

## Chapter 2 ~ Sage

Three days after I walked out on Mason, I arrived in Monterey, about as far from the east coast as you could get. The long days of driving had been spent reliving the scene in the alley, the scene that followed in our living room and wondering what my life would look like going forward. It was impossible trying not to dwell on the bridal gown that would never be worn, the wedding that would never occur, the happily ever after that would never happen. Whatever thoughts filled my head, I kept coming back to Mason's mouth devouring Eva's in that alley, his hands tangled in her hair.

How could you, Mase? You were about to marry me.

Trying to reconcile that image with what I knew of Mason proved impossible. He wasn't like that. He just wasn't.

And yet, I'd seen with my own eyes that he was exactly like that. Did he feel bad? Yes, I had no doubt. I'd seen the shame and regret in his eyes. But he'd still gone there with her, breaking us irrevocably.

Why, Mason? What were you thinking?

With each mile I drove farther away from him, I was no closer to any answers than when I began my journey. Each night when I stopped at a hotel, despite my exhaustion, sleep eluded me. I twisted in bed, wondering if they were together now that Mason and I were no longer a couple. Had they been seeing each other the whole time Mase and I were together? Or was it something recent? Was it a final goodbye to her and their shared past before he and I got married? Or was he planning on marrying me and keeping Eva on the side?

Did you ever really love me, Mase? Was she always lurking in the background?

My mind recalled every single thing he'd ever told me about Eva, about their relationship, searching for clues I might have missed. Maybe the biggest clue was he'd never deleted his contact for her on his phone. Why hadn't I pushed harder for answers to that? Why hadn't I demanded he block her number and delete her contact? Why didn't I press for more information each time he'd told me she contacted him and wanted to get together? Had he really told her no? Did they meet secretly? Was he lying to me every time he said he'd told her no?

If I did manage to settle my brain for a few hours of sleep every night, I woke up drained, bombarded with the same doubts and suspicions all day long, no matter how good my driving playlist was. I was so far lost in my sorrow that not even angry chick anthems could lift my spirits.

I drove right to my apartment in Monterey that was provided for me as a travel PA. It was on a quiet street and within walking distance of the hospital. I'd told my new supervisor to expect me tomorrow -- even though she asked several times if I didn't want to give myself a couple of days to recover from the long drive. My answer was a firm no; I was desperate to lose myself in work so I could focus on something other than Mason and the way he'd broken my heart.

Do you feel anything, Mase? Do you feel like you've been torn in half, too? Or are you secretly relieved the pretense is over?

The apartment was a small, furnished studio, but it was higher on a hill, so I had a great view and could just about make out the bay. Overall, I was quite pleased with the place. Keeping it neat and tidy wouldn't be much of a challenge since it was maybe 600 square feet. I loved tiny spaces, and bonus! -- there was nothing in the apartment that reminded me of Mason's house. There was even a tiny, apartment sized stackable washer and dryer tucked into the bathroom.

It took me half an hour to unpack my suitcases and dupe bag, and I threw a load of clothes that I'd worn on the road into the washer. I set out my scrubs for the next day, my PA bag and my shoes. Looking up the address of the hospital on my map app, I saw it was a ten-minute walk, so I planned my morning schedule of a quick run, shower and breakfast and left thirty minutes to get to the hospital.

I popped two sleep gummies -- I wasn't hungry, I just wanted to go to bed -- and fell asleep around 8 p.m.

The melatonin in the gummies did their work and I awoke, feeling pretty refreshed, right before my alarm went off at 6 a.m. Throwing on a sports bra, a dry wick shirt, shorts and running shoes, I headed out my door for a quick three-mile run. Despite the scenic charm of the Monterey homes, my mind, of course, went to Mason. What had he been doing for the last few days? Did he realize I was long gone? Had he tried to contact any of my friends? Speaking of...there were quite a few calls I needed to make. I had not told anyone -- except my supervisor -- what was going on, and she promised not to tell Mason anything, if he even tried to find me. I'd made that clear when I called her. Had he told Eva what happened? Was that bitch gloating that she'd gotten me out of the way and could have him back? Would he be happier with her? Or would he step out on Eva, too?

If my tears mixed with the sweat running down my face, no one I passed would ever know. That's the great part about exercising while you're crying -- it's impossible for anyone to tell.

When I got home, I waved to a woman leaving the apartment complex and headed up the stairs to shower and get ready for my day. After I dried my hair and pulled it back in a long braid, I forced myself to eat a granola bar I had that was leftover from my driving snacks. Grocery shopping was first on the list after work today, and I planned out my meals and what I'd need. This was good -- distracting my mind was job number one now, and work was going to accomplish that in amazing ways. I could look forward to a long stretch of time where I wouldn't have to think of Mason.

It sounded like a good plan. But the minute I found my way to my supervisor's office, Daria greeted me with a huge smile and an even bigger bouquet of sunflowers and tulips -- my favorite flowers. I prayed this was just a typical "welcome to you first day on the job" arrangement that the hospital gave to all new employees. A girl can dream, right?

"Welcome, Sage! We're so happy to have you for the next six months. Looks like someone else is excited for you, too," she teased me.

Suddenly, I wasn't feeling so exuberant about my first day. I'd been gone just four days and he'd already found out where I was working, what day I was starting and what department I was assigned to. No doubt, one of his military buddies had been tasked with running me down, and I would bet money Mason had known my apartment address before I did.

I tugged the card out and, shoving it in my back pocket, asked Daria if she would mind keeping them in her office for me. She gave me a brief, puzzled look, her smile dimming just a bit, and agreed. For the next hour, I filled out paperwork, then she gave me a tour of the hospital, focusing on the Emergency Department, where I'd be working, and then I watched some mandatory training videos. I was able to eat lunch with Daria, and she answered the many questions I had while I pushed my salad around my plate. I knew I'd be expected to work between 14 to 16 10-hour shifts a month, but I told Daria I'd be up for more if they needed me. (What else did I have to do other than feel heartbroken and contemplate Mason's betrayal?) In the afternoon, she attached me to another Emergency Department PA so I could shadow her for the next few days, learning routines and procedures and the electronic health record system they used.

The afternoon flew by seeing patients after patients, and I was tired when I finally walked up the stairs to my apartment. Ten minutes after ripping off my scrubs, my doorbell rang and when I asked who it was, I was surprised to hear that it was a food delivery service.

Mason.

After checking my peephole, I opened the door, and my food was handed over. The boy refused a tip, saying he'd already been given one that was more than he made in two days of tips. On the bag was written "You need to eat, kitten."

If I hadn't known it was from Mason already, that note would have clueed me in. Almost from the first, he'd nicknamed me "kitten." When I'd protested, he defended himself, saying back to me of our first date (we'd gone out to dinner, then came back to my place to watch a movie since neither of us had wanted the evening to end), I'd curled up on his lap like a tiny kitten and fallen asleep. He'd held me for hours until I'd awakened in the middle of the night and had dragged him to my bed.

Mad as I was at the man, hurt as I was by the man, I couldn't throw out the steak, baked potato and salad that was a favorite meal of mine. I justified it by saying I hadn't taken the flowers (I'd let them in Daria's office) and he would never know if I ate the food. I definitely wouldn't be thanking him. As I devoured the first solid meal I'd had since fleeing from Mason, I thought about my day.

Flowers at my hospital.

Food at my apartment.

He was letting me know that he knew where I was and what I was doing. He was also taking care of me, which I couldn't understand. Maybe it was out of guilt that he'd made me feel the need to run to the other side of the country. Maybe it was his way of apologizing for hurting me. Maybe it was a final goodbye.

Debating my next move, I retrieved the note from the flowers that I'd put into my scrub pocket. All day it'd been burning a hole there and I had to resist reading it each time we had a brief patient break. I took it out of the envelope and satisfied my curiosity.

I promise to fix us. I love you and only you.

Once, twice, ten times I read that card before I remembered him kissing Eva in the alley.

I threw the card away.