

Chapter 9 ~ Sage

I'd been crying so hard, I'm still not certain how I'd made it out of Mason's house and to my apartment in one piece. Like the blinding-tears-I-can't-breathe-and-I-actually-think-I-might-be-dying kind of crying. He'd played me. He'd played me this whole time, knowing that it hadn't been just a kiss in an alley but full-on sex next to a filthy dumpster. That would be a charming story to tell the child someday. Daddy banged Mommy in an alley by a dumpster and nine months later, there you were, our little garbage man!

I stumbled into my apartment and stood in the middle of the living room, not knowing where to go, what to do, what to think. Except cry, and I clearly understood the assignment because I was a disgusting, slobbery, shuddering mess of goopy tears and other nasty shit I didn't want to think about. Unsure of what to do, I thought about my options. I wanted to call a friend so I wasn't alone while I was trying to absorb this, but I didn't want anyone around me. I wanted to talk to a friend about this, but I didn't want to tell anyone about what had happened. I wanted someone to tell me it was going to be OK, but I didn't want yet another person in my life lying to me.

In the end, I just stood there bawling, hugging a pillow from the couch to my chest, and just accepted that I might never be able to stop the tears.

My phone pinged with a text. Wiping my eyes, I saw it was from an Unknown Number, but it definitely wasn't from Unknown Skank, so I counted that as a win.

It's Mason, on my work phone since I destroyed my phone. Followed you home to make sure you got there safely. Now I'm standing outside in the hallway listening to you cry and trying not to break down your door to get to you. It's killing me to hear you in so much pain, kitten.

Why was he still lying? Didn't liars have to give up at some point and admit they'd been caught out?

I will respect your wishes for now and stop contacting you. But that doesn't mean I won't be thinking about you every fucking minute, loving you hard and not giving up on our future together. You are my life, Sage, and I'm not going to let her lies ruin us. I'm going to prove that I did not lie to you and I am not the father of that baby. I love you forever and always.

Words. His words sounded so good, but I couldn't believe them any longer.

The next day, I met a couple of my friends for dinner and our shi ended. I'd never felt less like going into work, but I wasn't going to let those two assholes take anything else from me. I'd given into my tears all night, my face looked like I'd suffered the worst allergic reaction ever known to man, but I'd pulled myself together and gone into work.

Taylor, another nurse practitioner, took one look at me and demanded an explanation -- and she wrapped me up in a tight hug. Our other good friend, Hannah, a doctor, came up while Taylor was squeezing the life out of me and demanded details. And giving them the barest bones, they informed me we were going out for drinks that night and I was going to spill my guts.

Something to look forward to. Not.

That evening, armed with a margarita and some of the best chips and salsa ever, I spilled my tale of lies and betrayal and watched while their jaws dropped.

"So, are you over-over?" Hannah asked. "Like there's no going back? No forgiving this fuck up?"

I shook my head. "I was just starting to sort through the alley kiss, believe him when he said it was a mistake -- and that forgiveness was about seven months in the making. And you know what? I still wasn't there with the trust all the way. Rightfully so, as it turned out. But this? He fathered a baby with her and telling me, assuring me, promising me that nothing more than a kiss had happened that night. I was not all right with the damn kiss even happening, but now that I know his D had...wandered across state lines, so to speak? Gross. No way. Some lies you can't come back from and this is one of them."

Taylor looked thoughtful. "So, no reconciliation in the future? Are you sure about this? I know you're mad right now, but you love this man. There's no doubt in my mind how much you love him. And I know he loves you, even though he made a terrible mistake. That man looks at you like you invented beer and motorcycles and football and the Marine Corps."

"Tay," I said, "Eva is the most awful person you can imagine. Even if I wanted Mason enough to overlook what he'd done, there is no way I would get mixed up in his life ever again knowing that he and that bitch are going to be connected through that baby for years and years and years. She's so nasty, she'd make sure to try to make his life miserable because he didn't choose to be with her."

"No step-mama-ing for you?"

I made a face at Taylor. "If a man had a child from a previous relationship when I started dating him, that'd be one thing. But having to deal with a baby that resulted from my man cheating on me? No. Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Keep your cheating dick and the product of your cheating far, far away from me because I want nothing to do with either one. There's no way in hell I'm the type of person who could deal with that. I am not that nice or forgiving. Some women are, and I admire being that kind of person who can accept and forgive, but I know myself and I know, to my bones, that I'm not one of them."

Taylor nodded her understanding. "I hear you. Not sure what I'd do, faced with that situation, but it probably wouldn't be pretty."

"I love Mason. That's a fact. But I can never get past this -- his cheating, his lying, his fathering a baby. It's too much. And it may break my heart, but I'd rather live with that than live with him, knowing he had to interact with Eva because of the baby. How can you be with a man when you resent him and his child? I know the child is innocent, but I can't get over his origins." I stopped and looked up at them. "Does that make me a terrible person?"

Hannah shook her head. "No. I think it just means you're a person who knows her limits. Some women could forgive and accept the child. More power to them. That's an amazing display of forgiveness. But some women could never accept the cheating or the child that resulted. And that's just as valid a response. Better to know that than to try and end up resenting the child. That's not good for any of the parties involved."

I nodded, feeling a bit better in my mind about my decision to be done with Mason. My heart, though? That was a different matter.

Two weeks later, as I was sorting through my mail, I came across a light green envelope that looked like a birthday card at the bottom of all the junk mail. Curious, I opened the envelope, pulled out the little piece of cardstock and found myself staring at a picture of Mason and Eva. He was standing beside her, looking down at her adoringly, his hand next to hers on her baby bump.

We're so excited to find out whether our little blessing is going to need a pink or blue nursery! Please join us at our home for our baby gender reveal!

My breath seized. The address listed was Mason's. They hadn't lost much time making it official and moving in together, but reading that invitation made me sick to my stomach. Just two weeks ago, a mere fourteen days, he'd been with me, insisting he couldn't possibly be the father -- and now he was living with this bitch, excited about his baby and planning a gender reveal. With Eva. So much for his protestations of innocence, begging me to believe him, believe he couldn't possibly be the father of Eva's spawn. He hadn't touched her since before he and I got together and it was just a ten-second kiss in the alley that night.

There's something off, something happened, but I am **not** that baby's father. That's the truth. You have got to believe me.

Apparently, once I'd made it clear that I wasn't buying what he was selling, he'd gone right back to Eva, just like he always did.

Mase has never been able to resist me. And he didn't resist me that night.

I would never understand why a man pursued one woman when he already had another woman on the side, a woman whose past was so enmeshed with his that they could never really be separated. And all the people they hurt along the way, well, they'd just have to get over it because there's no stopping true love from triumphing. Try as he might, Mason had never been able to resist the allure of Eva, the pull she had on him and this alley baby was just proof of that.

Nothing made sense to me, and sometimes, that's the most difficult aspect of a break up and come to terms with: it might never make sense. You go over and over every word, every action in your mind, wondering if you missed the signals that things were going to explode or if it truly was the surprise that it seemed. All women became biology majors after a breakup and we drove ourselves crazy dissecting the hell out of every aspect of the relationship.

I'm not going to let you end us over something that meant absolutely nothing.

Looking at the picture of the two of them on that stupid invitation, I scoffed. It meant absolutely nothing, Mason? That's why you moved her in with you so fast and are in party planning mode?

Sage, I don't love her. I love you. You're the one I want to marry. Swear on everything holy that it was meaningless to me -- it was just kissing. I stopped her before she could undo my belt. It meant nothing.

So it meant nothing turned into living together in Mason's house, where just weeks ago, he'd been trying to convince me to move back in with him. That could have been a little awkward -- not to mention crowded -- if I'd taken him up on his offer.

This was a huge lapse in judgment, sweetheart, and I'm so fucking sorry. You're the woman I love, and you are the only woman I want to spend my life with.

Maybe that was a clue. Is a kiss really a huge lapse in judgment? Or had that been a slip of the tongue and he was unconsciously telling me that it had been more than a kiss in that alley?

I promise I'll do whatever it takes to earn back your trust. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you.

Except tell me the truth.

I put that fucking invitation right on my refrigerator door so I could look at it and be reminded of his lies.

Everything turned out to be a lie.