

Chapter 1 ~ Mason

"Haven't seen much of you these last couple of weeks," my friend Nate observed as he slouched in a chair across from where I sat on my couch. He lifted a beer to his lips and watched me as he slugged it down. Neither one of us paid attention to the basketball game playing on the TV. It had been an excuse for him to come over and we both knew it.

I shrugged, not answering. He understood what was going on, what my stupidity had cost me. He'd been the one to track down Sage after she'd pulled a runner, and the twelve hours where I didn't know where she was had been agonizing. A genius at finding people, Nate had located my girl, provided me with her new cell phone number, the address of the hospital she'd be working at, and her new apartment address in half a day. Today, he'd been sent to babysit me to make sure I was OK.

He, and our other friends, knew that had I not been colossally stupid, I'd be getting married in one hour. Right this minute, had things gone according to plan, I'd be pulling on my dress blues and making my claim on the woman I loved officially. Instead, the day after she left, I'd had to cancel our wedding, knowing that she wouldn't be back.

Watching me carefully, he tipped his beer bottle at me. "Any progress?"

"Nope. She still won't respond to my texts or calls. I did get a thank you note from Safe Harbor, thanking me for my generous donation to the women's shelter."

Nate cringed. "She sell the ring?"

"Yep."

"Sorry, man. Maybe that's a sign to...let go, you know? It's been two weeks of nothing from her. I mean, she traveled across the country to get away from you. That's a pretty big statement that she's done."

Leaning forward, I pinned him with my stare. "She needs time. I'm not giving up." Ever since I couldn't bear to think of never having her in my life again. I still couldn't believe I'd made the rookie mistake of leaving her alone while she was in such a volatile state.

It's not often you regret something as innocuous as taking a shower, but regret it I did. It was actually just one of many regrets from that day where I'd screwed up our lives. I'd allowed Sage to slip away from me when I ran upstairs to shower over the stench of an evening of bad choices. Foolishly, I'd expected that after my shower, Sage and I could talk about what she'd seen and what I'd stupidly, stupidly done. I'd thrown on my clothes and jumped into the icy cold water, letting the freezing spray sting me like a punishment. Then I'd twisted the handle to hot, wanting the water to scald the feel and smell of another woman off of me.

Hurry hurry hurry

I rushed through the soaping and shampooing, trying to erase the feel of Eva's hands in my hair and on my chest, her lips on my mouth, on my neck, whispering in my ear.

The minute she'd walked into the bar where my friends and I were talking about Drake, sharing our memories, I should have left or asked her to leave. But the guys had their girls with them -- and they'd all known Drake -- and Eva had been with me when Drake and I had been the tightest, Drake and his wife going out with Eva and me all the time. It was almost as if all of us being together could conjure up Drake and he'd walk through the door any minute, and I clung to that feeling of nostalgia.

In the three weeks since Cassie had called to tell me of Drake's death during what should have been a routine training mission, I'd been trying to come to terms with never seeing or speaking with him again. Regret weighed heavily on my heart that we'd not talked as often as we had when we'd been stationed at the same base. My mood had been heavy and I didn't want comfort as I grieved my friend. Sage would have joined me tonight, but she'd never really known him and I didn't want to force her to sit through us reminiscing about him. Selfishly, I just wanted to mourn with those of us who had known him well. I hadn't anticipated one of the guys telling Eva about the gathering or her deciding to join us. She'd sat next to me, her perfume heavy, her hand repeatedly straying to my leg as she joined in the retelling of old memories as we tossed back shots in Drake's memory. I'd pushed her hand off four times, and when she touched me again, I'd asked her to step outside and talk to me.

"You need to stop whatever it is you're doing here."

She smiled and stumbled into me, my hands going to her waist to steady her. "I think you've missed me."

"I think you've lost your mind," I tossed back, knowing she was drunk and not liking her mood. In the years we'd been together, often and on though it was, I'd come to know her moods and the brokenness inside her that triggered the worst ones. "If you go back in there, I want you to keep your hands to yourself. I don't want to embarrass you in front of everyone, but I will. My patience is gone."

"You used to love it when I touched you. Tonight's been perfect. All of the gang back together, talking, having fun...it's like the old days."

"We're mourning Drake, Eva. This is not a good-time get together, it's a time to remember a great man and a good friend."

"I've missed you so much. All night I've been thinking about how Drake and Cassie and you and I used to go out all the time. We had good times together, the four of us." Tears started falling from her eyes and I cringed, uncomfortable with tears as she patted my chest. "What happened, Mase? You just stopped seeing me without an explanation."

I didn't need this on top of my grief for Drake. "Not true, Eva. I told you we'd run our course and what we had wasn't healthy. It was time to move on for good."

"I don't believe you," she said, her words slurring slightly. "I've never felt for anyone else what I feel for you." Her one hand went to my jaw in a gesture as familiar -- and unwanted -- as she was.

"I'm sorry to hear that since there's no hope in hell of us getting back together."

"I don't believe you feel nothing for me after all the time we were together." She slid her hands around my neck, yanking my head down until her lips crashed into mine. It was like a perfect storm blending together muscle memory, sad memories, good memories, grief, alcohol and wanting to go back to a time when Drake was still here. My hands tangled in her hair as I kissed her back for longer than I should have, our mouths clashing until she fumbled with my belt buckle, ripping her mouth away from mine so she could beg me to fuck her.

At that point, I snapped out my daze, and I pushed away from her hold, snarling at her to stop. I stepped back, not caring that she almost fell over. "This is done, Eva. Don't call, don't text, don't attempt to see me -- I'm done."

"How can you say we're done after a kiss like that?"

"Because that was a mistake, nothing more than a huge regret."

Before she could say anything else, I walked back inside, made my apologies to everyone, and went walking for a couple of hours. My stomach churned the whole time, wondering if I should come clean with Sage, wondering why I'd kissed Eva back. That wasn't like me at all. I was monogamous, and, up until tonight, I'd never even come close to stepping out on Sage. I hadn't been tempted, ever. So why had I allowed Eva's lips on mine, even for a few seconds? Why had I kissed her back? I honestly was not attracted to her any longer -- Sage captured me completely and was everything I wanted and more. It seemed like a cop out, but as I thought hard about it, I felt that that my response was due to grief, to just wanting things to go back to a time where Drake was alive. The thought of being with Eva turned my stomach, and those few seconds that I kissed her back, it hadn't felt right, hadn't been anything other than something that filled me with regret. I didn't want a repeat, had no desire to be with her again in any way. My body didn't respond to her the way it did with just a look from Sage.

Satisfied that there were no lingering, unresolved feelings for Eva, the only thing bothering me now was my conscience. Regardless of feeling nothing for Eva, I still had messed up. No matter why, I had kissed her back. With that guilt pressing on my chest, I went home, reluctant to face Sage, still not sure if I was going to admit what happened or move ahead and never think of it again. Neither path felt right.

My dilemma was unnecessary, however; Sage had seen us in the alley but apparently didn't stay long enough to see me push Eva away.

With a muted growl of frustration at myself, I finished the shower, threw on some basketball shorts without bothering to dry off, and ran downstairs.

Only to discover a silence that was so loud it was deafening. I knew she was gone -- knew it to the depths of my soul -- but I still ran through the house and garage and onto the street, calling her name even as I called her cell nonstop. She didn't answer, but I kept trying, hoping she would. I needed to explain, needed to make her understand what had happened. Walking back into the house, I saw a note propped up by a picture of us. It was my favorite picture of us, taken not long after we'd started dating, but you could already see we were in love. Both our smiles were so big, it really seemed they were ear-to-ear. I snatched up the note, hoping it would say she just needed time, but what she'd written nearly broke me in two with both its brevity and accusation:

I guess we both broke promises tonight.

I'd faced enemy fire, hand-to-hand, life-or-death combat, but never, never had I felt fear like I felt reading that note. My girl was gone and my heart was beating so hard I was sure it'd explode from my chest. Struggling to breathe, I forced myself to calm down, and I made her a promise that I vowed to never break: I would prove she could trust me and win my girl back.

And I wouldn't stop until I did.