

KALLYSTEN



GLASS
& GLITTER

Glass and Glitter

Kallysten

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This story takes place a year and half after the novel CheckMate.

Warily staying out of the sunlight, Lilia opened the door to the postman, only to have two packages thrust into her hands before the man hurriedly backed away. She wasn't quite sure how he had found out she was a vampire, but he certainly seemed not to be too comfortable when she was the one opening the door. He was back to the street before she could thank him, and she shrugged, immediately putting him out of her mind. She couldn't have cared less what this particular human thought of her.

The first package, the smaller of the two, was addressed to Vincent, and the return address pointed to his father. She dropped it on the coffee table, unconcerned about what might be in it. If she was to judge by the Christmassy stamps and stickers, it was probably Vincent's Christmas gift. Like the previous year, his father had wanted them to travel to his house for the holidays; she and Vincent had declined again, and there had been an awkward pause on the phone when Vincent had explained to his father, as he had a year earlier, that Lilia didn't celebrate Christmas. He hadn't actually pointed out that vampires weren't exactly interested in anything that had to do with religion, but from where she had been listening, that was what it had sounded like to Lilia.

The second package, a rather large square box, bore her name in the same handwriting as the first, but it lacked the holiday trimming; instead, it had been stamped repeatedly with the word 'Fragile'. Curious, she set it on the sofa and opened it, using a sharp nail to break off the tape. Tissue paper hid its content except for an envelope resting on top, her name scribbled on it. She

pulled out of it a handful of pictures, all of them showing Vincent at various ages, all of them showing him as he decorated a Christmas tree. On the oldest picture, he didn't look older than two years old maybe, and he was in his mother's arms, clinging to a wooden ornament. On the most recent, he looked sixteen or seventeen and he was rolling his eyes at the camera, but smiling just as much as on every other picture. Just as happy.

She was quite certain that she made Vincent happy, but there was something in the pictures that felt different. Maybe because the child they depicted had been innocent still, and had not met death as closely as he now saw it so regularly as a Special Enforcer.

Still wondering why Vincent's father had sent her pictures of him as a kid, she looked again in the envelope, searching for a note that would explain it, but finding nothing. After putting the pictures away, she turned back to the rest of the box. A few sheets of tissue paper revealed bubble wrap. Through the clear plastic, Lilia could see the colored glass of the ornaments beneath. She stared at them for a few seconds before covering them with the tissue paper again, laying the envelope on top of it as it had been, and closing back the box a bit more abruptly than was necessary. A quick visual survey of the house later, she carried the box to the coat closet and pushed it as far back and to the side as she could, where it wouldn't be too noticeable. Combined with the pictures and the fact that the box had been addressed to her, the ornaments were an unsubtle attempt from Vincent's father to change her mind about not celebrating Christmas. She wasn't pleased, far from it, at the push; she had no intention of playing the game. And she was going to tell Emery Jordan exactly what she thought of his tricks.

She had no trouble finding his phone number in Vincent's address book, and she dialed angrily, already grumbling recriminations. The phone rang four times before Emery picked up, and Lilia had to keep a tight control over herself not to shout at him.

"Vincent told you I don't celebrate Christmas," she snapped, forgoing greetings to jump straight into the matter. Emery seemed startled by her abruptness and remained silent for a few seconds, but when he finally spoke his voice was as calm as though she hadn't just barked at him.

"Good afternoon, Lilia. I would suppose you received my package?"

"I did. And again, I don't—"

"Celebrate Christmas," he finished for her. "I had understood the first time around."

"And still you sent me those things!"

"They're called pictures, my dear. And ornaments. I assure you, they are quite inoffensive."

Lilia gritted her teeth. He wasn't backing off. She knew, now, from whom Vincent had inherited his stubborn streak.

"And yet, I happen to find it offensive that you sent them to me, Emery. You're lucky I'm on a strict diet these days."

Judging by the silence that followed, the old man had either forgotten whom he was playing with, or he hadn't expected Lilia to be this upset. In all honesty, she

hadn't realized she was until she had heard the not quite threat pass her lips.

"Christmas used to be my son's favorite holiday," Emery eventually said, still clinging to his calm, but Lilia could tell she had shaken him. "Not just because of the gifts. Because of all of it. The decorations, the songs, the food. He stopped enjoying it as much the year his mother died, and we never touched the ornaments since."

Her anger dimming slightly, Lilia let out a long-suffering sigh. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Why?" Emery repeated, sounding surprised. "You claim to love my boy. I thought you might be interested in knowing more about him. I apologize if I was mistaken."

Shaking her head incredulously, Lilia hung up the phone without a goodbye. Clearly, Emery had had his speech ready. He had thought it all very carefully, she was sure of it. Trap her with words and lead her to a road she had no interest in traveling. That only proved how badly he knew her. If he had told Vincent about his idea, his son would have set him straight quite easily on what worked with her and what didn't. At least, it meant that Vincent wasn't in on all this stupidity. She was going to forget all of this. In fact, she couldn't wait to forget about it.

* * * *

Days passed, and Lilia didn't forget. Over and again she kept coming back to the box and pictures. Whenever she had a few moments to herself, be it because Vincent was out of the house, taking a shower or still sleeping,

she pulled the box out of the closet and opened it again. The first few times, she only took out the pictures and looked at them again, always focusing on her Mate's smile and trying to remember when she had last made him that happy. After a few times, she started pulling out the decorations too, glaring at each piece of glass as she carefully took them out of the box as though they were responsible for her obsession with the box and what it contained. As much as she tried, she couldn't understand what made these bits of glass so special. They were pretty, certainly, but not enough to warrant such grins from Vincent.

She never mentioned the box to him, though, nor did she let him see anything of her little ritual. She was all at once intrigued by the shiny pieces of glass and exasperated by them. She was a vampire, and she had no use for Christmas decorations. But these same useless things were responsible for Vincent's happiness in so many pictures...

As Christmas grew closer, she became more and more irritable, annoyed by her own behavior and by the fact that Vincent's father had tried so blatantly to manipulate her. At first, her irritation manifested itself through snarky comments at the expense of the neighbors' elaborate holiday display or glares at the town's decorations when they went out at night to hunt. Vincent usually tried to distract her, succeeding for the most part, or ignored her comments when she insisted in being disparaging of the whole holidays game. But the night before Christmas, her annoyance broke through with a crash that surprised even her.

"What do you mean, we're not patrolling tonight?" she testily asked her Mate when he told her of his plans for

the evening. "You think vamps take a day off because it's Christmas?"

"I'm not that naïve," he replied with a brief laugh. "It's just something I do. I don't work on Christmas Eve and Christmas, that's all. Personal tradition. You didn't seem to mind last year."

She snorted at that. "I hadn't realized it was a tradition. And a fine one at that. Leaving the town to the vamps sounds like a fine gift to them. If I had known when I was on the other side of the fence, I'd have made sure to leave gifts in front of your door. Wouldn't it have been special to find a pile of corpses—"

It was his gaze, so dark that it seemed his pupils had swallowed every bit of blue, that stopped her, and she belatedly realized what she had been saying. Vincent had never held against her what she had done before their Mating; that didn't mean, apparently, that he enjoyed hearing her flaunt her kills so openly.

"Don't tell me you had forgotten what I am," she defended herself, flashing her fangs at him. "Vampire here, remember?"

Without a word, he stood and collected his shoes and jacket.

"I'll tell you what, Lilia," he said coldly as he dressed. "You can go hunt vamps all night long if it amuses you, or stay here and continue your rant by yourself, or do anything else you want. I don't care. Just like you don't care about what I think of Christmas. After all, just because you don't give a damn about it doesn't mean I can't enjoy a nice holiday dinner with my friends."

They exchanged glares as he walked out, and she unconsciously growled when he banged the door shut behind him.

"Anything I want?" she took the empty room as witness. "I'll show him anything."

Seconds later, the door banged shut again, this time behind her. She knew from experience that the clubs downtown remained open during the holidays. A bit of dancing and hunting might help improve her mood. And with any luck, she would calm down before she did anything that would incite Vincent to stake her if he ever found out.

As it turned out, she calmed down long before that. All it took was the glimpse of a child through a window. She couldn't even tell if it was a boy or girl, but the smile was the same as Vincent's on all those old photos. And instead of giving him one more reason to be happy, she had made him more upset than she had in months; even more, it seemed, than when he had believed she had been unfaithful to him.

He hadn't even asked her to celebrate the holiday or anything of the sort, she guiltily realized. He hadn't asked it of her this year, nor the previous one. He hadn't mentioned it at all, in fact, not until tonight and his question of what she wanted to do since he wasn't planning on going out and hunting vampires. It was his father who had nudged her with that damned box, and she had lashed out at Vincent instead, simply because he was there while Emery wasn't.

The question was, how would she make it up to him?

* * * *

By the time Vincent was ready to pull into Don and Jeanie's driveway to take advantage of their dinner invitation, his anger had faded to a simple bad mood, and he was suddenly reluctant to impose his presence on his friends. To come like this, in such a bad temper, without warning and without Lilia was sure to raise questions, and it would have been selfish from him to spoil their Christmas because his own was turning out to be a disaster. So, rather than parking behind Don's van, he picked up speed again and left the residential neighborhood, still unsure of where he was going.

A familiar diner on the side of the road caught his attention and he pulled in. The smile on his face was as fake as his cheerfulness when he wished the waitress, whom he had known for years, a happy holiday. She didn't call him on it, but she left him alone after bringing him his order. He picked at his food without realizing what he was doing, his mind too caught up in what had happened with Lilia to care about anything else.

He had noticed, in the past few days, how cranky she was whenever she saw something that was holidays-related. He knew how much she hated pretending she was human, and he had been very careful not to ask her to follow traditions she wasn't interested in. Because of that, he couldn't understand how his one request—that they take a couple of nights off—had caused her to lash out so cruelly, especially when it hadn't raised a comment from her a year earlier. She rarely ever reminded him so directly of what her nights had been like before they had Mated, and he was grateful to her for it. That she had chosen this night to talk of corpses and remind him how they had once been enemies, had made it even more difficult to bear. But it was also a sign, he could recognize it now, that something was

really bothering her, and it was undoubtedly more than the holiday trappings he hadn't tried to force on her.

He had to talk to her, and figure it out. And he had to do it before she had time to grow even angrier. It wasn't often that they argued, but when they did, sparks flew and ignited fires that could be hard to extinguish.

Abandoning his unfinished dinner, he returned to his car and drove home. The light he could see seeping from behind the drawn curtains made him hopeful; at least, she was there. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as he had thought. Nothing, however, could have prepared him from the sight that greeted him when he opened the door.

Beneath the mezzanine that was their bedroom, a tree was propped up against the wall, a handful of ornaments hanging from its discolored branches. At its feet, a box laid open, tissue paper and bubble wrap spilled around it. And standing next to the tree, Lilia was glaring for all she was worth as she hung up another ornament, a bit of tinsel adorning her hair.

"That tree is evil," she informed him, transferring her glare from said tree to Vincent. "Maybe you should have Don check it out. I bet it's cursed or something just as unnatural."

Repressing a chuckle, Vincent shrugged out of his jacket and threw it over the sofa on his way to the combat zone. "It looks like a normal tree to me," he commented, keeping for himself his observation that the thin but tall thing, which had begun turning brown, had probably been the last in whatever lot Lilia had found it. "What makes you think it's evil?"

"It fell on me twice," she replied grumpily. "And look at me! I'm covered in scratches!"

Her bare arms were indeed crisscrossed by light red marks; knowing for a fact how quickly Lilia healed from wounds much more serious than these, Vincent made a soothing noise but did not exactly worry. As he returned his attention to the tree and wondered whether pointing out that it wasn't standing right was worth risking another of Lilia's glares, an ornament attracted his gaze. Light blue and silver, it had lost some of its glitter over the years, but the words "Vincent's First Christmas" were still easily readable. Reaching toward the glass ball without thinking, he cradled it in his palm; it had never seemed as small as it did at that instant.

"You weren't supposed to come back so early," Lilia grumbled. "You never come back that fast when we argue."

The comment didn't register in Vincent's mind, as he was still trying to process that Lilia had not only been decorating a Christmas tree, but she had been decorating it with the very same ornaments his family had used all throughout his childhood and until his mother had passed away.

"Where did you get these?" he asked quietly, even though the answer was already obvious.

"Your father sent them to me last week," she replied, still grouchy. "Along with a bunch of pictures of you looking all smiling and content."

There had been an edge of something in her voice on the last words, and Vincent turned to her, trying to read

the same emotion on her face, but her features were too carefully blank.

“And you decided to surprise me?” he prodded.

“I wasn’t going to. And then you were so mad earlier...” She sighed, the façade of forced crankiness vanishing entirely. “I just thought it’d be nice to have you happy like on the pictures rather than mad at me. I never thought that damn tree would be so uncooperative.”

And just like that, the pieces of the puzzle clicked, and Vincent figured out why she had been so irritable for the past few days. She must have been arguing with herself about what to do with the ornaments. Left to her own devices, she more often than not acted as a human would in many situations; but if anyone asked her to play the act, she invariably dug in her heels and refused. Vincent did his best not to antagonize her by pretending she was something else than a vampire, but his father still hadn’t learned.

It made the fact that she had gotten a tree, set it up and started decorating it, all of it to please him, even more special, and he couldn’t help laughing lightly in delight.

“What?” Lilia snapped instantly, the façade back up in a flash. “Did I do it wrong? Why are you laughing?”

“Earlier you were claiming to be an evil vampire,” he grinned. “How does that fit in with setting up a tree for me?”

Clearly, she didn’t appreciate his teasing. Her eyes darkened as she scowled at him.

"You know what, Jordan?" she said, her voice brimming with anger. "You can take your fucking tree and go to hell for all I—"

There was one sure way to shut Lilia up, and Vincent had no reservations about using it. Catching her in his arms so that her own were trapped along her body, he pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her, hunting down her lips again a couple of times when she turned away and weakly, unconvincingly, pretended to fight him off. She soon gave up the battle and he sweetened his kiss as she finally accepted it, making his touch a light caress on her lips and tongue. She remained passive for a few more seconds, but eventually added her passion to the kiss, setting Vincent's mind and body on fire. His hold slackened just enough for her to slip her arms around him, and he couldn't help but smile and break the kiss when she did.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Head slightly tilted to one side, she considered him for a few instants, as though trying to decide if he meant his words, before almost, but not quite, returning the smile.

"You're welcome. But I'm warning you, don't expect a gift. The tree was it. Even if it's not finished."

Her words struck him, because, in the same instant, she was admitting she had gotten him a Christmas gift, and trying to make it sound as though it didn't matter to her. He knew better than that. If Lilia didn't care about something, she simply didn't bother with it. There was no halfway for her. And he suspected that her grouchy attitude was due to the fact that he had returned too early for her to be done with her preparations.

It made his lack of gift for her even more uncomfortable. He had planned to buy her a little something and give it to her without making a big deal out of it, just as he had done the previous year, but with the way she had snarked against anything related to the holiday season, he had given up on the notion. It wouldn't matter, though, he decided in the time it took him to lean in and kiss her again. He knew what the perfect gift was for her. He had always known.

* * * *

Lilia's fear that her gift, if she could call it that, wouldn't be enough to make Vincent forget their argument and her hateful words vanished the instant he had laid his lips on hers. Something in her demanded that she not give in so easily, but she could never resist him. When he touched her, kissed her, sometimes even just looked at her, the Mating link that bonded them would wake and ask for more. More touches and kisses, more than looks; simply more of him. And to be in his arms, now, to be kissing him when a few hours earlier they had both been so angry, felt better than anything else in the world.

Without hurrying, they undressed, taking turns to rediscover each other's bodies as they were slowly exposed. Lilia made a point of kissing the round scar just above his heart; she still blamed herself for distracting him, a few months back, and allowing a vampire to use Vincent's own stake against him. She had been so scared of losing him, that night...

A playful nip at her shoulder brought her back to the present.

"I'm fine," he said quietly, his lips now trailing over the shell of her ear, and she realized that her arms, wrapped tightly around his waist, had to be uncomfortable. It seemed she always ended up smothering him when she thought back of that close call, and over the months he had learned to recognize her fear for what it was.

She smiled up at him a bit sheepishly, and he kissed her again, nice and slow; as nice as his body pressing against hers, heated flesh warming her own and making her burn for him; as slow as his hands, cupping her breasts one moment then sliding down, one to caress her ass, the other to the apex of her legs. She mirrored his touch, pressing him closer to her with one hand, massaging his cock with the other, never letting go of those so talented lips until he pulled back from their kiss.

"I've got a gift for you too," he said, his eyes sparkling, and Lilia grinned.

"I know. I've found it already." She squeezed the hardness in her hand to punctuate her words, eliciting a small gasp from Vincent's lips. "And I think I want to try it."

Still grinning, she pulled him down to lie on the floor and straddled his hips. That first instant when he slid inside her was always incredible and breathtaking. It had been almost two years since their first night together under Don's spell, but every time, it was the same for Lilia. Every inch of him penetrating her, stretching her, made her feel so amazingly complete that she couldn't understand how she had ever lived without him.

The best, though, was the look upon Vincent's face and the realization that he felt the same.

After a brief pause to enjoy the feel of him deep within her, she rested her hands on his chest and used the leverage to raise herself until he had almost completely slipped out. The feeling of being bereft was worth it, if only to experience his cock entering her again, the sensation as familiar as ever and yet always new in some way.

"That wasn't my gift," he grunted as she repeated the motion, a little faster now. His hands clutched at her hips, guiding and following her movements all at once.

"It wasn't?" His cock struck just a little deeper when he raised his hips as she was bearing down, and she moaned. "It's a... fine gift, though."

"Can't give you what's already yours."

She faltered for a second at the words before resuming her rocking, clenching her muscles around him now so each thrust down was that much tighter, the sensations that much intense. He was close; she knew his body well enough to see that. His eyes were very dark as they alternated between closing and looking at her. His hands gripped her tight enough that they would probably leave marks, and he would apologize in the morning, never understanding her pride in them—her pride that she could make him lose himself in her that much.

"So, what was my gift?" she managed to ask, her voice strained as she struggled to push him toward his release, knowing that hers would follow from feeling him pulse inside her. He startled her by sitting up abruptly, stilling her movements as he held her close to his chest.

"This was," he murmured, tilting his head so that he was offering his neck to her. Her eyes latched onto the two punctures mark she had left there the night they had Mated, two marks she had opened again when she had come so very close to killing him while under her Sire's thrall, and once more when Vincent had wanted to prove he truly loved her, demon or not.

"I know you miss human blood," he continued when, after a few seconds, she hadn't moved at all. "I can spare a few mouthfuls. For you."

Lilia wanted to protest, to refuse, to point out to him what he was suggesting was dangerous, and stupid, and unnecessary. She had told herself the same things many times over the past year and half to prevent herself from asking him, even when she craved his blood so strongly that she could barely look at him. Especially then.

But the arguments in her head faded as she slowly remembered who he was. He was a Special Enforcer, and as such he knew, better than most humans, what vampires were capable of; there was no need to remind him of the risk that she might go too far, take too much. He knew it, and he wasn't offering her his neck lightly. He was also her Mate, her partner in bed and in the hunt, and the gesture spelled out, more clearly than words ever could, that he trusted her with his very life.

How could she refuse such a gift?

Rocking herself lightly onto his cock to recapture the moment, she pressed her lips to his mouth, then trailed them down his jaw and to his neck. Tiny flicks of her tongue against the raised scars that were already there made Vincent gasp and arch up into her, and Lilia

grinned against his skin as her fangs extended. Finding the exact spot where she had bitten before was easy. She slid her fangs in gently, piercing his skin as delicately as she could; Vincent shuddered, his arms tightening around her, holding her even closer as she started pulling on his blood. The first mouthful had him gasping; at the second, his orgasm tore through him, sweetening his blood with pleasure and making Lilia moan as her body responded to both his cock surging in her and his blood flooding her mouth. It was better than she remembered, more flavorful for the many months of passionate love they had shared, and she had to fight herself to stop drawing more blood before she took too much. Vincent groaned when she finally pulled away; at first she thought it was in pain, but she soon realized that it was in protest.

"You barely took anything," he mumbled as they collapsed to the floor, limbs still entangled, their bodies so close they felt as though they were one. "I used to give more than that at my high school blood drive."

Still a little dazed, it took Lilia an instant to understand what he was saying, and when she did she chuckled quietly.

"It's OK," she murmured when he gave her a questioning look. "It's not even midnight yet. I can enjoy my gift some more when it's really Christmas."

She didn't really mean that; it had been hard to stop the first time around, she didn't want to tempt fate and risk robbing Vincent of the life that made him so precious to her. But his smile held nothing back, and neither did his words.

"Anything you want, Lilia."

He kissed her, soft and chaste, his hand cupping her face and caressing her cheek as lightly as a breeze. When he drew back, he was still smiling; only then did she recognize his smile. It was the same one she had seen on each of the pictures sent to her with the ornaments. And in one instant of clarity, brought forth, maybe, by this feeling of being as close to Vincent as she had been at the instant they had become Mates, she understood. The child on the pictures hadn't been happy because of fragile glass and shimmering glitter. He had been happy because he had been loved. And the man Vincent had become was still happy for the same simple but crucial reason.

"Merry Christmas, love," she said right against his lips, and claimed his smile as hers.

The End

Kallysten specialises in paranormal romance and has a number of sultry rated stories available for sale on Alinar Publishing, including CheckMate, which tells the complete story of Lilia and Vincent, and the On the Edge series.

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?

On The Edge

Brett Andrews thought he had it all. His new club, On The Edge, catering to vampires and humans, is a 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.

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