

Chapter 17 ~ Sage

He did not just say that.

No, maybe I misunderstood.

Mason did not just say he was going to write to Eva every week while she was in jail. Even after everything he'd been saying to me, even after everything she'd done to both of us, this bitch still had some sort of hold on him that he thought writing to her would be OK with me? I wanted whatever he was smoking.

Trying to yank my hands out of his, he held tight.

"Wait, Sage," he said calmly, "it's not what you think. Please listen to me. Please! It's not what you think. Not at all."

I stopped struggling, considering his words, as he went on.

"Give me a small bit of trust, and I'll explain why," he said, still in that same calm, even tone.

Give him a small bit of trust? I thought for a minute. Could I? Could I do that? If I stopped and listened to him, I would be giving him, as he said, a bit of trust. One small bit that could be added to others going forward until he had earned back all of the small bits. And if I was willing to give him the trust he wanted, would he be stupid enough to betray that trust he was so desperate to rebuild?

"OK, I'm listening." Somehow, my voice sounded calm even though I was a mess inside.

Trust. Trust. Trust.

He smiled at me in gratitude. "Eva's boss, Robert, and I were both not happy with her sentence. Six years doesn't seem like enough for what she did. She could have destroyed Robert's career with what she pulled. And we know what she did to you, to me, to us. Hell, even to Nate. She wasn't going to tell him the baby was his."

"Ohhh-kay," I said, still not sure where this was going.

"You know how you can get time off for good behavior? Well, apparently the opposite is true. Inmates can get time added to their sentences for bad behavior. And if they have enough strikes against them on the inside, that can change their category or classification and have them put in a more restrictive facility."

I'd perked up when he said time added. This had possibilities. Wonderful possibilities.

"If there's one thing I know after spending all those years with that bitch, it's how to trigger her. The thought of me being with another woman always bothered her, but apparently me being with you really triggers her, as we discovered when she pulled the shit she did. Plus, she's going to be on edge anyway from being locked up, so it shouldn't take much to...set her off, so to speak."

Hmmmm. I liked this. I liked it a lot. The possibilities were endless. And so, so delicious.

"So Robert is going to let me know whoever Eva's cellmate is. We'll send the letters to this person. The prison authorities would catch on after a while that Eva triggers after getting a letter from me. This way, with a go-between, there's not as obvious a link. We'll make sure the cell mate gets some perks so she has incentive to give the letters to Eva. And she'll be big enough and strong enough to prevent Eva from hurting her."

Was it wrong to be so delighted at this devious payback plan of Mason's?

Oh, hell to the no! This bitch was so wrong on so many levels that she deserved every bit of time she was going to have added to her sentence.

I looked up at Mason, and was glad I'd handed over that tiny bit of trust.

"Do you think...do you think I could write to her, too, Mason?"

He grinned at me. "I think she'd be even happier to hear from you, kitten. It does get so lonely in prison. You're such a caring person, Sage. It's one of the things I love best about you, the way you're always willing to reach out and help a person in need."

"I am quite the humanitarian," I agreed. Then I cackled. I actually cackled.

He and Robert had agreed it was best to hold on to the letters until Eva gave birth and was back in prison. When the baby was born, a boy, he was given into his father's care and Eva signed her parental rights away, giving Nate sole custody. She wanted nothing to do with the baby; he had never been anything but a pawn to her. Eva's brother, devastated by his sister's actions, asked Nate if he could be part of the baby's life and Nate agreed. From what Mason heard from their other friends, Nate had become resigned to being a father, but fortunately, the minute that helpless, tiny baby was placed in his arms, he fell in love. Nate had turned into a very proud papa and was looking into an honorable discharge so he could have a life with his son that didn't include being gone on missions for weeks or months at a time. In the meantime, until that happened, Nate's parents would provide support.

Once Robert gave Mason the news that Eva was no longer pregnant and was six weeks post-partum, Mason wrote the first letter with minimal input from me because the man knew what he wanted to say. And his laugh as he was writing it I can only say was downright evil. After several drafts, this is what he sent to Eva's cell mate at the prison -- but only after he'd drenched the letter in some cheap perfume:

Hi! I have some awesomely wonderful news to share with you! I just had to let you know: Sage has agreed to take me back!!!! Mason and Sage, true love forever! I have never been happier in my entire life. Every day when I look at her, I see everything I could ever want in a woman and so much more, and I realize I've never felt like this before in my life -- at least, not until I met my beautiful Sage. It's like all the women before her were terrible mistakes, exercises in bad judgment, horrible choices I made before I realized what a good, decent, kind, loving woman was really like. I look back and wish I could erase the others from my memory -- and then I realize that I don't need to erase them because Sage is doing that for me all on her own! Any woman prior to Sage is just fading away into nothingness, soon to be not even a memory. My beautiful girl is driving away even the smallest recollection of any previous women. There is room for nothing but Sage in my mind and my heart.

You'll be happy to know that things have been going really well for us these past months, and I'm working hard to convince my gorgeous girl to move in with me. I feel like a broken record, but Sage is the only woman I've ever wanted to live with. She really share my life with on a deep and forever kind of level. To me, she is my everything and I'm looking forward to spending the rest of my life loving her, this goddess who owns my heart, my devotion, my adoration and, most of all, my eternal love.

~Mason

P.S. I just had to spray this letter with Sage's perfume so you could have her magical scent with you at all times. I know what a comfort that will be for you.

Mason, after he finished reading the final draft, said to me, "This is the pure truth. Every single word of this is true."

"Except for the part about my perfume bringing her comfort," I reminded him with a laugh.

Mason grinned at me, his eyes twinkling. "Except for the part about your perfume," he agreed.

Eva's former boss kept Mason updated on the progress every couple of months. Eva went nuts with the first few letters, all of them smelling of that awful perfume, and she unwisely attacked anyone who got in her way: prison guards, a doctor who was trying to stitch her head up after a yard fight, and a fellow inmate who loved a good throwdown and defended herself against the attack that all witnesses agreed Eva started. Unprovoked. Although rumor had it that certain prisoners were drenched in a certain cheap perfume at the time of the attacks. The scent somehow, in some very strange way, seemed to be a trigger for her. Go figure.

Time started being added to her sentence. Then Eva started to hold out for a couple of weeks at a time, tried so hard to be good, but when she blew, it was bigger fights, more serious consequences, so the time added reflected that. We kept up a steady stream of one letter a week, never on the same day twice in a row so she would never know when to expect one. Her longest period of non-violence lasted only three and a half weeks. It almost seemed better for her to lose it after each letter because otherwise, the pressure and tension built and brewed and bubbled until they exploded with so much force someone had to pay the price. And that someone was the oh-so-deserving Eva.

By the end of the first year, Eva's sentence had already been extended by an amazing two years and she'd been moved to a more restrictive facility.

"That's a decent start," Mason would say. "But we can do better."

Nope, not even eight years behind bars for her was enough for Mason and Robert. They had a goal of at least a twenty-year sentence, but I suspected they wouldn't even stop once they achieved that. At the rate they were going, I often told Mason that with so much bad behavior, Eva was going to be put away for life. He shrugged and said she'd deserve every minute and he could definitely live with that.

That first year of sending letters was a time of work and effort for Mason and me. So much of our relationship was comfortable, familiar. We knew each other down to the smallest detail. But there were aspects that were new and not so comfortable.

The kiss between Mason and Eva was there now, and just because we were happy and back together didn't mean that my doubts and concerns magically disappeared. It didn't mean my trust came back with a snap of my fingers.

But Mason was patient and understanding and he kept asking for small bits of my trust, and I kept giving them to him -- and he slowly built that trust back. He was once again my partner in the fullest, truest sense of the word. And even though he'd regained my trust, he kept doing everything he could to prove to me that he would never break that trust again.

After about ten months, I'd moved back in with him when my lease was up. About two months after that, I came home from work one day to find Mason already there and working on dinner. He'd taken a job as a military contractor and it was classified work, so he couldn't tell me much, other than he enjoyed working with Marines who were training to do what he had done.

"Hey, kitten," he said, greeting me with a kiss. "I finished the draft of this week's letter. I've got dinner started, so I'm going to go change while you read it. Let me know what you think?"

He gave me another kiss and he left while I picked up the letter.

Hi! It's been a year since Sage and I got back together. It's been a year that I've spent trying to rebuild the trust between us that I so carelessly shattered with one act that I will regret the rest of my life. One act that I will spend the rest of my life proving will never happen again. Sage is it for me, and that was true whether she took me back or not. She didn't have to come back to me for me to love her for the rest of my life.

Love isn't about never making mistakes; it's about battling back from them when you do fail. It's about ensuring you never make the same mistake twice if you want to keep your heart with you for the rest of your life. It's about becoming someone whose every action begs for forgiveness, and when it's granted, it's happily working your ass off to show you will keep earning that forgiveness every single day. It's proving over and over again that you will never betray her trust, and it's rebuilding that trust a tiny bit at a time until a new trust is forged. And you will do everything in your power to guarantee this trust will remain intact, to defend and protect it with everything you have, because you've seen what your life was like without her and you hated it.

When I felt like I was dying in that jungle, it was Sage's face I saw, it was the thought of her love that gave me the strength to fight for my life, to take every step toward safety when it would have been easier to just let go. It was the thought of getting to kiss her even one last time that gave me the courage to fight for my life. Life becomes so clear when you think it might be ending. And although I already knew it, in that jungle I knew deep in my soul: Sage is my life. She is love -- my love.

I'm going to ask her to marry me, but I don't know if she'll say yes. I'm hoping she will so I can spend the rest of my life showing her how much I love her every single day.

I'll let you know what she says.

I read that letter three times and my hand was trembling by the third read-through.

"Turn around, Sage," Mason's deep voice was right behind me.

I turned and saw this man I loved so hard on one knee, a tiny, black-velvet ring box in his hand.

"I love you, Sage. You are my everything and all I want in my life is to spend the rest of my days with you so I can love you every single minute, the way you deserve to be loved. So, I was wondering...my love, my Sage, my kitten...will you marry me?"

I launched myself at him, laughing, crying, telling him I loved him, and he held me because he was laughing and crying, too. It wasn't easy getting to this place. But we had gotten there through a lot of pain and work and healing. And now, we were ready for our reward.

P.S. She said yes.