

KALLYSTEN

ONLY WITH
THE
Heart

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CHAPTER 13

“You don’t have to do this.”

Evan glanced up, though he continued to rub alcohol over his instruments, habit guiding his movements. Ellie stood in the doorway, not quite entering the dining room where he stood. She looked tired. He hadn’t heard her come in last night. Again.

“Someone has to,” he replied. “And it’s not like it’s that complicated anyway. Just a quick check up. I know it’s been a while, but I can’t have forgotten how to do something so basic.”

The attempt at self-deprecating humor fell flat, and Ellie continued to stare at him blankly. Needing to look away, Evan set down the stethoscope and picked up the otoscope instead, checking that he had some disposable tips before he started cleaning it too.

“Like Lance said, I offered to do it last night,” he continued; he wasn’t sure if he was telling her, or reminding himself. “And it’ll make things easier this way. No need for Lance to spend a day with the police or social services trying to explain why he’s taking care of a child he has no legal right to supervise.”

“I didn’t think he’d keep him here,” she said, almost defensively. “At first it was just for a night. If it bothers you...”

She let the end of that sentence hang between them, and Evan could only wonder how she’d have finished it. If it bothered him, what? Would she go and drop James at the Children Services office? Would she do it regardless of what Lance thought? Or would she argue with Lance until he did it himself? As far as siblings went, the two of them got along pretty well, but the rare times when they’d clashed in the past hadn’t been pretty.

“It doesn’t bother me,” he said, swallowing a sigh, then frowned and looked at her. “Does it bother you?”

“No!” she said, a little too fast, a little too loudly. “Of course not.”

But she didn't quite meet his eyes when she said it, and he wondered if she meant it. Could it be she saw another child when she looked at James? Their child?

The idea was like a wave of pain right at the center of his chest, radiating out and making everything a little unsteady—from his hands, now clutching the otoscope, to his mind, causing him to blurt out without thinking, "I went to his grave last night."

When nothing followed his admission but silence, he had to force himself to look up and meet her gaze again. He couldn't make sense of her expression—was it grief or pity reflected in her eyes? Or both, maybe?

Before he could figure it out—or before she could say anything—James cleared his throat behind her, and she moved aside to let him in. He didn't, however, and remained where he stood in the hallway, looking warily at Ellie and Evan in turn.

"I told Lance I'm fine. We don't have to do this."

With a slight smile, Evan shook his head.

"And yet we're doing it anyway. Get in, please. Ellie, will you close the door?"

With the most teenager-esque disgruntled grimace Evan had ever seen in over ten years of practicing medicine, James took a few reluctant steps in. Ellie closed the door behind him, her expression revealing nothing of what she thought. Evan wished... But no. Right now, he had to focus on the child in front of him.

"So you really are a doctor?" James asked, warily eyeing Evan's medical bag on the table and the instruments he'd pulled from it.

"Did you doubt it last night?" Evan asked back even as he hunted for the box of disposable gloves at the bottom of the bag.

James shrugged. "All you did last night was tell me to breathe. And anyone can have a stethoscope I guess. And this doesn't look like a doctor's office."

He looked around the room, his eyes lingering over the door. He didn't want to be there, that much was obvious. 'Do no harm' was echoing at the back of Evan's mind. Might forcing James to go through even the most basic, most innocuous of medical exams trigger another panic attack?

Setting the gloves down on the table rather than putting them on, Evan drew a chair and sat down, indicating the chair opposite him.

"Sit down with me for a moment?" he asked.

James' wariness only seemed to increase a little more, and he regarded the chair as he might have looked at a bear trap into which he was being asked to step.

"Is that part of the exam? What kind of doctor are you anyway? I told Lance I don't want to talk to anyone."

The defiance in those last words was filled with a fear Evan didn't want to examine right now.

"I'm a pediatric surgeon," he said calmly. "And no, it's not part of the exam. You look tense. I thought it would relax you to talk for a few minutes."

James still didn't sit. He looked ready to take a step back toward the door.

"Like I said, I don't want to—"

"Talk," Evan finished for him. "Yes, you already said so. But we don't have to talk about you. We can talk about something else. Did you have breakfast?"

The question seemed to take James aback.

"I... yes. Cereal."

Evan raised an eyebrow at that.

"Lance had cereal?"

James grimaced and laid a hand on the back of the closest chair.

"It was kind of stale but that's all right." After a beat, he added, more quietly, "I've had worse."

If his words sounded like an invitation to continue on the topic, his eyes said something different. It was a test, Evan realized. James wanted to see if Evan would push even after being told not to.

"I'll make pancakes again tomorrow if you want."

With a slow pull of his hand, James tugged the chair away from the table.

"That'd be nice," he said. "Thank you."

He wasn't sitting yet, but Evan didn't know what else to say to bring him another step closer. More by habit than anything else, he picked up the stethoscope from the table and set it over his shoulders.

"If you're a surgeon," James said, observing him, "does that mean you work in a hospital?"

Evan nodded. If he'd been entirely truthful he'd have mentioned he wasn't working at the moment, but that would only raise questions he didn't care to answer.

"And pediatric means... isn't that a doctor for kids?"

Another nod. Evan's throat felt tight, though he wasn't sure why it should be. This was his job, wasn't it? The career he'd chosen when he was barely older than James was now. The path he'd followed relentlessly, working hard, sacrificing much, yet managing to find both the love of his life and the best friend he'd ever had along the way.

Why did it feel like he'd never been so close to losing them both on top of his career? To losing everything he valued, really.

"It must be hard," James said after a few seconds of silence, drawing Evan out of his thoughts again.

Evan looked up at him. He still hadn't taken a seat, but he seemed on the verge of doing so.

"What must be hard?"

James shrugged. His fingers flexed over the back of the chair.

"You know. Working with sick kids. Don't you feel bad for them?"

"It's not part of my job to feel bad for them," Evan said, wondering if James would realize he wasn't answering the question. "My job is to do my best to make them feel better." After a beat he added, "When I can."

Another moment passed in silence until James finally cleared his throat.

"So what is this check up exactly, then?"

He still didn't sound thrilled, but at least he was willing. Good enough.

* * *

With Evan's words still echoing in her mind, Ellie barely even realized where she was going until she was letting herself plop onto the sofa next to Lance. He didn't say a word or acknowledge her presence, but after a few seconds he muted the television, letting the report about demon attacks play without sound. The images of devastated streets and shell-shocked survivors spoke loudly enough anyway.

For all that these attacks seemed to be happening more and more often, there were still more unanswered questions than facts about the whole situation. No one understood where the demons came from, and how they seemed to appear and disappear again out of nowhere. How they could cause so much damage when they only carried weapons such as swords, axes and the like, Ellie could hardly fathom.

“He really did offer,” Lance said after a while, sullen. “James couldn’t breathe last night. He had a panic attack or something. Evan helped him, and he was the one who suggested James should have a full check-up.”

Remaining silent, Ellie pieced the timeline together. She’d left for that work appointment. James had had this episode and Evan had helped him. And then he’d gone out to the graveyard. It had to have been late, long past the closing time.

Once, just days after the burial, she’d received a call from the guard who kept an eye on the church and graveyard at night. What he’d said was that he wanted to remind Evan of the visit hours; what she’d heard was that Evan was visiting at night without telling her.

Was he still going without mentioning it? He’d been running almost every day, lately; was that where he went?

Part of her wanted to ask Lance if he knew. Maybe Evan had confided in his best friend what he couldn’t tell his own wife. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know if that was the case however. It would hurt too much.

Needing to take the conversation away from Evan, she opted for the next logical topic.

“I went to see Taylor last night.”

Lance’s only reaction was to turn as still as stone next to her. Even his breathing was shallower suddenly.

“She seemed all right,” Ellie went on. “I mean, her face and hand looked terrible, but she said it didn’t hurt much anymore. When she called me, I could hear how much pain she was in, but last night she seemed much better.”

She waited for Lance to answer, even shifting her body toward his to watch him, but while he licked his lips as though he would speak, nothing came out.

“She’s still herself, you know,” she pressed on, needing to hear him say something, anything at all about Taylor after months of silence. “I spent a few hours with her, and if I hadn’t already known what she’s become, I’d never have guessed.”

Lance still didn’t respond. He didn’t even look at her, his eyes glued to the television where the news report had given way to advertisement. Annoyed with his silence, she punched his shoulder, drawing a grunt and a nasty glare from him.

“What the hell?”

“I was about to say the same thing,” she shot back. “What the hell is wrong with you? You’ve loved her for-fucking-ever. I could understand if you’d pulled back because she wasn’t the same person after she became a vampire, but you dumped her before you even knew if she’d be different. You didn’t even try—”

Lance was on his feet in a second and looming over her.

“Try what?” he demanded. “Try to live with a vampire when I made it my job to know how dangerous they can be? Invite her inside this house, put you and Evan at risk when you were both too out of it to defend yourselves if it came to that?”

Standing as well, Ellie jabbed a finger at his chest.

“Don’t you dare,” she snarled. “Don’t you dare make it our fault when—”

“Of course it’s not your fault,” he interrupted. Turning his back on her, he walked over to the television and turned it off. “It’s my fault. It’s all my fault. Don’t you think I know that?”

The agonized note in that last question robbed Ellie of her breath and anger all at once, and for a moment all she could do was stare at Lance’s hunched shoulders. It felt wrong, so wrong for him to seem so small suddenly.

And it felt even worse to realize he might not be talking about his break-up with Taylor anymore.

“Lance?” Stepping forward, she rested her hand tentatively in the middle of his back, and when he didn’t pull away she rubbed small circles there. “She knew the risks. We all did. What happened to her could have happened to any of us. It wasn’t your fault. If anything, it was mine. I should have been there with you two and—”

Her words ended in a breathless gasp when Lance abruptly faced her again and drew her in for an unexpected hug so tight that it threatened to bruise her ribs. Rather than complaining, she hugged him back just as tightly.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said, his voice choked up. “I took the assignment when I knew we’d be short one person. I allowed the vamps to separate us. And then... and then...”

But whatever came after this ‘then’, Lance didn’t say. He took in two shuddering breaths and pulled away from Ellie. She’d have expected to find tears on his cheeks, but the only sign of his distress was the redness of his eyes. Silly men who thought crying made them weak...

“Taylor is still the same person,” she said quietly. “If you can’t love a vampire, at least... could you try to be her friend again? She doesn’t have anyone but us.”

Like earlier, she had the feeling that he wanted to say something, but in the end all he did was look away and nod.

“I’ll go see if Evan and James are done,” he muttered as he stepped away, and she sighed at his retreating back.

One painful conversation over. Now if she could only muster enough courage to initiate the second one...