blurred look he gets when he drives deep inside, is more than I can take. I lift up on my heels and slam into him, again and again, and he lets out a guttural moan, his hands clutching my hips as he pistons into me. I feel so close again and can’t believe I could have anything left, but his fingers move between my legs as he coaxes more out of me. This time when I fall apart, he starts to shake and his thrusts get more erratic as we go beyond the point of no return.

He gasps my name and shoves in even deeper, coming with a shattered cry. I sag into him or we sag into each other. I can’t tell who is holding who up. Our bodies are sweaty and sated. He wraps his arms around my waist, and I bury my head in his neck, feeling so good I just might cry.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 32

## REVELATIONS



Zac

“Holy shit, what was that?” I say after I’ve cleaned us up again and gotten in the bed, my body facing hers as we stare at each other.

“I honestly don’t know what to say. I-that...” We both laugh. “Well, I guess I’m speechless,” she says.

I put my hand on her hip and love the way her mouth parts. It’s as if my every touch surprises her. Or maybe it’s the way I feel when she touches me, like my nerves are all standing at attention, all craning to feel whatever she gives.

“Why did you say I’d go?” I ask.

Her eyes drift down my neck and chest, and I reach up and tilt her chin up so she’s looking into my eyes again. I don’t want her to try to hide what she’s feeling anymore. After the sex we just had, I know we’ve both been hiding

just how much we're feeling.

"Honestly, it probably boils down to something very basic and boring," she says in a light tone.

I frown. "Nothing about you is basic or boring."

"I've got good ole daddy issues," she says. "Summer and I have talked about it a lot. It actually became so obvious when she first went to California and I went through some of her relationship woes with her. Our dad left our mom twice, the last time was when he knew I was coming, and he's never made the best attempt to be part of my life. I'd say he's trying the most he ever has now that he has his daughter Augusta...who is the cutest little girl in the world besides Ivy," she adds. "He hasn't called since I got here, and I haven't called him." Her shoulder lifts in a tiny shrug.

I listen, thinking about what she's saying and what a different person I might be if I didn't have two loving parents.

"And then, I've made some shitty choices in the guys I've dated. My focus has been to protect my feelings and have fun, not always in that order, and that has led to either guys that take advantage of my generosity and me taking too long to put a stop to it since my feelings aren't invested anyway, or guys that cheat...or both."

"Imagining how anyone could ever cheat with you in their bed is beyond fathomable," I say, my fingers trailing down her neck and between her breasts, my eyes getting stuck on her perfect tits. I force my eyes back up to hers, placing my hand over her heart. "You're an amazing person, Autumn," I tell her. "The way you are with Ivy and with my family...the way you've been learning sign language in secret—do you know how many women would've made such a show of doing that? It wouldn't have been about Ivy at all, it would've been about trying to impress me. The way you don't let me get away with any crap," I laugh, "and the way you dive headlong into the work you love. Any guy who doesn't see what an incredible woman you are is not worth another thought."

She inches closer to me, the tips of her nipples touching my chest as she puts her arms around my neck. I pull her the rest of the way, my hands reaching back to squeeze her perfect ass cheeks. I groan into her hair. "This body of yours. I shouldn't be bringing it up while we're talking about all of this, but damn. Every inch of you is everything I want," I whisper in her ear.

She shivers and I swear, I'm hard as a rock again. My phone rings from the floor and she pulls away, looking around.

“Is it on the floor?” she asks.

“Let’s ignore it.” As soon as I say it, I know I can’t do that. It could be Ivy. I lean over the side of the bed and grab the leg of my jeans. “It’s Ivy’s last week of school before the break, and they’re doing all the fun filler things they do the last week. I doubt it would be her.”

I fumble around until I get the phone out of my pocket and see that I’ve missed a call from my agent, Chase, and also from Jamison. I frown. I didn’t realize I’d already missed calls. It rings again and it’s Chase. I glance at Autumn apologetically and she smiles, mouthing, “It’s okay.”

I answer before it rings again. “Hey, Chase. How are you?”

“How are *you* is the question,” he says. “Why didn’t you tell me you were in a serious relationship? I would’ve said congratulations, it’s about time.”

“W-what?” I stutter. “How did you—”

He laughs. “I’ve been telling you about the power of social media and you didn’t listen. I know you’ve tried to stay out of all of that and I don’t blame you, given Ivy and her mom and all that, which is all the more reason you should’ve told me.”

“I-yes, you’re right. It’s just so new,” I tell him, sitting up and leaning against the headboard to catch my breath. My heart is galloping and not in the ideal way it has been with Autumn this afternoon. I get up and slide my jeans on as best I can with one hand, walking into the other room. “How did you find out?”

“There are pictures of you and Ivy with the woman in Boston—is she really Liam Taylor’s sister-in-law? And the video of you singing to her in Topsy Hank’s has gone viral. I didn’t know you could sing like that!” He laughs.

“What the fuck?” I say, hands going through my hair. “I knew I should’ve been more careful having Ivy with me that day, but I didn’t think it all the way through.” I hope like hell that Autumn is okay with all of this. I know I can’t hide Ivy from the world forever, but I should’ve thought about how this could affect Autumn too. She’s just now getting used to the idea of me, what will she think about how crazy the fans can get?

“It’s not a bad thing to have a woman in your life, Zac,” Chase says. “I did want to give you a hard time about not telling me about her, but I really am happy for you. And I also wanted to check on this with Ivy. It wouldn’t hurt to be proactive a little bit, maybe doing an interview or two with the two of you—or even better, the three of you—would be a good idea. Let everyone

know what an incredible dad and boyfriend you are.”

“No, I don’t want that. Thank you, though, for letting me know. I need to have a conversation with Autumn. Yes, she is Liam’s sister-in-law, but we’re very new and I don’t want anyone getting in the way of us in any way, okay?”

“I’ll do my best. Cat’s out of the bag now though, so I say you just roll with it and try to regain control of the narrative.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, a little late for all that, but I hear ya.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 33

## INHIBITIONS SLIPPING



### Autumn

Zac's expression is guilty when he comes back in the room, looking up from his phone, and it has me immediately on guard.

"What's wrong?" I ask, trying to hurriedly grab my clothes. I went to the bathroom as soon as he left the room and was tempted to get back in the bed, but we should probably get back to work.

"I'm usually so careful when I go out with Ivy, and I wasn't the other day. At all. There are pictures of the three of us." He holds up his phone and I swipe through a few of the pictures. We look cute together, definitely like a couple.

I study his face, trying to determine which part of this is most upsetting to him. "Are you worried for Ivy's safety?"

"I'm not ready for her to deal with photographers or to talk about why her



mom's not in her life."

"So this is about Ivy," I say.

"And I wasn't sure how this would make you feel, seeing us discussed this way, when you haven't even wanted to go on a date with me. I don't want to jeopardize your job with Jane in any way..." He points at the headline on one: **Who's the mystery girl dating NFL's GOAT?** And my mouth drops when I see another: **Liam Taylor's sister-in-law in questionable threesome.** He grits his teeth, his lips lifting in a forced, fake smile and I laugh, moved that he's concerned about me at all.

"Well, I've never had a threesome and don't know what Liam has to do with it, but I should probably message my sister and give her a heads-up that this is out there since they made that one gross." I pull my blouse over my head and then put my bra on, clasping it before sliding it around to cover myself and then I finish with the blouse, putting my arms through the sleeves.

"Oh, did those have to go?" he says sadly, looking at my chest.

"Still right here," I say, patting my boobs.

His eyes light up, his tongue reaching out to wet his lips and the heat curls through me again. The ache of where he's been and how I wish he was there again is hard to ignore.

He glances at the clock next to his bed. "It's almost time to pick up Ivy. Do you want to ride with me?"

"I have more to do here, and I can just get an uber back to the house when I'm done."

"I need to see what's taking so long with my car in the shop." He shoots me another apologetic look. "I'm sorry, this is such a hassle, but I'm not comfortable having an uber driver come out here if your face is all over the place right now. I'm sure it will all die down, but we should get more security going out here. If my car still isn't done, I'll work on getting you another so you don't ever feel stuck."

I nod and stand up, enjoying the way his eyes drink in my body. I slide my jeans on and just before I pull them over my rear end, he comes over and puts his hands on my backside, his lips meeting mine in a consuming kiss.

He groans when it instantly heats up. "It's going to be impossible to get you out of my head now. I hope you're happy."

I laugh. "Yeah, I kind of am." I reach up on my tiptoes and give him one more kiss before stepping away and pulling my pants up the rest of the way. "I'll ride with you to get Ivy and I can work on some things at the

guesthouse. Will we still be able to go furniture shopping this week or should we wait until things die down?"

He's quiet a moment and puts his shirt on. "You know what? I'll work on that. It should still work for us to go. I'll see what day is best."

"Okay." I smile at him and he takes my hand as we walk through the house, grab our things, and leave.

The drive to pick up Ivy is sweet and full of longing gazes back and forth. His hand goes from mine to my thigh, getting dangerously close to territory he should not be thinking about if he doesn't want me to jump his bones. I glance at him and he looks over, his lids heavy and I shake my head, laughing.

"What?" he asks, grinning.

"It's a good thing I hadn't seen this look before. I wouldn't have been able to hold my ground as long as I did...which I'm still not sure was long enough."

He pretends to pout. "How can you say that?" His eyes get wide. "You're not regretting it, are you?" He sits up straighter and his hand grips mine.

"No, I'm not. Not at all. But you're looking at me like you want to splay me out on a table and have your way with me." I hold up my hand when he starts nodding slowly, whispering yes. "No, we cannot talk like this when we are literally three seconds from getting Ivy." Just then he turns into the parking lot of the school and we get in the pickup lane.

"I like to think I'm better than most men at multitasking, but you're right. I haven't been in a relationship since I had Ivy."

I stare at him incredulously. "At all?"

"Why does that surprise you? I told you I don't bring women around her."

"But I didn't know you hadn't had a relationship."

He inches the SUV forward. "Does that bother you?"

"No?" I hesitate and he laughs.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. I just...I still can't figure out why *me*. I mean, I know that guys like how I look and I'm nice...funny sometimes. But you're—" I lift my hands, waving them in his general direction.

He shakes his head, laughing. "You're still not seeing yourself the way everyone else does. You're like a dream I didn't even know was possible, Autumn." He looks at me so intently, both of us are surprised when Ivy opens

the door and hops in.

My skin and body feel thoroughly loved up and like every emotion I've ever felt must lay exposed on my skin for the whole world to see, but I rally, turning around and high-fiving Ivy.

"Did you have a good day?" I ask.

"It was great," she yells.

"Oh, no, you don't," Zac says to me, signing. He turns to face Ivy. "Do you know how much sign language Autumn knows?"

Ivy's eyes bug out. *NO*, she signs.

He holds his hand out for me to show her and I sheepishly sign: *HOW ARE YOU?* I make a face. "What's the sign for snack?"

"There's not really a good sign for snack," he says. "Can just say eat instead."

*WANT EAT?* I finish, grinning.

Ivy's mouth drops open and then she squeals. She starts signing rapidly and not speaking out loud at all and Zac laughs. I shake my head, moaning and signing, "Slow, slow!" And then I can't sign because I say it too fast and wouldn't know how to say all of it anyway: "I don't know all the signs, just very random ones. I do know all the bad words," I add under my breath.

"I can't wait for this," Zac says, pressing his lips together to keep from cracking up as we pull out of the parking lot.

Ivy signs to me all the way home and waves her hands in the air as applause every time I get something right.

*This is actually the best day ever.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 34

## NEGOTIATIONS



### Autumn

We stop by Zac's house to grab Zac's laptop before heading to his parents' house, and Ivy ends up hopping out and running around to get rid of some of her energy. I get out and join her, texting Zac to let us know when he's ready to go. We end up by the lake, picking up pretty rocks. It's the quietest Ivy has ever been around me, but she's being plenty chatty, just signing and not speaking, which forces me to learn and sign more.

I keep telling her to slow down and it cracks her up every time. She's so excited that I know as much as I do that it makes me feel bad for ever keeping it a secret.

She hands me a rock shaped like a heart and I sign *LOVE* back to her with an *awww* expression on my face and when I try to give it back to her, she closes her little fist around my hand and the rock.

*YOU KEEP*, she signs.

I thank her and give her a hug before she skips away to find the next pretty stone. My nose burns and I blink rapidly, my chin wobbly from trying to not cry. It's unbelievable to me that I've gone from never crying to tearing up over a rock.

Of course I don't believe it has anything to do with the rock itself, although it really is a beautiful rock, but I do wonder how long I will tear up over every sweet gesture Ivy makes. Not only that, but I could've had a long cry after having sex with Zac. I didn't let myself because I knew if I started, I wouldn't be able to stop. It wouldn't have been a pretty cry either, it would've been a heaving, sobbing wail that might've set me back a couple of days. Not that I've ever in my life done that—the thought is comical—but I have no doubt I was on the cusp of that with Zac earlier.

I've just never felt so *good*.

Is this normal? Do most people know what to do with having things go well in their lives? Do they expect the good and not think it's a foreign concept that belongs to everyone else but them?

I've had a nice life, so I'm not sure why I have all this reticence toward these warm fuzzies, except that my circle has strictly consisted of my mom, my sister, and now her husband.

Everyone else, and I do mean everyone...has decided I'm either too much or too little...to stay. With friendships, I've not felt much need to expand my circle because I have all I could want with my mom and sister, and in defense of the few who have tried to get closer, I've been busy trying to build my career. In London, it was such an amazing opportunity, and I couldn't afford the expense or the time to hang out when everyone else did. But when it comes to men, as Mama and Summer tell me more and more, I've chosen poorly. Simple as that.

So, how do I let myself settle into this experience with Zac and his family and accept that it really is this wonderful? Is the other shoe going to drop? Or will they see what everyone else has seen and decide I'm not worth it?

Ivy tugs on my hand to get my attention and I turn to see Zac standing there, watching us.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

Ivy shakes her head and tells him to sign only.

He makes a face and signs. *YOU OKAY?*

Ivy looks at me, studying my face to see what he means.

*I'M HAPPY*, I sign. I hold up the rock and my smile grows when he grins. *IVY GAVE ME*, I tell him. Ivy nods proudly and he puts his hand on her shoulder and holds his hand out for me to take.

Ivy looks back at me, beaming as she signs, *YOU DAD'S GIRLFRIEND?*

I choke back a laugh and Zac chuckles next to me, squeezing my hand before letting it go to sign: *I WISH*.

He gives me puppy dog eyes and Ivy giggles, dropping his hand to come grab mine. She swings our hands all the way to the car and once we're there, she turns to me and signs *PLEASE*.

I wave my hand in front of my face, the nose burn so intense I almost sneeze, and my eyes blur so much I can't see her face clearly anymore.

Zac puts his hands on my shoulders and kisses my cheek. *WE NO PRESSURE*, he tells Ivy.

*PRESSURE?* She repeats his sign, frowning.

He starts poking me in the side, making pesky faces, and signing with every little ticklish jab, *GIRLFRIEND, PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE?* He looks at Ivy, brows lifted, and signs *PRESSURE* again before he goes back to repeating *GIRLFRIEND, PLEASE*.

Ivy and I both laugh so hard and I hold my hands up to block another poke in the side. *I'M THINKING...* I sign, pausing when I can't think of how to do the rest. I point to Zac and just sign it again. *I'M THINKING*.

Zac does a little dance, twirling Ivy around like that's the best news ever, and I love it so much and yet feel an unfamiliar fear rise up inside of me. What if I hurt *them*?

I've had such a safeguard around my heart to keep it from getting hurt anymore that I haven't really stopped to think of it from the other angle. And Zac has been just as cautious with his heart before now, from what I can tell. How is he so certain about me in such a short amount of time?

"You're overthinking," Zac sings and I grin. He stops and helps steady Ivy with her dizziness and leads her to the car. Once she's in, he turns to me and wraps his arms around me, giving me a bear hug. "I can see your brain working overtime from a mile away," he says in my ear.

I pull back just to see his face. Clear, peaceful eyes, a calm sweet grin that makes my knees weak. "How are you not worrying right now?"

"Honestly, I don't know," he admits. "It's never been like this for me before—none of it. From seeing you and pursuing you to the time with you today." He brings my hand up to his and kisses my knuckles. "All I know is

that I want this, I want you.”

And God help me, I want him too.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 35

## INSIDE VOICE



Autumn

My phone starts buzzing after we get inside, and I ignore Jane's first call, worry building about how angry she might be if she's seen the pictures of Zac and me. When she immediately calls again, I face the music and answer the call.

She doesn't bother responding to my hello, jumping right into it. "I don't know what's going on in Boston, but you were sent to do a job and I expect you to do it well."

I can just imagine her sitting in her office, jaw clenched along with her right fist, as she grips the phone tightly with her other hand. I wait for her to say something else, unwilling to offer more until I hear her out.

"I can't say I'm surprised," she says, and I stop pacing, freezing in place. "I thought something might be going on since he was so persistent about



hiring you.”

I don’t even know how to respond to that.

“These things happen,” Jane says in a softer tone, and my mouth drops in shock. “Never ever let what may happen in the bedroom keep you from doing your job.”

Nervous energy is bubbling inside of me, but I keep it together when I respond. “I assure you I won’t let anything keep me from doing my job.”

“Talk to you in a couple of days,” she says and hangs up.

I fan my face when I get off, taking a deep breath before I go into the dining room.

Dinner is an exuberant affair. Ivy proudly tells everyone I have been learning to sign in *secret*, and she instructs everyone to use sign only, not even any mouthing of the words. And we try really hard, but we all cheat terribly, which causes Ivy to reprimand us, stern brows and flailing hands halting all conversation.

My stomach hurts from laughing so hard, which has become the norm around here for these family dinners, but tonight has taken the cake.

When Pappy wails and signs, *MY VOICE IS DYING TO EXPLODE*, we all lose it.

Well, all but Ivy.

She holds up her pointer finger and wags it, signing, *TEACH A-U-T-U-M-N SIGNS THEN VOICE*.

*I CAME THIS CLOSE TO HIRING A TUTOR*, I sign. *PROFESSOR IVY IS BETTER*.

She loves that, moving her chair closer to mine and leaning her head on my shoulder. I squeeze her, my heart so full I don’t even know what to do with myself.

Zac’s phone has been going off a lot tonight. His anxiety has been building with all the places our pictures are up. The ones of Ivy out there are concerning him the most and rightfully so, but when he gets a call and is gone for more than five minutes, I begin to worry more is going on. He comes back all smiles though. I look at him in question and he signs *LATER*.

His eyes are full of promise and I feel my face heat. Ivy bounces in the seat next to me and points at me and her dad and signs *GIRLFRIEND*. Daisy gasps and Pappy claps and Daniel looks confused.

“Ivy,” Zac says out loud, shaking his head but grinning. “Remember?” he speaks and signs and when she starts to fuss at him for talking out loud, he

lifts his finger, halting her. “No pressure, remember?”

Pappy repeats his phrase, *MY VOICE IS DYING TO EXPLODE*, giving an elaborate drawn-out sign for *dying*, but once he’s done being dramatic, he beams at me and waggles his eyebrows. Zac and I laugh, but my face flames. Oh God, can they all tell Zac and I had sex today?

It’s quiet for a moment and I can tell Daisy is about to explode with questions. Maybe it’s a wonderful thing that this is the night we’re not speaking out loud.

I focus on eating my food, chewing the grilled chicken extra long to avoid eye contact with anyone while my body returns to a normal temperature. I help clear the table and Zac and I end up in front of the sink, him rinsing dishes while I load the dishwasher.

Zac looks behind him and the room is clear for a second. He leans toward my ear, his lips against my skin making me shiver.

“Sorry for all the girlfriend talk. Is it scaring you off?” Zac asks, his voice husky.

“Is it scaring *you* off?” I ask, turning my face toward his. Our lips brush against each other’s and my nipples jump to attention. He puts his hand on my stomach and his hand is so large that he could just nudge his thumb up a tiny bit and it would be covering my nipple. He does exactly that in the next second and my breathing halts.

“I’m not scared of you, Winters,” he says, reaching out to bite my bottom lip.

I gasp and laugh into his mouth as he kisses me.

A slight rattle of dishes sounds behind us and I jump away like we’re doing something terrible. Zac turns toward the sink, laughing into his fist, and Pappy hurriedly places dishes on the counter closest to him.

“Don’t mind me. Found a few more dishes, that’s all, but carry on, carry on,” Pappy says, backing out of the room.

I put my head in my hands, laughing, and Zac puts his hands on my waist.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says.

“Where are we going? There are still dishes.”

“Come back to the house with me for a while,” he says, tugging me closer. He leans in to kiss me and out of the corner of my eye, I see Ivy walk past the doorway and stop when she sees us.

“Ivy’s watching,” I whisper. I take a step back and he lets me go, looking back at Ivy. She makes a silly face and runs off, laughing, and he turns back

to me, waiting for my answer.

“But then Ivy would be in bed and I’d need to get back here and it would just be tricky,” I answer.

“Or you could spend the night. I could take the couch,” he says, lifting a shoulder.

“We both know that wouldn’t happen.” I laugh.

Ivy runs back and this time she comes into the kitchen. “Can I watch a movie with Pappy?” she asks, forgetting her no-words-out-loud rule.

Zac looks at the clock and then at me.

“Want to hang out with me in the guesthouse while she watches a movie?” I ask, feeling like a teenager sneaking around.

“Hell, yeah,” he whispers. “Yes, movie,” he tells Ivy. He points at the clock. “Start soon, okay?”

She nods and runs off, and Zac turns to pull me in and I skirt past him, grabbing the last of the dishes and hurriedly putting them in the dishwasher.

We’re both laughing as I dodge him and he looks so hot, his eyes twinkling, his large body ready to pounce.

“Thanks for dinner, Ma,” he yells. “Ivy said she’s watching a movie with Pappy. That okay?”

Daisy sticks her head in the kitchen and smirks. “Wasn’t sure you were getting any dishes done in here, but it looks pretty good.”

“What do you take me for, a slacka?” Zac lays the Boston accent on thick and Daisy laughs, patting his chest.

“Of course, it’s okay if Ivy watches a movie with Pappy. You two gonna go out for a bit maybe? Catch a movie yourself or something? You should.”

I point toward the guesthouse. “We could go over the plans—”

I trail off when Zac and his mom both look at me, my face heating, while mischief dances across Zac’s.

“Absolutely,” he says. “Let’s do that.”

He opens the back door like a gentleman and keeps a few feet between us until we’re out the door, and then he takes my hand.

“Do you think your mom is watching us through the window?” I ask.

“Oh, no question.” He laughs.

# 36

## WHAT I LIKE ABOUT YOU



Zac

This day went far better than I ever imagined it could. I did not see getting Autumn into my bed anytime soon, and if I'd been told this morning that it would be happening *today*, there's really no way I would've believed it.

Not that that's been my big agenda, getting her to sleep with me, although I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about it...night and day since the moment I laid eyes on her...but holy *shit*, now that we've gone there...I can't stop looking for reasons to touch her. Any small damn way.

I want to hold her hand. I want to bury my nose in her hair and inhale. I want to kiss her senseless, until both of us come up for air and then go back in for more. I want to sink into her sweet tight body and never come out. I want to hold her in the crook of my shoulder, talking and laughing until we fall asleep together.

What the fuck has happened to me?

“You really want to talk about plans?” Is what comes out of my mouth instead of all the jillion other ways I want to claim her body and make it mine.

“I got nervous,” she says, as I close the door behind us.

“Of me? Of my family knowing about us?”

“I don’t know what we’re doing or how much we’re saying or what we even are. I did not plan on sleeping with you!” she insists, and her voice breaks on the last sentence.

“Hey, hold on, come here.” I hold my hand out and she looks up at me, her eyes shining as she takes my hand. “Are you upset?”

“I don’t think so,” she says, taking a deep breath. “I just don’t want to disappoint anyone.”

“You’re not...”

“I know you don’t normally do this.” She points between the two of us. “And neither do I really. And I just don’t want to get it wrong.”

“How about we take a deep breath and not try to figure it all out right now?” I say. “Would you like to watch a movie?” I point to the couch and glance toward the kitchen. “I could pop some popcorn, we could sit on the couch and just hang out.”

She nods, smoothing down her shirt. “That sounds good. Okay.”

She moves into the kitchen with me and we get the popcorn going. She fills two glasses with ice and opens the refrigerator. “Would you like water? Or water? Or maybe some water?”

“I think I’ll have water, thank you,” I answer, laughing. “If you’d prefer wine or Coke or something, I can go grab some from the house.”

“No, I’m good. I had wine with dinner and have hardly had any water today.”

“Same. And my wine days are almost done. I’ve got a couple of weeks max, and then it goes away for the rest of the season.”

“I admire your discipline. The way you are about exercise too. I’ve totally slacked since I’ve been here.”

“You got a little bit of exercise today,” I tease.

Her face turns pink and I love it.

“And it’s my job, so I treat it as such. I put in my time and then try not to obsess over it the rest of the day. I’m not as strict with myself as some of the players I know.”

The microwave dings and I pull the popcorn out, pouring it into a big bowl. We move toward the couch, and she sets the glasses of water on the coffee table, while I sit down next to her, holding the large bowl of popcorn.

“And here I thought all jocks were into partying and a never-ending supply of women...and maybe you *are* into the never-ending supply when you’re traveling or something...” she trails off.

“Are you still expecting me to be a liar?” I ask.

“No,” she says emphatically. “I mean, you could be, but I think it would really shock me if you were, and I don’t know any man I’ve thought that about except my brother-in-law. And with him, it was because he loves Summer so freaking much. With you, it’s because I believe you really are the best kind of person.”

I set the bowl on the table and turn to her, my hand on her face. “Thank you for thinking the best of me. It sounds like the male race has not given you much reason to trust us and I’m honored you trust me. I don’t take it lightly.” I lean in and kiss her sweet lips, letting my tongue brush against hers, my hands lost in her thick hair and my body craving more of her. It’s heated from the first touch, but when it becomes an inferno, all I want to do is straddle her legs across me and drive my dick home, but I pull back and take a breath, placing my hand on her chest to feel her heart racing.

“Is there a movie you’d like to see?”

“We’re really watching a movie?” she asks, and I hear a slight twinge of disappointment, which makes me smile.

“I got the feeling I might be coming on a little strong, the whole girlfriend conversation with Ivy, my family, me asking you to come back to the house...”

“I like it,” she whispers, her hands on either side of my face. “I like everything you do.”

My heart practically flies out of my chest cavity, galloping out of control.

“What else do you like?” I ask.

“Besides you?” She drops her hands from my face and takes my hand.

“If I say, what else do you like about me besides everything I do, would I sound desperate?” I try to say it with as straight a face as I can manage but lose it when she laughs.

When she stops, she holds her thumb and index finger an inch apart. “Maybe just a little,” she says.

I place her legs over my lap and take her hand again. My other hand is on

her back so I'm not tempted to feel her up...okay, *less* tempted.

"Your laugh is one of my favorite things about you," I tell her. Her lips part and she might not even realize she's doing it, but it's like she holds her breath when I touch her or say something that surprises her, like right now... and then when she remembers, she has to take a deep breath. It's another favorite thing, but I want to keep that one to myself a little longer. "You laugh with your whole body. Your head falls back, your mouth opens, sometimes your eyes close or your nose crinkles right here." I lift our joined hands to the bridge of her nose and smooth it out while her smile grows. "And at the end of your laugh, you kind of hum."

She crinkles her nose more, making a face. "So you like that I'm a weirdo, is what you're saying."

I lift my shoulder. "If that's what we're calling it, then yes, I freaking like that you're a weirdo."

"I like that you keep your hands at nine and three on the steering wheel. It's actually what the NHTSA recommends now, did you know that?"

I laugh and she shifts her hips, her calf bumping into my semi. She glances down and her eyes linger there, not helping matters. "The NH what?" I chuckle, trying to redirect.

"National Highway Traffic Safety Administration," she says primly.

"Ahh." I push back the hair on her shoulder, my fingers brushing against her neck. "I had no idea you kept up with the rules of the road, but I'll keep that in mind when I have you in the passenger seat again. Does it turn you on when I slow down for a yellow?"

"Yes," she says emphatically.

I don't think I've stopped smiling since we sat down...before that even. "Who knew?"

"Most men speed up when the light turns yellow, but I love that you slow down."

"Wow. *Love*. Okay, noted. You love a safe driver."

Her cheeks flush and I have to think of Pappy and Gran, boogers, that time Ivy vomited blue after having too many blueberries...to keep from leaning her back on this couch and finding all the other places she's flushed.

My phone buzzes and it's Ferdinand Designs. I turn the sound off. I'll check messages later, and if there's an emergency with Ivy, they can yell out the door or come get me.

"Get that if you need to," she says.

“I’m expecting a message from Ferdinand Designs giving me a one-time code into the building. That’s the phone call I was on before we ate. They’d normally be closed tomorrow, but they’re opening the showroom for us. I thought we’d shoot for nine or ten, maybe get some lunch while we’re in Boston, and be back in time to pick up Ivy. Does that work?”

“Yes. Seriously? It’s perfect,” she says.

She lifts a finger and then makes a tiny squeak of a sound. And I look around the room wondering if she saw something that scared her...please don’t tell me there’s a mouse in here. But she’s calm. Maybe she was beginning to say something but changed her mind. But then she blinks and squeaks again. And again.

“Wait. Are you *sneezing*?” I ask incredulously.

She looks at me like *duh*.

I give her a grave look, patting her knee. “Oh, my fine little squeaker, looks like I’m gonna have to teach you the fine art of letting go.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 37

## SORE EYES AND CLEAR SKIES



### Autumn

I go to bed smiling and wake up smiling, thoughts of Zac permeating my dreams and all the awake moments too. After he left last night, I practically floated through my nighttime routine, struggling to focus on my ASL studies, and finally giving in to reliving every moment we spent in his bed, the family dinner, how playful and hilarious he was on my couch, the kisses he gave me before he left that made me wish he could stay...and this morning I'm replaying all those same things.

Everything feels brighter, happier, *better* this morning. I'm having an incredible hair day...it's rare when I fully approve of the direction it's taking. I remember the package that was waiting on the doorstep that I never opened last night with Zac here and it's the railroad striped flared jeans and a wide belt that I've been waiting to arrive. I put them on and they fit like they were

made for me.

I slide into my platform wedges, loving that Zac will still be so much taller than me, grab my utility jacket to put over the white tank if I get chilly, and open the door when Zac has barely knocked once.

His eyes widen, taking me in from head to toe. “Pappy would say you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“What do you say?” I ask, feeling my breath stutter in my chest when he leans in to kiss me lightly on the lips.

“I say you blow my fucking mind.”

I take a deep breath and laugh, trying to subtly rub away the goose bumps he gives me just by being near.

“I’m glad you know what you’re doing because I won’t be able to concentrate on furniture with you in that tank top and those jeans.”

His hands circle my waist as he pulls me in for a longer kiss, my fingers tugging his hair when the kiss deepens. When we pull apart, I feel drunk and he looks it, his eyes glazed over.

“You act like you’ve never seen me dressed nice before,” I tease.

“You always look incredible. But I haven’t had to leave you for the night and then see you for the first time after we’ve had sex...looking like this... before.” His cheeks get pink when he’s finished, and I give his hair another tug, pulling him toward me for another kiss. He walks me through the door and shuts it, turning so my back is against the door as his kiss makes everything I dreamed through the night a reality.

He lifts my thigh around his waist but still keeps it chaste. I want him to thrust into me and ease the ache that’s been building since we were together yesterday. The ache I now know he’s so good at filling.

He groans and sets my leg back on the floor, his hands coming to my face as we break apart. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about being inside you,” he whispers.

“I haven’t either,” I whisper back.

He curses under his breath as he leans his forehead against mine, his chest rising and falling. “Okay, now that I’ve gotten that off of my chest, maybe I can behave like a functioning human.” He laughs and then pulls me flush against him and my breath hitches in my throat when I feel how hard he is.

“When I was telling you the things I like about you last night,” I whisper, leaning on my tiptoes, my lips against his, “I neglected to mention how much I liked how you were so greedy for me, you came in my hand.”

He groans and this time he does thrust into me, making my heart trip over itself.

“And I couldn’t tell which excited you more,” I continue, kissing him in between words, “the way you made me come or the way my hands felt on you.” When I start to lower my feet back to the ground, he holds me in place, his eyes piercing into mine.

“You whispered my name,” he finally says, his voice raw with need. “When you came, I felt *everything* and then you said my *name*.” His head shakes slightly, his hand clutching my jaw. “You said my name and that did it.”

We stare at each other, the hunger a physical presence in the room, but also the truth...that we’re not even trying to hide that this is something more than a physical attraction between us. Something much bigger than that.

“How is this happening?” I whisper. And somehow I know I don’t have to explain that I mean the feelings, how quickly we’ve become invested in each other’s worlds.

His thumb rubs my bottom lip and his mouth follows, placing the softest kiss there. “I don’t know, but I know I don’t want it to stop.”

*Me either*, I want to scream from the rooftops, but hope that my kiss says it instead.

His phone buzzes and I pull away. He looks at me in a daze, and I smile at him. “Your phone,” I remind him when he doesn’t answer it.

“It’s Jamison. I’ll call him in a while,” he says. “Should I cancel our plans? We could just stay here all day...talking and...kissing.”

I laugh, my hands on his chest. I have to consciously remove my hands from him because every part of me wants to take him up on this plan.

“We should go,” I say mostly to him but also to myself. “Otherwise, Ivy will be stuck furniture shopping with us and she explicitly said she did *not* want to do the big shop.”

“You’re right,” he groans and again even louder when I turn toward the door. “*Fuck*, I hadn’t seen the back view yet.” I startle when he gives me a little slap on the behind. “Get me out of here, sweet cheeks,” he says.

I give him a flirty look over my shoulder. “Today, I’m wearing the *white* lacy boyshorts.”

He curses under his breath as he adjusts himself and points at the door. “Go, woman. You are testing every ounce of my self-control.”

I turn and walk outside, perhaps swaying my hips a *little* more than

necessary, if the way he curses under his breath like a sailor is any indication.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 38

## SKIN AND SWEAT



### Autumn

The air is charged on the drive, both of us sneaking glances at each other. My skin runs hot when I'm around Zac, but he turns the air on so high, my nipples stand on alert. I know the minute he notices, and he reaches up to change the temperature.

"Chilly?" His voice is clear innocence, only the gleam in his eyes giving him away.

"I can put on my jacket." I'm already working my hands through the sleeves when he lightly touches my hand.

"Please don't, unless you just *want* to wear it." He grins, setting the temp to 79. "Better?"

I laugh. "You don't like my jacket?"

"It's a great jacket. I feel bad freezing you out."

“Mm-hmm.”

“And anything covering you up is just a travesty,” he adds. “Even though you look beautiful in absolutely anything. And especially in absolutely nothing.”

I fan myself, suddenly toasty warm.

“You’re willing to sweat the whole way just so I’ll show more skin?” I shake my head, laughing.

“It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make,” he says solemnly.

I snort and he smirks. “Mm-hmm,” I repeat.

“Being near you, I’m already in a constant sweat.”

*This man.*

My phone vibrates off of my lap and I bend down to pick it up. It’s Dominic calling. I roll my eyes. I forgot to block him after the last time, but I thought telling him not to call again sunk in since he’s been quiet for a little bit.

“Don’t feel you have to ignore calls on my account,” Zac says.

“Oh, I don’t want to talk to him,” I tell him.

“Is there...someone at home waiting for you?” His voice sounds hollow. “Or someone you’re wanting to be with maybe?”

“No,” I say emphatically, turning to face him. “I wouldn’t have been with you yesterday if there was...” My face flames when I realize maybe our time together is just something he does, and it didn’t really mean more than an itch he needed to scratch.

My inner self chides me for being all over the place. First, I don’t want anything to do with Zac Ledger, then I develop a hard, fast crush. What was I *thinking* having sex with him? He’s a freaking athlete—aren’t they in and out of different beds every night of the week? I put my hands on my throat and can’t breathe for a few seconds.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Maybe we could have it a little cooler in here,” I say, adjusting the temp. My phone buzzes with a text this time and I look down.

Dominic

What the fuck are you doing with Zac Ledger?

Dominic’s texts come in quick succession once they start.

Dominic

We're not even fully broken up and you're...what...are you living with the guy?

Dominic

You really went to Boston for him?

Dominic

I can't believe you gave me a hard time about Tempest. I was at least there for you. Once the season starts, you think Zac will have time for you?

Dominic

YOU DON'T EVEN FUCKING LIKE SPORTS!!!

Somewhere along the way, I turned my sound completely off, but I'm shaking now as the texts come in one by one. I don't know if I'm panicking because I realized Zac and I haven't even established what we are, or if it's all the rage I feel toward Dominic.

I toss my phone in my bag and lower my head as far toward my knees as I can and still be buckled in.

"Autumn?" Zac asks, his hand on my back. "You're worrying me. Are you sure you're okay?"

He takes the exit and turns on a quiet street, parking the car and turning toward me.

"Talk to me," he says.

"I'm not cut out for this," I tell him.

"Cut out for what?" His eyes are kind and concerned, but when he tries to take my hand, I pull back and he flinches. "What happened? Did I go too far with the talk about your body?"

"No," I whisper. "That was funny." I shake my head and look out the window, hating that my thoughts have completely turned upside down on me. I started out this day flying high.

"What is it then? Talk to me."

"I realize I've been all over the place with you," I tell him. "But you asking if someone's waiting for me or if I'm wanting someone from home... after the day we had yesterday...I—" I pause, not knowing how to get it out. "Now I realize that maybe this is just something you do, make a girl feel

special and like she's the only one, and it'll all be over when your season starts and you'll have more choices at your disposal..." I trail off.

He puts his fingers on my chin and tilts my face up toward him. "I thought I'd made it clear that I don't do this...not with anyone. In the past, I've had physical relationships that were beneficial to us both, but I haven't slept with anyone since I met you. I haven't wanted to."

My breath shudders and his face inches closer.

"I don't have women at the house or at my parents'—that's why they're so giddy around you, why Jamison came from the city mid-week to meet the woman who has captured my attention. I don't introduce women to Ivy." I gulp back a choked sound, trying not to cry, and his eyes soften. "I don't tell women I want them in my home and in my bed and that I'd never let them go."

His thumb caresses my cheek and my breathing starts to slow to a more peaceful rate.

"Dominic said you won't have time for me once the season starts, and I don't even know what your schedule will be like—I'm not sure why you like someone who doesn't even know your game."

He chuckles and then his eyes darken. "Who the fuck is Dominic anyway?"

"The ex who managed to take over my apartment while also sleeping with someone else..."

He makes a derisive sound, his eyes narrowing. "You really want to listen to someone like that?"

"No, I meant to block him a long time ago." It hits me then and my eyes get wide. "Our pictures must be out there more than I realized if Dominic's seeing them."

His expression is grim. "I'm sorry for that. Does it bother you?"

"I do wish I could give approval on the pictures used...you know, so I can make sure I'm showcasing my best side," I attempt to sound lighthearted.

He grins and leans his forehead against mine. "I want to see where this will go with us, Autumn. I know this is a lot for you, and I probably should've handled everything a lot differently...taken things slower...I just—I wasn't looking for you. Wasn't expecting anyone like you in my life. And...well, you've hit me like a lightning bolt."

"That explains the constant fever," I whisper.

"She's got jokes when she's traumatized," he whispers back, his lips



barely brushing against mine.

“Will you just promise that if these feelings you’re having for me start to wane...you’ll tell me?” I push back slightly so I can see him better.

“Yes, I promise. I don’t see that happening, just so you know,” he says. “What does concern me is that you live on the West Coast and I live on the East Coast, and I don’t want to stand in the way of the career you’re building. Will you promise me that when this project is over, if you need us to be done too, you’ll be straight with me as soon as you know?”

The thought makes me so sad I don’t even want to go there.

Not today.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## TRY IT, YOU BUY IT



### Autumn

The showroom is massive and filled with furniture that suits the look we're going for, which is Cape Cod comfort meets artsy eclectic. Zac isn't afraid of color, so this place won't have as much white as his lighthouse on the Cape; we'll be adding touches of teal, bold green, and brown, which helps narrow our search as we walk through row after row.

I find two sectionals that I love, a cognac brown in the softest leather, and a plush teal one that we both sink into.

"This is nice, really nice," he says.

"You're looking at me more than the couch." I pretend the couch is more interesting than him, which is a lie.

"I'm imagining the fun we can have on this couch. I like how big it is."

I press my hand to my cheek, trying to cool down, and he smirks like he

knows the effect he's having on me.

"Shall we try the brown one? I can't imagine it being more comfortable than this one, but you might like it longer than you would this color." I stand up and his hands are on my waist in the next second, leading me toward the other couch.

When we sit down, we both sigh contentedly, our heads turning to face one another.

"Yeah, it doesn't get any better than this," he says. "I think we need both. It's a big house."

"I imagine this one in your living room, and we'll get some comfy chairs too, and the teal can be in the family room for the more playful vibe we're going for in there."

"Sold." He leans over and gives me a quick kiss like we're sealing the deal.

"You're easy." I stand up and look down at him, knowing if I kiss him again, we'll be distracted for who knows how long.

"When it comes to you, there's no question," he says, his eyes lingering on my mouth.

I pull him up by the hand. "Okay, lover boy, quit shining those moon eyes on me and let's knock this out." I turn to walk away.

"There's so much I want to unpack in that sentence."

I can hear the smile in his voice and I giggle, rolling my eyes at him *and* myself.

We find chairs, side tables, a coffee table we both love, and a huge ottoman to go with the teal couch. For the kitchen, we find white leather bar stools and a long farmhouse table with comfortable white leather chairs, giving it a little more polish than the distressed chairs in his lighthouse.

When we get to the bedroom furniture, he takes my hand and goes for the largest bed.

"We should try this out," he says.

"Zac!" I hiss, looking around even though no one has been around since we came in with the code.

"To see how comfortable it is," he says innocently. "What did you think I meant?" That smirk. It will be the death of me, I'm sure of it.

"I don't think this mattress would be the one you'd get anyway. We're looking at the *furniture*."

"It's for sale," he insists. "Come on. Lie down with me."

I groan but slide out of my wedges and crawl onto the mattress. He grins down at me and then hops on the bed like a kid, lying down to face me.

“If the staff sees this on the cameras, they’re never going to agree to this again,” I whisper.

“We better make sure we choose the right things today then,” he says, his hand on my waist as he leans in and kisses me, his lips soft and warm, and his tongue sliding in like it belongs with me. I get lost in the kiss, so lost that it takes a few times of hearing it to realize that the loud throat clearing is a person standing at the foot of the bed.

I jump back and Zac looks at me lazily and then up at the forbidding woman with the slicked-back bun.

“Hi, Percy,” he says. “We’ll take everything in this room, definitely the mattress.”

Her pale skin flushes as she puckers her lips together in what I think is a smile. “Wonderful, Zac, just wonderful.”

I don’t know if I’m more surprised that she’s not forbidding at all or that Zac doesn’t seem the least bit embarrassed to be caught making out with me on this bed.

“This is Autumn Winters,” he says, his head turning on the pillow to grin at me. “I’m trying to win her heart. Tell her I’m good people, Perce.”

“Oh, he’s the best of the best,” Percy tells me emphatically, with that pucker smile again. She’s really the cutest, primmest woman I’ve ever seen. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” I smile and the pucker intensifies. So cute.

“Absolutely charmed,” she says. “And I’m so sorry to interrupt, Zac dear, but...there seems to be some...*activity* outside. I don’t want to rush you at all, but I thought you should be aware,” she says.

Zac sits up, cursing. “More than one?”

“Not that I could tell, but he has a long lens and yet he’s still moving in closer.”

“Thanks, Percy. I think we’ve mostly picked out the important pieces anyway. We’ll need to work on the bedrooms, but I think we can do that online. Ivy wants to come choose things for her room too, so anything we’re not sure about, we can check out then.”

“I look forward to that,” Percy says.

“Are you still connected to the Judith Sage showroom?” I ask.

“Yes, dear, and their outdoor collection is to die for.”

I grin. "I can't wait to see it."

"Wonderful, just wonderful." She presses her hands together. "Let me know when you are ready to leave and I will help you make the best escape."

"You're a dream, Percy," Zac says.

Her face turns scarlet and she titters. "Oh my." She fans her face. "Oh my."

I scoot off the bed and try to hold my laugh in.

"I guess you're telling me I need to get up too," Zac groans.

"No one has said any such thing," Percy says, and I think the "*oh-ho-oh-ho*" stuttering out of her might be a laugh. It's hard to tell because her lips aren't moving at all now.

Zac stands and I fear Percy might just pass out with the magnitude of Zac Ledger in this beautiful bedroom setting. She clutches her throat and gazes up at him. Is no one immune to his charm? I think not.

"Thank you," he tells her, leaning down to kiss her cheek. I have to look away, the need to laugh is too great. Her knees buckle and Zac holds her elbow, balancing her.

"My pleasure, Zac dear. My pleasure. I'm just so glad I saw your call in time to make this work. I would've felt terrible if you'd had to go with Langard Designs. *Oh-ho-oh-ho*."

"You know I would *never*," he says, laughing.

I grin, mentally clocking the beautiful things from Langard and Sable Edith versus Ferdinand Designs and am glad I preferred the things from here since I'd never want to go anywhere else either when there's a Percy.

Zac looks at me and holds his hand out. I take it, probably almost as red as Percy myself.

"Are you ready?" he asks. "We can take more time if you think we need it."

"No, I think we're good. I've been taking notes of all our choices along the way. We've got an excellent start."

"Okay then," he says, his smile growing. "Lead the way, Percy."

We go through the showroom and the maze of offices before taking an elevator down two levels. When it opens, we're in a parking garage.

"I should've had you park in here, I don't know what I was thinking," she frets.

"I'm just impressed you spotted the guy. But we will have to walk out of the garage to get in the car," he reminds her.

“Well, I have a most excellent idea,” she says.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 40

## CHANGE OF PLANS



Zac

“Her plan was indeed, most excellent,” I say as we covertly swap back to my SUV and Percy pulls away in her Lexus from an In-N-Out parking lot. “I think she loved sending that cameraman on a wild goose chase.”

“Someone is *smitten*,” Autumn says, her eyes twinkling when she looks at me.

“Oh, you mean I’ve *finally* won you over? It worked?”

She gives my arm a shove and laughs. “Not who I meant,” she sings.

I grumble under my breath and she laughs harder while I pretend to pout. “Way to burst my bubble. And I’m bummed because I wanted to take you to a restaurant near the showroom. Now we’re all the way over here...”

“I’ve been craving In-N-Out,” she says, shrugging.

“Yeah? That’s how you like it?” I’m pretty sure I hear her sweet fast

intake of breath and notice how she squirms in her seat, which makes my heart swell to ten times its normal size.

I pull into the drive-thru and look at her.

“A mustard fried double-double, cheese fries, and a large Coke,” she says.

“Interesting. No shake?”

“I’ve got enough on my own,” she says, giving me a dose of my own medicine, and my eyes travel over her sweet mouth.

“Damn straight, you do,” I tell her. The microphone squeaks and we both startle out of our lust-filled haze, cringing with the sound. I give her order first and then add a 4x4 protein style with a water.

“No *fries*?” she whispers.

“Can I have three of yours?”

“Three. *Three*?” She states again as if to be sure she’s not misunderstanding my ridiculousness. “Three In-N-Out fries is the equivalent of eating *lint*. That’s nothing!”

“Lint is definitely something,” I say as we pull forward. “But three fries will be better than lint, I promise you.” I reach out and squeeze her thigh. “I didn’t know you were so passionate about fries. Tell me more,” I tease.

She shakes her head. “I mean, if I need to explain it when you’ve already had them, then you clearly don’t understand the value of an In-N-Out fry.”

“I prefer a Wahlburger fry, as long as we’re going there.”

She sniffs. “Too crispy.”

I try not to laugh. “I had no idea you were such a fry snob. But hear me out...”

We’re interrupted by the cashier taking my credit card and then freaking out when she realizes that “OH-MY-GOD-FREAKING-ZAC-LEDGER-IS-HERE.”

I smile, flashing an embarrassed look at Autumn before agreeing to sign an In-N-Out cup and then a piece of paper when the pen doesn’t work well on the cup. A small line of employees forms in the window until the manager yells for them to get back to work, and then the manager gets his turn, leaning his chest out to see if I’ll sign his shirt. When the people waiting in the cars behind us start honking, we’re finally free to go.

“You are smooth as can be,” Autumn says.

“Hear me out,” I say, going back to where I left off before. “This is why we’re perfect for each other...the fries?” I add when she looks confused.



“Because you think lint is a food group?” she asks, carefully surrounding her lap with napkins and trying to hold back her laugh.

I snort. “Cheeky little sass,” I say, and her cheeks turn pink. “And no...I prefer not to digest lint. But I like crispy fries. You could have all my soggy.” I tilt my head to her container of fries and she pretends to be outraged that I’m calling them soggy, but that’s exactly what they are and she knows it. She holds up a fry, putting it in my mouth while I pull out of the parking lot.

“*One*,” she draws the word out and we both laugh.

“Cheeky little sass,” I repeat. “Hey, I know of a park near here. We can at least look at a pretty view while we eat.”

“That sounds nice.” She waits on eating the burger and has a few fries, eventually giving me my second fry with a long *two* that sounds like a kindergarten teacher.

The park is beautiful. We park and look at the water. It’s a gorgeous day. I move to get out of the car and she turns toward me.

“Should we stay in the car after our almost run-in with the paparazzi?” she asks.

“Nah. I’ll throw on a cap and sunglasses. Let’s go sit by the water.”

I reach in the back and grab my disguise while she gathers all the napkins on her lap and puts her food back in the bag. She hops out and shuts the door before I’m even out of the car.

“I’m hungry,” she calls over her shoulder, hustling to a bench.

I laugh as I jog to catch up with her, loving this day.

I don’t get fry number *three* until I’m done with my food and she’s finishing up hers. We’re kicked back, watching birds swoop into the water. A few people pause when they walk past us, but they keep going, either unsure if it’s really me or giving me a break to focus on the beautiful woman next to me.

I couldn’t care less if the whole world knows I’m with Autumn...as long as she’s okay with it and no one bothers my daughter. If I had my way, I’d let everyone know I think I’ve met my person.

My phone buzzes and speaking of letting people know...there’s a text from Hardy.

Ty

Damn, man. You’ve been holding out on me. Some of the guys showed me pictures of you looking cozy with some model I hadn’t

ever heard of. You afraid she'll get a look at your brother of another color and trade up?

Fuck yeah, Hardy. I do have some sense, you know. All kidding aside, I can't wait for you to meet her. Just...try not to look TOO good when you do.

He sends back a gif of Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall with their mouths hanging open. And then one of Terry Crews with a shocked face. He only ever sends gifs with black men so I can "get the full effect of his words" and on the occasion I send him one, it's always little old white ladies. It works for us.

I chuckle. "Looks like our pictures are making the rounds everywhere. Ty says he saw me with a model looking cozy." Instead of thinking it's funny, she looks worried and I put my hand on her neck, leaning over to kiss her hair. "He meant *you*," I whisper.

"You're sure you're okay about it?" she asks. "You're rarely photographed with the same woman twice..." She clamps her mouth shut.

"You been looking into things, Little Sass?"

She lifts an eyebrow. "So you're going with that, huh?"

"It fits you *really* well," I say into her ear before kissing it. "And I assure you, I'm absolutely okay with being seen with you. Should we give them something to talk about?"

Her ear lifts slightly with her grin. "I guess we could..."

I tilt her face toward mine and kiss that mouth that I can't seem to get enough of.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 41

## IN THE CLOUDS



### Autumn

I never knew I could live in this dream state, but my cheeks hurt from smiling so much, my stomach feels like it must have an eight-pack from the workout it's getting laughing, and I'd swear I was drunk if I didn't know with one-hundred percent certainty that I haven't had a drop of alcohol since last night's wine. I'm slap-happy and lust-smacked, and I don't even feel bad about it. I practically dance into the Ledger house with Zac, unable to even get my signs out right the first time because my whole body feels tugged like a magnet to Zac.

It's absurd, and I would be making so much fun of myself right now if I didn't feel so damn awesome.

"There you are," Daisy says, signing it too.

We both eye Ivy to see if we're having the *no voices* rule tonight, but

she's chatting happily with Pappy, showing him the folder she's brought home from school with some of her favorite drawings and projects. Zac stands next to me, the heat from his arm against mine, and we ooh and ahh over Ivy's work. After a while, I help Daisy finish up with supper and Zac sets the table, and after Daniel gets home, everyone moves into the dining room.

I realize I still have my shoes on and my feet are tired, so I take a little detour and take my shoes off by the door. I jump and nearly hit my head standing back up when the doorbell rings.

I can hear Daisy saying, "Who would that be? It's probably a package again..." And then she says louder, "Could you grab that, honey?"

"Sure," I call back, just as there's a softer knock.

I open the door and my stomach bottoms out. I stare for what must only be a second but feels like an eternity before she smiles wide, her eyes crinkling in her signature pose.

*Halle Reid.*

"Hello there," she says. "May I come in?" Her voice is playful, like we're part of an inside joke, as she walks past me without waiting for an answer.

I lift my hand toward the dining room, still unable to form words. My stomach hurts. My heart hurts. This can't be good.

"Oh, are you *deaf*?" She over-enunciates and speaks louder with every word. "Are. You. One. Of. Ivy's. Aides?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Who's here, sweetie? Come on back," Daisy says.

Clearly this family doesn't know the concept of stranger danger. What if it had been a reporter? Someone trying to get to Zac and Ivy? Someone like his supermodel ex and the mother of his child. Who cares if it's a gated community so everyone has already been vetted before they even get through the gate? Things happen.

I wish I'd touched up my makeup, freshened up after being in the hot kitchen, and I so wish I was still wearing my platform wedges. She looms over me, tall and glorious, nothing out of place. Her makeup looks as if it was done moments ago by Joelle, the makeup artist who travels with her and is famous in her own right now that the two of them have collaborated on a makeup line together.

I feel sick, trailing behind her as she follows the sound of laughter. Since she steps in the room first, I'm able to see the expressions on their faces as

one by one, they notice who's come for supper. Pappy is the last one to see her, and I think he only does when the table falls silent.

Ivy lifts her hand and I expect her to speak because she's been extra loud tonight, but she signs without mouthing the words or uttering a sound. Like a repeat of last night but without the humor flitting behind her gaze. She gets up and goes to her mom, giving her a shy hug.

"What did she say?" Halle asks, wrapping her arms around Ivy.

"Hi, Mom," I whisper.

"What are you doing here, Halle?" Zac says. He gets up and gives her a hug too, and I grip the back of my chair, moving hurriedly to sit down before I faceplant into it.

The two of them look like sunshine and caviar, perfection meeting perfection with a sexy kiss. No, they're not kissing, but it's only a matter of time, I know it as sure as I know I don't belong here.

Daniel and Daisy get up to hug her too, with Daisy hurrying to the kitchen to get a plate. Pappy glances at me across the table and looks concerned and I try to smile like, *hey, no big*.

Lies, all lies.

"I was missing you," she looks at Zac as she says this and he signs it as if she's saying it to Ivy, "so I canceled a few things, got here as quick as I could." She shrugs and squeezes Ivy again.

*YOU LEAVING WHEN?* Ivy signs.

There's a pause and then Zac repeats what Ivy signed. And in my sadsack heart, the pieces begin to fall into place. Does Halle really not know sign language?

"I'm not sure yet," Halle says, smiling her Zen smile. "I'm just so glad to see you." She reaches out and squeezes Ivy's hand, and Ivy smiles tentatively.

My heart pounds heavily in my chest.

Daisy sets a plate for Halle between Daniel and Pappy and the child that I am, I want to kiss her for not putting her next to Zac. When Zac sits next to me, I wait to see if his hand will find my thigh like it did all the way home from Boston, but he's stiff and quiet. I feel like a robot, watching the way Halle speaks to Ivy, over-enunciating the way she did with me in the entryway, and Zac signs everything to Ivy. So far, Ivy has still not said one word out loud.

Daisy finally seems to shake herself from the shock of having Halle here

and tries to get the conversation moving, asking Halle where she flew in from, what's been her favorite location recently.

She flew in from Amsterdam, and her favorite location recently was Mykonos, Greece. Daniel asks about the food in Greece and that gets Halle stirred up.

"The papoutsakia was out of this world, and I've been trying to learn how to make pastitsio...maybe I can make some for you all while I'm here," she says brightly.

Sounds like she's planning to be here a while.

"So, you met Autumn," Daisy says, beaming at me and then Halle.

"Who?" Halle asks.

Zac's voice is low and he's still signing everything, even for the rest of his family when they forget, in their surprise over Halle being here, to make sure Ivy is part of the conversation. He does that often, but Ivy reads lips so well that he's not usually this diligent about it.

"This is Autumn," he says, putting his arm on my back, and I feel like the sun is shining on me again...until his hand drops to continue signing. "She's the interior designer for the new place Ivy and I bought."

I suddenly feel very small.

The dream I've been living in for the past two days dissolves, and I'm left feeling like the little girl standing at the window watching her dad leave, wishing he would claim her.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 42

## LET ME LOVE YOU, PIE



### Autumn

Halle is a charming dinner guest—funny, entertaining, self-deprecating. The Ledger family loosens up after the initial surprise of having her show up unannounced, and I can tell they enjoy her company, that they love her and are happy to see her. Even Zac has loosened up, although he keeps checking in with Ivy, who seems to be quietly taking it all in. I can't tell if she's normally bashful around her mom or maybe it takes time for her to warm up to being comfortable after not seeing her for a while.

"Ivy, you're not going to believe what I saw a few weeks ago," Halle says, grinning at Ivy and then Zac.

*WHAT?* Ivy signs, her eyes wide.

"A platypus."

Ivy gasps before Zac signs it, but I don't think Halle notices, and I don't

know why I'm stuck on this if it doesn't bother any of them...that *her own mother* doesn't know sign language? I can't seem to get past this.

*You're just looking for reasons not to like her, I tell myself.*

*Not true. You've been obsessed with Halle Reid ever since her first Vanity Fair layout.*

*But that was before you fell for her boyfriend and daughter.*

*EX. Ex-boyfriend.*

*Give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she does know sign language and just has to work up to remembering. She's probably jet-lagged and she's probably just rusty after not using it every day.*

*She didn't know Hi, Mom.*

I choke out something between a cough and a hysterical sob or laugh and cover my mouth with the inside of my elbow.

"You okay?" Zac asks, turning toward me, his hand dusting my back again for a second.

I nod and cough. "I'm fine."

Halle keeps talking about the platypus, her words coming faster as her face lights up with animation, and Ivy starts watching Zac more to catch everything, her own face bright. Ivy clasps her hands together when Halle talks about the way Halle went on an early morning expedition in Victoria, Australia, to this area she'd heard platypuses were occasionally seen.

"I got barely three hours of sleep, so I fell asleep in the bush along the banks, and when I heard a splash near me, it's a miracle I didn't jump and scare him off because when I opened my eyes, a platypus was staring right at me." Halle throws her head back and laughs when Ivy squeals.

*WHAT HAPPENED?* Ivy signs excitedly, Zac's voice quickly following.

I find myself more swept up in the way the two of them work together than in hearing Halle's story. Although I'll admit, it's a good one simply because of how it's bringing Ivy out of her shell.

"I stared him down," Halle says, laughing again. "And I did something stupid." She pokes her lips out in a pout.

*WHAT? YOU DO WHAT?* Ivy asks.

She gets down and moves around the table to stand by Halle, and even though I'm ashamed of the level of jealousy warring in my gut, I'm happy that Ivy is having this time with her mom. There's no missing the adoration in Ivy's eyes, and even though I'd love nothing more than to make Halle the evil mother in this scenario, there's no missing the adoration in her eyes



either.

“I very slowly lifted my camera, and I mean as slow as a sloth or-or a turtle...*slow...*” She mimes inching her camera up ever so slowly, and Ivy cackles.

*WHAT HAPPENED?* Ivy asks, bouncing on her heels, and Zac follows with the question, a smile thick in his voice.

Halle’s shoulders lift, her posture picture-perfect, her eyes dancing. “It was like he looked at me and said, ‘You really think I’m gonna fall for that?’ and he slipped back under the water. The picture I took just shows this much of his brown head.” She holds her fingers up in the size of a quarter.

*I SEE?* Ivy can barely contain her excitement and Halle looks thrown for the briefest second, so fleeting I’m not sure anyone else notices.

“I don’t have it on my phone,” Halle says, her head tilting in disappointment. “I had a big camera that day.” She holds her hands up to show how big. “And so...it’s not...” she trails off.

Ivy’s sadness over that is temporary, her next few questions pouring through her hands. I don’t catch all of it myself, but Zac is on it, speaking it almost as quickly as Ivy signs it.

*HIS EYES? COLOR?*

“Brown like chocolate,” Halle says.

Ivy asks something about his bill, I think. *HIS FEET? YOU SEE?*

Halle answers this one with something cute too. Of course, she does. “I blinked and thought he lifted his front foot in a wave.”

Ivy giggles. *HE LOOK LIKE PUSSY?*

I snort back my laugh, and it’s the first time Zac looks at me like we’re in on a joke together since Halle walked into the room. He doesn’t say this question out loud and I sign, *YOU FORGOT ONE.*

He chuckles and slides his hand over his mouth to cover it up.

“What?” Halle asks, eyeing us with interest. Her eyes flicker over me before resting on Zac, and I wonder if he feels the way she’s drinking him in, the way her entire body is hungry for whatever he throws her way.

I know, because I feel the same way when I look at him and am certain I must be as obvious as she is.

“Did he look like my platypus?” Zac asks. “That’s what Ivy asked,” he adds when Halle still looks confused.

“Pussy,” Ivy says.

The only word she’s used her voice to say tonight.

The entire table freezes for a moment and then can't hold back the laughter.

Halle looks around. "Did I hear that right?" She laughs nervously.

"You heard right." Zac laughs. "That's what she named the platypus you gave her."

"Geez, couldn't you have picked any other name?" Halle says, laughing.

Zac pauses before signing it and then he does because it's obvious Ivy already knows what she said. She frowns and moves back to sit in her seat.

"I'm kidding," Halle says. "*Obviously.*" She smiles at Ivy and Ivy stares at her dad with an expression that makes the fractures in my heart crack even more.

"She was kidding," he tells Ivy.

Ivy's eyes shine with tears and she nods slightly, pressing her lips together as she tries to stop them from trembling. She looks down at her plate and the table is quiet.

"I really didn't mean anything bad by that," Halle says under her breath. "I just thought it was funny, I mean it *is* funny, right?"

"How about dessert?" Daisy asks.

Pappy and Daniel pipe up with a resounding yes, happy to have a break in the tension.

"You've grown so much since I saw you," Halle says to Ivy. When Ivy doesn't look up, Halle waves her hand to Zac. "Can you tell her I said that?"

Zac places his hand on the table in front of Ivy and she looks up at him. He then signs what Halle said.

Ivy nods and glances at me, signing, *A-U-T-U-M-N SAYS I'LL BE TALLER THAN HER ONE DAY.*

I smile at her and she smiles back. I sign: *AND MORE BEAUTIFUL.*

Her smile grows and she shakes her head.

*AND SMARTER*, I add.

She laughs and shakes her head harder.

*IT'S TRUE*, I sign.

Zac conveys all of this and Halle's attention ping-pongs between the three of us.

Ivy's little shoulders lift and she thanks Daisy when she sets a plate of pie in front of her. Ivy does a little dance in her chair, signing, *EXCITED.*

Daisy starts to put a piece of pie in front of Halle and she holds up her hand. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you'd remember I don't want any. *Still* not

eating desserts,” she says with a slight edge.

“Right. Just thought maybe your diet had changed by now,” Daisy says, grinning good-naturedly.

Daisy gives the S’mores pie to me instead.

“Thank you. Can’t wait,” I say.

Is it ridiculous that I get a thrill out of especially enjoying every single bite of the 1,000-calorie pie I take my time savoring in front of Halle Reid?

Absolutely.

Yes, it’s childish and completely foolish, and I should be completely ashamed of the way I moan how good it is with every bite, licking my fork thoroughly to make sure I’m not missing any flavor, and basically have an erotic experience with the pie for as long as I can possibly make it last.

Daisy is *thrilled*. “Well, now we know what to serve Autumn for special occasions,” she says with delight.

---

We survive the dinner and all move to the family room. Usually, Ivy’s dancing or chatting to herself on the floor as she plays with her Barbies, but tonight she sits as still as a statue.

It makes the night feel formal, important...and I want to slink to the guesthouse in defeat, but I’m too curious about the way the relationship I actually had hoped about for longer than two seconds is going to die its painful death. I’ve already seen the writing on the wall, but I think I just need the final nails to be hammered into me.

Zac isn’t even sitting by me. Granted, that could also be because Halle took the place I’d hoped he’d sit before he could, but I’m not sure he would’ve either way. He’s barely looking at me, his hands working overtime tonight with all the signing.

My insecurities whisper that it’s because I’m not important in this family, not important to him, but even in my fragile state, I know that’s not true.

But then, Halle turns to me and says, “It’s really late for you to still be on the job. Do you have an early day tomorrow?”

I’m taken aback by her blatant attempt at putting me in my place, but then I reconsider her intentions. Perhaps she just wants me to do a good job on

Zac's house.

I glance at Zac and he's looking down at Ivy. I have no idea if he even heard Halle.

Pappy speaks up. "Autumn has become part of the family since she's been here. We want to keep her around here forever."

"Thanks, Pappy," I say, smiling at him.

"Where do you live?" Halle asks, her eyes flicking over to mine before looking down at her nails. They're painted an unusual shade of blue and will be the next trend, I have no doubt.

"Oh, in the guesthouse right now," I say, biting my lip. I haven't regretted not staying at the house with Ivy and Zac until this moment.

Something crosses over her face. Relief maybe. "I mean, when you're not working on this project."

"California."

"Autumn is Summer Winters' sister," Daisy says. "Maybe you know her?"

"Who?" Halle asks, her voice cool.

Zac snorts. "Don't tell me you don't know who Liam Taylor married." His tone surprises me, but he's smiling as he watches Halle. Maybe I misheard the edge in his voice.

Why won't he look at me?

*I wouldn't look at me either if Halle Reid was in the room.*

"Oh, that's nice," Halle says, unaffected by Zac's response. "No, I didn't know her name. Liam's great. We were in Paris together, and he was something *else...*" She laughs as if it's a *very* fond memory and I rage inside. Both for my sister and oddly, for Zac if this is hurting him in any way. "I still can't imagine him married." She shakes her head as if she doesn't quite buy into the whole thing either.

"When he met my sister, he fell hard," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "He worships the ground she walks on." I lift a shoulder. "They've got the real deal."

She shakes her head, letting out an amused chuckle, and that's apparently all I can take.

I stand up and everyone looks at me in surprise.

"Thanks for an amazing dinner," I tell Daisy. "Goodnight," I say out loud, signing to Ivy. "One more day of school before break." I shake my hands in a little dance and try to get out of the room before I lose it.

I turn and then feel Ivy's little hands circling my waist and I pat her hands, turning to smile at her. *NIGHT, SWEET GIRL*, I sign. She smiles and turns to sit back down.

“Goodnight,” Pappy says.

“Night,” everyone else echoes.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 43

## RISKY INVESTMENTS



### Autumn

I rush to the door to get my shoes, my hands shaking as I lift the strap to my sandals over my heel, and the night air is a welcome relief when I open the door. I don't run to the guesthouse even though I'm dying to, but I walk as quickly as I can and trip on the tire of Ivy's bike.

Strong hands steady me and I gasp, stiffening and letting out a soft cry of alarm.

"Sorry, it's me," Zac says. "I should've warned you I was behind you. I thought you must've heard me."

"No, I can't say I heard you sneaking up behind me," I snap, shoving off his hands.

"I'm sorry," he says again. "Are you okay? You seem—are you mad at me?"

Am I? I honestly don't know at this point. But then it all rushes at me like a tsunami. The torrent of emotions I've been keeping at bay this whole night.

"I'm confused," I tell him. I stand taller, putting my mask in place, my bruised heart going back undercover where it needs to stay. "Why were you signing everything?"

"She doesn't know sign language," he says like it's a no-brainer. He sighs and runs his hands through his hair. "And...I don't know—Ivy usually makes it easier for Halle than she has been tonight. She's always talking out loud along with signing or at least mouthing the words. I felt an extra... vulnerability with Ivy this time and I wanted to make it as easy for her as I possibly could."

When he says things like that, when I see yet another example of how he is always considering Ivy, always loving her in the best possible way...well, it's no wonder that I'm crazy about him.

"That makes sense. And maybe you were trying to make it easier for Halle too."

He shakes his head, sighing again, his shoulders sagging slightly. "I want to do whatever I can to help their relationship, yes."

And now I feel like the worst kind of person for all these feelings. Of course he'd want his daughter to have a relationship with her mother. And anyone can see that the best way to do that would be if they are together, living as a family. I would never want to stand in the way of that.

"You're the best dad I've ever seen," I tell him, my heart peeking out to bare itself one more time. I have to at least tell him this. "It's amazing to watch, Zac. The love you have for her is inspiring and beautiful. She is so lucky to have you. I hope you know that. You're doing such an incredible job."

He stares back at me, the moon and patio lights illuminating his eyes and one side of his face. For a second, I think maybe he has tears in his eyes, but it's probably just the light.

"Thank you, Autumn," he says. "That...that really means a lot." He clears his throat and his voice comes out stronger. "As soon as I became a parent, I began second-guessing *everything*. I guess that's just part of the job. So... thank you...for saying that."

"Of course," I whisper.

"I should get back...to Ivy."

I nod. "Of course," I repeat.

It feels as if we've not only taken a step back, as in *two steps forward, one step back*, but about a *thousand* steps back. Like we're two complete strangers standing here, uncertain of what we're doing in front of the other, where to look, what to say.

"Well, good night," I say, turning to walk the rest of the way.

"Good night," he says.

---

It's not a good night.

I don't sleep.

I cry.

And I FaceTime Summer, grateful for the three hours' difference as I blubber, "Sister, sister," the thing we used to say to each other when we were little, when she answers. And then I proceed to fall apart even more when I tell her every detail of what happened. I'd filled her in on the sex already, so she takes it just as hard as I do, this whiplash of being on the highest high and then the lowest low.

"Halle Reid sounds like a real *bitch*," Summer says more than once.

"That's the thing. I'm not sure she is. She was nice, and the family clearly loves her."

"But the way she acted like you shouldn't be there..."

"I'm sure that was just me projecting my jealousy onto her."

"Well, I don't like the way she sounds," Summer says, scowling at me. There's noise in the background and Summer yells Liam's name so loud, I jump.

He walks into the room and grins when he sees me, his smile dropping when he sees my face. "What's going on?" he asks.

"Nothing," I say, wiping my face. "Just having a weird night."

"Do I need to come over there and rearrange Zac's face?" he says, lifting his arm and patting his muscle.

I snort. "He'd flatten you so fast it would be painful."

"Hey, that hurts," Liam teases and I laugh. "There, that's better."

He's the best brother-in-law ever.

"Did you have a fling with Halle Reid?" Summer pokes him in the side



and he jolts, too ticklish to handle that and stand still. She pokes him again and he yelps, grabbing her finger.

“No,” he says, kissing her finger. “What is this about?”

“Did it happen and maybe you forgot about it?” she asks. She holds up a hand when he makes a face. “It’s okay if you did, I just want to know. You had quite the history before me.”

“No, we did not,” he insists. “She came on to me once...I think we were in Paris for a premiere and she’d had a cameo in the movie—I hadn’t even seen her during filming. Anyway, she let me know she liked what she saw and...gave me a key to her hotel room.”

Summer and I both gasp and Liam looks sheepish.

“How could you not tell us this even one time when we were going on about Halle Reid?” Summer says.

“Because I wasn’t into her.” He shrugs. “I didn’t go to the hotel. I didn’t even let her kiss me...she tried, and you know how I like to kiss,” he says, leaning over to kiss Summer. She holds up her hand to block him and he sags, dejected. “Sweet Lips, you know I only think about your mouth. I was just saying...back then...before I met you...well, I was a little loose with the lips.”

I scoff, but I’m grinning because it’s so entertaining to see the way he’s always working for my sister. I freaking love it.

“You really expect me to believe you weren’t into Halle Reid?”

“No, I wasn’t. She was a little too...sleek for me. She came across as high maintenance. I don’t know, I just wasn’t. I might’ve known a thing or two about her relationship with Zac too, so no, I wouldn’t have touched her with a ten-foot pole.” He leans over and nuzzles Summer’s cheek. I can see she’s softening, but when he adds, “She doesn’t even come *close* to being as beautiful as you,” she huffs and pushes him away.

“What?” he says, laughing. “She’s not.”

“You went too far there. I was buying all of it until you said that.” She rolls her eyes and glares at me when I laugh.

“I meant it,” Liam says adamantly.

“Autumn and I are chatting,” Summer says, shooing him away with her hand.

I press my lips together to keep from laughing again when he sighs and puts his hand on her cheek.

“Guess I’ll just have to prove my love when you’re off,” he says,

shrugging and biting down on his lip. “Take your time though. I’ll just be here.”

“Oh, God, he’s pitiful. Go, so he can prove how in love with you he is,” I moan, laughing.

Summer laughs too, throwing a pillow at him. He turns around and catches it, grinning hopefully. “We are not done here,” she tells me. “Did Zac really seem like he wanted her?”

“I don’t know. He definitely looked at her more than me. But he was different...more serious. And...he’s always focused on Ivy—as he should be—but tonight even more so.”

“I’m sure he was just surprised she was there and didn’t know what to do. She’s probably never seen him with anyone else,” Summer says.

“That’s just it—he didn’t act like I was with him at all. I’m just the interior designer who’s working on his house.” My voice breaks. “Pappy was the one who said I was part of the family.” I look up at the ceiling. “It’s crazy that I’m so upset. I haven’t even been here long enough to be part of the family. This is a good reminder that everything’s been moving way too fast.”

“A lot has happened in a relatively short amount of time, yes, but when you have that connection with someone, sometimes it is fast,” Summer insists.

I shake my head. “I love you, Sum, but we knew this was too good to be true for me, right?” I try to smile and she starts to say something and I shake my head again, halting her words. “I’m gonna go. Thanks for listening to me rant. I’ll be back to my hard heart by tomorrow, don’t worry about me.”

“Your heart is not hard, Auto. You have more love to give than anyone I know. Promise you won’t close yourself off to the possibility of this—we just don’t know all the details yet, right?”

“I know that he was all over me yesterday and today...until he saw his ex, and then he was so not.” I lift a shoulder. “That pretty much says all I need to know.”

# 44

## SO MUCH TO SAY



Zac

I stare at Autumn as she walks away, wishing I could go with her. Wishing we could hole up in the guesthouse for the rest of the night and that I'd have nothing to think about but making her feel good. That's not how this night will go—I'll be doing good to sleep at all. I let out a ragged breath and it sounds loud out here in this quiet, humid air.

I head back inside and am surprised to see Ivy tucked under Pappy's arm, about to fall asleep. The room is quiet, and I wonder if I've missed anything important.

"I should get Ivy home," I say.

She sits up when she sees me sign her name and stretches before kissing Pappy on the cheek. She gets up and does her rounds, kissing Daisy and Papa and saving Halle for last.

“Wait, you’re leaving?” Halle asks, standing.

“It’s her bedtime,” I say.

“She can stay up a little later tonight, can’t she?” Halle grins and then amps it up when she sees my expression. My shoulders tighten. She’s accustomed to getting her way. “Can I talk to you for a second, Zac?”

“You can walk us out if you’d like,” I say, following Ivy’s lead and kissing my family goodbye. They pretend to not be hanging onto our every word. “Thanks for everything tonight,” I tell my mom.

She smiles, her eyes worried. “Of course, love. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

I step outside, holding the door open for Ivy and Halle. Ivy peers around at Halle and tilts her head in confusion when she looks back at me, signing, *SHE’S COMING?*

“No, she’s not coming with us,” I say, looking at Ivy as I sign it.

“Zac,” Halle says. “It’s late. I’d hoped I *could* come stay with you. It sounds like Ivy only has one more day of school before she’s out for, what, two weeks? She could take the day off and we could hang out together, I could see your new place...”

I tell Ivy I’m going to talk to Halle and to get in the car, unlocking the door and opening it for her. Once I’ve closed it, I turn and lean my back against the SUV.

“No, I’m not comfortable with you staying at the house,” I tell her.

She gasps, stuttering, “B-but why? I’ve been able to stay with you in the past.”

“Those were planned visits, and honestly, I wasn’t comfortable with it then either, but I didn’t want you to think of more reasons to stay away.”

“That’s not fair,” she says softly.

“Isn’t it? Ivy’s getting older now...I don’t want to answer all the questions she’d have if you were to stay with us and then disappear for another year. I’m not doing that to—”

“It hasn’t been a year,” she interrupts, shaking her head.

“It’s been eleven months, Halle,” I say quietly.

“My schedule has been so crazy,” she says, talking faster. “I can’t believe it’s a year. Zac.” Her voice cracks and I look up at the sky, taking in the stars and trying my best to stay calm and not say anything I’ll regret. “Zac, are you *listening* to me?” she cries.

“What are you doing here, Halle?” I cross my arms over my chest and wait.

“I missed her. I missed you,” she says softly. She touches my arm and I shift away from her. She wilts and takes a deep breath. “Can I at least take Ivy on a girls’ trip for a few days? Have some one-on-one time with her?”

“You’ve never been alone with her. Why now? How would you talk to one another?”

“She’s getting older and-and she reads lips so well,” she says. “Maybe I’d get the signs better with just the two of us, without you there to interpret.” Her eyes cut toward mine, flirty and playful, and her smile drops when I don’t play along. Halle’s tactics haven’t worked on me much longer than she realizes.

“No, you can’t take her on a trip,” I say. “She shouldn’t have to piece together your sentences—yes, she does exceptionally well at figuring out the general idea of what’s being said, but she misses things without an interpreter, and it exhausts her when she has to rely on lip reading. She shouldn’t have to work so hard when you can’t even bother to learn the signs for *Hi, Mom*. And you want to take her away for a few days? Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I lower my voice. “Absolutely not.”

“Why are you being this way?” she cries. “You’ve always been glad to see me before. And I’ve tried to learn sign language. I really have.”

A hollow laugh comes out of me. “You haven’t tried. If you’ve learned how to make *pastitsio*, you can learn the sign for *mom*. I’ve always been accommodating to you because I wanted our little girl to know her mother and to have a good relationship with you. And I’ve wanted to keep things peaceful between us too...but tonight, seeing Ivy go into a shell and so uncomfortable, I don’t think it’s helping her for me to be so accommodating, to just let you come in and out of her life whenever you want.”

“It’s because you have a girlfriend now, isn’t it?” she asks, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “I knew you’d be different with me...”

“And I knew that was the real reason you showed up here out of the blue.” My voice is cold as I lift off of the vehicle and walk around to the driver’s side. “Call before just showing up next time, Halle, if there is a next time. I’ll let you know whether it’s convenient for us or not.”

I slide my hand down my face, glancing at Ivy to make sure she’s not watching every word of this. She’s asleep, thank God.

“That’s it? You’re really going to leave me standing out here this late at night?” she spits out.

“Call your driver. I’m sure he can be here within half an hour. It’s a nice

night. Gotta be better than sitting in a swamp waiting for a platypus.” I snort. It would be a cold day in hell before Halle Reid ever sat in muddy water, and we both know it. “Kudos for remembering you gave her the stuffed animal though. She still loves that thing,” I add because I’m not completely heartless. “I’m getting her home.”

“So I can’t spend the day with her tomorrow?” she asks.

“She’s not skipping school to hang out with you, no.”

“I can’t believe how hateful you’re being.” She’s crying and typing on her phone, swiping her face, and maybe I should feel some kind of remorse, but I have nothing left to give her.

“I’m not trying to be hateful to you, Halle. I’ve never wanted us to get to this point. I don’t think you’re a bad person...I really don’t. But you decided you didn’t want to be a mom when you left her with me. I’ve tried my best to be as understanding as I can possibly be, even though I cannot *comprehend* not wanting to be in Ivy’s life. For about a minute there, it seemed like you were going to try and we both know what happened when you found out she was deaf.”

“It was a *shock*,” she chokes out. “I still can’t believe my little girl will never hear music or crickets chirping, or—”

“Our little girl’s life is so incredibly full. She’s happy and vibrant, and so smart it’s not even funny—”

“I know, I see it. I can tell she’s amazing. I’m not trying to say she’s not, it’s just...it’s hard. We’ve always known I was not cut out for this, but I-I want—” She puts her hand over her mouth and her shoulders shake as she weeps.

I press my fingers into my eyes, letting out a long exhale. “Listen. I’ll try to say this in the kindest way possible. When Ivy was younger, she could handle you coming in and out of her life—you were like a fun aunt who occasionally brought gifts and never stayed long enough to get too attached. But you don’t get to be sad now when she starts to treat you like the stranger you are.”

She sniffs and wipes her face. “I’ll do better,” she says. “I promise I will.”

“I’m not the one you need to be making promises to.”

“Is it serious with this girl?” she asks. “You guys don’t seem all that serious to me...maybe it was for the camera? You looked cozier in the pictures than you did tonight.”

“I had no idea a camera was there, that’s how far gone I am about her. Tonight was about protecting my little girl, and I’ll need to make that clear to Autumn.” My stomach sinks when I think about how she must be feeling right now. I basically shut off all my feelings and went into papa bear mode. *Shit.* “I want it to be serious with Autumn,” I say, realizing how *much* I mean that.

“It’s sad that you feel you need to protect our daughter from me. How did we get here? Don’t answer that.” She gives a sad laugh and wipes her face. “How did you find someone who knew sign language?”

“She met Ivy and immediately started trying to learn.” I don’t miss the way Halle flinches. “She kept it a secret, how much she knew. I didn’t realize until I signed something without speaking out loud and she knew—“ I shake my head. “Anyway, she’s still learning, but I can’t believe how fast she’s catching on.” My voice is proud and I can’t even bother toning it down.

Ivy deserves someone like that.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 45

## RALLY



### Autumn

I think I fall asleep around four, so when my alarm goes off at seven, I hit snooze a million times before finally getting up. It's a messy bun kind of day; I just don't have the energy to wash my hair even though I stand in the shower longer than usual.

I have no idea what to expect today. Did Halle spend the night with Zac? Will she be at the house today? Zac was supposed to be at an early morning practice, and I wonder if he'll be off his game after being up all night with the supermodel of the ages.

Not my business.

When I found out Dominic had been cheating on me, it's fair to say I was livid. It still makes me angry when I think of the way he worked his way into my apartment, mooching off of me while he carried on with someone else.



I'm mostly mad at myself for letting that happen. I knew I didn't want to live with him—one night turned into five and then ten, and before I knew it, it felt weird to say...*what are you still doing here?*

But it didn't feel like my heart was an exposed nerve. Like I couldn't take a full breath and have it reach my lungs. Like I'd had the life sucked right out of me and only a shell was in its place.

Which is the way I feel now.

I stare at myself vacantly as I brush my teeth.

*So this is how it feels to get in over your head.*

*Over a guy.*

"Silly, silly girl," I tell my reflection. I point my toothbrush at myself. "Buck up. Lose the infatuation glasses. You're here to do a job, not get your heart ransacked."

A knock on the door startles me out of my one-way conversation. Shit, I'm not ready to face him. And I still look haggard despite the makeup. I grab my laptop bag and purse and open the door, bracing myself, only to be greeted by the smiling faces of Daisy and Pappy.

"Good morning." They speak at the same time, both in their chipper, happy voices, and I don't think I'm imagining the way they look me over carefully to assess if I'm okay.

"Hi, good morning," I say, smiling as if I've never been happier. Or at least trying to go for that look.

"Zac's at the stadium, but he said he should be back by early afternoon," Daisy says.

"Okay." I nod, stepping out and shutting the door behind me.

"Would you like some breakfast before we take you to the house?" Pappy asks.

I can't help but smile at his hopeful expression. "I'd kill for more coffee right now," I tell him.

"Excellent," Daisy breathes out. "I was hoping you'd say that. I just took a breakfast casserole out of the oven, and I've got a pot of coffee ready for us too." She beams, falling into step next to me.

"Oh, that's...sweet." Inside, my heart is sinking because I'm not sure how long I can keep up this lighthearted façade.

"I guess I should check to make sure you have time for a little sit-down. Is that Magnum guy meeting you today?" she asks.

"Magnus will be there at ten, I believe, so there should be time..."

“Perfect.”

We walk back into the house, and it must be obvious that I’m looking around for any lurkers because Pappy says, “It’s just us this morning.”

I smile and nod, my insides both relieved and anguished. Glad Halle’s not here. Sad that she must be at Zac’s.

I glance at the table in the breakfast nook, three place settings and a covered dish placed on the table.

Daisy gives me a sheepish look. “Have a seat, you two. I’ll grab your coffee.”

“Thank you.” I sit and it feels like a bad idea. I need to keep moving today if I want to get anything accomplished. I’m too tired to sit still.

Pappy pats my back once before sitting next to me. “You look exhausted, dear.”

I look down at my plate and nod. “Yeah, the night was too short.” Or too long, depending on how you’re looking at it.

“Still as pretty as an autumn night when the moon lights the sky just right,” he says, leaning over to pat the top of my hand.

“Thank you, Pappy. You’re so lovely.” I smile at him and the next thing I know my eyes are spilling over with tears. “Oh, I—I don’t...ignore me. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea.” He reaches behind him to grab a tissue and hands it to me.

When Daisy carries the coffee mugs over, she notices my face and her expression crinkles into compassion. Or pity. Ugh. I shouldn’t have agreed to breakfast, but how was I to know I’m officially a crier now?

“Oh, honey,” she says, sitting next to me. “It’s gonna be okay. I’ve never seen Zac look at anyone the way he looks at you. He never looked at Halle that way, did he, Pappy?” She leans toward me and puts her arm around me, smiling encouragingly when Pappy agrees with her. “I think he was just thrown that she was here at all. We all were,” she adds.

I dab my already raw nose and a shaky laugh comes out. “I’m okay, I promise. I didn’t sleep much and everything just feels right here.” I put my hand on my chest and make a face. “I’m *fine* about Halle...it’s good that she came for a visit, right? And Zac doesn’t owe me...well, *anything*.” Again with my brutally awkward laugh.

“I didn’t mean to be presumptuous about you and Zac,” Daisy says, her eyes concerned. “After seeing the two of you together the night before and

Ivy saying that about you being his girlfriend...I just assumed—” She looks to Pappy for help and he pipes up.

“I’ll be having a word with that boy today,” he says.

“No,” I squeak. “I mean, not if it’s on my account.”

Daisy puts a pile of the casserole on my plate and my stomach cries out at the thought of having to eat all that with the way I’m feeling.

“Oh, that’s so much. How about we make this Pappy’s portion?” I hold up the plate and he takes it. “Just a little for me, please.”

Daisy gives me a sad look, no doubt thinking about how much I usually eat and knowing I’m not as fine as I’m trying to act.

She gives me half the amount and it’s still too much, but I take a small bite, starting out slow. If I pace myself, I can do it. I’d be all about this cheesy, meaty, carby goodness any other day, but it punches my gut like a physical blow.

“Just eat whatever you want, doll,” Daisy says.

I’m not fooling anyone.

We eat quietly for a few minutes, and then Daisy sets her fork down and turns to me. “I’ll just say one more thing, and I know...I *know* it’s sticking my nose in where it doesn’t belong, but...I just have to say it.”

I wait, my nerves tense about whatever she’s going to say.

“I realize you haven’t known us for long,” she starts, “so it might seem like this is something we just do...open up our home and table to anyone who comes through. That would be the nice thing to do, but I’m not that nice.” She cackles, and Pappy and I join in.

“You’re so nice,” I insist.

She waves me off. “Well, thank you. But let’s just say, I probably wouldn’t have even met Zac’s interior designer if not for the way he talked about you before you even got here. It clued me in to some things,” she says, lifting her eyebrows and leaving them there as if to say, *see?*

No, I don’t see at all.

“And then when he threw out the idea of you maybe staying in the guesthouse...mind blown.” She laughs. “He’s been very careful about who he lets in, Autumn. *Very* careful. So, even if he hasn’t figured it all out yet, he will. I just hope he doesn’t blow it in the meantime.” She sighs.

I know she’s trying to make me feel better, and for about a second there, I almost did, but her last sentence gives me a much-needed reality check.

Because I think he’s already blown it.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 46

## THE MENTAL IMAGES



### Autumn

Things are looking up when I get to Zac's house and see that Halle isn't here either.

Maybe she went with him to Gillette Stadium.

I give myself a mental shake, trying to internally rein in my thoughts because Pappy is here and he's sticking close.

I give him a small list of things to do and when Magnus arrives, we dive into the family room and a tweak I'd like to add to make it even more ideal for Zac and Ivy.

"Your ideas are outstanding, Autumn," Magnus says, lifting up to his full height after we've been hunched over the laptop.

"Thanks so much."

"Have you ever considered starting your own company?"

“That’s the dream, but I don’t think I’m anywhere close to that happening. One day...”

“You’re certainly ready to carry a company on your own,” he says.

“That means a lot. If I can pull off making this house even better than the way Zac imagines it, I’ll feel closer to being ready.”

Magnus smirks. “Zac will love whatever *you* do, trust me.”

I ignore the innuendo in his tone and get back to work. There are some choices to be made about the bathrooms upstairs, so I take my laptop and lose myself in the options. Before I know it, Magnus is heading out for the day and Zac still hasn’t come home. I check my phone and am shocked that it’s almost time for dinner and I haven’t seen Pappy for a while. He’s checked in frequently until the past hour—relieved, I think, to not find me rocking in a corner, crying over his grandson.

I find him snoozing on the couch in the lower level, and his eyes open when I trip over a stuffed animal.

“Careful there, Grace,” he says, grinning.

I make a face. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to wake you up, promise. I think I’ve done all the damage I can do here today. Should we call an uber and head to the house?”

“Oh, Daisy won’t mind picking us up.”

“Just seems right at dinnertime. I don’t want to bother her.”

“Sweetie, did you not hear a word Daisy was saying this morning? Or maybe the words she *wasn’t* saying?” He chuckles. “You are not a bother to this family. We could not be happier about this development with you and Zac.”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up about that if I were you,” I say under my breath, but of course he hears it.

He juts out his face and grins defiantly. “My hopes are as high as the heavens and you are not gonna change my mind,” he says.

I laugh and plop down on the couch next to him. “Stubborn old coot,” I mutter.

He slaps his knee and laughs, wiping his eyes. “You’ve got moxie, kid,” he says. “And I could not be more pleased about it.”

“Is this where all the cool people are hanging out?” Zac says, walking in.

My body does that trembling cold rush-hot flash thing that I should be used to by now when it comes to seeing him, but that still manages to send me sideways.

The silver lining to all of this is that now I won't have to learn about football. *Score.*

I already know that if I ever saw him play, I'd be a fan for life and that's just too pathetic to think about right now.

He looks at Pappy and me sitting together on the couch and folds his arms across his chest, smiling and...I don't know—he looks way more relaxed than he did last night.

Maybe that's what a night of sex with Halle Reid does to him.

His expression changes as he looks at me, his head tilting slightly as small lines form between his eyebrows. "You just got really pale right now. Are you okay, Autumn?" He steps toward me in concern.

I'm not. I thought I was working my way toward okay, but I'm really, really not.

"Fine," I lie.

"Where's that Ivy girl?" Pappy asks, standing up.

"She's actually out front right now. Mom stopped by to pick you up and has cupcakes at the house to celebrate Ivy's mini-break."

"Oh, I'll get out there, don't want to make her wait," I say, already halfway across the room.

"Autumn, wait," Zac says, reaching out to hold my elbow. He takes one look at my face and drops it. "I'd hoped we could talk. I can take you home when you're ready."

"I'm ready," I say coldly.

"Oh. Okay." He rocks back on his heels, his eyes never leaving mine. "Will you please ride with me?"

Pappy has hightailed it out of the room and if I were a betting woman, I'd say the odds are high that he'll tell Daisy to leave before I get out there.

"Fine," I snap.

"Fine," he says softly.

My eyes narrow and I walk past him, not trusting myself to look at him right now.

Daisy's car is long gone when I step outside. I get in Zac's vehicle and stare at my phone without seeing it.

"Autumn," Zac says when he gets in. He turns to face me and says my name again.

"Yes?" I look out the window.

"Please look at me." He sounds as tired as I feel and maybe as dejected

too.

I turn and look at him for a moment before glancing away again.

“You have every right to be upset with me,” he says. “Can I explain some of what I was feeling last night? I’ll explain all of it if you want to hear it, but...if not, I’d understand that too.”

I’m quiet and he takes that as my consent to go ahead.

“The level of rage I felt when I saw Halle walk into the room with you last night...I don’t know if I can even put it into words,” he says.

Not what I expected him to say at all.

“And I’ve had some anger to work through about her, trust me.” He makes a sound with his mouth, looking down at his hands. “The first thing I thought was that she was there because she’d seen the pictures of us together...and I was right.”

My mouth falls open. “She acted like she had no idea who I even was.”

“Oh, she knew. And it was stupid of me, but I wanted to see if she’d admit to it...”

“So you kept your distance from me,” I finish.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” He shakes his head, looking down again, his lips pressed together. “At least that’s what I started out doing, but then, Ivy was not herself.” He looks at me, his eyes pained, and I want to wrap my arms around him so bad. “Did you notice that or was it just obvious to me since I know how she normally acts when her mom is around?”

“I noticed,” I whisper.

“Yeah.” He’s quiet for a minute, looking out the front windshield. “So then I became consumed by that, and it was like I couldn’t think of anything but how fucking angry I am that my little girl is hurting yet again because of her own mother.”

“I would’ve understood that,” I say quietly. “I *do* understand. I just wish you’d told me.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 47

## NEVER



### Autumn

When his eyes meet mine, the glint in his eyes softens. He holds up his hand, a question in his gaze, and I weave my fingers through his in response. He sighs and kisses my palm.

“That’s where I messed up royally, and I’m really sorry. If I could do it all over again, I would do it so differently,” he says. “Do you forgive me?”

“Yes,” I say quietly. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“What *is* the deal with you and Halle? Until this conversation, I wouldn’t have guessed you were angry with her. You’ve never really said anything negative about her, and if I were on the outside looking in, which is how I felt last night, I’d say you’re on very good terms with each other.”

“I’ve made it very easy for her. For a lot of reasons, not all of them good.

I was about to break up with Halle when she told me she was pregnant. I knew I didn't love her, and I knew I'd made a mistake to stay with her as long as I did. I'd always been so careful and felt like an idiot for getting her pregnant, completely blaming myself, even though I've never regretted having Ivy. Never. I made a decision to stay with her and make it work. It was obvious right away that she wasn't bonding with Ivy and I couldn't understand because I *did* bond with Ivy...instantly. I thought Halle would come around...that some maternal instinct would eventually kick in, and all I cared about was that I was in Ivy's life and not just a part-time dad. I actually understood Halle's drive to have a successful career, tried not to hold it against her, the fact that she wasn't really cut out to be a mom."

He pauses and turns on the car, turning up the air conditioner.

"Sorry, it's so hot and I've got you shut up in here...should we head to the house?" he asks.

"Sure. Ivy is probably wondering where we are."

He smiles and drives down the long driveway.

"When did you guys decide you'd have full-time custody?" I ask.

"Well, it started with her traveling more and more with modeling. Ivy was five weeks old the first time she left and she was gone for a month."

"What?" I gasp.

He nods, his jaw clenching. "It was at a crazy time in my life too. I don't know what I would've done without my family and understanding coaches. Any time I had to travel, if it was overnight...and it was a lot...my mom and Ivy stayed in the hotel with me. If Halle happened to be near wherever we were playing, she'd meet us, and she'd come home for the holidays when she could, that type of thing. But when the doctor told us Ivy was going deaf, Halle checked out. She still came around but much less, she didn't stay long, and she didn't make an effort to learn what Ivy needed to thrive."

He takes a deep breath. "Is this too much?"

"No, if you're okay telling me, I want to know."

"This is the longest she's gone without seeing her. I'd started to believe she was done, which was why I was so angry. And that her reason for returning would be about you and me...she's never seen me photographed with anyone more than once and *that's* what got her here? It's almost been a *year*, Autumn. A year that she hasn't seen her daughter. And seeing Ivy with her last night..." He shakes his head and for a second I think he might cry, but he clears his throat. I squeeze his hand and he grips back tightly. "I just

can't keep putting her through that," he says. "I sent Halle on her way last night. I'll never keep her from seeing her daughter, but it will be on our terms from here on out."

"Wow. I'm truly speechless. I don't know how you've not been angrier this whole time."

"I've been too busy to be angry," he says, laughing. "No, really, I've still sort of hung onto the hope that Halle would do the right thing and be there for Ivy, and I've been determined that when and if that day ever came, I wouldn't let my bitterness get in the way of that."

"I'm in awe of you," I whisper, a tear dripping down my face. I close my eyes and more tears trip across my cheeks. "I haven't seen that kind of love in a dad before, the way you've so selflessly given her everything she needs...it's...well, I told you this last night, but it's just true—it's inspiring."

His cheeks and ears turn pink and he lifts my palm to his lips again. "Thank you," he whispers huskily.

"I hate to even ask this," I say after a long silence.

"You can ask me anything, remember?"

"Do the two of you...you and Halle...usually act like a couple when she's around? Is that why she came as soon as she found out about me?"

"No. I'm embarrassed by how long we did though. For so long, I tried to convince her that being a parent didn't have to mean the end of her glamorous life. I thought if we had some happy days together, if she saw how adorable and easy Ivy was...she'd get invested. But that never happened. I think all it did was make her think I was more into her than I was, which..." He shakes his head. "Yeah, it's all kinds of fucked up. We haven't since Ivy was three...when we found out she was deaf. But, full disclosure: Halle tries to sleep with me almost every time she comes around. After last night and the things I said to her and about you...I think she might've finally gotten the point."

Oh, how I wish I could've heard that conversation.

"Have you given in to her at all in the past three years?" I ask.

"Not once." He looks at me before entering the code to the gate into his parents' community. "And I never will. *Never.*"

It's the most I've liked the word *never* in my entire life.

# 48

## SPIRALS



Zac

“Are we okay?” I ask, before we get out of the car.

“I might’ve spiraled last night,” she says, her cheeks flushing.

“I’m so sorry.” I put my hand on her cheek, my thumb brushing over her soft skin.

“You didn’t even text me. It was a long night. But I’m glad we talked now. Really glad,” she whispers. “I’m not used to talking things out like this...I mean, my sister and I do, and my mom...” She makes a face, her teeth gritting together. “Oh...I...I’m embarrassed to tell you that Liam might also be aware of some of my feelings about all this. He sort of came through on my FaceTime with Summer. Sorry. I promise they’ll keep it to themselves, and they’re the only ones I confide in, so it won’t go past us. I know how private you are.”

“I’m really sorry I didn’t do better last night. And it’s good that you have Summer and Liam. I wouldn’t have it any other way. I want the whole world to know we’re together, Autumn. If you decide you want to be with me, I won’t have any hesitation sharing the news.” I lean over and kiss her lightly before pulling back, checking in to see if she knows I mean it. Her eyes are shining back at me, so I go in for another kiss, my tongue stroking hers and an overwhelming need to show her how real this is for me.

She pulls back before I’m ready. “Should we go have a cupcake to celebrate?”

I grin. “I can think of a lot of other ways I’d rather celebrate, but yes, let’s get in there.”

She jumps out of the SUV, and I hustle to catch up with her, taking in her long legs, that perfect ass, and her updo bobbing as she hustles to the front door.

“What’s your rush?” I ask, wrapping my arms around her waist and pulling her back against my chest before we go inside.

“Well, Ivy’s break isn’t nearly long enough. I’d thought she was off for like a month...she’s only off for two weeks! We’ve got things to do. *There is fun to be had.*” She looks at me over her shoulder and I nearly tell her I love her right then.

Which is crazy because it’s too soon. Way too soon.

I decide not to let these thoughts shake me the hell up.

I grin down at her and reach around her to open the door. We rush inside, her hand in mine, and I falter a little when I hear a commotion in the kitchen. I frown at Autumn and she lets go of my hand, jogging to the kitchen when she hears Ivy crying. I’m right behind her.

Ivy is in my mom’s arms, and my mom looks at us, her face wet with tears too.

“I’m not sure what’s wrong,” Mom says, signing fast too. “She’s been crying for a few minutes now.” She looks at Ivy. “Look. Dad and Autumn are here. Can you tell them what’s wrong?”

I’m already on my knees when she turns and crashes into me. I hold her against my chest until she takes a deep breath and then I pull back to look at her face. *WHAT’S WRONG?* I sign.

Two tears fall down her already wet face and my chest squeezes. I can’t remember the last time she’s cried like this.

*I THREW PUSSY AWAY*, she signs. Her eyes clamp shut and more tears.

AT SCHOOL. Her eyes open and her lips wobble. *I WENT TO GET HIM... GONE.*

*OH, SWEETIE,* I sign back. *I'M SORRY. I'LL CALL SCHOOL, BUT...* I shake my head.

She nods and wipes her nose. Out loud, she says, "I'm sorry, Daddy." Her face crumbles again, and she goes back to signing without speaking. *YOU... TAKE ALL MY STUFFED ANIMALS. I DON'T NEED THEM ANYMORE.*

I smooth her hair back and take the tissue Autumn hands me, wiping Ivy's face. *GIVE YOUR STUFFED ANIMALS AWAY? OKAY. LET'S TALK. THREW PUSSY AWAY—WHY?*

She takes a quivering breath and then shakes her head, looking down at her feet.

I lift her chin up to meet my eyes. *I LOVE YOU, MY SWEETEST GIRL. YOU CAN TELL ME ANYTHING.* I sign *anything* with extra emphasis.

"Mom gone?" she says out loud.

I pause for a moment and then nod.

"Pussy gone," she says.

I had a feeling it might be leading to that conclusion, but it still hurts like all hell to know the things she's trying to work out over her mother.

She takes the tissue out of my hand and wipes her nose with it. My mom swoops in like the cleaning goddess she is, wraps a clean tissue around the dirty one, and throws the whole thing in the garbage. Ivy and I exchange a smirk.

"Cleaning angel," Ivy says, smiling as she signs.

Her breathing is still stuttered from crying so hard, but my baby girl is smiling again. It's a start. I have no doubt there will be a lot more to work through, more than I can imagine probably, but I hope she never doubts the love right here in this room.

She frowns. "Where's Autumn?"

I turn, surprised. "I don't know. Didn't see her leave." I stand and shake out my knees, hearing Autumn in the other room. She walks into the kitchen, holding her phone up and looking triumphant. God, she's gorgeous.

"The school has Pussy," Autumn yells. And then she flushes a deep red, cringing as she glances at my mom before signing to Ivy, *PUSSY FOUND.*

If she's surprised Ivy isn't ecstatic over the news, she doesn't show it. And Ivy does perk up a little, telling Autumn thank you and hugging her.

When they break apart, Ivy signs, *CUPCAKE NOW?*

Autumn repeats the cupcake sign, her eyes narrowing as I can practically see a loop of the ASL she knows running through her head. She bites her bottom lip and finally does the sign again with a question in her eyes.

Ivy runs over to the elaborate cake plate of my mom's and carefully lifts the lid and sets it down, and then she holds up the cupcake.

"Oh," Autumn says, making the sign again. And then she starts signing, *YES, YES, YES, YES, PLEASE, PLEASE, YES.*

*PRESSURE*, Ivy signs, laughing, and runs to Autumn, holding out the cupcake, her eyes wide. She laughs again and looks at me like Autumn is crazy when Autumn takes the cupcake and does a little dance, but it's obvious she's thrilled about how excited Autumn is.

"You love cupcakes," she says, signing *love* emphatically as she laughs.

Autumn takes a huge bite and her eyes close as she groans and signs, *I LOVE CUPCAKES.*

Ivy looks up at me and grins. "You?"

I hold up my finger.

Ivy smirks and holds up two fingers and I shake my head. "One," I repeat, laughing. "Two, at practice I'd be..." I slump over and drag myself across the room, pretending to do a pathetic pass...

Ivy and Autumn giggle and my heart feels like it might burst. I hear a sniffle and see my mom hurriedly wiping the tears off her cheeks.

"I'm fine," she says, waving me off when she sees me watching. "Just like seeing my girl happy," she says, signing to Ivy. "And my boy," she adds, smiling through more tears.

"Love you, Ma," I say, barreling into her with a hug.

Ivy wraps her arms around both of us and motions for Autumn to come join the hug. Autumn steps next to her and we all hug until Ivy's too antsy. She pulls back and swings Autumn's hand back and forth, and then asks, her voice loud, "Autumn. Sleep. Our house?"

Autumn looks at me over Ivy's head, trying not to laugh.

"No school tomorrow," Ivy adds when neither of us sign anything back.

"That could be fun." I smile at the way the heat is crawling up Autumn's neck. "Autumn might be tired of being at our house..."

"Why?" Ivy asks.

"Work," I say, shrugging when I sign it.

Ivy's eyes light up and she does what Autumn did about the cupcake. *YES, YES, YES, YES, PLEASE, PLEASE, YES*, she signs, dancing around

Autumn.

Autumn's eyes meet mine and she laughs. "Okay," she says, starting to dance with Ivy.

*YES?* Ivy signs, her eyebrows lifted in question.

*YES,* Autumn signs. She holds up a finger and then points at herself. *CUPCAKE?*

"More," I say, laughing, showing her the sign for it. "We should have taught you that word first."

I don't mean to sound like I want to rip her clothes off and give her more of whatever she wants, but somehow I think she hears my intention.

Ivy gives her the biggest cupcake, and then asks if we can go get pizza too.

"Yes," I say. "Mom, you coming?"

She grins, full of mischief. "Oh, you go and enjoy yourselves. Get into all kinds of trouble if you like..." She lifts a shoulder. "I could pick Ivy up for breakfast out with Daisy, we could go on a little adventure, us girls...or just whatever," she says, giving Autumn and me a huge wink.

"Always so subtle, Ma. Thank you." I laugh. "Maybe a rain check." I lean in and kiss her cheek, saying softly, "I want to see how Ivy's really doing about her mom and all that."

She knocks her head with her hand. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking. Seeing how excited she is about this sleepover...I put that other right out of my mind. Yes, you're right. See how she's doing. We can go on an adventure another day."

"Love you, Daisy," I tell her.

*I LOVE YOU,* she signs and then points to Ivy. *AND I LOVE YOU. AND YOU.* She saves Autumn for last.

They both hug her and we head back outside. This isn't how I saw tonight going, but I'm not complaining for a second.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 49

## SLEEPOVER TO-DOS



### Autumn

In all the excitement, I almost forget to grab a few things, but I hurry into the guesthouse, Ivy on my heels, and quickly grab clean underwear, my cosmetic bag, and a curling iron in case some of my waves need taming. Opening the closet door, I motion for Ivy to pick out an outfit for me. She squeals and starts pulling out clothes like I'll be gone for a week.

I laugh and shake my head. *ONE*, I sign, forgetting what the sign for *night* is.

She makes a face but then settles on a black jersey dress that I haven't worn yet. It's something I'd originally brought with me before I knew I was staying, throwing it in at the last second because it doesn't wrinkle, it's comfy, and it's also surprisingly sexy.

I nod my approval and then stare at my pj's. All a bit revealing. It's not

like he hasn't seen me...but seeing me in this in front of Ivy...feels weird. She pulls out a green tank and short plaid shorts and waves them.

OKAY, I sign, but still look in the drawer to make sure there's not something with more coverage. A sweatshirt will have to do. I toss it in the bag.

Ivy waits to see if I need anything else and when I nod at her like I'm good, she grins and holds out her hand, pulling me to the door.

I laugh and we walk *very briskly* toward the SUV. I think the sugar has caught up with Ivy...or she's *really* excited about me spending the night. The tears are long gone and I'm glad of that. Seeing Ivy sad gutted me.

When we get closer, I realize Zac's on the phone and it sounds like Ty on speakerphone.

"I'm starting to get a complex," he's saying. "Here I thought we were like family, and you haven't even let me meet her yet."

Zac takes him off of speakerphone, and I smirk, enjoying seeing him flush.

"I'll see if I can get her to one of the practices soon. Or better yet, the cookout," Zac says. "She thinks she doesn't like football...or sport, as she puts it."

He laughs and the look he gives me sends heat straight to my core.

"Oh, she *is*, trust me," Zac says, his gaze drinking me in as his teeth scrape over his bottom lip.

I swear my cute navy and pink floral underwear set are going to fall right off of me with the way he's looking at me.

He takes my overnight bag and puts it in the back seat as he helps Ivy get situated in her seat.

"I better run, man. I've got two pretty girls waiting on me," he signs the *pretty girls waiting* part and Ivy asks who he's talking to. *T-Y*, he signs.

I turn, watching Ivy sign too rapidly for me to catch it, and Zac laughs.

He balances the phone in the crook of his neck, so he can sign better. "Ivy's inviting you to the sleepover," he tells Ty. "What should I tell her?"

Ivy leans forward, her expression pure excitement.

Zac makes a face. "He says he'll come for Sunday dinner."

I expect Ivy to be disappointed, but she lifts her hands in the sign for applause, which makes me think of jazz hands.

"She approves," he tells Ty. "Okay, looking forward to it. Love you too, man."

“Aw, you and Ty are so sweet together. I’m excited to meet him.” I buckle up and wait for Zac to walk around and get in.

“He’ll love you,” he says, his eyes cutting over to me and roaming down my body like he just can’t help himself. “I’m so happy you’re coming home with me.” His voice is low and raspy and my body feels like it’s humming.

Zac tells me the name of the pizza place and I order pizzas for us on the way. When we pull up to the restaurant, he starts to get out.

“I can go in, it might be easier to get in and out, Mr. GOAT,” I tell him.

He looks surprised and then relieved before he starts laughing. “That would actually be great, thank you.” He tries to hand me cash and I shut the door before he can, which earns me a scowl.

When we get back to the house, we take the pizza around to the back of the house and eat it with our feet in the pool. After we’ve eaten and our stomachs have settled, Ivy has so many ideas of fun things for us to do, she can’t make up her mind what to do first.

So we see how much we can fit in.

First up: we decide to swim. Since I still haven’t bought a swimsuit, I ask Zac if I could borrow one of his shirts to wear over my underwear.

“What’s wrong with just wearing your underwear?” he asks, shifting my shirt slightly to see the color of my bra strap and apparently approving wholeheartedly. That twinkle in his smiling eyes will be my downfall, it really will.

“It’s a little revealing to wear in front of Ivy,” I say through clenched teeth.

“She’s seen bikinis before. It’s healthy for her to see a woman with a healthy self-image.”

“Nice try. Bring me a shirt. Please,” I hiss.

“Womp-womp.”

He brings me a white one.

“Really?” I ask, narrowing my eyes when he hands it to me.

He grins. “What? You look so good in white. Looked for the smallest one I could find too.”

“You are something else,” I say, pulling the shirt over my head.

“Something incredible? Something awesome?” he asks hopefully.

I snort and give him a slight shove right as he’s leaning in to kiss me. There’s no way I could have made this boulder of a man budge with that shove, but he makes an elaborate show of flailing around and then falls back

into the pool with a massive splash. He comes up sputtering, his hair flying as he shakes the water out, and Ivy, who is hanging onto the rail as she inches in, one small increment of water at a time, laughs so hard she leans her chest onto the rail and holds her hand up like she can't breathe.

I lose it then, laughing at both of them, and take a minute to get my composure before I jump in myself. Ivy squeals when the water splashes her and I swim over to her, holding my hands out for her to come in the rest of the way.

We have a blast out there, and I expect us to stay out there for a couple of hours—the night is perfect—but Ivy has a full agenda.

Before we go inside, we all use the outside shower that I can't wait to update. It gets the job done for now, but when I'm done with this space, it will be amazing. Zac wraps huge, plush towels around us, leading us in the door while we shiver. Ivy runs to put on her pj's, and I look for my overnight bag to put on mine.

"I put your bag in my room," Zac says, leaning against the doorjamb.

"Oh. Should I stay in there? I mean, I should sleep on the couch, right?"

"No, you should *definitely* not sleep on the couch," he says. "If anyone should, it'll be me, but if it's Ivy you're worried about, once she's asleep, she's out. She'll sleep great tonight after all this excitement." He walks over and puts his hands on my waist, grinning when my breath hitches. I roll my eyes which just makes him laugh. "I'll be awake long before she is," he adds. "I want you in my bed, Little Sass."

I'm sure he can hear me gulp. "I just don't want to do anything...I don't know...confusing to her or inappropriate..."

"Inappropriate would be me bending you over this couch right now," he whispers. "In fact, you better go get changed so I can get this situation under control before she comes in here."

"I was trying to ignore that massive tent in your pants," I whisper, flushed.

"It's unable to ignore you," he says, his thumb caressing my lower lip.

I turn and bolt out of the room, hearing him laugh as I shut his bedroom door and change, my insides trembling. I zip my sweatshirt to the top like that will help cover what the tiniest sleep shorts known to man will not. When I walk out, Zac and Ivy have moved to the kitchen. Zac makes popcorn while I give Ivy a manicure and a pedicure with the polish I happened to have in my cosmetic bag...Sally Hansen's Shooting Star. It's a big hit. Once her

fingernails are dry, she does my nails, biting her tongue, her brow furrowed as she concentrates.

I hold my nails up. “Impressive,” I say before fingerspelling the word out.

Ivy beams proudly and shows me the sign. I repeat it and then I point at her and do a sign I learned a couple of days ago that reminds me of her. She tilts her head and then grins.

I do it again. *I-V-Y, YOU...CANDY. YOU. SWEET AS CANDY.*

Plus, she has the adorable dimple, so the sign for candy fits perfectly for her.

She wraps her arms around me and hugs me tight, and then says out loud, “Dad.”

When she pulls back, he’s watching us with a raw expression on his face. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but Ivy tells me to do it again. So I do and she leans up on her knees, excited, as she wraps her hands around my neck.

“She gave me name sign,” Ivy says, still squeezing me too tight to sign it.

Zac clears his throat, and his voice is husky when he says, “She sure did.” To Ivy, he signs, “It’s perfect,” saying it out loud for my benefit too.

Gah, these two. I don’t know if my heart can take any more.

We take the popcorn down to the lower level and Ivy tells Zac she wants to watch *13 Going on 30*.

I only know because he says it out loud, signing it again slower and making a face. “Why?” he asks.

Piecing the things she says out loud with the signs I recognize, I think someone named Eloise has watched it with her mom twelve times.

“Twelve?” Zac repeats, eyes wide.

She nods and curls up next to me, her little body tucked against mine.

“And I want to watch with Autumn,” she says.

I didn’t think my heart could swell any bigger than it already had with the two of them, but it just did.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 50

## SEEING AND SEEN



### Autumn

Ivy's asleep before we even have to fast-forward the striptease by Jenna's boyfriend. My sister and I have watched this movie many times, so I'd been prepared to shield Ivy's precious eyes when the time came. No need.

"You weren't kidding about her sleeping hard," I say, watching Zac untangle her from my side and lift her into his arms, with her not even stirring.

"It actually scares me, how out she goes," he admits.

I follow him into her room because she's just so cute and I like seeing her for as long as possible, but now my mind is reeling. How *does* that work if she sleeps this hard *and* she can't hear if anyone snuck into her room, or if—oh God—if she was around someone untrustworthy and they took advantage of how vulnerable she is like this? I press my hand across my mouth to keep

a cry from escaping and rush out of the room.

Zac finds me pacing in his room a few minutes later.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I turn and his expression changes to alarm.

“What happened?” He’s in front of me in seconds, those huge hands wrapped around my waist.

“We need to look into better security. I know you have an excellent one already, but...is it good enough? All these people coming in and out working on the house...we need to keep her out of the picture when they’re here. I know we’ve vetted every single one, but...*how do we really know?* How do we protect her from all the bad people in the world?” My throat closes and my voice comes out in a small whimper on the last words.

“Breathe,” he says.

His thumb traces calming circles on my cheek and my breathing steadies. He catches the tear that drips down my face and smooths it away.

“You’re the sweetest thing to care about her like this. Thank you.” His Adam’s apple rises and falls as he stares at me. He leans his forehead onto mine.

“Thank you,” he whispers again. “No one ever prepared me for the panic that came when she was placed in my arms that very first time. It was immediate love and I knew I would die protecting her if I had to. That look in your eyes...I didn’t know I could feel seen in an instant.”

I put my hands on his face and kiss him hard. It’s probably weird that I want to inhale him and climb him and dive under his skin right now, but honestly, the fact that he’s such a heartbreakingly beautiful dad is one of the things I love most about him. His shoulders are another thing...his hands, his mouth...okay, he’s got a lot going for him that works for me.

His mouth meets mine with the same urgency I feel and when he grinds into me, I whimper. His hands twist through my hair, one venturing down my body to pull me in tighter, and my body suddenly feels too hot, too fevered. I back away, breathing hard, and yank his T-shirt over his head. He unzips my sweatshirt slowly and slides it off my arms, hissing when he sees my tank top. Like it’s the sexiest thing he’s ever seen.

“No idea why you’ve been covering this up,” he says, his fingers dipping into my cleavage before closing over my breast. “I’ve been missing these. It’s been too long since I got to do this.” His palm slides over my nipple before giving it a tiny pinch and then the tank is over my head in the next breath and

his mouth is wrapped around my peak. His fingers tease the other side and then his mouth gives equal attention to that side before he bends down and lifts me up, and his tongue goes back to work, flicking and sucking until I'm squirming.

I'm sprawled out on the bed before I know it, and my shorts are tugged down, his eyes glazed as he takes me in. I motion for him to take his off too when he gets distracted looking at me.

"Impatient?" he says, his voice husky as he hooks his thumbs under his waistband and his shorts disappear. Or at least that's how it seems because once his hard length is freed, all of my senses are fixated on him.

I lean up and take him in my mouth, and he lets out a little grunt of surprise and then a strangled curse. He goes perfectly still for a moment, and then he puts his hands in my hair, tugging it gently. I lift off of him with a pop.

"You have no idea how good that feels," he says. "Lie back." Commanding. Firm.

I'm still eye level with his cock and I stare longingly at it, giving it one more long swipe of my tongue.

"Autumn," Zac hisses, but his eyes are playful, and he pushes my shoulder until I'm leaning back on my elbows, pouting. He chuckles, and I feel the slick heat between my legs. "Lie back," he repeats.

He drags up my body, giving me one kiss on the lips as a reward, and then he's climbing down my body, and his mouth is between my legs. I think I go to another sphere when his fingers spread me open and he kisses me hungrily, exploring me with his perfect tongue. When his tongue flicks over my clit, tiny teases at first and then in rapid time, my eyes roll back, but then he sucks me there like he's starving, his fingers gently diving inside one at a time, until he has three in, plunging faster and deeper as his mouth never loses its focus. It's unlike anything I've ever felt, and I unravel for him, wholly and completely. My body shakes and quivers and I cry out sharply, shocking myself by how loud I am.

His tongue gentles as I stop twitching against him and he kisses me again there twice before trailing his mouth up the rest of my body. He pauses by my breasts like he just can't pass them by without making sure they know they're noticed. His tongue circles around one side and then the other.

I take a shuddering breath, my chest still rising and falling rapidly.

"Was that okay?" he asks against my skin.



“That was...” I laugh and shake my head, my hands in his hair.  
“Unbelievable. I loved how...”

He lifts his head up and looks at me, inching up so he’s an inch from my lips. “How what?”

“How greedy you felt for me.”

He groans, and I feel his hardness tapping against my pubic bone, as if it’s knocking to get in. “That’s exactly how I feel.” He leans in and presses a kiss against my lips, my cheek, my temple, until his mouth is against my ear. “I could do that all day, every day and still want more.”

“How do you know?” I whisper.

“Because you taste and feel and sound...like a dream. Like you’re mine. Like you’re the answer to a call I didn’t even know I was uttering.” He burrows his head into my neck, his hand back on my breast. “I want to sink into you and never come up for air,” he says against my skin.

“Please,” I whimper. “Please,” I say again, louder.

He lifts his head up and leans over, getting a condom out of his drawer. I watch mesmerized as he slides it on, my mouth watering.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 51

## THRESHOLD



Autumn

“Don’t tease me,” I say when he lingers over me, staring at me with his shining eyes.

He smirks and gives his length a pass with his fist, up and down, eyes laughing when I groan.

I lean up and pull him down, wrapping my legs around his waist, my hand between us showing him the way. I push him inside and then arch up, enjoying the tight slide in.

“Who’s greedy now?” he murmurs, kissing me.

My head falls back when he drives in deep, and we both groan with how exquisite it feels. He lifts onto his elbows, his lower half still flush against mine, and watches us, as he slowly glides in and out of me. I feel frenzied, primed and ready to detonate again, but he is steady precision, patiently

letting my tension build.

“How are you so calm right now?” I whimper, sweat beading across my forehead.

“I have to make up for coming in your hand the first time we were together,” he says, laughing and then stilling as I twitch around him. “Stop that,” he teases. I whimper and he sucks my bottom lip.

“It was perfect. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way,” I tell him, meaning it completely. “And then the next time was perfect too. And this has been...” My eyes flutter closed when he thrusts even deeper and then in short bursts, as if he’s going for the secret portal in the deep unknown.

“Mmm, that’s too good,” he says, dragging out all the way, his hips lifting off of mine as he slowly inches back. “Watch how perfectly you take me in,” he says.

It’s only then that I realize the light in his bedroom is on, which is not something I’m normally comfortable with, but I love being able to see everything, from the way his chest is glistening with sweat, his abs tight as he controls his movements, every expression on his face tuned into what I want, what feels good to me. The sounds of us fill the room and there’s no hiding that in the dark either, I want him to hear and see how much I crave him.

“God, I wish we’d been doing this all this time. How could I have wasted a single day being careful?” I ask, leaning up to kiss his chest, my tongue flicking his nipple.

His pupils dilate and he jerks faster into me. “Nothing with you has been wasted. Even though I want to fill you up and make you scream my name with every single breath I take, I wouldn’t change a second with you.”

There he goes making my eyes well again. Is this what setting aside my armor feels like? I didn’t know I had this many tears to unleash and somehow I don’t unleash them on him now, but my heart is a wreck. I feel like every time we’re together, every conversation, every kiss, every intimate moment, I shed another layer of protection around my heart. I never imagined I was capable of that, or that it would feel so freaking wonderful.

“Where did you go?” he asks, his hand smoothing back my hair, his dick throbbing inside me with the need to move while he ignores it.

“I’m here. I just can’t believe how perfect you really are. How perfect we are together. I didn’t think I could ever—”

He waits for me to finish and when I don’t, he rubs his nose against mine, whispering, “I didn’t think I could ever have this either.”

When we begin moving again, it's a slow glide into a trance. Our eyes never leave each other's as we find a rhythm that's like the easy rock of a boat, like getting lost together on an ocean's wave. It feels like love, a deep, intentional fall. I'm attuned to every sound he makes, his breathing quickening with our tempo, slowing down as he tries to pace us. My skin craves every brush against his. He's impossibly deep and it's like I feel him in every part of me.

I bite down on my lower lip to keep from crying out, but he leans down and tugs my lip with his teeth, freeing it from my own.

"I want to hear you," he says.

His thick slide in and out of me picks up, the intensity between us building when I thought there was no level beyond what I was already feeling. I lean up, kissing him as I rock into him, keeping time with his strokes, and then I fall back so I can give more attention to this ride we're on. His hands move to the pillow on either side of my face, his focus centering me as his shoulders flex with his movements, the urgency in us building, building, building until we're growing sloppier and more crazed. I clutch his back, my whimpers rhythmic with our hard thrusts, his velvety hardness pounding into me.

He mouths a silent *Fuck*, his eyes getting a feral edge, and when I gasp out his name, we both lock into another level, overdrive. It hits us both at once, our pleasure colliding. He meets every clench inside of me with a pulse of his own, another answer to my call, and it feels like I might lose consciousness for a second. Our voices are both hoarse by the time we collapse into each other, our bodies slick and breathless.

He kisses me, long and sweet. "How have I lived without you?" he asks when our kiss eventually breaks. He slowly pulls out of me, wincing as he does, and I smooth between his brows with my thumb.

It's terrifying how connected I feel to him, how every word out of his mouth resonates with what I'm thinking too. I *know* how I lived without him and how it was nowhere close to being as good as this. I know I never want to know what that's like again.

And I also know it's way, way too soon for either of us to be at this point with one another.

# 52

## THE DAY AFTER



Zac

I'm dragging through my workout routine this morning, but I can't stop smiling. It took every ounce of willpower to leave that goddess in my bed, but I knew if I didn't, I wouldn't be able to leave her alone.

We barely came up for air last night. One time rolled into the next and the next, like a continuous loop, each time more earth-shattering than the last. I finally had mercy on her around four, so tempted to sink into her while she slept on top of me, her body melting into mine. Instead, I waited until she was fully asleep and lifted her off of me, tucking my pillows around her. She turned to her side and pulled the pillow toward her, hitching her leg over it, and I imagined her bare skin against mine like that and had to get out of there.

Giving my head a firm shake, I force myself to pay attention when I lift

the heavier weights. I'm not sure how I get through the workout, but I do, and a shower too, using Ivy's so I don't wake up Autumn. Once I'm upstairs, I get to work on the pancake batter and it's not long before I hear the pitter-patter of feet. I glance up and Ivy and Autumn are standing there, holding hands. Both have wild hair and sleepy eyes, but they're standing there smiling at me and I feel a pang in my chest.

I can't help the sweep from Autumn's bashful smile to the flush of her cheeks, and lower, to the pebbling peaks coming through despite the sweatshirt she's wearing, and down her long, toned legs. I swallow hard, glad the island is hiding my dick.

"Mornin,' you two. You wake her up?" I ask Ivy, signing with one hand while I turn on the griddle with the other.

Ivy glances up sheepishly at Autumn, but Autumn just taps Ivy's dimple and grins.

Both look at me and talk at once: Ivy signing, *I DIDN'T MEAN TO!* And Autumn saying out loud, "She didn't mean to!"

I laugh, and Ivy and Autumn both look confused until I explain to Ivy what Autumn said and tell Autumn what Ivy's sign meant.

"Jinx!" Autumn says, laughing. She makes a face and then fingerspells it.

Ivy tilts her head and fingerspells it with a questioning look.

"Hmm. I don't know the sign..." I shift to signing only, telling Ivy it's when two people say the same thing at the same time...or sometimes involves magic spells. I point to Autumn and shift back to speaking and signing. "You said the same thing at the same time."

Ivy lights up and then lifts her two fingers up by her chin, crossing from one side to the other while she yells, "Twins!"

Autumn grins from ear to ear and I don't think I could possibly be any happier as I watch her put her arm around Ivy's shoulder. Before I turn into a useless ball of mush, I ask if they're ready for pancakes, and when they both wholeheartedly answer yes, I start cranking those babies out.

We eat and Ivy is a bubbly ball of hyperness, her signs going faster and her words getting jumbled as she tries to speak and sign. Somehow Autumn keeps up, jumping in when she misses something or doesn't recognize a word. And then she glances at the clock and her eyes widen in alarm.

"The crew will be here in less than an hour," she says, only managing to sign *TIME*.

I smile, finding her efforts to sign endearing even when she doesn't get it

quite right. I don't think she can know how much it means that she's put in all this time trying to learn. Even when she misses words, she works to communicate in a way that Ivy will understand.

It's so far beyond what Halle has ever done.

"Magnus thinks we can have this place ready sooner than we think," Autumn says. She stands up, taking her plate to the sink and washing it. She signs *THANK YOU* and kisses both of us on the cheek.

Ivy jumps up and puts her plate in the sink and says she's going to get ready for the day.

"Is he saying how soon?" I ask.

She lifts her eyebrows. "Maybe even before Thanksgiving."

"No way."

"I almost didn't tell you because I didn't want to get your hopes up yet, but he mentioned several people he personally knows being out of work after a huge company just went bankrupt...he says they're exceptional and fast, without skimping on the work."

"Well, tell him to hire them STAT," I tell her, catching her before she goes to get ready. I pull her into my arms, my hands reaching down to cup her ass, and put my forehead against hers. "I'm drunk on you," I whisper.

She grins, her hands winding around my neck as she presses against me. "I'm surprised I can even walk today."

I make an apologetic face. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"I feel every inch of where you've been and I love it," she whispers. "It's going to get me through this long day, feeling the ache of you."

I whisper a curse in her hair, my dick ready for another round.

She pulls back enough to look me in the eye and grins. "Hopefully I don't fall asleep while Magnus is in mid-sentence discussing the ins and outs of your home, Mr. Ledger."

I laugh and kiss her. "Ah, he's a bag of wind anyway. You probably wouldn't miss anything important."

She gasps as if she's outraged and removes my hands from her backside as she takes a step back, earning my sad eyes.

"Don't you have some fun to get after?" she says, walking away, her ass drawing my eyes to its perfection.

"Yes," I grumble. I didn't tell Ivy yet, but we're meeting Jamison for lunch. "I'm now regretting getting you here under the pretense of working. Can't you skip today, let Magnus handle everything?"

She looks at me over her shoulder, shaking her head. “This is the price you pay for not just saying flat-out that you wanted me.” She shrugs and my heartbeat tap, tap, taps against my rib cage.

“I thought I did?” I lift my hand to my chin like I’m the fucking Thinker. “Pretty positive I laid it all out, my desire for you.”

“Hmm. Well, yes, in theory, I believe you think you laid it out, but you only really laid that desire all out last night...*all night long.*”

I groan and fist my cock, loving the way her eyes flare with heat. “You sure are a Cheeky Little Sass when you’re walking away from me...”

Her eyes drag away from my dick and I have to squeeze the tip hard to tamp the bastard down.

“I’m gonna get a quick shower and you stay far, far away. Deal?” She folds her arm across her chest and I don’t miss the way her nipples are as hard as tiny round stones.

“Is that a trick question?”

She points at me. “Stay put. I mean it.”

“Well, that just feels like a dare. Don’t you know I’m a competitive athlete? Hearing limitations like that makes me strive to surpass expectations.” I grin when she bites the side of her mouth, trying so hard not to laugh.

She finally gives in, laughing, her shoulders shaking as she can’t hold it back anymore. “I do not have time for this,” she snorts.

“I’ll be so quick you won’t even know I’m in there.”

She snorts. “Yeah, I’d venture to say that has never been true for you.” She waves her hand in the direction of my dick. “You can’t miss that thing.”

I frown. “I’m trying to decide if *that thing* is complimentary or...”

“I’m locking the door,” she says over her shoulder, walking out and laughing. “So you and that *amazing* thing can’t have your wicked way with me and make me late for work.”

“That’s more like it. Now we just need to work on the word *wicked*,” I call after her and laugh when I hear her cackling.

Sadly, Magnus shows up before I can thwart her shower plans and it’s late that night before we further examine wicked ways.



# 53

## REAL LIFE



### Autumn

The past month has been the best month of my life. I go to sleep smiling and I wake up smiling. My nights are spent wrapped around Zac's body, often exploring each other until the wee hours of the morning. My body is consumed with desire for him, the days a long, consuming buildup as he either goes to practice and sends me flirty messages throughout the day, or he's at the house with the forty other people who have ended up working here, his gaze trailing a fire down my skin.

We keep it tame around Ivy, of course, our attention focused on her when she's home from school and awake, but the nights are ours and do we ever make the most of them.

Instead of stuffed animals, Ivy has decided she wants to collect Mini Brands. So far she only has Elsa and Spiderman. Since they come in mystery

capsules, it seems like a risky collectible to me, but that's half the fun, I guess. We'll see how long it lasts. Her stuffed animals are in a donation bag in the garage, and I can tell Zac isn't sure how to feel about it. She hasn't talked about it since we recovered Pussy from school, and he went in the bag first. She said she didn't want to donate them yet, maybe when she turned seven or if she met someone who needed them...but she was merciless about getting them out of her room.

I haven't gone back to stay in the guesthouse and I can't even feel weird about it when everything feels so *good*, so right. We still have dinner at his parents' house a couple times a week, and the family spends a lot of time here, pitching in where they can with the remodel. Pappy is a peppy mascot for the construction crew, keeping morale up with his encouragement of each person's skills from everything to the way they hammer a nail to the exquisite craftsmanship of the tile backdrop in the kitchen. He also has every man here wishing they had the love of a person like Gran.

I've met a few of Zac's teammates by now and I think I passed the test. Zac claims I aced it and then some, but I'm not sure he'd say otherwise. Ty is my favorite. He made sure to set me straight on giving football a try when we first met. I promised I would, but I've not had a chance to put that into action yet. With the house being a constant job, Ivy being so entertaining, and this guy wearing me out at night, my only other extracurricular is still learning ASL.

It's the most legitimate, meaningful relationship I've ever been in and yet we haven't given what we are a title. I've normally wished for that ambiguity, demanded it even, knowing whoever I was seeing was shaky ground, but when I think about Zac and me, I find myself believing in the idea of *us* more and more. For the first time in my life, I actually want to define what we are.

He's asked me to go to a party with him tomorrow night, my first with the entire team and their significant others before their preseason game on Thursday, and since it seems to be big news that Zac is even bringing me, it now feels urgent that I figure out football.

It feels like the least I can do as Zac's friend...or whatever I am.

I don't have as much guilt about my lack of football knowledge as I would if I hadn't made an effort to learn sign language, but it's building with each day that he gets back from practice sore and muscles tight. I've tried to make up for it with massages and encouraging him to sleep more at night...

which so far hasn't happened much.

As soon as Magnus and the crew leave, I go downstairs and turn on the TV. I have at least an hour before Zac gets home from practice, and Daisy is dropping Ivy off around then too. I pull up an old game of Zac's on my laptop and start watching, pausing the screen when he makes an impressive play. I only know it's impressive by the way the announcers go nuts when he throws the ball or when they talk about how good Zac is looking this season.

Sadly, that's about as far as I get with my knowledge—thinking he sure *is* looking good—when Ivy gets home. Daisy had already asked if I would mind being with Ivy for a few minutes before Zac got home so she could get a cavity filled, so I wave to Daisy from the door when they pull into the driveway. She rolls down the window and waves.

“Thanks for doing this!” she calls. “See if you can figure out what’s going on with this one,” she says, signing, but Ivy isn’t paying attention.

She turns to wave to her grandma and waves back at me, but I can tell she’s not herself. We walk inside and I ask her if she wants a snack.

She shakes her head, so we bypass the kitchen and head downstairs, the only area in the house that isn’t affected by the remodel yet. She sees that I have a game paused and she flounces onto the couch, leaning her head back and crossing her arms over her chest. I frown when she sighs heavily.

*WHAT’S WRONG?* I ask.

She lifts a shoulder in a half shrug and I frown again. My mama didn’t have many pet peeves when us girls were growing up, but that shrug thing never went over well with her and it doesn’t go over well with me now.

*YOU LOOK SAD,* I sign.

When I sit next to her, she only turns her head to face me, letting out that long sigh again. She looks older and more serious than I’ve ever seen her, and it’s starting to make me nervous.

Finally she speaks and signs, “Anya says I don’t have mom.”

Now I’m the one hissing in a sharp intake of air and then slowly exhaling. I don’t want to get this wrong with her. “Why did she say that?” I finally ask.

She goes back to signing without speaking. *HER MOM...ALWAYS THERE.* Her bottom lip trembles and her eyes fill with tears. *SHE KNOWS SIGN LANGUAGE.*

I feel a hard lump building in my throat, along with a strong dislike for Anya, who is apparently heartless. Don’t even get me started on Halle. There’s been no word from her since she showed up to dinner that night. But

I take a deep breath and try to not let my feelings about Halle Reid get in the way of letting her little girl know she's loved.

*SOMETIMES FAMILIES LOOK DIFFERENT*, I sign. When she looks at me in confusion I try to sign it in a way that is clearer. *YOUR MOM. ALWAYS HERE? NO. SHE CARES...YOU? YES.* I may have my own thoughts about what she should be doing to show she cares, but it's not my place to say anything about that. *AND YOUR DAD AND PAPA DANIEL... DAISY...PAPPY.* Yes. I sign an emphatic yes and she smiles. *ME? NO DAD OR PAPPY OR PAPA DANIEL OR DAISY. ME? MOM AND SISTER.*

Her eyes get huge. *DAD? NONE?*

*NO. HE LIVES...FAR...AND BUSY.*

*LIKE MY MOM*, she signs.

I'm thinking every curse word right about now and so distracted that I don't even hear Zac until he's in the room. I jump and something between a squeal and a scream comes out.

"It's me," he says. "Sorry, I thought I was making a racket." He leans down to kiss me and signs hello to Ivy before kissing her forehead. He stares at us for a few extra beats and then asks, "Is something wrong?" He still always talks and signs at the same time, which never fails to impress me. It's still hard for me to do both at the same time.

I wait for Ivy to tell him why she's sad, but she just looks at me and shakes her head. I can almost see the wheels turning in her head. It takes me back to when I was a little girl and I didn't want my mom to worry about me when I was hurt about my dad. Even at Ivy's age, I somehow knew my dad not being around hurt my mom and that she worked extra hard to make up for the lack. I didn't know how to say it in so many words; it was more of a protective feeling I got over my mom whenever my dad was mentioned. Ivy's eyes plead with me to not say anything about this to Zac and my heart breaks a little bit more for her.

No kid should ever have to make up for their parents' mistakes.

Ivy surprises me by saying she's trying to teach me football.

"Really?" Zac is even more surprised than me. "How's that going?" he asks me.

"You look really good out there." Under my breath, I add, "In your uniform."

He smirks. "Oh, that's what you learned?"

"We were just getting started..."

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 54

## ALPHA SIDE



### Autumn

Zac ends up putting his game on the huge TV screen and he and Ivy stand by the screen and point out things that I wasn't able to understand before about football. Literally. Ivy's finger looks tiny on the screen as she points at the graphics that show where the ball is and how far it's gone, and Zac says what each play is called. I probably won't be able to remember it all even an hour from now, but I'm much closer to understanding the game than I was before.

When Zac does more than just toss the ball to the running back...a term I'd never heard of before...I stand up and cheer with them. Ivy and I bump hips and wave our arms in the air. Zac watches us with an amused expression.

"If I'd known that's how you'd react when you watch me play, I would've tried this a lot sooner," he says.

“I wasn’t ready,” I tease.

“You couldn’t handle the truth?” he says with that smirk that melts my panties.

But I roll my eyes and pretend I don’t think that’s funny. He reaches out and tickles my side and Ivy laughs when I run and crouch behind her to hide. He manages to get both of us then, Ivy and I both squealing as we laugh and try to tickle him back. Ivy suddenly turns to the screen and points at Zac, who has the ball and she jumps up and down, pointing at the line on the screen and how far he got the ball.

He shakes his head and signs, *YOU CAN’T DISTRACT THE TICKLE FINGERS*, which makes her laugh even harder, but then he makes a touchdown and we’re all glued to the game.

We end up ordering pizzas and we finish the game—the Patriots win—and start another, the two of them quizzing me about certain plays, and by the end of the night, I feel like I’m grasping it. Ivy’s getting drowsy, and I’m relieved that her spirits are so much lighter than they were when she got home. Meanwhile, my thoughts have been churning, going over made-up conversations in my head with little Anya. I don’t know if I should tell Zac about everything or wait to see if Ivy will tell him.

The next morning, we sleep in since it’s Saturday and Ivy is back to her sunny self when she gets up. She’s excited because she’s spending the night with the grands while we’re at the party and her uncle Jamison will be there too. We have a late breakfast and then watch a movie before she’s picked up. As soon as she leaves with Daisy and Daniel, Zac pulls my back against his chest.

“Race you back to bed?” he says in my ear. I can feel him smile against my skin when I shiver.

“You don’t have to sculpt your sexy body into shape for hours this afternoon?”

His laugh is husky and my blood thrums in anticipation. Every part of me wakes up around him. How I could ever even pretend to think he isn’t my type is beyond me. Denial.

“You were so out of it this morning, you didn’t hear me get up.” He kisses the shell of my ear, and I lean into him like a contented cat just shy of purring. “Did I wear you out last night?” he whispers, his massive hands covering my breasts.

I’m in awe of the way he manages to be gentle when his hands are the

size of bear claws, and yet, he's not all soft and sweet. During the night, for example...

I turn in his arms and lean up on my tiptoes as my hands clasp behind his neck. "Yes, you wore me out with your kinky torture."

His eyes gleam and good God, there is *nothing* sweet about the way he's looking at me right now. "My Cheeky Little Sass took every bit of it too," he rasps and I swear my body goes into *déjà vu*, feeling every sensation of his hand meeting my ass, the sting and the heat before he soothed it with his next touch. He kissed away the pain, his tongue wreaking havoc on me from behind, getting me so close to the brink, until I was practically weeping for him to let me come.

His fingers teased and pinched, and when I whimpered, "More," he'd give me just enough to drive me insane but then pull back when I got too close.

"Wait," he'd whispered. "You think I don't know what you need?"

When he finally sank into me, I thought he'd give me the relief I craved, but when I bucked against him trying to chase the pleasure, he pulled all the way out. Our bodies slick by this time, and with all the control in the world, he said, "Not yet," before carrying out that slow, torturous dive back into me.

"Torture," I whisper again now.

He's pure male cockiness right now, a side of him I only see when it's just the two of us, and it's probably a little twisted how much I love that.

"You look a little flushed," he says, leaning in to say it against my lips. "I had a hard-on through my entire workout, remembering how hard you came on me. I got through it and was on my way to wake you up with this," his tongue swipes my lips as his fingers dip between my legs, "before getting intercepted." He gives me a little pinch right where it counts and my head falls back as I hum my approval.

A loud beep startles us both and I pull back, looking for my phone to turn off the alarm. When I see the time, I gasp and tug my tank over my head. He grins and takes a step toward me, and I hold up my hand, shaking my head.

"Nuh-uh. Stay back," I say, dodging him as I hurry to his room, calling over my shoulder. "I almost forgot I have a manicure and pedicure appointment. Remember? You and your sexy voodoo magic keep your distance. I need to look nice for this party."

He follows me into the room, falling back on the bed, his hands behind his head as he watches me throw on clothes. "Does sexy as fuck constitute as



nice? Because you've got that covered. I've got an idea. You push the appointment back or better yet, let me do your nails, and we revisit some places I wasn't able to fully pay attention to last night."

I snort, throwing my hair up in a messy bun. "Trust me, there's not a place you missed." My cheeks get pink and I look at him from the mirror, rolling my eyes at his smirk. "Don't you have to run errands too? I thought you had it all planned out."

"Shit, you're right. I do." He sits up and takes a deep breath before standing, lifting his arms to the ceiling in a stretch. "You can take the car. Did you see where my dad left the keys?"

"I think they're on the table by the door." At least I hope that's where they are because it's so torn up upstairs, if they're not there, we're both going to be late trying to hunt them down.

It's silly, but I'm kind of sad that Zac's car is finally out of the shop. It's been in there for so long, I think Zac was afraid they'd sold it out from under him or something, but Daniel picked it up from the mechanic earlier and then rode home with Daisy and Ivy. Everyone has felt so bad that I've been stuck without a car all this time, but I've loved riding everywhere with Zac. And some of my favorite times with Ivy have been dancing in the car on the way home from school.

I slide into my wedges and lean in for a kiss. Zac squeezes my ass as he kisses me like we have all the time in the world. I pull away and he yawns, following me up the stairs and through the maze of construction.

"Maybe you can get a nap before we go," I tell him as we walk outside. With the level of intensity in Zac's workouts and the longer practices amping up, not to mention how little sleep we're getting each night, I'm surprised Zac is even up for this party tonight.

He kisses me again before I get in the car. "I might be cutting it too close for that," he says. When I frown, he gives me another kiss on the cheek. "Don't worry about me. I'll gladly give up sleep for the rest of my life if it means worshipping your body all night long."

I'm struck speechless with that, stumbling into my seat as he grins and taps the car, walking to his SUV with that swagger that makes me weak in the knees.

# 55

## NO NICE GUYS



Autumn

The party is at one of the coach's houses, or *mansion* would be more fitting. Every light in the house is on, and the sound of boisterous laughter trickles out as we walk up to the door.

"Sounds like the party is already in full swing." I tug on my dress, wondering if I should've worn something a little longer, a little less form-fitting...I went for a dress that hugs every curve.

Zac's arm is around my waist until we reach the front step, and then he gives me a slight push in front of him, his hand dropping to my ass as he sneaks in a squeeze. I jump and he laughs.

"You look unbelievable," he says. "It's not too late to turn around and leave right now."

I look at him over my shoulder, smirking as I catch him staring at my

backside and he looks up and leans in to kiss me.

“You have to make an appearance,” I say against his lips.

“It’ll be a mild party since we have to play Thursday. We won’t stay long...you’ll be two orgasms in before midnight.” He kisses me deep, my legs turning to jelly.

“Well, look what we have here,” an amused voice rings out, making me jump back, my face already hot from Zac’s comment. I turn and see Coach Belfry, smiling from ear to ear. I recognize him from the games Zac has shown me.

“Hey, Coach,” Zac says, completely unflustered. “I’d like you to meet Autumn Winters. Autumn, this is Coach Belfry.”

“His *favorite* coach,” Coach Belfry says, shaking my hand. “It’s lovely to meet you, Autumn. Get ready for lots of eyes on you tonight—this guy doesn’t bring many dates around.”

Zac and the coach shake hands and then Zac’s hand is on my waist as Coach Belfry leads us inside. His wife, Maren, comes over when she sees us, not bothering to hide her open curiosity as we’re introduced.

She’s beautiful—tall and blonde, with a body that won’t quit. She also has a kind smile, which makes some of the tension leave me. She hugs me and then Zac before leading us past the foyer, toward the music. I’m introduced to people along the way, recognizing some of the players from the games I’ve watched, and we come to a stop when we reach the great room that leads out to a huge patio filled with pretty people. Ty and Dylan are dancing on the patio with two girls who look like twins, and when Ty sees me, he motions for us to come out there and dance, but people are already flocking to Zac. His teammates come up and do complicated handshakes, while some of their dates—I can’t always tell who is a girlfriend, a wife, or a date—stare longingly at Zac and then do a cursory glance at me, pausing at his fingers interlocked with mine. I feel like we’re center stage with everyone coming by to say hello.

Maren is still by my side and she leans in, saying, “Everyone is curious about the one who landed Zac Ledger.”

I stare at her in surprise and her smile widens along with her eyes, all mischief. I can’t help but laugh.

A beautiful girl walks up who I recognized instantly from stalking Zac. Ava Langdon, one of the cheerleaders. I’m prepared for her to snub me or maybe not be very warm, but after she hugs Zac, she introduces herself and

hugs me too.

She leans in and whispers, "I've been so excited to meet you since I saw the pictures of you and Zac and heard about you..."

"Oh, thank you." I don't know why I'm surprised she seems to like me already, but I guess I just assumed she and Zac had dated after seeing that picture of them together. And maybe they did...she's right up there with Halle Reid in the beauty department.

"That man is gold." A look crosses over her face as she adds, "Unlike his younger brother..." When she sees my expression, she waves her hand. "Ignore me. I don't need to get started on Jamison Ledger." She makes a face and then grins. "Ty has said nothing but amazing things about you."

"Ty's great," I say, feeling a little guilty when I don't add that I think Jamison is too, because I do. He does come across as more of a player than Zac, but then again, I was wrong about Zac in the beginning too.

"Ignore any jealous eyes coming your way." We look around and I guess I wasn't imagining the slight hostility coming from some of the women here tonight. There's a group of three women staring at me, the blonde in the middle looking the most aggressive. Ava leans in again. "I've got your back if Caroline gives you any trouble," she says, pulling back to look at me.

"Caroline?" I repeat.

"I'm not sure how she managed to get an invite," she says.

I have no idea who she's talking about, and Ty comes over before I can ask her. He drags Ava out to dance and just as Zac leans closer, asking if I'm ready for a drink, the gorgeous, tall blonde who's been staring at me walks up, her focus on Zac. He's turned toward me when she reaches him and she puts her hand on his chin so he's facing her, and my mouth drops when she goes in for a kiss. He jerks his chin away when he realizes what's happening and her lips land on his lower jaw.

"Caroline, what are you *doing*?" Zac takes a step away from her, moving so his chest is against my back and both hands are on my waist, which I have to admit feels pretty damn good right now, but it also makes her attention shift to me.

So *this* is Caroline. And there is no question that she's hostile where I'm concerned. She assesses me from head to toe, her upper lip curling like I disgust her, and then she looks past me at Zac, giving him a sexy pout.

"You invited me, remember?" she asks, tilting her head as she smiles up at him.

“No, I did *not*,” he says, his hands tightening around my waist.

She laughs and makes a face like, *yeah, right*. “I guess we were in the afterglow when you asked me,” she says.

I freeze and I’m sure I look queasy or something because that’s the moment she chooses to look at me again and her expression turns smug.

Zac’s hands clasp around the front of my waist, the movement tightening his hold around me like he knows I want to bolt. “I’m sure you’ll remember that I don’t extend invitations to professional events *or* do the afterglow with anyone I’m not in a relationship with.”

Ouch. I inwardly cringe for her, but her eyes simply narrow and she reaches out and puts her hand on Zac’s arm, laughing.

“You’re hilarious,” she says. “You act like we didn’t have sex multiple times.”

I take a deep breath, my entire body feeling hot and not in a good way.

“You’re being incredibly rude to my date,” Zac says. “I’m asking you to stop. *Now*.”

“I just want to know why you stopped calling. You acted like you didn’t have any complaints.” Her eyes are wide now, tears filling them, and god, this is uncomfortable.

“Caroline, this is not the time or place. Please don’t make a scene.”

“But we had something good,” she says, tears spilling over. “So, so good.”

Zac steps next to me, still not letting me go, and I feel his eyes on me, but I can’t look at him right now.

“Caroline,” he says, his voice low. “Now is *really* not the time or place.”

She puts her head in her hands and sobs. Zac lifts his hand and Maren and two massive men appear out of nowhere, surrounding Caroline. Maren looks at me and Zac in concern, mouthing, “*Sorry*,” as she puts her hand on Caroline’s elbow.

“Caroline, let’s get some water in you and I’ll make sure you get home safely,” Maren says.

The guards try to talk with Caroline and she’s inconsolable. It feels like all eyes are on us, and I’m grateful when Ty yells for everyone to come dance.

“I’m mortified, Zac,” Maren says under her breath. “I ran into her yesterday while I was shopping and we go way back. When I told her I was having this event, she asked if she could come and I know better, but she’s

always been so...*levelheaded*,” she whispers. “I had no idea she’d—” She pauses as Caroline lets out another sob and puts her arm around her, pulling her away.

Zac moves in front of me, his hands on my cheeks as he lowers his head to look into my eyes. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea she would be here, and even if I’d known, I wouldn’t have expected that to happen.”

“What did you *do* to her?” I ask.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 56

## BLARING ANNOUNCEMENT



Zac

I flinch at Autumn’s words, the accusation in her voice and the embarrassment over Caroline’s scene doing a number on me.

“Let’s get out of here.” I take a step back, my hands dropping from her face.

Her eyes are almost panicked for a moment before they glaze over and fear stirs in my chest.

*Shit.*

Several of my teammates try to talk about it on our way out, but I don’t want to hear how crazy Caroline is or to try and defend myself right now. I feel terrible that her feelings are hurt, and that I obviously misread the situation. I just want to get out of here.

“I can’t apologize enough,” Belfry says, meeting me at the door. “This

was supposed to be a night with just us, no outsiders coming in and causing drama.”

“It’s okay. It happens,” I say.

Ty comes over and puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing. “You okay, man?” He knows I’m not and curses under his breath before looking at Autumn. “We’ve all had our fair share of drama being in this line of work—it comes with the territory—but you’ve got the best guy in the league. I’d trust him with my baby sister and there is *no one* I trust with my baby sister.”

I give him a half-hearted fist bump and thank Belfry for having us, and then open the door and wait for Autumn to finish saying goodbye to all the people who realize we’re leaving and want to talk to her before we go in case this is the last time they see her.

I wouldn’t blame her if this is the last time any of us see her. After that shitshow, I think I’d want to run too.

I blast the air on high all the way home, too heated to think straight. The ride is quiet and I can’t take it anymore when we pull into the driveway.

“I met Caroline through my lawyer, Stan. She was at the same restaurant as us one day and Stan called me later saying she’d asked him to give me her number. He spoke very highly of her but said she worked too much and he’d never known her to be in a relationship.” I look at Autumn out of the corner of my eye and she’s looking down at her hands, nervously picking at her nails. I sigh and keep going. “I didn’t call her right away and Stan reminded me of it when I saw him again, asking if I’d called her yet. I told him I would and in that first conversation, she said she wasn’t looking for a relationship. I said I wasn’t either, but we texted for a few weeks and met up twice.” I look at her again and she finally meets my eyes.

“You had sex,” she says softly.

“Yes, twice. She texted after I met you and I knew I wasn’t interested in even a casual hookup with her and let her know.”

“I’m sorry I assumed the worst there at the end. You don’t even owe me an explanation.”

“I want to tell you whatever you want to know.” The frustration comes out in my voice and I run my hands through my hair, exhaling. “I’m so sorry that happened on your first night with everyone. Nothing like that has ever happened at that party before...now when we’re traveling, that’s another story. Pretty much limitless opportunity and madness available to us at all times if we want it. But I swear to you *I’m* not like that.”



She's quiet and I feel like everything I'm saying is coming out wrong, but I keep trying.

"It's not that I've been celibate by any means, but I've been careful. Careful to be upfront and not lead anyone on, careful to be cautious about who I trust—and honestly, the number of those I've trusted has been low. But with Caroline—I mean, I still got it wrong, so that just makes me uncertain about everything and everyone."

Autumn shivers and I open my door, walking around to her door and opening it. When she gets out, I want to hug her, to ask her if she's okay, but I can't fucking shut my mouth.

"Until the night Halle got pregnant, I'd never had sex without a condom and it's never happened since. Before Ivy started school, it was rare for my mom and Ivy not to travel with me, and before you, I didn't even consider opening up that part of my life to anyone else."

She puts her fingers on my lips and her fingers are cold. I put my hand over them and kiss them warm.

"I've made so many bad decisions, Zac. I've been with guys I didn't even want to be with and I've let others trample on my heart just because I didn't want a confrontation or I didn't want to see the truth of who they really were. I don't know how you guys do it when you're on the road and women are throwing themselves all over you. If you're telling the truth, and I believe you are, you've handled it a lot better than most would."

"I'm telling the truth," I whisper, leaning in to kiss her. I lift her up, wrapping her legs around me and laughing when she shrieks as her short dress rides up her thighs. "Let me warm you up," I say against her mouth.

"I've never had sex without a condom and I have an IUD, so that's one area I've done better than you," she says, dancing in my arms.

I was already hard, feeling her heat pressing against me, but now it's painful. I give her backside a nice slap, laughing when she jumps. "You bragging now?"

"Someone's got to." She wraps her arms around my neck and leans in. "Thank you for telling me what happened. You didn't have to, but I'm really glad you did. You know what I like about you?"

I stare at her mouth, which makes it take longer for me to open and close the door, but once I do, I press her back against the wall, my hands still squeezing her ass. "You like me?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, now you're begging for compliments?" she

teases. “The more I get to know you, the more amazing you become to me. Do you know how rare that is?”

“I do know how rare that is...how rare *you* are.” I turn and carry her to my room, intent on getting her in my bed. “I almost forgot I promised to warm you up.”

When we reach my room, I toss her on my bed and she bounces, looking like the best contradiction—a sinful angel, her naughty sweetness lighting a fire in my body. She leans up on her elbows and points at me.

“Let’s see what you’re working with, Ledger.” She smirks and then her cheeks flush as I strip down to nothing. She licks her lips when she sees me and it’s all I can do to not jump her.

She sits up on her knees and I unzip her dress, sliding it down her shoulders. She undoes her bra and I bury my face between her tits, inhaling her sweetness before I wrap my mouth around her peaks, one at a time. My fingers wander down and dive beneath her lacy panties, circling her clit before sliding my fingers inside.

Her head falls back and I tongue her nipple, as I slowly draw my fingers back out, tracing her wetness over her clit and then back inside for another dip while my thumb circles over the spot that makes her eyes burn with lust when she looks at me.

“You like that?” I whisper.

She shimmies out of her panties and thrusts into my hand while my cock juts toward her, desperate to get in on the action.

We’re both on our knees and I fist myself, bending just enough to drag my tip against her most sensitive places. She groans, her gaze hooded as she watches what I’m doing. I stare at her watching and then I can’t tear my eyes away from where my body is touching hers.

She gasps when I dip inside, her eyes meeting mine. “You feel so good.”

“All I can think about is driving as deep inside you as I can get...bare.” I force myself to slide back out, my fingers continuing their torment as she rocks into me. “I didn’t think I’d ever consider that again,” I admit.

She swallows hard, her teeth stretching her lower lip as my fingers pick up the pace. “I trust you,” she says.

I moan, kissing her hard, my tongue fucking her mouth the way I want to be.

“Are you sure?” I whisper when we break apart, our chests rising and falling against each other’s.

She nods and falls back, her hair splayed out against my pillows, and I brace myself when she looks up at me with those big brown eyes, her heart and body vulnerable to me.

It hits me with resounding clarity.

There is no safety net. No attempting to guard my feelings or to take things slowly while we get to know each other better and figure this out.

It's too late for any of that.

My heart has already made the leap.

I'm so in love with her.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

57

NO WORDS



Autumn

The only way I can describe what is happening to me right now is that it's sacred.

I've been worshipped from the top of my head to the soles of my feet.

One minute Zac was teasing me with his fingers and then his dick, looking at me with such intensity, I thought he could read my mind, which was screaming, *Please, get inside me now!* And then he had his mouth and tongue and fingers between my legs, feasting on me like I held the secrets of the universe. He kept his promise—I had two orgasms well before midnight, and both were before he looked up at me with satisfaction, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and dragged himself up my body until his body was perfectly lined up with mine.

But now, this, when he's slowly inching his way inside me, his bare skin

against mine elevating every sensation, his eyes never leave mine as we barely breathe, our bodies so taut with awareness...this is something beyond.

“This is the best thing I’ve ever felt,” I say, closing my eyes when I flutter against him.

“Autumn,” he rasps. “I want to live right here forever...”

Even though I’m soaked, he’s thick and long, and my walls keep trying to squeeze the life out of him. He hisses a curse as I clench around him, my head falling back.

“More,” I whisper, trying to get him to go in deeper.

“I love how hungry you are,” he says, sinking in a little more.

I hum my approval and arch into him, earning another groan out of him. He drags back out and I whimper my protest, my mouth falling open when he slides back in, deeper this time. And he keeps up this torture until I’m desperate for him, my legs quivering and our bodies slick with the concentrated effort of taking our time. When he is finally, *finally*, all the way inside, we stare at each other in awe. I don’t have to question if he’s present with me in this moment because I can see it, I can feel it—this is just as powerful to him as it is to me.

The rush of emotions floods me all at once. I want to cry, I want to laugh, I want to open my soul and let him roam around in there, make himself at home.

“Zac,” I whimper when he leans in and gives me the sweetest, softest kiss. Somehow this kiss says everything right now.

“I know, baby,” he whispers. “I know.”

A tear drips back into my hair and he wipes it with his thumb, his lips following the path. He surges inside of me and I arch into him until he’s so impossibly deep I don’t know where he ends and I begin.

When he begins to move, the relief is intense. If he tried to pull out to tease my clit one more time, I would surely die. I need him deep and he knows it, his thrusts deeper and faster, giving it everything he has until we’re both panting, our movements becoming choppy and chaotic. Pleasure hits me sideways, somehow taking me by surprise and sending me spiraling into heaven. He follows close behind, my name on his lips like a prayer, and another tear drips down my face.

He kisses me, smoothing my hair away, his eyes taking me in, and I don’t even feel the need to hide or retreat. Maybe later I will, but right now, I feel like I’m in the safest place I’ve ever been.

“I like being able to stay right here,” he says, thrusting gently into me.

“I like everything about what just happened.” I smile against his lips, loving the sound he makes when he does that deep, close-mouthed chuckle.

“I like everything about *you*,” he says, kissing me until my toes curl, my entire body sated and content.

And, oh, it is so mutual. I like every single thing about him. Except I’m afraid what I’m feeling is much more than *like*...but there’s no need to rush into knowing what this is. For someone who’s never believed I’d have anything close to these feelings, I’m good with keeping it at this L-word.

---

We take a shower and lazily slide our soapy hands over each other’s bodies, but it quickly turns heated. Zac picks me up like my slippery body is a feather, which will never get old, the way his muscled body can handle me as nimbly as it does a football. When he feels how ready I already am for him, he slams me down on him, his hips snapping into me as fast as I’m craving it, and we both come so hard I think we’d wake up the neighbors within a mile radius if there were any.

A few hours later, I wake up with him nudging inside me, my back to his chest, his fingers stroking between my legs.

“You can keep sleeping,” he says huskily. “You said my name in your sleep and let out the sexiest moan...I had to try to make that dream come true.”

I moan and he swells inside me, his hand stilling to cup me before we find the sweetest rhythm. His fingers go back to their sure strokes, playing me so well. It’s a slow build, our bodies lighting up in increments, and it’s a deep fall into bliss.

I fall asleep on top of him, my face in his neck, his burly chest more secure than any mattress. One of his hands rests on the back of my neck and the other has a firm grip on my backside. And I wake up that way in the morning, except he’s hard as a rock against me, and I lift up just enough to guide him inside as I sink on top of him. He opens his eyes sleepily as I sit up, loving how deep he feels this way.

“I’ll never get enough of you,” he says.

And I'm glad he says it because it's exactly how I feel, but I just haven't known how to say it.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 58

## DOSE OF REALITY



Autumn

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Summer says, slapping her hand over her mouth. When she starts laughing, I hold up my hand and shake my head.

“Oh, no, you’re gonna hear this, Miss I Do Not Believe in Sport.”

“It’s *sports*, thank you very much.”

“Well, *I* know that, but you’ve never seemed to.” She circles me and snorts. “Wait—did you *bedazzle* your jersey?”

“I did.”

She snorts again. “I so wish Mama could’ve come with me.”

“Shut up.”

“We have to FaceTime her from the game.”

I roll my eyes. “I do wish they had more exciting colors—I personally think navy is overdone in football, and I would’ve preferred pink to red, but



who am I?”

Summer cackles and I lift my shoulder in a shrug. I might’ve downplayed my new passion for football a little bit with my mom and sister because they already tease me mercilessly about how crazy I am about Zac. I don’t need to give them *more* ammunition. After the three preseason games, I’d say I officially crossed over. Now we’re seven games into the season and I’m *hooked*. I’ve gone to the two Sunday games that were here and this will be my first Monday night game. Zac teases me about my floundering football terminology, but I tell him I’m doing good learning two languages—English and American Sign Language. He can’t really expect me to learn football too.

Summer arrived earlier today and will only be here until tomorrow—she’s meeting Liam to film in New York for the next three weeks. She was shocked when I told her I’d be taking her to a game tonight.

We’re staying at Daisy and Daniel’s guesthouse while she’s here. The crew at Zac’s house has thoroughly taken over right now and it felt too hard to get it all tidy and pretty for just one night.

Summer drops onto the couch, checking her watch. “We have ten minutes?”

“Yes. I’m shocked Ivy isn’t pounding on the door yet. She’s so excited to go with everyone.”

“She still doesn’t go to the games?”

“She’s been to a few now. Zac still stresses about her being in the public eye much, but she loves watching his games and really wants to go to all of them.”

“How is it with him being gone more now? And why haven’t you gone to any of the away games?” Summer asks, leaning her arm over the back of the couch to play with my hair.

“He’s asked me to, but it’s his job, and I’m here to do a job too with his house. I don’t want to get in his way or make him lose his focus when he’s playing, and I really want to get his house done right...the sooner, the better.”

“Does Ivy mind staying with you? Has that been weird?”

“Ivy stays with her grandparents when Zac’s gone to keep things familiar, I guess. I usually stay here in the guesthouse too so I don’t get lonely.”

“Hmm...I didn’t realize that.”

“Which part?”

“I don’t know. All of it, I guess.” She looks at me like she’s trying to figure me out, working her teeth over her lower lip, which has always made

me antsy.

“Spit it out. What?” I grumble. “And you’re gonna make your lips chapped, knock it off.”

She grins but gives her lip a break. “Has there been any talk about what’s happening once you’re finished with the house?”

I shake my head, not bothering to say anything. The fear in my eyes already speaks volumes.

“Auto,” she says, reaching out for my hand. “I know how into him you are. Does *he* know?”

I swallow, thinking about how I crash into him when he gets home, my legs going around his waist if Ivy’s not here too. Often we don’t even make it to his room before he’s sinking into me. My face heats and Summer smirks.

“I think he knows.” I nod, fanning my face, and Summer laughs. I put my hands over my face and drop my head back, sighing loud.

“You should make sure he knows,” she says. “And it wouldn’t hurt you to go with him sometime. Think about all the Carolines and *Halles* out there just ready to snatch him up.”

Things are going so well with Zac and me, but the truth is, I’ve been concerned with a few things myself, and it feels like Summer is honing in on it after only being here for *one* day.

“I can’t go there in my head with the Carolines and Halles,” I tell her. “No, I just can’t. But...I do worry because—”

There’s a knock on the door and I jump up. Summer grabs my arm. “Finish that sentence, please.”

My shoulders droop. She stands up and puts her hands on my shoulders.

“What is it?” she asks softly.

“It feels so perfect between us.” My voice is barely above a whisper, as if the words coming out too loud will break something. “I’ve never had someone treat me so amazing...everything about him is just—” I make a face, trying to come out with it. “I...I didn’t think I’d ever have something like this...” I finally get that much out and she waits for me to keep going, but I can’t.

“But?” she asks, leaning in.

“But we haven’t talked about the future at all. He doesn’t ask me to watch Ivy...ever. He’s very careful to make sure she’s not my responsibility, which is so thoughtful really...but when we’re all three together, it’s almost like we’re—”

The pounding on the door makes me jump and I laugh, pulling away from Summer to get to the door.

“Almost like you’re what?” Summer tries one last time.

“Like we’re a family,” I say, opening the door.

Ivy is standing there in her matching bedazzled jersey. We worked on them for hours yesterday. She’s bouncing as she waves happily at Summer and gives me a huge hug before signing that it’s time to go.

I’ve FaceTimed Summer a lot when Ivy’s around, Pappy too, so when Pappy walks out and sees Summer standing by the car, he beams, waving both arms like she’s his long-lost friend.

“There she is,” he sings. “It’s about time you came to see us.”

She laughs and meets him halfway, hugging him. “I couldn’t stay away,” she says. “It’s a quick trip, but I’ll be back.”

She winks at me when she says it and I try to shove down the worry that builds with each day we’re closer to finishing Zac’s house. And to make things worse, it’s going to be done in record time. There hasn’t been the typical stall that comes with remodeling projects of this magnitude. There have been more hands on deck than we ever imagined, and they’re knocking it out.

Daniel and Daisy come out last and after they hug Summer, we all pile into Zac’s SUV. I see two missed texts from him and smile at my phone.

Zac

Make sure you leave early enough to miss the madness. I don’t want you to have any trouble getting to your suite, but Dad and Pappy know all the tricks to getting in without being seen.

Zac

I’m wishing I’d tried harder to change your mind about staying at the guesthouse tonight.

“I hope Zac will relax and play his best,” Daisy says. She’s in the third row of seats and when I turn to look at her, she shakes her head, exhaling on a long whoosh.

Pappy glances back from the passenger seat. “He’s always a little high-strung before a game. He’ll be fine.”

“He’s texted me ten times about us surrounding Ivy when we walk in,” Daniel says. “Even though it’s the private entrance and I’ve only ever seen

guards and the other players there.” He chuckles. “And here we have Summer Taylor in our midst.”

Pappy winks at Summer. When we all laugh, Ivy looks up from her video game and I sign what she missed.

“I’m not as important as Ivy Ledger,” Summer says, and Ivy cracks up when I sign that.

She sits up taller and smirks, pointing to herself and saying out loud, “Movie star.”

We all laugh and Ivy grins proudly before returning to her video game.

“Oh, while I have all of you here without Zac...when is his birthday? He’s been weirdly secretive about it, so I have been about mine too.”

Daisy chuckles. “Don’t let him fool you. He loves his birthday, he just likes to act like he’s into everything else surrounding the holiday.”

“What do you mean?” I turn to look back at her.

“It’s on Halloween,” she says.

My mouth drops.

“No, it isn’t,” Summer says, laughing as she looks at me. “That’s Autumn’s birthday.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Pappy says. “How are we just finding this out? That’s coming up quick.”

“We need to have a party,” Daisy announces. “I tried to talk him into a party for this birthday months ago and he refused—it’s his thirtieth, you know—but he won’t be able to when I tell him it’s your birthday too.” Her eyes are bright as she leans forward. “Or better yet, let’s surprise him.”

“It’s perfect. I’ll try to come back...Liam might even be able to come,” Summer says.

“That’s just next week and the house is close but not *that* close. What if...” I pause and open my phone, checking the calendar. “What if we *really* surprise him and have a party when the house is done in a few weeks?” I look at Summer. “We could do it that weekend before you go home.”

She gives me an odd look but nods, her smile more tentative than before. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea. The timing sounds perfect.”

“Can we pretend like we don’t remember his birthday at all?” Pappy asks, his shoulders shaking. “It’d serve him right for keeping it a secret from you.”

I grin, liking the way this plan is going. “Suits me just fine. Just pretend you don’t know mine either,” I say.

I glance at Ivy and she’s in her own little world, doing a little dance as

she makes a little creature hop onto the flying rock. I already know her birthday is in February, so there's plenty of time to plan her party.

My heart hitches when I think about it...the house will be done within the next few weeks. There's been no talk about me staying. None. I've been too busy and too loved up to let myself think about it, but it's going to all come crashing in on me soon. *Very soon.*

All my talk about caring about my career when I first got here, and I still do care, but it's been nice to only see Jane on our weekly Zoom calls. The thought of going back to that environment every day is daunting. I've thrived here, in every way. Working on Zac's house has made me feel like I can take on any project and do it well.

But it's so much more than that—living with Zac and Ivy has made me happier than I thought possible. How could I ever live on the opposite side of the country from them?

What makes me think I'll still be in their lives months from now?

Summer meets my eyes in the car as we drive through the back entrance of the stadium, and she reaches out to clasp my hand like she knows where my thoughts are taking me.

I have a sick feeling this dream life I've been living is about to come to an end.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 59

## ANIMAL MAGNETISM



### Autumn

“Okay, I’m totally seeing the appeal of this game.” Summer turns toward me and clutches my arm. Her face is flushed, and she looks like she could bounce right out of here on an adrenaline high. “And I have two words for you: silver pants.”

“Oh, don’t I know it. *Damn*. Those silver pants do it for me too. I mean, I’m not complaining when he’s wearing the navy ones, but it’s a lot harder to get definition, if you know what I’m saying.” I smirk at her and she laughs.

Zac just made an insane throw and Ty was there to catch it despite nearly getting mowed down by the other team. I have no idea what the correct terms are for what just happened, but I tell it like I see it: Zac made that ball his bitch, and Ty was around to take names.

I’m hoarse from cheering and sweaty from dancing with Ivy. She’s on a

cotton candy high and it's way past her bedtime, but she's going strong.

We're ahead by twenty-one points and have three minutes left when Zac has to take his quarterback god status to the next level. He goes to throw the ball to Ty, but Ty isn't open, so Zac ends up keeping the ball and runs it a *long ass* way down that field. When he makes a touchdown, the place goes *wild*. Our suite goes wild. Ivy and I yell in each other's faces and shake our booties, and high-fives and hip bumps are dealt to all by Pappy.

It's a high unlike any other I've experienced, and I'm still smiling as we head through the long hall that feels like the underbelly of the stadium. I can't help but feel like I'm getting away with something back here. There are guards with us, but I haven't seen anyone who's not supposed to be back here, and the girlfriends and wives I do see smile and do a double take when they recognize Summer. I've gotten to know a few of them a little better since the party but haven't exactly broadcasted the fact that I'm related to two household names.

Maren is still my favorite, and Ava too, but since she's on the field most of the night, I rarely get to talk to her at the games. I sat next to Felicia at the last game, the wife of one of the running backs, and liked her a lot. She's one of the women we run into on our way out and she's friendly to Summer...and *normal*, something that has been odd to witness—how many people don't know how to act around celebrities.

Summer's talking about how nice Felicia was when we turn the corner and see Zac walking toward us. I was asleep when he left this morning and just thinking about not sleeping next to him tonight has me missing him already. My heartbeat picks up as I watch him, his wide, muscular frame intimidating as he stalks toward us. He has this swagger that borders on obscene.

I feel like our family dog, Jericho, the way he sprawls out on his back for us to pet him. *Take me, take me now.*

"Steady, girl," Summer mutters next to me. "There are children present."

I laugh, but I don't tear my eyes off of Zac. He's smiling at Ivy, and he says hi to everyone, but his eyes keep coming back to me, unadulterated lust dripping off of him. Or maybe it's me that's dripping.

Ivy runs and hugs him, and then he's in front of me, his hands on my waist and that smirk the last thing I see before he claims my mouth. He hasn't been afraid to show a little PDA in front of his family, especially around Ivy, but it's been limited to hugs and holding my hand. He hasn't kissed me like

*this* in front of anyone. A kiss like this is what leads us to all-night sessions where we can't get enough of each other. Someone whistles and we break apart, breathless, and my insides are shaky.

Ivy claps her hands and giggles, pressing her lips together as she looks back and forth between the two of us, her eyes huge.

"Couldn't help myself," Zac mutters, his voice husky.

"I'd say this boy played a good game and has his testosterone skyrocketing to the heavens," Pappy says, cracking up at himself.

"That's not the only thing that's skyrocketing right now," Zac says in my ear, smiling when he sees how red I am. "Thanks for being here tonight," he tells everyone. "Summer, I'm sorry you had to spend part of your visit at the game, but I'm glad you're here."

"Seeing that kiss was worth the price of admission," she says, laughing.

We walk toward the exit and Zac kisses my fingers, leaning in one more time for a quick kiss. "I'll miss you in my bed tonight," he says so only I can hear. He hugs everyone else goodbye and goes to meet with the team. He'll probably be at least another hour before he leaves and we'd already agreed that I would spend every minute with Summer while she's here. Still, I'm sad to see him go.

Summer puts her arm around my waist as we walk the rest of the way. "You seem really happy," she says. "Do you...can you imagine yourself staying here?"

I look around to make sure Zac's family can't hear us. "I think I haven't let myself think about any of it too much. The date for everything to get done has just been out there, somewhere in the future, and now that it's only a few weeks away, it's starting to hit me. You know, I've never thought I'd have something like this...or what you have. And for how close I've gotten to all of them, it still feels like nothing is defined. It's just all been *so good*. When I'm with Zac, I'm in that moment completely. We talk about so much, everything really...everything but the future."

We reach the SUV and right before I get inside, Summer says, "I might've been worried if I hadn't seen the way he kissed you. That man is not going to let you go."



# 60

## SO MUCH FOR THAT



Zac

At the airport after Summer and Autumn hugged goodbye, I carried in Summer's luggage despite her protests and she filled me in on a secret that blew my mind. I still can't believe Autumn and I share a birthday. I've never known anyone who has the same birthday as me.

So, this morning I got up earlier than usual and did my workout. I'm glad it's not a game day. I'll have to go to the stadium for a few hours later, but I have time to make her a surprise breakfast and spoil her a little bit after Ivy's at school. But when I get to the kitchen, Autumn and Ivy are already in there and pulling some kind of fancy quiche from the oven.

"What's going on here?" I ask. I look at my watch. "Am I later than I thought?"

Ivy and Autumn giggle and my heart somersaults. I love watching the two

of them.

“We...just wanted to do a little something special for you,” Autumn says, signing at the same time. She’s gotten really good at signing while she’s speaking. It took me so much longer to be as fluent as she is.

Ivy comes over and wraps her arms around my waist.

“Aw, thank you,” I tell them both. “I was trying to do something special for *you*.” I almost laugh when I see Autumn’s eyes narrow, but she doesn’t say anything. “You should’ve slept in,” I say. “Have a little breakfast in bed...get spoiled.”

She lifts her eyebrows. “That sounds fabulous, but it’s a Tuesday, and I promised Ivy I’d come to her school today to watch the parade.”

“Shit, I forgot about that,” I say under my breath. “What time is the parade?”

“Two.”

I make a face and pull out my phone, messaging Belfry to see if I can leave a little early today. Since I’ve never asked for anything like that before, I’m hoping he’ll be fine with it.

Autumn and Ivy usher me to the table and put a beautiful plate of food in front of me. Ivy has a cloth napkin draped over her arm and when I sit down, she tries to put it on my lap.

“Wow. I am really getting the fine treatment today,” I say, chuckling.

They sit down next to me and Ivy has me choose a song to play while we eat. I pick one I know she can feel and she bops her head while we eat. Autumn is quiet, but smiles at me every time I look at her. When Ivy goes downstairs to put on her Halloween costume, I take Autumn’s hand and turn to face her, my legs against hers.

“What’s going on with you?” I ask.

“Nothing?” she responds, as if it’s a question. When she laughs and I don’t, she adds, “I’m just sleepy. Someone keeps waking me up throughout the night and sexing me up...”

I slide my hands up her thighs, grinning. “Yeah?” I pause, making a face. “Shit, sorry. I need to stop waking you up, don’t I? You need your sleep...”

“You need *yours*. I’m good. I don’t know how you’re playing like you are with so little sleep.”

I kiss her fingers and want to tell her I’m going to make this a birthday she doesn’t forget, but for some reason, Summer hadn’t wanted me to let her know I knew.

“Just spoil her rotten,” she’d said.

I’ve never told anyone Halloween is my birthday either. I like having a day where everyone is already celebrating, but where I can also not have all the focus on me. At school, everyone was so busy checking out costumes, I didn’t have to do the whole embarrassing acknowledgment to birthday wishes like everyone else did the rest of the year.

Ivy comes out before I say anything else, and Autumn and I go on over her. She’s in a fairy dress and has the wings on already, but Autumn helps her put on the pink wig and does her makeup, Ivy sitting as still as possible while Autumn works.

When she’s done, Autumn holds out her hand and they walk to the mirror in the entryway. Ivy gasps and turns to look at herself from every angle, the smile never leaving her face.

Belfry texts asking if I can come earlier than I’d planned on and I groan, swiping my hand down my face. So far nothing is going as I’d hoped.

When I tell Autumn, she says, “It’s okay. Daisy’s on her way to take Ivy, so you can go ahead and get to the stadium. I can meet you at the school at two if you’re not able to get back sooner. And I’ll get there a little earlier so one of us is there.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I be?” She looks genuinely confused.

“I just...I know you didn’t sign up for all of this when you chose to take this...job.” It sounds lame as soon as I say it, but it’s the truth. I don’t want her to ever think I’m taking advantage of her, and more than that, I never want her to feel stuck. Ivy is my responsibility and I know Autumn cares about her, but she’s bound to want some time to herself now and then. If she felt like she couldn’t take a break when she needed it or that she didn’t really want to be here but was sticking it out to avoid hurting our feelings...I would hate that.

“I love Ivy,” she says softly. Her eyes are hurt when I look at her and I put my hand on her arm. She pulls away as there’s a knock on the door.

*Fuck.* I just keep botching up this day.

My mom pokes her head in the door and takes a bunch of pictures of Ivy before they leave. Belfry texts again and I let him know I’ll be on my way.

“I’m sorry to rush out of here,” I tell Autumn as I say bye. She straightens for a moment, nodding. “I’ll head out so I can be back for the parade.” Her shoulders drop again and I feel like a fool.

What am I doing?

---

I work my ass off and am showered and at the school at two on the dot. I jog inside the building and get my visitor pass, moving through the crowd of parents and grandparents to find Autumn and my family. When I spot Autumn, her cheeks are flushed and she's looking down, glaring at something. I hustle toward her and some of the kids move out of the way, I see Ivy's classmate, Anya, and Anya's mother, Jacinta.

Jacinta is a tiny woman, barely taller than Ivy, but she makes up for it with her large personality. I've never minded the woman, but right now she's scolding Ivy, both in sign language and out loud, and it takes everything in me to pause and find out what's going on before I blindly react.

"You do not treat Anya like that, ever," Jacinta says, glaring at Ivy. "Unacceptable." She shakes her head and the crease between her brows goes even deeper.

"I'll tell *you* what's unacceptable," Autumn jumps in, and no one is more surprised than I am, but Jacinta is also taken aback. "Anya needs to stop saying rude things to Ivy about her mother. *That* is unacceptable. What is *not* unacceptable is for Ivy to reach her limit with such rudeness and to say stop, even if done with a bit of aggression. She's asked nicely and Anya didn't listen, so Ivy got in her face and yelled it, big whoop." Autumn's hands are shaking and she clenches her jaw, her chest heaving up and down as she takes a deep breath.

I come up and put my arm on Autumn's back and she looks at me in relief. Ivy reaches out and takes Autumn's hand, and Autumn's eyes glaze over with tears.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize Anya was saying things about Ivy's mother," Jacinta says. "I'll talk to her about it when I get home."

"Anya's said things to Ivy about her mother before, but I thought she'd stopped," Autumn says, and I look at her in surprise. "But I heard her myself today and it was mean-spirited. She should apologize. No child should have to defend themselves about their parents."

Anya lowers her eyes to the floor when Autumn signs the last part and

nudges the heel of her foot with her other shoe.

“I’m sure she meant no harm in it,” Jacinta says with a nervous chuckle.

Anger flares in Autumn’s eyes as she looks at me in disbelief and I’m already there.

“I’m all for letting kids work out their problems.” My voice is calm, but just barely. “But if she’s not stopping when Ivy asks her to, then clearly, Anya needs more guidance at home about what’s appropriate and what isn’t, don’t you think, Jacinta? I’d be happy to explain if you’re not capable of telling her what’s right and wrong.” By the end, I practically hiss the words and my signs are sharp and jerky. I don’t want to be an asshole to anyone, but this is ridiculous.

I take a deep breath. When I speak again, it’s calmer.

“I apologize for letting my temper get the best of me. I hope you will convey to Anya that Ivy is fortunate to have a family that loves her. Not everyone is so fortunate. And anyone who tries to make others feel bad about that is not being kind...in fact, it’s rather cruel.”

Anya and Ivy are pulled by their classmates to get in line for the parade, and Jacinta moves between the other mothers who have been watching our conversation with rapt attention. Jacinta’s lips are pinched and I’m sure she’s embarrassed as all hell, but I can’t help it. My daughter has suffered enough at the expense of her parents.

The parade begins and I stand there in a daze, my hand still on Autumn’s back. I snap out of it when I hear her sniffing and when I look at her, she’s wiping her cheeks with her sweater, the material hanging over her hands as she wipes and wipes and wipes.

“Baby,” I whisper. I move us so we’re out of the way, which is impossible when you’re as big as I am, I’m sticking out more than a sore thumb, always. More like a sore 6’4” piece of wood.

I put my arm around her and she buries her face into my neck, hiding her face with her hand. Everyone is too enthralled with the adorable kids in their costumes to notice her, but I want to protect her just the same.

“Come on, we’ll go around and watch the tail end of it from outside. That’s where they end up.” I take her hand and we walk out the way I came in, taking a turn at the last second to go down the hall that leads to the outdoor courtyard. I want to see Ivy walking past one more time anyway to make sure she’s okay.

When we see her, she lights up, waving at Autumn and me. She waves at

me, smiling like everything's fine, and when she looks at Autumn, she points at her and then does the sign for *I love you* but with a twist—she wiggles her index finger. She points at Autumn again, and repeats the sign before she walks past, and it hits me.

“She’s saying that’s your name sign.” My voice cracks and Autumn turns to me, her skin blotchy and damp. I do the sign for her, pointing at my index finger moving with my other hand. “It’s the sign for *I love you*, but this is the number one, and your name starts with A, the first letter...and she loves you.”

“Is that how names work in sign language?” She chokes it out, tears running down her cheeks.

I lean my forehead against hers, swiping her tears with my fingers. “My name is boring compared to yours,” I tease, lifting my hand to do the sign for dad. “I’m not sure how I should feel about her giving you the number one I love you.”

She shivers and I rub my hands across your arms. The last of the kids walks by and I lift my thumb toward the parking lot.

“Should we get in our cars and beat the rush?” I ask.

“I rode with your mom, but we got separated when I saw Anya being mean right as they were lining up. I sort of saw red and cut through the crowd,” she admits.

“You are the best person I’ve ever known,” I tell her.

But it doesn’t feel like enough. What I want to tell her is that she’s *everything*, and that I don’t know how I ever lived without her.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 61

## COMPLETE



### Autumn

I had all these intentions for Zac's birthday. I was going to surprise him all day without letting him know it was over his birthday. But I've been thwarted at every turn.

It's definitely been the most emotional birthday I've ever had. My feelings have been laid out on the highway and driven over with a Mac truck. I didn't know how much hurt I still carried from not having my dad around much, the things kids would say to me, the hollow place in my chest that I'd get when I saw little girls with their dads, knowing mine didn't want to be with me.

But seeing *Ivy* hurt shattered me. I love her so much, *too much*, and the thought of anyone purposely hurting her—I can't take it. Anya is only a little girl, but she was making fun of *Ivy* for not having a mom, saying things no

kid should say, and I have to wonder if it's things she's learned about at home. Either way, I don't regret standing up for Ivy. I only regret not doing something about it sooner.

It's been healing to see the way Zac loves Ivy, healing in a way I never saw coming. And my dad has made small efforts over the years to do better, maybe that helps too. But I thought I was past some of those old feelings and it turns out they can still rear up and haunt me.

I'm embarrassed by how I lost it, and the unease that has been building in me about my future with Zac and Ivy is at an all-time high, even though Zac has been more attentive than ever.

She gave me a name sign. I can't get over it.

I haven't had a chance to ask her about it since we took her trick-or-treating in a neighborhood by her grandparents' house and then brought her home for a bath and going through the candy and all the things, but every time I think about it, I get tears in my eyes all over again.

"Story?" she asks, pointing at me, her eyebrows raised hopefully when it's time for her to go to bed.

Zac looks at me. He usually does the stories before bed and I haven't wanted to intrude on that.

"It's up to Autumn," he says.

She lifts her hand and does the sign again, the first time she's done it since we've been home, and Zac smiles at both of us. Of course, I feel like I'm about to be a puddle again.

Zac signs, asking if that sign is for me and she nods, smiling at me shyly.

*HER NAME*, she signs.

"It's beautiful," I say, a blustery mess. "I love it. I love you." I do the sign for her that I've used since I gave it to her, *SWEET AS CANDY*, and she wraps her arms around my waist and squeezes me tight. "I'll do whatever she wants," I tell Zac, trying to dry my face.

He laughs and pats my hip as he walks past. "Be thinking about what *you* want."

*Damn. He's good.*

He lifts up his finger. "One book."

Later, after I've showered, somewhat surprised that Zac didn't meet me in there, I go into his bedroom and there are candles lit all over his room. The light is on a dimmer switch, so it's not just candlelight, but mostly.

"Oh," I whisper.



He's leaning against the wall, shirtless, his sweats hanging low on his hips, and I don't know how it's possible to have an endless craving for him, but I do.

When he lifts off of the wall, I realize he's holding a small box and he holds it out for me.

I take it and grin, pressing my lips together to keep from laughing. I move to the drawer I've been using and pull out a small box for him.

He lifts his eyebrows in surprise and then grins.

"Who told you?" he asks.

"Told me what?" I shrug.

"Hmm," he says, staring at me.

"Quit trying to read my mind. Who told you?"

"Open your present." He laughs.

"What did I do to deserve a present?"

"You were born," he says softly.

"Happy Birthday," I whisper.

"Happy Birthday."

I open the box and there's a small fabric bag nestled in the middle. I swallow hard. I can't think of a single guy I've dated who has bought me a present. Why did I date such losers?

I open the bag and pull out a delicate chain in white gold. I gasp when I see the Scorpio constellation in diamonds.

"It's beautiful." I hold it up for him to put it on me. "I love it."

"I keep imagining you wearing it and nothing else," he says, leaning in to kiss my neck before he fastens the back. When it's on, he steps back and looks at me. "Perfect, give or take that pretty shirt and these." He gives my lacy underwear a tug and rips them right off of me. My mouth drops open. He's working on lifting my silky camisole over my breasts when I take a step back and grin, motioning for him to open his present.

He shakes the box like a little kid and I get that tumbling feeling in my stomach...I actually clutch my hands to my chest as if that will keep me from falling any deeper. It's no use. I'm already gone on him.

He opens the box and his eyes are shining when he looks up at me. "I can't believe us," he whispers.

"I know." I giggle.

He lifts the watch that has a constellation face and stares at it. "If sexy was a watch, this would be it."

“Don’t tell Tag Heuer you said that blasphemy, but I *agree*.” I help him put it on and admire it on his wrist. “I can’t believe our birthdays are on the same day.”

“I looked it up and apparently Scorpios are good together.” He lifts a shoulder. “I guess that explains it.”

I’m having a hard time putting a damper on my smile. “How long have you known?”

“Seven days. You?”

“Eight.”

“Can I take your shirt off now?” he asks, his hands spanning my hips.

“As long as you take off your pants first.”

He slides them off in one swoop. “Done.”

My mouth waters at the sight of him. “There’s only one problem with birthdays on the same day...”

His head tilts. “The only problem I see is that you’re still covering up those tits...” He smirks when I roll my eyes, pretending to be annoyed, but I pull the camisole over my head and he exhales a shaky breath. “Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he whispers. “I don’t see any problem with this.” He leans down to slide his tongue over my nipple.

“On birthdays, isn’t there some sort of unwritten agreement about—” I hold out my hand, hoping he’ll fill in the blank.

“Oh!” He looks up, still rolling my peak with his tongue. “Are you afraid to say blow job?”

“Not afraid, no, just...” I crinkle my nose in embarrassment. “I’d rather just do it than talk about it.”

He stands to his full height, thoroughly invested now in whatever is on my mind. I put my head in my hands and he slowly peels my hands away.

“Why are you shy? We’ve *done* that...and it was—” He nods sagely like he remembers it well. He puts his hands on my ass and my eyes flutter at how hard he is against my stomach.

“Well, you’ve messed up every time I’ve planned on doing it since early this morning by working on *my* birthday surprises.”

“Hmm, it’s making sense now,” he says, his lips twitching. “And I agree, today has sucked royally because it’s probably the first morning since you’ve stayed with me that we haven’t started the day out right...so here’s what I propose...”

“This is an awful lot of talking and the candles are getting feisty.”

“You’re really gonna argue with me right now?” He presses into me, his breath hitching.

I shrug as much as I can while he’s got such a firm grip on me. “I vote no blow jobs today.” I lean up on my tiptoes and wish I was just a little bit taller so I could sink down on him. He lifts me up and does it for me, both of us exhaling in relief.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were so wet?” he whispers. “I would’ve shut up a long time ago.”

“Shut up,” I whisper, my head falling back when he drives in all the way. “Happy Birthday to me.”

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 62

## WHAMMY



### Autumn

The past few weeks have flown by. I can't believe how the house has come together. It's a testament to how much these people love Zac Ledger, the way they've kicked it in gear and gotten the work done. And beautifully too.

Ivy is with her grandparents and Zac has been in New York since last night—they're playing today—and even though it's a Sunday, Magnus has already done a final walk-through of the house with me, making sure everything is perfect for the surprise party we're throwing for Zac tonight.

He's usually exhausted but wired after a game and ready to set my body on fire. I grin at my reflection in the mirror. He's going to die when he sees this dress. Ruched, with a sweetheart neck that is a proper length but with a naughty slit, the rust color matches my hair. I can just imagine him sliding the satin spaghetti straps down my shoulders and then getting impatient when

he realizes there's a hidden zipper.

It's probably not the best time for a party. Thanksgiving is in a few days and we're ready to enjoy this house without unending dust and obstacles in every corner. My phone buzzes and I glance at it, sighing when I see that it's Jane again. I've been avoiding her calls the past few days. I managed to get out of our last Zoom meeting because of bad reception on her end and she's already called once today. Since it's Sunday, I decide to avoid her one more day.

I don't know what I'm going to tell her yet. I know I don't want to work with her anymore, but I want to leave on good terms and I also want to have a firm plan in place for what I'm doing next. I'm hoping I can figure that out more now that the craziness of this remodel will be past us.

I'm still in the bathroom downstairs, but tonight, the three of us will move to the bedrooms upstairs. I can't wait. Last night, after everyone had left, I got the beds ready and moved enough of our things up there to be comfortable tonight.

Summer keeps asking what I'm doing next too and I've finally admitted that all I can think about right now is getting the house done and doing this party for Zac. Thanksgiving hasn't even really been on my radar until she reminded me that I'm invited to her house. She'll be here tonight, but she and Liam are flying back to California after the party.

This morning when we FaceTimed, she said something that's playing on repeat in my head.

"Please talk to him. The two of you have *everything* going for you EXCEPT the fact that you haven't talked about what's next. Your time limit is up. It's time to stop avoiding it, Auto."

I stared at her and her face softened.

"He's not going to leave, baby girl. He's not. He loves you."

And there it is, in a nutshell. Somehow I managed to help Summer work through her abandonment issues—why can I not seem to get through mine?

I feel like Zac loves me, but wouldn't he have said it by now if he did? I fan my face and point at the mirror.

"Tonight, we celebrate. Tomorrow, we calibrate." I shake my head. "Stupid mantra, just talk to him already."

I head upstairs and check the warming dishes. I didn't know if Zac would be okay with caterers coming here, so I talked a catering place into letting me pick up the food and the chafing dishes. It's not a meal I'd normally pick for

a party, but since there'll be a bunch of football players in the middle of the season, I thought I'd make it easy for them. Salmon, sweet potatoes, brown rice, veggies and hummus, and a bean burger for the vegans.

The doorbell rings and I open it to Ivy running toward me, hugging me tight. Pappy, Daisy, and Daniel are grinning behind her.

"Missed you," Ivy says.

"Missed you," I say, signing it too with my free hand and squeezing her hard with my other hand. I used to always stay at the guesthouse to be near her when Zac was gone, but there's been too much to do at the house to have it ready for tonight.

Pappy wraps his arms around the two of us, and when we let go and all move inside, he whistles.

"It looks even better than yesterday," he says. "How did you pull that off?"

"Magnus's smaller crew stayed after Zac left last night and we got it done." I look around, unable to stop smiling.

"It's unbelievable," Daniel says, putting his arm around my shoulder. "I can't get over the transformation."

The living room has the soft cognac sectional and loveseat, two cozy white chairs, and I've added the touches of teal and bold green in the pillows, artwork, and huge area rugs. Two massive fiddle leaf fig trees flank the windows and a monstera that I'm hoping will try to reach the tall ceilings. The kitchen is a showstopper with a Tuscan Viking freestanding double oven in Frost White, grey and white granite countertops, and an island that won't quit. And the windows. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the lake and the infinity pool make it feel like I could walk through the glass and walk on water.

Guests start arriving in droves, laughing about the creative places they found to park around the property. Belfry and Maren, Ty and Dylan, and most of the other players trickle in as it gets closer to time. Daisy sent Zac on a bit of a wild-goose chase to make him later than everyone else. I squeal when Summer and Liam walk in, and laugh at how even Belfry seems starstruck by Liam.

Jamison shows up right before Zac is due and I watch how he checks Ava out and she glares and turns to walk in the opposite direction. Definitely a story there that I need to investigate.

Everyone but Zac's agent, Chase, has shown up with time to spare. When

I see Zac pull in, I shush everyone, and we get in our places.

Ivy and I stand in front, Ivy giggling and bouncing with her hand in mine, and when he opens the door, there's a holy hush. From where I'm standing, I can see him taking in the cleared-out entry, the woodwork over the arched walkway a masterpiece that stands out more than ever now that there's not a huge ladder taking over. He's wearing a suit as he always does after a game, and the new white, rust, and navy floral tie I stuck in his suitcase when he wasn't looking. Ivy giggles again in anticipation and Zac calls out, "Hello?"

When he's finally in the living room all the way, Jamison flips the lights on, and we all yell, "Surprise!"

He jolts back and then rubs his hand over his jaw, laughing. His eyes find mine and I can see his wheels turning from here. I hope his mama isn't able to read the lust in his eyes because damn, he is sending out the vibes big-time as his eyes roam down my body. Ivy runs and hugs him and I make my way over to him too, as people pound him on the back wishing him a happy birthday.

"What have you done?" he murmurs against my cheek. His hands splay across my lower back and he tugs me closer. "You look good enough to eat. I thought we already celebrated birthdays. Is this your way of asking for another blo—"

I cover his mouth, eyes wide as he laughs. He greets everyone, and in between, he goes on about the house and how he can't believe it's really done, how amazing it looks...and keeps getting distracted by how I look.

"I was just here last night," he says for the third time, shaking his head. "How did you do this? It was close, but...I can't believe it. And you...in that dress...you're taking my breath away while also wiping out brain cells since all the blood has rushed straight to my Dick LeBeau."

He grins when I narrow my eyes in confusion.

"Have you not heard of Dick LeBeau, the football coach?" he teases, shaking his head. "We still have so much to cover. But I'm not really talking about him," he whispers.

My cheeks hurt from smiling.

"Happy Birthday, Zac," a sexy, familiar voice cuts through the rising chatter, and we both turn to see Halle standing next to Chase.

Zac glances at me in bewilderment and I'm sure I look just as dazed.

"Halle," he says evenly. "This is unexpected."

"When Chase told me about the party, I knew I couldn't miss it," she

says, her eyes drinking him in the way mine do when I'm checking him out. She doesn't acknowledge me at all as she steps closer and kisses Zac on each cheek.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



# 63

## IS THIS REAL?



### Autumn

I look around the room, trying to find Ivy, and see her with Jamison. It's not really my place, but all I can think about is getting to her before she sees Halle. I don't know why I think I can help prepare her, but I want to try.

What is Halle doing here?

I don't know why I'm even questioning it. The reason is obvious. She knows she messed up letting Zac go, and she's here to reclaim her territory.

My phone buzzes as I get closer to Ivy and I glance down. It's a text from Jane and she's moved from impatient to irate.

### Jane

Call me NOW. I do not appreciate being put on the back burner, Autumn. We need to talk immediately.

I sag, the exhaustion of all I've done in the past twenty-four hours hitting me like a freight train. I reach Jamison and Ivy and sign so no one will overhear me. Ty is standing nearby, but I don't mind if he understands what I'm signing.

I get Ivy's attention and don't know how to start other than to just come out with it. I force excitement into my features.

*HALLE HERE. DIDN'T KNOW*, I sign, shaking my head. But I want to make it as positive for her as I can, so I smile wide and point to where Zac is still talking with Halle. I stay focused on Ivy when I hear Jamison curse under his breath. Ivy's eyes have shifted from playful to resigned since I came over here, and when she nods, she looks at least five years older.

I squeeze her shoulder and she glances at me and nods again, taking a deep breath as if she's bracing herself.

*YOU OKAY?* I ask her.

She doesn't look okay, but she nods. I point at my phone and tell her I need to go make a call. When I start to walk away, she grabs my arm and signs, *THANK YOU*. And then does my special sign that still melts me every single time.

I lean down and kiss her cheek and exchange a look with Jamison who has watched the entire interaction.

"I have to call my boss," I tell him and he nods.

"I'll look out for her," he says, putting his hands on Ivy's shoulders.

I squeeze his arm and step outside. The air is crisp despite the outdoor heaters and I walk closer to the fireplace where it's warmer. My hands are shaking as I dial Jane's number, and it has everything to do with Halle, not my boss.

"Autumn," she says when she answers. "I hope you have a good reason for not returning my last five calls."

"It's been crazy here, wrapping up—"

"Yes, well, it's been crazy here too, and now that you're done with the Ledger project, it's time to start talking about all the work you've neglected by being across the country."

I stare out at the water in confusion. I've only had this account since Zac hired me, and it's been colossal enough that Jane and I agreed that I wouldn't even fill an advising role on the projects she's taken in my absence. There's nothing I've neglected except answering her calls the past few days.

"We agreed my focus would be here," I finally say.

“And now that it’s done, your focus needs to be here,” she says firmly.

All this conversation is serving to do is reiterate that I don’t want to work for Jane Winthrop a second longer. I remind myself to breathe and to not burn bridges.

“I’ll come home after Thanksgiving and we can discuss everything,” I tell her.

“That’s not going to work,” she snaps. “We just landed Harry and Meghan’s house and I cannot emphasize enough how we’re going to need everyone giving one thousand percent for this.”

She pauses like she expects me to say something, but all I’m thinking is...Halle is here, I can’t go back yet, and when did one hundred percent stop being enough?

“Autumn!” Her voice is like nails on a chalkboard and I close my eyes, rubbing my head where a headache is forming. “I’ve arranged for you to fly home first thing in the morning. Your flight leaves at 6:25 and you’ll be arriving at 10:09. I’ll arrange a car for us so we can discuss the details on the way to the Sussex house.”

Everything she’s saying is making me more agitated and when she says the Sussex house, I snort. It doesn’t even make her pause. She’s on a mission. This must be the most uptight she’s ever been about a job, and I can’t believe the timing.

I’m so tempted to quit over the phone, but the proper girl my mama raised me to be just can’t do it.

“Okay,” I finally say, as soon as I can get it in. I attempt to use my perkier voice. “I’ll be on that plane tomorrow. I’ll come home.” It feels like I’m saying it as much for myself as I am for her. Nothing about going to LA right now feels like going home.

“Perfect. We’ll get you up to speed in no time,” she says. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, Jane.” I hang up the phone and shiver, turning around to go inside.

Zac is just inside the door, which is good—the sooner I can tell him what’s going on, the better. When I reach him, I put my hand on his back and smile up at him, but he walks away. I look at his back, frozen for a second, before I follow him.

“Zac,” I call, and when he doesn’t stop, I pick up my pace until I’m by his side. “Zac, are you okay? Is it Halle?” I whisper. “I swear to you I had no

idea she was coming.”

His jaw clenches, but he acts like he doesn't hear me and I clutch his arm, feeling panic rising inside of me.

“Zac.” I try to move in front of him, but he sidesteps me and Belfry shakes his hand heartily, going on about how magnificent the house is.

I glance around the room, trying to make sense of what's happening right now, trying to stay calm when I just want to cry.

“There you are,” my sister says, coming up behind me and hugging me, her chin on my shoulder. “You have worked your magic and then some. This place is incredible.”

“It really is,” Liam says, leaning in to kiss my cheek. When he pulls back, he frowns. “Hey, what's wrong?”

Summer moves until she's in front of me and grabs my hand. “What happened?”

“I don't know. I-Halle showed up unexpectedly...”

“I saw that,” Summer says under her breath. “I know we've thought she was the ultimate, but let me tell you, you are killing it in this dress. Halle has *nothing* on you,” she hisses, and I smile in spite of myself.

“You're the best sister to say that,” I sigh, “but I haven't even had time to be insecure. I had to call Jane back, and she's insisting I fly out tomorrow morning...”

“What?” Summer gasps.

“Yeah, and Zac...I left him talking to Halle so I could check on Ivy and call Jane, and now he can't even look at me. I have no idea what happened.”

We all look around the room for Zac and when we spot him, Liam curses under his breath. Zac is standing in a corner, his face pinched and thunderous, like a dark cloud has taken over his body.

“He looks like he's about to fucking explode,” Liam says behind his fist.

“I need to talk to him.” I take a deep breath and squeeze Summer's hand.

“Don't worry about the party. Everything's running smoothly. I think I saw Pappy working on a puzzle with Ivy, so don't worry about her. And I might try to run into Halle Reid and see how many ways I can tell her to leave my sister's man alone.” Summer hugs me and pulls back, her hand on my cheek. “Let me know if you need me.”

I nod and walk across the room to Zac but before I can reach him, I'm stopped by guests, several asking if I can meet to discuss redoing their homes. Ivy eventually walks over and puts her arm around my waist and I

lean down.

*ARE YOU OKAY?* I sign.

She nods and looks over her shoulder where Halle has managed to move near Zac again.

When I have Ivy's attention again, I probably butcher my signs because I'm upset, but I try my best to get it out. *ME. GO TO CALIFORNIA. TOMORROW.*

Ivy's eyebrows lift and she clutches my hands.

"I'll be back," I say without signing and she drops my hands, letting me sign the words. "I need to get my things," I add.

She looks so relieved, I reach over and hug her. She pulls back and signs, *BACK. WHEN?*

"I don't know yet," I tell her. "I'll call you when I get there. Okay?"

She nods and then Jamison stops in front of us.

"Cake?" he asks Ivy.

She does a little dance and they take off toward the cake. I look around for Zac, unable to find him at first. When I catch his eye and walk toward him, he looks up at the ceiling like he can't even stand the sight of me.

"What happened, Zac?" I start to put my hand on his arm, but stop at the last second. "I need to talk to you."

He looks at me then and his eyes are distant. He gives me a brisk nod. "Okay," he says.

"Okay," I repeat, hoping that I'm imagining all of this weirdness. "I had no idea Halle was coming," I start.

"I know," he says.

"Oh, good. And...I was on the phone with Jane earlier." I turn to see what he's looking at over my shoulder that seems to have his full attention, but I can't be sure. I look at him again and step closer. This is crazy—why does it feel like he's shutting me out? "Uh, I need to go back...Jane's insisting I fly out *tomorrow* actually..."

He clasps his hands in front of him, his shoulders straight. He looks at me then and it's like he's looking right through me.

"What time do you leave? I'll arrange a driver for you," he says.

"Oh, don't worry about that—I'll take care of it. I want you to enjoy your party..." I swallow hard, watching as his tongue dips out over his lips.

"While I'm there, I'll be able to pick up my—"

"Thank you for all you've done, Autumn," he interrupts, his voice so

cold, I shiver. “The house is better than I could’ve hoped. I’ll have the final payment in your account first thing in the morning.”

And with that, he walks away, leaving me staring at his back, my heart in shreds on the floor.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 64

## BLINDSIDED



Zac

*“I’ll be on that plane tomorrow. I’ll come home.”*

I hear Autumn saying those words over and over in that animated tone I don’t even recognize.

Something inside of me curled up and died the moment I heard her say it. I’d seen her through the windows and went out there to tell her I’d let Halle know in no uncertain terms that she was not welcome at this party.

I’d wanted to apologize to *her*. I felt awful that she’d put all that work into the house and then threw a party for me on top of it, only to have my ex show up cooing into my ear how she’d made such a mistake and wanted me back. I got rid of Halle, fired my agent, and hightailed it outside to kiss any worries out of my girl.

Only to find out she’s leaving me.

I'm such a fucking fool.

I take another long swig of whiskey straight from the bottle and listen to the water lap against the rocks as the wind picks up. I've been out here a while. The party ended hours ago and Ivy went home with my parents. My mom wanted to let Autumn and me have a romantic night together, but I just wanted to make sure Ivy didn't get her heart broken when she woke up and realized Autumn was gone.

Halle didn't even try to see her daughter, and good fucking riddance. I am done with women and done with relationships. I don't know why I ever thought I was capable of having one.

Sometime in the night, I move by the fireplace and fall asleep on one of the couches. I jump when I feel something on my shoulder and open my eyes.

Autumn is standing over me, the light from the fire and my bleary eyes making it seem like I'm looking at her through a rainy window.

"I couldn't find you," she says, her voice breaking. "I'd hoped we could talk."

I sit up and rub my eyes and then try to hold my head in where it's pounding.

"I just wanted to tell you bye," she says.

"I'm terrible at goodbyes." My words are slurring, and I sound like a bastard, but I can't pretend that she isn't breaking my fucking heart.

"Yeah," she says softly. "I am too." She wipes her face and I blink, her tears coming into focus this time.

"I hate it when you cry," I croak.

She sniffs and puts a tissue up to her nose like she's been at it a while.

"I'll call Ivy later. I let her know what was happening last night, but I'll call her when I get home too," she says.

I wave my hand. "Don't bother," I growl.

Her eyes get huge. She picks up the bottle next to me and freezes. "Did you drink all of this?"

"Get out of here, Cheeky. Isn't your ride here yet?" I grumble, lying back down. I close my eyes so I won't have to look at her anymore, but when she walks away, I sit up and I watch her go.

---



“Easy does it. Come on, sit up. Whoa, someone is smellin’ rank,” Jamison says, squinting at me, his nose curled up.

“What’re you doing here?” I groan.

“I woke up to messages from Autumn. Five of them, in fact...each one more desperate than the last.” He pulls me to my feet and I let out a long string of all my favorite curse words. “Okay then.” Jamison laughs. “Let’s get you in the shower.”

My head feels like parts of it are splintering off, or maybe that’s my heart that’s in pieces. Everything hurts. I press my fingers to my eyes and they come back wet.

Jamison pretends not to notice. He leads me inside the house, sets me down at the island, and pours me a cup of coffee. When he hands it to me, he leans on his elbows on the opposite side and studies me.

“Someone cares about your ass. I hope you didn’t blow it with this one,” he says. “She sounded as heartbroken as you’re acting. What happened, brother?”

“She left,” I choke out.

“Did you want her to stay?”

“What do *you* think?” I yell, but my voice is hoarse, so it’s not very effective.

“What do *I* think? Let’s see. I think I really hope you told her how much you wanted her to stay. I think I hope you’ve been telling her how fucking gone you are over her. I think I really, *really* hope you’ve told her you’re in love with her because anyone with a brain can see it, but something tells me with how lost she sounded...that maybe she didn’t know it.”

My mouth opens and closes. I wrap my hands around the mug but barely feel the warmth.

“In so many ways, I did,” I finally say. “In every way I knew how, I did.”

He snorts, and I want to know when my brother became a fucking therapist.

“Our family says *I love you* all the time,” he says, glaring at me. “You know how to say the words. *Did you say them to her?*”

I growl at him and he stands to his full height, looking like he’s about to come at me and send me flying across the room. Today he could probably do it.

“No, I didn’t fucking say it,” I say, putting my head in my hands. “Everything was going so well, I didn’t want to do anything to mess it up. I

didn't want to do a *single thing* to upset the balance. This is a lot." I wave my hands around. "My career and my daughter and my ex. And she's only twenty-four and trying to get her career off the ground..." I hit my mouth with my fist, looking up at the ceiling. "And I couldn't take the thought of her leaving me and Ivy," I finish quietly.

Jamison stares at me for a beat. "Then you better sober up and figure out how you're gonna get her back. Because she's gone, and you basically just said see ya."

Her face, crinkling up as she was telling me bye hits me. "She was *crying*." I stand up and feel like I'm going down. "I'm supposed to be at practice."

"Don't you blow this, brother. I'd give anything to have what you guys have, and you know I don't have a romantic bone in my body, but the two of you make it look easy." He lets out a long exhale and continues to glare at me.

"I didn't know you wanted to settle down," I say weakly. "You used to say you weren't cut out for commitment."

"Yeah, well, you're not making it look very appealing at the moment, but I have faith you'll turn it around," he mutters.

"I found the right girl...if I haven't already lost her." My voice cracks and Jamison just shakes his head. "You'll find the right person for you too." I sigh and the exhaustion is like an ache or maybe that's literally my heart breaking right now. "I have to go. I'm supposed to be at practice."

"You're Zac fucking Ledger. Everyone knows you were off last night. You were on cloud fucking nine at the beginning of the night and then as dark as a hurricane. Play your heart out on Thursday night, and you'll be okay. What are you gonna do about Autumn?"

I stare at nothing for a few long minutes, the enormity of what I've done and *not* done sinking in. "I'm gonna get her back."

"Whew. You scared me there. I thought I was gonna have to beat some sense into you. Now go get a shower before you stink up this pretty new house..."

"Watch it, Little Squirt. I can still bench press you with my little finger."

He snorts. "*Ohh-kay*, Ballzac. I'd like to see you try."

# 65

## ENDINGS



### Autumn

My nose is raw and my eyes hurt from crying too much. The person next to me on the plane keeps giving me sidelong glances and trying to scoot as far as she can get from me.

“I’m not sick, I swear,” I finally say. “Just a sad night.”

She pretends to not hear me. Figures.

Sometime at that party last night, Zac stopped listening to me too. My eyes fill again and I close them, too tired to fight it anymore. I fall asleep and wake up when we’re landing, my first thought on Zac and Ivy. I wonder what they’re doing...and then it hits me all over again that something has been broken.

If I could just know what went wrong. I stayed up all night waiting for him to come to bed. At first I was in our room downstairs since I hadn’t told

him I'd moved us upstairs already, and then I went upstairs, eventually searching the house for him. I tried calling him. I embarrassed myself by calling his brother, his mom...and when I found him outside, I was just so grateful he was okay that I didn't even consider being mad.

I wipe my nose and wince. Ow.

How dare he write me off to a business arrangement? I yank my carry-on out from under the seat with aggression and stalk off of the plane. *Money in my account first thing this morning...* I can't believe he had the audacity to bring money into our conversation. My heart thump-thump-thumps faster with each step to baggage claim. I almost didn't check a bag, still thinking I'd be back—but why? He acted like he was washing his hands of me. What made me ever think he wanted me to stay?

I feel like such an idiot. Here I was, mentally rearranging my life, thinking we were on the same page even if we weren't talking about it, and the first chance he has to get rid of me, he jumps on it.

Okay, I'm mad.

I text Jane to let her know which door I'll be exiting, get my suitcase, and the car pulls up for me within minutes, trunk popping open. A guy meets me, lifting my suitcase into the trunk and I get in the backseat where Jane is waiting.

She frowns when she sees me, already shaking her head. "You can't go to Harry and Meghan's looking like this."

"No, you're right. I cannot," I say, letting my head fall back on my seat. "Thank you for the experience, Jane. I'm officially giving you my two weeks' notice."

She sputters and by the time the driver gets in, she's found her voice. "I knew I shouldn't waste my time on someone like you. I had to practically force you to take the Ledger job, and then you went gallivanting across the country and I barely heard from you again. I should've known you weren't stable." She puts her head in her hands. "Subpar work, flighty, and unprofessional," she moans. "How did I get where I am doing everything by myself?"

"Jane," I say, holding my hand up.

I feel her eyes on me as she turns to look at me.

"Yes, I just did the ten-thousand square foot house you *forced* me to do, showing up for the calls we agreed to, and doing a damn good job." I turn to look at her and she looks stunned that I'm speaking. I guess I haven't ever

said much to her beyond *okay* and *yes* and *let me get that for you*. “He wanted me without you, and I insisted we go through you because I’m ethical and dependable and fucking fabulous. You’re welcome for that incredible commission that you didn’t earn.”

Her mouth opens and closes and her beady eyes are drilling holes into mine with her shock.

I nod. “Okay, that’s enough of that.” I lean forward. “Would you mind dropping me at the cafe up there? I’m tired of being in spaces where I’m not welcome.”

“Uh, sure,” the guy says.

Within minutes, I’m rolling my suitcase and carry-on into the cafe. The pink flamingo on the wall judges me when I walk inside.

“Yep, I’m back,” I tell her.

I order coffee and a piece of sourdough toast, my stomach still too much of a mess to try to eat more than that. While I wait, I text Summer to tell her what happened and where I am. She tried to get me to come back with her last night, but I couldn’t do that when Jane had already bought my ticket. I groan. So much for trying to do the right thing.

My phone buzzes and it’s my sister.

Summer

On my way.

I can get a ride, just taking a minute to breathe and drink coffee first.

Summer

Stay put. I’m coming.

I look at the time and think about where Ivy would be right now. She’s off school today and hopefully still with Daisy. I FaceTime Daisy’s number before I can change my mind.

“Autumn,” Daisy says when she picks up. She looks frazzled. “You’re already in California?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay, honey?”

“No,” I say honestly. “I wanted to be sure I checked in on Ivy. I told her I’d call and let her know that I made it. Is she there?”

“Yes, honey. Let me get her.”

It's not long before she's back with Ivy and when Ivy sees me on the screen, she smiles and waves.

*HI. HOW ARE YOU?* I sign.

*GOOD. WHERE?* She tilts her head, pointing at something past me.

I turn and look behind me and it's the flamingo. I smile.

*CAFE. MISS YOU. YOU. DAISY. FUN! SURPRISE IN YOUR ROOM AT HOME.* I smile again with my eyes wide, trying my best to keep it together. I take a shaky breath. *CALL ME...ANYTIME.*

Her brows crease. *YOU COME HOME?*

Oh god. My eyes fill with tears and I turn away so she can't see me losing it. *I LOVE YOU, SWEET AS CANDY. I LOVE YOU.*

She blinks and looks like she might cry. Daisy's sitting next to her and I try to subtly wipe my face. "My sister is almost here," I tell Daisy. "Can you please hug each other for me?"

To Ivy, I simply sign, *HUG.*

Daisy nods and looks like she might cry too. She presses her lips together and leans in. "I don't know what happened, but we love you, and you guys can work this out."

I press a kiss to my fingers and lift them toward her. "I love you too. Bye."

Feeling an urgency to see my sister, I hang up and put my phone in my suitcase, and hurry to the door. I need the California sunshine to soothe my battered heart.

Summer's there within minutes, and it doesn't solve anything, seeing her, but I know with her, I'm in good hands. I hug her hard, starting to cry again with her compassion. She cries too, my sweet sister.

"I'm so sorry, Auto," she says, pushing back my hair. "I want to kick him in the nuts so bad."

I choke out a laugh. "Is it bad that I like his nuts too much for you to do that?"

She makes a face and nods slowly. "You do have it as bad as I thought if you're into his nuts."

We both sigh and then she starts driving us through the crowded streets.

"Change of plans if you're okay with it," she says. "But something tells me you're okay with some changes since you quit your job as soon as you got here." She glances at me. "Holy hell. I'll need to hear that in detail, but first, let's see what you think. If you're not up for it, we'll get her here instead."

“What? Who?”

“Liam has the plane ready to go to Charlotte. Mama’s worried about you, and I’d convinced her to come here for Thanksgiving, but I thought it might be nice for us to go home. You could cry with Jericho by your side and Mama wouldn’t have to go through getting jet-lagged...”

“Yes,” I say emphatically. “Yes, that sounds perfect.”

She does a little dance and takes another turn. “Good, I was hoping you’d say that.” We pull into a lot and I realize we’re near the airport, just the area off the beaten path that has the smaller hangars for the private planes.

Within half an hour, we’re taking off, heading back to the East Coast. It feels like déjà vu, the way I flew back and forth from coast to coast when I first took the job with Zac, and yet this full circle moment is full of gaps that make no sense.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 66

## IT'S GOOD TO BE HOME



### Autumn

I feel like a kid again. Being at my mom's house has been the best possible option. If I had to be miserable, there's no one I'd rather be miserable around than the three people in this house. Mama, Summer, and Liam have let me cry ad nauseum, and we've cuddled and laughed and cried and watched more TV than is healthy. Liam has kept us supplied with cocktails that are getting increasingly better the more he makes, and Jericho's little fat furry body is in heaven, having all of us around to pet him.

I realized I'd lost my phone not long after I got here. I've searched my suitcase, my carry-on, called the cafe and they haven't found it, and the only thing I can figure out is that in my blurry-eyed state, I just thought I put my phone in my suitcase and it's really in someone's pocket somewhere...

It's for the best anyway. I would've been obsessively checking my phone



otherwise, and that wouldn't have been healthy. I miss Zac and Ivy so much it hurts to breathe. I don't think that will go away. I'm not sleeping well. My clothes are already baggy and Mama forces me to take a long bath every day; otherwise, I probably would still be in my leggings and bedazzled jersey.

We had a lovely Thanksgiving dinner tonight, later than usual so we could have a leisurely morning, and are in the family room about to start a movie.

"I know I've already said it, but I just can't stop thinking about Ivy. I told her to call me anytime and then I lost my phone—I let Daisy know about the phone, but still. Will she think I've abandoned her?" My voice cracks and Liam puts his hand on my shoulder and gives me a cocktail. "Thank you," I whisper, my lips trembling. "I'm sorry you're having to see me like this. I didn't know I could go to this wretched place. You're a good brother."

His face is pained as he bends down and kisses my forehead before sitting on the ottoman my feet are resting on. "Please don't hate me," he says, making a face.

"What?" I ask, as Summer stands in the doorway, hand on her hip.

"What did you do?" she asks.

"I let Zac know you'd lost your phone." He cringes like he's waiting for me to pelt him with rocks. "After I told him he was on my shitlist," he adds. "And that you wanted to make sure Ivy knew you hadn't abandoned her."

I look at the ceiling, willing the tears away, which just doesn't work, and get my bearings before I thank him. "Did he say anything back?"

The pause Liam takes before answering has the anger welling up in me all over again...no, not all over again—once my anger showed up, it never left. He glances at his phone and seems to decide something. He picks up the remote and turns the station to the Patriots game. They're playing the Vikings and down by three.

"Hell, no, we're not watching this garbage," Summer says.

I'd laugh if I didn't feel the same way. Except just then the camera zooms in on Zac taking off his helmet during a timeout. He has dark circles under his eyes and—

"Turn it off, Liam," Summer says.

"Wait," I say. "It's almost over."

Mama sits next to me and puts her arm around my shoulder. "You can do better than him, baby doll," she says. I tear myself away from Zac's retreating backside, every part of me hungry to see more of him, and look at my mom.

“Are you not seeing the same man I am?” I ask. “There is no better than that.”

She lifts an eyebrow while Liam says, “Hey!”

“There is if he doesn’t realize what he’s got in you,” Mama says. “I don’t care how good-looking he is, if he didn’t hold onto you with everything he has, he is absolutely not worth your time.”

I stop trying to talk because just seeing him is agonizing and filling a craving at the same time. I almost wish I’d watched the whole game, almost. Zac calls out the play and pauses for a second before throwing the ball to Dylan. The Vikings were expecting him to throw it to Ty, and Dylan has a wide open space to run. We’re quiet, but inside I’m cheering when they get a touchdown. I imagine Ivy jumping up and down in front of the TV, which makes me happy even in the hurt. Ty and Dylan surround Zac, tugging his helmet and slapping his back. The next play, the clock runs out and then Zac and his team celebrate. A reporter stops Zac and asks him how he felt about the game.

“It was too close for comfort,” he says. “I needed to win tonight so I could talk to you.”

The reporter laughs and her cheeks get pink, while I see red.

Zac looks at the camera, and I forget to breathe.

“Autumn,” he says, “if you’re watching...”

I gasp, and the tears make everything blurry as he signs the rest.

*I LOVE YOU.* He smiles that smile that makes me weak all over. *WITH ALL MY HEART, I LOVE YOU. PLEASE FORGIVE ME.*

One of his teammates walks behind him and they fist bump, while I sit frozen, staring at the screen. Summer and Mama screamed somewhere in there while he was talking, but I haven’t moved.

“I don’t really know sign language, but I know the sign for *love*,” Summer squeals. “What did he just say? Autumn! *What did he just say?*” she says louder when I don’t answer fast enough.

“He loves me,” I whisper. I press my fingers to my lips, laughing and swiping the tears away. “He loves me. He loves me!”

Mama and Summer huddle around me, hugging me hard.

“He wanted to make sure you were watching,” Liam says, grinning. “That’s what he texted back.” He rewinds the footage back to the beginning and lifts his eyebrows.

I nod, pointing at the remote. Liam laughs and presses play and we watch

Zac at least twenty times before I believe he's really talking to me.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# 67

## ALWAYS



### Autumn

I take a long bath, thinking about Zac and his apology. I'm not sure what to make of it just yet. He hasn't called. It's Thanksgiving and he didn't even call to wish me a happy one. I knew he'd be in Minnesota today—it's part of why my Thanksgiving plans had been so tentative. He wouldn't have even been home today.

But what happened in the past few days for him to go from an ice cube to calling me baby on national TV?

He's only ever called me *baby* occasionally, and I never thought I'd be okay with someone calling me that, but when *he* does...I love it.

I'm at prune status before I get out and see that my mom has washed my leggings and jersey. I decide to save that for tomorrow and put on one of Zac's shirts that I snuck in my suitcase. I don't feel exactly peaceful yet, but I

have a spark of hope building inside.

*He'll make things right...* it's the last thought I have before I fall asleep.

When my mom's hand jostles my shoulder, waking me up, I squint at her and look at the clock. "Is it morning?"

She laughs. "Sure is."

"Wow, I slept till ten," I croak.

"Time to rise and shine," she says, smiling wide.

I yawn. "Mmm, that sleep felt good."

She picks up my leggings and jersey. "Did you notice this is all clean?"

"Thanks, Mama," I say, smiling at her. "Thanks for putting up with my moody ass self."

She pulls back the covers and I startle, shocked she's aggressively trying to get me out of bed.

"What's going on?" I ask as she pushes me toward the bathroom.

"You've got three minutes." She laughs when I squint at her, waving me toward the bathroom. When I step inside, she places my clothes on the counter. "Two minutes, forty seconds."

"Geez." I do my business and wash my hands, put my clothes on and brush my teeth, while she hums in the bedroom. My hair is wavy from going to bed with it wet and doesn't look too bad, but I'm about to pile it on my head when she stops humming.

I poke my head out of the door about to tell her she's acting weird, and Zac and Ivy are standing next to her. I gasp and Ivy's lips press together, her eyes shy and excited. I hold my arms out and she rushes at me, wrapping her arms around me. I hug her so hard, my eyes meeting Zac's as he watches us.

"I'm so happy to see you," I tell her when she pulls back to look at me.

She does her sign for me and I have to hug her again.

"Your mom was gracious to let me inside after the way I treated you," Zac says.

"The apology on national television helped," she says, smiling. "And the groveling when you got here." She looks at me. "He's *really* good. I think you might be right about him." She winks at me.

"Ivy, can you help Autumn's mom in the kitchen?" Zac asks. He spells out her name, *J-E-N-N-A*. "We interrupted your breakfast plans," he tells me. His eyes wander down my bedazzled jersey and leggings like he's memorizing every inch of me. I shiver and rub my arms.

Ivy nods excitedly. "Chocolate chip pancakes," she says, doing a little

dance.

My mom laughs and leads her out the door. “So happy to feed another little girl around here.”

Zac steps closer when my mom shuts the door. “I’m sorry for so many things,” he says. When he’s close enough to touch, he looks unsure. “Are you happy to see me or was that just for Ivy? I’d understand if it was.”

“I’m happy to see you too.” I don’t know why I’m shy around him. We’ve shared so much together, but somehow, this feels different. “Why are you sorry?” I ask.

“For the way I treated you. For not listening. Ivy is the one who told me you were coming to California to get your things. I jumped to conclusions. I didn’t give you a chance to explain anything. But mostly, I’m sorry for how long I went without telling you I love you. And I’m sorry I didn’t beg you to stay.”

My breath gets caught in my throat, and his lips quirk up when he hears it.

“I love you so much, Little Sass. It’s been so easy to love you that I thought it must be clear to you how I felt, which is just stupid. I can’t expect you to read my mind. These days without you have been agony. I didn’t know how many hang-ups I still had over Halle leaving, but that was about Ivy and the loss that would mean for her. You leaving is the only time I’ve ever been devastated over who *I* was losing.” He takes a breath and laughs shakily, swiping his hand over his jaw. “Can I please get my hands on you?”

“Yes, please,” I whisper. He puts his hands on my waist and pulls me in and we both sigh. His forehead touches mine and I inhale the scent that is all him. “I love you,” I tell him, my hands reaching up to his cheeks. “I’ve had some hang-ups of my own, and I’ll try to tell you about them instead of expecting you to fill in the blanks. I’m so in love with you...and Ivy—I never want to live without her either.”

“I’ll do whatever you want,” he says. “If you want to be here, California, Massachusetts...we’ll figure it out.”

“Doesn’t where we live kind of depend on where you’re playing?”

He grins when I say *we*. “Yes, but I’ll retire before long and we can work on houses together...if you’re not sick of me by then.”

“I’ll never get sick of you. And I’d like to enjoy the house we’ve spent so much time working on already, please.” I give him a pointed look. “I had major plans for the master bedroom the other night, and you had to ruin it all

by disappearing on me.”

His eyes flash with discomfort. “I feel awful about it,” he says. “I promise I’ll—”

I lean up and kiss him. “All is forgiven. Just promise you’ll love me forever.”

His hands squeeze my backside and I melt into him.

“Forever and then some,” he whispers.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# EPILOGUE



Zac

Seven months later...

Life with Autumn is better than wonderful. Some days I can't believe how happy I am. I just didn't think it was possible for me to have a life like this. The girl I fell for at a wedding a year ago is the girl I want to spend the rest of my life with...Ivy is thriving...football is going great...I'm looking into investment property with Jamison—it doesn't get any better than that.

Except it does. It keeps on getting better and better every single day. I tell her I love her excessively, according to my family. They tease me nonstop over how whipped I am when it comes to Autumn Winters. Hell, I am the first to admit it.

I've brought her to the lighthouse to celebrate the anniversary of the day



we met. We got here a few hours ago and have already christened the master bed and shower. She tries to have her way with me after we eat dinner, but I'm intent on getting her down by the water before the sun sets.

"Come on, let's go stick our feet in the water." I pull her up and she pouts, running her hand over the bulge in my pants.

"I was having a moment," she says.

I give her ass a smack and she jumps, laughing. "I'll see your moment and raise you an eternity." I lean down and kiss her, lifting her so her legs can wrap around my waist. Once she's secure, I jog the rest of the way, grinning at the way she squeals and laughs with every bounce.

There's a blanket on the dock, and I set her down on that.

"How did you have time to do this?" she asks, smiling.

She looks so damn beautiful, I'm struck speechless. A bird flying overhead squawks and reminds me where I am.

I open the bottle of champagne and pour two glasses. "It's the lighthouse fairy." I shrug. "He knows what we need."

She smirks and clinks her glass with mine. "Lighthouse fairy, huh? I can't keep up with all your roles."

I reach behind me and pull paper boats out of the picnic basket, placing one in the water and floating it toward her.

She smiles and leans in closer, inspecting it. "That's so cute. Did you make it?"

I nod. "I have Pappy to thank for my mad paper boat skills."

"How do you get it to float so perfectly?"

"Trial and error." I laugh. "And a flat bottom. Something we can never say about you."

She snorts. "Wait, it says something." She leans in the water and picks it up while I place another boat in the water, and a couple more behind that.

Fortunately it's a calm night. The stars are aligning for us tonight.

"It does? What does it say?" I ask, and she looks at me like she knows I'm teasing her and looks back at the boat, turning it until the word is facing her.

"Will..." she says.

"Hmm."

She picks up another boat. "You..." Her head flies toward me, eyes wide, and her mouth falls open while I smile and fight the butterflies going nuts in my chest. "Zac," she whispers.

I point to the next boat floating toward her. “That’s a big one there,” I tell her. “Better see what it says.”

She snatches it and I hold onto her so she doesn’t fall in. “Marry...” Her voice is high and shaky, and she grabs the last one fast. “Me...”

She faces me, and I lean in closer, my hand in her hair, my eyes on her mouth, her eyes...I press my lips against hers, unable to wait another second.

“What do you think?” I ask. “Do you think you’d like to be my wife?”

“I’d love it more than anything,” she says.

I kiss her again, a sweet, claiming kiss that quickly turns deep and urgent. She crawls into my lap and straddles me, her heat seeking mine, and I love every second.

I want to draw out every ounce of her pleasure and wring it out of her until she’s incoherent from feeling too good.

I want to touch every inch of her skin with my tongue and explore the places I already know so well until new horizons are exposed.

I’ve been inside her as deep as I can go, but I think there’s deeper. I need to find out.

I smile against her mouth and slow down, reminding myself that we have all night.

We have forever.

***Would you like more Zac & Autumn? Click here to read about their wedding!*** <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/n2m2wxtrlp>

***>>>Want to know more about Jamison and Zac’s resort in small-town Colorado? Pre-order here:*** <https://geni.us/LandmarkMountain>

[OceanofPDF.com](https://oceanofpdf.com)

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Nate, Greyley & Kira, and Indigo, you are the best parts of me, and I'm so grateful for your love and all the cheering on that you do for me on a regular basis. We're in this together and I love you so much.

Laura, you've made my life so much better just by being in it! Love you so dearly. Thanks for the sprints and the nudges to keep going and the laughter on a daily basis. You make doing this author life so much more fun.

Catherine, my sweet friend! Thanks for all the love and encouragement, for always being willing to talk things out and figure out solutions to allll the things! Love you! #lovechain

Tosha, my sister forever, I love you. Thank you for being excited to read every book, but really for so much more than that.

Nina, thank you for all you do for me and my books! This one would not be the same without your help! I'm CRAZY about you.

Christine, you are such a gift. Thanks for your help all these years! We are the OGs. :) So glad you're in my life!

Kim, Valentine, Christine, Sarah, Kelley, and Debra, you are the best. Thank you so much for all the ways you help me. I love you all!

Emily, I love you and your covers so much.

Lynette, Tammy, Amy, and Samantha, thank you so much for your time and help with all my questions and mistakes and redos. You made it easy for me! Lynette, thanks especially for the list of ASL resources!

Jennifer, thank you for being such a wonderful person and beta.

Tarryn, always my love. We're doin' it. #livelikeananimal

Christine Maree, thanks for the steady, unfailing love. You have my heart.

Claire, I live for our voxes. We're figuring out life, one vox at a time. :)

Korrie and Linda, thank you so much for saving me at the last minute with this book!

Kalie, you deserve special mention for reading everything I write, and I do mean EVERYTHING. ;) I love you.

Courtney, love you so, always have, always will. Terrijo, there's never enough time to cover it all. Love you. Trish, Savita, Darla, Priscilla, Anna/Nina, Natalie, and Kell, I love you. Thank you for encouraging me on a regular basis.

To the Asters group, thanks you for hanging in there.

Winston, I can't imagine writing without you by my side now, so I need you to live forever.

To my dad, I love that you're still the only one I know who reads as much as I do.

Troi, thank you for paving the way for me to express myself creatively. I love you. Phyllis, thanks for putting up with my brother. I love you.

To every reader or author or blogger who has read my books or shared my work, thank you. I'm so grateful to be doing what I love. And for everyone who has left a review—THANK YOU!

XO,

Willow

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# OTHER BOOKS BY WILLOW ASTER

## *Standalones*

[True Love Story](#)

[Fade to Red](#)

[In the Fields](#)

[Maybe Maby](#) (also available on all retailer sites)

[Lilith](#) (also available on all retailer sites)

[Miles Apart](#) (also available on all retailer sites)

[Falling in Eden](#)

[Summertime](#)

## *Landmark Mountain Series, coming in 2023*

[Book 1](#)

## *Kingdoms of Sin Series*

[Downfall](#)

[Exposed](#)

[Ruin](#)

[Pride](#)

## *The End of Men Series with Tarryn Fisher:*

[Folsom](#)

[Jackal](#)

## *The G.D. Taylor Series with Laura Pavlov:*

Book 1: [Wanted Wed or Alive](#)

Book 2: [The Bold and the Bullheaded](#)

Book 3: [Another Motherfaker](#)

Book 4: [Don't Cry Over Spilled MILF](#)

Book 5: [Friends with Benefactors](#)

## JOIN MY MASTER LIST...

<https://bit.ly/3CMKz5y>

## FOLLOW ME...

Website: <https://bit.ly/3faYdWY>

Newsletter: <https://bit.ly/3wi0CWz>

Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3tSAXLs>

Twitter: <https://bit.ly/3fc0QI3>  
Instagram: <https://bit.ly/39dJtTx>  
TikTok: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMRbtXW9n/>  
Bookbub: <https://bit.ly/3sjRHkG>  
Amazon: <http://amzn.to/2AJu5uo>  
Goodreads: <https://bit.ly/31dNQcT>  
Join the Asters group: <https://bit.ly/3cjg4ZW>

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# ASL LEARNING RESOURCES

National Association of the Deaf Online ASL Resource:  
[bit.ly/3WuZKK8](http://bit.ly/3WuZKK8)

ASL Connect:  
<https://bit.ly/3Wql0k6>

ASL Pro:  
<http://www.aslpro.com/>

ASLized:  
<http://aslized.org/>

The ASL App:  
<http://theaslapp.com/>

ASL Nook:  
<https://aslnook.com/>

What's the Sign:  
<https://whatsthesign.com/>

American Society for Deaf children:  
<https://bit.ly/3uYADDM>

SignOn with ASDC:  
<https://bit.ly/3V4xxsh>

LifePrint:  
<http://www.lifeprint.com/>

ASL Core:  
<https://aslcore.org/>

ASL Nook:  
<https://aslnook.com/>

ASL Stories Directory:  
<https://bit.ly/3uZhTUH>

Gallaudet University ASL/English stories:  
<http://v12storybookapps.com/>

Texas School for the Deaf, ASL Storytelling videos:  
<https://bit.ly/3V7OEK0>

Rocky Mountain School for the Deaf, ASL Storytelling Videos:  
<https://bit.ly/3W1Uyxr>

[OceanofPDF.com](https://www.oceanofpdf.com/)