

Chapter 16 ~ Mason

The relief I felt when Sage said she wanted to give us a chance was...incredible. Unbelievable. More than I deserved. It was actually better than when the doctor told me they had cleared up the infection and would not have to amputate my arm. That may sound crazy, but to me it was like my arm versus my heart. One I could live without, the other I couldn't.

On the day we were caught in a firefight, I thought seriously about my life ending when I realized we were surrounded by the enemy. And I thought about my life without Sage and realized it had already ended when she told me she was done with me. I knew she meant every word.

So death suddenly didn't seem like the enemy it had always been before -- something dark and evil looming before me, behind me, beside me, ready to pop out at any given moment and take me down. Death was something to be avoided and fought back then because I had Sage to return to, our life to look forward to.

With the bullets in my arm and shoulder, blood pouring out of me at an alarming rate and two of my men down, I thought that was it. It was all over. The curtain was coming down. While I felt the life draining from me, I decided I was OK with it since I didn't have Sage. She would take care of Cashew, and I'd changed my will many months ago making her the beneficiary of my life insurance policy, giving her my trust fund, my house, my SUV -- anything of value I had, Sage would get. She'd be set for life, and in that way, I knew I could let go, knowing I'd taken care of my girl one last time and she'd be OK.

Then two things happened.

The helicopter had landed, giving us cover as they were laying down suppressive fire. We just had to get to them, but those twenty five yards might as well have been miles given our injuries.

And then my Sage's beautiful face appeared before me.

Her face changed everything.

Sage saved my life, and probably Jake's.

Connor, in better shape than Jake, rallied himself.

"We need to get Jake," he said.

Enrico was with us, the least hurt of all of us. "I got your backs," he said. "Can you three get to safety if I'm covering us?"

We had no choice. Connor looked dubiously at Jake, who was barely conscious. "I don't --" He started to voice his doubts.

Sage

Sage. Get back to Sage

"I got him," I said. "On three."

On three we went. I half carried, half dragged Jake, Connor stumbled alongside us and Enrico had our backs.

Sage, Sage, Sage chanted all the way to the helicopter.

Sage, Sage, Sage.

Yard by yard, we got there, and it wasn't the helicopter I was seeing in front of me, it was Sage's face.

Mason she seemed to be beckoning me closer so I ran toward her.

I had promised myself, if I could make it ten feet, I could kiss her again. I would kiss her again.

Then if I made it halfway to the helicopter, I could kiss her again.

Then if I could make it the last few yards to the helicopter, I could kiss her again.

Every step of the way, the thought of Sage kept me going, kept me moving, kept me conscious.

Then we were there, and our fellow Marines were lining us up, taking control -- and just before I passed out, I thought I could kiss Sage again.

Waking up in the hospital two days later was waking up to a lot of reality. Jake and Connor were alive, our team had made it out and we were all going to live.

Then the doctors threw words at me, and since none of the words was Sage, I didn't quite comprehend.

Transfusions. Blood loss. Surgery. Touch and go.

But not one word was Sage, so I drifted where I could see her face in my dreams and promise myself I would get to kiss her.

The next day, the doctors looked grim and the nurses looked concerned. Again more words fell from their lips.

More surgery. Infection. Fever. Critical.

But they still weren't saying the important word, Sage so again I drifted and thought about my reward. A kiss from my Sage. A kiss. Kiss.

It was a few days before I woke again to more grim doctors and more concerned nurses. I still had a fever, my infection was still raging and I was still in danger of losing my arm.

"I'll get better," I told them through dry, fever-hot lips. Sage thought, Sage. I'll get better and come to you.

Then I'd passed out again.

A few days later, the fever broke, ending my fever dreams. Sage was with me in those dreams. We were married. Holding hands. Cashew was walking alongside our baby we were pushing in the stroller.

"Nice to have you back with us, sir," the nurse said.

I looked at him. "When can I get out of here?"

My voice didn't even sound like my voice it was so raspy.

"Well, I'll let the doctor talk to you about that," he evaded.

Coward.

"Let me get your vitals in the meantime. I have to say, your eyes look clear today. The past few days you've been pretty out of it when your eyes were open, talking a lot about herbs."

The doctor explained I'd be a guest of the hospital for at least a week, maybe two, until the antibiotics finished their work and my arm was deemed safe. Until I completely recovered from the blood loss. She explained that they'd almost lost me three times over the last couple of days, two of those times in surgery.

I'd asked her about Jake and Connor, was told some bullshit about HIPAA, then I asked if she could get permission to see me. Again, so I could be updated on their status. Fucking fuckety fuck. We had just survived hell and they couldn't tell me how my fellow Marines were doing. I was still too weak to make as much of a protest as I wanted, but I think I successfully conveyed my feelings of this is complete and utter bullshit through the look in my eyes.

An hour later, I was told Jake and Connor were doing well and their prognosis was good.

I already knew my special teams career was over. When the doctor had explained the damage to my arm, I could read between the lines. Surgery. More surgery, and possibly a final surgery once the infection was completely gone. Then rehab, rehab, rehab. And in case you missed it, rehab for weeks to get my hand and arm in working order -- and probably never as good as new, just in working order. It was the end of my career and I was surprisingly OK with that. Maybe I could find something else I could do in the military, but I was also, for the first time in my life, considering a career outside the military.

I had the money to never work again, but that wasn't appealing in the least. If I took an honorable discharge, there were a number of possibilities for someone with my skills in the civilian world. My old college friend ran Hatcher Security, but I didn't know if I wanted to be a personal protection officer. I knew several people who ran civilian consulting firms that contracted solely with the military for specific jobs, but again, I didn't know if that was what I wanted. The important thing was that I had time to decide.

Since I was now conscious and able to focus on getting better so I could kiss Sage, I amazed the hospital staff with my recovery. A third surgery was avoided, the infection was completely gone, my wounds were healing cleanly and I was completely fever-free.

They moved me to a rehab facility and I began the arduous and painful process of getting my mobility back in my shoulder and arm.

I'd thought about contacting Sage, but I decided it was better to let her think that I'd gone dark because of a mission, not because I'd been badly injured. I knew Sage. Even if she was mad at you, if you were hurt, she'd be there. She could put the anger aside for the time being, let it simmer on the back burner while she nursed you back to health -- and then, once she was certain you were going to be OK, the pissed off was welcomed back in.

So, after about five weeks of therapy, I was headed back home, where I would continue in outpatient therapy. When my plane landed, I had shot Sage a text. I'd thought long and hard about what to say. I'd wanted to say I love you. Thank you for keeping me alive. I love you. And I want you to know I love you.

Instead, knowing that she'd just watched Cashew for four months as a favor to a man she no longer wanted to be with, I'd kept it short and impersonal, figuring she'd appreciate that.

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

Then, when I had just a little left to do on base, I texted her again, giving her an out if she didn't want to see me. Again, I thought of the text I wanted to send: About an hour from home. Please be there. I've missed you so much and I want to kiss you and tell you how much I love you and thank you for saving my life.

But, again, I didn't want to force her to see me or she'd made it perfectly clear she was done with us, so I gave her the perfect out.

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

I was shocked when she texted back, sounding almost...angry?

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

I started a reply, telling her I loved her and of course I wanted to see her. Then I erased it.

Then, after thinking on it some more, I started another text telling her that the only reason I made it out of that jungle was the thought of once again seeing her face and kissing her. Then I erased it.

I wrote three more texts, all along the same lines, but erased them all, figuring they were not being respectful of her wishes to be done with me.

So after about five minutes of this fucking back and forth in my head and in my texts, I finally settled for a text that put the decision in her hands.

Stay if you want.

But please please please stay I'd wanted to beg her. All the way home I'd wondered if she'd be there or not.

So when I'd arrived home, I opened the front door and I saw her standing inside my house, I almost fell to my knees in gratitude. In two steps, I had Sage in my arms, my one hand diving into her hair as I pulled her close with the other one. I said everything in that deep, desperate kiss that I'd wanted to say in my texts but refused to allow myself.

I'm so glad to see you.

I've missed you so much.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

You saved my life.

I love you.

She had stayed. Maybe just to bitch me out for being gone four months, but she had stayed that had to mean something. I think I would have kissed her all night if Cashew hadn't started bumping against me, so I had to stop and give my boy some attention.

I reluctantly pulled back, giving Sage a smile before I started scratching Cashew behind his ear and speaking doggy nonsense to him.

Sage and I talked on my couch, and I explained why I'd kissed her or she'd figured out I'd been hurt.

Then she gave me the most incredible gift ever to be given: another chance at us. She said she wasn't going to make any promises, but she wanted to try. She wanted to try.

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

"I know," she said, then added firmly, "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." I hated that I put that doubt in her mind, but swore I'd wipe it away.

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

She let me kiss her after that, and I happily obliged, but I pulled back after a minute because I needed to tell her something.

Something she might not like.

So I held her hands in mine and looked her right in the eyes.

"I need you to know something, Sage, because I want to earn back your trust. So you should know that I plan on writing to Eva every week for however long she's in jail."