



KALLYSTEN

ONLY WITH
THE
Heart

ONLY WITH THE HEART

KALLYSTEN

CHAPTER 17

“Are you going to lurk out there much longer?”

Evan’s question was met with silence, and for a moment he thought he’d imagined those quiet noises in the hallway that could only mean someone was out there, close yet not coming into the living room where he sat. After another few seconds, slow steps entered the room and he looked away from the television to watch James walk in.

“I wasn’t lurking,” James said.

Evan had to fight a smile at how much sullenness he could fit in those few words.

“What were you doing, then?” he asked with as much of a straight face as he could manage.

Rather than answering, James gestured vaguely at the closest armchair.

“Can I watch TV here?” he asked, still remarkably sullen.

Barely refraining from asking if there was something wrong with Lance’s television, Evan offered a quiet, “Sure,” and James sat down, his full attention immediately directed at the screen even though it was a commercial break. Evan observed him from the corner of his eye, wondering what had brought him there. Not the television, certainly; Lance had the same access to cable in his half of the house. The desire for company, then? But if so, why was he all but ignoring Evan?

Evan considered asking him if he wanted or needed something, but decided against it. James could speak for himself, and he had proved that very morning that he had no qualms asserting what he wanted or didn’t want. Maybe he only needed time to get the words out.

But as a few minutes, a half hour, a full hour passed, the commercials giving way to a news report, then to a documentary about those strange demon-like beasts that had been popping up all over the world, James didn’t speak. He seemed comfortable enough, now with a leg curled under himself as he leaned his head on his closed fist, elbow

propped on the arm of the chair, with none of the fidgeting or rigidity of someone who wants to say or ask for something.

Evan had stopped waiting for him to say anything and he was startled when James finally asked, “Are these demon things real, then? I thought they were fake but they talk about them like they’re real.”

Confusion filled his voice, and when Evan looked at him there might have been on his features the hope that Evan would reassure him and tell him that of course this was all fake, of course more and more demons were not appearing every year. Evan, however, had long ago promised himself he wouldn’t lie to children anymore.

“They are real,” he said quietly. “A dozen countries have reported finding some on their territory. It wouldn’t be possible for anyone to build up a hoax that large.”

“But...” James bit his lip, now frowning at the television as he pointed at it. “The images are always all fuzzy. It looks like a bad movie. It’s gotta mean it’s fake.”

“I’ve heard reports say that they think there’s something where the demons appear that disturbs electrical systems. That’s why footage turns out grainy.”

Even as he spoke, another of those short clips played on the screen, the footage going in slow motion. The image really was horrible, static turning everything a little blurry, but the shapes moving in a deserted street at night were now familiar to Evan: tall, with wide, thick torsos, oversized heads with vaguely animal features, protuberances all over their bodies that varied from creature to creature and were part of clothing, maybe, and always, always in their hand the easily recognizable gleam of a metal weapon of some sort.

“But...” James’ voice fell to a whisper, and Evan wasn’t sure the words were meant for him any longer. “They said it was a hoax.”

“Who did?” Evan asked softly.

James blinked and looked at him, bringing both legs up in front of him as though to hide. Evan almost asked him to get his feet off the armchair—but really, he didn’t care all that much anymore about the furniture.

“The vampires,” he said, still very quiet. “They said it was some clever hoax from other vampires to... to make a little chaos, they said. So they could have fun.” He swallowed hard and went on. “And my mother, she said it was all fake, that it was the television people who were making it up for ratings. And my—”

James clamped his mouth shut and turned his eyes back to the screen. In the bluish light cast by the television, he seemed too pale, almost sick. Evan wondered who else he'd been about to name who had lied to him about demons. He'd mentioned his mother... so his father, maybe?

He didn't ask.

"Maybe they really believed that," he said in as gentle a voice as he could manage. "But I'm afraid they were wrong. Demons are real, there's no doubt about it. Sometimes when people are afraid of something, they like to think it's just not real."

He'd been about to reassure James that they were safe here; no demon had ever been sighted anywhere close. But James spoke again, in such a cold voice this time that it chilled Evan down to the bones.

"She lied all the time. About everything and to everyone. Maybe she lied about that too. But Dad... he never lied. Maybe he was just mistaken. He wouldn't have been afraid. Not of anything."

On his last words, he turned a furtive look to Evan, and it was hard to tell if he was regretting these revelations or waiting for confirmation. Either way, Evan had no idea what to reply.

"When I worked at the hospital," he heard himself say after a moment, "we used to get notices sometimes that doctors were needed in other towns, close to the places where demons were sighted. That's how I knew it was real."

He remembered reassurances he'd offered to a child, then. Not outright lies that demons weren't real, but promises that they were safe here. But safe from what?

"Why don't you work at the hospital anymore?" James asked suddenly, and the change of topic was so abrupt that Evan's head jerked back as though he'd been slapped.

Lie? Evade? Refuse to answer? All of it would have been too easy.

"I killed someone," he said, as calmly as he could, and the words sounded much too simple to describe what he'd actually done.

James blinked, then his eyes widened. "You mean... by accident? Sometimes vampires kill without meaning to. Was it like that for you?"

Evan shook his head. "No. I knew exactly what I was doing."

"Was it..." James' voice fell back to a whisper. "Was it a bad person?"

"No." Evan's throat tightened as though to keep the words in. "No, he was a good person. Kind. Funny. Very sweet. Everyone who met him adored him. And he loved everyone right back."

“Then why?” James breathed, his eyes now round as marbles as he stared at Evan.

Why was he telling him this? He hadn’t spoken about it to anyone, not since he’d made up his mind about what to do, so why was he telling this virtual stranger now? Why was he telling a child? Why couldn’t he stop answering questions? It had been the same, earlier, with Ellie, when he’d told her things he usually would have kept to himself. What was going on that had opened this dam in his mind, letting things flow that he’d kept back for so long?

“Because... Because he was in pain,” he heard himself say. “Every moment. Every second. More pain that he could bear. There was nothing anyone could do. Except that I could make the pain stop forever. So I did.”

For a long moment, James was silent. When he finally said, “Then it was a good thing, wasn’t it?” Evan’s eyes prickled until it was all he could do not to cry in front of the child.

“I hope so,” he murmured, and closed his eyes so the tears wouldn’t fall anyway.

* * *

Seated in his car, Lance stared up at the building in front of him, and at a particular window on that building. The lights were on behind the curtains, and a little while ago shadows had moved there, answering the question of whether Taylor was home.

He knew she was there, he’d made up his mind about what to do and what to say... so why was he still here? What was he waiting for?

Why was it always so hard to go to her when, deep down, he craved to be in her presence again?

He knew the answer to that last question, at the very least, and a familiar pang of guilt thrummed through him.

“Enough,” he said aloud to himself. “Just get on with it already.”

Trying not to think ahead about what it’d be like to be near her again, he came out of the car and went to the trunk, pulling out Taylor’s sword from under his own scabbard and the case that held Ellie’s crossbow. He unwrapped the blanket from around it and, holding the scabbard all but reverently in one hand, he closed the trunk with the other and started for the entrance of the building.

He took the steps two at a time, and once he stood in front of her door he knocked at once, refusing to let himself hesitate any more. He knew she'd hear him if he just stood there dawdling anyway, so there was no point in waiting.

He didn't hear her come to the door, so his only warning was the slide of metal on metal when she undid the lock. His heart jumped to his throat, his palms suddenly damp against the leather of the scabbard. He blinked twice—and there she was.

He felt a sense of relief at how much better her face looked, her burn no longer raw and painful to look at. Her skin was still red, but no more than when she'd sometimes caught a little too much sun by accident, back at the Academy, when they spent long hours training outside. So, she was healing even without the benefit of human blood to help her. That was good to know. Very good indeed.

A flash of surprise lit her eyes when they met Lance's, followed by something that was harder to define. Amusement, maybe? She leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb, resting her other hand against the side of the door, keeping it barely open.

"Lance," she said, maybe a little louder than was necessary. "I didn't expect you to visit again so soon." Her gaze drifted down to the sword he held, and she frowned ever so slightly. "Unless you're here on business?" she added.

"Yes and no," he said slowly, and raised the sword, showing it better to her so that she'd recognize it. "I just thought..."

The words he had oh, so carefully prepared in the car fled his mind, leaving it blank, making him feel dimwitted and slow. Swallowing the lump that tightened his throat, he raised the sword higher still, now holding it like an offering in front of him, resting flat in his open palms.

"It's my sword," she said in a murmur.

Was that regret in her words? Longing? Could she remember the night she'd last held it? Lance certainly did.

"Yes," Lance managed, and that simple word opened the path to more. "I thought you should have it back."

She still wasn't reaching for it, and instead frowned a little more deeply at him.

"Did you? What for? Vampires cannot legally be Special Enforcers. What else could I use it for?"

Lance's mouth opened... and closed again without a sound. 'Playing fish charades', Taylor used to call this. The phrase came back to him in a

flash, threatening to make him smile when really smiling was the last thing he felt like doing right now.

“I just thought,” he said again, and again couldn’t complete the sentence. What was it, really, that he’d thought?

Had he even been thinking, or had he merely wanted an excuse to see Taylor again? Months of remaining away from her, and now he couldn’t go more than a day without coming back? He knew he was weak, he’d known it since her death, but this was ridiculous.

And it wasn’t fair to Taylor either, was it?

“If you don’t want it back,” he started again, and again was interrupted —this time by his ringing phone.

No, not just his phone. Two ringing phones: his own, and a second one inside Taylor’s apartment. And both emitted the same ring tone, the siren of a police car, that Ellie, Taylor and Lance had once programmed in their respective phones as a sort of joke. The ring tone indicated a call from the police dispatch who reported all suspected illegal vampire activity. Except that Taylor wasn’t on the call list anymore, not since she’d become a vampire. So when, instead of answering, Lance used the sheathed sword to push the door wide open, he already knew he’d find his sister there. It didn’t diminish his surprise one bit, though.