

Chapter 7 ~ Sage

Mason knocked on my door bright and early the next morning.

"So we can spend as much time together as possible," he'd said. He'd always been a morning person thanks to his military life, but the beaming smile on his face as I opened my door was especially bright, his eyes happy and eager.

And it possibly melted my heart just a teeny, tiny bit. We'd gone out for breakfast that day, then spent time at the beach, ending with a romantic dinner on a pier, watching the sunset.

That set the tone for the ten days he was visiting. On the days I had work, he insisted on driving me to work and picking me up. He met me for lunch in the hospital cafeteria on work days and he was able to meet some of the friends I'd made, and who never failed to mouth he's so hotbr some variation of that behind his back as they pretended to fan their faces.

And, I had to admit, my Marine was hot.

Well, OK, not myMarine. We weren't back together or anything. Not at all. I was still having trust issues, obviously, and he knew it. So Mason was taking it slow with me, not pushing me for anything physical, even though he would have had me completely naked in point four seconds if I'd given him the green light. Not gonna lie: it was really tempting to fall back into bed with him. We'd done some hot and heavy kissing, but he always stopped it with a kiss to my forehead when it felt like we were about to burst into flames and spontaneously combust.

"Not until you trust me and believe with your whole heart that I love you and only you," he'd murmured in my ear, right before he'd give my neck a little nip.

I'd even teared up when I watched him drive away in his rental car to go to the airport. The ten days had gone by quickly -- much too quickly -- and our time together only reinforced how much I missed him in my life.

So the remaining three and a half months of my contract sped by. Mason called me every night, and we texted multiple times throughout the day as our schedules allowed. There were still the every-other-day offerings of flowers and chocolates or some other treats. Carl and company still delivered dinner every single night without fail.

He'd also flown out to see me on weekends four more times, the last one to help me drive home. True story: Mason insisted on doing all of the driving on the way back home and part of me wondered if it wasn't to prevent me from turning the car around and heading back to California permanently, if I'd been so inclined.

Honestly, although California had been beautiful and I'd made some good friends there, I'd missed home. And, to be completely truthful, I'd especially missed Mason. That was both a simple and a complicated truth. His calls and short visits had helped ease the loneliness that haunted me, but I wanted to be around him full time, to see if we could ever get back to what we'd been before he blew it up with his idiocy, or maybe, more realistically, find a new us.

Mason had also helped me find a small, one-bedroom apartment to live in back home, even though I knew he wanted me to move back in with him. When he'd tried to argue the point, I'd told him I just wasn't ready to live with him again because... trustand he'd nodded grimly, understanding my point of view but not happy because he'd done this to us.

Once he gave in to the notion that we wouldn't be picking up where we'd left off, he approved of a nice apartment complex on a quiet, upscale street not far from his home. I'd ordered a bed and couch, but not much else, figuring I could furnish it once I returned. Mason let the delivery men inside to deliver those big-ticket items, so I had a place to sit and sleep, at least, when I returned. I refused to let Mason buy me anything, telling him if he did, I'd donate it to a thrift store.

He was frustrated, I knew that, but I also knew I wasn't going to be rushed. This man I had been weeks away from marrying had kissed his ex. No matter how much he wished he could take it back, it was a fact of our lives now. That still burned to the point that some days I wondered if I could ever get past it completely. Try as I might, I couldn't unsee the two of them in the alley. Although it wasn't in front of me all the time any longer, that vision did pop up occasionally -- enough to make me slow things down a bit. I'm sure Mason felt that we were one step forward, two steps back at times, but the man was unfailingly patient with me and my mood swings.

Over the next several weeks, while I settled back into my job and routine, Mason was just as attentive as ever. We went shopping for furniture for my apartment together, ate dinner together when our schedules allowed, and continued dating. I was getting closer and closer to allowing our relationship to become a physical one again, and every time we were together, we took things almost to the point of no return, but still Mason stopped us from taking it all the way.

"You're not there yet," he told me, frustrating me, but I couldn't deny he was right. I wasn't there quite yet with the trust.

And then Mason decided to start playing dirty. First, he took me to a greyhound rescue event and told me he was going to adopt an ex-racer, but I was going to be the one to decide which dog was right for him. Looking around, I was overwhelmed with choices -- frankly, I wanted to take them all home -- but we met a tall, fawn-colored male and I immediately lost my heart to him and knew he'd be perfect for Mason. One week later, after the rescue coordinator made a home visit to Mason's house and all of the paperwork was finalized, Cashew found a home.

I'd already agreed to watch Cash, as we'd decided to nickname him, when Mason was gone on his missions, which meant I'd be staying at Mason's whenever he was away. Even when he wasn't away, I found myself spending more and more time at his house since that's where Cash was. We walked that beautiful boy together and he cuddled up beside us on the couch while we were watching movies or just talking together.

Second, he asked me to help him redecorate some rooms in his home. He wanted to redo the living room with leather couches and he had two guest bedrooms that were basically empty. The third bedroom was his office, and he thought it might be nice to redo that room as well. Mason knew I loved decorating and buying furniture, and having to work on all of those rooms meant even more time working and planning together.

One Saturday afternoon, while we were furniture shopping for couches, we passed the baby section of the store, and he stopped me by tugging on my hand he'd been holding.

"Someday, kitten, we're going to be buying furniture from this section, too." Then he'd pressed a kiss to my lips, laughing so loudly at my bemused expression, and tugged on my hand to get me moving again.

Later, I would look back on that statement and wonder exactly what he meant by that. At the time, I'd assumed he was talking about our future baby, but in hindsight, maybe he hadn't been talking about that at all. Maybe he'd been talking about his own baby that had nothing to do with me.

That night, as I was preparing my lunches for the upcoming week, I heard my phone signal an incoming text. Thinking it was from Mason, I washed my hands off and grabbed my phone.

Unknown number: **I bet he told you nothing happened that night in the alley, didn't he?**

I sucked in a breath. Was this Eva? Or had someone else witnessed the kiss? My stomach clenched and I pretty much stopped breathing as I saw another text appear under the first text.

Unknown number: **I bet he told you it stopped at a kiss.**

I could feel that taunting tone in the text, the desire to hurt me. This was definitely Eva. I felt it. Even if another person had seen them in the alley, nobody else had a reason to be mean to me about that incident like Eva did.

Unknown number: **But Mase has never been able to resist me.**

This bitch If someone could invent an app that allowed you to reach through the phone and choke someone to death, they'd be a billionaire in seconds.

Unknown number: **And he didn't resist me that night.**

My breathing seized up again, and I could feel my heart hammering against my ribs.

Unknown number: **He gave me the hottest sex of my life that night.**

I swallowed. She had to be messing with me. Mason wouldn't lie. He wouldn't be working so hard to get me back if he'd gone there with her.

Would he? No. No way. Right?

Unknown number: **You know what else he gave me besides multiple orgasms?**

Then there were three pictures in a row.

The first one was a picture of a positive pregnancy test. I'd seen that pregnancy test months before, but I'd stupidly written it off as a wrong number or spam. Stupid, Sage

The second picture was an ultrasound printout, showing the date the ultrasound was performed and the gestational age circled, showing weeks and days.

I quickly did the math. It was right around that night in the alley that she'd conceived, to the day.

The third picture showed Eva with what looked like a six-month baby belly. She was staring right into the camera, a smirk curving her lips, her other hand that was not holding her phone resting just under her belly, to emphasize the unmistakable roundness.

Had Mason lied to me? Or was she lying and someone else was the father? But what kind of crazy person would lie about that? She had to be lying, but that made no sense to me -- proof of paternity was just a DNA test away, so why start the lie to begin with?

Obviously to make trouble. But why? Did she really think Mason would come running back to her if I was out of the picture? There was no way he would. He'd made it clear to her that they were finished, he'd blocked her number and had not had any further contact with her.

So he said. But he'd also said they'd shared nothing but a kiss in that alley and it hadn't gone past that.

Someone was clearly lying. But why lie about something that could be proven?

And if she was claiming it was Mason's baby, wouldn't she have found some way to get in touch with him and let him know? But that would be useless if they hadn't slept together -- he'd know she was lying. If she had tried to say she was pregnant with his baby, wouldn't he have told me?

No, this had to be her trying to mess with my head, make me doubt him.

Unknown number: **If a man isn't afraid of the results of a simple paternity test, he'll agree to one to prove his innocence.**

Where was she going with this? Had she asked him to take a paternity test and he refused? But if it had gotten that far, he would have told me. Right? Unless he was scared to even bring it up to me since we were still on extremely shaky ground -- like earthquake kind of shaky ground.

Unknown number: **But refusing one? I'd take that as a sign of guilt. We'll see what Mase says. Have a good night.**

I'd barely read the bitch's last word before I was calling Mason.