

Chapter 15 ~ Sage

Four months.

No word from Mason in four months

The first three weeks, I wasn't concerned. He'd been gone that long before with no communication. Then those weeks became two months, then three, then four entire months. And with each day that passed, I tried not to worry -- no news was good news, right? I knew some missions could take longer. He'd told me that Nate had been out on one for months.

But when you want to tell someone some important news, you don't want to wait. And I'd been waiting four months to talk to Mason. Waiting and waiting and waiting to tell him I wanted to try. The more days that passed, the more sure I became of my answer.

In the meantime, I'd poured out my heart to Cashew. My concerns, my fears, my hopes, my ultimate dreams. And Cashew was a great listener...until he'd had enough and flopped onto the couch only to promptly fall asleep and cockroach in that funny way of sleeping greyhounds had. Yes, my boy was a good listener like that.

So I'd heard nothing from Mason for four months until today, and even then it was a short text.

I'll be home around four. Sorry this mission took longer than expected. Had some challenges. I appreciate you watching Cashew all this time.

Staring at my screen, willing more words to come from him, I read the text over and over, hoping there was some hidden message I could decipher if I just read it enough times.

Prior to this mission, Mason's longest mission had been three weeks -- and that was even an aberration because he was normally gone no more than a week at a time. But this one had been four months

What challenges had they run into? What did that even mean? Like they ran out of food? They were caught in violent thunderstorms? Were they even in a place that had violent thunderstorms?

And he appreciated me watching Cashew all this time? Like I was some impersonal, unknown dog sitter? I was surprised he hadn't said he'd put a check in the mail for my time and trouble when he returned. As if we were now transactional acquaintances only. Nothing personal between us.

And then more words did appear from him, but they were nowhere near what I was hoping for.

About an hour from being home, so no need for you to stay. Cash will be fine by himself for an hour. Thanks again.

What the hell? What in the ever living hell were these short, impersonal texts?

Oh, that just burned me. I was being dismissed? No. If he wanted me gone, he was going to have to spell it out for me.

Do you want me to NOT be here when you get home, Mason? Just say so, but I've been waiting four months to talk to you.

Dot dot dot.

Dots disappeared.

Dot dot dot.

Dots disappeared.

Three more times that happened.

What the hell? It was a pretty simple question. Yes, leave; no, stay.

Then finally, a five entire minutes: **Stay if you want.**

I was pretty sure that I should check my blood pressure. His texts were pissing me off.

Stay if you want? Like he didn't give a flying flip either way? And why had it taken five attempts and five minutes to send that simple, basic, four-word message to me? Did he really not want to see me? Was he completely indifferent to me now after four months away?

He could have said Stay if you want because I'd really love to see you. But no. Just Stay IF YOU WANT! It made no difference to him whether I was here to greet him or not.

He could have even said I'm exhausted and I just want to head to bed. We can catch up in a few days if you don't mind that would have been better than Stay if you want

I needed to calm down before I started throwing things and scaring Cashew. I'd start with all of the pictures of Mason and me or just me that were still decorating almost every available surface in his place. That had surprised me when I'd walked in that first day to take care of Cashew. There were even more pictures of me, of us, than there had been when we'd been together.

And had I taken the time to snoop while he was gone? You bet. I'd gone into his bedroom and found my wedding gown hanging from his closet door; everything else in that room was unchanged, right down to my pictures on the nightstand and our engagement photo blown up over the bed. But it was my beautiful dress that held my attention; Mason had taken it out of the garment bag it had come in, and I'd felt the sharp sting that I'd never gotten to wear it. I imagined Mason looking at it every day, regretting that we weren't married, as planned.

Or maybe, based on his texts, he wasn't regretting anything any more. Maybe Mason had gotten over me in the last four months. Maybe that was why there was absolutely nothing personal in his texts. Maybe he really didn't want me here but was too polite to say so, especially since I'd watched his dog for four months, and he didn't want to look like an ingrate.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

I sighed over all the uncertainty. He had no idea that I'd come to a decision about us, about trying again with the caveat that we take it slow so I could rebuild my trust in him. As far as he knew, I was fine with him taking himself out of my life; for all he knew, I could have been on a dating spree for the last four months, living my best life without him as a part of it.

At last, I heard his key in the lock and both Cashew and I leapt onto the couch and were standing by the door before it even opened. The minute the door opened, all I saw were his eyes, blazing at me, and in two steps he was to me, his le hand tunneling into my hair in a move he knew I loved, grabbing a hold of it to immobilize my head as his lips crashed down on mine in the most intense, desperate, deep he'd ever given to me. I think it would have gone on all night had not eighty-eight pounds of greyhound been whining and bumping at Mason, clearly needing some love and attention as well.

Mason reluctantly pulled back, giving me a smile before he started scratching Cashew behind his ear and saying loving nonsense to him.

While he was engaging in the bro fest with Cashew, I looked more closely at Mason, my trained eyes cataloging the subtle changes in him.

He'd lost weight, and his face was just this side of gaunt.

There were lines bracketing his mouth that spoke of pain and stress.

He'd used his le hand to grab my hair, not his dominant right hand.

His skin had a slightly gray tinge to it, as if he hadn't been well.

"What happened to you, Mason?" I demanded. I knew something had gone down; I just didn't know what

He shot me an uncomfortable, almost guilty, look. "Can we sit down and talk?"

I walked over to the couch, following him. He seemed to be walking fine, so that was positive. He sat down, giving a sigh of relief, and Cashew lay down at his feet. I sat about a foot away, bracing myself.

"So, two months into the mission, we ran into some trouble and I caught three bullets."

"Mason!"

"It's OK, Sage. I'm fine now."

"Where were you shot?"

"Twice in the right arm, once in the right shoulder. Broke the humerus and the scapula."

I was already tearing open his shirt and sliding his sleeve carefully down his arm, my fingers sliding over the puckered scars, still red and angry looking.

"Jake and Connor also caught a couple of bullets. We had to call in a helicopter for evacuation. We all had to have surgery; Jake and I got bad infections, so we've been recuperating, getting physical therapy for the last two months. Even though we're all going to be OK, that was probably the last mission for the three of us. For me, even with physical therapy, they aren't sure my right hand will ever work as well as it used to."

"Oh, Mason," I said helplessly, not liking how close his shoulder scar was to the artery near the scapula. "You were very lucky."

"They told me a half-inch to the le would have had a much different outcome."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I let you go, Sage, and I didn't want to pull you into whatever I was facing. It wasn't your responsibility. I already had to ask you to watch my dog, and I felt bad enough about that."

"So, that's why you didn't care if I was here or not when you got home?"

"I cared, Sage. Nothing I wanted more than for you to be here when I walked in the door. I just didn't want you feeling guilty or pity when you saw me and realized I'd run into some trouble on the mission."

"I would have come to you, Mason. Wherever you were in the hospital, I would have come to you."

"I know you would have."

Now I was getting mad at his mixed messages. "So if you didn't want me around when you were in the hospital, what the hell was that kiss to end all kisses you laid on me when you walked in here this afternoon?"

His eyes were solemn. "That was the kiss I promised myself if I made it out of the jungle alive. That was the kiss that helped me drag Jake to the helicopter while I was bleeding so badly they don't know how I was able to move myself, much less Jake. That was the kiss that kept me going through two surgeries and a really fucking bad infection they didn't know if I'd survive. It was the thought of getting to kiss you one last time that kept me alive, Sage. Your kiss was my reward."

Leaning forward, Mason pressed a kiss to my forehead. "So, thank you for that kiss, kitten. It made surviving these last two months worth it."

I closed my eyes and savored the feel of his lips against my skin for a moment before pulling back.

"When you called me to watch Cashew, I had twenty-four hours left of the three days I gave myself to think about what you had done -- giving me up -- and how that made me feel. The next day, I was going to call you and tell you I wanted to try. Honestly, truly try. I've been waiting four months to tell you that, so don't think it has anything to do with pity or because you were hurt."

He studied my eyes for a minute, something easing in the lines of his face, some life being added back to his eyes that had been missing.

"I know I have a ways to go to rebuild your trust," he said quietly, as if he could read my mind. "And I know it's not going to be easy, but I just want you to know, I'll do whatever it takes, Sage. Whatever you need me to do to start rebuilding that trust, it's yours. However long it takes, I'll keep at it and I'll never stop. But I don't want this to hurt you. That was killing me before, realizing just how much I was constantly hurting you."

"Well, I know how I felt without you these four months. I didn't enjoy them, and I missed you, Mason. It hurt more being without you. So, I'm not making any promises about where we'll end up in the future right now, but just know I want to work on it together and see if we can move forward."

"Kitten, whatever you're willing to give to me, I'll take it gladly. I want to give you everything."

"I know. But we're going to take this slow."

"You set the pace. When you're ready for more, just say the word. And every time you say the word, I'll have you covered."

"I want to believe that."

"And someday, you will, Sage," he promised. "Someday, you will."