

Chapter 14 (Elowyn): The New Parts

Following book club, Roberta, as usual, maneuvered herself to the end of the line so she'd be the last one buying next week's book selection.

"How are you doing on your attempt to find an answer about cheaters?" she asked me, her smile kind and interested as I rang up her purchase.

"He's in the area. For the next two months." I avoided answering Roberta, but I spilled some interesting tea for her. Fair trade, I supposed.

"Will you see him?"

"No," I said definitively as I popped her book into a bag.

Roberta watched my face, not saying anything.

"Probably not," I amended my first response.

She nodded.

"I doubt it."

Shut up, Elowyn!

"Maybe?"

She continued watching me without uttering one single word. Saying nothing seems so passive, but really it's quite aggressive. It's an in-your-face flex that keeps the conversational ball squarely in the other person's court.

"What would be the purpose?" I asked desperately as I saw a tiny staring contest where I blinked first. I handed her bag and receipt over to her.

"That's an excellent question, Elowyn."

"Should I, do you think? See him?"

"Why would you?"

Dammit. Roberta was good at returning a question for a question. I didn't exactly like it because I wanted her to tell me what to do since she obviously had experience with a cheater. Cheaters? I wanted to benefit from her experiences, have her tell me definitively what to do so I didn't have to hold all of the internal debates I'd been having since Lach had texted me that he was going to be nearby for the next two months.

I still don't want to see you.

That hadn't been the complete truth when I'd texted him that, but I felt like I needed to make a strong statement back to him so he wouldn't think I was wavering, which...I was. It was the response I knew I should give, a show of force. But part of me did want to see him, see this man who was such a mess inside but was trying to work on himself. You're just as big a mess, Elowyn, but what have you done to help yourself?

When I didn't have an answer at the ready, Roberta leaned in a bit. "Maybe that's an easier question to ponder this week than the bigger one you've been thinking about. Sometimes it helps to break down those seemingly overwhelming questions into smaller, bite-sized pieces." She lifted her bag containing the novel for next week's book club discussion and rolled her eyes. "I'll try to get through My Secret Lover's Dark Secret while you work on figuring out an answer."

As ordered, I tried to answer the question, trying out different variations. Why would I see Lachlan? Why would I see Lachlan? Why would I see Lachlan? No matter how I asked it, I couldn't come up with a good reason that made me want to text him back with an answer one way or the other. That was the fear controlling me. Fear that, deep down, I wanted to see him.

In addition to the daily good morning and good night texts he continued to send, Lach texted me a couple of times throughout the day, pictures of gardens he saw or just pretty landscapes. He still sent quotes from whatever self-help book he was reading, and when he finished the book, he sent it on to me. Based on the book titles, the sheer number of book titles and the amount of underlining he was doing, he was working hard to understand himself, what was driving him and how his past had helped define his present. There were books about breaking free of the past's ties and carving out a new future for yourself that wasn't controlled by childhood issues and traumas.

Why would you see him?

There were only a couple of reasons. To say hello to someone I shared a life with for so long. To give him a strong message to stay out of my life. To see why he was in town. To see if he was still the same man who'd cheated on me.

A week after he texted me that he was in town, a box of cupcakes from my favorite bakery were delivered to my store with a note.

Wyn, I'm sending this instead of texting to put less pressure on you. If you'd be willing to meet, have coffee, share a meal, anything, just text me a time and place and I'll be there. I'll understand if you say no.

Him and his damn no pressure and understanding. The Lachlan I knew wasn't like that. I thought about his request as I ate the dozen cupcakes over the next two days, practically making myself sick on the rich icing and fillings. (Totally worth it, by the way.) I thought about the question Roberta let me with. I thought about all of the hurt inside of me, some of it caused by his actions, some of it caused by my passivity, and some of it caused by the uncertainty churning inside me.

In desperation, I called Roberta. She'd given me her number a while back, but I hadn't yet used it.

"Tell me what to do. He sent cupcakes and asked to see me. And...I'm seriously considering it. Talk me out of it."

"I can't tell you what to do."

"You have to have an opinion!"

"Your opinion is the only one that matters here, Elowyn. You need to make this decision by yourself and for yourself. No one else."

"I know." Dejection had a sound, and it caught in my voice.

She hesitated when she heard my breath hitch. "Ask yourself who you're going to be meeting. The old Lachlan or the new Lachlan? Do you want to meet either one? Or is he now just someone you once loved no matter who he is today?"

The next day, after a sleepless night thinking about Roberta's never-ending questions, I sent a simple text to Lachlan: **Cello's at 7 pm Thursday**

His response was immediate. **Meet you there or pick you up?**

Meet you there

Thank you, Wyn

I arrived at the restaurant just after seven, having been held up a few minutes at work balancing the day's receipts. Lachlan was already there in black jeans, black boots, black Henley and cut. I watched him watch me, taking me in from head to toe.

"You look great, Wyn," he said sincerely. "Beautiful."

I could tell he wanted to hug me, but he held himself back.

"They don't do reservations, so we might have a wait," I said. "They're always busy."

"We don't have to wait," he said, then held the door open for me so I could enter the restaurant. When we stepped up to the hostess stand, he said, "We're ready to be seated."

The hostess snapped to and gave us a welcoming smile as she grabbed two menus. "Right this way, please."

She walked us to a table near the stone fireplace, and he held my chair out and then sat across from me. A server took our drink orders, and I kept shooting glances at him to find his eyes steadily on me.

Lach kept the conversation light, and although I'd been tense at first, I slowly relaxed and we talked the way we used to through our appetizers, meals and desserts. It was both familiar and new at the same time, but surprisingly comfortable most of all.

He'd surprised me when he told me he and a brother were scouting the area as a possible location to begin a charter of the Lords of Mayhem.

"I'm thinking the area wasn't random?"

"No. Not in the slightest," Lach admitted. "Told Butcher I didn't want to leave Mayhem, but I would if needed so I could live near you. And then I pitched my idea of a charter to him out here. The Mayhem's gotten huge in the last few years, so it makes sense to branch out."

As we were lingering over coffee, Lachlan leaned across the table toward me, his eyes searching mine.

"Elowyn, I destroyed us. We talked about it when I came out here before."

I nodded.

"And I've been thinking about nothing else but how to make this right between us. So I began working on myself, learning about all the shit inside me, looking deep into things I never wanted to think about again. But I was more than willing to if it meant working through them and understanding how they affected me so I could come back to you a better man."

I knew Lachlan and knew talking about this wasn't easy. He'd never wanted to have difficult discussions before, never would have admitted to his struggles like this. And neither did you, Elowyn. You held back, didn't push, accepted.

His hand covered mine. "I broke what we had between us and hurt you so bad you left. But I've been wondering, Wyn, if you think there are enough pieces of us left to put back together. To make something whole from, and we could fill in any gaps with the new parts of ourselves."