

## Chapter 4 (Elwyn): Burning Eyes

Other than a heavy stone sitting inside my chest where my heart had been, the last six weeks since I'd left Lachlan had been good. Well, fairly good. Definitely OK. Not horribly bad, really. You can either choose to let the hurt drive the car or sit it in the backseat. Attitude is everything and I was determined for mine to be good, positive so I left that hurt bitch buckled in the backseat.

Each day I was getting stronger, learning to let go of the routines I needed that were so much a part of my life over the last five years. Most good. Just a couple that were... not I was learning how to be on my own in a healthy way, in a way I hadn't managed at all before I'd met Lachlan. In a way I hadn't managed in one very critical way since I'd been with Lach.

It's funny the blinders you can put on to survive. I'd been drawn to Lachlan from the start. His massive body felt like a solid wall I could stand behind. Hide behind His long hair, beard, tattoos leather and denim made him look dangerous. But despite the embarrassment I felt following the circumstances of our first meeting, Lachlan took care to put me at ease. He refused to let me ignore him, and he sat at the end of the bar every night I was working and watched me or talked with me, depending on how busy we were. It was a few weeks before I realized we were actually getting to know one another. I wasn't quite sure what to do with a man who didn't want me for sex. Considering the disappointing, pathetic men I'd allowed access to my body before him, I wouldn't have denied Lachlan.

But he'd denied us. For three months.

He was entirely different from the men I had been with before, as I jumped from one frantic, failed relationship attempt after another. I had no idea what to do with the respect Lachlan had shown me. Respect was a foreign word, a strange concept to me, something I'd thrown away in my desperate, mistaken attempts to find something even more important that had eluded me all my life.

Caring and concern Love didn't seem attainable and I wasn't even sure what it was or what it looked like, but a reaction was doable and would have been entirely welcome and easier to identify. I couldn't imagine someone caring about how my day had been, if I got home safely, how I was feeling. But every night, when Lachlan walked into the bar where I worked as a barback, he'd watch me while I worked and chat with me whenever it was quiet. I suspected Lachlan was tipping the bartenders very well so they wouldn't mind if he was flirting a bit.

So suddenly, miraculously, after almost twenty-five years, caring seemed to be staring me in the face. He'd started following me home after every shift, unless he was out of town on his club's business. On those nights, he sent a prospect -- someone working to join the club - - to make sure I got home safely. I felt cocooned in his care and his pale blue eyes communicated something to me that I'd never seen aimed at me in my life. Lachlan wasn't beautiful in a traditional sense, but he was extremely attractive in a rough way. His smiles, though rare, were glorious. And the longer we talked, the more attractive he became to me, and the more I looked forward to winning a smile from the man.

I felt lighter when he was around, and the first night he kissed me, I relived that moment for years. Kissing had previously been brief, a means to an end, something guys did to get me into bed. But Lachlan's first kiss was like my first kiss ever. He'd brushed my hair back from face and pressed his lips to my temple and I heard him inhale. His lips moved to my cheek, the corner of my mouth and then he kissed me fully on the lips, his hands moving into my hair as he kissed me more deeply. When he pulled back, his teeth lightly nipped my lower lip and he looked right into my eyes.

"That was a perfect start to us, Elwyn," he'd said to me.

It was.

It had been.

A few months later, he'd told me he loved me, and I'd wanted to cry and gather up those three words and tuck them into my pocket for safekeeping. I loved that man but I never would have told him if he hadn't said that first. Pure and simple, I loved Lachlan right back. Because of him, I knew what love looked like from the way he treated me to the way he talked with me to the care he showed me. It was the most precious thing in my life, and I wanted to keep it close at all costs.

"Lo," I heard my name called, bringing me back to earth. Somehow, at my new store, everyone called me Lo. I didn't love it but I wasn't going to make a big deal about the nickname. It was better than some of the things I'd been called growing up.

Smiling, I turned to face the store manager who was training me to take over from her in just two more weeks. Since I'd arrived six weeks ago, I'd been her shadow, trying to absorb everything I could before she retired. Trying to focus on my new job instead of wondering if Lachlan even cared that I was gone.

Ugh. This was a big step for me, and I battled myself everyday to not call Lach and tell him about what I'd achieved. Keeping my job from him for the last four years had been a challenge but I didn't want him to know I was working and saving money so I could leave when he got tired of me one day. I honestly thought it would have happened before I finally left, given Yomi and her big mouth. When she'd cornered me in the hallway at the clubhouse one night and explained some basic truths I'd suspected, I knew my time with Lachlan was rapidly coming to an end.

"Sorry, Nia," I said, apologizing for getting distracted by thoughts of Lachlan. She and I went over some scheduling conflicts we needed to resolve before we sent it to the employees through the portal, and after half an hour, we worked them out. Then we went out to the floor to observe the cashiers and stockers.

"It looks like we're going to need to hire a couple more cashiers," she said. "We're really getting busy and --"

I never knew how she was going to finish that sentence because we were interrupted by the electronic chime of a customer entering the store.

And there, in all his badass glory, burning eyes trained on me, was Lachlan.