

Chapter 14 ~ Mason

The call came at 9:30 at night, surprising me, even though we'd been trained to always be prepared. Maybe I had just been hoping in the back of my mind that I could have some more time sitting around home with Cashew, moping, contemplating my fucking bleak future without Sage before I had to become a functioning military operative again.

In the two days since I'd fucking cried like a baby in front of her and walked away, I'd barely been functioning. I'd wake up, walk Cashew, come home and sit around until Cashew needed to go out again. While I remembered to feed my boy, food had lost its luster to me, but I did manage to drink a couple of beers, even though the taste repelled me. I figured a few beers was practically like eating bread.

But my luck ran out a er two days and we got a call mobilizing my team fast. That meant something hot was happening for such a quick call up. We were taking o in an hour, which meant I had just enough time to grab my go-bag and break my promise to leave Sage alone.

She answered on the first ring while I was backing out of my driveway.

"Mason?"

I'd have time to rethink the way she said my name later. In fact, I'd go over and over the way her voice was both breathless and hopeful and curious all at the same time. Right now, though, I just had time for business as I drove through the dark streets to get to base.

"Hey, kitten," I greeted her without thinking, then mentally sighed at my carelessness. "Hate to bother you, but I've got a meeting right now," and she knew what that meant.

When we'd first started dating, I had told her I might be called up suddenly and could not disclose any information to her, even if the line had been secure. So I told her I'd tell her I had a meeting; if it was a meeting right now that meant I was leaving immediately on a mission and could not say anything more. "Could you please watch Cashew?"

"Yes," she said right away. I knew she had a hundred questions, but she also knew not to ask. Or she would have had a hundred questions; I don't know if she did any more.

"And I have no idea how long the meeting's going to last, so don't wait up."

That was also code I had warned her about. Since we never got information until we were almost in the air, at which point we'd be debriefed on specifics, I never had an inkling if I'd be gone three days, three weeks or three months. It was usually on the shorter end of the spectrum, but you never could tell if it was going to be a more complicated mission with a greater risk of things going sideways.

"OK, Mason."

"Thanks. Feel free to stay at my place; I know it's easier for you. You still have the key?"

"Yeah, I'll stay there, and I do have the key," she said so ly. Then Sage hesitated and gave me her old sign o. "Hey...have a good meeting, Mason."

Be safe, Mason. Be careful. Watch yourself. Come back to me. She had given me her own code of what have a good meeting meant.

The most important one, though, Mason, is come back to me

"Thanks." And then, because I never knew if I would be coming back home to her, I had to say it.

"Take care, kitten. I love you."

I hung up before she could protest or respond or tell me to fuck o and not think that just because she was willing to watch my dog that it meant anything. I felt bad for asking her to take care of Cashew, but I hadn't thought I'd be called up so soon, so I hadn't made alternate arrangements in the last two days. I'd have to take care of that as soon as I got back so I wouldn't have to ask this of her again.

Telling Sage I was letting her go was, without a doubt, no contest, the absolute hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. But there comes a point when you have to look at the impact your actions are having on another person and decide if getting your own way -- in my case, keeping Sage in my life -- is more important than the other person's heart or state of mind. Sage's well-being won, hands down. How can you claim to love someone if you keep hurting them? You can't.

The way she'd looked at me when the paternity test results showed I was the father of Eva's baby about killed me. Her eyes held a myriad of emotions. Condemnation. Accusation. Disappointment. Betrayal. Hurt. Oh, was there hurt.

But there wasn't one ounce of belief that I was telling her the truth -- that there was no way I was the father. I'd killed her trust in me, and I could understand it. I could even accept it. Trying to imagine what life would be like for Sage if we were to stay together, with her doubt in me always lingering like smoke between us, was what I couldn't accept.

Every time I went out, she'd be wondering, whether consciously or subconsciously, if I was going to betray her again. Every time I was late, she'd be wondering if I was really working or if I was doing her wrong yet again. Every time my phone chimed with a text, in the back of her mind, she'd want to see the text to make sure it wasn't from some woman. That was just consigning Sage to constant pain, forcing her to carry a one-hundred pound weight on her back for the rest of her life.

When a man has killed his woman's trust in him, it's up to him to relieve the burden of her worrying, watching and waiting. So maybe, just maybe, with the news that Eva fucked with the paternity test results, I could have gotten Sage to forgive me and come back to me. But she'd be coming with that doubt still buried in the soil of her mind, ready to bloom again at any moment. Maybe it would happen while I was away on long missions -- what's he doing right now? Is he messing around with any women wherever he is? Is there a woman on the team he's finding hard to resist? Some local woman he keeps seeing around? Thoughts that would have never occurred to Sage before I'd fucked up would be bombarding her relentlessly. It's human nature. It's unavoidable.

Even though she'd made it clear I wasn't to contact her again a er she saw the paternity test results, once she heard the baby wasn't mine, she'd be expecting me to come at her again, pushing my own agenda above her peace of mind.

I couldn't do that to her. I wanted to. Every single part of me wanted to keep her in my life, keep hammering at her to forgive me, take me back -- but I couldn't forget that defeated, broken-hearted look in her eyes when she'd read the paternity results with me.

How much do you love someone? Enough to let them go if being with you causes too much pain?

I had to answer yes. My thoughts were interrupted when I was stopped at the base entrance and asked to show my credentials. Once the guard checked my ID, I was waved through.

I parked and grabbed my bag from the car, hustling into the building where my team would soon be prepped with mission details. Then we'd grab all of our gear and board the plane taking us to wherever. While en route to our destination, we'd go over topography maps, satellite reconnaissance photos, photos of our targets -- all of the critical details we'd need to know when we were boots on the ground.

For the next two months, in the heat and humidity of a tropical jungle, my team and I worked our plan stealthily, hunting, gathering intel, setting traps, interrogating those we caught so we could keep moving up the chain until we eliminated the prime target.

Dismantling a subversive organization this big took time and e ort, the days bleeding into weeks, which turned into months.

As always since I'd met her, while I was living in daily horrors, Sage was my shining light during the dark days. I'd bring her smile to mind and feel the weight I was carrying around lessen. I'd keep slogging through the shit we were living in, knowing that she'd be proud of me if she knew what it was we were doing.

My four teammates and I were sitting around one night at our camp, just shooting the shit a er dinner. Our fi h teammate was patrolling.

"So what's going on with you and Sage?" Jake asked me. He'd been at my place the night I'd done my fact-finding mission to find out what happened a er I le the bar the night of the alley kiss.

"Nothing. We're done."

He and Connor, who had also been at my house that night, exchanged glances.

"What?" I demanded.

Connor shrugged. "Never thought we'd hear you say that."

"Never thought I'd say that either. But I needed to let her go because all I was doing was hurting her, over and over again."

"Seriously?" Connor looked at me like I was a special kind of stupid. "You gave up?"

That made me want to knock him out of his chair. "Let me ask you this, Connor. Suppose every time Amelia saw you, she got punched in the gut. How would you feel?"

"Like shit," he admitted a er a moment.

"Yeah. And every time Sage saw me, I was a figurative punch in the gut to her. I was no longer Mason, the man who loved her; I was Mason, the man who she saw kissing another woman in an alley. I was Mason, the man who betrayed her."

"You don't think in time she could have gotten over it?"

"Jake, do you ever really get over it? It's like the fucking monster in the closet or under the bed. It's always there, waiting to pop out and scare you all over again. It never fucking goes away."

"So who's watching your dog while you're gone?" Another teammate, Ryan, asked that.

I grinned sheepishly. "Sage is."

"Dude," Connor laughed at me. "How'd you manage that if it's over?"

I shrugged. "She loves Cashew. I didn't think we'd be called up so soon, so I never made arrangements for him. When we got this call, she was the only one who knew how to take care of him on no notice."

"So she came running because you called."

"Because I was desperate and needed help with my boy."

Jake laughed. "Sounds like you need to rethink being done. Most of my exes? I called 'em to ask for help, they'd be all fuck o and die, asshole. They wouldn't help. Maybe she's not so done with you as you think."

I'd just opened my mouth to respond when we heard a hoot. Enrico was walking perimeter, and that hoot was our signal that something wasn't right.

Silent as ghosts, we slapped on our helmets and picked up our weapons, enough firepower between us to level a small village. We spread out, listening, watching, searching.

You're making the world safer, Mason heard Sage's voice in my mind. It was something she'd told me many times whenever I was leaving for a deployment. I patted my pocket over my heart, the one where I kept a picture of my girl whenever I was on a mission. It made me feel invincible, knowing she was waiting for me to come home. This time was no di erent.

Except that it would be my last mission because it turns out I wasn't invincible.

Three bullets saw to that.