

KALLYSTEN

ONLY WITH
THE
Heart

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CHAPTER 15

They went to the hospital first to get the prescription script filled at the pharmacy on the ground level. Lance supposed he could have had it filled anywhere, but old habits died hard. This was where he always came when he had a mishap doing his job. It didn't happen all that often, but still often enough that the staff knew Lance by name—and they knew now not to ask about Taylor.

The pharmacist had a moment of hesitation when she read the prescription. It wasn't what was on it that troubled her, Lance was sure, but rather the name of the prescribing doctor. She excused herself with a smile and went to talk to someone in the back. James looked fairly worried at that point and Lance offered a quiet, "Everything's fine," that seemed to reassure him at least a little.

She returned quickly enough, and seemed to make a point of being extra-friendly as though to make up for the slight delay, even commenting on what a dangerous career being a Special Enforcer was. For a brief moment, Lance thought she was making an indirect reference to Taylor... but no, she was talking about the antibiotics and the scar-minimizing cream. She thought they were for him, after all; the legality of Lance taking care of James, or lack thereof, extended to such things as insurance and Evan had written the script in Lance's name.

"Not as dangerous as fighting those demon creatures on the West coast," Lance deflected the conversation with a smile, and contented himself with nodding after that as the pharmacist went on about how incredible that whole situation was. Whenever he wanted to change the topic, this trick always worked.

It wasn't too soon that they were walking out again. James hadn't said a word the entire time, and even in the car he seemed even more subdued than usual.

"Nothing," he answered when Lance asked him what was wrong. "Everything's fine."

But those words, echoing Lance's, seemed to ring hollow.

“Come on,” Lance sighed. “Something’s bothering you. What is it?”

“I just... I don’t like hospitals all that much, that’s all.”

Flexing his fingers on the steering wheel, Lance found himself at a loss for words. What could he say when really, neither did he? Too many bad memories in these places. Was it the same reason for James? Should he ask?

In the end, he didn’t.

Their next stop was at the grocery store, and already the territory was less familiar. Lance did shop there regularly, but he usually made a bee line for the freezers. Finding himself in the fresh produce area felt less comfortable than going through dark alleys at night with a sword in hand. It didn’t get any better when he asked James what he liked to eat and got a ‘deer in headlights’ look in reply.

“Huh... French fries?” he said, looking toward the mounds of potato bags.

Somehow, Lance doubted this was what Evan had had in mind when he recommended fresh food.

After running through the aisles three times without picking up anything, Lance got tired of the exercise. He grabbed whatever was at hand—tomatoes, sweet potatoes, zucchini, bell peppers, cauliflower, whatever fruit looked good—and figured he’d either borrow those cooking books Evan had offered to lend him, find easy recipes online, or somehow trick his sister into ‘showing’ him how to cook whatever he’d bought. Steak and eggs were next; those, at least, Lance was fairly certain he could prepare on his own.

By the time they walked out of there, James looked somewhat more relaxed, though he still wasn’t saying much. It was late enough for both of them to be hungry; they got Chinese take-out on the way home. When Lance said, only half-joking, “Don’t tell Evan,” James grinned. Was it his first smile today? When was the last time Lance had even seen him smile? Whenever it’d been, it certainly didn’t happen often enough. But it did happen again when, after they’d put the groceries in the fridge and all but inhaled their take-out, Lance offered, “So, do you want to start training now, then?”

He was at least doing one thing right.

* * *

Ellie’s brother was insane.

And she was going to strangle him.

Neither thought was all that new, but rarely had Ellie been as infuriated as when she entered the training room that afternoon and found Lance coaching James on how to grip a sword properly. The fact that it was a training weapon that James was holding didn't abate Ellie's shock in the least.

"What on Earth are you doing?" she demanded, standing with her hands on her hips.

It was Lance she was glaring at, but it didn't escape her that she startled James so much that he fumbled the sword and dropped it. It hardly made a sound on the mats covering the floor, and immediately James picked it up again, his hands shaking over the molded plastic whose heavy core was weighted to have the same balance as a real sword.

"What does it look like?" Lance replied with a raised eyebrow, looking absolutely unimpressed by her disapproval.

"It looks like you're getting ready to teach a kid how to wield a sword, but you can't possibly be that stupid."

Lance snorted at that.

"What's wrong with teaching him with training swords?" he asked. "That's what they're made for."

They were made for training without the dangers of a real blade, yes, but that didn't mean they couldn't raise bruises when they struck an arm or leg, as Lance knew quite well.

"He's a kid," she said again, incredulous that Lance couldn't understand something so basic. "He's—"

"No I'm not," James interrupted, his voice rising just high enough to be heard. "I'm thirteen. I'm not a child."

She had a hard time not rolling her eyes at that.

"Fine, you're a teenager," she said dryly. "And you're still half Lance's age, and probably a hundred pounds lighter than he is. Even with training sword he could hurt you badly."

Lance certainly had much less qualms about rolling his eyes than she did.

"Do you really think I'm going to train with him as though he were as tall as I am?" he asked. "I'm showing him the basics. We probably won't even spar today."

"We won't?" James said at once, sounding disappointed.

"I told you, we're doing balance exercises today."

“Yes, but I thought that after that... at least a little bit?”

They were both insane, Ellie thought, and she was going to need help. Throwing her hands in the air, she stomped away from the training room, an addition to the house they'd built together, the four of them, over the course of their first summer in the house. She went to find Evan in the living room, bursting out before he even looked up at her.

“Lance has lost his freaking mind!”

Evan quirked an eyebrow at her over the book he was reading.

“Nothing new there, then,” he said lightly.

Huffing, she came closer to him in the room.

“He’s teaching the kid to fight with a sword.”

Another twitch of his eyebrows didn’t quite seem enough of a reaction.

“Well,” he said slowly, “I did tell him James needs exercise. Sword-fighting wasn’t really what I had in mind, but whatever works.”

Ellie could only gape at him. Was she the only sane person left in this house?

“But he’s a kid!” she said when she’d found her voice back. “He could get hurt, or... or...”

She gestured vaguely, not sure how to even finish. Wasn’t the possibility of a child getting hurt enough to get Evan off this sofa?

Apparently not; if he finally closed the book and rested it on his lap, one finger between the pages marking his place, he didn’t look anywhere as upset as she was, or as she thought he ought to be.

“As a medical professional,” he said with the faintest hint of humor in his words, “I’d be more concerned about potential injuries if he decided to play football. I’m sure Lance will be careful. It’s not like he isn’t used to training with people who are smaller or lighter than he is.”

That much was true, of course. Ellie preferred a crossbow to a sword, but she still knew how to use a blade, and she trained with Lance at least three times a week. Taylor had trained with him even more often than that.

“And from a mental point of view,” Evan continued, and now he wasn’t joking anymore, “I don’t see any drawbacks to having him learn to use what’s still the main weapon employed against vampires to this day. He won’t be anywhere as skilled or strong enough to take down a vampire by himself anytime soon, but just the idea of it might help him sleep better at night.”

It seemed an oddly specific thing to say, and Ellie couldn't help but wonder if that was something James had mentioned during his 'check-up'. She knew better than to ask, however. Like she knew better than to persist when it was obvious Evan didn't share her concern.

Men! If Taylor had been here, Ellie was sure she'd have been on her side.

Annoyed, she started to turn away to leave the room, but from the corner of her eye she caught... something that gave her pause. She had to look at Evan again to figure out what it had been, and the way his shoulders tensed gave it away. He'd relaxed when she'd been about to walk away, and was tensing again now that she didn't look like she was leaving anymore.

Why would he be so tense when she was near? Why would he be so nervous...

And then she understood. The last words they'd exchanged, earlier, had been about his visit to the graveyard. They'd been interrupted before she could figure out what to reply. He was still waiting for that reply—and dreading it.

And Ellie still didn't know what to say, which was why she'd stayed away until now.

Feeling very tired suddenly, she sat in an armchair across from him, leaning her head back though keeping her eyes on him. He watched her in return, his tension clearly visible now that she knew what to look for. What did he think she'd say? What was he afraid of? Was this where their marriage stood—on the edge of a cliff, so unsteady that even one word might be too much?

"It wasn't the first time," she finally said quietly, certain he'd know what she was talking about. "Why did you tell me today?"

His expression didn't register any surprise that she'd known about the other times. He continued to look at her, now apparently wary.

"I'm not sure. It felt like... like you ought to know where I was so late."

Was it a bid to ask her where she'd been without actually asking the question? No, she doubted it. It wasn't like him to be so oblique. If he'd wanted to know, he'd have asked straight out.

Then did the fact that he wasn't asking mean he didn't care?

She shook her head, disgusted with herself. How could she even think that for a second about Evan? She knew better than that. She knew him better than that.

“I went to see Taylor,” she offered quietly. “We had some ice cream and watched a movie. Just like old times.”

The sadness in those last whispered words surprised even her, but should it have? She’d lost Taylor, too—or at least it had felt like she had.

“Do you see her often?” Evan asked, and she didn’t hear more than curiosity in his voice.

“I’ve been talking to her,” she admitted, “and I’ve seen her a few times in passing, but it was the first time I actually spent time with her.”

Evan nodded absently and gave her the faintest of pained smiles.

“It must have been worse for you, losing him and then your best friend so close together.”

Unbidden, tears started rising to Ellie’s eyes. She blinked repeatedly to chase them away.

“Don’t do that,” she said, her voice turning raw. “There’s no need to decide who had it worse.”

He inclined his head, but didn’t answer. With each trickling second, the silence seemed to grow between them, widening the fissure that had opened so gradually that Ellie hadn’t noticed it until it was too late.

“How often do you go to... to the graveyard?” she blurted out before she even knew what words were rising to her lips.

Evan became very still, as though the wrong move might be an answer in itself.

“It varies,” he said, the words coming out slowly. “At times, every day. At times, I can go a week or even two without going.”

Without needing to go, he meant. She bit her bottom lip rather than ask where that need came from. Neither of them had ever been very religious. They’d agreed to have a pastor, a friend of Evan’s parents, officiate the funeral, but Ellie had been too numb at the time to care about much of anything, let alone what book might be read from while she struggled to come to terms with her new reality.

“Does it help?” she asked instead, sounding young and small.

“At times,” Evan murmured, but it sounded like ‘no.’

“Can I help?” she asked, wondering if he’d hear the ‘can you help me?’ she couldn’t quite voice.

After a long, too long pause, Evan sighed.

“I don’t know,” he said, and it was worse than an outright no.

Never mind standing on the edge of a cliff, she thought, stricken. They were already over, already falling. They just hadn’t hit the bottom yet.

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