

## Chapter 12 (Elowyn): Confronting Avoidance

\*\*\*TW for reference to domestic violence\*\*\*

I understand.

It was too soon to ask. I'm sorry.

I love you, Wyn.

That's all the tiny card said that came with the bouquet of flowers just delivered to the store. For Lachlan to send flowers was unusual. He was a more practical gesture kind of man. A brake job for my car. Washing my car every week and detailing it. Turning over a section of our backyard to create a vegetable garden for me because I mentioned I wanted to start one. Researching what vegetables you shouldn't grow together to help me lay out the seeds properly. Laying down a brick patio in the backyard because I'd mentioned wanting one. Researching how to make a koi pond that I wanted and then finding all the different colors of koi he could.

Do you want a variety of colors or just go with the gold and white ones, Wyn?

In the time we'd been together, Lachlan had rarely veered from the practical. He'd given me three pieces of jewelry over five years, things he'd noticed me looking at when we'd been out but which had been too much money so I'd walked on by. They'd miraculously appeared on the kitchen table the next morning, not wrapped, in whatever box the jeweler had provided. Lachlan never held them back until my birthday or Christmas.

"My birthday's in six weeks," I'd protested when I'd opened the earrings. "We'll just call this an early birthday present."

"No, we won't," Lach had said. "You don't ask for anything."

I'd wanted to ask for something, but I was afraid he'd ask for something in return, and that I just couldn't do.

"This is why you never tie yourself to a man," my mother had told me, pointing to her swollen face and split lip. "So you can just take off if necessary."

Now he'd sent flowers in response to my turning him down when he asked if I would let him come visit.

"Pretty flowers," Roberta said to me, admiring the mixed bouquet of pink lilies and roses in the clear glass vase that I'd set on the checkout counter. Once again, Roberta had lingered behind the others at the end of book club, making sure she was always the last to buy the next week's book selection.

"Thank you," I said, admiring them right along with her.

"Did you find an answer to your question yet?"

She'd been asking for five weeks now, and I was no closer to an answer despite Lach's daily texts.

"Not really. No. I mean, how do you ever know if a cheater's actually changed?"

"That's a great question, and I wish I had an answer to it," she said thoughtfully. "I think it's similar to when no blood test exists to prove someone definitively has a disease and they have to go by the symptoms to make a diagnosis. You kind of have to look at a cheater and go by the signs to determine in what ways he's changed...or hasn't changed."

"I just don't know," I semi-whined.

"One of the hardest things in the world is to find out that your man is cheating on you. Your trust is destroyed and it takes a huge leap of faith to even think about trusting again."

Hmmm "I knew," I admitted to her.

"Oh, Elowyn, I'm sure you did. I think women almost always know, deep down."

Could this get any more uncomfortable?

"No, I'm not talking about a gut feeling, Roberta. I mean we'd been seeing each other...and then right as we were talking about my becoming his ol' lady, he told me I needed to know that he'd occasionally cheat on me, but that I was the one he loved and he'd always come home to me."

That had surprised Roberta. It would probably surprise any rational, thinking woman.

"Oh, honey, what happened to you?" she asked so ly, her eyes warm and sympathetic.

"I don't understand."

"What happened to you to make you accept that?"

Don't expect too much from a man. They all start out nice and then they turn on you.

As long as he's not hitting you, be happy with what he's willing to give you.

Leave yourself an out, Elowyn. Never tie yourself to him. Ever.

"I don't know how to answer that, Roberta," I said, trying not to sound as defensive as I felt. So I tossed the argument at her that I'd used on myself over the years. "Women marry men thinking they're going to be faithful because they promised to be -- only to find out they've been cheating. I knew from the start cheating was possible. Probable! I shrugged. "Which is the bigger betrayal? Promising to be faithful and then cheating or telling someone straight up, from the start that the cheating will happen?"

She tilted her head at me, trying to puzzle something out. "And could you cheat?"

"I could have, I suppose. Lachlan would have hated it, oh, he would have hated it but he would have had no choice but to accept it or lose me."

"So did you?"

"No, because I didn't want to. I'd lost interest in multiple partners given my past. I'd been really..active from the time I was sixteen until even a er I met Lachlan. And about a month a er I met him, I just became really disgusted with myself one day. I wasn't having sex because I liked it all that much. I was just having it in the hopes that..."

"Someone would love you?"

"Not even love. I would have settled for a ection. Caring. Any kind of concern." Pathetic, Elowyn

"I see." And the way she said it made me think she really did get it.

"So your Lachlan didn't love you, but maybe he cared for you?"

"He said he loved me." Kind of. You know I love you" But he started cheating a er a year of me being his ol' lady, so maybe he didn't."

Some customers walked into the shop, chattering and laughing, and Roberta looked over her shoulder at them and then back at me. "I'd love to talk more next week, if you're willing."

I returned her smile because, despite being about forty years older than I was, she was easy to talk with. No judgment, just honest curiosity about my situation.

I didn't thank Lach for the flowers, which I suppose was bad manners but I wouldn't be maneuvered into having to contact him. The **No**'d returned in answer to his text asking if he could visit was enough.

When I went home that night, I was thinking over my conversation with Roberta as I made a simple dinner of chicken salad, rolls and peas. This was comfort food for me, and for some reason, a er the conversation with Roberta and a er receiving the flowers, I needed comfort. I'd forced myself to leave the flowers at work because it was bad enough that I carried Lachlan's letter around with me still. By now, I had it memorized. All the words and items on his BAD list were committed to memory.

As I had dinner once again with Lachlan's letter, it gave me an idea based on something Roberta had said.

I think it's similar to when no blood test exists to prove someone definitively has a disease and they have to go by the symptoms to make a diagnosis. You kind of have to look at a cheater and go by the signs to determine in what ways he's changed...or hasn't changed.

So maybe I could diagnose Lachlan. Maybe I could determine if he was really trying to change or just trying to make me think he was to get me to come back home to him. Grabbing some paper, I put the header at the top: **Signs Lachlan Is Trying to Change (At Least Himself And Maybe That Will Lead To Him Not Being A Cheater But It's Too Soon To Tell)**.

Well, that header was long as hell, but I started on the items in my list.

1. He opened up about his past to me/talked to me about his cheating
2. He's not trying to railroad me into coming back
3. He's recognized all the ways he hurt me and all the ways his cheating hurt me
4. He's reading self-help books to understand himself
5. He keeps reaching out to me despite never getting an answer from me

I pursed my lips, considering the list I'd created and compared it to his. Mine still wasn't definitive proof in the slightest. It still didn't mean anything had truly changed or he wouldn't revert to his old ways. It still didn't mean I could or would get over his cheating and his unwillingness to discuss it. It didn't mean I would ever be his one and only, and I refused to ever settle again.

Elowyn, if you find someone willing to provide a good home for you, take it. Don't expect perfection because it doesn't exist, especially not for someone like you.

My mother's words came back to me at odd times, as much as I tried to shut them out. While she hadn't been a terrible mother, she certainly hadn't been a nurturing one. Her calls had always frustrated me, and one day, when she'd said something so mean that it actually made me start crying, Lachlan grabbed the phone from me and practically snarled at my mother.

"You call her again, I'll find you and make it so you can't call her again. I don't know jack shit about you, lady, but you don't get to make her cry. She'll call you if she wants to talk to you."

Apparently, the irony of that conversation was lost on Lachlan at the time. That byplay was fresh in my mind the next day when I got my mail and there was a letter tucked into a book from Lachlan that he'd clearly read and marked up.

Confronting Avoidance

I couldn't wait to see what Mr. Avoidance himself had marked up in this book.

It would be illuminating.