



KALLYSTEN

ONLY WITH
THE
Heart

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CHAPTER 12

As Lance took slow sips from his second cup of coffee of the morning, he didn't look away from James. As a teen, he'd always felt that his parents looking away when they were arguing with him was a sign of weakness on their part, and he didn't want to give James the idea that his silent glaring would get him anywhere.

Why he was putting himself in the role of parent in this situation, he preferred not to think about. He was only James' caretaker for the immediate future, nothing more.

"I'm fine," James said for what had to be the fourth or fifth time.

By now, he'd left exasperation behind and was firmly entrenched in the land of frustration. Unfortunately for him, Lance prided himself on his stubbornness. It'd take more than a few glares and pointed sighs to make him change his mind.

"Tell that to someone who hasn't seen your arms without sleeves covering them to the wrists. I talked Evan out of giving you a check up last night, but if I don't get you to him now and he finds out about the bite marks and the burns, he's never going to talk to me again. I don't have that many friends that I can afford losing one over your squeamishness."

A brief frown and James' lips soundlessly mouthing that last word hinted that he might not know what it meant. He didn't let that throw him off, however.

"He's already seen the marks," he said, almost triumphant. "And he didn't make this big fuss about it like you do."

Now that gave Lance pause. Evan was - or had been, his present status was a little unclear - a pediatric surgeon. For him to see a child's injuries and not mention them or try to do anything about them seemed completely out of character. Regardless, Lance couldn't let that be the winning argument.

"I'm not making a fuss," he said as calmly as he could manage. "Last night, you were upset because I'm responsible for you and didn't do a

good enough job. Well, this is what a responsible adult does. He gets the underage person in their care to see a doctor and have a medical check-up at regular intervals. Or are you telling me the vamps who held you took good care of your health?"

It was the first time in the thirty odd hours since he'd found James—God, it felt like a lot longer—that Lance was directly questioning James about his time with the vampires. His reaction was exactly what Lance would have expected: his eyes clouded and he looked into his bowl of cereal, his back stiff as a board as he moved the spoon from the bowl to his lips and back in mechanical movements.

Lance finished his coffee one small sip at a time before clearing his throat.

"I'm no doctor myself, but I'm fairly sure you'd be better off talking about what happened. Evan can probably recommend a therapist who—"

"I'll let him give me a check-up," James interrupted, "but afterward you've got to teach me how to fight with a sword like you promised."

Lance's eyes widened in alarm.

"I never promised—"

"Yes you did. Last night."

"I remember saying 'maybe.' That wasn't a promise."

James' flat, expressionless eyes held his until Lance sighed.

"We'll give it a try after Evan gives you a clean bill of health," he said. "Just a try, mind. I've never claimed to be a teacher, I might be terrible at it."

Lance had heard it said that the fact that both parties to a compromise were unhappy was a sign that the compromise was a good one; if it was true, their agreement was certainly perfect because James looked about as disgruntled as Lance himself felt. With his mind still in shambles after seeing Taylor, the last thing he needed was to spend time in the training room, where they had spent so many hours sparring together.

Maybe he'd take James to practice in the backyard instead. It might be cowardly for him to flee the ghosts that inhabited the training room, but hadn't he already proved that, when push came to shove, he tended to pick the easy way out? What was one more small check mark in the 'shame and guilt' column?

A wave of renewed guilt washed over him and he turned his back to James to help himself to another cup of coffee. Maybe the bitterness of

the brew would wash away the bad taste left in his throat by his own choices. Seeing Taylor had only brought everything back to the surface.

"I don't want to talk about it," James said now that Lance wasn't looking at him anymore. He sounded tired. "If you force me to talk to a therapist, I'll just sit there and ignore them and waste everybody's time again."

One small word was all it took for that statement to take a whole different meaning.

Again.

Which meant someone had taken James to see a therapist in the past. If he'd been with vampires for the past three years, it had to have been before that. What had been going on in his life back then that someone had thought it necessary to get him to a shrink? How long had they tried to get him to talk? Had it ever worked at all?

"I won't force you to talk to someone," Lance said, turning back to him. "But it'd be nice if you talked to me. You don't have to tell me everything, just whatever you're comfortable sharing."

For a long moment, James watched him from across the room, and Lance started wondering if he was working up the nerve to reveal something of his past, so he waited patiently for the words to line up in James' mind until they were ready to be voiced. What came out, rather than a revelation, was a question.

"Did you stop loving Taylor because she became a vampire, or are you just pretending you stopped loving her?"

Had James hit him over the head with a two by four, Lance wouldn't have been any more stunned. Had he ever hinted that he and Taylor were anything more than friends? He didn't think he had. Would Ellie have told James? He doubted it. So how did he know?

Lance almost asked, before thinking better of it. It wasn't any of James' business, and Lance had no more desire to talk about this than James had to talk about what had happened to him. He suspected that was what James had been trying to prove by asking this particular question.

"Finish your breakfast," he said tersely. "I'll go see if Evan is there and if he'll see you now."

As he walked away, Lance couldn't help the feeling that, even though James had agreed to that check-up, Lance still had lost this round.

He found Evan in his kitchen, sitting in front of a full mug of coffee that he didn't seem to realize was between his hands. When he looked

up to watch Lance come in, a thin, automatic smile came to his lips, but it didn't touch his eyes. Darkened by heavy circles, they remained a little unfocused.

"Morning," he mumbled. "Coffee should be ready in a minute."

Lance glanced at the coffee pot, kept warm by the coffee maker, then back at the mug in Evan's hands. The pointed look seemed to draw Evan's attention to the coffee he wasn't drinking, and he frowned at it as though just realizing that coffee was, in fact, more than ready.

"You okay?" Lance asked, coming closer and resting his hands on the back of the chair opposite Evan.

Evan made a noncommittal noise as he took a sip from his mug, immediately grimacing. If Lance were to guess, he'd say the coffee was cold, but he refrained from commenting. Evan wasn't okay, he knew that already. Cold coffee and zoning out were only the latest of many clues, but Lance had no idea how to help his friend.

"Last night," he said instead, "you said James needs a check-up. Are you up for it now? I got him to agree to it but I have a feeling he might change his mind if I give him enough time to think about it."

For a handful of seconds, Evan merely stared at Lance as though he couldn't comprehend his words. When he did reply, it wasn't the answer Lance had hoped for.

"I haven't done regular check-ups in forever. You'd be better off taking him to a GP."

"Last night you were ready to do it on the spot."

"Last night," Evan started heatedly, but stopped and started again in a calmer voice. "Last night was different. He'd just had a panic attack. He's fine, now, isn't he?"

Lance observed him, trying to figure out what had changed his mind. Was this man still the same friend he'd known for so long, or was he a different person, now?

"He said you saw his burns." Lance's fingers flexed on the back of the chair. "What do you think will happen if I take him to a doctor and they see that, and the bite marks on him?"

"They'll call children services," Evan said dully. "Possibly the police, too. And seeing how you have no legal right to foster that child, he'll be taken away. Which let's face it, might be for the best."

Those last words left Lance reeling. He blinked twice, ready to ask Evan what he meant by that, but already Evan was standing and answering the unvoiced question.

“That child was held by vampires. Hurt by them, too. Multiple panic attacks.” Standing at the sink, his back to Lance, he dumped what was left of his coffee and filled his mug again as he went on. “My psych rotation took place a long time ago, but this screams PTSD to me. He needs help, more help than you or I can give him right now when we’re both suffering from PTSD too.”

Anger flashed white-hot through Lance.

“I don’t have PTSD!”

“Right, sorry,” Evan said, his voice colder than Lance could ever remember hearing. “Watching the girl you’ve been in love with since you were twelve die and become the thing you both trained to kill, that wasn’t traumatic at all, was it? And breaking up with her, refusing to see her or talk to her until you suddenly decide to open a vein for her, refusing to touch her freaking desk like it’s a shrine, that’s all perfectly healthy, isn’t it?”

Over the course of Evan’s little speech, Lance’s anger grew and grew until the desire to hurt his best friend was almost overwhelming—then disappeared like a soap bubble pricked with a needle.

Evan didn’t know.

He was working on flawed assumptions.

All Lance had to do was tell him what had really happened and...

And nothing.

Lance couldn’t, wouldn’t tell him, or anyone else. He’d already lost Taylor. He couldn’t bear losing his best friend or his sister, too.

“What I did or why,” he said in a slow, measured voice, “is not the question here. The question isn’t even your state of mind. The question is whether treating the injuries of *that child* falls under the oath you took as a doctor.”

He didn’t wait for Evan to reply. He left the room—and walked straight into Ellie. He only needed one look at her face to know she’d heard every word.

“Leave. Evan. Alone,” she said, and her words were no less fierce for being whispered. “If James needs medical attention, there are other doctors. No need for you to be cruel.”

“How am I being cruel? He offered to do it last night. It’s just a check-up, nothing—”

“I’ll get my medical bag,” Evan interrupted as he walked by them without stopping. “Get him to the dining room. The lighting is better in there.”

He didn't look back, but there was an unnatural stiffness to his movements, as though he was forcing himself to move.

"Asshole," Ellie murmured when he had walked past the corner, and threw Lance a dirty look. "He's not ready."

"How do you know?" Lance shot back. "When was the last time you actually talked to your husband?"

"At least I didn't dump the love of my life when things got tough," she shot back, and strode past Lance and into the kitchen

He knew, the way he'd always known to ever since they were kids, just how much he'd just hurt his twin. But while he'd always done his best to apologize and mend the bruises left by careless words, he didn't know what to say right now when she'd hurt him just as badly with words that were nothing but true.