

Chapter 19 (Elowyn): Hold On

*** TW for graphic discussion of domestic violence and child abuse ***

Roberta had met with me twice in the last week, and each conversation with her had left me feeling raw.

Exposed.

Unburdened.

Lighter, amazingly, as if I'd just shrugged out of a three hundred pound backpack I'd been carrying for my entire life.

Before we'd met the first time, Roberta had said we'd just talk and it wouldn't be anything official or clinical or scary.

"I'm a retired therapist," she'd said. "Happily retired. But I've felt so strongly for a while that you needed someone to talk with, Elowyn. I'm good at listening, and I might have some insights, some suggestions that may help you. But mostly, I'll just listen. Sometimes, simply telling your story helps enormously. It's a good first step forward, away from the past. So we can talk, if you want. I'll talk with you as a friend who also happens to be a therapist. And then you may decide down the line that you want to speak with someone officially."

I wanted to talk with her. I couldn't imagine talking to a stranger.

The first time we'd talked, I'd filled her in on my childhood. It helped that her eyes didn't fill with pity or horror. They'd just remained kind and steady.

The second time, I'd filled her in on my adult years up through Lachlan.

That time, it helped that her eyes didn't fill with disgust or condemnation at my behavior. They just remained calm and compassionate.

"So I wasn't enough for him," I finished and at that, her face changed and she leaned forward.

"I'm going to tell you something straight, and if you don't hear anything else, hear this: his cheating had nothing to do with you. It was something from inside him. Think about it this way -- your refusal to marry him stemmed from your childhood, from the things that happened to you, from the example your mother gave you. I suspect, based on what you've told me about his journey to fix himself, that his cheating came from something from his past. That's not on you, Wyn. It's never on you if someone cheats. It comes from something inside them that's broken."

"That makes a lot of sense. It's just hard to believe."

"Believe it. Have you ever really broken that down for Lachlan?"

"Not really. No."

"You've talked to me twice now. And I hope we can talk some more. But maybe think about talking with Lachlan about this. I'm not saying you should, or you have to; I'm just saying think about it."

"I actually have been thinking about talking to him for a while. Ever since he opened up to me about his past, it made me think that we...well, we talked about everything but our pasts when we were together. And we definitely should have talked about them. It might not have made a difference, but maybe it would have."

Roberta gave me a half smile. "It's always hard to say. But both of you had some issues to overcome that left you two in a constant cycle of hurt."

She wasn't wrong, so when Lach and Orion had walked into the book store unexpectedly, it'd seemed like a sign. Without thinking about it too much, I'd asked Lach to dinner, which was why I was now opening my door to him.

"Brought some comfort food for tonight," he said seriously, holding up two bags from a really good local rib place. The man knew my weaknesses.

We got settled at my little table, and I tried to start eating -- the ribs smelled wonderful -- but I was nervous with all the dark thoughts in my head. Picking at my food, I felt Lach's eyes on me.

"You hurt me."

We both froze at my words. Lach because he thought we were having dinner before we started talking, and me because that wasn't what I had practiced saying at all. But I'd started and, we were both about to discover, we were in the midst of an avalanche of emotions we couldn't outrun.

"You hurt me." That came out stronger, and I looked at him instead of my plate this time.

"You hurt me. You hurt me, Lach, for years. You hurt me, and I know I agreed to it, but it hurt. And it hurt more and more the longer it went on, and I wanted you to stop because I wanted you to be the one person in my life who never hurt me."

His eyes watched me, but he didn't say anything, didn't try to interrupt because he knew what was coming, and what was coming was everything I'd never told him.

"My mom...she used to get beat. Beaten by whatever man was in her life. She kept picking losers that hurt her, and they'd hurt me, too. They'd smack her around, and then, when I couldn't stop screaming or crying, they'd hit me. Sometimes they'd knock me into a wall, sometimes they'd hit me so hard I'd need stitches, a couple of times they broke my arms, sometimes they'd kick me so hard I flew across the room and I had big bruises that would hurt for days."

I swallowed back the tears, kind of missing the days when he and I never discussed our childhoods.

"Mom never stopped them. Never. She just told me to never tie myself to a man because they always hurt you, and as long as you weren't married, you could get away clean. And she'd take me to some person in the neighborhood who'd stitch me up, stitch her up, but sometimes I had to go to the hospital or she did. And we'd lie about what happened. Since we moved around, I never had broken bones in the same hospital system twice."

Looking down at my plate, I saw I'd shredded my napkin.

"Some of the men seemed nice at first, and I could see hope in Mom's eyes, but then they weren't so nice and it would start again. I can remember thinking with each new guy she brought home that maybe this guy would actually be nice. I just wanted a dad like other girls had. I wanted somebody to love me because it didn't feel like my mom loved me if she let them hurt me. When I got older, I kind of gave up on that and lowered the bar, thinking maybe if someone would even just care about me, I'd be happy."

I forced my hands to relax, noting I'd clenched them into fists.

"And when I hit high school, I found that guys would be nice to me if I was nice to them, but the minute it was over, it was like it never happened, until the next time they wanted sex. And I was always willing, hoping somebody would care. I was always willing, Lach, I was that girl in school, the easy one, the one who actually slept with every guy on every team. I got called names, but names didn't hurt as much as fists, and for a few minutes, I could pretend that I was with someone who cared for me. I was still doing that when I met you. You saw it. And you didn't care that I was a slut."

"You weren't a slut, Wyn. Don't ever call yourself that." His voice was gentle, but stern. Maybe edging toward angry that I would refer to myself like that.

"You had the kindest eyes of anyone I was ever with. You sat and talked to me at the bar. You got to know me -- except where my past was concerned -- and I fell in love with you. I needed you to be the one person who didn't hurt me, but you did, Lachlan. Over and over and over again."

My voice was getting loud but Lach was still watching me, his eyes agonized. Unable to sit still, I jumped up and Lachlan did, too, staying right with me, right in front of me, giving me a target.

"You hurt me and you wouldn't let me talk to you about it! I wanted to be the only woman in your life. I wanted to be the only one!"

I made an incoherent noise and stepped closer to him, forcing myself to look into his eyes, which had tears in them.

"You hurt me, Lachlan. You hurt me and you wouldn't let me talk about it!" I'd never yelled at Lach like that in my life. "You wouldn't let me talk about it!"

"Because I didn't want to have to make a choice!" he yelled, but he wasn't yelling at me. I knew that. It was something pushed down deep in him that erupted from him loudly. It was his pain and fear finally coming into the light.

It was the same way he'd reacted when I wouldn't answer his texts after I sent the picture of Yomi in his arms. His texts that came in before I knew I was angry, demanding, something that was unlike Lach. I'd scared him when I sent that picture, when, in effect, I'd slapped him in the face with not believing he cared for me. He'd been panicking.

He took a deep breath. "Because I couldn't lose you, Wyn. And I knew if you said stop, I'd have to stop or lose you and I didn't know if I could stop. I didn't understand the need for control then. I want to think I would have stopped, I even told you that I would have, I want to think we could have worked it out if given the chance, but I didn't know for sure so I couldn't risk you asking."

"So you just kept hurting me!"

"I did, Wyn."

"You hurt me."

"I did, Wyn." He cradled my cheeks in his hands. "I did, Wyn, and I'm so damn sorry." His remorse underscored every broken syllable as tears dripped down his cheeks.

"You hurt me. You hurt me! You hurt me you hurt me you hurt me!" was screaming by now, and Lachlan just grabbed me close while I screamed and cried against his chest. I was screaming at my mother; I was screaming at her many boyfriends; I was screaming at the hundreds and hundreds of guys I'd had sex with; I was screaming at Lachlan.

After a while, I stopped screaming, but I couldn't stop crying, and Lach held me and eventually sunk to the floor, cradling me on his lap. He held me tight, not saying a word, just holding me against his heart while I let it all out, his hand rubbing my back. It could have been hours; it could have been days. But eventually, the tears slowed and I calmed, my breathing eventually returning to normal with the occasional shuddering breath.

"Your legs," I finally managed to speak. "They have to be numb by now."

"I don't give a fuck about my legs, Elowyn. I'll hold you forever," his gravelly voice promised in my ear. "Please, let me have this. Let me just hold you."

How ironic that the man who'd broken my heart was now the one holding it together.

Holding me together.

Holding me.

Holding on.

And sometimes, healing can begin just by knowing that someone, despite everything, is willing to hold on.

We were like tiny seedlings pushing their way up through the dirt in the spring.

Delicate.

Fragile.

Struggling.

But doing our best to hold on.