

## Chapter 13 ~ Sage

I couldn't tell you how long I stood in the kitchen after Mason left me.

Left me.

My knee-jerk reaction was to run after him, to drag him back into my apartment and discuss things. But I stopped myself, because I had to make certain of my next steps with Mason. This was either a go forward, full-speed ahead situation or a let it fade away and turn in to a cherished memory situation. And it would be cherished because, regardless of those ten seconds he spent in an alley with Eva, he was absolutely right: the millions of seconds before that had been beautiful.

Despite wanting to tear out the door after him, despite feeling as if I were going to hyperventilate at the thought of my life without him, I put my next move on pause. It would be cruel to Mason to call him back if I wasn't certain I could put the alley in the past, if I couldn't one hundred percent believe he'd never do that to me again.

It's funny how you can take something or, in this case, someone for granted. I was used to Mason being there for me, even when we were apart. He was always in the background, even when I left him, even when I refused to speak to him, patiently waiting for me.

Loving me

The meals. The flowers. The texts and calls and letters. He couldn't be there to physically take care of me when I'd leave him, but he'd made sure to take care of me just the same, with no promise or hope that I'd ever let him back into my life.

I used the palms of my hands to scrub the tears from my face.

Looking in a mirror, I was amazed at just how awful my face looked after only a few minutes of crying. Well, OK, let's be honest -- sobbing. Hysterically.

Picking up my phone, I called my date that night, and apologized profusely for having to cancel at the last minute. I felt horrible doing that to him, but there was no way I could have faked my way through conversation with a stranger for even an hour. And honestly, I felt nothing but relief that I didn't have to go out and meet someone new. My first date had been nice enough, but it felt forced to me, as if I was trying to rush something you really can't rush.

I had accepted these two dates to appease Hannah and Taylor -- and that was wrong. It wasn't fair to these perfectly nice men to be going out with them when I was not ready to start dating yet. I needed to move on in my own timeline, not some well-meaning friends'. And while jumping from relationship to relationship might work for Taylor, it wasn't for me. Neither was Hannah's two-week rule -- she always gave herself two weeks to get over a man before she forced herself to start dating again. However, I needed to process and think, allow my heart to mend so I wasn't looking across the table at someone and thinking about another man's eyes or another man's much superior smile. My theory was, if you didn't give yourself time to heal, you were bound to make the same mistakes repeatedly.

Ironically, I refused to impose a timeline on getting over Mason, but I'd given myself a deadline of three days to think about what I really wanted with him. For seventy-two hours, I would force myself to keep waiting and think clearly. At work, I was able to miraculously focus, so my shift hours flew by, but the minute I walked out the hospital doors, my mind was whirling, thinking, sifting, sorting.

Tonight, with just twenty-four hours to go, I was meeting Taylor and Hannah for dinner and I'd fill them in about what had happened with Mason and Eva. I hadn't shared that with anyone yet, so I was curious to see what their reactions would be.

We met at a little Mexican restaurant we all loved that had the best margaritas in glasses so big, I swear you could practically swim in them. By the time we had ordered our food, Hannah and Taylor were staring at me impatiently.

"Bryce said you canceled the date," Hannah said, not even pretending to ease into it. She just wanted the tea spilled and spilled now.

"Yep." Taking a long sip of my drink, I bought myself a few seconds to marshal my thoughts. "Mason came over when I was getting ready for my date."

That made them sit up, wide-eyed. "Was he just trying to mess with you?"

"No. He had no idea I had a date. He came to tell me that Eva had falsified the paternity test --" at their shocked exclamations, I stopped for a second to let them react to that bit of craziness -- and he wanted me to know that he hadn't had sex with her or lied to me, and the baby was definitely not his."

"That's a game changer," Taylor said with authority.

"And then he told me that he was letting me go. That he couldn't stand to keep hurting me. He said he realized when I didn't believe him that the baby wasn't his that he'd hurt me in a way that was going to keep hurting me if he stayed in my life. He said he'd rather bear the hurt of living without me than to keep hurting me by being a constant reminder of what he'd done and the way he'd destroyed my trust."

Hannah's eyes looked stricken. "Oh, wow."

"If that wasn't enough, he actually cried and told me he loved me and wanted me to be happy and then he walked away. I have never seen Mason cry. Even when his friend Drake died, Mason never shed a tear. I honestly didn't think he could cry. But the idea of leaving me, living his life without me... that made Mason cry."

My stupid allergies were clearly acting up, and I had to wipe my eyes.

Two pairs of sympathetic eyes were trained on me.

"You still love him," Hannah told me. She wasn't asking. She knew the answer to that. They both did.

"Yes, but that's never been the issue. Can I ever trust him again is the real problem."

"You know I hate what he did to you," Taylor said slowly, "but maybe he's more than his mistake?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. I think I've forgiven him, but that doesn't automatically mean I trust him."

"I get it," Taylor nodded her agreement. "That's not an easy thing to come back from. Do you think he ever cheated on you before?"

For a minute, I thought about my answer, wanting to make sure that I wasn't just blurted out the answer I wanted to give. "No, I really don't think he ever cheated on me before that alley incident with the ho."

"I think him backing away says a lot. I think it sends a huge message that you're more important to him than his own wants and needs," Hannah said thoughtfully, taking a sip of her margarita. "Most men would be begging and pleading for you to come back and forgive them at first, but I can't imagine many men would work at it for as long as Mason did. They wouldn't care if it was hurting you, as long as they got what they wanted."

Taylor shook her head sadly. "You and Mason were always relationship goals for me. I couldn't believe it when he did what he did. I was pissed I didn't understand it."

"You and me both," I said without amusement.

"I get it," Hannah said. "I get patients in all the time that have done stupid shit. They can't explain to me why they thought doing what they did was a smart move, especially when it resulted in them being hurt. They just acted in the moment and messed up. Most of them learn from their mistakes, and I don't see them again for stupid shit -- or at least not for the same stupid shit. Occasionally, I see patients who have successfully repeated their stupid mistake and they did it the second time because they wanted to see if the outcome would be different. Those are the Darwin contenders. I don't think Mason is a Darwin contender."

"No?" I wanted her reassurance. I wanted her as my second opinion.

She stuck out her lower lip and shook her head. "He's not. He loves you in a way that I've rarely seen. He fucked up. No doubt in my mind about that. No doubt in anyone's mind, especially his. But is he a constant fucker upper? No. Before that bad grief and alcohol-fueled stupidity, he was straight as an arrow, had eyes for you and only you and made it clear to everyone around. And I think you taught him a lesson he will never forget. You left his ass, no debate, no hesitation. That man will never risk losing you again."

"Let me ask you this, Sage," Taylor picked up the conversational reins as soon as Hannah dropped them. "Did he apologize, sincerely, for what he did?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel he regretted it? The kiss, I mean, and not the getting caught part."

"I have no doubt he regretted that kiss."

"OK. Do you feel he blew off what happened, tried to rush you into getting over it, minimize it in any way, or did he own his shit and let you take it at your pace?"

"He definitely owned it and let me set the pace."

"And during all the months that you were socially apart, did you hear from him?"

"Yes."

"How often? How did he communicate with you?"

"I heard from him every day. He, ah, sent me texts, he wrote me letters when I told him to stop texting, he sent me dinner every night, and flowers or food to the hospital every day. And for the last few months, he came to visit on weekends."

Taylor leaned forward. "Sage, hon, was he doing all of this without a definite commitment from you as to whether you'd take him back eventually?"

"Yes."

"A lot of guys wouldn't have done that, Sage. Not even a tenth of that. And most wouldn't have done it for months after months after months without the promise of some reward at the end of their effort. He wasn't acting out of guilt, he was acting out of love. He was trying to show you his love, that it was you he wanted. Most guys would have been all this bitch is too much trouble; time to move on and cut my losses. But Mason only let you go when he realized his presence in your life was just going to keep hurting you."

We all sat and pondered that kind of love for a minute.

"So, if I take him back, how do I address the trust? It still concerns me."

Hannah nodded. "Rightfully so. You can only tell him you don't want him out of your life, but trust is going to take a while."

"Something he'll have to work on rebuilding with me, step by step."

"Yeah, I know he'll be willing to work on it with you," Taylor said. "Just make sure that's what you want, too."

Slowly nodding, I looked at my friends. "I think we have -- had? Still have? -- something very rare. And when it comes down to it, I don't want to let it go."

Taylor pressed her hand over mine. "I've dated a lot of guys, Sage. Some are, sadly, no more than their mistakes. Mason is not his mistake, I don't think. I think he is a man who made a terrible mistake and regretted it hugely. If I thought for one second he'd do it again, I'd warn you out in a heartbeat. But I'm not warning you out."

Since Taylor and Hannah lived near each other, they Ubered home together after we hugged good night, and I took my own Uber, glad for the time to just sit and think about everything we'd talked about over dinner. I was pretty sure what I'd be doing when my self-imposed deadline the next day was up.

But as I walked into my apartment, my phone started ringing, and I realized I wouldn't have to wait to talk to the man whose ears were probably burning.

Mason was calling me.