

Chapter 4 ~ Sage

Wherever you are in life, you got there because of the choices you made -- either proactive choices where you're faced with multiple paths forward and have to choose one, or reactive choices, where you make a choice based on something that's been done or happened to you. My choice to leave for California was obviously a reactive one to Mason kissing Eva. Fleeing to California is not a choice I normally would have made, but due to circumstances, I'd made it. It's been two weeks now since I ran from Mason, and my life has fallen into a basic routine. Every day I get up early, go for a run, get ready for work, go to work, go home, eat dinner, think about Mason, read his texts and go to bed. Lather, rinse, repeat. Some days, I get crazy and shake up my routine with a trip to the grocery store or to Starbucks, but I try to keep those wild impulses to a minimum.

Today, though? Today, my routine is shot all to hell because of choices made. It's Saturday, and I have the day off, which unfortunately gives me a lot of time to think, think, think and possibly feel sorry for myself, but I'll never admit that out loud.

Today would have been my wedding day. Would have been! Would have been my wedding day had my fiancé not made the choice to lock lips with his ex...or maybe his current? I didn't know what to believe. There's everything Mason is saying in his texts to me that is fighting against what I saw in that alley. She didn't look so exthen. It would have been my wedding day had I made the choice to stay and accept his apology. Choices. So many choices that led to this day.

It's chilly this morning, and I ran to the beach so I could watch the waves in Monterey Bay pummel the shore. Out in the distance, a pod of dolphins play in the surf. The sight does nothing to soothe me like it usually does. All my mind is focused on is what I'd be doing right now if I was back home preparing to get married.

Why wasn't I enough, Mason? Why did you have to turn to her? Mason began with his texts early today, his mind obviously on the same thing as mine.

Good morning, kitten. I was up all night thinking about what today would have been if I hadn't been such an unthinking, stupid asshole. There has never been anything I wanted more than to marry you.

Then why did you kiss her, Mason? Why?

The bridal shop called a week ago, so I went and picked up your dress. I couldn't help looking at it. It's beautiful and you would have looked gorgeous in it. You don't know how badly I wish I could see you walking toward me today, wearing this dress.

The boxes holding our wedding rings are open and in my hand. All I can do is stare at them, wishing that later today we would be sliding them on each other's fingers and promising each other forever. No matter how horribly I messed up, I am promising you my forever, Sage, whether you want it or not.

I would have held you so close while we danced our first dance as a married couple, never wanting to let you go. I can't ever let you go, Sage. Please don't ask me to, because that's the one thing I won't be able to do. I'm hoping someday I will still be lucky enough to call you my wife one day.

Good luck with that, Mason.

I'm thinking about our wedding night, and how I would have slowly undone every one of the five million buttons on this dress of yours, giving you a different kind of kiss for each one. Deep, fast, slow, quick, drugging...until I'd finally gotten it out of you and it pooled onto the floor.

I imagine you finally falling asleep right before the sun came up, and I would have held you, my beloved, precious wife, in my arms as I fell asleep, too.

If I called you today, would you talk to me? I just need to hear your voice, on today of all days. Please talk to me, Sage. Being away from you is torture. I'm not above begging.

Just like Eva wasn't above begging you to fuck her, her hands already on your belt buckle.

I just tried calling you four times. You don't know how much I wished you'd answered, but I understand you don't want to talk to me. I ruined us, ruined our wedding day, ruined what should have been one of the happiest days of our lives. Saying I'm sorry doesn't even begin to cover the regret I have for my stupidity.

Mason doesn't know how close I came to answering each of his four calls. My finger was a hairsbreadth away from swiping to the right to answer the call. I yearned to hear his voice, too, on this day, when I would have become his wife. My heart longed for the comfort his deep voice had always brought me. But then I remembered our last conversation.

I admit we got carried away and we were kissing, but it didn't mean anything, Sage, and it didn't go any further than that. I swear to you, it didn't mean anything.

So I never answered his calls, my weakness in wanting to talk with him being overriden by the image of Eva and Mason kissing in an alley. Sometimes I really wished brain bleach was an actual thing because I would love to wipe that horrible image from my mind. I suppose it was some small miracle that I'd only heard Eva's voice in the alley and not Mason's voice saying anything to her.

The first time I'd heard her voice had been almost -- almost -- as memorable. Mason and I had been dating about a month, and we were out to dinner with two of his Marine buddies and their wives. I'd known this was an important night for me, being introduced to Mason's friends, but he'd tried to calm my nervousness with his drugging kisses and his constant reassurance that his friends would love me.

"You're looking all kinds of gorgeous and hot, kitten," he'd told me, looking my outfit over in appreciation. The royal blue dress clung to my curves, hitting me mid-thigh and the one-inch shoulder straps and square neckline were flattering and sexy without being over-the-top. My three-inch heels gave me a little extra oomph in the height department, but Mason still towered over me. I'd worn my long hair in loose curls, which Mason had already messed up twice.

"I'm thinking we need to cancel dinner tonight, Sage," he said as he advanced on me. I held out a hand but that didn't stop my Marine. I was in his arms in moments, his mouth demanding a response from mine that I gave him, not even caring about my carefully-applied, seldom-worn lipstick. When he finally dragged his lips from my mouth, I'm not sure which one of us was breathing harder, but I knew that look in his eyes already, even though it was only one month in to our relationship. But there was no way I was showing up to a dinner to meet his buddies for the first time, freshly fucked and messed up.

Putting my hands to his chest, I shook my head at him. "Slow your roll, there, Mason. We're going to dinner, and I am not going looking like I just walked through a hurricane to get there. We'll have plenty of time when we get home."

He narrowed his eyes at me, but they were twinkling in that way he had, so I knew what was coming next would be outrageous. "I'll agree to your demand, but in exchange, you have to give up something."

"And what is that?"

"Those panties of yours. I saw you putting them on and knew I should have tackled you onto the bed right then."

"You are not getting my panties," I protested. "I am not sitting through dinner with your friends commando!"

He cocked a brow at me. "Fine, freshly fucked look it is. That's the option I would have chosen anyway." Then he moved toward me, a determined glint in his eyes, and I knew what choice I needed to make.

"Marine, this is conduct unbecoming, I hope you know," I groused at him as he smirked at me while I shimmied out of my royal blue thong.

I dropped them into his waiting hand, he smiled, his eyes burning into mine as he shoved them into his front pocket, and then I flounced off to the bathroom in a hurry to fix my lipstick-smeared face.

Smiling the whole time since he couldn't see me.

We'd managed to arrive at the restaurant on time, without further incident or the loss of any other clothing. His friends and their wives had been open and friendly, and I soon relaxed in their company, fielding their questions and watching the men tease each other relentlessly. They were warm, welcoming and genuinely curious about me. It wasn't until coffee and dessert that things took a hard left turn.

We'd been enjoying some really nice conversation and were making plans about getting together for a day of hiking, when a tall, blonde woman walked up to our table.

"Well, this explains why you haven't been returning my calls or texts, Mase."

I immediately noticed three things. One, the woman was absolutely stunning if you liked cold ice queens. Two, she was staring at Mason in a proprietary way. And three, everyone at this table knew her. All eyes jumped from the strange woman to me to Mason.

I guess there was a fourth thing I noticed, too. My officer and a gentleman did not get to his feet for this woman as the other two men did. His arm stayed on the back of my chair as it had been for all of dinner, his thumb idly stroking my shoulder.

"How...how have you been, Eva?" Sheryl finally said to break the silence when it became apparent Mason wasn't going to answer Eva's question. Sheryl was married to Mason's friend Eric, who was watching the scene unfold warily.

So this was Eva, Mason's most recent ex.

"Fine, thanks, Sheryl," Eva barely spared her a glance before her attention snapped back to Mason. "I'd be doing better if my boyfriend would answer my question."

I stifled and Mason's eyes finally turned to Eva.

"Told you three months ago, we were done and everything between us was done for good. I'm not your boyfriend and haven't been for a while. Not sure why you think showing up here and embarrassing yourself would change that."

"I want answers, Mase. I deserve them."

"I gave you answers three months ago, and you got everything you deserved. Now you need to go."

"If she's an attempt to make me jealous, you should have picked someone who was an actual threat."

Mason shot to his feet just as the man with the same blonde hair and features as Eva came up behind her.

"Eva," the man said, "let's go." His unhappy gaze shifted to Mason. "Sorry, Mase. We clocked you when you were seated, but she insisted on staying." And watching was implied.

At this point, before Mason could respond, the maître d' came up and asked if there was a problem.

"No problem," the blonde man said, grabbing what I could only assume was his sister's arm. "See you men tomorrow."

Eva allowed herself to be dragged away after glaring at me, but the evening had been ruined. With about a thousand questions spinning through my head, I knew Mason could sense my withdrawal. We all said a subdued goodnight, and Mason and I walked silently to his car.

He opened the door for me, and then shut it once I was settled into the passenger seat. When he was in the driver's seat, he turned to me, making no attempt to start the car.

"I'm sorry about that," he said, and I could hear the regret in his voice.

"So, that's Eva," I said. In the month we'd been together, he'd mentioned he'd dated a woman once and named Eva, but that was all he'd said. I didn't realize the other part of their relationship was so recent, and it made me uncertain if I was just being used as filler until they resolved whatever it was between them and got back together.

"She seems just lovely."

I knew he couldn't miss the sarcasm.

"She can be a bitch," he said, irritated with the woman, "especially to the woman I'm dating."

"Oh, so you've been through this before with her? Date someone else, she makes a scene and you get back together?"

He seemed uncomfortable, or embarrassed, I'm not sure which.

"Yes, it has happened before. There was a lot of back and forth, breaking up and getting back together again with Eva. She was not easy or pleasant to be with."

"So, am I just being used here, Mason? Do I have to worry about running into her all the time and that you're just biding your time until you decide to go back to her?"

Those eyes of his burned into mine. "You are not being used, Sage. I finished whatever was between Eva and me two months before I met you. I told her then we were done for good, and I was not going back."

"Can you explain to me what you got out of your relationship with her? It sounds volatile and intense, up and down, and again, the complete opposite of what you and I have."

"There was just something that drew us together, but that was before I knew what a real relationship could be like. That was you, kitten. Meeting you. And yes, my relationship with you is the complete opposite of what Eva and I had, but to me, that's a very good thing. I never felt about her the way I feel about you. I finally grew up, grew past the drama and realized that was not what I wanted in my life. I don't want to deal with the kind of shit she pulls, I don't want to play her games, and if she doesn't want to accept that I'm done with her, that's on her."

He picked up one of my curls, and rubbed it between his fingers. "I was done with her before I met you, Sage. I was ready for someone good and sweet and pure-hearted. That was you, kitten. Meeting you was the very best thing that's ever happened to me, and I can guarantee you that she's got no chance with me. You are all I see, and maybe it's too damn early to tell you this, but you are all I see in my future. Never thought about the future before, but that's all I think about with you."

"And you honestly don't text her back or take her calls?"

He held out his phone to me. I already knew his passcode because he'd needed me to look up something once while he'd been driving and he'd given me the code without hesitation.

"I've got nothing on my phone you can't see," he said. "Look through my texts, look through my outgoing calls."

I shook my head and gently pushed his phone back to him. "Is she going to make it a habit to confront you every time we're out?"

"From what I can tell, she was in town to see her brother. She lives two hours away, so no, we won't be running into her."

"And you work with her brother?"

"For some of our missions, yes. He's intelligent and we work with him sometimes. That's all I can say. But he is the reason I met Eva in the first place."

"And your friends all know her? At least the ones we were out with tonight?"

"Yes, she'd been in my life for years. They'd all met her."

"Great. So they're all making comparisons," I muttered, looking down at my hands.

His finger tipped my chin up to look at him. "Sage, the only comparisons they're making is about how much better you are, how much happier I am than they've ever seen me, how much more beautiful you are inside and out than she was. Trust me, they've all noticed the change in me, and they like it as much as I do, and they know you're the cause for my happiness because you're all I talk about."

"I don't want to get screwed over in a few months, Mason, when you decide you can't be without her anymore."

He shook his head. "That's not going to happen. I can be without her. But I'm beginning to suspect that it's you I can't be without."

My phone buzzing startled me out of my trip down memory lane.

Mason.

Choices. Choices. Choices.

I swiped right to accept his call.