

Chapter 12 ~ Sage

Standing in front of my closet, I debated what to wear on my date tonight. I looked down at the jean shorts and so green tank top I was wearing and kind of wished I was just staying in tonight. There were a couple of new shows on Netflix I wanted to watch, but I'd promised my friends I'd give dating a try, mostly because they kept nagging at me until I caved.

This was my second date in the last week, and I didn't have high hopes for it -- mainly because men did not hold much appeal for me right now. Not as much appeal as, say, watching Netflix on my couch while scarfing down chocolate ice cream slathered in hot fudge. I wasn't one of those girls that could jump to a new man while still dealing with feelings for the old one. Although I admired girls that could do exactly that, it just never seemed fair to me to try to use a man as a stepping stone to getting over another man. Maybe my date tonight would be so fascinating and wonderful I wouldn't be able to resist his charms. Yeah. I'd keep holding my breath.

"Sage!"

I heard my name shouted just as the banging on my door began. I knew that voice, so I knew the most beautiful man in the world stood outside, and my heart cracked and shattered again. He's with Eva, they're having a baby, he's a liar, he's a cheater, I'm charmed to myself so I wouldn't fall under his spell.

"Sage, can we talk for a minute?" he asked as soon as I opened the door. He seemed out of breath, as if he'd run here.

"It's not really a good time. I'm...getting ready for a date, Mason."

Something passed over his face that I couldn't quite read. It was more than regret, maybe sadness with possibly a flash of jealousy. But there was more to it. Resignation?

"Do you know this guy? Is he safe? Are you meeting him somewhere safe? Does someone know where you're going, what time you're expected back?"

Now that was so typical of him, worrying about my safety. When we were together, he'd always looked out for me. But now I refused to let myself feel that familiar sense of warmth his concern always wrapped me in.

"What did you need?" I tried to keep my tone businesslike so I wouldn't throw myself into his arms. Why did I have to miss him so damn much? He's with Eva, they're having a baby, he's a liar, he's a cheater.

"Can I come in, please? This won't take long, and I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

I nodded, stepping back to allow him inside.

He looked around, still seeming out of breath, so I walked to the kitchen, where I offered him some water. He was about to say yes when he spied the gender reveal invitation and snatched it off the refrigerator.

"That fucking bitch," he muttered. He looked up at me sharply and, holding the offending cardstock by the corner, brandished the reminder of his infidelity at me.

"This is a lie. There was no gender reveal, she was not living with me, ever, and I don't know who photoshopped my head on someone else's body, but that sure as fuck isn't me and I sure as fuck never posed with her for this picture."

My eyes were wide at the pure rage streaming from this man. Then he took a step toward me, his eyes so intent on me I could feel them like a physical touch.

"I came here to let you know that Eva falsified the paternity test results. I'm not the father of her baby. She lied. She lied, Sage. Aerial her in the alley after that stupid, fucking kiss. Nate came out to see if she was OK and he's actually the father."

"Oh, my god," I breathed. "Why would she do that?"

"She's crazy," he shrugged, but I could tell he was furious. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know, so maybe it could give you some peace of mind, that I'm not as big of an asshole as you think. I never lied to you. I never fucked her. But I am guilty of kissing her in that alley and for allowing that bitch into our lives by not dealing with her sooner. I'm so sorry for that, Sage. Sorry you were hurt, most of all, in so many ways. I'll regret the fact that I allowed her to hurt you for the rest of my life. We had something beautiful, and in ten seconds, I fucked it all up. That's something I'm going to see every day when I look in the fucking mirror."

"Mason," I said so ly, helplessly, not knowing what to say in the face of such misery and pain.

He told me how he had investigated what had happened in the alley that night after he learned her, how Eva had wanted to break us up because she's an evil bitch, how she had misused her boss's credentials at the CIA to order the paternity test to be falsified, claiming it was a matter of national security. He also described the confrontation with her, her boss, Nate and him in her boss's office -- and that she was going to jail for many years for a number of crimes.

"That was the easy part," he said to me, and his eyes were so lost I wanted to cry. "The other thing I wanted to tell you was I get it. I understand, Sage. I tried for seven months after I fucked up to prove my love to you, to prove I regretted my actions in the alley that night and to prove you were the only one for me. In my mind, it was a ten-second mistake, definitely a betrayal of you, of your trust, of our relationship, but a mistake that I regretted with every part of me, down to my soul, a mistake I would do anything to take back. And since I obviously couldn't take it back, I wanted to show you, reassure you, that even though I fucked up so badly, that you were worth it for me. That you were and are the love of my life, the whole fucking reason I exist."

Taking a step closer to me, he stared into my eyes. "I was hoping that months and months of my devotion before and after that alley scene could erase it from your mind, help you to see that nothing like that would ever happen again, to show you that all of our time together, all of the moments and memories we had together, were bigger than my mistake. We had ten months together. That's about twenty-six million seconds. The alley kiss was ten seconds. I made the colossal mistake of thinking it was only ten seconds out of all the seconds we shared. How could ten seconds of wrong possibly wipe out twenty-six million seconds of amazing wonderful incredible perfection?"

His hand reached out to stroke my cheek.

"Then Eva's lies about the baby, the falsified paternity results -- you immediately assumed I was lying because all I could give you was my word that I wasn't the father. You didn't believe in me because I'd given you a reason to no longer trust my word. Ten seconds wiped out everything you trusted in me because I kissed another woman in an alley and ruined everything between us. Twenty-six million seconds, Sage, and I killed everything good between us in ten fucking seconds."

For a moment he drew in deep breaths, as if he was gathering his courage, then he focused back on me.

"I also realized those ten seconds are all you're ever going to see when you look at me; it's always going to be a dark shadow in some corner of your mind, whether it's today, tomorrow or years from now. You're always going to think the worst of me in some corner of your mind, you're going to doubt my devotion to you, to expect another betrayal from me at some point. And that falls squarely on my shoulders."

Both of his hands came up to frame my face, and he looked me in the eyes, so much sorrow and pain in his that I felt like I was looking into the depths of hell.

"I don't want to keep hurting you, Sage. The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt you, and that's all I've been doing by being present in your life, by forcing myself into your life since that fucking night with my texts and calls and flowers and food deliveries and letters. It kills me to keep hurting you, to be a constant reminder of the day I betrayed you. So my Sage, my kitten, I'm letting you go so that you can find someone you can trust and love, someone who is not going to be a constant reminder of the ten second fuck up that ruined everything beautiful between us. The very last thing I want to do is to keep causing you pain. I don't want you with a man you cannot trust. I don't want you battling fears and demons and doubts just so I can be selfish and keep you in my life. My need to not hurt you has to be greater than my need to keep you with me, or what kind of love is that?"

He choked and it sounded like a sob escaped from his throat. "I'd keep fighting for you forever if it were up to me, but I'm causing you too much pain and I don't want to be selfish. I can't keep being selfish, Sage. I don't want you with a man whose devotion and loyalty you question. I want...I want you to find a man who you can believe in one hundred percent, who will never make a mistake like I did. I want someone for you who you never have a reason to doubt. I love you so fucking much, Sage, so much but I'd rather be the one living with the broken heart than you. I'm not willing to keep hurting you by trying to force your forgiveness. I just want you to know, one last time, how sorry I am for hurting you, and that I wish you a beautiful future with a man who is your everything, who never gives you a reason to doubt his devotion."

He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "If you ever need anything, I will be there in a heartbeat and I'll get it for you, do whatever you need. I'll never change my number in case you ever need me tomorrow or thirty years from now."

He pressed a kiss to my lips and then pulled me to his chest, inhaling so deeply I'd swear he was trying to absorb my very essence into his soul.

"I love you so much, kitten. I loved you yesterday. I love you today. I'll love you for all my tomorrows," his words were so choked with tears I could barely understand him. "Please be happy, Sage. You deserve it. You deserve all the happiness that life has to offer and I want that for you more than anything."

Mason looked down at me, and I could see the tears in his eyes. My Marlene had tears streaming down his face as he turned, walked away from me and went out my front door.

For the last time.

For good.

Mason had just ended our story.

The end.