

# KALLYSTEN

Love &  
Comfort



# Love & Comfort

## Kallysten

This scene takes place six years after the end of the novel Carte Blanche, and five years after the short story Rules & Rewards.

## Love & Comfort

That night, Grace returned home two hours after sunset in a foul mood. At times, she hated her job. She understood the attraction vampires had on humans—she understood it quite well indeed. She understood that, sometimes, inviting a vampire inside one's home could seem like a good idea; she had done so herself, and had lived with the vampire in question for years. But what she did not understand was this client of hers, who called her every Monday morning without fail to request a disinvice spell on his apartment. She didn't know what he did on his weekends, but she had a feeling that, sooner or later, the Monday morning call wouldn't come, and she'd have a murder to investigate and a killer to hunt down. It was all part of the job, of course, the disinvice like the hunting, but sometimes it was hard to silence the little voice that claimed some people deserved what was coming to them.

Leaving her keys, purse and jacket in the entry hall, she followed her nose to the kitchen, where she found Laura leaning against the counter with a paper plate in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other. A pizza box lay closed on the counter next to her.

“Pizza?” Grace said with a raise of her eyebrows. “I don't remember agreeing to pizza on a Monday night. There were leftovers in the fridge.”

Laura shrugged her shoulders and took a small bite from her pizza before answering. She sounded uneasy. “I think there's something wrong with Ray.”

Grace, who had walked over to her and pressed a kiss to her daughter's cheek, froze with her hand on the box. “What do you mean, wrong?”

“He was in his studio when I came home, and I think...” She swallowed hard. “His eyes were very red. I asked if he was

OK and he gave me twenty bucks and told me to order pizza for dinner.”

Still frowning, Grace picked up a slice of pizza and munched on it as she thought. Ray knew she didn't like to order out, especially when there was already food in the fridge. Was he trying to get a rise out of her? They had talked about that before, and it had been a long time since he had tried to anger her on purpose. When he needed special attentions from Mistress Red, he knew all he had to do was ask. Or at least, she had thought he knew.

“Where is he?” she asked, frowning.

Laura glanced at her as she was taking a second slice. “In your room, I think.”

Finishing her pizza, Grace looked at the bedroom door at the end of the hallway. It was closed. The door just before that, the guest bedroom that Ray used as his studio, was open. Grace would start there, she decided, and try to figure out what was going on.

She washed her hands and, after asking Laura if she'd be OK, she walked over to the studio. The heels of her boots clanked on the hardwood floor and she had no doubt that Ray could hear her. Would he think she was coming to him, she wondered? Was he waiting for her? If he was, he would need to wait just a little longer.

She entered the studio and flicked on the switch by the door. Bright light flooded the room. Her eyes were drawn at once to the worktable against the wall, and the large sheets of paper covering it. A couple of pieces had fallen to the floor. Grace picked them up. Her eyes widened when she recognized the man featured on both drawings. With a slightly shaky hand, she laid the two drawings on the table—on top of yet more drawings of Keller. Some of them showed only his face, some his entire body; none that she could see was finished.

A knot tightened inside Grace until she had some trouble breathing. She closed her eyes and forced herself to take deep, slow breaths. The drawings by themselves meant nothing. Or rather, they could mean anything. It wouldn't help anything for her to worry that Ray was leaving her to return to Keller. Until he told her as much, she refused to even consider it.

It would have been easier not to be so scared if she hadn't wondered more than once over the years how long Ray would play house with her before tiring of it.

When she had her emotions under control, she left the room, turning off the lights behind her, and entered the bedroom she shared with Ray. The room was dark once she closed the door, but she had caught a glimpse of him while walking in. He was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room, with his back to the wall and his forearms resting on his knees, drawn up in front of him. She went to sit on the bed, a few feet from him, and let her eyes adjust to the darkness. With the light from the hallway seeping beneath the door, she could just distinguish his features. She had rarely seen his face so expressionless.

"Ray? Are you all right?"

He didn't reply or even appear to have heard her.

"Is Keller back in town?" she insisted, her voice hardening ever so slightly.

Ray flinched, but he still didn't look at her or say a word.

"Come to me," she said, and she wasn't asking anymore. Her tone made that clear.

Still, Ray didn't react.

Grace's voice hardened a little more. "I said—"

"Sunshine."

The word was quiet, empty of any emotion. Grace was so stunned that, for a few seconds, she wasn't sure she had heard him right. She had known Ray for six years, had lived with him for five, had played BDSM scenes countless times with him, but he had never said that word before. Even when they had played rough, even when she knew he had wanted to say his safeword and stop her hand, he never had. And now he had, when all she had demanded was for him to come to her.

She pulled off her boots before standing, then she went to him. She sat next to him on the floor, knees raised like his were. She rested her hand on top of his on his knee, and was relieved when he let her link their fingers together.

"Talk to me, please."

For a long time, Ray remained silent. Grace's instinct was to push; she was not the most patient woman, and she rarely had to wait long to get what she wanted. This time, though, she could not push. This time, it was Ray's game. And so she waited.

"He's dead," Ray finally said, the words cold and emotionless.

"Keller?" Grace asked, needing to check.

"Yes."

"How do you—" she started, but didn't finish the question. She didn't need to finish. She knew how Ray knew. They were vampires; it was a well-known fact that Sire and Childer knew of each other's death through the blood link they shared.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and realized as the words passed her lips that she meant them.

For the first time that evening, he turned his face to look at her. His eyes were red, like Laura had said, but there were no telltale tear tracks on his cheeks. He frowned at her. “Sorry?” he repeated. “Why on Earth would you be sorry?”

“Because you loved him and you’re hurt.”

He stared at her. “Loved him?” He said the words as though they were foreign to him and shook his head. “Of course I didn’t love him. He was my Sire.”

For a long time, she held his gaze, and wondered how hard to press on. If they had been playing, she would have punished Ray for lying to her. Did he even realize he was lying, though?

“Do you love me?” she finally asked.

His frown deepened, and she knew why. If there was one thing he didn’t like, it was for her to doubt him, or his feelings. “You know I do. That has nothing to do with—”

“What will you do when I die?”

He gritted his teeth and looked away. “Don’t say things like that.”

It might have been easier to let it go, but Grace wasn’t interested in easy. “Don’t do what?” she asked. “Don’t remind you that I’m mortal?”

Easy didn’t make relationships work. Honesty did. Either that, or it broke them to shards sharp enough to rip hearts and souls to ribbons.

Ray pushed up to his feet and started pacing back and forth through the room like a caged animal. His fingers clenched

and relaxed at his sides, then patted in turn his jeans' pockets. Searching for cigarettes, she guessed; he only ever seemed to crave nicotine when he was stressed, angry, or needed an intense scene at Carte Blanche. This time, it was anger, she thought, and when he turned back to her, his eyes full of fire and his voice as dead as the coldest winter, she knew she was right.

"You think I don't know that?" he spat. "You think I don't worry every time you're five minutes late that a vamp may have caught you?"

He had never talked to her like this, and she had to remind herself that they weren't playing; he didn't need to be scolded at that moment, or reminded of his place in their relationship. This one time, he needed her to be Grace, not Mistress Red.

"I think," Grace said slowly, "that you try not to think about it. Like you tried not to think about what would happen if Keller died."

Ray glared at her. "He wasn't supposed to die!" he shouted. "He was the one person who was supposed to always be there! And it didn't matter if he was on the other side of the world or even if he didn't want me. He was alive." His voice started cracking but he tried to continue. "He wa—"

He lost his voice mid-word. Turning his back on her, he pressed his hands to his face and growled. "Damn it! What the hell is wrong with me!"

Staying back had become too hard. She went to him and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. He was tense against her, but slowly started to relax as she held him a little more tightly. She pressed a kiss to the back of his neck and murmured, "You loved him. It's OK to cry."

"I didn't," he said, but the words ended on a dry sob.

As gently as she could, she turned him in her embrace until he was facing her, his eyes closed tight on the tears he wouldn't shed. She pressed a soft kiss to his lips, just to make sure he knew she was there for him, then drew him down to lie on the bed with her, arms and legs tangled, their bodies so close that her heart beat for the both of them.

He accepted the embrace for a while, but eventually tried to free himself. She refused to let go. She knew him, she knew what he needed, and at that moment she knew he needed contact more than anything else in the world. She was proved right when he stopped pulling away and clung to her even more tightly.

Long after he had fallen asleep in her arms, Grace continued to run her fingers through his hair, her eyes wide open and staring into the dark. She didn't know who would be there for Ray when she passed away, but she hoped that someone would hold him, comfort him, and tell him it was all right to cry. She hoped whoever it was would love him every bit as much as he deserved to be loved; every bit as much as she loved him.