

## Chapter 15 (Elowyn): You're Not Alone

"Lach," I said, "if there's one thing that's become clear to me, it's that we were toxic together. I don't see how we go back to that or even why we'd want to."

"Two things. First, the way we were was toxic. The way we were. No doubt, Elowyn. I'm working on straightening myself out, but it's going to take work because I'm seriously fucked up. That's the reason I send you the books I'm reading, so you can see what I'm learning and figuring out about myself. So you can see I'm one hundred percent serious about not being a total fuck up anymore and hurting you ever again."

Reaching across the table, his scarred, thick fingers drew patterns on the back of my hand.

"If you figure out what the problem is, if you figure out what's wrong with you, you can learn from your mistakes and be better by fixing yourself. I wanted to fix myself for you, Wyn, for us. Reading these fucking books -- it's like the authors are talking right to me, like they know exactly what I went through growing up. I'm working on myself so that when you're ready to come back to me, you'll know you're safe, and I won't ever hurt you again."

"That's a lot of work with no guarantee that I'll come back to you in the end."

"Not going to lie, Wyn. I started this because I knew it was the only chance I had to get you back. But as I've gotten more into it, whether or not you come back to me, I need to do this, see it through. For me. I'm fixing me for me and for you. Didn't like myself for what I did to you, but when I thought about it more, I also just plain didn't like myself. And I especially didn't like myself because what I did hurt you and drove you away, and I had to live my life without you. Well, Wyn, living without you is hell on earth. So I made up my mind that I'm going to live without you if I can help it, and I'm learning that I can help it. I'm going to earn you back. And the first step is me."

All of this was coming from a man who never wanted to talk about deep emotions. He was the kind of man who didn't spend time on self reflection, feelings and emotions. Lachlan was goal-oriented, task-driven, straightforward and unswerving with a focus on getting the job done and done well.

"I'm looking at it like I want to go pick you up for a date, Elowyn, but I go out to my bike and it's broken down. Can't pick you up 'til the bike's fixed, so job one is fixing the damn bike."

He was so earnest it broke my heart, my heart that had already been broken by him in a much different way. Lachlan, from the first time I met him, was always confident, a stoic badass, a tower of strength. Now, I was being given a glimpse of the little lost boy he carried inside peeking through his rough features. This man was riddled with scars inside and out, but his determination to be more than he had been was almost palpable.

"And the second thing?" I asked, watching his fingers on mine.

"The second thing is I'm going to remind you about the good parts of us. The good things, the right things, and there were good things despite all the bad things I did. There were ways we were strong. Those are the pieces I'm talking about fitting together again."

I needed to think about what he'd just said later, when I was alone and had time to really pick it apart and examine his words for flaws and truths.

"One of the things I've been learning is to look at myself realistically and not to apply absolutes. It's really easy to say I'm a total piece of shit person and there's nothing good about me and to leave it at that. People throw up their hands in a fight and say well, guess I'm just an asshole then. But that's the easy answer, the cop out to avoid trying to improve yourself. I'm saying guess I'm just an asshole...but I don't want to be one so now I'm going to fix that. Unless you're a complete psychopath, and I know a few of those, there are parts of everyone that are good. So what I'm learning is to look at the good and the bad in myself and work to understand why I have those bad parts and what I can do to repair those. But the other half of that shit is to look at the good parts of me and work to make those even stronger. It's playing to your strengths."

I didn't need to think about that for even a second to realize that he spoke an important truth. Condemning someone wholly and across the board wasn't valid for the most part. It was a basic fact of life: good people did bad things and bad people did good things. It was our nature. I thought back to those nights years ago when Lach had stationed himself nearby while I was in the alley with one of the men from the bar where I worked. Lachlan was the first man who'd ever looked out for me without expecting something in return, and I remember being surprised when he hadn't treated me like a slut.

He could have. He definitely could have and I wouldn't have blinked an eye because that was how I saw myself. Lachlan still had no clue how many men I'd been with before him, why I'd been with so many, what made me use men to try to fill up the missing pieces and gaps inside me.

If I was going to be honest with myself, Lachlan hadn't been the only broken one in our relationship. He was, however, the only one seriously trying to fix himself. Even though I'd finally gathered the courage, self-respect and reserves to leave him, I hadn't tried to fix myself, to address the reasons I'd been willing to accept much less than I should have. I'd simply changed locations after deciding I'd had enough, dragging my baggage and old habits with me, but I hadn't truly looked within myself the way Lach was in the process of doing.

My mind flashed back to a conversation I'd had with Roberta when I'd told her I'd gone into a relationship with Lachlan knowing he'd cheat on me.

Oh, honey, what happened to you?

I don't understand.

What happened to you to make you accept that?

It was a simple yet complicated answer that I didn't like to think about: my mother had happened to me. The way I'd grown up had happened to me. My pain had happened to me.

I twisted my hands so they took hold of Lachlan's hands. Those strong, square hands that were battered and scarred.

Like the two of us were.

And even still, the feel of them, the familiar roughness, the sheer strength brought me comfort.

"I'm...I don't know the right word, here, Lach -- impressed? glad? awed? -- that you're working on yourself and making changes. But listening to you has made me realize that I need to work on myself."

His eyes were watching me carefully, beautiful in their steadiness.

"I've been reading the books you've been sending me, looking at what you've been highlighting. And you've been really brave because the sentences or paragraphs you're highlighting are excruciating. Lach. They're really hard to apply to myself because they open old hurts, make me think about things I've never wanted to revisit. But I've been thinking, with every book you send, that I need to start the same journey you did. And I don't know if I can make any promises --"

His hands squeezed mine as I choked.

"Elowyn, I get it. I know what you're saying," that rough voice was choked, too. "You need time. I won't push you because it's hard. You're the only one who knows what I'm doing, and sending you texts every day helps ground me and makes me feel like I'm not so fucking alone. Got all the brothers in the world, but you're the only one I can share shit with. Taking a look at yourself is going to hurt, so I'll make the offer of being your friend with no other expectations."

He swallowed, his jaw ticking.

"But promise me something, Wyn. Those days when it gets to be too fucking much because there's that much pain coming out of you, reach out to me, even if it's just to cry. I'll sit with you and not say a word. I'll be on the other end of the phone and listen. I'll walk with you while you clear your heart. Whatever you need, ask. I'm not afraid to talk anymore, and I just want you to know while you work through things that you're not alone."