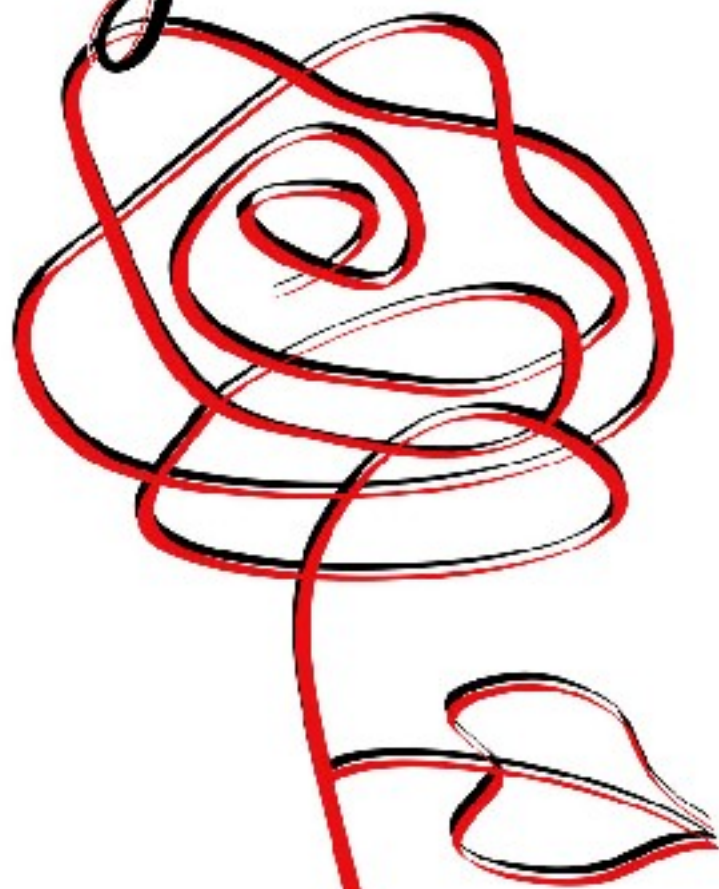


Kallysten



*Five
Valentines*

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All characters in this publication are purely fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Edited by Mary S.

Novels take us on a journey through the lives of characters. In the space of a few chapters, we meet them, discover their strengths, their fears, their hopes and failings. We often leave them as they have conquered themselves, an enemy, or even love, but their lives continue beyond the words 'The End'.

Have you ever wondered what happened to your favorite character a day, a month, a year after you closed a book? I have certainly wondered as much, and so I give you glimpses into five worlds, brought together by a common holiday they celebrate in different ways.

I hope you enjoy these visits from old friends and remember their stories fondly.

Happy Valentine's Day!

Diamonds are Forever (in the world of **Forever Start Now**)

Aria's Red Roses (in the world of **Aria and Will**)

On the Edge of his Seat (in the world of **On The Edge**)

A Blank Card (in the world of **Carte Blanche**)

Mating (in the world of **CheckMate**)

Diamonds are Forever

In the middle of the café, light pooled over a lacquered baby grand piano on a platform a foot from the floor. The pianist had already been playing when Claire and Matthew had stepped in three hours earlier, and he was still playing now, one slow melody after the other. All around the stage, couples were swaying to the music, wrapped in each other's arms and lost in their own worlds.

Claire couldn't help smiling as she watched them, her mug of hot chocolate forgotten in between her cupped hands. She had never cared much for Valentine's Day, but this subdued atmosphere was nice. She looked back at Matthew, and her smile deepened when she saw he was observing her.

"You're glowing," he murmured.

He rested his hand on the table between them, palm up. Claire covered it with her own.

"I'm happy," she said. "You make me happy."

He twisted his hand beneath hers and linked their fingers together.

"I try." He stood, keeping her hand tight in his. "Dance with me."

She was glad to follow him to the dance floor, and easily found her place in his arms, resting her cheek against his. This was how they had met—sharing music and sensuous movements—and even after all these years

had passed, it still felt like the first time, all over again. Their bodies fit together to perfection, and followed the music effortlessly. If Claire's heart had still been beating, it would have been trying to break free from her chest.

"How many Valentine's Days has it been?" Matthew asked, speaking so low that his voice was barely audible over the notes cascading from the piano.

"A few," she replied, just as low. "But never enough."

"Never enough," he repeated. "Good thing we have forever in front of us."

Forever. The word swirled around Claire's mind, echoing like the music, and when she closed her eyes, a myriad of colors bloomed into fantastic shapes. She had told Matthew she was happy, but happy seemed wholly inadequate to describe the warmth inside her chest and the feeling of perfect contentment that filled her.

"Know what else is forever?" Matthew murmured after they had danced for a few minutes.

Claire turned her face to his neck and laid a kiss there. "Love?"

He laughed quietly. "Undoubtedly, yes. But I had something more...commercial in mind." His hand let go of it for an instant. When it returned, something smooth slid down her ring finger.

Claire did not look quite yet, savoring the moment. "More commercial, huh?" she said, but the teasing she wanted to put in her voice disappeared behind raw emotion.

“What can I say, diamonds sellers can be very convincing.”

It had been a long time since Claire had worn a ring on that finger. However, she was already getting used to the light weight of it again, used to what it meant.

“Do vampires marry?” she asked, her lips brushing against his jaw with each word.

“Few do. But it’s not unheard of. When it’s the right person in front of you, it doesn’t really matter if you’re human or vampire. It doesn’t matter if you’re signing up for sixty years or six centuries. Does it?”

Claire opened her eyes and finally looked at the ring on her finger. Three bands of gold wove in and out of each other, surrounding a diamond that sparkled under the shimmering lights of the café.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

Matthew brought her hand to his mouth and laid a kiss on her knuckles. “No. You are. But you still haven’t told me if—”

“Of course,” she interrupted, laughing, unable to wait another second.

She threw her arms around his neck and drew him closer. Their mouths met in a tender kiss. His lips parted at the smallest touch of her tongue, allowing her in to dance alongside his tongue. Without thinking twice, she found his fang and nicked her tongue against it, sharing a few drops of blood with him as though to seal the promise they had just made each other.

They had shared each other's lives for years now; shared thoughts and dreams, a lot of laughter and a few tears. They had shared blood. They had shared everything they were. The shiny rock on her finger, the gold encircling it, only meant that they would share it all, still, for years to come.

One by one, the couples on the dance floor drifted away, until Claire and Matthew were the only ones left following music they barely even heard. When the pianist finally took his bow, they were still dancing.

Aria's Red Roses

Before she even opened her eyes, Aria knew what she would see. The sweet and thick scent of roses surrounded her, filling her sleepy mind with the warmth of a summer day. She could almost feel the sun sliding over her skin, caressing her with all the gentleness of a loving hand. Except...the sun burned, she remembered, still a little drowsy. And no imaginary hand could be as tender as this one.

With a small contented hum, she rolled into the touch, and straight into Will's welcoming arms. He closed them around her, holding her tight to his bare chest. She took a deep breath, and for a moment his scent covered that of the roses.

"Hey, you," he murmured, kissing the top of her head.

"Hey." With her mouth pressed to his skin, her voice came out muffled. She turned her head and rubbed her cheek against his chest. "Woke up earlier and you weren't there."

He stroked her back up and down, drawing a purring sound from Aria. "I got a call, I had to go down. But I came back, didn't I?"

"Call?" she repeated, confused. "Didn't hear it."

The world shook—or so did Aria think, until she realized Will was chuckling silently. "You did hear it. Don't you remember telling me to get the phone or you'd chuck it out the window?"

The hand she had curled beneath her chin unfurled and slipped over his abs, only to be stopped by the waistband of his pants. Her eyes still closed, she frowned.

"I did?" she muttered. "Don't remember. And it was your day off anyway."

His hand stilled just above the curve of her ass. "You're off. I'm not. I can't—"

She grumbled and he fell silent. His fingertips glided up her spine and settled at the back of her neck. She shivered.

"You can do anything you want," she said, pouting a little. "What's the point of being in charge if you can't?"

He laughed again. "I've asked myself this very thing many times. But I guess it has some advantages."

She felt him shift against her and, clinging to him, protested with a groan. It seemed as though he was reaching for something on the nightstand. She knew what it was as soon as he laid down again and something soft, softer than his callused yet so gentle fingers, brushed along her back. Petals. A rose. The touch sent sparks throughout her body, slowly rekindling the flames of her desire.

They had been too tired, at the end of the night, to do anything more than crawl into bed and wrap themselves around each other. Even now, Aria's entire body ached with the tiredness from three days and nights' worth of fighting demons under overcast skies. In a minute, she'd move, kiss Will, return his caresses. In just a minute. Or

maybe two. But until then, to lie in his arms and enjoy his touch was enough.

The rose brushed against her shoulders, coming up to trail against the bite marks on her neck. Waves of warmth radiated at that simple touch throughout Aria's body. She moaned quietly and pressed her lips to Will's chest.

"I have to go back," he murmured. "Get some more sleep."

Without even realizing what she was doing, she tightened her hold on him. "Stay."

"Aria..."

If she insisted, she knew he would bend to her request. She also knew he truly had to go. She had asked him to take the job; she couldn't fault him now for doing it to the best of his abilities.

With a light groan, she raised her head from his chest, finally opening her eyes to see him smile before she kissed him. The taste of blood lingered in his mouth, and she let her tongue seek it. Her hunger for blood awakened, dimming her hunger for him for a moment. He nipped at her lips teasingly before drawing back. His eyes sparkled when he caressed her cheek, then her lips, with the rose.

Looking down, she noticed the unusual color. She took the barely-open bud from him and brought it to her nose, breathing in deeply. The scent made her a little lightheaded—or that might have been Will's presence.

"Red?" she asked, holding his gaze. "It's been a while since you gave me red ones."

His lips twitched in amusement. "It's been a year."

"A year exactly?" She frowned. "Why red today, then?"

Shrugging, he stood. He picked up his shirt from the foot of the bed and put it on as he answered. "Long before you were born, this was a special day. People would show their love with gifts. Red roses were traditional."

Kneeling up on the bed, she crooked a finger at him to beckon him forward. He came closer, raising his eyebrow in a silent question. Aria snapped the stem of the rose she held, shortening it, then slid it inside Will's breast pocket so that only the bud peeked out.

"I love you," she said. Curling a hand at the back of his neck, she drew him down for a short but sweet kiss.

It was only after he had left, when her eyes had nothing more to focus on, that she saw them. She gasped, surprised and grateful. All around the room, filling it with their heady scent, dozens and dozens of red roses pledged Will's love for her.

On the Edge of his Seat

Brett's cell phone buzzed inside Lisa's purse. He leaned forward and made a token attempt at grabbing it, but already she had picked it from where it lay between them on the table and pulled the phone out. She glanced at the display and frowned.

"Is it the club?" Brett asked, his worry piercing in his voice.

He couldn't believe he had let them take the phone from him. He also couldn't believe that he had agreed to go out on Valentine's Day night, when it was usually one of the biggest nights of the year at the club, coming only second to Halloween. So many things could go wrong. How was he supposed to take care of his business with his lovers conspiring against him like this?

"I'll take care of it," Lisa said as she stood. She stopped behind Leo to rest a hand on his shoulder. "Try to remind him he's not supposed to think about work tonight."

Leo chuckled at the request. "I'll see what I can do."

Brett glared at him, then at Lisa's retreating back for good measure. They had promised him tonight would be nice, that it would take his mind off work for a few hours. He hadn't realized that they would try to force him to have fun. So far, it wasn't working that well.

"You know how she is about holidays," Leo said with a roll of his eyes. "I talk her into having a night out together, and you're just ruining it all." He took a sip of

his champagne cocktail, his eyes never leaving Brett. "You're such a pain."

If they hadn't been in such an upscale restaurant, Brett would have made a very rude hand gesture. As things were, all he could do was smile and say in his sweetest voice, "You're fired."

Leo chuckled. "Again? You've got to find a better threat, this one has lost its bite."

His voice deepened on the word "bite," suddenly more appropriate for a bedroom than a public setting, and a wave of heat flashed through Brett. Loosening his tie just a bit, he slipped the tips of two fingers inside his collar. The bite marks at his throat were itching all of a sudden, as though awakening at their maker's voice. Leo knew exactly what he was doing to Brett's libido; his satisfied little smile said as much.

The waiter returned at that moment with the appetizer Lisa had ordered. Brett hadn't wanted any—he had hoped to leave the restaurant faster if they skipped the appetizers altogether—but as one of his favorite dishes was placed in front of him, he couldn't resist. It was useless anyway; his lovers outnumbered him, and he had yet to find a way to say no to Lisa.

He picked one of the metal skewers and used his fork to pull off the first shrimp. It crunched under his teeth, caramelized perfectly. Across from him, Leo grimaced.

"I don't know how you can eat that," he said with a disgusted look at the plate of skewers.

Brett replied only by biting into a second shrimp. Shaking his head, Leo picked up his cocktail glass again.

His face remained expressionless save for a tiny grin pulling at the corners of his mouth. Brett only had enough time to wonder what he was up to when he felt the first touch. He nearly choked on his food. Glaring at Leo, he kicked his left foot beneath the table, pushing Leo's foot away.

"Will you behave?" he hissed.

Leo laughed quietly. "Do I ever?"

With that, he resumed his attack under the privacy offered by the floor-length tablecloth. Putting down his half eaten skewer and fork, Brett tried to block the shoeless foot that kept rubbing up his leg and to his thigh. He took Leo's lead and tried not to let anything show on his face, but after a few minutes, it was just impossible. He couldn't stop himself from laughing, and tried to disguise the sound by coughing in his napkin. For his part, Leo kept his composure, but his eyes sparkled mischievously.

Lisa finally returned to the table, and Brett tried to distract himself by watching her approach. Leo looked good in his suit, very good indeed, but Lisa was breathtaking. Her sleeveless red dress was quite modest compared to some of the other dresses in her closet; it covered her knees and the V-neck only showed a small amount of cleavage. Still, Brett found himself edging forward on his seat, getting closer to her and Leo, if only by inches.

She placed the phone back in her purse and looked from Leo to Brett. She sniffed once, and her eyebrows rose in amusement.

"You seem in a better mood," she told Brett. "Ready to enjoy yourself?"

Despite himself, Brett glanced at the purse. He wondered what that call had been about. It had to be serious for his staff to call him after Lisa had asked them not to. When he looked up again, both Lisa and Leo were observing him, waiting to see what he would do.

He could ask her what the call had been about, or he could trust that the club would be fine if he took just one night off.

Picking up his skewer again, he nodded. "I'm already enjoying the food and the company. Was there anything else?"

Beneath the table, Leo's foot was nudging at the inside of Brett's thigh. Brett toed off one of his shoes and tried to decide—would he return the teasing touch, or pull Lisa into the game?

A Blank Card

It had been years since Ray had broken one of his Mistress' rules, and longer than that since he had even wanted to. On that cold February day, it was by accident that he displeased her. Accident or not, he was punished; he wouldn't have expected anything different.

Just the previous night, they had played a long BDSM scene at the club Carte Blanche. Grace had been very busy at work in the past couple of weeks, which had cut down on their time together. She had made it up to him, and hours after they had returned home, every inch of Ray's body still tingled in mixed pleasure and pain. He spent his day waiting for her to return from work, flashes of their night popping into his mind and making him ache for her touch. He distracted himself, in the late afternoon, by giving Grace's daughter Laura and a friend of hers their weekly drawing lesson. It was during that lesson that Grace returned, and, without thinking, Ray greeted her by calling her "Mistress Red."

The muffled laughs at his back froze him. Grace's only reaction was a slow blink, but Ray knew he was in trouble. Laura was a clever child, and he knew she had guessed his relationship with her mother was...special, to say the least. Just the same, he had been strictly forbidden to show any outward sign of submission to his Mistress when the child was around, and his slip of the tongue definitely qualified as such.

Grace kissed his cheek as she did every day, though somehow her lips seemed to barely graze his skin. Then she kissed Laura's, and exclaimed over the two girls' sketches as though nothing had happened. Ray took his cue from her and commented on the girls' progress,

chatting lightly until Laura's friend left and it was time for dinner. Inwardly, however, he was furious with himself. He hated disappointing Grace, and he was already cringing at the thought of what she would say later when they were alone.

Still upset, Ray said goodnight earlier than usual. Retreating to the bedroom he shared with Grace, he stripped and knelt down, pulling his hands behind him and keeping his head low. Maybe, if he showed he was really contrite, the punishment wouldn't be too severe? He didn't really expect it to work, but he could hope.

When Grace finally came into their room, she closed the door and leaned back against it, her arms crossed over her chest. Ray chanced a glance up at her face. Her expression was severe.

"I'm sorry," he started, but she didn't let him go any further than that.

"You've said quite enough, Ray. Not a word. Not aloud, not in writing. Not until I say otherwise."

He flinched. Her tone may have been mild, but her scent did not lie. She was angry. More so than she showed. That was never a good sign.

"I'll go take a bath," she said tiredly. "You can go to bed. Don't wait for me."

It wasn't until the water stopped running in the master bathroom that Ray stood and dragged himself to the bed. Her best weapon against him, the worst punishment she could inflict was to ignore him; she knew it quite well, although it had been a long time since she had last resorted to this measure. Lying on his back

in the king-sized bed, Ray could only wonder how long she would hold his mistake against him. Surely, she had to know he hadn't done it on purpose—didn't she?

Her bath seemed to take hours as Ray waited for her to come back. When she did, she slipped under the covers without a word and stayed on her side of the bed, facing away from Ray. Before long, the regular sound of her breathing announced that she was asleep. Ray just kept staring into the darkness, wondering how to apologize when he couldn't even say a word. It was a long night.

He carefully left the bed very early in the morning, and was out of the house before the sun even rose. He borrowed Grace's car and drove first to a dinner down the road, then to a convenience store, managing in both cases to purchase what he wanted without talking to anyone—his Mistress had said not a word, and he intended to obey even if she wasn't around.

He ducked back into the house just as the first light of sunrise pierced the horizon, clutching his take-out box in one hand and the slim paper bag in the other. He set the food aside for the time being and sat down at the kitchen with the greeting card he had bought and a pencil. The outside of the card showed traditional Valentine's Day imagery, cupids, flowers and hearts, all in pink, red and gold. He thought it was a bit gaudy, but it was the only card he had found that didn't bear some kind of message either on the cover or inside. Not a word, she had said. Not even in writing, which was how he had worked around the restriction in the past. She thought of everything.

Opening the card, he feverishly started working on the first drawing on the left side. Forgiveness was a hard concept to get through without words, but he had

thought about it almost all night long, and he knew exactly what to draw. As always, his depiction of his Mistress was much more detailed than that of himself, but they were both recognizable, he thought. And her benevolent gesture, her hand on his head as he knelt at her feet, was the best way he could think of to show his wish for her forgiveness.

The next drawing was much more straightforward. On this one, his image was standing, and offering a heart to Grace while leaning in for a kiss.

He was just putting the last touches to his wordless message, using a crayon to put touches of red in Grace's hair and fill in the heart, when he heard noise in the master bedroom. Leaving the card on the table, he pulled out a pan and reheated the pancakes he had bought. Grace and Laura both enjoyed pancakes for breakfast, but they had long ago gave up trying to teach him how to make some for them. As easy as it was, he always ended up burning them, or not cooking them enough so that they were a gooey mess. At least preparing coffee only required him to press a button.

Half of the pancakes, he set aside for Laura in a plate covered with a paper towel. The other half he transformed into hearts with the point of a sharp knife. He had just finished setting them, a cup of coffee and the bottle of syrup on the table when Grace entered the kitchen, wrapped in a thick robe and yawning lightly. Her eyes widened in surprise as she took in the breakfast waiting for her, and she blinked twice when Ray hesitantly handed her the card.

He watched her carefully as she opened it, and had to repress a relieved sigh when she smiled at the drawings.

"I love you, too," she murmured with a half smile.
"Happy Valentine's Day."

Her hand curling at the back of his head, she drew him in for a kiss. When she pulled away, Ray beamed at her.

"I love you," she repeated, and her smile broadened, taking a wicked turn. "But your punishment still stands."

It was all Ray could do not to groan in protest.

Mating

Wrapped around each other as they were, kissing fiercely and caressing through clothes, it was a miracle that Vincent and Lilia didn't fall off the staircase before reaching the bedroom in the mezzanine. The back of Lilia's leg bumped the edge of the bed, and she grunted when Vincent pushed her back onto it. Her hands fisted into his shirt, she drew him down with her, and they hit the mattress with a shared 'oomph.'

Lilia rolled over him and sat up, straddling his thighs, so she could feverishly work on unbuttoning his shirt. He pushed her back and sat up as well, working on her clothes equally as fast. The sound of fabric ripping reached Lilia's mind, but did not slow her in any way. She didn't know if she had torn Vincent's clothes or if he had torn hers, and she couldn't have cared less. It only spurred her on.

They tugged and pulled and pushed at each other, animalistic grunts accompanying their work. Before long, they were rolling on the bed, both of them naked, both of them wanting to get on top and direct their lovemaking.

They were on their sides, her thigh over his leg and his cock pressed to her belly, when Lilia's mouth latched onto Vincent's forearm. She sucked hard, never breaking the skin but drawing a purple bruise to the surface. He groaned as he nuzzled the side of her face. His hands cupped her breasts, and he squeezed gently. Lilia turned her head to his. Her sigh of pleasure brushed his lips before she smashed their mouths together, her tongue already invading his mouth. At the same time, Lilia

closed her hand over his cock. It was hard, the tip covered in precome. She spread it down over the shaft, as always thrilled and simply joyous that she could affect him so.

She pumped his cock a few times. Vincent moaned into her mouth, then more loudly when she pulled back, ending the kiss.

"Anything you want, lover?" she asked, hissing a little.

He took in a sharp breath when her palm brushed the sensitive tip of his cock. "You. Don't be a tease."

Her reply was lost in a groan. His thumbs had just brushed against her hardened nipples, and pleasure thrummed through her, making her yearn for more. She pushed him onto his back and straddled his thighs again, losing no time before she poised herself over his cock and led him inside her.

Vincent's heartbeat had the time to pound twice before she started moving. He found her hands and clasped them, holding them as he held her gaze. His pupils were dilated and his mouth slightly open as he breathed hard. Lilia pinched her lips tight to stop herself from babbling that he was hers, all hers, so beautiful and strong and how had she ever lived without him.

She threw her head back, focusing on bringing him pleasure. His hands squeezed hers one last time before letting go and settling at her waist. Gripping it tight, he reinforced her rhythm as she started raising and lowering herself in turn, slamming down always harder onto him and grinding her clit against him. The heat of his flesh was searing, and all Lilia wanted was to be consumed by it, by him, and lose herself in him.

The only warning he gave her was a whisper of her name. His hands slipped from her waist to her back. He drew her down to him for what she thought would be a kiss, but with a jerk of his hips, he rolled their bodies until she was beneath him, already arching into him and struggling to regain the advantage.

He distracted her by covering her right breast with his mouth and sucking hard. Lilia whimpered, losing herself in the pleasure of his mouth and the strong rhythm of his cock pushing deep inside her. Her fingers clutched at his back, his nails digging into her skin. Her legs rose, opening her just a little more to his thrusts.

The pressure of his lips and tongue increased even as he started losing his rhythm. Lilia bucked against him, and her breast slipped from his mouth. Her arms tightened around him, pulling him closer. He sucked on her nipple again, this time adding the most fleeting hint of teeth. Lilia came apart, crying out her pleasure in the form of his name.

Vincent slowed down but didn't stop moving inside her. Leaning onto his forearm, he watched her, his hand brushing the hair out of her face. The part of her mind that wasn't blinded by pleasure expected him to look triumphant. Instead, all she could see was his love for her.

She framed his face with her hands and pulled him down. Her lips pushed hard against his, and he pressed back before yielding and giving her entrance. She only caressed his tongue with hers for a second before drawing out and kissing a path over the prickly stubble on his jaw and down his neck.

No doubt understanding what she was about to do, Vincent accelerated the pace of his thrusting again, but it was becoming a little erratic, betraying how close to his orgasm he was. She bit his neck over the marks she had left there on their mating night, using blunt teeth only, but biting hard enough to leave an imprint for a few hours. Vincent cried out and jerked forward, burying himself inside her. He pressed his face into the crook of her neck as he came, and she held on tight to him.

His thundering heartbeat slowly calmed down against her chest. She rubbed a lazy hand up and down his back, shivering at the panting breaths that caressed her neck. After a few seconds, Vincent laughed against her, his entire body shaking.

“What?” Lilia said with less fire in her voice than she intended.

“No flowers or chocolate for Valentine’s Day,” he said in between chuckles, “and I still get great sex. I’ve got to be the luckiest guy on earth.”

She pushed him off her, giving a playful punch to his shoulder. “You have any doubt left about that?” she asked mock-gruffly.

He laughed again, more softly now. “I don’t, no. But sometimes I still pinch myself.”

As he finished, he reached to grab his cigarettes on the nightstand on her side of the bed. When he stretched over her lap, Lilia’s eyes went straight to his bare ass. With a wicked smile, she pinched it.

“Hey!”

Reclining next to her, Vincent gave her a look that was a cross between outrage and hilarity.

"I thought I'd help," she said, playing innocent.

He was chuckling as he lit up a cigarette. Lilia took the pack from him and returned it to the nightstand, giving him the ashtray instead. He balanced it on his stomach and gave her a nod of thanks. Lilia rolled onto her side. Resting her chin against her closed fist, she watched him closely. Fine lines had appeared at the corner of his eyes since the first time they had met, but his eyes were still just as sharp—and just as warm when he smiled at her.

He brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "What's on your mind?"

The words came out before she even knew it. "Why do you smoke?"

Vincent shrugged and took a deeper drag on the cigarette. "Afraid second-hand smoke will hurt you?" he asked, teasing.

"Don't be silly. But those things will kill you. And when they do, they'll kill me as well."

The flinch was minute, but it was there. She knew he didn't like reminders that her life was tied to his. As years passed, he liked them less and less. They were Mates, however, and whether they liked it or not, their lives were bound.

"Special Enforcers rarely reach fifty," he said, now defensive. "The cigarettes won't do anything to change that."

She rested her hand on his chest and slowly made her way up until her fingers came to rest at the marks that proclaimed that he was her Mate. He shivered at the touch. Seconds passed as she watched him, wondering if now was the time to tell him. She didn't want it hanging over his head like an inescapable sword—but she didn't want to take him by surprise either. She might as well do it now and have it out in the open.

"You'll reach a lot more than fifty," she said, trying to keep her voice even.

Vincent's eyes sharpened. Without breaking eye contact, he crushed his cigarette into the ashtray. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

The fear that had clawed at her heart started letting go when she realized how calm he sounded. "You don't sound all that surprised."

"Why would I be?" He shook his head slightly. "You were promised centuries, and my death will take that from you. I'm not surprised you'd want to do something about it."

Lilia sat up. Could she dare to hope—

"That doesn't mean I want you to do it."

She snorted to herself. Of course, it wouldn't be that easy. When had Vincent ever made things easy for her?

"Will you try to stop me?" she asked, an edge of defiance hardening her words.

"I don't know." Vincent's lips curved into a bittersweet smile. "I don't want you to die because of me. But I never wanted to be a vamp, either."

Lilia searched his face, trying to find an answer. Her eyes followed the scar she had carved on his cheek—it felt like an entire lifetime had trickled by since that night. She had wanted to kill him, then. Now she wanted him to live, as a human or a vampire, it didn't matter to her. She just wasn't sure it was worth it if he lived only to hate her.

"How about this," she said, feeling more unsure than she had in quite some time. "When the day comes, if you ask me not to do it..." She gritted her teeth and forced herself to finish. "If that day you ask me not to turn you, I won't."

Relief washed over Vincent's face. He leaned in toward her and cupped her cheek. He stopped just short of kissing her. "Promise?" he whispered.

Lilia didn't want to promise. She didn't want to think about her Mate dying in her arms and not being able to do a thing to save him because of a few words. She didn't want to imagine the pain she would be in, then, or how long she would hold her own against madness before taking her own life. But she also didn't want to see fear in Vincent's eyes every time he looked at her.

And so, she inclined her head. "To me, it's more like a threat. But yes, I promise."

It was worth it, if for nothing more than Vincent's lips brushing against hers in gratitude.

About the Author:

Kallysten's most exciting accomplishment to date was to cross a few thousand miles and an ocean to pursue (and catch!) the love of her life. She has been writing for fifteen years, and always enjoyed sharing her stories and listening to the readers' reactions. After playing with science fiction, short stories, poetry and fanfiction, she is now trying her hand, heart and words at paranormal romance novels.

To see her other stories, visit:

<http://original.kallysten.net>

Other stories in this series available at Alinar Publishing:

On The Edge

Brett Andrews thought he had it all.

His new club, On The Edge, catering to vampires and humans, is a smashing success, and the beautiful vampire Lisa is everything he could have dreamed of.

When an old lover of hers, Leo, shows up at the club, Brett's immediate fear is that he will lose Lisa. But if he just stops thinking long enough to follow Lisa's lead, he might gain a lover instead of losing one.

Forever Starts Now

After receiving pictures that prove her fiancé's infidelity, Claire breaks her engagement to Jonas and throws him out of her house. As a Special Enforcer, Jonas' job is to hunt vampires who kill humans, but while she packs his belongings, Claire discovers he might be killing innocent vampires as well. Needing to know more about vampires before she decides whether to turn Jonas in, she

visits a club where vampires and humans come in close contact, On The Edge.

There, she meets the attractive and mysterious vampire Matthew. She observes him from afar for a few nights, and when he finally comes to talk to her, it is to scare her and ensure that she will not return to a place he considers dangerous for her--a view he unexpectedly shares with Jonas.

Claire does return, however, and discovers more about Matthew's past than he wanted her to know. She also discovers he is attracted to her, just as much as she is to him. Their first night together is passionate, but, with the intervention of Matthew's Sire, it ends in blood...

CheckMate

Lilia is a vampire; Vincent hunts vampires. They've each sworn to kill the other, and have battled many times without either of them winning. But when a spell gone wrong links them through bonds of shared blood and sex, the game stops abruptly and with no clear winner.

Trying to stay alive, they learn to guard each other's back against old and new enemies alike. The game takes a new turn as the memories of what they shared under the spell become too hard to ignore and they succumb to lust - or could it be more than that?

Carte Blanche

When a lobbyist opposed to vampires' rights is found drained of her blood, Special Enforcer Grace Alkins investigates the woman's connection to a local BDSM club and its vampire customers. It has been a long time since Grace played on this particular scene, but old habits return easily when she puts on the attire of Mistress Red.

On her first undercover visit at the club, however, she finds herself tricked into playing a scene with Ray, a submissive whose Master left town abruptly. The Dominant in her enjoys the opportunity -

while the Special Enforcer is shocked to realize Ray is a vampire, and possibly a suspect for the murder she investigates.

Will Grace manage to keep a cool head and find the killer when every new meeting with Ray cranks up the heat a little more?

Aria & Will

In an indistinct future, humans and vampires are allied against the savage demons that relentlessly attack their cities. In the fortified town of Newhaven, a centuries-old vampire, Wilhelm, is slowly losing track of why he fights. Meeting the human child Ariadne and watching her grow up to become a fierce fighter reminds him of his purpose and gives a face to the humans he tries to protect. As years pass, however, and Aria becomes a young woman, then a vampire, his protectiveness slowly turns into love...

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