

Chapter 3 ~ Sage

The hardest part of staying strong is staying strong when you're at your weakest. The truth is, I missed Mason in a thousand and one different, little ways, seemingly insignificant ways, the ways you take for granted and don't think about until they're no longer part of your life.

His sleep-roughened voice calling to me if he woke up and I wasn't next to him in bed.

His calloused hands on my skin.

His warm lips whispering filthy, dirty promises to me in public.

His arms enfolding me from behind, tugging me close.

His smile when I catch him just looking at me.

His eyes going from warm to hot when I appear in my sweats and tank, messy bun and all.

His happy smile when he brings me flowers.

His just-because-I-missed you calls.

His texts.

Well, his texts haven't stopped so I haven't had to miss those.

Mason: I love you. I love you. I want to say that to you every day first thing when we wake up and last thing before we go to bed at night and hundreds of times in between.

It was a er that first text that I texted him back for the first and last time: **Wrong number. This is Sage, not Eva.**

A er that, total radio silence on my end.

I know I hurt you. It kills me. Being without you is like being without my heart.

If I apologized a million times a day for the rest of my life, it still wouldn't come close to telling you how sorry I am.

There is no good reason for hurting my everything for someone who is nothing to me. Any words I say are just weak excuses. I wish I could say it meant something because otherwise I hurt you for nothing. But that's exactly what happened. She means nothing to me, what happened with her meant nothing to me. You mean everything.

We come back to it just being a lot of words to convey how sorry I am and they don't do anything to help your pain. More than anything I want to take away your pain.

I can just hear your response to that: well, maybe you shouldn't have fucked up. And you'd be right. I will never understand why I did what I did. But I do know that it wasn't because I had any feelings for her or desired her in any way. There is no part of my heart that belongs to her. It all belongs to you.

I'm done hammering at you tonight. I'm sorry, kitten, and I love you with every part of me. I'll keep saying that until you believe me.

His texts I read over and over again, my heart in absolute tatters at his words, at his emotions. I know this man, or I thought I did, and I don't understand how someone who professes to care for me like he does could do thatto me.

The next day at work, around lunch time, there was a massive food drop for us from a local Italian restaurant. It was set up in the break room and we all popped in and indulged as we had time. A er I'd finished eating and was heading back to work, Daria stopped me and handed me a note card that was addressed to me.

Kitten, I miss making your lunch every day so I'll just have to provide it for you. Make sure you eat, Sage. Don't be so busy you forget. I hate not being there to watch over you and make sure you're taking care of yourself. I love you.

Daria was watching me read the note, a funny smile on her face.
"Flowers, lunches. Sounds like somebody is missing you."

I gave her what I hoped was a mysterious, Mona Lisa-like smile and shrugged.

She shook her head at me. "I'll look forward to hearing about this when you're ready."

Not wanting to throw out the note with my supervisor standing there, I tuck it into my back pocket, feeling as if this is becoming a habit.

How do you move past someone if he's always tucked in your pocket?

There is another food delivery right a er I get home, which means another note. As I eat, I stare at the little envelope, afraid to open it, but knowing I'm going to weaken and read his words. With a laugh, I imagine what the people who have to write down his words think.

Dinner is not the same without you, Sage. I can't even sit at our kitchen table because you're not there to talk with. Food is better when I can share it with you. Everything is better when I can share it with you. I love you.

I love him, too, and the yearning to reach out to him was overwhelming. Just to hear that growly voice, even just to hear him breathing, anything to keep our connection.

Stay strong.

Stay strong.

I wanted to believe it was just a one-o , some horrible mistake he'd made and would never make again. If it had been some random woman, I think that may have been easier to accept, but it was Eva.

Eva who had such a long history with him. Eva who still texted (maybe even called) Mason. Eva who was still in his phone contacts. Eva who previously (and still did, obviously) had something that drew them togetheras Mason had said long ago. Eva who just had her mouth on his so recently.

If he'd made a mistake with her once, who was to say there wouldn't be more mistakes with her in the future? I wanted to believe him that it meant nothing, but kissing was so intimate, especially a kiss between former lovers. It had to have meant something, even though he was denying it.

Why, Mason, why did you do it? Why did you destroy us for nothing?

My phone chimed with a text. I knew Mason was beginning his round of evening texts. So far, he texted me in the morning, always something sweet but innocuous.

Good morning, Sage.

I miss waking up to your beautiful face.

Thinking of you, kitten.

Take care of yourself today, Sage.

There would be one or two during the day while he was at work, but at night, he'd barrage me. Tonight was no di erent.

I keep the lights on in the house at night because that makes it harder to see that you're not here. I sit in the dark and ponder my stupidity at losing you.

All I want is to talk to you, try to explain what happened so you can understand it wasn't anything to do with her. It was grief and frustration over Drake's death, it was alcohol, it was sitting around with old friends who knew him, thinking about times when he was alive. But since you can't know what's inside of me, it only sounds like a bunch of excuses to you. I love you, Sage. I don't love her. At all. You own me.

For being a Marine, the tip of the spear, I know what I want to do to resolve this conflict between us. But I'm giving you some time not because I want to, but because I'm trying to think about what you need at this time.

I want you to think about us, not in terms of my mistake, but as a whole. I want you to remember the good times, the sweet times, the night times, the morning times, the simple times, even the times we argued and especially the times we made up. Those were real, Sage. They were real and they were us.

I love you so much. Sage, you can't even imagine how deep and strong my love for you is. And I refuse to believe we're over. I know you love me, too. I am going to count on that to get me through each day I have to spend without you.

Good night, kitten. I love you, Sage. You owned my heart yesterday, you own it today, and you will own it forever.

I love Mason. There is no doubt in my mind as to how deep my love for him is. And I want to believe his words, so so badly, but I keep seeing him in the alley with her.

Something is nagging at me, something I've asked myself many, many times, and it's something I try to push back in my mind every time it pushes forward. Why haven't I blocked Mason? Why do I continue to allow him to text me? Why haven't I cut off contact? And I know it's because I want to hang on to him, to still have that connection, to not lose him completely.

Which leads me back to a question I've had for a long time: why didn't Mason ever block Eva? Did he want that connection, too? Was he trying in some small way to hang on to her?

The thought kills me, but it helps me to stay strong.